

Welcome to Colombia!

By Rev. Jack and Virginia Miller.

Welcomed we were, as the eight members of the Southeastern Minnesota Synod group that toured churches and projects of the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Colombia (IELCO).

The welcome was often overwhelming. In the central Colombian city of Tunja, a little chapel was packed with about a hundred people, and a wonderful program with prayer, music, theater, and gifts began – of course – with food. They brought the food to us – a big bowl of thick chicken stew (think Minnesota hotdish) – and as we started warily to eat, we wondered: “Are we going to be the only ones served?”

Not a chance. More bowls came, first for the adults, then for the dozens of children, right down to the last little boy who, even with help, spilled about half of his on the floor (No problem. A couple of smiling moms came and cleaned it up and an older girl helped him continue eating.) When Christians gather for a meal, here or in Colombia, *everyone* eats.

Such hospitality was the norm throughout our ten-day stay (Oct. 11-21) in this conflicted but beautiful country. Coordinated by the staff of IELCO, our main activity was to visit a few of the small but amazingly active local congregations.

One of our first impressions was of size – the great size of Bogotá, estimated at six to eight million people, and the small size and large impact of the congregations we visited. One impoverished neighborhood in Bogotá has an estimated one and a half million people! This neighborhood has been the dumping ground for displaced people during the approximately 50 years of civil war, still a reality in Colombia.

Poverty is pervasive in Colombia. We were told that two thirds of the 40 million people live in poverty. This in a country with superb natural resources of land, forests, water and minerals. No one should be poor. But it is precisely the fighting over these resources that has

helped to impoverish the masses.

Violent fighting between the military, the guerrillas and the paramilitaries, though lessening, is still a part of life in Colombia. Many places in the country still are not safe, but security has increased in much of the country, thanks to the presence of soldiers and federal police. We felt completely safe, both in Bogotá and in the outlying cities we visited.

Last year was the first such visit from our synod to Colombia following ten years of conditions too unsafe to visit. Now the Lutherans there are urging us to come and to strengthen the ties we have as sisters and brothers in Christ.

As a body, IELCO has undertaken an amazing array of projects for the benefit not only of their members but of all Colombia. For example, they are involved in:

- Helping children and young people attend school (some through graduate level)
- Feeding and teaching children and families in off-school hours (sports, music, computers and marketable skills such as handcrafts)
- Supporting private Lutheran schools
- Advocating for human rights, including programs to combat HIV and AIDS and to get rid of land mines (Colombia is the country with the most land mines in the world)

We were especially impressed with what is being done by Only by Faith, the little Lutheran congregation in Bogotá with which our congregation, St. Matthew Lutheran Church, Granger, Minn., has recently become a partner. They run a school and community center called The True Vine, that was filled with children on Saturday morning when we visited.

Some of these beautiful children don't go to school, lacking even the family motivation or the little money it takes to buy supplies for public school. But what a great time they were having! And when it came time for lunch, they ate the big meal with gusto, and we saw very little left.

How can a little congregation like Only by Faith run a program like this? They're small, with approximately fifty people in worship on the Sunday we visited. The secret is that they get help from the scholarship and social project fund Leadership and Development LIZWAN, coordinated in the United States by Pastor Natanael Lizarazo of First Lutheran Church, Sioux Falls, SD.



During the group's visit to Principe de Paz (Prince of Peace) Lutheran Church, Tunja, Colombia. Left to right. Mary Duvall, Marilyn Bunge, Jorge Ramirez, Kathy Bolin, Francisco Ramirez, and the grandfather of Jorge and Francisco.

Continued on page 7

Sal y Luz

The Sal y Luz project of Lutheran World Relief partners communities of faith in the United States with Colombia's courageous Peace Sanctuary Churches.

"Sal y Luz" means "salt and light." This is what the Peace Sanctuary Churches aspire to be: places of refuge and hope in a country ravaged by five decades of violence. Thousands of individuals have been killed and millions have been displaced from their homes in Colombia's civil war. More than 40 Protestant pastors were murdered in 2003 alone. In the midst of this violence, many congregations have declared themselves Peace Sanctuary Churches. These congregations boldly pursue peace, feed the hungry, shelter the displaced, establish new economies, and open dialogues to reconcile relationships.

The Southeastern Minnesota Synod Women of the ELCA have been a Sal y Luz partner community for the last several years. The synod Global Mission/Companion Synod Committee is currently evaluating the future of a Sal y Luz community in the synod.



Get it Online

This and more information about Sal y Luz and Lutheran World Relief's work in Colombia at www.lwr.org/colombia/salyluz

Continued from page 4

Pastor Natanael, whose presence with us on most of the trip was a great help and a delight, showed and told us about many of the LIZWAN projects, including help for some people to buy homes.

And yet, the Lutherans we encountered are not one-sided social activists. Their spirituality shines with the love of Jesus, in their singing and praying and overflowing love for one another, a love they poured out on us. And if anyone exemplified this love in the Lord, it was their bishop, Rev. Sigifredo Buitrago, who welcomed us, hugged us, accompanied us, and drove the last of us to the airport for the flight home, waiting for an hour till we passed security!

We had the benefit of a talented and Colombia-connected group from Minnesota, several of whom spoke excellent Spanish. Our companions were Kathy Bolin and Katie Livingood from the synod; Marilyn Bunge, member at Christ Lutheran, Preston, Minn.; Pastor Norman (ret.) and Anita Omodt of Chatfield, returning to Colombia for only the second time since ending their time as missionaries there 37 years ago and serving as a wonderful resource of previous knowledge of the country and the language for the group; and Mary Duvall, Midwest Grassroots Advocacy Organizer, Lutheran World Relief, Minneapolis, Minn., also a great asset with her Spanish-speaking ability.

Next year a similar trip is planned, and we hope that others from the synod will have the opportunity to go. We recommend that they be sure to bring an open heart and a good appetite. They will be filled.

Root Prairie Lutheran Rededicated

By Mary Finseth
Root Prairie Lutheran Church

"Bless this house, O Lord we pray, make it safe by night and day", the first line of a famous 1927 hymn, was also the theme of the rededication service held at Root Prairie Lutheran Church, in rural Fountain on Sunday, November 11.

After vandals struck almost six months ago, the church is now getting back to normal. Attendees of the service witnessed many changes within the church. The 109-year-old altar painting that had been sent away for restoration from the vandals' damage was put back in place. In addition, many of the stained glass windows in the sanctuary had been restored, new chairs replaced broken pews, and fresh sheetrock and paint converted the damaged basement into a new fellowship hall.

Bishop Harold Usgaard and Pastor Paul Forde led the service that was full of joyous thanksgiving and blessing for all that has been accomplished.

As 2007 comes to a close, the congregation of Root Prairie would like to express their heartfelt gratitude to all of the congregations, individuals and businesses of Southeastern Minnesota for the outpouring of support. The whole experience of the last six months has been one of growth and blessing for the congregation.



Sue Mueller-Story, Mankato, standing in front of the altar painting she restored.