

Bogota 2014

The Latin American friends who organised our time and tours in Bogota were simply amazing people, there were about four of them altogether including the Regional Secretary, Marcello who began by putting the plan together. However, he had to travel to Cuba for other business, and so Lizeth, who was the local coordinator for the anticipated General Assembly ended up being our key liaison person. Her good friend, Remi, accompanied us whenever she could, as did Eva, an intern from the Methodist Church who had been in the country for some eleven months but whom to my envy spoke Bogotan Spanish fluently by then.

We were blessed to be taken to more than four projects, most of them run by Lutheran World Relief. Ben Posta College was the first. After the Trans Millenium (the local bus system which had its own assigned 'path' on the roads) and a local smaller bus-van, and a tiny walk up a very steep hill in the outer suburbs of Bogota, we entered the gates of this beautiful space and school. I no longer remember the name of the boy sentry but each day had its own schedule of sentries for the gate into the school. The boy (or girl) would be in charge of ensuring that only the allocated people could enter or leave the grounds. Why, you might ask?

This was a special school because in the words of Daniel Campo, our guide and the very first student in the school, "it is run like a government in itself". The students aged between 8 and 17 live in this tranquil space, study 8 subjects a day and two extras – the first on "Living in Community" and the second, something like "Learning to Govern oneself" – and have their own councils and senates/parliaments etc. The residential blocks each have their own leaders/mayors and the various committees meet daily to decide on misdemeanours and discuss the issues of the day.

Ben Posta, whom the school is named after, was a circus owner (I think he came from Spain) who took pity on the street kids he encountered and slowly took them into his circus providing them some sense of job and self-esteem. When a Swedish Church donated seed money to buy the property, the school was established and today is shelter and home to about 130 students. I was struck when I saw at least two girls who wore noticeable make-up and many of the young boys had very modern hairstyles.

The School had an interesting logo, depicting peace (dove) and the rising sun, symbolising hope, a smile and most importantly, a space at the bottom left hand corner symbolising the unknown or possibilities that could yet be built.

We joined the students for lunch (cooked by three women in the kitchen), and saw how each had their allocated cleaning/tidying away the dishes jobs and did them heartily and as one team.



More than half the students are local Bogota children/youth whose parents have placed them in the school for their benefit, but the process to study here has to be a tripartite one where parent, school admin and student are agreeable to the arrangement. The other 40% of students are those young people who have been forced to flee the war that raged/still rage in parts between the paramilitary

and the drug cartels. Caught in the crossfire, they are either orphaned or have managed to flee. They need about US\$30 per month to pay for their food and board and this funding comes largely from the Lutheran World Relief program in Colombia.

There were some beautiful murals in this school as well as a really odd-looking building that was their theatrette (could pass for a nuclear or bomb shelter), and in one section War Child Holland had raised funding to build a special two-storey 'home' for the girls who were 15 to 17 years old and needing more of their own private space. Walking into their dormitories and seeing the teddy bears and little colourful notes on their notice boards next to their beds, I couldn't help feeling that it is the same for young people everywhere – the need to belong and be loved and cared for and to show that love and caring for others as well.



Another morning, we visited an area called Sowacha which didn't exist till about 50 years ago. This was a sort of shanty town, higgledy-piggledy homes made of any materials that one could scavenge off the street. The 'roads' were unsealed mud-paths similar to what I had grown up among in my village in Singapore 60 years ago. This area houses anything from 700,000 to a million people, and in an area where the population is one-eighth that of Bogotá's it boasts a homicide rate that is at least four times that of the capital city!

The morning we were there, our social worker guide was extremely cautious as he escorted us into the town. We removed all jewellery on us (necklaces, rings) and moved in a tightly-knit group to visit the aged day care centre, again operated by Lutheran World Relief. Later we learnt that police had raided some house that very morning and found a huge cache of knives and guns.

At the aged care centre, we were greeted by about thirty to forty elderly people, many excited that we had come to visit them. Are (from Sweden) was the only SCMer amongst us with some Spanish, so it was a heavy reliance on sign language and some humorous attempts at trying to master a few Spanish words. Each elderly person introduced themselves, and our guide explained a little about the program they ran before we heard directly from three of the older folk about the 'craft boxes' that they had put together – interesting collages of their 'earlier' lives (memories of football, dances, vinyl records, relatives and so on). Many had lost numerous relatives in the conflict zones, but they were cheerful and eager to meet us, and it felt right when just before we left, Lizeth (our local intermediary) got all of us to sing together a well-known local hymn with very simple actions accompanying it.

Across the day care centre was a space for a basketball court, and in simple things like this, the community made an attempt to try to keep the youth in the area off crime. I felt sad thinking about the future of this community, and was touched to observe how close the social worker was with many of the young kids in the area whom we came across in our walk out of the 'village'.



At the women's cooperative in Caracoli, we were introduced to a group of women (varying ages) who often came around to this centre, initially sometimes just for company and partly because they were unemployed. They had grown into a community and were now (the program organiser said) on the verge of being able to begin their own cooperative. He explained to them that each person had developed her own skills (in sewing, marketing, accounting) and encouraged them to contribute a little cash towards the cooperative, and in pooling their common resources they would then have a sense of ownership and be able to set about becoming independent and self-sustaining. One of the bright young women there, a black Colombian girl, (maybe university age) didn't hesitate to ask our group quite pointedly why we had come to chat with them and what we hoped to achieve through the visit, challenging questions indeed!



If you would like to make a direct donation to this 'possible' cooperative please email ncord@ascm.org.au and I will make sure that the donation goes to them via WSCF Latin America.

On Day 4, we were taken to visit the YMCA in one of the 'tolerance areas' of prostitution in Bogota (of which there are three). Many women arrive at the bus station in Central Ciudad and because there is temporary housing available in the 'inkilinato' nearby for either one night or more, they tend to end up residing in these apartment blocks where prostitution/sex work is a key industry. The women are often poorly educated and have little skill for other employment. In the inkilinato, there are anything up to ten families located on one apartment floor (about a five to six storey building) in little rooms accommodating mother, sometimes grandmother and child or children. The YMCA approaches these families and offers free programs for their children outside of school hours.



The children are from primary school age upwards, and we saw tiny ones learning how to use simple carpentry tools or making the most delightful figures from plasticine. The idea is to try to provide a look-in at/experience of some sort of normal life (as many people understand it) for these children, and we were also introduced to one of their 'graduates', a young man who had actually managed to complete university and who was now one of their volunteers as well. There were sports/dance programs offered as well as classes that tried to address the future hopes/aspirations of these young people. In one classroom, so many of these young kids talked about their dreams in which becoming football stars featured equally with cars which they wished to use to drive their mothers around; how could one not be touched by such simple hopes?

Around noon, we were led out of the Y building and allowed to walk around the streets very guardedly as it wasn't always safe – there were 'poorer' streets where the prostitutes were forced to accept very little payment, and others that had very attractive-looking stiletto-ed transvestites who competed with the women sex workers. Though it was broad daylight, business was already on the go, and I couldn't help comparing with the situation I had encountered in Seoul, South Korea in 1983 where at least even at 4 pm, the whole sex worker area was still 'dead' and the workers were actually still on their 'rest break'.

We also visited a non-government agency, CEPALC whose Spanish name translates roughly into "Organisation combatting against the Colonialism of Colombia by the private companies of North America". The director-founder was a phenomenal woman who had been there for three decades; unfortunately as my Spanish was so minimal, it proved difficult to have any real conversation. The

Centre employs a few part-time workers, and Eva B was the gorgeous young woman from the Philippines, a Methodist intern who often filled in as translator-interpreter. One of the issues she was working on was the production of a DVD especially for men to help them understand gender issues; she was at the stage of organising some focus groups to provide feedback on the effectiveness of the DVD.

Another evening, the director's husband did a talk for us, filling in the blanks about Colombia, providing a structural analysis of the country. How shocking to learn that only 20 to 30% of people are fully employed, that 50% earn less than pittance a day, and half the people are under- or unemployed. Staying at the youth hostel in La Candelaria, the downtown Bogota, it was commonplace to encounter beggars and homeless, and once it was dark it was obvious that to wander outside by oneself was sheer stupidity. (Some tourists had taken to carrying a spare wallet on them that had just a few dollars inside, in the event of being robbed; and we learnt from our hostel owner that being asked to show one's passport to fake police was another common scam in petty thievery).

At the Lutheran World Relief office, we were most fortunate to meet both its Finnish director as well as one of their program workers whose job was reviewing/analysing the success of their programs.



The former, Sandra, spent valuable time with us, explaining a bit more about the country and the crucial work they did, and then Andrea took over, and told us more, especially about some of the success that legally-sponsored projects had achieved in helping the native people to reclaim land and nature resource rights in the border regions.

At Ben Posta College, the back gate connected to a road that led to the Cuache Nature Reserve, and even here, though the foreign public company that owned it was 'kind' enough to let the locals in to enjoy the tranquillity, the water resources here were not government-owned but had been sold away!

In terms of sightseeing, the Museum Botero, Laguna Guatavita and the Salt Cathedral at Zipaquirá stand out as the highlights, and of course it was an adventure losing my passport as I discovered another whole side of Bogotá – its rich official business district (like another planet from the hostel area in La Candelaria), and the kindness of the Australian consular officer there, a young Colombian/Australian man called Andreas Mattalana.



Some evenings, the six of us who were there (Canada, Sweden, Hong Kong, Finland and Australia) spent time together talking about our SCM programs and political situations in our countries. Little did we know then how quickly the situation in Hong Kong would deteriorate.

It was useful identifying similarities and differences amongst us, and trying to explore some of the difficult questions facing our Federation today.

Sincere thanks again to Marcello, Lizeth, Alex, Remi and Eva, and to the Australian SCM for making this trip possible and so memorable.

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Note: all statistical mistakes in this article solely my responsibility.