

I still cannot believe that it has been more than a year since I left my work as the coordinator and psychologist for the Refugee Project at the Mennonite Church in Quito Ecuador. When I remember the three years I worked there, many faces come to my mind, many emotions, memories, tastes, odors, images and important stories. I don't think I can explain with words what I experienced during that period. It was a very intense time, where in one day I was able to experience a whole variation of emotions, where my mind could not stop working. It was a time where I felt I had important responsibilities because I had to think very carefully what I could do to help each family I met. I also learn to feel a true sense of compassion towards other people and I felt closed to human's pain and suffering.

My job at the Quito Mennonite Church was to support the refugee families that came to the church in need of help. Every month hundreds of refugees come to Ecuador to have a better and safer life. Most of the families come from Colombia, but we also encounter with families that come from far away places like Middle East countries and from different African countries. Families coming from Colombia have to escape from their own countries due to violence perpetrated by the paramilitary groups, guerrillas and gangs. Most of the times, refugees have no other choice but to escape from their countries barely with what they have on. When they realize that their lives are being endangered by direct threats or they have killed some of their family members. They only have the choice of escaping, put a few things they have on reach on their suitcases and leave as soon as possible. They have no time to say goodbye to anyone, not even their own families. They leave behind their entire lives. In a way part of their identity of the refugees dies in that instant.

Those families that we interviewed at our church and visited during the week were completely broken families. There was no smile seen on their faces. I have never seen in my life people with so much sadness, full of pain, resentment, anger. When I listened to them, I felt unable to do anything. How can these families go through such suffering? How could they have so much pain in their souls? How can they still stand and live?

I remember a time where I had the opportunity to interview along with my husband Luis a man who lived in the outskirts of Colombian big cities. The way he talked and expressed himself, really touched me. We felt his story was genuine and humbled. I will never forget his story. He had been a victim of the paramilitaries and the guerrillas. He lived near a river in Colombia, the very few things he owned was a canoa which he used to work. He worked by transporting people from one end of the river to the next. A guerrilla group asked him to take them from one end of the river to the next. The paramilitaries noticed what he was doing and threatened to kill him as they are big enemies. How is it possible that such humble man that earns his only money by using his canoa to transport people has to leave everything and go seek refuge in a foreign country? It's very absurd!

Unfortunately these families did not only had to struggle through the experiences lived in Colombia but also when they arrived to a new country. When they arrived to Ecuador they also faced hundreds of challenges. For example, this humble man had no idea how the life in the city worked as he always lived in the countryside. He did not know how to work in the city. Most of the refugees in Ecuador end up working as street vendors as it is the only way to survive. It is impossible for them to find a stable job. They suffer of discrimination to the point of when they look for jobs there are many places with signs saying "we don't accept

colombians”.

Stories like these ones we heard every week, stories full of suffering, pain and injustice. The toughest stories for me to hear were those of women. Many of them were victims of sexual abuse perpetrated by criminals and were witness of cold blood murder of their own families. Valentina along her daughter were victims of abuse. One day a group of men entered their house and raped her and her daughter in front of her youngest kids. Sofia saw a man on a motorcycle killed cold blood her brother outside her door. Sara as she came back to her house saw her daughter laying in the ground after the guerrilla killed her. Her along her husband had to take care of two of her grandchildren. Isabel was kidnapped 2 years by a guerrilla group, she went to series of abuses and became pregnant from one man who raped her. Mara had to escape the African continent with her brother because armed groups killed their parents.

I had the privilege and honor of being the psychologist of these five courageous women and also Sara's grandchildren. I did not only walked with them psychologically but they also became an important part of our Quito Church. My psychological walking was just part of the process of restoration but the true restoration comes integrally. When Jesus healed the person with leprosy he did not only healed physically but also socially, psychologically and spiritually. The sick man was marginalized and repudiated from society. That's exactly how these five women felt, rejected, criticized and marginalized by society.

Judith Herman says that trauma isolates, breaks social bonds made by that person, isolating him or her in their loss and pain. The recovery requires reintegration to the community which takes the victim out of their isolation. Herman explains that a community gives a feeling of security of acknowledgement and of social reconexion to be able to help that person recover from stress and trauma. Explained by Herman, that's freedom and recovery of these 5 women. I remember Sofia always told me the church was a place where she always felt safe and where she could forget about her problems. Her compromise with the church was so big she even got married there to her now husband, and later became members of the Quito Mennonite Church.

I remember Isabel's family, while at a Christmas meal that we organized for the refugee families, they were so excited to hear Luis's sermon talking about Jesus being a refugee kid. Isabel was about to give birth to a baby that at first was not wanted, but later on was accepted and loved by her. The family felt identified as they thought Isabel's baby was just like Jesus, was going to be born in a foreign country, without luxurious things and trying to escape violence.

I remember when Mara used to tell me that she did not believed in psychologist, that she did not smiled to people and she was always angry with God for all the suffering he caused in her life. Nowadays, she has friends, she will like to study theology and wants to be missionary.

I remember how Valentina participated in all the activities we put together at the church, and how she always wanted to give her opinion. The day she went to say goodbye to us at the church, as she was leaving to the U.S. represented by the United Nations, she gave us her frier as a gift to the Refugee project. This was used to by her to cook colombian empanadas to later sell them in the streets. She told us to look for a courageous family like her, so they

can keep on going working and using that frier.

Finally I remember Sara's grandchildren assisting the Dominical School at our church, Sara and her husband helping by cooking in the activities we organized. Also the day they traveled to Canada represented by the UN, they give as a gift to the Refugee project the kitchenette and the gas cylinder that the very church had given to them when they had just arrived to Ecuador so they could cook and work. They wanted us to give these materials to a family that needed it just like them when they had just come.

Healing is an integral process, just like Jesus told us. It is why the Quito Mennonite Church is in charge of giving a bed and a little place to cook where they can sleep, cook, food, cleaning materials, job opportunities, psychological assistance and spiritual guidance. I think that is the greatest difference with other organizations that help refugees in Quito. The other organizations only offered material and psychological help but not spiritual. The Quito Church gives a community and a family. Because of their love, presence of god, they have prevailed as an example of security and acknowledgement of these five women. These community served as an instrument by God to help heal and transformed them.

Certainly healing is a process that happens during life, pain does not end so easily for these families. But I am convinced that there was a before and after at the time these women were able to laugh and dream again although they suffered so much. And even deeper in that pain being able to thank God for their lives. When I observed what happened in these processes of healing, I felt my words did not mattered or fit in there, that I should have only observed, admire and learn from the greatness of humankind. Because clearly it was not only that the community give so much to them but actually how much they taught us about forgiveness, gratefulness and being able to persevere.