

## Colombia: Death Threats & Ministry

*Starting a new church from scratch is never easy. But it's even more difficult when you have to do it amid death threats.*

Death threats have been a standard part of ministry life for "Xavier Gonzalez," a church planter working one of Colombia's most dangerous regions: a poor, rural area currently ruled by paramilitaries.

Before he moved into ministry, Xavier had a successful career in broadcasting. But in 2009, God directed him to begin a church in one of Colombia's poorest cities. Even his coworkers warned him, saying, "That's a violent place. There are paramilitaries there, and they are going to kill you."

But Xavier couldn't deny the call from God. "God gave me an order and I have to go," he told them. "Even I have to die for Jesus, I will go."

In the 12 years since he yielded to the call, Xavier says God has kept him through everything. He's been threatened by guerrillas, paramilitary members and even street gangs. His wife was robbed at gunpoint, and the robbers told her, "If you see us again, pretend you've never seen us before. If not, we'll kill you."



Near the beginning of his ministry, a leftist guerrilla told him the reason why the armed groups fighting against the government hate Christians. The man told Xavier, "My boss hates Christians because Christians make people not want to join our ranks."

And though he and his church of about 130 are hated, they chose to offer love to their enemies. "We preach about love and forgiving others and they don't want to forgive. They don't want this to be preached... [but] we treat them well. We give them food, we give them soda and serve them in any way we can," Xavier said.

Though the threats are constant, the actions of the Christians are making a difference. One believer was summoned to meet the paramilitaries, which almost always means you'll be killed. He said goodbye to his wife, and the church began to pray for him.

When he reached the paramilitary camp deep in the jungle, he was greeted by a tall, black woman. He shook her hand firmly to show that he wasn't afraid. "How can I help you?" he asked the woman.

She looked surprised. "What do you mean? Everyone who comes here wants something from me."

"I can help you," he said, "because I have God and you don't. I know that God can do things in your life."

The woman began to cry. "That's why I asked for you," she said. She revealed she had cancer and asked for prayer. The Christian man prayed for her and headed home. Three months later the paramilitary woman called him to tell him the cancer was gone.

The strength of the church members' testimonies and interactions like this have given Xavier and the other believers a measure of respect in the community, but the danger remains constant. Though recent news from Colombia is all about a peace process between the government and the rebels, in Xavier's area, nothing changed. "In our region, all they did was put the uniform away," he said. "But there are still weapons and they are still issuing threats." He said the paramilitary groups have done the same thing.

Their hope is not in a government-negotiated peace process. "We are putting our hope in the lasting peace that God can give," he said.

Xaveir's request to his brothers and sisters is for prayer for protection. He said prayer will allow them to continue to preach, to grow and to overcome every problem. "Every threat we take as a challenge because we want to win these people for the Lord. That is all we want."

**Posted: May 15, 2017**

**Updated: May 18, 2017**



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