

How one woman found respect through faith

Nelly Tuiran says that becoming a Pentecostal has helped her take charge of her life.

The Christian Science Monitor
December 19, 2007

Seven years ago, Nelly Tuiran, her partner, and her 11-year-old son fled their hometown when it became a battleground for leftist guerrillas and right-wing paramilitaries.

For years they struggled, until they could no longer sustain themselves financially. Earlier this year they relocated to the town of Sincelejo, where the number of displaced Colombians has grown 10-fold over the past decade.

Like many others, the first place Ms. Tuiran found was a tiny, palm-covered Pentecostal church called Remanso de Paz.

"I feel so calm; I used to have a lot of fear and didn't trust anyone," says Tuiran. "I know I am around people who love me now."

Through training programs offered at the church, she is learning how to make artisan crafts, such as handbags, and how to grow vegetables in small plots. It is this work that is most useful at this point in her life, when her family has no income, but the support of other women is invaluable, she says.

On a recent weekend, she went on a retreat with other women from her church, hosted by the National Ecumenical Network of Women for Peace, a not-for-profit designed to help displaced women recover from their experiences. They broke into small sessions to brainstorm ideas about forming collectives to sell the goods they are learning how to make – work that has sustained families that had lived their entire lives as farmers.

"This is the first time in my life that I feel that, if we have ideas, we are respected as women," she says.

The time she spends with other church members does not intimidate her partner, she says, because she has changed for the better. "He says he sees me now with the desire to live. I was very depressed before. I thought, 'I have achieved nothing in this life. My life has just been problems. God put me here for nothing.' "

Now, she says, she is no longer afraid to talk, no longer afraid people will make fun of her. After a church service one day, she says it is the feeling of community surrounding her that has given her that confidence, a community bound by its pursuit to persevere and guided by its pastor, Adelina Zuniga.

"She understands us, as if she were our mother," Tuiran says. "She makes us feel important."

Tuiran wonders if, had she converted sooner, she would have had more enthusiasm for life, but then she allows herself to ponder no longer.

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