



Peace and Hope in Colombia

'Peace I leave with you; my peace I give you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not be afraid.'

(John 14: 27)

In this month's newsletter, Paz y Esperanza UK Trustee, Vicky Mancuso Brehm, writes about her recent visit to Colombia.

In March I travelled to the city of Medellín in Colombia to visit my daughter Sophia, who is spending four months as an *Andemos* volunteer with Paz y Esperanza Colombia. During my visit, it was a privilege to have the opportunity to meet members of the Paz y Esperanza team and to learn more about their work in this vibrant, dynamic and complex country.

I landed in tropical Colombia late at night, and the very next day we headed up to Granizal, one of the communities where Paz y Esperanza is working. Granizal is an informal settlement on the edge of the city, built quite literally on the side of a steep mountain. It was quite a trek to get there, first on the well-organised metro system, then on the metro-cable car high above the red-tiled and corrugated iron roofs, up the steep slope to the last formal suburb, and then half an hour on a local mini-bus which skilfully navigated the hairpin bends and increasingly chaotic traffic. The final part of the journey was on foot up a very steep, muddy path to the Iglesia Shalom church building, that serves as a hub for community activities. We went with several of the Paz y Esperanza Colombia team.



GRANIZAL - vulnerable housing conditions

Granizal and other similar places on the mountains surrounding Medellín, have been built by people displaced from brutal armed conflict in other parts of Colombia. The population of Granizal is

estimated to be between 25,000 to 30,000, and it is the second largest settlement of displaced people in the whole country

The conflict in Colombia, involving a plethora of disparate armed groups, dates back more than 70 years. Millions of people have been violently displaced from their homes and land. The majority of the residents who have moved to Granizal have built their own houses, often brick by brick with their own hands. They lack basic services such as running water, and the absence of paved roads means a lot of the older people in the community have to climb up and down steep and unstable paths, which can be very limiting. The Paz y Esperanza team and the local churches are working alongside this very marginalised community, who have not received official state support or assistance despite their displacement and the violence they have endured.

We visited the Mujeres de la Memoria, which literally means ‘Women of Memory’, but in practice could be translated as ‘Women’s Remembrance’. Mujeres de la Memoria is a group of about 25 women, all of whom have experienced deep trauma. The sense of grief and loss was palpable. Most have lost children, husbands and other family members at the hands of the armed groups in the rural areas. The weekly meetings, started by several of the women themselves a few years ago, provide a safe space and a sense of community.



'Mujeres de la Memoria' – Granizal

The women I met were very friendly and extended me a warm Colombian welcome, and were clearly appreciative and at home in the group. Raquel, the Paz y Esperanza psychologist, led the formal activities, starting with a simple, encouraging Bible message and prayer, including prayer for access to water. This was followed by time spent on a craft project, which on the day I visited was a patchwork quilt being sewn by the women. The quilt will represent the women’s home communities in a positive way, whilst enabling them to think about a positive future for their new community in Granizal. The session was very well organised, combining elements of a support group with art therapy. But also on another level, the group was just like my own church women’s group: a place of laughter, friendship and encouragement. I also sensed the care and compassion of the Paz y Esperanza team, and their concern for each individual.

I was very moved by the Museo de la Memoria (The Memorial Museum), a room in the church which has been set aside for displaying the arts and crafts created by the women over the years, telling the stories of their lives before and after being displaced. There was such a contrast between the chaotic, rubbish-strewn streets of Granizal, and the white-washed, basic but well-maintained church

building. Stepping into the Museo de la Memoria, the artworks and stories of the women are displayed in a beautiful and dignified way.



Some of the exhibits in Museo de la Memoria

The Paz y Esperanza team have come alongside the group and sensitively provide professional advice, logistics and structure. The support provided by the team to the Mujeres de la Memoria is clearly making a real difference. The team are also working with other groups, including amongst young people in the informal settlements around the city.

Are you interested in hearing more?

Sophia Brehm will be speaking about her time volunteering in Medellín, Colombia, at an event in Oxford on Saturday 27th June.

The meeting will be at Headington Baptist Church, Old Street, OX3 9HW, from 3.30pm to 5.30.

Refreshments provided. See you there.

If you would like to find out more about the *Andemos* volunteer programme that Sophia took part in, click here.

<https://andemos.peaceandhopeinternational.org/>

If you would like to support the work of the Paz y Esperanza teams in Colombia and elsewhere in Latin America, you can find details here.

<https://www.justgiving.com/charity/pazesperanza>