

Gratitude, hope and faith renewed on D&P solidarity tour to Bolivia

Verna Stecy spent a week in rural Bolivia, looking for a sense of how donations to the Development and Peace-Caritas Canada are making a difference in the lives of the people there.



Verna Stecy has returned to Canada after touring Bolivia in August during a visit by Development and Peace.

She's returned with hope, and a renewed sense of her own faith.

"There wasn't one moment where they weren't grateful. They have hope even though they had daily struggles for clean water, food and basic needs," said Stecy. "I think that's just incredible."

Stecy is among 14 people from Alberta and Manitoba who participated in an Aug. 13-26 Solidarity Tour.

It's a chance, every few years, for Canadians to visit local projects supported by Development and Peace-Caritas Canada, the official international development organization of the [Catholic Church in Canada](#). The goals include improving human rights, indigenous and women's leadership, and food and water sustainability.



Monica Nino, Alberta and Northwest Territories animator for Development and Peace

"The development model we use is that we're there to support local organizations," said Monica Nino, the Alberta and Northwest Territories animator for Development and Peace.

"There's a lot of collaboration and dialogue. It's not a top-down approach where we say 'Here's the cheque.' "

In 2015-16, Development and Peace spent approximately \$9.9 million on development, \$9.7 million on humanitarian aid and \$13.4 million on bilateral programs.

Stecy said seeing how donations are being spent was “eye-opening.”

“It’s absolutely strengthened my faith,” said Stecy, a member of Development and Peace since 1988. “I’ve always had a focus on social justice and that’s grown in me. I saw firsthand what real social justice looks like.”

First, tour participants had to deal with culture shock. For Stecy it was on the drive to the hotel, weaving through streets lined with kiosks, where Bolivian women sold everything from chocolate and fruit to crafts.

It’s a far cry from her home in Winnipeg for the mother of five.

“The roads are very curvy and there aren’t too many guardrails,” Stecy said. “But the drivers are experienced, driving in and out of traffic. If there’s an inch of space between you and the next car, then you’re the one who gets through.”

The next ride was in the box of an ore truck as Stecy and the other Canadians toured a tin mine near Huanuni, about 280 kilometres southeast of La Paz, to learn about the work of a local advocacy group, known by its Spanish acronym CAEP.

“Development and Peace is supporting an organization that works with the miners on health, safety, and financial support for miners when they’re ill or get hurt,” Stecy noted.

CAEP also runs a radio station to educate Bolivians on women’s rights, education and empowerment.



The CEAP radio station, located about 280 kilometres southeast of La Paz, educates Bolivians on women’s rights, education and empowerment.

“When you teach women and give them a better sense of self, then there are benefits to the whole family,” Stecy said.

“The children are treated better, family life improves, the men benefit as well.”

Solidarity Tour participants also visited a project to rehabilitate Lake Poopo, a key source of water and fishing for the indigenous Uru people, who are losing their traditional way of life to pollution.



Tour participants had to get out and push their bus out of the dry bed of Lake Poopo, one of many 'adventures' during the D&P visit to Bolivia.

The trip wasn't without its challenges. At Lake Poopo, participants had to push their bus out of the dry lakebed.

In Ancoraimes, a town 130 kilometres northwest of La Paz, traditional farming has expanded with larger buildings, greenhouses and herds of cattle, thanks to Development and Peace.

"We were welcomed with such a huge celebration," Stecy said. "They gave us gifts of alpaca blankets and scarves, there was music, they had a feast. People wanted to show us their crafts, their cheese and yogurt making. They were so grateful.

"I left with the impression that Development and Peace is supporting incredible work in upgrading the lives of people in Bolivia. Without the support of non-government organizations, they would be in poverty."

Solidarity Tour participants are now asked to make presentations to their local community to help increase support. Stecy plans to speak to the parishes she attends, the University of Manitoba social work faculty, and her local chapter of the Raging Grannies activist group.

"One of the lessons was the importance of fundraising, that it's just as important as education," Nino said, adding the participants saw how donations can help and "they're moved to do more."

In the Archdiocese of Edmonton, Development and Peace is one of 11 different Catholic organizations and institutions supported through the annual *Together We Serve* appeal.

She also noted that faith was present on the tour through prayer and reflection every day.

"One of the goals is to show how our faith is related to social justice," Nino said. "We have a social responsibility to the people around us. We're all called to be moved by our faith.

"The tour helped my own faith and I felt that the presence of God was really, really there."

The Solidarity Tour participants each paid \$3,000 for their Solidarity Tour. For more information on Development and Peace, visit www.devp.org/en.