



Colombia's Ongoing Witness

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President Alvaro Uribe, like the previous governments, wants to resolve the armed conflict without attending to its principal cause: the agrarian problem.

The Polarization of Lives

by Héctor Mondragón

While production in Colombia during the first trimester of 2003 increased by 3 percent in comparison to last year, the consumption of food dropped by 8 percent. The industry that grew the most in this period was construction, but the number of licenses given for low-income housing diminished by 50 percent.

These are statistics that summarize the drama lived by the two poles in Colombia—the wealthy, for whom the government works overtime, and the poor, who face greater impoverishment due to the labor reform that drastically reduced their salaries, the increase in consumer taxes on items that satisfy basic needs, and the daily reduction in social investment.

Colombia is receiving a downpour of loans from the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (IMF), after accepting the conditions of the structural adjustment plan and the increase in retirement age as imposed by the IMF. The government is also borrowing by issuing bonds as quickly as possible within the country and around the world.

A mortgaged “economic reactivation” has occurred as a result of the increase in state debt—the external debt has increased by 80 percent plus an increase of the internal debt with high interest rates—and as a result of the extraordinary war tax. There are constant announcements of a quick victory in the war “with the support of the international community.”

President Alvaro Uribe, like the previous governments, wants to resolve the armed conflict without attending to its principal cause: the agrarian problem. Complementary to giving

priority to military methods, he has eliminated any possibility for agrarian reform. The subsidies that the recently closed Institute for Agrarian Reform used to give to campesinos are now handed over to private business. The land “abandoned” by campesinos can be given over to any “producer.”

At the same time that support for independent campesinos is eliminated, the government is filling out the paperwork to provide large plantation owners with tax exemptions. The campesinos can only receive help through credits from the World Bank if they link up with the large landowners or business leaders. In other words, they would have to work for the large landowners, yet without labor rights because they would be termed “partners” in this exploitation. Six of the eight rural regions prioritized by the World Bank for these kinds of projects are owned by or under the influence of paramilitaries (see sidebar, p. 11).

Which Peace Can Work?

Coherent with this level of polarization in life, the “peace process” with the paramilitary groups arises, in contrast to the “hard hand” approach toward the guerrillas and accusations against dissidents, charging them with associating with the insurgents. While Bishop José Luis Serna, who supported the coffee-growing campesinos’ struggle to have their debt canceled, is investigated by the Investigation Bureau for supposedly “collaborating with the guerrillas,” the bishop of Chiquinquirá presides over a “meeting for peace” with thirteen emerald-mine owners, who repressed thousands of

Peacebuilding by Mennonite Brethren Churches

During the last five years the Mennonite Brethren congregations in Cali and the surrounding municipalities in El Valle have increasingly taken on a commitment to turn their churches into sanctuaries for peace. The Mennonite Brethren Peace Office has accompanied these churches as they seek to understand God's calling for them in a context of pain and violence.

Our work has shown fruit in the following areas:

- **Workshops:** We have held workshops to sensitize church leaders about the suffering community within and around the church. These leaders then multiply the same workshops within their congregations.
- **Brigades:** Congregations in Cali have organized health brigades and food packets to help marginalized people in the community.
- **Biblical peacebuilding training:** Currently we are holding seminars on reconciliation, forgiveness, sanctuaries for peace, and human rights.
- **Center for Holistic Attention to Families:** Offers psychological, legal, or pastoral counseling for church members or people from the community. The center is a pilot project in one church, with volunteer support from professionals in the congregation. We hope other churches will take on this model.
- **Solidarity line:** We are working to make a phone line available to offer counseling and orientation to people who need this support.
- **Solidarity center:** In the near future we will begin to offer workshops on practical craft-making skills, to help people generate income to support their families. We will also provide emergency assistance: clothes, nonperishable food, medication, and personal hygiene items.

small miners with blood and fire. The principal owner was just declared innocent of the charge of promoting paramilitary groups; he owns large extensions of land beside the Meta River—a river projected to be sold to private interests.

The government then dialogues with the paramilitaries, or the United Self-Defense Forces of Colombia (see sidebar, p. 11), with the intervention of other bishops. It offers conditional freedom to these illegal groups that have committed criminal atrocities if the paramilitaries hand themselves in voluntarily. This is the key to the paramilitaries' step toward legality. The government insists that this policy also applies to guerrillas that desert their groups and says that it hopes to divide the insurgent forces.

Meanwhile, the armed conflict intensifies and the majority of the victims are civilians. The denunciations (accusations of violence done to civilians) of guerrillas and paramilitaries multiply. There are also denunciations against the Colombian army, as in the case of the massacre of the Betoyes indigenous people and the attacks against the Wiwa indigenous people, the Afro-Colombians in Cacarica, and the campesinos from Cimitarra.

Since the war has not ended quickly, and faced with a fiscal deficit that will become unmanageable when it's time to pay the debts, President Uribe places his hopes on President Bush's troops. At the World Economic Forum in Davos, Switzerland, in February 2003, President Uribe called on them to travel "to the Amazons once they return from Iraq."

Colombia as a Pretext

The government's efforts to promote foreign military intervention in Colombia during the Río Group meetings in April 2003 in Cuzco, Perú, became pathetic. President Uribe wanted the group to ask the United Nations to push the guerrillas to declare a cease-fire and begin negotiating, and to send the guerrillas an ultimatum: if the insurgents do not accept this proposal, international military forces will enter the country to impose peace.

The Río Group wrote the proposal as a call to the guerrillas to peace negotiations and not so much as an ultimatum. It opted not to refer to external military intervention but rather mentioned "other alternatives," a euphemism that led Venezuelan President Hugo Chávez to manifest his dissent with the declaration because it did not clearly reject military solutions "that would open

the door to a chain of foreign military interventions in South America."

For months, the Colombian press has daily attacked the Chávez government, trying to create a psychological climate favorable for conflict with Venezuela. Colombian paramilitaries attacked an area in Venezuela March 18, 2003, killed nine people, and remained there until they were driven back on March 24. The press and the Colombian Investigation Bureau gave credibility to the paramilitary version of the story, stating that it was the Venezuelans who attacked Colombia on March 24 but failing to say that Colombian paramilitaries had initiated the conflict by the March 18 attack. Repeatedly, pretexts are fabricated in order to attack Venezuela from Colombia.

President Uribe offers himself as an "alternative" to the failed coup d'état and other methods used to try to knock Chávez out of power. Moreover, by calling for foreign intervention, he desperately offers the United States the key they need to intervene against the growing resistance in Latin America to neoliberalism and the Free Trade of the Americas Agreement (FTAA).

While Perú's President Alejandro Toledo embraced his Colombian colleague, a multitude of Peruvians rose up against him. A million campesinos blocked Perú's highways and labor union marches extended throughout the country. Toledo declared a state of emergency, but the massive protests did not stop.

In Bolivia, the government faces even more grassroots rejection than that in Perú. The indigenous people in Ecuador march against the government's failure to carry out reforms that were promised during recent elections. Large mobilizations in Argentina and Paraguay reject the FTAA, as do social service groups in Brazil. All of these grassroots processes would be threatened by a multinational military intervention based on the pretext of the Colombian conflict.

The Colombian government knows that time is running out. If the internal war stretches out longer, the fiscal crisis will devour the country. So, the government does not hesitate to serve the United States a pretext on a silver platter to "return law and order" to Latin America.

Another Path

Only nonviolent mobilizations by social sectors in Colombia affected by President Uribe's policies can open up another path. On September 16, 2002, the Uribe govern-

ment had to face the first national protest strike. On May 1, 2003, nearly a million people paraded through the country against the government. The government tries in different ways to change the constitution, to cut back civil rights and close any possibility other than the paths prescribed by the IMF and military plans. Now, grassroots movements come together to oppose the October 25, 2003, referendum that would impose these constitutional amendments.

If the nonviolent social mobilizations in defense of the interests of the poor in Colombia can open the door, our destiny will change.

Héctor Mondragón is a member of Teusaquillo Mennonite Church in Bogotá, Colombia, and is currently economic adviser to the National Council of the Agricultural Sector in Colombia.

Interview with Ricardo Esquivia: The Church's Role in a Country at War

by Bonnie Klassen

What are the Anabaptist and other Protestant churches like in Colombia?

I think that the churches are committed; they have a very deep faith. However, influenced by their missionary origins, they have maintained a theology of separation from the world and in general a conservative theology that sometimes impedes them from fulfilling their mission and mandate as churches. But this is changing. The churches are opening themselves up to the suffering world around them.

How are the churches affected by the current situation in Colombia?

The Protestant churches, including the Anabaptist churches, are deeply affected by all of the country's circumstances, both by the social dynamics and by the war. On a social level, the Protestant church in Colombia is a grassroots church. Most of its members have very limited economic resources and so the church is hard hit by the increasing level of unemployment and the impoverishment that the country is suffering. On the other hand, the Protestant church is present in all parts of the country, and particularly in the zones hardest hit by the armed and social conflicts, which affect them directly.

For example, in the massive displacements caused by the armed groups' attacks on civilian populations, a large number of people forced to flee from their homes are from churches. The Protestant churches have suffered from a higher number of assassinated leaders than the Catholic church, even though the Catholic church remains as the majority religious group in the country. The

Protestant church has a high number of martyrs. As a result of these deaths, thousands of people have been displaced from their homes. Many people have had to leave the country seeking refuge. Yet, due to the cultural situation here, the government makes no particular effort to help the Protestant churches. This makes the situation seem even more difficult.

Are there any particular cases that you could mention to illustrate this reality?

Two weeks ago, in the rural regions of the municipality of Tierralta, 25 armed men arrived and assassinated the pastor, a teacher, two youth, and an elderly woman, simply because they are members of the church. Then 25 families fled the area as displaced people. Now they go hungry in the urban center of Tierralta because they had to leave the land that they cultivated. In Arauca as well, we have a ton of displaced people from the churches in the towns of Saravena and Arauquita because the armed groups have threatened them. There are 40 youth from the churches in the area forcibly recruited by the Colombian army, plus many other youth recruited by the illegal armed groups. These are just a few examples. So I think the situation is very difficult for Protestant churches in Colombia.

What are the churches doing on a local, regional, and national level in response to this situation?

First of all, due to the situation that they live with, the Protestant churches are transforming their theology toward a theology of social

Peacebuilding by Mennonite Brethren Churches (continued)

- Human rights: We held a seminar to sensitize community leaders on human rights.
- Prayer chain: We promote intercessory prayer for peace in Colombia through pamphlets. We are suggesting that each church set a daily time to pray for peace.
- Displaced people: We have been working with displaced people since 1999, providing emergency assistance and material aid, offering psychological and spiritual accompaniment, and helping to reorganize communities that have been forced to flee from their homes.

The process of becoming sanctuaries for peace has been very positive for us. Brothers and sisters from the local congregations have become aware of the situations of suffering around them, and are motivated to actively respond. We are satisfied to see how people from the churches begin to express their ideas out of their experiences in peacebuilding. We hope to continually strengthen these activities and multiply the fruit.

As a denomination we will continue to work in these areas, and other areas that arise according to the needs of the communities around us. In this way, the kingdom of God continues to manifest itself through acts of peace.

—Francisco Mosquera, coordinator of the Mennonite Brethren Peace Office, based in Cali, Colombia, and pastor of an MB church in Cali. His work leads him to visit churches in many parts of the Pacific coast regions of Colombia.

Bread and Peace

In September of 2002 the Anabaptist churches and church institutions in Colombia celebrated the United Nations International Day for Non-violence with a time of fasting and then holding a public vigil in the main squares in the cities of Bogotá, Armenia, and Pereira. They also published a declaration called "Bread and Peace" in all the main newspapers in the country, stating the Anabaptist position for peace, nonviolence, justice, and dignified life for all people. This statement also showed clearly that the Anabaptist churches in Colombia are not willing to participate in the armed conflict in any way, nor will they support any particular side in the armed conflict (the government armed forces, the guerrilla groups, or the paramilitary/self-defense forces). As Anabaptists, they will only seek to strengthen efforts that will help to make the values of God's kingdom real on earth. Anabaptist churches from throughout North America donated funds to make this public declaration possible.

"Bread and Peace" was not just a one-time event; the churches' commitment to living out the content of their statement continues. Mennonite churches protested against the military intervention in Iraq several times before and after the U.S. began to bomb this country. On May 1, International Workers Day, Anabaptist church members organized a vigil in the main plaza to accompany the workers' parade. They prayed, sang songs of justice, did skits showing nonviolent ways to resolve conflict, and handed out bread to symbolize the importance of building a peace that also fills the people's stomachs. Alongside these demonstrations, the Anabaptist churches—Mennonite Brethren, Mennonite, and Brethren in Christ—continue to stand alongside the marginalized and the oppressed in Colombia, and support them in overcoming the violence and poverty that they suffer.

—Bonnie Klassen

commitment. As leaders in the Commission for Restoration, Life, and Peace of the Evangelical Council of Churches in Colombia, we are supporting and guiding churches theologically and practically in 52 municipalities. In some cities the churches are providing humanitarian aid to the population. We are providing them with academic tools so that they can interpret the sociopolitical reality that causes the humanitarian crisis and organize themselves. Many local congregations are creating alternative production projects in response to the hunger and the impoverishment of the people. We are working toward helping churches become Sanctuaries for Peace, thus integrating all of these elements and providing real answers to the community around them. As churches, we are participating in dialogues with the armed groups, and we also provide support to the government in some of its actions to the extent that the government allows this. We maintain contact with the global faith family through newsletters, urgent action alerts, prayer groups, sister churches, and through the feedback that we receive from outside of Colombia.

What are some of the biblical bases and concepts that motivate and guide this work?

As a church, we follow Jesus' message. Jesus says that the peace that he brings is different than the peace that the world offers. It is different because he said that he came to bring abundant life. We understand then that peace means abundant life. This helps us see that we need to build peace in all dimensions, not just on a pedagogical level, but also a peace that produces employment, health, and schools. Referring to a different area, when we talk to the different armed groups, we understand that this comes out of a biblical mandate. The Bible tells us that when our brothers and sisters sin against us, we need to go and talk with them. It does not say that we should talk to them only if they are from the government, or are from the right or the left. We need to dialogue with everyone who causes us harm, rather than doing more harm ourselves. We are salt and light for the world, so we must provide good flavour on this earth, and illuminate new paths.

How do the churches maintain their hope in the middle of such difficult situations?

Really, in difficult situations we see how people are able to do more than what we thought was possible. They manage to respond to situations and positively transform them. We have many incredible

churches here that do amazing things to overcome tragic situations. Churches open up their buildings to receive displaced people; families open up their homes to take in victims of violence. This vision, love, and generosity are seeds of hope.

What are your dreams for the role that the churches can play in the future, both in Colombia and in the world?

My dream is that we, as an Anabaptist church, revive ourselves. I dream of a time when the church wakes up and understands its role not only as a historic peace church, but also as an active peace church today in the current world circumstances. How can we bring about the day when Anabaptist churches no longer see the term "historic peace church" as a trophy to store away at home but that no longer means much, and that could even be dangerous or problematic? How can we rescue that first love for justice and peace and recover our leading role in this world that suffers so much and lives in confusion? War is becoming the only tool used today for resolving problems. Anabaptist churches can no longer spend time just focusing on their glorious past. We need to define a relevant response to the world today and connect with the realities around us.

Many Anabaptists have become comfortable. They soothe their consciences by building good universities and organizing peace and justice committees in their congregations, but they do not necessarily practice what they teach. I dream of a church that is active in peacebuilding now. I dream of a church committed to providing light to this confused world. I believe that the Anabaptist churches have been blessed by God. For many years they have sown seeds of justice and peace. I dream of a church that now reaps this harvest and offers it to the world. We need to give the world a model that shows that it is possible to live at peace. We need to show that Jesus' message is not in vain; the church is living it.

Ricardo Esquivia is the director of the Christian Centre for Justice, Peace, and Non-violent Action (JustaPaz), a ministry of the Colombian Mennonite Church, and Coordinator of the Commission for Restoration, Life, and Peace of the Evangelical Council of Churches in Colombia. He has been trained as a human rights lawyer. Bonnie Klassen is the MCC country representative for Colombia. Thanks to Bonnie Klassen for compiling and translating the articles in this issue.

What Kind of Salt and Light Are We as Churches in Violent Times?

by Jenny Neme

For many people, the alarming statistics of violence that reflect daily life for Colombians are no secret. The data show that the war in Colombia has an annual cost of US\$1.5 billion, which could fund the education of 6 million children. It has also been shown that the different forms of violence in Colombia keep 60 percent of the population in poverty—around 26 million people—and 11.5 million Colombians live in absolute destitution.

Churches do not escape from the country's realities. By the end of May 2003, the regional offices of the Commission for Restoration, Life, and Peace of CEDECOL (the Evangelical Council of Churches in Colombia) had reported the assassinations of 22 church pastors and leaders by the armed actors that operate throughout the country. Within a few days at the beginning of May, in a municipality located near the Atlantic Coast, one single church received 25 families that had been displaced by the violence. That same week, three evangelical churches in a municipality in the southern region of the country received orders from one of the armed groups to close their doors.

These violations and many others suffered by our population remind me of a passage in Ezekiel 37 describing the valley of the dry bones. Just as our hard reality moves us, undoubtedly a valley of dry bones also filled Ezekiel with distress. However, in the midst of death and despair, God offers hope in response to the destruction and death in Israel. Yahweh asks the prophet Ezekiel to announce life and hope: "Come from the four winds, O breath, and breathe upon these slain, that they may live. . . . And you shall know that I am the LORD, when I open your graves, and bring you up from your graves, O my people. I will put my spirit within you, and you shall live, and I will place you on your own soil" (Ezek. 37:9, 13–14).

The Colombian people receive promises from the God of life. We who believe in God have received this promise through God's Word as we cry out for the world's peace, as we discern together. This inspiration has motivated the vision of churches as Sanctu-

aries for Peace, as part of the call God has made in our lives as Christians in Colombia. These churches include congregations from different denominations that seek to be salt and light in the middle of the situations of constant violence that we live with.

Churches Becoming Sanctuaries

During approximately the last four years, JustaPaz, together with the Commission for Restoration, Life, and Peace of CEDECOL, has been motivating churches to commit themselves to this call. In 2002 we dedicated our time to sensitizing these churches, to discerning and praying for our country. That process led us to analyze our context, and then to discover that although we live in Colombia, with its dynamic, complex, and ever-changing problems, many of us do not clearly understand why so many situations of violence, injustice, and hunger exist.

However, God's Spirit allows us—in more than 100 Colombian congregations—to understand the problems that surround us and to understand God's call for us in these times. The churches have been challenged to think about how to develop their commitment to be salt and light. Some understood that they needed to educate themselves more in certain topics like conflict analysis and resolution, economic alternatives for a dignified life, alternatives for children at risk of recruitment, dealing with trauma, strengthening the leadership among youth and women in the church, and accompanying disintegrated families.

Other churches, as a result of the process, have defined certain ministries that they are developing, such as attending to victims of the armed conflict (especially displaced families), prayer for peace, income-generating projects, and support to families at risk of disintegration. At the same time, some of these churches have begun to build sister relationships with churches in other countries. To this date, 12 relationships have been established, providing mutual blessings as they share their burdens and God's blessings with each other in all circumstances.

Within a few days at the beginning of May, in a municipality located near the Atlantic Coast, one single church received 25 families that had been displaced by the violence.

Unfortunately here in Colombia, like in other countries where there's a lot of violence, life is not valued. Working here, I am grateful for my Anabaptist roots. In our legacy as Mennonites, we have a long history of working at justice and peace issues. It gives me an inner calmness, a tranquility, that I'm another one of the many people trying to put into practice what we've learned as Anabaptists—that is, that all people matter, that no one is disposable, and that it's possible to solve our problems in the way that Jesus did.

—Frank Albrecht, MCC volunteer promoting peacebuilding and working to address family violence together with Mennonite and Mennonite Brethren churches in western Colombia

Resources on Colombia

BOOKS

Charles Bergquist, Ricardo Peñaranda, and Gonzalo Sánchez G., eds., *Violence in Colombia 1990–2000: Waging War and Negotiating Peace* (Wilmington, Del.: Scholarly Resources, 2001).

Robin Kirk, *More Terrible Than Death: Massacres, Drugs, and America's War in Colombia* (New York: Public Affairs Books, 2003).

Bonnie Klassen, *Mustard Seeds and Resurrections: Selected Journal Entries from War-Torn Colombia* (Mission Insight 21; Elkhart, Ind.: Mennonite Board of Missions, 2001; individual copies free; call 219-294-7523).

Garry M. Leech, *Killing Peace: Colombia's Conflict and the Failure of U.S. Intervention* (New York: Information Network of the Americas, 2002).

Frank Safford and Marco Palacio, *Colombia: Fragmented Land, Divided Society* (Oxford, U.K.: Oxford University Press, 2001).

AUDIO

Noam Chomsky, *An American Addiction: Drugs, Guerrillas, and Counterinsurgency in U.S. Intervention in Colombia* (CD of lecture; available at Amazon.com).

This is an unpleasant panorama before which anyone would become concerned, suffer, and feel distressed. But Jesus understood them.

God has been faithful during these years. By God's grace the Colombian faith family has grown stronger little by little, through their call to serve a suffering people. By the end of the year, the goal is that at least 50 churches from different denominations throughout the country can move ahead firmly in their plans for ministry as Sanctuaries for Peace

and also begin a sister relationship with churches in other countries. May God guide us along this path of justice, peace, and life with dignity, in Jesus Christ.

Jenny Neme coordinates the accompaniment program for Churches as Sanctuaries of Peace, based out of JustaPaz.

Peace in the Midst of Despair

by Alix Lozano

Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid. You heard me say to you, "I am going away, and I am coming to you." (John 14:27–28)

Once there was a town that controlled all of the world's resources, and they said one to another: "How can we be sure that we will have enough when difficult times come? We want to survive no matter what happens. Let's begin to store up food, materials, and information so that we are safe and secure whenever the crisis arrives." So they began to accumulate and accumulate until another town protested, saying, "You have much more than what you need while we don't have enough to survive. Give us part of your wealth."

But the fearful hoarders said: "No, no, no. We need to conserve what we have in case of an emergency, in case things get bad for us too, in case our lives are in danger."

Time went by, and then the others said, "We are dying. Please give us food, materials, and information to survive. We can't wait. We need it now."

So the fearful hoarders became even more fearful because they feared that the poor and the hungry would attack them. So they said one to another: "Let's build walls around our wealth so that no stranger can take it away from us." And they began to build up walls so high that they could no longer see if there were enemies out there or not. Yet they became more and more afraid, and they said one to another, "Our enemies are so numerous that they could knock down our walls, which aren't strong enough to keep them away. We need to put bombs on the highest part of the walls so that no one will dare to even get close to us."

But, instead of feeling safe and secure behind their armed walls, they found themselves trapped in the prison that they had built out of their fear. They even felt afraid of their bombs

and they wondered if these could do more damage to them than to their enemies. Little by little they realized that their fear of death had brought them closer to it. (Adapted from Henri Nouwen, *El Camino Hacia la Paz* [The Path toward Peace] [Sal Terrae, 1998], p. 98)

This short parable reminds us that fear, anxiety, and alarm in response to crisis lead us to act in ways that paralyze and dehumanize us.

In reaction to the panorama of our current realities—in Colombia, in Latin America, in the world—who doesn't feel anxious or afraid?

The biblical text above comes out of a context of chaos, disturbances, and despair. The disciples had just received news that produced shock, alarm, anxiety, and obviously fear in them. They were anxious and fearful for several reasons:

The news about a traitor (John 13:21–28)

The news that Jesus was leaving and that this time they couldn't follow him (13:31–33)

The prediction that Peter would deny the Master (13:36–38)

Betrayal, denial, and abandonment by their leader created a dynamic that paralyzed their lives and left them without direction.

This is an unpleasant panorama before which anyone would become concerned, suffer, and feel distressed. But Jesus understood them. While he was the one who really needed support and solidarity from his disciples, he did not leave them in a state of sadness and suffering. He responded with a consoling attitude.

Psychology tells us that anxiety is a state of physical and emotional restlessness, of profound concern. It is a state of internal com-

motion that can paralyze humans in relation to the objective facts of the situation they are experiencing.

Our Colombian reality is like this. Those who fill us with fear have power over us. "You'd better do what I say, because otherwise you will lose your job! If you don't follow my commands and support my policies, you might intensify the war. You can't blow the whistle on me because I will stop doing favors for you. Taxes will increase." Those who lead us back again and again to our fears exercise control over us.

Yet in the biblical text we find three lessons for peace that invite us to come out of this state of oppression, fear, loneliness, and anxiety that we experience in Colombia.

Lesson 1: Resistance

Don't be worried or afraid—resistance helps us overcome fear, which is the result of our constant obsession with death.

It's incredible how much we are obsessed with death in our culture. Out of this obsession, we create instruments of war and spend millions and millions of dollars to keep people obsessed with the possibility of death. This project of death has great power over this world.

But throughout the Gospels we hear over and over again, "Don't be afraid." This is what Gabriel says to Zechariah and then also to Mary. This is what the angels say to the women at the tomb. This is the Lord's message to the disciples: "Don't be afraid. It is I. Don't let your hearts be troubled by this situation. Fear does not come from God. God is a God of love."

Jesus then is saying to the disciples: "This panorama can't leave us in despair; it can't paralyze us. You need to resist this project of death, because my project is a project of life. Life continues and we are the men and women called to extend this life to others. Alarm and chaos can exist outside of yourselves, but you can't allow for this kind of alteration within. Nothing will make sense if you lose your direction. Remember that in the middle of chaos, I am present too."

Lesson 2: The Quest for Peace

"Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you." Peace is a central theme in the message of Jesus' good news. We need to be centered on the God of peace and life.

What connotation does peace have in this context? What does the world's peace look like? The Hebrew word for peace—*shalom*—goes beyond internal individual peace or personal tranquility. This term refers to a broad concept that implies entire well-being or total health, in both a material and a spiritual sense. It has to do with a condition of well-being that arises out of authentically healthy relationships between people as well as with God.

The Greek word for peace—*eirene*—on the other hand refers to a static condition rather than involving the dynamics of interpersonal relationships. It is a state of rest or the absence of conflict. The Latin word for peace—*pax*—then refers to the absence of war guaranteed by the presence of Roman military power.

In this context, God's *shalom* has many ethical implications. Due to the distortions of Greek and Roman origins within the church's tradition, we do not often recognize the fundamentally social and communitarian implications of the gospel. We think that we can have peace with God or receive peace from God even if we are at war with our fellow human beings. Yet according to the gospel, nonviolence should be the distinctive feature of children of the God of peace.

Lesson 3: Community

"I am going away, and I am coming to you." It is necessary that we live out this resistance and this quest for peace together. Community pulls us out of the fear linked to the search for individual heroism. Community breaks down the idol of individualism just as resistance breaks down the idol of death and peace breaks down the idol of war.

Community is the place where we can unite ourselves and forgive each other continually, where those who are tired and weak can find rest. Community is the place where people share with each other. We are not God, but we can mediate God's limitless love to others. Community is that place of joy and celebration where we can say to each other, "Keep going! Don't give up!"

Community is the place from which we can continually show to the world that there are reasons to celebrate. Community is the place from which we can announce the good news—"Don't be afraid. Look, it's all finished. Jesus is resurrected, and with him, our hope and redemption."

Resources on Colombia (continued)

ARTICLES AND REPORTS

Colombia Bulletin and Action on Colombia from Colombia Support Network: email csn@igc.apc.org

Colombia Human Rights Network, Colombia Update: email colhrc@igc.org

Jason Hagen, "Uribe's People: Civilians and the Colombian Conflict" (Georgetown Journal of International Affairs, winter/spring 2003).

"Indigenous Responses to Plan Colombia" (special issue, Cultural Survival Quarterly, winter 2003; online at <http://www.culturalsurvival.org/publications/csq/index.cfm?id=26.4>).

Paul Stuckey, "Alternatives to Violence and Peacebuilding in Colombia" (Peace Team News, Summer 1999; online at <http://www.quaker.org/fptp/42colombia.html>).

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WEB SITES

Center for International Policy: <http://ciponline.org/colombia/index.htm>

Latin America Working Group: <http://www.lawg.org/>

National Mobilization on Colombia: <http://www.colombiamobilization.org/>

Washington Office on Latin America: <http://wola.org/>

Contrary to the initial parable here, community means being open to the world, continually serving all the people around. In community, we are not closed off, looking out for our own safety and well-being, but rather for that of all people.

“My peace I give to you.” These words ring out as God’s promise to our country, our continent, our world. Let us not undervalue the signs of hope that spring up daily around

us. Resistance, the quest for peace, a community open to the world—not one that builds barriers or walls to close itself in—these continue to produce possibilities for life that can break down death and desolation.

Alix Lozano is the director of the Colombian Mennonite Biblical Seminary in Bogotá. She is also currently serving as the vice president of the Colombian Mennonite Church.

Affirmations from a Woman Peacemaker

by Jennifer Manrique

As a woman and as a Christian, I am permanently interacting with other women and men to motivate the daily task of protecting life and utopias. We seek alternative paths that allow us to glimpse toward the construction of a peaceful and hopeful society.

I am pleased when I identify women and men who work for a community open to different kinds of spirituality, to alliances for life, to values that promote ethical behavior in opposition to the power relationships that oppress the weak.

In the same way, I feel the healing presence of women and men who work against indifference and the silence toward offenders, and instead seek to build God’s kingdom—God our Father and Mother who lives among us and for whom power struggles and privileges don’t exist.

History tells us of numerous experiences where women traveling down the path of nonviolence have been able to affirm their condition as human beings with particular characteristics that are shown as they effectively obtain, apply, and protect their rights. These are stories of silent cultural revolutions carried out by women in all areas of social and political life.

Alongside the great wealth of nonviolent experiences in favor of women’s dignity there are also situations in which men have played an important role. As an example, I look at Jesus’ story. His life testimony and his liberating actions toward women comfort, encourage, and challenge me to continue to know and discover new horizons. I commit myself to work not only with women but also with the most humble people and victims of violence in all its forms.

There are countless followers of violence who seek their goals, even heroic goals, through violent means. Yet many others have chosen to practice nonviolence, living out their real commitment as Christians to transform reality and contribute to the building of God’s kingdom. Out of this community, a reality of peace and hope will arise.

Jennifer Manrique works in the Colombian Mennonite Development Foundation, founded by the Mennonite Brethren and Mennonite Churches. She coordinates efforts to support churches as they seek justice and peace for their communities.

Women in Colombia

The Mennonite Central Committee Women’s Concerns Report for May–June 2003 is devoted to the topic “Women in Colombia.” The issue is bilingual (Spanish and English) and was compiled by Bonnie Klassen, who took the same role in compiling this issue of the Peace Office Newsletter.

To request a copy, e-mail the editor, Patricia Haverstick, at tjh@mccus.org or contact her by mail: Editor, MCC Women’s Concerns, P.O. Box 500, Akron, PA 17501-0500.

To Caesar What He Deserves, to God and God's People All the Glory

by Ricardo Pinzón

Once again the god of war dresses up for a party. He has put on a cloak of justice, generating security and well-being; he has included in his wardrobe a cover of responsibility to protect the wealth of a few with the life and resources of many. He has improved his image by projecting himself as a lamb, hiding his wolflike intentions, and thus winning allies for his party.

He has interpreted the needs of the less-favored, offering them shelter and food; at the same time he has reached agreements with those who possess power and riches to increase what they have. He has offered himself as governor before the confused cry of a people who live under the torment of injustice, hate, anxiety, selfishness, prostitution, and assassinations. He has captivated the sense of patriotism, sovereignty, and national defense to achieve "justice."

In exchange, he has called for what the prophet Samuel (1 Samuel 8:10-18) announced that all kings demand. Yet the people, then and now, did not hear the voice of God, and so asked for a king who would make them into a nation like other nations, knowing that the king would take them away in his chariots, take their women, grab their grains, force them to take up arms, demand taxes and even the people's lives, in order to become a "great nation."

You Shall Not Kill

Today, in the international context from east to west, north to south, war cries are heard in the name of God. We are called to take up arms, pay taxes for war, give up our lives for the defense and sovereignty of our country.

In response to these situations that are repeated internationally, be that in Iraq, South Africa, Central American countries, or the United States, and particularly thinking of the lives of 44 million Colombians, we ask: What do we do? What answers to we provide to men and women who follow Jesus' gospel and who want to follow his steps and teachings that say: YOU SHALL NOT KILL? You shall no longer prepare for war or fight between nations.

The God of Life, our Heavenly Father who showed us great love through the person Jesus of Nazareth, leaves us with a clear calling: you shall not kill; love your neighbor as yourself, including your enemies; turn your swords into ploughshares. In Colombia it seems impossible to act from the perspective of God's kingdom. Not only the state imposes participation in the war on us, through obligatory military service and taxes for war, but also the guerrillas and the paramilitaries.

Our countryside and our cities find themselves at the mercy of the god of war, who dresses up as a soldier, a paramilitary, a guerrilla, a state worker, a governor, and sometimes even uses the church and the pulpit through theories of just war. As a result, some churches have perspectives influenced by an interpretation of Romans 13—that authorities are put in place by God—whereby they preach that Christians must support the authorities to the point of answering the war cry.

In this context, Anabaptists seek, from their nonviolent perspective, to call on multiple sectors of civil society to take on a new commitment: to stop the war, and stopping it means not paying for it. We are inviting others to act as conscientious objectors in response to the obligatory military service, opting for alternative service, and to not pay for war, becoming war tax resisters.

War tax resistance is arising from a national campaign called "Disarm Your taxes—Count the Costs." The campaign is being developed from different perspectives including diverse social sectors and churches that have taken on this commitment based on nonviolence as the way to build peace. Our constitution guarantees freedom of conscience; according to Article 18: "No one will be obliged to act against their conscience."

This campaign includes several different phases: sensitizing society, education and organization, elaborating documents about the tax system and the costs of war and their effects, technically acting as tax resisters, and structuring social programs to receive funds from tax resisters. We commit ourselves to not give one more peso nor one more man or woman to war.

In this context, Anabaptists seek, from their nonviolent perspective, to call on multiple sectors of civil society to take on a new commitment: to stop the war, and stopping it means not paying for it.

Upcoming MCC Video Features Colombia

"Lots of worthwhile things aren't easy, but we work at them because we really want them. Like landing a nose slide. Landing a nose slide is cool, but helping others—that's the coolest trick of all. You want to talk about a tough trick? Try being a pacifist."

A soon-to-be-released 12-minute MCC video, *Peace: The Ultimate Trick*, helps North American youth think about and discuss conciliation and peacemaking and what it means to help others.

Ryan, a young person from Ontario, uses his hobby of skateboarding to talk about MCC's relief and peacemaking work around the world. We travel to Colombia to see an MCC program that helps youth displaced by war learn to use conflict resolution skills as an alternative to violence. This video is aimed at grades 5 to 9.

Peace: The Ultimate Trick will be available in late 2003 for borrowing from all MCC offices. It will also be available for purchase (\$30 Cdn./\$20 U.S.) from MCC offices in Alberta, British Columbia, Manitoba, Ontario, and Saskatchewan, as well as from the Akron office, whose address is on the back page.

For MCC resources, visit the MCC Web site at <http://www.mcc.org/respub.html>.

We are called to give our lives for the cause of the gospel without taking up arms. It is a call to a new citizenship.

No Taxes for War

We believe that the taxes used to support the soldiers, the buying of weapons, the war-promoting publicity that permeates our collective thought, the information spread by the media to build up hate and create enemies, to justify some assassinations and to condemn others, should not come from those of us who have answered Jesus' call. This call should place us in a dynamic of brotherly and sisterly solidarity that seeks to demonstrate God's love in the midst of pain.

We are called to give our lives for the cause of the gospel without taking up arms. It is a call to a new citizenship. This call invites us today to object to any situation that seeks to force us to serve the god of war.

Ricardo Pinzón is a member of the Teusaquillo Mennonite Church in Bogotá, Colombia. He served for many years as director of the Coalition for Conscientious Objection. He also volunteers as a conflict mediator in the community.

Listening to the Voices in Arauca

by Janna Bowman

The growing presence and horrendously violent activity of the right-wing paramilitary groups add to the security crisis. There are substantiated allegations that security forces continue working in collaboration and collusion with the paramilitary.

In September 2002, JustaPaz and Mennonite Central Committee released the report titled "Listening to the Voices in Arauca." It presented deep concerns around what was then a proposal before the U.S. Congress to provide US\$98 million in training and equipment to protect an oil pipeline in the northeastern province of Arauca.

Interviews and on-site visits made it clear that, as the report subhead states, "Big oil has brought only guns and grief." Tragically, many of the fears and projections articulated by Araucans a year ago have become reality. This document takes a look at some of the most urgent matters with respect to U.S. involvement in Arauca. It amplifies the voice of church members in the militarized communities who are paying the cost of protecting the pipeline.

Between late 2002 and early 2003, the Congress provided US\$99 million to help protect the Caño Limón-Coveñas pipeline, partially owned by Los Angeles-based Occidental Petroleum. The Bush administration budget request for 2004 includes an undetermined amount of funds—possibly more than US\$110 million—to continue the program through training and providing equipment and armaments to as many as 800 Colombian soldiers.

While this pipeline is just one of "more than 300 infrastructure points that are of strate-

gic interest for the United States in Colombia"—as outgoing U.S. Ambassador to Colombia Anna Patterson is often quoted as saying—it is the most outstanding demonstration of the expansion of U.S. military involvement in Colombia. It represents a dramatic, twofold extension of the "Drug War" in Colombia by (1) providing security for U.S. business interests and (2) engaging in military counterinsurgency activities.

Arauca, a Violent and Impoverished Region

The military aid is coming to one of Colombia's most impoverished regions, and what has grown to be the most violent. Since the writing of the 2002 report, Arauca's assassination rate has risen at a startling rate. In 2001, 424 violent deaths were reported in Arauca, more than double the country's average rate per thousand. However, the murders within the first six months of 2003 have already well exceeded that number.

As the military gains additional resources and strength, the guerrilla groups will try to do the same. As in the past in Colombia, the guerrilla groups feel they must step up their crimes against civilians to demonstrate power. The growing presence and horrendously violent activity of the right-wing paramilitary groups add to the security crisis. There are substantiated allegations that security forces continue working in collaboration and collusion with the paramilitary.

As written in the 2002 report, a floundering economy feeds the ranks of the armed groups as the unemployed resign themselves to the only flourishing business: war-making. The economic crisis drives others to cultivate coca. Controlling its production and marketing has become an attractive lure for the FARC (Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia—Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia) guerrillas and the paramilitaries. An Arauca government official complains: “Why, when we are suffering from hunger, without health care services and educational opportunities, is this money going to the brigade and not toward our communities?”

Arauca, as is true of the whole eastern plains region, has historically been abandoned by the national government. Local people emphatically called for social investment and infrastructure, complaining that the region has few schools, paved roads, and social and health services or police protection. Nevertheless, the recent response to Arauca’s problems by both the Colombian and U.S. governments has been military force, not social programs meeting human need.

Military Solutions Do Not Offer Security

Last fall the Colombian government ceded special powers to the military in several highly conflictive regions of the country. These so-called security measures resulted in the violation of basic human rights and civil freedoms and were highly unpopular within many sectors of Arauca. Although the constitutional court declared these “Consolidation and Rehabilitation Zones” unconstitutional, the military continues to operate as if it still held these exceptional powers.

The United States has already sent at least 70 advisors from a Special Forces group to train Colombian soldiers. As frankly stated by a U.S. Special Forces member, “Our mission is to train the Colombians to find, track down, and kill the terrorists before they attack the pipeline.”

Clearly hard-line policy makers and representatives from the private sector can sell arguments of U.S. “vital national interests” cloaked in “war on terror” language to Congress. But how are Araucans experiencing this “protection”? What are the costs of this military injection to safeguard U.S. energy interests?

Recently five church members from Arauca came to Bogotá to denounce the military’s role, breathe freely, and momentarily escape

fear. One woman was widowed last year when her husband, the president of the town’s human rights organization, was assassinated while riding a motorcycle with their 15-year-old daughter. A second woman is an acting town council member who recently received another round of death threats. The others are leaders in the church’s social concerns association.

They come from one of the most theologically conservative denominations in Colombia, but the violence they’ve experienced and the shadow of death under which they continually live has pushed them beyond the four walls of their church. They spoke most passionately about the mistrust, “terror,” and rise in violence coinciding with the arrival of U.S.-trained Colombian soldiers in the province. They described the soldiers’ actions as “physically and verbally abusive” and “terrifying.”

According to these church representatives, the soldiers—who are clearly identifiable by their helmets, dark glasses, and weapons—aim their guns at civilians’ heads, supposedly looking through their infrared lens to find hidden weapons. “But you don’t hide guns in your head!” one woman said with exasperation. “The army is supposed to be our friend, but it has become our worst enemy.”

The overarching continued complaint of “always more militarization, but no social aid” also came through clearly. “We are hungry, and they send us guns,” said one mother of four children. Another woman added, “They call giving sweets to the children in the streets ‘social investment!’”

While some have called this and other activities geared towards children “social investment,” others dub such behavior “psychological warfare.” A military commander explained that they believe working with the children is the most effective way of reaching their parents, many of whom they believe to be guerrilla supporters. Logically, retaliation from “the other side” continues. Shortly after the army sponsored a recreational event for children, a guerrilla group pasted warnings around the town advising parents that the insurgents would not be responsible for the well-being of those children who had participated.

Last year one small-scale farmer who lives along the pipeline said, “Injecting the army with more power . . . will just mean more war, more poverty.” Documenting this layman’s projections, the delegation from Arauca spoke of economic paralysis in the

Cast of Characters in the Colombian Armed Conflict

State armed forces: Includes the army, air force, and navy, plus the “rural soldiers” that the president initiated in 2002 to provide armed “protection” in their own communities where the regular forces are not present. The state armed forces act in complete union with the government to engage the guerrilla groups militarily and to protect the interests of private business.

Guerrillas or insurgent groups: The current insurgent groups in Colombia arose in the early 1960s when a decade-long civil war was ended by agreements that protected the interests of the elite and left the common people in the same unjust situation. The two groups that still act on a national level are the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) and the National Liberation Army (ELN). The insurgent groups finance themselves largely through extortion, kidnaping, and (except for the ELN) taxing the drug-trafficking in Colombia. The previous government, under President Andrés Pastrana, held peace dialogues with these two groups, which ended at the beginning of 2002.

The United Self-Defense Forces of Colombia (AUC) or paramilitaries: The AUC began to form about 20 years ago as large landowners and drug-traffickers increasingly hired private armies to protect their economic interests from the insurgent groups. These groups collaborate with the state armed forces and are responsible for the majority of human rights violations in Colombia. These groups have largely financed themselves from drug-trafficking and contributions from large landowners. In early 2003 the AUC entered into talks with the government to agree on how to demobilize this group.

General delinquent groups: There are many small, organized groups that operate in urban centers, committing acts of general delinquency. They often take advantage of the armed conflict, blaming one of the armed groups for their acts of violence.

—Bonnie Klassen



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The Peace Office Newsletter is published quarterly by the Mennonite Central Committee Overseas Peace Office. Editor is Mark Siemens. Consulting Editors are Bob Herr and Judy Zimmerman Herr. Opinions expressed in this newsletter reflect those of the authors and not necessarily those of Mennonite Central Committee.

Additional subscriptions welcome—see address below. To keep paper and energy waste at a minimum we ask you to inform us if an address should be changed or if a name should be dropped from our mailing list. Telephone: (717) 859-1151. Printed in the U.S.A.

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already impoverished region. “[U.S. military aid] is generating mistrust, violence, and poverty.” They cited economic desperation as one cause for the growth of the illegal armed groups, forming a vicious cycle.

A Path Forward?

“When will this end? Where is this going?” We have no answers to the questions asked by those most vulnerable to increased militarization of their communities. The United States has no clear end goals in Colombia; it is not even apparent what success would look like according to policy makers. What remains clear are the numbing human costs to innocent Colombians of the flagrant pursuit of economic benefits for our energy-indulgent society.

Few North Americans would dispute that human life is more valuable than cheap oil, but making lifestyle choices and taking the necessary action to guarantee an ethical foreign policy is challenging indeed. May we listen to the “least of these” and seek the nonviolent path forward.

(For the full 2002 report, “Listening to the Voices in Arauca,” go to: <http://www.mcc.org/areaserv/latinamerica/colombia/arauca/index.html>.)

Janna Bowman is an MCC volunteer who works with JustaPaz, focusing on the effects of U.S. policy toward Colombia on grassroots communities, and particularly on churches