

Colombia

from drug king to pastoring the poor

BY TIM SCHIRMAN

PHOTOGRAPHY BY JESS HEUGEL

Bogotá's impoverished Suba neighborhood becomes mired after a rainstorm.



He is not at all uncomfortable in this world of hard men and drug wars. He shouldn't be. He once ruled such a kingdom of darkness.

The crowded street scene is typical of Latin America, with fruit sellers, a small grocery and hardware store and lots of people. But my walk with Carlos Yepes, my guide, is anything but commonplace. I feel as if I am walking with a celebrity. Carlos is pastor of the local Assemblies of God church, and every 20 feet or so someone wants a few minutes of his time.

My hosts in Colombia are the Bruce Ridpath family. Bruce, his wife, Lisa, and their two children, Alicia and Nathan, have served as missionaries in Colombia since the early 1990s. They have introduced me to some of the amazing church leaders in this dangerous yet beautiful country. Carlos is one of them.

We stop again on the street as a teenage boy talks to Pastor Carlos. The boy has the air of a street kid. He seems hard and unaffected, yet at the same time wary and afraid. I can tell he is getting a bit of a lecture from Pastor Carlos. I suspect he is not used to instruction, but he listens to Carlos and accepts the straight talk.

This is a rough area with lots of gangs and drugs. Bruce tells me that 29 people were killed in the past month alone in this community.

Yet Pastor Carlos walks through the area with calm authority. He is cautious but not afraid. He is not at all uncomfortable in this world of hard men and drug wars. He shouldn't be. He once ruled such a kingdom of darkness.

A dark past

Bruce and I sit with Carlos on the roof of his small, three-story ministry building. The sun is high and glistens on the sea of rooftops that surround us. This is one of the poorest communities in Bogotá. As I sip coffee, Carlos tells me the story of the life he once lived.

When he was 13 years old, he left his small town to join the drug trade in





A mother from Pastor Carlos Yepes' church studies while holding her daughter.

“There were times when his personal profit exceeded \$100,000 in a single day.”

the mountains of Colombia. The drug cartels were powerful, and Carlos, an intelligent, self-educated young man, quickly rose in the industry.

Carlos says his job was to procure and mix the chemicals necessary to make cocaine. But Bruce tells me that his position was much more impressive than it sounds and that Carlos actually managed many aspects of the trade.

“Sometimes they used up to 4,000 horses and mules and 500 people loading. It was quite an infrastructure,” Bruce says. “There were times when his personal profit exceeded \$100,000 in a single day.”

Though Carlos was a ruler, his kingdom was a dark one. “We were at high risk for being kidnapped,” he says. “About 40 men watched out for me.”

An intervening light

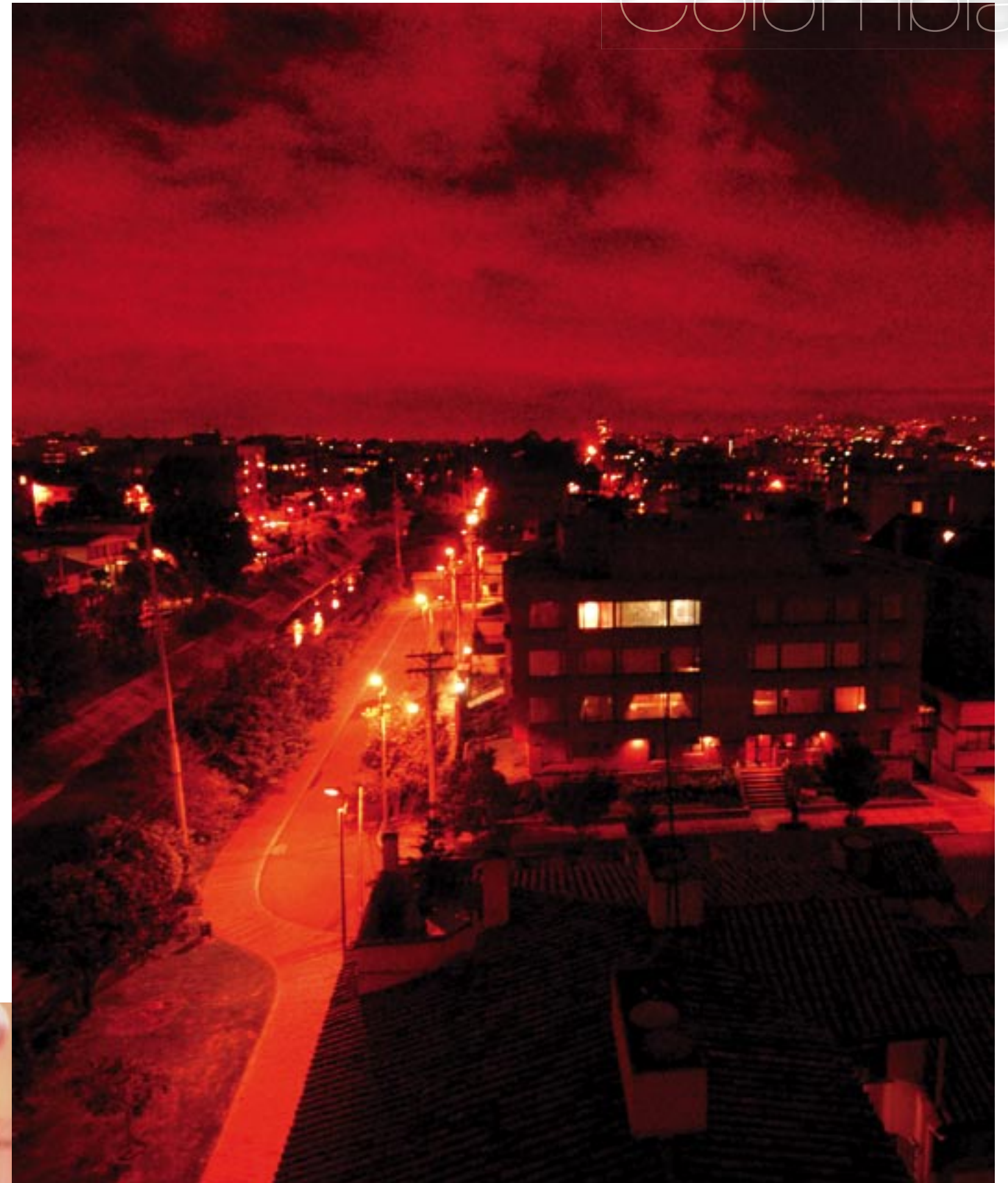
One harvesting season Carlos, an avid reader, found himself deep in the mountains with no books. Out of boredom he started reading the only book he could find on the plantation — a Bible. He read and understood the message, but he was not yet ready to give up his life of wealth and power.

Months later, while in a secluded area working in a field, Carlos suffered an accident and severely wounded his leg. His bodyguards were away, leaving him without help.

“I managed to drag myself into a co-worker’s room,” he says. “Every time I moved, more blood spilled from the wound. I was lying on the floor, unable to stand.

“A small radio was in the room, so I turned it on and found a Christian radio station. A man was preaching, and it seemed that he was familiar with my life story. Even though he was far away, he spoke of things I had done. He asked if anyone listening wished to receive salvation. That night, alone with an injured leg and a radio, I gave my life to the Lord.”

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A girl from Suba listens to Janeth Yepes share the gospel.

In danger of reprisals from drug dealers, Carlos hid in the mountains for eight months.



Burning the kingdom

Smiling and relaxed, Carlos tells me of the dangerous events that followed his conversion.

“I burned my cocaine lab and then told my co-workers that I no longer wished to work with drugs,” he says. “By 5 p.m., everything at the plant was destroyed. Now I had new problems to face, such as completely extracting myself from the drug industry and leaving old friends. I witnessed to the men who remained with me and advised them to accept Christ. All 40 of them gave their lives to the Lord.”

In danger of reprisals from drug dealers, Carlos hid in the mountains for eight months. He says he spent most of the time in prayer. Returning from the mountains, he found that God had softened the hearts of the men.

Bruce fills in more of the story. “After Carlos’ salvation, God miraculously protected him. He was even taken to the top paramilitary leaders in the area, a very dangerous thing. They wanted to know about what had happened up on the mountain. He got to share Jesus with them, and some of the leaders accepted Christ.”

Today 15 of the 40 men who once worked for Carlos in the drug trade are ministers.

A comfortable ministry

Sitting in the Ridpaths’ backyard on a cool Colombian evening, Lisa tells me more of Carlos’ story. After some ministerial training, Carlos and his wife, Janeth, planted a successful church in a middle-class community. They were



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comfortable financially and successful in ministry when they got a call to look at Suba, an impoverished community in need of a church.

“They went to look around the area and were appalled by what they saw — the poverty and the children on the streets,” Lisa says. Janeth told Carlos she could never envision coming to live in a place like that, but as they walked, God spoke to her heart.

Noticing two girls standing nearby, Carlos told Janeth to go witness to them. “As she talked with the young girls, she found out they were in prostitution,” Lisa says. “Their older brother was using them to earn for himself. Janeth told them about the love of Jesus, and they gave their lives to the Lord. After praying with the girls and spending time with them, Janeth’s heart was broken and she was able to say, ‘OK, God. I can do this.’ ”

A call to suffering kids

The sun is harsh and the air is clear as Bruce works hard to lose a soccer game with a group of teens. But the game is not really the point. This is ministry.

Carlos and his family organize a weekly soccer tournament for the kids of the community. The facilities are poor and the tournament organization is casual, but the impact on the kids is profound. I watch as hardened, world-weary teens follow Pastor Carlos, hungry for his hugs and attention.

Sitting on a small hill overlooking the soccer tournament, Janeth describes her and Carlos’ burden.

“Our goal is to evangelize these kids while playing soccer with them,” she says. “Afterward, we invite everyone to a church service. They hear the worship music, and see people praising God.

“Some of the youth who are in charge of the soccer game have been with us

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A soccer game sponsored by Carlos Yepes' church gets underway as a storm approaches the neighborhood.



Carlos Yepes referees the weekly soccer game held by members of his church.



Janeth Yepes leads a Bible study Sunday morning on the rooftop of the ministry center.

“All day these children are used to traffic drugs or as prostitutes.”



for years. They were saved from drug addiction, and even though they don't all have parents, they do have the church. We are their spiritual parents. We make sure they are fed physically and spiritually. We give them notebooks to help them with their schoolwork, and we help them learn to pray. Prayer is important because their lives are so difficult.”

A family meal

At lunchtime the smell of home cooking, Colombian style, flows through the small dining room filled with children and teenagers. The sound of clanging plates mixes with laughter and chatter to create the atmosphere of a big family gathering. Carlos' church provides the midday meal to the needy kids.

“All day these children are used to traffic drugs or as prostitutes,” Carlos says. “Many of their parents and relatives were killed, forcing the children to live as orphans. Others live in households without fathers. We deal with many children who have been abused and violated. It is a work of mercy as we fight to restore their tattered lives.”

Carlos describes the specifics of the ministry. “We work with 400 to 500 kids on a daily basis. The children come at 7 a.m. for breakfast, then they go to a classroom for academic reinforcement. Afterward, they go to their regular schools. This program prevents children from being on the streets, assures them of at least one meal a day and allows them to know Jesus Christ. Some of these kids have been with us since they were 6 years old. Now they are in high school.”

As I watch the lunchroom activities, I think of how far it is from the dark





What wealth he has found in following God's call! His life is one of abundance — even in hardship.

kingdom Carlos once ruled. As Bruce says, "He once walked around with rolls of \$100 bills in his pockets." But now, watching Carlos and his family — with their extended family of abandoned and neglected kids — I understand the ever-present smile on his face. What wealth he has found in following God's call! His life is one of abundance — even in hardship.

Ministry heroes

When I arrived in Colombia I asked Bruce to introduce me to the nation's heroes in ministry. Carlos is just one of many examples. In my final conversation with Bruce before leaving, I asked him to tell me his greatest joy in ministry.

"My favorite thing is the wonderful relationships I have with these pastors, these friends," he says. "I'm humbled to work with these guys because of their great hearts, their great passion for Jesus and their great work for Him."

Bruce left me with a prayer request to share with the American church. "Colombia is a land that's been washed in blood over and over again for years," he says. "We want the blood of Jesus to wash this country. Pray that God will continue to raise up His church and that this country, known around the world for all the wrong things, would be known for good things — changed lives, and a church that is growing strong."

With people like Carlos, willing to lay down the kingdoms of the world to be servants in the kingdom of God, those prayers are already being answered. **tpe**

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Sunday morning service at Pastor Carlos' church



Pastor Carlos Yepes with his wife, Janeth, and two children, Kimberly and Jonathan