

A Vision for Latin

America

Robin and Clara Dowling spent February and March teaching at the Evangelical Seminary in Medellín, Colombia, alongside GBM missionaries Theo and Sonja Donner. They reflect on a thoroughly busy and stimulating time.

'Truly the Lord greatly worked through you and I'm sure that he will continue to do so...'

'I can say thatyou have taught me a better approach to the Scriptures; above all, you have taught me not only to study them responsibly but to love them.'

'Thank you for all your teaching...Thank you also because I personally felt truly valued.'

These are some of the many comments I have received via email from pastoral students on my two courses in Hermeneutics (Bible Interpretation) and Pastoral Counselling since returning at the end of March from two months' teaching at the Bible Seminary in Medellín, Colombia. Clara also received from the students on her English course there such comments as *'thank you for helping us in the acquisition of new knowledge.... Truly it was a great help.'*

Such expressions of gratitude, and many other things, have left us in no doubt as to the usefulness of our ministry visit to Colombia. They reflect the needs which cry out to be supplied, not only in Colombia, but in Latin America generally.

Return to Colombia

We worked at the Bible Seminary in Medellín from 1993 – 1997, returning for a brief teaching visit in 2002. There was uncertainty about our recent extended return until early December 2009. However, thanks to a tremendous response from supporting churches and individuals, we were able to leave England on 30 January 2010 with no little apprehension about what lay ahead. With all the uncertainties, and the pressure of our life generally, there had been very little opportunity to do significant preparation before our departure. We arrived at the Seminary late on the Saturday evening after 24 hours of travel. By Tuesday morning at 7am I was teaching my first session of Hermeneutics! Ahead lay eight gruelling weeks of teaching sixty-four sessions of classes, preparing the material (in Spanish) as I went, making myself available for mentoring and pastoral sessions with students and setting and marking course essays. Clara soon found herself involved with the needs of the English department and taught both Seminary students and others from the community two evenings a week.

Our feet hardly touched the ground, yet, living in an apartment at the top of the steepest slope in the Seminary, doing all our own cooking, shopping and housekeeping, within a couple of days of our arrival we felt as if we had never left Colombia! Any spare moments were soon filled both spending time with our oldest son and his Colombian family, and making space for our many friends there. The glorious weather of Medellín (called 'the City of Eternal Spring' at 30-35 degrees!) meant that we never had to worry about keeping warm.

Although this was a relatively short visit, our intense involvement with Seminary students, teachers and ancillary workers, our fairly deep roots in the culture, and the links the Seminary has with many parts of Latin America, gave us a broad picture of mission needs in Latin America as a whole (though we would not claim to be specialists).

Needs within the Colombian Seminary

One notable evening, we were invited to the home of Samuel and Loida, a sister and brother who are excellent third-year students. They live with their widowed mother in a small student house in the Seminary compound. Their father was a pastor who died fifteen years ago. His family's pension did not materialise, leaving them destitute. This is not untypical. The problems of such people have been aggravated by the world financial crisis, which has hit both the nation and the Seminary. Some students are barely able to find one meal a day, quite apart from paying their academic fees. How marvellous that students like Samuel and Loida sometimes find food literally on their doorstep, provided by those who have resources that day. When they have food they are wonderfully ready to share with others. However, this testimony to Christian faith in no way diminishes the responsibility that we Christians in the so-called 'first world' ought to feel towards them.

The Seminary and students need material support. The staffing levels are significantly lower than the 1990s. Economic cutbacks are hindering the work of the Seminary. There is a need for able teachers (in both theology and English) funded from outside Colombia, for financial aid for the Seminary itself and for grants for students. We were deeply impressed with the ability, spirituality and motivation of the students we taught. Colombia and Latin America *need* them. *They need our support!*

The Bigger Picture

While we were there, one of the Seminary teachers paid a working visit to Cuba. She returned with news of Norberto Quesada, a Cuban friend of ours and a former student of

mine. He heads up a Bible training institute in Santa Clara *and* now pastors a large down-town church, in the midst of poverty and prostitution some distance away in Havana. Years ago he turned down a 'good living' for himself and his family, pastoring an influential Hispanic church in Miami, because he felt such a responsibility to his own people living under a difficult regime. He, and the church and training institute he leads, struggle daily for economic survival. They *too* need the support mentioned above. Yes, and what has been said of Colombia and Cuba could equally be said of situations throughout Central and South America.

However, the need and opportunity which *most* presses upon us on returning from Colombia is the lack of biblically focussed, culturally relevant, contemporary Christian literature in Spanish (and in Portuguese for Brazil) for theological students, pastors and other Christians. What a great work Theo Donner is doing here! It was so good to see Theo and Sonja again. On one of my courses I used a very accessible book on biblical theology he has written in recent years. He has also privileged me with the task of reading a draft of his immensely important developing tomes, *Historia de la Exégesis*.

'Have you put any of this in writing, Teacher?' asked one of the students on my Hermeneutics course. This, together with other comments, stimulated what has become a 'vision'. I feel I ought to find time and opportunity to write material for use in Latin America and to translate some key contemporary books (I already have an offer of help in editing such material from a scholarly Colombian colleague).

It was difficult to leave Colombia, though we were glad to get back to our family in England and to our lovely church in Finchley. We already have a firm invitation to return and teach again in the Seminary. While we wait to see how this might come to pass, we feel challenged to do our part in meeting the needs of Latin America outlined above. Please pray for us and our Church, but above all for our brothers and sisters in Latin America!

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