



While there have been innumerable cases of Venezuelan immigrants who have tragically been separated from their families as a result of the collapse of Venezuela's economy - in the midst of all the terrible sadness that I've seen first hand, there are two stories that I know of which are actually quite encouraging.

The first is of a friend who I met on the streets of Colombia's main border city with Venezuela known as Cucuta. He had studied to be a lawyer in the far Eastern plains region of Venezuela, but when he realized that Venezuela was lawless and that his degree wouldn't get him very far amidst all the corruption - he embarked on the uncertain voyage of making it to Colombia with little more than his miniature 4 stringed "cuatro" guitar and a few personal items... He arrived in Cucuta and hit the streets with his amazing voice and cowboy-style "cuatro" skills, and started playing his heart out to the drivers in the cars at the busy stoplight intersections. It was definitely not his profession of choice, but it certainly paid better than what an honest lawyer could make back home.

Eventually he fell in love with a Venezuelan young lady named Yurbey, and they had a beautiful little daughter whom they named Gabriela. In the midst of their daily struggle to survive, I showed up one day at the same stoplight Gabriel was playing at, and asked him if I could play the box drum along with him, so as to help him out there in his "open air office" as he liked to call it...

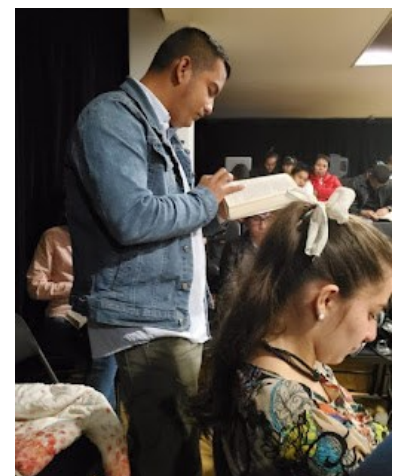
Obviously I just gave the money that we made to him, and when the opportunity presented itself, I started telling him about Jesus and how He came to save us. He took me to his little apartment that had nothing more than a small mattress and a stove top, and he introduced me to his lovely de facto family. As we sat on the floor and talked about who Jesus was, Gabriel starting mentioning to me all the different "gods" he believed in that were somehow associated to his syncretistic spiritism religion known as "santeria". He had little cards with him in his empty billfold that represented those demonic idols, and as he showed them to me, I just told him that if he ever started following Jesus, he would need to leave those false gods behind.



As the days went by and our friendship developed, he eventually exchanged his faith in demonic powers for a real faith in Jesus; and I invited him and his wife and daughter to the capital city of Colombia where there was a church they could attend which I had started a few years back...

At the time I was going to be traveling to the United States, and so I let my Venezuelan friends stay in my apartment for free, while they simultaneously attended our church in Bogota and Gabriel kept playing his cuatro at a couple of his improvised "stoplight offices".

As he and his de facto wife grew and matured in their faith, I eventually recommended that they get engaged and start taking practical steps to get officially married. With just about all the money that Gabriel had saved up while not having to pay rent at my apartment, he bought Yurbey a nice ring, and proposed to the mother of his daughter at a river on the outskirts of Bogota.





My girlfriend at the time accompanied me for the sweet occasion, and it was definitely a good little introduction for our own engagement that would take place about a year later.



When we all made it back to the border city of Cucuta, I had the privilege of baptizing both Gabriel and Yurbey, and then eventually they were able to get all their papers together so they could get legally married. By this time my previously mentioned girlfriend and I had already gotten both engaged and married ourselves, and it was such a joy to now have my wife Alejandra organize the wedding ceremony for our friends, and for me to officiate it. Gabriel and Yurbey have remained active in the Refuge Church of Cucuta ever since, and they have even grown a lot in their capacities as leaders in this same body of believers.



Now jump about six months into the future and meet Vivian. She too, like Gabriel, traveled more than 20 hours from her home town in Venezuela to make it to Cucuta and work with a company teaching Spanish online to people all over the world.

Somehow through the connection of a friend of a friend of a friend on Facebook (that's 3 times removed!) - one of Vivian's Spanish students living in the States made the effort to get someone to contact me so that I would contact this Venezuelan online Spanish teacher that lived in Cucuta, and invite her to our church... I did, and it turns out that she is an excellent Christian worship leader, and right from the start she jumped into our new church and started helping us out with everything she could.

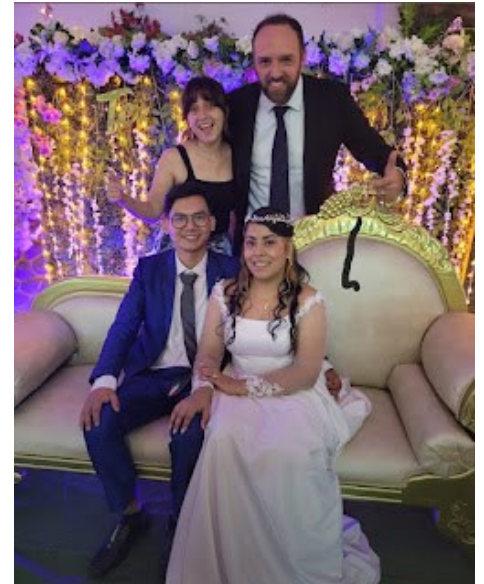




After some time she met a Colombian Christian man and they got engaged, and then who else but Gabriel and Yurbey served as the witnesses in their legal wedding!



...When they had their Christian ceremony, it was so special for my wife Alejandra and I to be there, and connect all the dots and consider how God had orchestrated everything.



These are just two happy stories, but the truth is that there are countless bitter stories of separation that have taken place over the past 8 years of Venezuela's catastrophe; ever since the poorer class of Venezuelans were forced to leave their own country in search of better opportunities.

The typical protocol for a family who is about to take this risk is to muster up all the cash they can find and send off the husband of the household to another country (usually Colombia), so that he can find a job and make enough money to send for his wife and kids...

Easier said than done, as after a few months go by and the husband can barely sustain himself, he starts getting lonely and ends up in a relationship with another woman... Either that, or both parents set off on their precarious escapade alone, leaving behind their children to be taken care of by a grandmother or an aunt or in some cases even a neighbor that can go so far as to abuse or neglect the children that have been entrusted to them.





Sometimes a whole Venezuelan family will start walking for more than a month to make it into Colombia and find a better lifestyle, only to be hit with the harsh and brutal reality that getting by in a foreign country that at times discriminates against them, is a lot harder than they ever imagined. The stress and anguish that this family may go through may become so intense, that the husband and wife often get separated, and the young teenagers become susceptible to narcotic influence or other criminal activity.



So what can the church do in the middle of all of this? Sometimes it feels like providing a hot meal or picking up immigrant walkers on the street to get them a little closer to their destination is just like putting a bandaid on a huge flesh wound... Nevertheless, it's something; and in the midst of our conversations that we have along the way—I love talking about Jesus who in many ways was an immigrant himself, and who understands and deeply cares about the struggles that my Venezuelan friends are going through.



Often a little money can go a long way, or better yet—connecting an immigrant with a good job opportunity can catapult them into a steady lifestyle that provides peace and dignity. Often immigrants feel terribly alone, and welcoming them into a body of believers that cares for them and honors them, will make their smiles return to their faces. Food is always a winner, and even if it's just during a nice lunch at a restaurant—hearing about Jesus can open up their eyes to God's love, and their hearts can start to burn within them (Luke 24:31-32).

