



# Daniel

COLOMBIAN COMMUNITY ORGANIZER  
A SAFE SPACE IN A RELIGIOUS INSTITUTION

There are deaths. All through his life, there have been deaths. The first was before he was even one month old: only much later would he learn that his father had been murdered by a paramilitary group.

*I never had a father, but not until I was around eighteen years old did I ask why. Before that, I didn't want to know, and no one told me anything.*

When he did ask, Daniel learned that his father had been killed by *Las Rayas*, “A ‘clean-up’ group that murdered thieves, drug addicts”. He was also told that his father “stole, but only from people who had something to steal” and that he was trying to leave all that behind him. “He wanted to change but his past was unforgiving”: the paramilitaries kidnapped him, tortured him for several days and left him dead in an empty lot near his house.

Daniel was born in 1981, in a poor neighbourhood in Barrancabermeja, a city of 300,000 in Magdalena, one of the most

violent areas of Colombia. When Daniel was five, his mother, a domestic worker overwhelmed by caring for seven children, brought him to his paternal grandmother. From then on, Daniel lived with her, an aunt and a cousin.

His grandmother bought him his first football: Daniel was so happy. He liked school and it wasn't particularly hard for him. But what he really loved was football. Daniel spent his afternoons at the field, playing with friends, chatting, fooling around: learning how to be a boy from the neighbourhood. From time to time, his grandmother would take him to church, but Daniel did not pay much attention.

Barrancabermeja is the centre of Colombia's oil region; it is a city with a longstanding tradition of labour struggles and violence. In the nineties, an armed Marxist group, the National Liberation Army (ELN), dominated the region and the city. The guerrillas would kill a thief or an addict from time to time “to set an

example.” Daniel grew up knowing that it was better not to get involved – but that wasn't always easy. When he was thirteen, an ELN group showed up one afternoon at the corner where his friend Alejandro, who was seventeen, was playing cards with some other kids.

*The guys took out their guns and forced him to kneel. They made him apologize for having had something with the girlfriend of one of them. And they killed him right there, kneeling. They shot him in the head in front of all his friends. Out of envy, out of jealousy, they killed him. That doesn't justify a death.*

*And people in the neighbourhood knew who the killers were?*

*Yes, because in trying to find Alejandro they had asked around where he lived, so many people saw them. But we lived in fear of retaliation.*

Soon, it was his grandmother's turn to die. Daniel went through a very dark phase. School wasn't going so well and he didn't know what to do with his life. The only thing he was certain about was football: Daniel kept improving and, at the age of sixteen, he made the Barrancabermeja team. He imagined himself becoming a real football player, one of the guys he saw on television. But then he injured his ankle, and all his athletic dreams came to an end.

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In 1999, when Daniel was about to finish high school, paramilitary groups allied with drug dealers tried to take Barrancabermeja. There were street battles on and off for almost four years. By then, Barrancabermeja was the most violent city in Colombia: an average of 350 homicides for every 100,000 inhabitants, every year. Meanwhile, the guerrillas kept recruiting.

During his last year of school, the ELN approached Daniel and several classmates.

*We were eighteen. We were finishing high school and didn't know exactly what to do next. The guerrillas take advantage of that. There are lots of young people who can't afford to keep studying, so they go up to them and say "Look, I can give you some money and other stuff if you work for us." They told us, "If you want a bike, if you want money to go out, to buy clothes, come work with us." A friend told me that he got 500,000 pesos for one round, which means stay posted to see if the military or paramilitary is coming. Or for performing a single task, like taking something (a message, weapons) to the commander of other sector. We were young and didn't have anything to do or any vision of the future. At home no one paid much attention, and they took advantage of that too.*

In Barrancabermeja, half of all young people are unemployed: violence was one of the few ways out.

*Didn't they talk to you about politics?*

*Not a lot. Sometimes they told us about their ideology and tried to sell it to us. They said you must fight for the people, all that stuff, but we had other interests.*

*You were never tempted to join?*

*Of course I was tempted because I didn't have other economic resources. But there were people – friends, family, Father Juan José – who influenced me in the other direction. They said that was not the way to get ahead, that I would end up killed.*

Daniel got closer to a youth group at his neighbourhood parish. His first contact was through his girlfriend, a Catholic girl who convinced him to start going to mass and participating in some Christmas activities. But he really got interested when they asked him to organize a football tournament for kids. There, for the first time, he felt useful, respected. His mentor Father Juan José convinced him that he had to find a way to help others: the first thing that occurred to him was becoming a doctor. But he couldn't, he would never have enough money. Then he thought he could become a priest and took a course to find out if he had the vocation: he decided against it.

After high school Daniel spent a year not knowing what to do. He couldn't go to college and he couldn't find a job; he spent a lot of his time teaching catechism and working with youth. At the end of the year, he received a scholarship to study hygiene and industrial safety, but he couldn't afford it and had to



drop out. Later, he went to a two-year trade school, but he wasn't able to finish that either.

Meanwhile, he got more and more involved in the parish. He organized tournaments, clubs, dances and debates for kids from the neighbourhood: the idea was to make them feel that someone was paying attention to them and occupy their free time so they wouldn't get involved in drugs, crime or political violence. Father Juan José explained that there is no peace with exploitation or without dignity. Daniel was named youth representative for his sector to the *Equipo de Animación de la Pastoral*, a Church group involved in community work. "I was trusted with that post in a very short time," he says, with pride.

The battle for Barrancabermeja ended with the paramilitaries victorious. There was no more fighting in the street, but the new

bosses had their own ideas about how things should be done:

*They thought they were our fathers. I don't know where they got the moral authority to pick up kids and make them "spin": run, jump, bend over until they threw up, to discipline them so they would not be on the street, take drugs, steal.*

And if the kids didn't do what they were told, the paramilitaries would take their clothes or shave their heads and make them stand on a corner with a sign that said "I am a junkie". If a group suspected that someone was working with the opposition, they died. Daniel and his friends knew that they had to take care of themselves to survive. The Church is one of the few institutions the armed groups

tolerate: for a young person with social concerns, it is one of the few places to do some sort of social work and stay alive.

In 2003, the Ministry of Family Welfare, the Diocese of Barrancabermeja and the *Corporación Desarrollo y Paz* launched an educational campaign on sexual and reproductive health with support from the United Nations Population Fund, UNFPA. Daniel was one of the people chosen to learn and, eventually, teach. Now he works on this project with kids from the ages of seven to sixteen. Daniel starts the sessions by asking the kids about school and their problems, and he helps them. Later, he talks to them about gender issues:

*What does mommy do at home?*

*She cleans.*

*Do you help her clean?*

*No, because my dad says that's women's work.*

*Is that really women's work? Little girl, do you help clean?*

*Yes, I help my mom.*

*Does your brother help her?*

*No, because my dad says that that is women's work. Women are for the house, men for work.*

***Do you believe that?***

The conversations get more complex and, generally go where Daniel wants them to: mainly, showing the kids that there are other views about men and women, and their obligations and rights.

Though it's complicated, this is, in a way, the easiest part. It is harder to explain to the kids how to take care of and respect their bodies, because the discussion always comes to the position of religion on sexual relations and contraceptives.

*The Church does not want to encourage young people to be sexually active. But it does want everyone to take care of his or her body, which is the temple of the spirit. So we say that you as a person have desires, but you have to take care of yourself, love yourself, value yourself. If you are in a relationship and you think the time has come to have sexual relations – because there is love and commitment – then take care of yourself. And to do that, you have to know about contraceptives.*

***But aren't there people in the Church who get angry if you give out condoms, for example?***

*Well, we don't give out condoms.*

***But you recommend them.***

*Yes, we recommend them but we don't give them out. It's true that what we are saying is not in line with what the Church says. But we are very prudent. We are not encouraging the kids to have sex; we are, rather, suggesting that they have a responsible sexual behaviour.*

***You see the contradiction...***

*Yes, I do. But I also feel that we are doing something for the community, and this is the way we can do that.*

This year, Daniel started an online university course studying ethnic education; he wants to dedicate his life to social work. For six years, he has been dating Diana Marcela, with whom he enjoys a responsible relationship. When she goes to the clinic for the contraceptive injections he goes with her, though he says everyone looks at him funny. Daniel says that as soon as possible he is

going to make a home and have children, and he will keep doing what he can for others. But death still lurks:

*They have killed many and no one says anything. Now things look calm. They keep killing, but nothing comes of it. No police reports, nothing about it in the papers.*

***Are you frightened something like that could happen to you?***

*Yes, of course. It can happen at any time. You don't make a good impression on someone and that's it.*

***Don't you get discouraged?***

*Sometimes I do, because of these things or others. But then I go and talk with God; He encourages me in many ways, in His little things. He tells me to keep moving ahead.*

***What are 'His little things'?***

*This, for example. The fact that I am somewhere as important as this. That is because God wanted it to be, to show me that I am on the right path, that what I am doing matters. Those are His little things.*

## YOUNG PEOPLE, RELIGION AND RELIGIOUS INSTITUTIONS

Religion is part of many young people's culture, contributing to their identities and helping them shape adult lives. Through religion, they form the beliefs, values and norms which help them find their way in the world.

Young people, especially in developing countries, seem to agree with their parents about religion. According to a "Wellbeing" study by MTV Networks International (MTVNI) in 2006, young people in the developing world are more religious than young people in the developed world.<sup>1</sup>

More than half of 16-34 year old Indonesians, Brazilians and Indians said that they were religious, compared to one in four in the USA and one in 10 in Sweden and Germany. There was also a positive correlation between active involvement in religion and happiness levels. Even so, young people are less likely than their elders to participate in church organizations and charities.<sup>2</sup>

Religious institutions help development by fighting poverty, providing safety nets for the outcast and the poor. Unintended pregnancies and unwanted children ensure that poverty endures from one generation to the next. Breaking this link means informing young people about their reproductive health and rights, allowing them to decide how many children to have, and when.

Many religious institutions find adolescent sexual and reproductive health too sensitive. Others, like the programme in Madgalena Medio, are more willing to help young people like Daniel find their way. These courageous institutions understand that giving young people the basis for informed decisions helps them plan for a better future. In the age of HIV/AIDS they realise that what they don't know could cost young people not only a better life, but life itself.

Partnerships with religious institutions and religious leaders also assist communities' development. For example, religious schools such as the Jesuit *Fé y Alegria* schools in Venezuela integrate community building, skills training, and leadership development into their programmes.<sup>3</sup> In Ghana, a network of inter-faith organizations provides education and services to local communities, including raising awareness about preventing HIV and pregnancies among young people.<sup>4</sup>

Religious leaders can mobilize communities, help shape public opinion and denounce harmful practices. Religious leaders frequently contribute to efforts to eradicate female genital mutilation. The head of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church has thrown his support behind a national campaign to end child marriage.<sup>5</sup>

Given the importance of religion in young people's lives, development programmes must involve religious leaders, religious institutions and young people themselves to find common ground and promote change as partners. Development practitioners should enlist religious leaders' support to reach out to young people, address issues like gender-based violence, end harmful traditional practices, encourage male responsibility, and improve sexual and reproductive health information and services.