

¡Ay primo hermano!

News from the Lacey family in Colombia

...settling in... We moved to Colombia mid-August and are based at the Centre for Projects of the Colombian Methodist Church. Our role is to support the existing work of the Centre accessing new funding opportunities and providing technical support and solutions.

Medellín is based in a beautiful mountainous valley and so we are changing altitude by about a kilometre

twice a day - that's why cable cars connecting the poor communities (known as "invasiones") on the slopes of the valley to the rest of the integrated public transport are so revolutionary in this city. People no longer have to trek up and down those high hills but can take a cable car which connects to a city train to get to and back from work - something that was not easily possible a few years ago.

We are slowly getting used to the local way of driving too - motorcycles, cars, bicycles, pedestrians all sharing the same road with blurry lanes. Near misses are only too common and make us watch our tongues. Praise God for horns!

In the morning, it's jumper weather, and by mid-afternoon it's shorts and t-shirt weather explaining why the locals proudly describe Medellín as the "City of Eternal Spring". We are still discovering new exotic fruits and finding how to best peel, open, and consume them.

Church here is done differently and takes on many different shapes and forms. Today we saw one located in a shopping centre. Our new church meets in a space that once was a

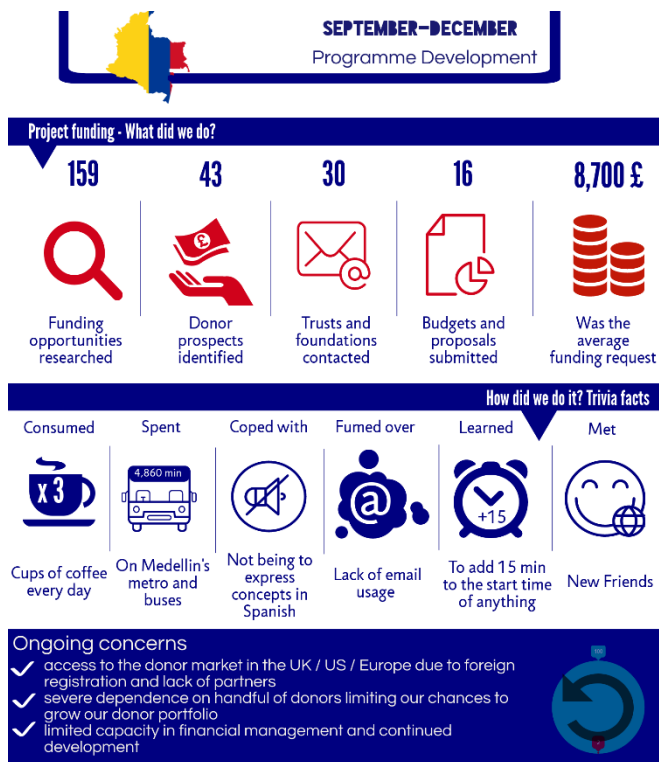


garage and it's not the only one. The congregation is very small and has around 15 members - most of whom are our new colleagues; the pews were made by the Bishop himself and his family. Our last service was led by a minister who had travelled for 10 hours on a long-distance bus before heading to the meeting of Conference... another 10 hours after that! But despite the modest appearance, the ambitions of the national Colombian church are high as it aims to transform entire communities which have experienced the country's political conflicts first hand.

By now you can probably tell that we are enjoying our first few months here, discovering what has become our new home. We are very much in the "Tourist Phase" of Culture Shock - a topic we covered during our pre-placement training in Panama. Looking at my notes, I realise that after the initial high of the Tourist Phase comes the inevitable dip of "Disenchantment" - that's when we expect different irritations to surface. I wonder what this will be in our case - possibly the fact that a 10am meeting is much more likely to start at 11am. Or maybe that questions are not perceived as a sign of interest but as a form of attack on the speaker, or that plans and agendas are considered too limiting and task ownership is not a positive value.

Regardless of what it will be, the training we received has provided practical tips on how to avoid common mistakes, and what to expect when entering a new culture. Thanks to the course, we also know that after the Tourist and Disenchantment phases follow "Resolution" and "Adjustment" - and so we pray that we get through those phases quickly! **V.**

...programmes and proposals...



...training sessions... During a recent pastoral retreat we had the opportunity to learn more about the various activities carried out across the country. Existing work as well as new 'blue sky' ideas were presented, and experiences were shared. Chris delivered a session presenting the new website and demonstrating how to add content to it. Email addresses were assigned to all, allowing everyone to access a shared address book and find people's contact details easier. During the hands-on sessions people got to practice how to edit webpages and use their new email - particularly those that do not normally use electronic devices.

During my sessions, we covered topics such as program funding and proposal design. The motivation behind the session was to improve the quality of project proposals, 'decipher' some of the confusing donor terminology and offer simple yet effective techniques for project design such as problem and solution trees. The training took place during the quiet time of December but we are already experiencing some renewed interest judging by the amount of news stories on the new website as well as number of proposals that come to and through our office. **V.**



...new web site...

One of the more "concrete" tasks in my job description was to set up a web site for the national Church, to enable us to communicate more about what goes on across the country - to congregations, to those people who might become our congregation (but just don't know where we are or when we meet!), and to international supporters and donors.

I was fortunate during my time at Christian Aid to have led the technology selection and implementation of their new site, which is what originally brought me into contact with the Content Management System (CMS) known as Drupal. And so, using this, I was able to build out our new site, www.icmetodista.org, relatively quickly. It went live in November, and now acts as our central point for disseminating news stories, providing details of each of our churches in all four districts, as well as providing information about the Church more generally and of its various ministries and projects.

I was initially adding all new content to myself, but the point of building the site on a CMS was that pastors and staff across the country would use it too... so it was particularly useful to be given the opportunity to provide training to staff and pastors who attended the Church's Pastoral Retreat in December to do just that. I'm hopeful that we'll start to see a lot of new and varied content that represents the full work of the Church, so check out the site regularly, subscribe to the areas that interest you, and please do give me your feedback! **C.**

...and in print too... We were honoured to be asked to contribute articles to some prestigious Methodist publications following our arrival in Colombia. You can read one in the latest Methodist Women in Britain newsletter, and in the Methodist Recorder on page 8 of the 1st December edition... **C.**



...trips to Brisas...

The small village of Brisas del Mar, about three hours' drive from Cartagena, is one of the most remarkable projects of the Church here in Colombia. I had something of a "Baptism of Fire" after our arrival - in that I was dispatched to Brisas the very next day after arriving! This was to meet a group of Volunteers in Mission that were arriving from the US as well as attend a meeting to introduce to the community the vision which the Bishop, Rev Juan Alberto, has for setting up a vocational training for the youth of the village.

The history of Brisas is a tragic one - an entire generation was wiped out during the decades-long armed conflict, and the people of the village have been thoroughly neglected by the government. They live predominantly in poor quality houses with mud floors, with no latrines nor sources of potable water. Malnutrition is common and there are no government health services - indeed, Afro-Colombians and indigenous people have often been discriminated against and denied their basic rights when attempting to access government healthcare in other towns.

The Church has been working in the community for the last decade, and brought remarkable changes - constructing a health clinic, providing a daily feeding programme to all school children, and - most recently - installing an electric water pump, water tanks, and several kilometres of piping to get clean, running water into the village. I had fun with the volunteers from the US while I was there, getting my hands dirty and helping with some of the construction, and later with some of the logistical problems of getting a heavy duty transformer installed - so it was particularly exciting for me that the system literally went live while I was writing this article - you can see some video at <http://www.icmetodista.org/en/node/102> .



But the most remarkable thing I found on my arrival was the sense of hope, optimism and love emanating from the people of Brisas. The Church service, which takes place under a thatched awning right in the centre of the community, was packed full of people of all ages, singing and praising God and eager to welcome church family members from lands.

I've since been back one more time, to meet with a foundation with whom we're hoping to cooperate to start some agricultural and entrepreneurial projects (just like our days at GARDC in Antigua!), so Brisas is something you'll be hearing a lot more about in future newsletters - as there many plans and hopes for other projects there. You can follow news updates at www.icmetodista.org/taxonomy/term/6 C.

...boxes of love... In the modern city of Medellín where we live it is sometimes easy to forget that Colombia is a country where a lot of people still live in poverty. You can see that by taking a metro journey linking to a cable car, which connects one of the disadvantaged barrios to middle-class neighbourhoods with economic opportunities.

Another reminder was the Christmas box ("*caja del amor*") collection organised by Sofie's and Abigail's school. Our family box was destined for a retired couple on the outskirts of the city. You can hear what the campaign means for the people living here and see what the typical household there looks like at <https://youtu.be/umWd4wJLlI> .



The list of suggestions for the content of the box included, as you might expect, a small gift but also a bottle of oil, a bag of flour and sugar, milk powder and other everyday essentials. This reminds us we live in a city where 1 in 7 live in poverty and for them receiving a Christmas box not only lets them know they're not forgotten during Christmas but also provides much-needed practical help. **V.**

...partnership with GARDC... Living in Colombia and working for the small Centre for Projects often reminds us of our time spent in Antigua at the GARD Center. What back then felt like a charity start-up, from our new perspective seems more like a well-established local NGO with a varied donor portfolio and clearly defined program focus! After our departure from Antigua 5 years ago we have missed the proximity to 'the action', working with colleagues in the field, and our boss: the visionary founder of GARD who at her 70 years of age is still willing to work long night-shifts when a proposal deadline calls for it.



At the time of our placement, GARD Center was undergoing huge growth: the number of projects doubled and so did the number of young people with whom the Center was working. We were also able to build two buildings and expand the campus for the vulnerable youth as well as gain financial independence. And so it's of no surprise we tried to stay in touch, and we were fortunate enough to support some initiatives despite the distance.

As the church in Colombia is currently looking to expand its work into the area of livelihoods and vocational training - something that is the niche of the GARD Center - it seemed only natural to try to build bridges between both these Methodist centres.

Our new partnership will allow not only for technical skill transfer, but also provide the necessary donor accountability when approaching foreign donors. The first result of this partnership is a joint project proposal submitted to the US government. If funded, the project will improve protection of vulnerable populations against violence, and the socio-economic situation of people caught up between impunity by paramilitaries and corrupt local administration. **V.**

...techsoup... Following our successful application to become a Techsoup member, we were very pleased to be recognised as a Colombian NGO and subsequently to receive many donations from Microsoft.. Back in November 2012, Rev Tom Quenet (the then Partnership Coordinator for LAC) noted in his trip report that "the Church's internal communication needed to be strengthened". With a (relatively) small number of churches scattered across a large country, and few funds available for transportation, it's hard for everyone to stay in touch!

And so I've started to install our various goodies from Microsoft (the likes of Sharepoint, Outlook/Exchange, Yammer and Power BI) to help bridge the communication gap both internally and with our external donors. **C.**

...prayer points... Please pray for:

- The general finances of the church – we've had to say goodbye to half of the staff in the office due to an inability to pay salaries, and times are tough for everyone
- The people of Brisas del Mar, for the clinic there which struggles to find funding, for the continued construction of the church building and the next visit from Volunteers in Mission in February
- Sofie's and Abigail's settling in to their school – particularly for their Spanish and ability to communicate with and make friends

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Chris and Vera Lacey, with their children Sofie and Abigail, are serving as mission partners with Iglesia Colombiana Metodista (the Colombian Methodist Church), providing IT solutions and identifying funding opportunities for their new Centre for Projects.

Please get in touch if you're interested:

*Cra. 77B # 45G - 88 Barrio el Velódromo, Medellín, Colombia
c.lacey@icmetodistia.org or v.lacey@icmetodista.org*

The Methodist Church 



Iglesia Colombiana
Metodista