

Salt and Light and Building Projects: TUMC, 25 August 2013

Matt 5.13-16: "You are the salt of the earth.... You are the light of the world."

"Don't get out of the bus and walk! It's too dangerous," said the voice on the cell phone. "Stay in the bus." We were in Cazucá, Colombia, a teeming shantytown on the outskirts of Bogotá, and our bus couldn't go any further on the dirt and rock paths, the so-called roads in this squatter community on the sides of the urban Andes mountains.

"We" were a group of Canadian Mennonite Brethren pastors and church leaders who accepted the invitation of the Colombian Mennonite Brethren church to visit them earlier this year, back in March. We went to share with them and learn about their efforts to be faithful to Jesus Christ in their context of violence, injustice and poverty. I had organised and was now leading this Mennonite Central Committee "Learning Tour".

"Don't get out of the bus." We were to going to visit David and Marina Bonilla who are Mennonite Brethren pastors and church planters in Cazucá. Our buseta (mini-bus) had stopped, the driver unwilling to proceed over the rocks and through the potholes, and so we had called Pastor David, asking what to do. "Stay in the bus." As you can imagine, we did what he instructed. We waited. In the bus. In the middle of the hill. That was a no-brainer.

Some of you may have a faint recollection of David and Marina in Cazucá; I shared a story about them in a sermon six or seven years ago. Before I share another story, I need to tell you a bit about Cazucá. Even though it's just outside the boundaries of Bogotá, Colombia's capital of over 8 million people, calling it a "suburb" would give you a wildly mistaken impression. Whitby and Oakville are suburbs; Cazucá is a slum. 300,000 people live in this squatter community, the

majority having been displaced from throughout Colombia, victims of the deeply-rooted violence and injustice that have plagued Colombia for over 60 years.

We can say that Cazucá is overcrowded and impoverished, but that's a huge understatement. Residents have to struggle mightily every day to meet their basic needs. They live in makeshift houses with few basic services. Every year, homes collapse when rains turn the dusty hillsides to mud. Cazucá is constantly expanding to cover the hills along the southern outskirts of Bogotá, with maze-like roads between simple brick houses and huts made of boards and tin. Well-functioning water supplies and sewage systems are non-existent. Education and health services are woefully inadequate. For example, there is no hospital in Cazucá; residents have to travel out of the area to access medical service. With no public transportation available at night, emergencies have to wait until morning. One third of the children cannot go to school. Add to all this the permeating presence of illegal armed groups allied with rightist paramilitary organisations that vie for control of the hearts and minds of the youth. Nonconformity or disobedience usually results in death.

So we wait in the bus. Soon Pastor David arrives to accompany us the last quarter mile to the Mennonite Brethren church. He tells us that the neighbourhood is dissected by invisible lines that mark gang territories. Crossing a line has to be done with utmost care. As we walk toward the church, we feel the thick silence, and we know in our stomachs that things here are serious.

We arrive, and immediately realise that "the church" is so much more. Both school and community development centre, the entrance opens onto a patio full of playing children. The scene is dazzling. The tin roof vibrates with their shouting and hollering. While some kids are running around, others play with broken toys. One child, doing an army crawl, pretends he's playing with an object that explodes in his hands. Some run to those of us with cameras. "Tómeme una foto – take a picture of me."

We meet David's wife, Marina, who leads community women in running an elementary school up to grade 2 for neighbourhood children who wouldn't otherwise be able to attend school. They have also established a sewing program for community women where they make clothes for their families that they otherwise couldn't afford to buy. David also serves as the unofficial neighbourhood pastor and conciliator, mediating between warring gangs and leading people to consider another way – the way of Jesus. Later, David leads us on a walk through part of the neighbourhood, past the hanging tree where people are executed, past the brown door behind which drugs are sold, past the colourful rose garden. We hear dogs barking everywhere; we see blood splattered in the dirt. And yet we're often greeted with smiles. And we also see evidence of very resourceful families. We meet the woman whose stew David describes as "finger licking good." Many people shout out greetings to him, calling him "teacher." It's obvious that he is well respected throughout the neighbourhood. When we return, he tells us that we had crossed at least 6 "invisible lines" that mark areas controlled by competing gangs. Now you tell us! And yet Marina insists that there is dignity and happiness in many of the people we meet, some of whom are part of the MB church in Cazucá.

And images of salt and light emerge in my imagination. "You are the salt of the earth. You are the light of the world." Salt and light. And I ponder the role of church buildings – cinder block and sheets of tin in Cazucá, bricks and mortar for us on Queen St East – in being salt and light.

No pastor, minister or priest lives in Cazucá. They arrive once or twice a week, sometimes less often, during the day, leaving before the sun starts to go down. About 250 NGOs (non-governmental organisations) have projects in Cazucá. But none of their representatives or staff live here. No one. Except for David, Marina, their two small children, and two MCC young adult volunteers.

David and Marina are from professional middle class families. But 10 years ago they felt God's call to serve in this forsaken community. Church leaders told him he was crazy to consider this. Their families begged them not to move there. Yet together with Marina, they moved into Cazucá to incarnate a Christian ministry that is transforming the community. They now have two small children. Growing up in Cazucá.

And many still tell them that they're crazy. "It's by being crazy we built all of this," he retorts, waving his hand encircling the cinder block and tin facilities of the church, school and community centre. When one of the MCC Seed workers describes the violence in Cazucá – gangs and paramilitary groups, rape and murder, thieving and drug trafficking – David shakes his head, perhaps in utter amazement that he and his family are indeed living here. It is crazy. Yet, you do not see in Marina or David the weariness often found in pastors burnt out by the demands of Canadian congregations, or in others of us juggling the demands of family, work and church. Marina and David exude positive determination and commitment.

And they're also, well, simply gorgeous. Marina is strikingly beautiful and David was – get this! – a model for a time before moving to Cazucá. A model! How's that for a career path toward being a pastor, Michele!! As individuals, they are enchanting. David is the more outgoing of the two, and both his laughter and his tears are infectious.

And they are saving lives. Daily. In their invitations to leave violence behind and follow Jesus. In their rescuing children whose mothers – widowed by the violence either in Cazucá or elsewhere in Colombia – are gone working from early morning until late at night, leaving their children either on the streets to be recruited by gangs or locked in their houses getting so hungry they eat toothpaste. Saving lives in their offering mothers job training so they can work from home and take care of their children while earning a living. Saving lives in David's negotiations with warring

gangs, or in his warnings to youth that they're on a hit list, about to be assassinated, that they need to leave Cazucá NOW.

I don't know any way to describe this all other than to say that David and Marina and the MB church there are filled with the presence of Jesus, and with the Holy Spirit.

And again my thoughts go to Jesus' words in the Sermon on the Mount: Do you know it by memory now, here at the end of the summer with our theme Salt and Light? Join me: "You are the salt of the earth; but if salt has lost its taste, how can its saltiness be restored? It is no longer good for anything, but is thrown out and trampled under foot. You are the light of the world. A city built on a hill cannot be hidden. No one after lighting a lamp puts it under the bushel basket, but on the lampstand, and it gives light to all in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven."

Salt and Light. Being salt and light is a poignant way to describe David and Marina. Much of their ministry and their cinder block walls and tin roofs have been developed in partnership with MCC. Today, the school and community training programs are funded in large part by MCC, through your donations. There are also the two young adult MCC workers that assist David and Marina. A partnership of being salt and light, building a Mennonite Brethren community in a place that all others flee before sunset. And while resources are needed – yes, please do continue to donate to MCC – what is of utmost importance, David and Marina tell us, is that we pray for them. That we pray for them. They say that their lives and mission are sustained not primarily by our support of MCC, but rather by our own encounters with God and Christ, by our continual search for new life radically present in community. By being salt and light.

The next day our group heads west for the pacific coast of Colombia. To the province of “Chocó”. Joining our group of Canadian Mennonite Brethren church leaders were several Colombian MB pastors, plus part of the MCC Colombia team, and also Cesar Garcia, General Secretary of Mennonite World Conference.

As we at TUMC have heard frequently over the years, Colombia is still in the throes of a 60 year-old civil war. Her population is greater than all of Canada, but geographically it's only slightly larger than Ontario. Her topography is very diverse with river systems that cross the country and form dividing valleys, while the Andes Mountains make almost impenetrable north-south barriers between neighbouring provinces. To get to the province of Chocó on the pacific coast, we had to fly from Colombia's capital Bogotá high on the eastern Andes mountain range, across the tropical Magdalena River valley, then across the snow capped central mountain range, and then the western range, to Chocó, where thick and wild jungles fill the land.

Mennonite and Mennonite Brethren missionaries arrived in Colombia 70 years ago, in the mid 1940s – the MBs in Chocó – and shortly afterward a bloody civil war erupted, claiming over 200,000 lives and displacing more than one million people. Sadly, that story continues today. Much of the conflict was, and continues to be over land that holds Colombia's vast wealth and resources. And there continues to be a growing number of victims. Colombia is ranked first in the world for number of people displaced (over five million people), due to the violence.

We step off the plane in the provincial capital named Quibdó and the tropical heat and humidity hit us like the proverbial brick. And we don't stop sweating until we leave five days later. The vast majority of Chocó's residents are of Afro-Colombians, descendants of African slaves the Spanish brought across the ocean 3 and 4 centuries ago. Chocó is also the home of about 40 Mennonite Brethren congregations. Pastor Rutilio Rivas, the conference head, meets us at the airport and

we travel to Istmina, the second largest city in Chocó. Along the way, Rutilio tells us that we are traveling on the only paved road in the province. The only paved road in the whole province. And even so, there are unpaved sections where our bus has to proceed at 10 kms per hour in order to dodge potholes big enough to break an axle. We arrive. Even though Istmina is the second largest city in the province, it has no buildings over five storeys, and evidently there's been no investment in infrastructure for many decades. There's a clear "small town" feel to it as apparently everyone knows each other. And within an hour, everyone knows we've arrived, including the paramilitary forces. Istmina is also headquarters of the Chocó MB Conference, and thus becomes our home base for the five days we are in Chocó.

One morning, we leave Istmina by boat, heading through the jungle on the San Juan River to a place where the Mennonite Brethren churches have partnered with MCC in an exciting agricultural and community development venture.

What you need to know is that it's virtually impossible to make a living as an honest campesino (small-scale, subsistence farmer) in Chocó. While years ago growing coca (for cocaine) was localized to mainly one area in Colombia far from Chocó, that is no longer the case. When the Colombian and USA governments decided to "take care of" the cocaine problem with massive aerial spraying, coca growing spread throughout the country, especially to the isolated jungle areas of Chocó where a number of MB churches are located.

Farmers in the church and in their communities suddenly found themselves unable to survive due to the soaring cost of living; those growing coca inflated the cost of most goods because they had extra money and because the number of campesinos growing food crops went down. So you are a small scale subsistence farmer. You have two options: grow fruit that sells for \$0.35/kg or coca that sells for \$1000.00/kg. What's an honest farmer to do?

We arrive via river to the Mennonite community development project. As we climb out of the boat and onto the 3.5 hectare parcel of land, the first thing we see is a rice processing plant built on the tailings of a spent gold mine. It looks more like a field of gravel than a field of dreams. Yet there, they tell us, is “Tejiendo esperanza” – weaving hope. We also call it “being salt and light.”

On this plot of waste land, the MB churches in partnership with MCC are being salt and light through a community agricultural project. Via a cooperative community rice processing plant, local farmers process the rice for market themselves, and are thus able to sell directly to consumers, bypassing the often-unscrupulous middlemen, and thus significantly reducing their costs and increasing profit. In addition to the rice processing plant, we tour their small fish farm and their growing nursery of cacao trees (for chocolate) that will be transplanted on farms in local communities. This gives honest farmers a viable option other than growing coca for cocaine. With 80% of the beneficiaries being outside of the church, the MB churches and MCC are being salt and light in their communities, weaving hope for honest farmers in the Chocó.

This project, however, almost didn’t happen. There were numerous obstacles along the way such as buying the land, getting electric power to the facility, and inspection approval. But the biggest hurdle along the way was the day that the local para-military group arrived, demanding payment of a “vacuna” a vaccine – protection money. The church was being required to pay a hefty informal tax to the illegal armed group. They told Pastor Rutilio and the others there that they were to come to meet with the para-military commander the next day with the first payment. They then left with their threatening machineguns.

After much prayer and with much nervousness, the key church leaders went to meet with the para-military commander. They underlined that this MB project was owned and operated by and for the whole community. And they emphasized

how they could not and would not support any armed group, period. Pastor Rutilio told them “Mennonite churches have been committed to nonviolence and peace-building for centuries. We will not support any armed groups, not even the State Armed Forces.... We will not support you, even if it costs us our lives.” The commander was not at all impressed with this challenge to his unofficial authority and hegemony.

The pastors then returned to the MB church and spent more time in prayer. The next day pastor Rutilio received a call from the commander. With a different tone of voice, he said that he had investigated “The Mennonites” and now believed what they said. He told pastor Rutilio that they and the community were free to proceed with their project, unencumbered. Without paying a monthly “vaccine”. Indeed, the para-military boss added that if any of his subordinates ever hassled them, they were to let him know immediately and he would take care of it.

“You are the salt of the earth; but if salt has lost its taste, how can its saltiness be restored? You are the light of the world. A city built on a hill cannot be hidden.... [So] let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven.”

How about Salt and Light in Toronto? I could spend the next half hour talking about how we at TUMC, both as individuals and as a congregation, are salt and light in our city. And telling all these stories – our stories – would be quite impressive and inspirational. However, I would like us to ponder for a moment our future: how will we continue to be salt and light as we give significant time, energy, and resources to our building project? I need to confess to you that I am a bit concerned, in spite of having expressed my clear support of our facilities expansion numerous times over the past year. What’s happened is that over the past three months or so, I’ve had a niggling unease in my gut (or in the back of my mind) that simply won’t go away.

Those persistent niggings are two-fold. #1: we in Canada are in a “post-Christian” era; this of course isn’t news. No longer do most people in our neighbourhoods head to church services on Sunday morning. Those who do – we this morning, for example – and a very small minority. Rather, the vast majority of Canadian-born adults in Toronto are simply not engaged in faith communities. (I am not including here our first generation Canadian, immigrant communities, both Muslim and Christian; their experience is different.) Church has no relevance for most Canadian adults, especially those under 40, even though they may profess faith. How many times have you heard someone say “I’m spiritual, but not religious”? Put simply, many church buildings in Toronto and across Canada are going the way of the one-room schoolhouse. Here on Queen St East, church buildings that were full every Sunday a generation or two ago are being redeveloped as high-end condos. Can we at TUMC buck this huge trend? I firmly believe the answer is a resounding YES, but it has a whole lot to do with the saltiness of our salt in our city, and the brightness of our light in our world. If our salt isn’t very salty or our light is hidden under that bushel basket, our building will eventually go the way of those one-room school houses, relics of a by-gone time.

My niggling concern #2 is quite similar to the first: as I reflect on the building projects that David and Marina have led in Cazucá and those that Rutilio and the MB church have initiated in Chocó, I’m struck by how those buildings’ primary purpose has not been internal, directed for the benefit of the congregation, but rather have focused on the physical, social, economic, and spiritual needs of the larger community around them. Granted, their context is quite different from ours. But I still think we would do well to ponder their example. Their buildings have grown out of their burning desire to be salt and light in their communities and beyond. To live out Jesus’ gospel of justice and peace. So where does Queen Street East and Toronto need our salt and light? How do we increase the presence of Jesus’ gospel outside

our bricks and mortar? Our building project, I suggest, must emerge out of the answers to those questions.

Salt and Light and Building Projects. The future of our congregation depends on how we integrate them. As one TUMC youth told me late month “if I decide to be part of the church when I’m an adult, it’ll be because of the community I find there, and whether I see faith lived out daily in action.”

Faith lived out in action – that’s salt and light. Increasing our salt and light in our city and beyond must be core to our building project. Amen.