

Pursuing Peace in Colombia

Joe Roos

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Philippians 1:9-11

Romans 14:16-19

At Hyattsville Mennonite Church we don't need to listen to the news or read newspapers or magazines to find out from firsthand sources what is happening in Colombia. We not only have relationship with our sister church in Colombia, but present and former members and attenders of Hyattsville are deeply engaged directly in Colombia. And they have stories to tell.

I saw Jenny Dillon right before Christie and Tony's wedding on April 1. She had just returned from nearly three months in Colombia with Christian Peacemaker Teams. I asked her how her time went and one very fresh and painful incident was foremost on her mind. Just a couple of days before returning home, their CPT group was standing together and talking behind a building in a small Colombian town. They heard what at first seemed like firecrackers going off, but they quickly realized that the sound and frequency were far too regular to be anything but gun shots. They ran to the front of the building to find a young Colombian man lying on the ground bleeding and in pain. They called for an ambulance that took thirty minutes to arrive and in the meantime all they could do was comfort him. They later discovered that the shooting was an assassination attempt on the life of this young human rights work, carried out most likely by paramilitary forces. He did not die but he will be paralyzed for the rest of his life, a price he has paid for trying to help other Colombians find dignity and hope and a little food.

Just last week I received an e-mail from Janna Hunter-Bowman who most of you will remember returned to Colombia earlier this year with her husband Jess. Janna works in Colombia with Justapaz, documenting human rights abuses, and Jess is the Andean Regional Director for Witness for Peace, leading delegations throughout Colombia and into Venezuela. Janna recounted two stories. Earlier this spring paramilitaries arrived in a small Pacific coastal town to ostensibly "protect" the inhabitants from guerillas. In other places the guerillas also "protect" others from the paramilitaries. But this so-called protection too frequently turns into assassinations. The paramilitaries made demands

upon the inhabitants that included the “loan” of a canoe owned by a small church. The pastor apparently declined to make the “loan” and several days later he was shot five times in the head and died. As Janna put it, *“the armed groups [both paramilitaries and guerillas] are cowards. They most often prey on the little people who refuse to bow to them, the unarmed civilian population struggling to care for families and improve the living conditions in their communities. Well over 90% of the victims of the armed conflict are unarmed civilians.”*

Janna next told the story from a Good Friday service she attended in April. One woman Mennonite pastor from a slum area asked through tears, *“What does it mean to teach the way of the cross to a country weary of torture and pain? How do we help people live beyond a bloody naked man nailed to a cross?”* Then Janna commented: *“She was not only asking as a sensitive leader, but from her own anguish. Four years ago her son-in-law disappeared—simply did not show up again, presumably killed by one of the armed groups. Three years ago her blameless son was jailed. Two weeks ago her son’s brother-in-law, a twenty-five year old worship leader in his congregation, was killed. Then eleven days ago her youngest daughter, widow of the son-in-law killed four years ago, went to work at the local high school and has not been seen or heard from again.”* The woman concluded her lament by saying, *“At this moment I cling to the cross, the just reconciliation of all things, peace one day, hope rising from suffering. This is my only strength. The alternative is despair. For this reason I will continue to follow and preach the way of the cross.”* This kind of suffering and pain goes on throughout Colombia.

And Lora Steiner, who attends Hyattsville with some regularity and whose work with the Mennonite Central Committee’s Washington Office includes Colombia, recently wrote about the pastor Janna referred to in the first story I just retold. Lora wrote, *“While no one can say for certain why [this pastor] was killed, pastors in Colombia are particularly at risk for various reasons, especially if they preach a message of peace. Refusal to affiliate with any armed groups can mean death threats.”*

Lora’s comment made me wonder. What if one of the questions I was asked during my ordination interview had been: Are you ready to die for preaching peace? What would I have said? I hope I would have answered ‘yes,’ but it certainly would

have made seeking ordination a much more weighty decision. But that's exactly the question every pastor of peace in Colombia must ask herself or himself.

It is also true for all of us who in our vocations or voluntary service opportunities try to make life better for the poor and marginalized and who pursue peace in a violent world. What if our involvements and activities placed our lives and those of our families in danger and harassment and that death might even wait at our doorsteps? How would we feel? What would we do? But that's exactly what many, many people like us in Colombia face every day.

Eric Olson has also brought back horrific stories and our sisters and brothers at Remanso de Paz have experienced some of the worst experiences first hand. From my visit in August 2004 I still remember the stories they told me of the massacres that sent them from their homeland in the Mountains of Maria to the edges of Sincelejo where they now reside and worship on a former garbage dump, eating not much more each day than many of us eat for snacks. I remember speaking with the wife and daughter of a man who returned temporarily, he thought, from Remanso de Paz to the Mountains of Marie to harvest some avocados to bring at least some money for his family. He never returned and his body was later found in a shallow grave. Whether it was the guerillas or the paramilitaries no one knows. And the truth is it could have been either.

In a little over a month Virginia Showalter will travel through Colombia for ten days as part of an ecumenical delegation who will learn from church and human rights leaders more about what is happening and visit several church communities, including Remanso de Paz. When she returns, I'm sure she will have more stories to share with us.

But in the midst of this seemingly endless suffering and pain there is hope, real hope. I remember a year or so ago attending a meeting at the home of Barbara Gerlach, a United Church of Christ pastor deeply involved in Colombia and who will accompany Virginia on her trip this summer. The guest of honor was Ricardo Esquivia, Mennonite pastor, founder of Justapaz and human rights leader, based in Sincelejo. Ricardo spends much of his time trying to negotiate peace with the guerillas and paramilitaries in the Mountains of Maria so people like our sisters and brothers at Remanso de Paz might return to their homelands and livelihoods. You may recall that two years ago Ricardo preached to us from this pulpit. Ricardo had just arrived from New York where he had

been part of some meetings about the church and peace in Colombia. He told us a journalist had asked him if he saw hope for Colombia, hope that this half-century old civil war would ever end and peace come to Colombia. Ricardo responded that yes, he did see hope. He saw a lot of hope. The journalist then said, “Oh, that’s right—you’re a Mennonite. You Mennonites always somehow find hope for peace.”

Those who experience the deepest suffering and pain for the belief in the gospel of peace are also those who experience the most profound sense of hope and joy in the gospel. Paradoxical to be sure, but paradox is at the heart of the gospel. That was also certainly true of many of the faith communities in the early church, including the group of believers in Rome, striving to be Christ’s body in the seat of a violent empire. The words we just heard this morning were written to encourage and strengthen those disciples of Christ in Rome in their pursuit of peace. Hear again what was written: *“The kingdom of God is not food or drink but righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit. The one who thus serves Christ is acceptable to God and has human approval. Let us then pursue what makes for peace and mutual upbuilding.”*

Peter Stucky grew up in Colombia as the son of the first Mennonite missionaries to Colombia. Peter is now President of the Colombian Mennonite Church. His brother Paul is co-director of Justapaz and worships with us whenever he is in town. Peter gives powerful testimony to the way Colombians are pursuing peace in Colombia. He recently wrote that he sees a new dynamic of peace and reconciliation among the people: *“Folks persecuted by opposite sides of the conflict, who might have deep seated hatreds for insurgents or for the paramilitary—who are often regarded as working with the government forces—folks who may have even at one time sympathized with one side of the other, are all becoming part of the same church, becoming brothers and sisters in Christ, baptized into one body and sharing in one Lord’s Supper. In a natural setting they might have a deep-seated fear and suspicion of each other. But in the church they have come to be not only sisters and brothers in Christ, but also friends and companions. This is the tangible result of praying for the gift of peace: for enemies to be reconciled in the body of Christ.”*

Even though we do not directly experience the suffering and persecution that our sisters and brothers in Colombia experience, we can nonetheless be about the business of

pursuing peace in Colombia right here in the seat of our violent empire. Peter Stucky encourages our involvement in helping pursue peace in Colombia this way: *“The body of Christ is a worldwide fellowship. An opportunity to pray and act in solidarity is coming up on May 21-22. On these days, a coalition of Colombian and North American churches and organizations—including the Mennonite Churches of Colombia and Mennonite Central Committee invite you to participate in Days of Prayer and Action for Colombia... Will you bear witness with us for the transformation of U.S. policies that escalate violence into policies that lay a foundation for peace with justice?”*

Each one of us can help pursue peace in Colombia tomorrow by doing just one thing. In the “Take Action for Colombia!” side of the salmon insert in today’s bulletin you will see an action you can take and prayers you can make. As you will note about 1/3rd of the way down, there’s a phone number you can call and talking points you can make in that call listed at www.peaceincolombia.org/actionday. It will take only moments of your time to help reverse and transform an ill-conceived and wrong-headed and wrong-hearted U.S. policy toward Colombia that increases the violence, bloodshed and heartache among the poor in Colombia, including our sisters and brother at Remanso de Paz who right now in their worship this morning are participating are remembering and praying for us and this campaign. I want to strongly encourage you to take that step tomorrow and then to pray for the Days of Prayer and Action and to pray for your and all of our commitment to pursuing peace in Colombia.

As the writer of Romans exhorts us today, *“let’s then [together] pursue what makes for peace and for mutual upbuilding.”*