

Young woman kisses child at the day care center at Principe de Paz Methodist Church, Bogota, Colombia. Below, a mother feeds her son at the center. Photos on pages 24-28 by Nile Sprague.



Gender Justice Also Makes for Peace

MISSION GIVING-SUPPORTED PROGRAMS FOSTER JUSTICE, PEACE AND RECONCILIATION.

by NILE SPRAGUE



The Rev. Nubia Ester Toro Bello shares lessons of faith and empowerment with women in Colombia. Below, a woman works in a cooperative coffee field in Caldas, Colombia.

The Rev. Nubia Ester Toro Bello is responsible for the entire coffee region of Colombia for the Methodist Church in Colombia from her offices in Armenia, Quindío District, Colombia, in the mountains southwest of Bogotá. But that's not the way she started out.

I first met Ms. Toro Bello in the spring of 2008 when she was 45 and the third woman pastor of Prince of Peace Methodist Church in Bogotá, Colombia. She shared the transformation of her life from a widowed mother who believed her sole role in society was to raise children to become the leader of a church, educating and empowering women, facilitating conflict resolution, and raising a healthy daughter with a positive self-image and strong sense of self-worth. Hers is a story of faith and



struggle that shows how United Methodist Women-supported women's leadership development programs foster justice, peace and reconciliation for individuals and communities.

A woman's worth

Ms. Toro Bello was born in Colombia but moved to Venezuela when she was 11 and remained there until she was 27 and her first husband was killed and she

returned to her family in Colombia. "I was three months pregnant," she said. "It was during the first attempt to overthrow Cesar Chavez. He was a soldier. It was very difficult, but it brought me closer to God."

Her eldest son, 14 at the time, was killed when he refused to join neither the guerillas nor the mercenaries in Colombia, which was also in turmoil. With a pregnancy marked by trauma and stress, Ms. Toro Bello's baby girl was born with health problems.

"After my daughter lost her kidney, she was still very sick, so I took her to a Christian church and told the priest about the problem. He prayed for her, and she got better," Ms. Toro Bello said. "I felt I had to do something to pay God back for healing my daughter. I



wanted to stand up in every corner, shouting, 'God is real!' I started working in the church, but there were a lot of restrictions. They restricted how women could dress, and I was prohibited from remarrying.

"In this world, it seems that the less valuable individual is the woman, though God chose a woman to deliver his son to Earth."

Ms. Toro Bello had a high school diploma and returned to school to study theology. She soon found she couldn't reconcile what she was learning at the university with many of the church's teachings. Ms. Toro Bello found the Methodist Church when the priest who had prayed for her daughter became Methodist and invited her to join in 2001.

The church where Ms. Toro Bello served as pastor in Bogotá was named the Prince of Peace because it was in a neighborhood rife with conflict and violence, and it provided a safe place for people to gather, worship and exchange ideas. The church helped impoverished migrants and displaced families in the community through a subsidized meals program for kids, daytime child care, women's and men's groups, and a family shelter.

Nuturing women leaders

Ms. Toro Bello was invited to participate in the Mission Giving-supported Centro Popular para América Latina de Comunicación, the Latin American Center for Popular Communication (CEPALC), an ecumenical group that



empowers women and educates society through various grass-roots activities, including discussion and support groups in churches, regular women's group meetings, educational workshops, annual celebrations, radio shows, printed publications and after-school programs.

"When I first went to the CEPALC women's group, I asked if I could bring my 14-year-old daughter, Glaselin, along with me. They replied, 'Yes, you must!'" Ms. Toro Bello said.

Through her involvement with CEPALC, Ms. Toro Bello started a process of transformation and liberation, for herself, her daughter and the congregation she led.

"The first workshop was called, 'How Much Are We Worth?' and we discussed the emphasis in society on women's beauty and their bodies," she said. "By examining this topic, a space was opened for us to look at ourselves and our beliefs and to ask many questions. We talked about the value of women beyond the role of wife and mother."

Ms. Toro Bello said the discussions helped her daughter feel better about her physical body and look at gender roles with new eyes.

"I was impressed with the emphasis on the equality of women and men," said Glaselin, Ms. Toro Bello's daughter. "This idea is unusual here; women are told they have to follow the decisions of men. But I learned that nobody is more important than someone else."

Ms. Toro Bello had experienced this firsthand. "In my old church, the pastor would tell women to love and obey their husbands, but then their husbands would abuse and hit them," she said. "A woman would come back with a black eye or bruises, and I would ask, 'What happened to you?' And she would reply, 'The church told me to submit to my husband.'"

"Many women in Colombia are raised thinking their only purpose in life is to bear children. I want to help them

Children attend day care at Principe de Paz Methodist Church, Bogota, Colombia. On opposite page, the Rev. Nubia Ester Toro Bello cares for a child at the church's day care center.



broaden their horizons and escape from this oppression."

Glaselin began working with children in the local church, making plays with puppets that re-create scenarios and explore issues discussed in the CEPALC meetings.

"Glaselin started working on the project with guidance and assistance from CEPALC. However, when I went to see the kids working on the plays, and I saw they were running and jumping around, I thought, 'This is a waste of time,' and I told Glaselin to stop," Ms. Toro Bello said. "I was still stuck in my old beliefs and values. I couldn't see the spirituality that existed in those movements."

"I recognize now that this was a mistake. Fortunately, a young man from another congregation came to help


Glaselin, and she resumed work on the plays. When I saw it, I was so proud and happy that I realized the error of my decision. It made me cry."

Today Glaselin is responsible for the women's program within Ms. Toro Bello's church district and leads women of all ages, including her elders, in a program of education, empowerment and sensitivity training. Her work is strongly supported by what she learned through her early involvement with CEPALC and the inspiration she found in its women's groups that she attended as a teenager.

Ms. Toro Bello and Glaselin continue to use these lessons as they lead the women of their community.

Ms. Toro Bello is now married again, and her husband is in the process of be-

coming a pastor in the Methodist Church, perhaps inspired by the work of his wife and daughter. The Prince of Peace Methodist Church still participates in the CEPALC program.

"I feel tremendous gratitude to the CEPALC program," Ms. Toro Bello said. "How it has changed my life! It has been through the knowledge I have acquired in the women's group that I have started the process of my own liberation. I cannot call myself a liberated person yet, but I have incorporated in my life many new positive values and have started to change my own life, my daughter's life and lead the women of my congregation to a place of greater liberation and empowerment." 

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