
Reflections of a Practitioner on David Bueno's "Gangs and Development: The Difficulties of Transformational Development in Gang- Controlled Communities in El Salvador"

Barbara Rowe

As a practitioner of Christian-based transformational development, I am highly impressed by the quality of David Bueno's article, as well as his unique insights and conclusions (Bueno 2022). He demonstrates a profound understanding of the history and current situation of El Salvador, the growth and development of the gang situation, and the challenges faced by the government, international aid organizations, and local churches in bringing community development to marginalized populations there.

I served as a missionary in El Salvador for a total fifteen years, first for seven years during and after the civil war in the 1990s, and then again for eight years from 2012-2020. My experiences have brought me to believe that the way to foster transformational development, which, as Bueno points out, "addresses the whole of human life: material, social, psychological, and spiritual" (2022, 42), is three-fold. First, we must strike at the root of the problem: human sin. This means we must begin with a focus on individuals, bringing them to faith in and commitment to Jesus Christ, which will result in a transformation of their character and lifestyle, and likely bring a change in the life of their families as well.

Second, group efforts are also key to transformational development. This is evident in the often-overlooked efforts of churches to bring about change in their own communities: providing food, clothing and economic assistance to needy families and individuals, offering training programs aimed at teaching job skills, teaching family values, providing individual and family counseling, and providing a place where people in the community can develop relationships.

Third, group efforts on a larger scale are also needed to support and encourage individual and group efforts at the community level. Still, in my view, these large-scale efforts aimed at social justice are not effective

for long-term transformational development without the first two.

In the reflections that follow, I share examples from my work in gang-controlled areas that have led me to these conclusions, focusing on the first two. I start with a bit of background.

Background

In the 1990s, I worked with a small community of displaced families located on both sides of the railroad track in San Martín, the same community Bueno writes about. At that time, there was no gang presence, but we began to hear whispers about local gangs, and the word "mara" (Spanish word for gang) started coming up in conversations. I was working with [Christ For the City International](#), and we were supporting a church plant while at the same time promoting transformational community development through economic projects, literacy, and health initiatives. The community assisted in the building of a place of worship, which also served as a location for the programs.

By the time I returned to serve again in El Salvador, the gang phenomenon had taken hold and the country was firmly in its grip. Practically every inch of territory in the country had been divided up by gangs defending their turf. I lived in a lower middle-class neighborhood where this was evident by the presence of "sentries," as the article notes, more commonly known as "lookouts." These gang members observed all comings and goings, as well as who came by to visit. I could not receive certain people in my home, particularly those from areas controlled by rival gangs. When my internet service failed, the company refused to come to the neighborhood to repair it (though they wanted to continue to bill me for the service).

Though I did not seek out contact with the gang, certain situations required it and at times I was approached by and even threatened by gang members. One example occurred when I had to approach a gang leader to gain permission to bring in a mission team that would build a house for a member of the community.

When travelling with visiting missionaries or local Christians into or through some communities, I informed the gang members in advance to avoid trouble.

The most difficult encounter I had with the local gang was the night I found them beating my vehicle with baseball bats. They were angry with the person who had borrowed the vehicle. The police refused to come, and so with much prayer and reliance on the Holy Spirit, I was able to slowly approach the car, get in and drive away as they retreated into the darkness.

It is important to remember, as David Bueno shares, that El Salvador is a small, densely populated country with a history of military rule and dictatorships. The country is now a fledgling democracy after the signing of the Peace Accords that ended the country's 12-year-long civil war. The country emerged as a functioning democracy, but struggles with problems of political corruption and the long-standing power of the wealthy elite. Some elites are even closely tied to the gang leadership in the country in order to further their political and personal ambitions (Ávalos 2018, and *Fiscalía de El Salvador... 2021*), and one of the greatest challenges faced by the society is the lack of a properly functioning justice system.

Examples from Work

My organization, Christ For the City International, is a mission agency with transformational development "in our DNA." Our vision is to have "No place without a witness, no church without vision, and no person without hope." Our vision seeks to transform individuals and provide local churches with support, which will in the end bring about transformation of the neighborhoods and cities in which they are located. Leadership is cultivated and developed at the local level, allowing those individuals to drive the processes and decisions for change at the community level. We also focus on supporting local individual Christians in mission by recruiting them as missionaries to work in their own (and surrounding) communities, to the point that over 90% of our total work force is made up of Christians not of North American origin.

My main work in El Salvador was dedicated to the FARO project, an effort to assist local Christian churches in opening youth centers where pre-teens and teens could come to learn vocational skills, enjoy fun activities and sports, and learn about the Christian faith. We hoped to bring about personal and community transformation by bringing youth into a personal relationship with Jesus Christ and a commitment to serve and obey his commands, rather than being sucked into the gang world that permeates their environment. This program continues to be active in the country, and we have achieved moderate success in some locations.

At the Individual Level

Two examples stand out to me that illustrate the importance of work at the individual level. Both focus on the root problem of human sin. First, similar to the experience related in Bueno's article by the pastor of the after-school program, we had a young man who was about to join a gang after becoming disheartened and cynical about his life and possibilities for the future. He lives in one of the most dangerous neighborhoods in San Salvador and was living with his grandmother after being abandoned by both parents. After introducing him to the youth center and spending some 18 months taking him to and from the activities and classes, he dedicated his life to Christ and is now serving in the program as a coordinator.

In analyzing what brought this complete turnaround in this young man's life, it is clear to me that by teaching him the truth about who God is, and who God created him to be, we were able to transform his worldview and provide a glimpse of a brighter future. In our programs he discovered he has gifts for creating beautiful art and learning languages. He discovered what it felt like to be loved for who he is, which reminded me of the tenuous and unstable environment gang members live in, where they may be betrayed or punished at any moment, and where struggles for power keep them in constant fear. He experienced true joy in having fun in a safe environment where he could relax and be himself. In short, being with us was much more "fun" than being with his gang friends.

Second, in addition to the FARO program, I worked directly with gang members from MS-13 and 18th Street gangs in the Salvadoran prison system, both adults and juveniles. In my work inside the Salvadoran prison system prior to 2019, I had the privilege of witnessing the power of the Holy Spirit at work as young men turned their lives over to Jesus Christ and began to walk the long walk of faith through discipleship. These young men today continue to practice their newfound faith, both within the prison and once they are released. They share the joy that they have in living lives free of criminal activity; lives dedicated instead to sharing about Jesus Christ with others and working for positive change in their community.

But there were also some who had been "evangelized" by local churches, only to fall away and return to gang life. That this happens shows how deep the evil of gang life goes, and how important it is for Christians to continue the work God calls us to. It also reinforced for me how the focus areas in our work, both in FARO and the prison ministry on adequately disciplining young men, needed us to recognize that it takes time and a complete transformation of worldview

in order to understand fully what it means to be a follower of Jesus Christ.

At the Group Level

At a group level, we were careful in our Christian youth centers to give control and responsibility to the local church, providing mostly guidance and training, with a minimal number of resources to encourage them along. Our FARO program does not provide large amounts of resources to churches wanting to start Christian youth centers. Rather, we walk alongside them, providing training and a minimal amount of funds and human resources once churches demonstrate their commitment to their youth center program.

One of the requisites was a core group of Christian youth willing to participate in the program and use it to reach their non-Christian friends with the gospel, thereby assisting their friends to discover their identity in Christ. Church members were encouraged to volunteer to assist in reaching the youth in their neighborhoods, thereby promoting transformational change.

It is well-documented by psychologists and social sciences that youth in their pre-teens and teens experience a particularly vulnerable time in their lives. They are exploring their own identities and how they fit in the world as they pull away from home life to enter into society on their own. This is a reality that gang leadership takes advantage of, recruiting boys as young as 8-10 years of age.

Knowing that youth are seeking a group (other than family) to belong to, we developed a model where the Christian youth from the sponsoring church were permitted to determine certain aspects of the program such as choosing a name for the center, developing their own logo, and even determining their activities at the center. They were encouraged to invite friends and acquaintances to participate in these activities, regardless of religious background and/or gang affiliation. Our goal was to lead the youth toward a commitment to Jesus Christ and prevent them from joining gangs, all the more important because once in, it is very difficult (but not impossible) for anyone to leave the gang.

Models that rely on and give most of the decision-making power and responsibility to the local church are, I believe, a more effective way of working toward transformational community development than models that are brought in by outside agencies with decisions made primarily by outsiders. But this kind of grass-roots development requires a change in past program development standards and assessment techniques, as Bueno notes. Current programs measure outcomes using relatively short-term time frames, whereas giving more control and responsibility to local communities

means that results will require more time, patience, and collaboration with the community as it struggles to find resources and answers to local problems.

This also means that the organization assisting the community must allow the community to make mistakes, and even fail in their efforts to bring about lasting transformation. During my years with the FARO project, a number of youth centers were opened and then had to be closed due to lack of understanding or commitment on the part of the local church. In one case, there was an attempt by a corrupt pastor to use the program for his own ends. When that happened, my organization felt forced to cease collaboration with the program, sadly to the detriment of the youth living in that community.

There were other challenges as well. It is hard to find sufficient volunteers and even staff for programs in poor communities where every able adult is working to earn income for their families. In gang-entangled communities it is particularly difficult when bringing people from outside the community is so dangerous. Keeping Christian youth involved at one of our centers was likewise challenging due to the constant migration of youth to the United States, where, for their own safety, parents would send them to live with other family members.

Bueno is certainly correct in his assessment that small churches in poor communities are unable to achieve self-sustainability without outside support, either from national church bodies or international organizations. Yet it is vital that outside organizations avoid providing excess amounts of resources and making decisions unilaterally in order to safeguard against the disempowerment of communities and individuals interested in working for transformational change.

Conclusion

In my view, Christians have the key to lasting transformational development in individuals and communities. Bueno rightly notes that in gang-entangled communities, change seems improbable, and a positive view of the future is limited. Genuine community transformational development takes years to achieve, sometime generations. Although local churches can be leaders in the effort to bring change in these communities, they cannot act alone. They need the support of national and international institutions to provide resources and training that otherwise would not be available to them. Work must be done to engage people and institutions from all classes of Salvadoran life, to foster a greater understanding of the value of raising up these communities for the benefit of the entire society. Finally, we cannot rule out the work of the Holy Spirit, who works in the hearts and minds of

individuals with the life-changing message of the Gospel!

As Christians working for transformational change in these gang-entangled communities, let us remember the words of the parable Jesus shared in Matthew 13:44, “The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field, which a man found and covered up. Then in his joy he goes and sells all that he has and buys that field.” When we share that treasure with others, and they receive it, their lives are transformed, and they begin to experience the joy and peace of being a member of the kingdom of God.

References

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