

Youth Building Shalom *desde Abajo*

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Colombia, the country of my birth, is a beautiful nation that has suffered the consequences of violent conflict. One of my dreams has been to return Colombia to make a difference there. I dreamed of building peace. When my family and I returned to Colombia in 2016 after a year of home assignment in the United States, I imagined all the ways God was going to work through me to bring transformation. However, since arriving in Colombia it is I who have been undergoing transformation as I learn from the Covenant youth I serve alongside. They have shown me what it means to build shalom in a town that has experienced decades of social, economic, and environmental conflict. In walking alongside these young people who are building peace from the bottom up, *paces desde abajo*, I have witnessed the transformation of their community, and I have been transformed in the process.

Colombia is a country that has experienced centuries of violent conflict. It was conquered by Spanish colonial violence in the sixteenth century,¹ and it secured its independence through violence in 1819.² Colombia's path to becoming a republic was marked by civil wars.³ A brief period of peace (1906–1930)⁴ was followed by intermittent episodes of violence (1931–1948)⁵ and a period of increased violence (1948–1974)

¹ David Bushnell, *Colombia: una nación a pesar de si misma: nuestra historia desde los tiempos precolombinos hasta hoy*, 21st ed. (Bogotá: Planeta, 2016), 27–49.

² *Ibid.*, 51–82.

³ *Ibid.*, 85–114.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 22–58.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 261–85.

as rebel groups began to fight with the government.⁶ During the 1970s through the 1990s, violence came to the cities through warring drug cartels.⁷ Later in the 1990s through 2006, paramilitary groups fighting against the rebels, carried out massacres and caused significant displacement in the countryside. From 2007 to the present, criminal gangs have been responsible for many homicides and displacement in some areas of the country as they fight for the control of territory, natural resources, and drug markets. El Bagre is a town that has experienced many of the consequences of these conflicts.

El Bagre is a town of 51,862 people located in the state of Antioquia. Its economy is largely dependent on gold mining (80–85%), and over three-quarters of its people (77.41%) live beneath the poverty level.⁸ Illegal armed groups have been present in the town since the end of the 1970s. Over 49,000 people have been victims of violence or displacement between 1985 and 2020 due to violence in the surrounding countryside and extortion in the urban areas.⁹ El Bagre's rivers and creeks are polluted with mercury and sediment from gold mining.¹⁰ The land is being destroyed by mining, and the process of recovering it for agriculture is very expensive and time consuming.¹¹ Government presence in the area has been so weak that the local people do not trust the state. The Colombian government has signed peace agreements with a paramilitary group (2006) and guerrillas (2016), but local people are not yet experiencing that peace. It is in this context that a group of Covenant youth are bearing witness to the gospel of shalom.¹²

Paces desde Abajo

God's shalom is not the kind of peace the world is seeking (John

⁶ Darío Villamizar Herrera, *Las guerrillas en Colombia: una historia de los orígenes hasta los confines* (Bogotá: Penguin Random House, 2017).

⁷ Gerard Martin, *Medellín: tragedia y resurrección, Mafias, ciudad, y Estado, 1975–2013* (Medellín: La Carreta, 2014).

⁸ "Perfil productivo del Municipio El Bagre," July 15, 2014, p. 43, http://issuu.com/pnudcol/docs/perfil_productivo_el_bagre.

⁹ Red Nacional de Información, Ficha estratégica PDET, <http://fichaestrategica.unidadvictimas.gov.co/BoletinPDET/IndexPDET>.

¹⁰ Sandra Elena Botero, "Minería y contaminación de ríos, las violencias invisibles en el Bajo Cauca," *El Espectador*, January 17, 2017, <https://colombia2020.elespectador.com/territorio/mineria-y-contaminacion-de-rios-las-violencias-invisibles-en-el-bajo-cauca>.

¹¹ D. Villar Argáiz, "La minería como 'locomotora' de la economía colombiana y su costo ambiental," *Revista Colombiana de Ciencias Pecuarias* 27, no. 3 (2014): 155–56.

¹² Colombian law defines youth as fourteen to twenty-eight years of age.

14:27); sometimes even Christians do not seek this kind of peace. God's shalom is peace that passes any human understanding (Philippians 4:7) and involves human's relationships with the Creator, oneself, other humans, and the whole ecosystem—in other words, the entire sphere of human relationships. Shalom is what Eve and Adam experienced in Genesis 1 and 2: harmony with their Creator, themselves, each other, and the creation.¹³ Shalom is not merely the absence of conflict because conflict is a part of being human.¹⁴ To build shalom is to create environments where life can be lived and experienced fully.¹⁵ This is the peace Jesus Christ came to give (John 10:10b). This is the peace a group of youth in El Bagre have been building since 2017, and I have had the privilege to partner with them.

Paces desde abajo is the peace that is built by communities that have experience direct structural or cultural violence; therefore, they themselves start initiatives to transform their situation in peaceful ways, according to their understanding of peace. This is not based on top-down peace agreements but on local ideas. These ideas come from groups of people—children, youth, women, indigenous people, Afro-Colombians, and farmers—who desire transformation in their own contexts.¹⁶ These peace initiatives are generated in communities of violence as the people use their moral imagination to envision something better without forgetting the reality of their context.¹⁷ They decide to build something good despite the current situation. In Colombia there are many secular examples of peace building based on *paces desde abajo* that have been giving hope to communities within the country.¹⁸ However, an even more complete hope can be offered when the peace built from the bottom up comes from the very giver of shalom.

The Whole Gospel in El Bagre

For a group of youth actively engaged in peacebuilding in El Bagre,

¹³ Lisa Sharon Harper, *The Very Good Gospel: How Everything Wrong Can Be Made Right* (New York: WaterBrook, 2016), 13.

¹⁴ Percy Calderón Concha, "Teoría de conflictos de Johan Galtung," *Revista de Paz y Conflictos* 2 (2009): 67, <https://www.redalyc.org/articulo.oa?id=205016389005>.

¹⁵ Luis Gómez, "Consecuencias prácticas de la: Shālôm y su relación con la Justicia hebrea," *Franciscanum* 58, no. 165 (2016): 203–14.

¹⁶ Esperanza Hernández, "Paces desde abajo en Colombia," *Reflexión Política* 11, no. 22 (2009): 176–86.

¹⁷ John Paul Lederach, *La imaginación moral: el arte y el alma de la construcción de la paz* (Bogotá, Colombia: Semana Libros, 2016), 21.

¹⁸ See Esperanza, "Paces desde abajo."

through the “Be Peace, Make Peace” project, two Bible verses have been central: “Seek the peace [shalom] of the city to which I have carried you into exile. Pray to the Lord for it, because if it prospers [shalom] —you too will prosper [have shalom]” (Jeremiah 29:7); and “Blessed are the peacemakers for they will be called children of God” (Matthew 5:9). The youth do not see themselves as exiles because they live in their own land, but they want to not only *pray* for the shalom of their land but also to actively *build* it. They believe they are children of God and for this reason are working for peace. In order to do this, they entered a six-month process of learning about shalom, conflict transformation, and public advocacy. They then began to put what they learned into practice.

For the youth of El Bagre, shalom is practical, and it is pursued outside the walls of the church building. The local churches in El Bagre tend to focus their ministry in a centrifugal way, expecting people to come to the church building to get to know God. By contrast, the youth of the Covenant church in El Bagre, Centro de Armonia Cristiana, have been taking the church outside the four walls of the church building, sharing shalom in different neighborhoods throughout the town. As a part of the “Be Peace, Make Peace” project, they have organized peace fairs, led clean-up campaigns, planted trees, held an “abrazaton” (offering free hugs as people passed by) in a busy area of town, organized a peace soccer tournament, created a community kite festival, participated with the local youth organization to plan and implement a youth event, and joined a peace march. These are just some of the practical ways youth are seeking to build shalom in El Bagre.

The youth have understood that the peace that comes from God has to be shared in tangible ways with everyone, especially with those who do not come to the local church. They are building shalom from the bottom up, and it shows according to Alirio Castro, one the leaders in the community, who said:

These youth have positively impacted my life and the community, because today we have a group of youth and children with a basic concept of forgiveness, reconciliation, and transformation of conflicts. To see these young people speaking of these themes with ownership and with conviction is so incredibly satisfying....It’s not just theoretical for them. It is practical knowledge and the significant experiences that they have had in different areas is a testimony.

The work the youth are doing in El Bagre is connected to their vision of

the whole gospel. The kind of peace they are building seeks to reconcile relationships that have been affected by sin, relationships Jesus came to restore: relationship with God, ourselves, others, and the whole creation. This kind of reconciliation is based on the entire narrative of Scripture and centered on the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. It is through Christ that God reconciled the whole world to himself (Colossians 1:20), and for the youth in El Bagre peace is built on the work of Christ who is the reconciler and the one who brings true peace.

The whole gospel seeks to restore all aspects of human life that have been affected by sin, including the economic, political, social, and cultural spheres of human existence.¹⁹ This is what the youth of El Bagre have been seeking as they build peace in their hometown. They have been teaching other youth entrepreneurship in order to improve their economy. They have been equipping youth to understand their political rights and be involved in the democratic process. Teachings about gender equality and conflict transformation help participants face the “machismo” and the culture of violence that are so present in El Bagre. The project also creates space for activities aimed to prevent youth and children from gang involvement and drug use. The youth are working additionally to restore their ecosystem that has been damaged by gold mining, teaching their peers that stewardship of God’s creation is part of the whole gospel. The Covenant youth of El Bagre are building peace that seeks the well-being of participants in all aspects of their life.

Global Lessons from El Bagre

Many things can be learned from this particular youth ministry. The whole church, including children and youth, can and should be agents of transformation. The youth-led peacebuilding in El Bagre, transforming a community impacted by decades of violence into a town of hope, is a testimony for the entire church. Too often, children and youth are seen by local churches as the object of the gospel rather than agents of transformation. In El Bagre the youth believe that they can transform not only one neighborhood but a whole town by building shalom. Pastors and church leaders need to trust and encourage the work that youth and children can do in order to bring transformation to their context through the good news of the whole gospel. This ministry, “Be Peace,

¹⁹ Lausanne Theology Working Group, “The Whole Church Taking the Whole Gospel to the Whole World,” *Lausanne Movement*, June 1, 2010, <https://www.lausanne.org/content/twg-three-wholes>.

Make Peace,” has impacted not only the town of El Bagre but also the global personnel who serve alongside the youth. They have taught us to let the youth lead and believe that they can bring transformation to their own town.

Biblical shalom is tangible, and it produces real transformation when it is put in practice. The ministry of peace in El Bagre demonstrates that in regions impacted by decades of violence, peacebuilding must be visible and contextualized, based on people’s abilities and needs. The youth of El Bagre desire shalom for their community. They want people to experience harmony with God. They want people to experience healing from the consequences of violence. They want to be able to forgive and live in harmony with others by transforming conflict in peaceful ways. They want to protect and recover the ecosystem.

One day we were meeting about the peacebuilding initiative far from El Bagre in the city of Medellín. We, some professionals and others from Medellín, were trying to tell the youth of El Bagre how best to implement the ministry of peace in their hometown when a sixteen-year-old girl spoke up and said, “We know how to do it. We don’t need people from the big cities to tell us how do it. We live there and we know our region. We know how to do it; just walk a alongside us.” This is a critical lesson for intercultural ministries: local people know how to do it.

The youth of El Bagre are building shalom from the bottom up, *paces desde abajo*. They say this is Jesus’s way because he could have transformed the world from the top down, but he wanted to come to be with us, to walk with us and transform lives, communities, and towns from the bottom up. We have the privilege of walking with these children and youth who have been agents of transformation in their own land, building peace from the bottom up. We need to let them know that we go with them, that they are not alone.