

# Serving the Seminary Community in a Country in Conflict: Five Lessons Learned at the Biblical Seminary of Colombia

DIANA LUCÍA PEÑUELA

BIBLICAL SEMINARY

Student communities are miniature representations of the society and history of a country. As such, Biblical Seminary of Colombia (FUSBC) embodies traits such as joy, friendship, and a certain “magical realism” found in Latin America. The seminary’s theology curriculum comes from both the rigor of books and from the experience of being Colombian. For example, virtually everyone who has come through our classrooms will remember the now famous “night of the regions,” which features the best of each geographical and cultural region the country. Typical dances, music, humor, and delicious regional culinary dishes make this the most waited for fiesta each year.

But not everything is fiesta. Along with the smiles, Colombians also carry deep wounds caused by century-old historic injuries. Until most recently, Colombia endured the longest-lived internal armed conflict in the world. As a result, Colombia now has the world’s largest internally displaced population.<sup>1</sup>

The nation has made great strides to overturn the cultural impact left by narcotic trafficking in the 80’s. For example, our hometown of Medellin has transformed from the world’s most violent cities to being named the most innovative city in the world.<sup>2</sup> However, many scars remain. In the church, and therefore in the community of the seminary, we also bear the effects of the Colombian social turbulence.

<sup>1</sup> Verdad abierta, *VerdadAbierta.com*, <http://www.verdadabierta.com/cifras/3829-estadisticas-de-desplazamiento>, último acceso 30 de abril de 2017.

<sup>2</sup> Caracol Radio, Caracol Radio, [http://caracol.com.co/radio/2013/11/30/nacional/1385813160\\_028088.html](http://caracol.com.co/radio/2013/11/30/nacional/1385813160_028088.html), último acceso 30 de abril de 2017.

The following paragraphs offer reflections from the experience of serving this seminary community with the hope that they will prove helpful for others who serve in communities with similar complex situations or realities of conflict. Perhaps, they will also enrich those who have not had to suffer.

## The Healing Power of the Community

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In a school that prepares people for service to God and others, the academic program, with all of its importance and priority, does not meet all of the needs of the members of the school community. A context of conflict amplifies this reality. Students arrive at the seminary from very different backgrounds, many of whom have faced profound trauma. Students bring experiences of their own internal displacement, the violent death of loved ones, or physical and emotional abuse. The institution, therefore, has an obligation to become aware of these situations and help where it can.

At FUSBC, we have responded institutionally by creating a Department of Community Well-being that is responsible for the pastoral and professional care of those who need these services. If a situation requires professional intervention, the seminary arranges access to a specialist. Providing such care requires a one on one approach. The results have produced both satisfaction and some deep frustrations, but such is the inevitable cost of working in the mysterious region of the soul.

In our experience, however, the best curative power comes from the community. Families open their homes to share the table with a poor student. Students benefit from proximity to people with more significant experience in their lives and faith journeys. Years of studying and living together weave deep friendships among students and staff alike. The solidarity that develops among neighbors has a curative power than more formal instruments – as necessary and effective as they may be – can ever produce.

Sarita,<sup>3</sup> a baby born with severe health problems, illustrates our community experience. Having wanted a wanted a child for years, her parents had suffered several miscarriages. Finally, after a complicated pregnancy, they experienced the premature birth of this little one. During days that became weeks and months in the hospital, they remained uncertain if Sarita would survive. However, the community moved in solidarity with this family. They offered constant prayers, organized care for mother and daughter, displayed concern in multiple ways, including envelopes with small, sacrificial money gifts that were slipped under the door. Happily, Sarita survived and today is a lovely young girl. In the midst of this

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<sup>3</sup> All names are fictional in order to protect the identity of the individuals.

challenge, the community became a channel of healing.

Our school has viewed the development of community as a strategic priority and intentionally supplemented our formal curriculum in three ways. First, we engage in spiritual formation together through devotional times in the dormitories, weekly chapel services, and formal and non-formal prayer times during the week and the school term. Messages that develop the theological importance of service and mutual care as an expression of our faith and adoration set the framework for action. Second, we organize groups around shared interests (e.g., women, singles, married couples, athletes, musicians, etc.) or service projects for the community. Service projects take place once each semester and always end with a communal meal - a barbeque or “sanchocho.” We have also instituted formal programs such as the “Nieces and Nephews Plan” in which a family “adopts” a single student to share one or more meals. Schools can creatively develop a host of responses that fit their unique culture and setting. At FUSBC, we believe the community is therapeutic and therefore important in forming students for ministry.

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### Service That Comes From Vulnerability

Alfredo is one of our graduates. He arrived in Medellin after surviving a massacre in the war-torn area of Urabá, near the border with Panama. A bullet wound caused him to lose 80% of his sight. However, he considered himself fortunate to be alive, which was only possible after playing dead for several hours after he was shot. Possessing a drive difficult to express in words, he finished his studies at the seminary and for the last decade has served as a missionary in Colombian prisons.<sup>4</sup> This admittedly extreme case is emblematic of a community in which wounded Colombians seek to help their wounded nation. Too often, we believe a myth, common among Christians, that only those “who are healthy are going to heal the sick.” Serving as wounded healers has its own difficulties but, in general, our collective wounds have provided seminarians with a great capacity to understand and share the in pain of others.

Throughout the years, we have learned that “to weep with those who weep” is a key to a vibrant ministry, especially in the context of conflict. As we encourage our graduates to serve from this vulnerability, our faculty and staff make a conscious effort to serve the students from our vulnerability rather than from expected strength. Both students and faculty members serve out of their personal stories, which include injury and weakness, as well as giftings and strengths.

A few years ago, Carlos, a professor known for his intellectual rigor and personal discipline, suffered from burnout. This full-time professor and administrator,

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<sup>4</sup> To learn more go to: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rb1kK\\_FcFPU](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rb1kK_FcFPU)

who was very popular among students, had to stop working for nearly two years and enter a long period of recovery. After this, he returned to the classroom with a lighter academic load, but increased involvement in the lives of the students. Since returning, he can often be found sitting with a student in one of the cafes of the city, offering wisdom obtained from the illness. Because of his experience, he has changed his counseling approach from one based on a supposition of total excellence to one conscious of personal limitations. This change has made him one of the best and most sought-after counselors in the seminary and throughout the city.

The ties that bind a community together are those of common needs, shared without pretensions in daily life. Community will not develop if its members insist that they are a club of best practices before they recognize that they are first a group of imperfect beings. Lasting ministry impact flows from this understanding of weakness and vulnerability within the community.

## Creativity in Response to Needs

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Theological formation often happens in the context of financial challenges, and our school is no exception. Most students come with little or no financial assistance and from very difficult conditions, often a result of decades of internal national conflict. Therefore, the difficulty is both institutional as the school strives to remain operational, but also affects the entire community as students struggle to cover their academic fees and the cost of living.

In this context, we have seen the extreme value of creativity as a means of solving financial needs. In Cuba, “vocal sampling” is a well-known genre of music in which musicians imitate the sounds of instruments with their voices. In the musical culture of Cuba, this surreal and experimental genre of a cappella singing emerged in response to the difficulty in obtaining musical instruments. Instead of remaining silent, they began to “sing” the trumpet, stringed instruments, and drums. In the seminary, we have learned to do “vocal sampling” with clothes, food, fun, and, when sound judgment allows, even the health of the community.

Consequently, we have experienced some surprising results as the community addresses the needs of its members. Some of the initiatives include a community clothes closet, where people donate used clothing in excellent condition that students can obtain through trade for non-perishable food items. The school then distributes the food to those in need in the area. On campus, we have other food subsidies financed through donors, so that students can have a balanced daily menu, at a lower cost, improving their nutritional level and therefore improving their academic performance. We also involve students in various types of service to the institution as part of the scholarship support they receive from the school.

Student-led groups organize sports championships, have musical groups, support research projects, offer tutorial help, and even contribute to reading and recreational programs for the children in the neighborhood where the seminary is located. To provide health care, we leverage available resources in the city, including doctors who charge lower rates for members of our community, or medical professionals who visit our campus. The school also pays for a service that covers medical emergencies for members of the community.

One of the most valuable aspects of the use of creativity for supplying our needs is that we have not focused on offering hand-outs. Rather, by creating exchanges and student-led approaches, we confer a high sense of dignity, as the community contributes to the well-being of its student members.

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## The Value of Diversity

The seminary places great value on its diversity that brings together people across a breadth of denominational, racial, cultural, educational, and geographic backgrounds. This diversity has even more importance in a fragmented society like Colombia. By way of illustration, in our classrooms we have former delinquents and former police officers who see each other as brothers. On the other hand, students who have not suffered the reality from the armed conflict personally have found it enriching to live with those who have suffered these realities and have risked their lives to live out their faith.

Fernando, an artist with a degree from a private university, grew up in a Christian church that focused on evangelism of the professional classes in Bogotá. When he came to study at the seminary, he encountered colleagues whose personal stories changed his view of Christianity forever. One of his classmates was a poet, displaced from the war-torn region of Urabá and who was extremely sensitive to social injustice. Another classmate spent a decade in prison. A third studied theology in order to share the Gospel in the neighborhood where he had been a delinquent. And another, with whom he later sang in several presentations, came from a pastoral family in a rural municipality on the Northern coast who had a price placed on his head for refusing to join in the political corruption of local politicians. Inevitably, the lives of his classmates became the primary source for his creativity and also a decisive element of his own Christian identity. Through his songs, this richness has reached many corners of Latin America. He is just one example of the rich value and profound impact of the diversity in the seminary community.

We have also learned that a Lutheran male student and a Wesleyan female student can be friends – and even marry; or that a Pentecostal “lit by fire” can end up serving in an Anabaptist community. Moreover, this does not happen because

of doctrinal superficiality but by recognizing the singular fundamental sufficient reality of the Gospel.

## The Seed of Great Change

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Finally, our seminary remains a relatively small institution. In our 70-year history, we have lived through periods of great national turbulence including more than 50 years of civil war between leftist guerrillas and the state, the religious violence of the 50's, the ideological fever of the 70's, the battle of the drug cartels of the 80's and 90's, and the activity of right-wing paramilitary groups since 2000.

With the most recent peace agreement, Colombia has entered a risky post-conflict process. Many in the country have become disenchanted and weary of the corrupt leadership. Neighboring Venezuela, in the early stages of a bloody conflict, sends a stark warning of the damage that political polarization can cause a society. In the meantime, we face other social challenges as well. Technology has opened new avenues for young people but includes some dark places as well. Teens encounter with new sexual alternatives that generate questions of personal identity. Online sociopaths entice young people to harm themselves. In the midst of these challenges, we continue to reflect on the relevance and effect of a theological education institution whose very existence faces challenges year after year.

Yet, God, in his grace, has given abundant and encouraging signs that these efforts are worth the fight. We see external evidence of the positive impact that the seminary, through a graduate, a publication, or program, has contributed to in society or in the church. Another modest but important impact is evident in the students themselves or in their families. Currently, one of our graduates—married to another alumnus—pastors a flourishing church in southern Chile. By 22 years of age, he had already been in prison in Medellin. Only the gospel has the miraculous power to take him from prison to pastoring, but that work primarily took place in the location and community of the seminary.

In his account of the multiplication of the loaves, John registers that a boy offered his insufficient resources. Although they were almost nothing when compared with the urgent need, Jesus not only received them but used that gift to ignite the miraculous. Like those five loaves, the seminary seems so small before the immensity of the needs of Colombia and the world. However, by those marvelous and paradoxical dynamics of the Kingdom of God, that which might be the cause of discouragement and impotence becomes the wood that stokes the fire of our calling. God does great things with unexpected instruments. The seminary continues forward, one of many other communities that walk in contexts of conflict and need, sustained by this faith that conquers the world.

## References

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### **Diana Lucía Peñuela**

Diana Lucía Peñuela is a theologian and psychologist with a master's degree in clinical psychology. She has years of experience in mentoring women and youth, counseling, and developing community projects. She currently works with the Biblical Seminary of Colombia, leading the department of Community Well-being. Together with her husband and two children, she resides in the city of Medellin, Colombia.