



## Colombia: A place of great need and abundance

Leslie Jones

Walking to the top of Monserrate in Colombia, South America takes your breath away.

There you can sit on the steps of a 17th Century church, nearly two miles above sea level where the air is thin and fresh. The sound of Gregorian chant quietly emanates from the sanctuary and flows past you to the clouds blowing by.

The hill of Monserrate is not just a natural monument and tourist attraction. It is also known by its religious character, and its sanctuary has been visited by millions of pilgrims since its foundation in 1640. In contrast to the city below, it is filled with a sense of peace; an easy place to reflect and pray.

From Monserrate, you have a panoramic view of Bogotá, Colombia's capital city of nearly 8 million people. Bogotá sprawls from a modern center out to 20 barrios in the north, east and south.

Colombia is entering its 44th year of a civil war among drug gangs, Marxist guerrillas and right-wing paramilitary groups—a war fueled by the international demand for cocaine. As a result, Colombia sees more than 18,000 murders a year and, according to children's charity Unicef, more than 7,000 children have been recruited by force into groups financed through drug trafficking.

Violence in many urban areas, including Bogotá, has decreased markedly in the past decade. But evidence of a country in turmoil is everywhere. Military personnel and police line city streets. Private guards augment security and help protect banks, shopping malls, apartment complexes and even suburban neighborhood street corners.

Hundreds of Colombian people arrive every week in Bogotá and in cities along the Caribbean coast, pushed north by the cocaine-fueled

guerrilla war. According to a Reuter's news release, "Left vulnerable by a government too weak to protect them, displaced families are greeted by poverty and growing exploitation that the United Nations says is compounding the world's worst ongoing humanitarian crisis outside Africa."

Amidst the chaos in Colombia, saints abound.

### HOME OF THE DIVINE SAVIOR

Misión Divino Salvador is located in San Rafael, an impoverished barrio in the southeastern part of Bogotá.

The Connecticut delegation to Colombia visited the mission on a Saturday morning in May. Unlike Monserrate, it is not peaceful; like Monserrate, it can take your breath away.

The Rev. José Romero Ramirez created and oversees El Hogar Divino Salvador—The Home of the Divine Savior—in a four-story building which is also his home. Father José lives on the top floor. He does not receive a salary; he lives on the generosity of benefactors.

On the next floor down (street-level), there was a flurry of activity on that Saturday. Used clothing was available to the right as you enter the mission; over-the-counter medications were being dispensed to the left. Haircuts were given in the bathroom down the hallway as you made your way to a make-

shift dental clinic. A bedroom for old women was to the left of the clinic.

Goods and services are available to the area's poorest, especially children and the elderly. Father José finds professionals to donate their time, volunteers to provide personal care, and benefactors to provide money.

As you squeeze your way through people lined up in the hallways waiting their turn, you go downstairs to the third floor. One room is dedicated to about 20 elderly men and women who are part of a program called *Alegria en el Ocaso*. They have no family. They have no place else to live. This is where they will die. This is where they are nourished in body and soul.

There is another room on the third floor for children in a program called *Educando Para La Paz*—Education for Peace. About 40 children cram into this tiny, narrow room on Monday through Friday for help with schoolwork and nutritious meals. On Saturday mornings, there are English classes, help with math and writing, and discussions about cultures and contemporary issues.

Father José asks parents to contribute 10 cents a day. Most cannot pay. The children attend anyway.

The sanctuary is on the bottom floor of Misión Divino Salvador. Just walking inside brings a sense of joy. Misión Divino Salvador may

*In May, a delegation from the Diocese of Connecticut visited Bogotá, Colombia, South America. It had three goals: to see how we can help support the Millennium Development Goals in our companion Diocese of Colombia, to establish a relationship between cathedrals, and to determine the feasibility of recruiting and supporting seminarians and clergy for missionary positions. Delegation members met with diocesan personnel and toured parishes and missions throughout Bogotá.*

*After one week, they know one thing for certain: there is much need and there are many saints in Bogotá.*

local news



have limited monetary resources but there is no limit to their resourcefulness in decorating a worship space! The walls are painted bright blue. White and blue balloons surround a statue of the Virgin Mary. Metallic stars are pasted on the ceiling overhead. Huge arrangements of fresh flowers adorn the altar. A boom box is hidden under the altar, ready to provide music for Sunday's service.

About 125 people were expected to crowd into this small but beautiful space to pray on Mother's Day. Father José conducts services every Sunday and their diocesan bishop, Bishop Duque, often visits. At confirmations, Father José buys all new clothing for the confirmands, from head to toe.

When the Connecticut delegation visited the Misión Divino Salvador, they saw a place filled with saints. In just one small room there was a dental professional donating her time and skills, a little boy having teeth pulled without novocaine and without a parent, and a pastor giving the child comfort. In another room, there was a clean, safe place where old people lived in community and where an old woman held and comforted her husband of 58 years while he died in pain.

#### A PLACE OF GREAT NEED AND ABUNDANCE

There are 19 clergy in the Diocese of Colombia, serving 5,000 baptized members in 27 parishes and missions. Only nine clergy are salaried. The majority of clergy are like Father José, the Rev. Edgar Giraldo and the Rev. Tomás Mier.

The Home of the Divine Savior is overseen by the Rev. José Romero. He is shown to the right, at the Misión Divino Salvador which serves people in the San Rafael barrio. Goods and services are available at the mission, including clothing, dental care, medications, elder care, education for children, and personal care. As the sign outside reads, "Estan cordialmente invitados" — Everyone is welcome.

(Photos: Leslie Jones)

During the week, Edgar Giraldo earns a living as an electronic engineer in the area of telecommunications. With no compensation, he is the deacon and priest-in-charge at Misión del Espiritu Santo as well as the communications director and webmaster for the Diocese of Colombia. Tomás Mier has a law degree and is an employee of the Presidency of the Republic. With no compensation, he is deacon and priest-in-charge at Misión Santiago Apóstol.

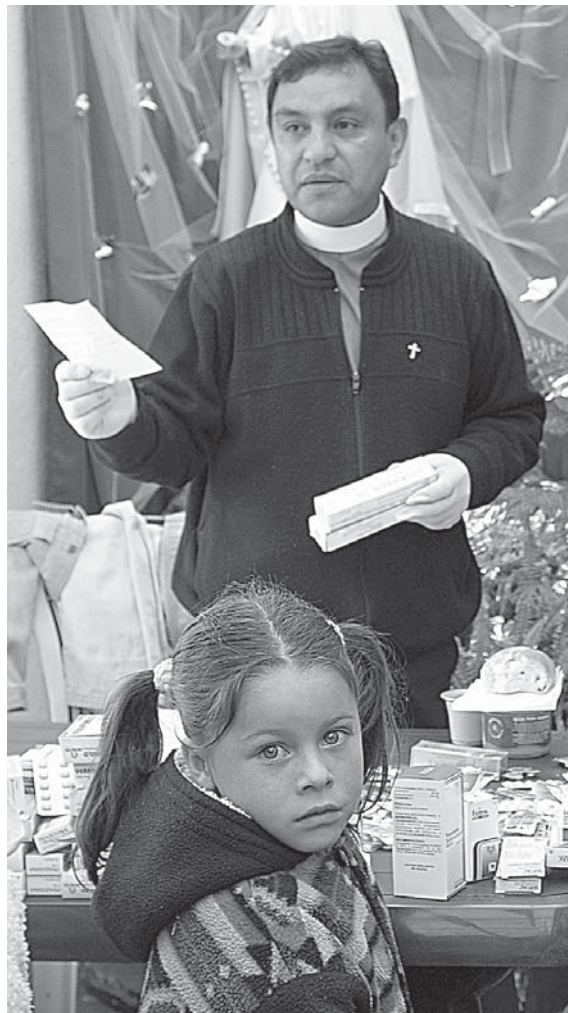
Most of the missions visited by the delegation are severely impoverished and needy when compared to parishes in Connecticut. But our Colombian companions—clergy and laity alike—operate from a great sense of abundance. Rather than focus on what they don't have, they focus on their gifts and what can be accomplished

with those gifts. Their unflinching faith in God's own abundance is inspiring.

As in many places throughout the world, the needs are great in Colombia. They don't have many things that we take for granted, including The Book of Common Prayer ... only the cathedral has those. They are in great need of clothing and educational materials in Spanish.

And yet, when diocesan bishop the Rt. Rev. Francisco Duque was asked how people in Connecticut can help, he responded, "First, pray." he said. "Pray for peace in Colombia." ♦

*Leslie Jones is diocesan assistant for communications and media. She is a member of the Companions in Mission Committee and was part of the delegation to Colombia.*



## CONNECTICUT & COLOMBIA

### Companions in Mission

The companion relationship between the dioceses of Connecticut and Colombia grew from a friendship between two men.

Several years ago Francisco Duque, diocesan bishop of Colombia, and Wilfrido Ramos, then bishop suffragan in Connecticut, were discussing how the Diocese of Colombia felt isolated from the rest of The Episcopal Church. Their desire for companionship was great and yet they had few visitors, probably due to perceptions about the civil war. People were apprehensive about visiting and sending missions, despite the fact that travel to parts of Colombia is as safe as travel in many large U.S. cities.

The companion relationship was formally established by resolution at Connecticut's annual convention in 2004. It's part of the Companion Diocese Program of The Episcopal Church which was first formed in 1968 as a way to strengthen ties between dioceses throughout the world.

The purpose of the companion relationship is:

- To help strengthen the Anglican Communion through the direct experience of interdependence across cultural and geographical boundaries within the Body of Christ; and
- To strengthen one another for mission by building a relationship in which each partner is both a giver and receiver.

Bishop Duque regularly visits us, most recently for the consecration of Bishop Ahrens. We include Colombian missions and parishes in our Cycle of Prayer and they include us in their prayers. Bishops, clergy and laity have visited Colombia in an effort to establish cathedral-to-cathedral and parish-to-parish relationships, to determine the feasibility of clergy exchanges, and to find out how we can help with respect to the Millennium Development Goals in Colombia.

The May visit to Colombia was led by the Very Rev. Mark Pendleton, dean of Christ Church Cathedral in Hartford. The delegation included Leslie Jones from the diocesan office of communications; Mark's son, Will Pendleton, student; the Rev. Emiliano Amat, deacon at Trinity, Hartford; and Emiliano's wife, Consuelo Amat, who is Colombian and grew up in Bogotá. While in Colombia, the delegation was blessed with the gracious hospitality of Bishop Duque and his family, diocesan and cathedral staff, and clergy.

Here's a snapshot of our companion diocese:

- Area: 440,839 sq. miles
- Population: 45+ million
- Poverty: 7% live less than \$1 per day
- Episcopalians: 5,000
- Episcopal churches: 9 parishes and 18 missions
- Clergy: 19 (9 are salaried)

If you'd like to learn more about Colombia and **What One Can Do** (one diocese, one parish, one person) in our companion diocese, contact Leslie Jones at [ljones@ctdiocese.org](mailto:ljones@ctdiocese.org) or 860-233-4481.