



MINUTE FOR MISSION

May 1, 2005

A Faithful Pastor in Colombia

Jesús sat across the desk, clean-shaven and handsome, in Alice Winters' office on the campus of the Reformed University of Colombia. "Not the resurrected Jesús who lived in Palestine 2000 years ago (although he was there too)," writes Alice, "but one of my former students." Jesús (pronounced "hay-SUS") is a common name throughout Latin America.

This Jesús studied in the Bible Institute in Urabá, which many Presbyterians have helped to underwrite. He went on to become a pastor and served in the small mountain town of Saiza. Alice Winters visited Saiza in May 1999 and found that in addition to the many activities Jesús' church had already initiated, its members wanted to ask the PC(USA) Hunger Program to fund a project for raising pigs in order to help farm families add more meat to their diet.

That project was never submitted because six weeks later Saiza ceased to exist. Paramilitary troops came into the village and rounded up the men in the village square to be killed. But one of the "paras" knew Jesús and whispered to him, "Pastor, don't just let them kill you. Make a run for it!" Jesús later said it was like coming out of a trance. He ran, and then everybody ran. The paramilitaries fired indiscriminately but killed only twelve instead of the seventy they had anticipated. Jesús hid out all that night, not knowing what had befallen his family, while the frustrated troops set fire to the village.

Within days Saiza's entire population, some three thousand persons, had come down from the mountains, becoming another great wave of displaced persons fleeing Colombia's violence. (Gifts to the ECO project for displaced persons help the Presbyterian Church of Colombia respond to this continuing crisis.) The presbytery felt that because he initiated the resistance in Saiza, Jesús would not be safe in the area. He was placed in Coast Presbytery as the new pastor of a church in Cartagena. The church in Cartagena is in a poor neighborhood that tourists never



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see. When Jesús arrived, still traumatized by his experience, he found a congregation weakened by divisions and a city overrun by displaced persons from Urabá—including a number of old friends—and all over northern Colombia. In five years as pastor in Cartagena, Jesús built up the church and developed an important ministry among the desplazados (displaced).

But the past caught up with him, perhaps because of his ministry with the desplazados. As he sat in Alice's office, he shared with her the Calvary he passed through just before Holy Week. First, there were anonymous telephone calls with threats. Then a note came: "We have your coffin ready." The decisive incident was a beating to his 15-year-old son. Unknown persons forced the boy into a car one evening as he ran an errand for his mother. They took him to an isolated beach, beat him up, and held him under water. After two hours, they left him on the beach, bruised, bleeding, and soaking wet. At around midnight a taxi finally took him to his frantic parents. This was the message: "You've been warned."

"I'm leaving Cartagena," Jesús told Alice. He leaned forward and added, "But not because of fear. I'm leaving for the sake of my family and for the sake of the church. Both my congregation and the presbytery are giving me wonderful support. The congregation numbers have been drawn together through this experience as they suffered together with my family. As for me, I look on these threats as applause for the work I have been doing."

Alice asks for prayer for all the pastors and church leaders in Colombia. "But I don't want you to think we live in an atmosphere of gloom. There is caution, even fear at times, but there is also irrepressible joy, a constant sense of the presence of the risen Lord," continues Alice. "We are grateful for the Americans who are with us as part of the PC(USA) accompaniment program, reminding Colombians of the many Presbyterians and other Christian friends in the United States who stand with them in prayer."

Do you have a mission story to tell? Would you like to read inspiring stories of Presbyterians in mission? Visit the Witness Season Web site: www.pcusa.org/witness. New minutes for mission are posted on the 1st and 15th of each month.

For more information on the Witness Season mission education emphasis contact Billie Healy, Associate for Mission Education Resources (888) 728-7228, ext. 5689, or Bhealy@ctr.pcusa.org.

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