

History of the Church

Colombia is acknowledged as the most devoutly Roman Catholic country in Latin America. Over ninety percent of Colombians consider themselves Catholic. Spanish missionaries brought the Christian faith to Colombia. After independence, the Catholic Church gained significant power in the government. The Catholic Church is usually associated with the Conservative party.

The Presbyterian Church of the United States established a mission in Bogotá, Colombia in 1856, its first permanent mission in Latin America. The first Protestant schools in Colombia were



founded by Presbyterians, one for girls in 1869 and a school for boys the following year. In 1888 a second Presbyterian station was opened in Barranquilla, with a third at Medellín in 1889. The Iglesia Presbiteriana de Colombia (IPC) is a result of these efforts. The oldest Reformed denomination in the country, the IPC currently has two synods, each with three presbyteries.

The IPC is committed to working with the oppressed and dispossessed, providing strong leadership in defense of human rights and in the struggle to make peace. The church has been a pioneer in the ecumenical movement and was one of the first denominations in Colombia to encourage women's leadership and ordain female clergy.

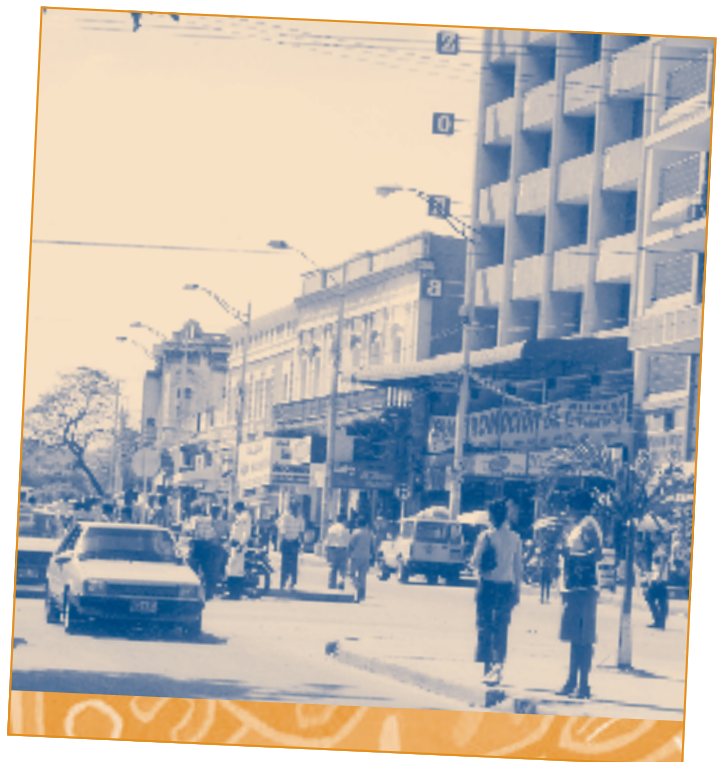
The IPC places a high value on quality education. The older Presbyterian schools rank among the best in the country. The church has started several schools and childcare facilities in impoverished neighborhoods and resettlement camps for displaced persons. These schools reflect the church's belief that they are called to help build compassionate, open-minded and intelligent leadership for their country's future.

The Reformed University of Colombia (CUR) in Barranquilla plays a key role in the life and educational mission of the IPC. The former Presbyterian Theological Seminary of the Gran Colombia is now the School of Theology of the CUR. The CUR received formal recognition from the Colombian government in May 2002. The university provides degree programs for Reformed theological education for Protestants throughout the region. The CUR and its programs are among the major peace projects of the IPC.

Colombia Now

Colombia remains caught in a civil war waged between guerrillas, the Colombian military, and paramilitary forces (often comprised of former military personnel). The war has raged for more than forty years; its roots lie in political exclusion and economic injustice. Colombia is a wealthy country, but the distribution of wealth is extremely skewed. Just over one percent of the landowners own fifty-five percent of the land (www.colombiasolidarity.org.uk). The top ten percent of the population receives forty-four percent of the income (www.cia.gov/cia/publications/factbook/geos/co.html). Fifty-five percent of the population lives below the poverty line; the unemployment rate stands at seventeen percent (www.cia.gov/cia/publications/factbook/geos/co.html).

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Although the two parties (the Liberal and the Conservatives) that have historically dominated Colombian politics differ little in program, they have spent decades struggling for power. There has been little room for other opinions or opposition parties to develop.

The current guerrillas began their struggle in the mid-1960s as groups seeking land and economic and social equity. Paramilitaries, who oppose the guerrillas and anyone suspected of sympathizing with them, have been active since the 1980s. Both guerrillas and paramilitaries profit from the drug trade as they levy “taxes” on growers working the land where coca cultivation takes place. Paramilitary groups are responsible for most human rights violations according to Human Rights Watch.

Colombia has become a target of the United States’ “war on drugs.” The U.S. Congress passed legislation in 2000 known as Plan Colombia, a massive aid package intended to help Colombia reduce drug production and violence and to curb the flow of drugs to the United States. Over \$2.5 billion has been sent since 2000 with an additional \$700 million projected for 2004. In 2002, the U.S. State Department identified guerrilla and paramilitary factions as terrorists and the administration altered the use of the money sent to Colombia to include fighting the “War on Terrorism.”

Various economic factors, revolving around ownership of land and natural resources, further contribute to the instability and conflict in Colombia. The rural poor (campesinos) are often displaced by large landowners and corporations seeking the land itself, the resources on the land, or both. In some instances, people lose their land because they failed to register the land when they settled on it. In other situations, people are forced to sell their land at imposed prices. Threats, disappearances, and violence are among the tactics that are sometimes used.

Thousands of poor people in the southern part of the department of Bolivar have been displaced from land that has rich soil and is believed to have minerals and other natural resources that could be mined and extracted. Many rural poor and people of African descent have had their land taken from them in the department of Choco (which borders the Pacific Ocean and Panama) possibly because of plans of large landholders and large companies to build a canal linking the Pacific and Atlantic Oceans. Communities of indigenous people and rural poor in southern Colombia are being displaced as large companies seek access to the resources of the Amazon rainforest.

Such displacement takes many tolls. Those who are displaced make their way to urban areas where they face unemployment and hunger. They often end up living in slums, facing overcrowded and unsanitary conditions.

Some three million Colombians are internally displaced or have become refugees outside of the country. Thousands have been killed. Gangs are becoming more

and more a problem as families are disrupted and uprooted. Families often fear their children will join one of the fighting forces to find a source of stability and income.

Human rights workers, labor leaders, and people of faith who become involved in the struggle for justice and peace are also targets of threats, violence, arbitrary detention, torture, and disappearances. In 2002, 187 union leaders were murdered, more than in any other country. This danger was heightened by a speech given by Colombian President Alvaro Uribe at the inauguration of the new commander of the Colombian air forces in September 2003. Speaking of human rights organizations and other non-governmental organizations, Uribe stated, “They are



politicians in the service of terrorism, cowards who wave the banner of human rights in order to hand back to terrorism in Colombia the space our public forces and our citizens have taken from it."

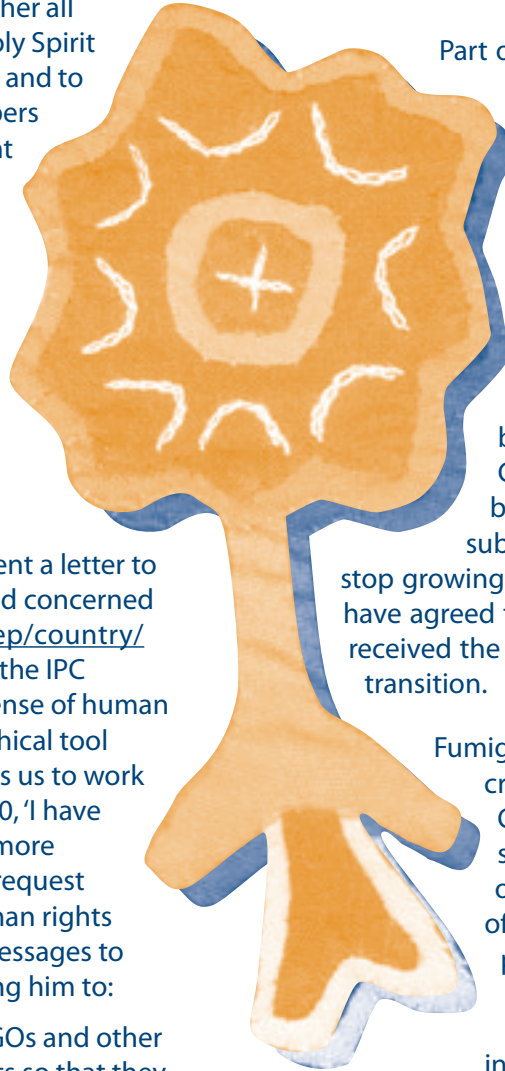
Christians in Colombia have called on the ecumenical and international community for support. In July 2000, an urgent call from the churches in Colombia asked churches in the Northern Hemisphere "to unite your voices with ours to denounce the perverse nature of this kind of [military] 'aid.' We plead with you, just as Esther did, to call together all believers and to fast and pray for the Holy Spirit to change the minds of your governors, and to give strength and wisdom to the members of Colombian churches so that we might console, offer hope and continue to take a message of life and peace from our Lord Jesus Christ to this people and this suffering church." (*An Urgent Call from Colombia to the Churches in the North, Bogotá, Colombia - July 1, 2000*; www.mcc.org/us/washington/seedspeace/call.html)

Responding to President Uribe's denunciation of human rights workers, the Iglesia Presbiteriana de Colombia sent a letter to churches, ecumenical organizations, and concerned friends (www.pcusa.org/pcusa/wmd/ep/country/col-friends.htm). The letter stated that the IPC "considers that the promotion and defense of human rights is an international judicial and ethical tool which belongs to humanity and permits us to work to fulfill the words of Jesus in John 10:10, 'I have come that ye might have life, and that more abundantly.'" The letter concludes, "we request your prayers for those who defend human rights in Colombia, and we ask you to send messages to Colombia's President Alvaro Uribe urging him to:

- ☀ Support and seek protection for NGOs and other organizations active in human rights so that they may do their work with full guarantees as they seek to promote a peace that includes the full participation of all Colombian men and women,
- ☀ Guarantee and protect the lives and the work of those who defend human rights in Colombia,
- ☀ Take all steps necessary to guarantee the lives, physical safety and liberty of the members of the Commission of Justice and Peace and the communities, which they are accompanying."

Plan Colombia Revisited

Over eighty percent of the money provided through Plan Colombia has gone to the Colombian military, a military cited for having human rights abuses and ties to the paramilitary. This money buys military equipment such as planes and helicopters made in the United States and trains Colombian soldiers in Colombia and the United States.



Part of Plan Colombia calls for fumigation to kill the coca crop used to produce cocaine. The chemical sprayed in this process has affected legitimate crops, water supplies, schools, and homes. After fumigation, people have reported respiratory problems, rashes, and burning in the eyes. Plan Colombia states there will be compensation and crop substitution for farmers who stop growing coca. Of the thousands who have agreed to switch, very few have received the aid needed to make the transition.

Fumigation has killed some drug crops. Coca cultivation in Colombia has decreased somewhat, however much of the decrease has been offset by increases in coca production in Bolivia and Peru. Military aid to Colombia has failed to curb drug abuse in the United States, one of its main goals. According to the U.S. Office of National Drug Control Policy, drugs are just as available on streets in the United States now as they were three years ago. The price of cocaine in the United States remains the same as before Plan Colombia. A study by the Rand Corporation suggests that treatment programs would prove more effective than interdiction and military action in addressing drug abuse. Yet the United States continues to pursue a military response.