



Building Bridges of Reconciliation in Latin America

IN THIS ISSUE

- 2 Mennonite-Catholic Relations in Colombia: We witness to the reconciling love of Christ**
by Peter Stucky
- 3 Working Without Prejudices For The Same Cause**
by Ricardo Torres
- 4 Creating Space for Dialogue: MCCers Speak on Interfaith Work in Latin America**
by Laura A. Schildt
- 8 Radical Ecumenism**
by Arturo Orrego
- 9 Purifying the Memories**
by César García
- 10 Mennonites and Catholics in Dialogue**
by Ivan J. Kauffman

Introduction

by Daryl Yoder-Bontrager

One of the fondest memories from my time of living in Latin America is watching a Mennonite pastor and a Catholic sister, both from Honduras, standing beside each other in a circle of people demonstrating against obligatory military service, holding hands and bowing their heads together in prayer. In the Latin American context, Catholics and Protestant leaders are more likely to preach in their pulpits about the faults of the other group than they are to pray together.

When Mennonite Central Committee (MCC) international programs chose Interfaith Bridge-Building as a key initiative, it arose out of a concern with the enmity between Christians and Muslims. Those of us working in Latin America and the Caribbean, where Islam is a very small presence, chose to focus on bridge-building between Catholics and Evangelicals, as Protestants are known in the region.

The history goes back to the early days of the Catholic church in the western hemisphere, when the church arrived hand in hand with the colonial powers. Any threat to the church was a threat to the state and vice versa. When evangelical missionaries began to work in the region, with their goal of winning as many Catholics as possible to evangelicalism, the Catholic church perceived a threat and pushed back.

The stories of tension between the two groups are many; emotions often run high when they talk about each other. At least one Mennonite leader in Bolivia, a former Catholic catechist, was confined by the government when a Catholic priest denounced him to political authorities. Those experiences are woven into

the fabric of churchgoers, and too often reinforced by the people in the pulpits.

MCC workers on assignment have often lived the gap between the Evangelicals and Catholics. In many communities some MCC workers attend the Catholic church and others attend the Evangelical church. Some workers have regularly attended both. Either way often brings a holy confusion to the rest of the community.

And begins to build bridges. Included in this Peace Office Newsletter are the results of a study done last year by Laura Schildt who compiled experiences of MCC workers who lived and worked among Catholics and Protestants. One observation was that relations seem to work well when the groups focus on something outside of themselves. For example, Ricardo Torres recounts below his work with the Mennonite Peace and Justice Project work with gangs carried out in cooperation with several Catholic parishes.

Several writers in this issue note the Vatican-Mennonite dialogue and the progress in building relationships that has been made. However, as César García points out, while the dialogue has been fruitful, there is a much work remaining to get the reconciliation that is happening at the official level to trickle down to the average church member in Latin America who experiences first hand the tension felt between Catholics and Evangelicals. We hope that this newsletter will provide opportunities to think about how to help that task along.

Daryl Yoder-Bontrager is Mennonite Central Committee Director for Latin America and the Caribbean.

Menonite-Catholic Relations in Colombia:

We witness to the reconciling love of Christ

by Peter Stucky

By the Seventies and Eighties we had cultivated relations with progressive elements of the Roman Catholic church.

We felt affinity to their pastoral action in response to the social and political situation in which we lived.

In Colombia, as in much of Latin America, it is unfortunate that the relations between Protestant churches and the Roman Catholic church historically have not been good. I remember my father saying years ago that for the Catholic church there were three enemies of Colombia: Communists, Masons and Protestants. And we were Protestants. During the years called “The Violence” in Colombia, Protestants (a very small minority) were severely persecuted and discriminated against. Things began to change here with the Second Vatican Council convened by Pope John XXIII. He said that Protestants were not to be considered heretics but separated brethren. A milestone in these difficult relations for the Mennonite missionaries in Cachipay was when the town priest walked down the road a mile to the Mennonite school to give his heartfelt sympathy to them on the assassination of President John F. Kennedy. I don’t suppose it was irrelevant to his gesture that JFK was Catholic.

In spite of the many things that happened our church did not promote anti-Catholic feelings. By the time the decades of the Seventies and Eighties rolled around our church had cultivated relations with progressive elements of the Roman Catholic church. Those relations were primarily among folks belonging to religious orders such as the Jesuits, Carmelites and various women’s orders, as well as with lay Catholics who participated in base-community movements. Often these groups were persecuted and repressed within their own church, or by government forces. We felt considerable affinity to their social analysis and to their pastoral action in response to the social and political situation in which we lived in Colombia.

During this time and in the 1990s as Latin American theology, or Liberation Theology, developed in the Catholic church, we reflected on and deepened our understanding of Anabaptist theology with the help of North American Mennonites like John H. Yoder, John Driver, Arnold Snyder, Robert Suderman, John Paul Lederach and others. Some of them were personally present with us and our contact with others was through their writings. These two theologies—Liberation Theology and Anabaptist theology—

intersected at a number of points and differed at others, but we had something to say to each other. Even more importantly, it enabled us to work together in the mission of the church to the world.

During the 1990s our peace position and theology became more widely known as the internal conflict in Colombia increased. Brothers like John Paul Lederach, Mark Chupp, Vernon Jantzi, and others came and taught, and the Social Pastorate of the Colombian Bishop’s Conference asked John Paul to be an advisor and teacher to their teams. Justapaz and CLARA-SEMILLA put out books that were sought after.

In 2004 our Colombian Mennonite Church along with three Catholic dioceses in the northern part of Colombia were founding members of a foundation for development and peace in a very conflict-filled region called Montes de María. This foundation now counts institutions such as city chambers of commerce and universities as members, and receives the support of the Colombian government and the European Union in building an infrastructure for peace in the region.

In 2005, along with the other Anabaptist conferences in Colombia, we used the Mennonite World Conference-Vatican dialogues as a jumping off point for a half-day meeting at the Bishop’s Conference. Now we want to have a two-day follow-up conversation in which we invite bishops and Anabaptists from Colombia and four other Latin American countries. We intend to also invite other Christian churches, Moslems and Jews. The fact that one of MCC’s areas of interest is precisely interfaith dialogue encourages us in this path.

As war, conflict, internal displacement, corruption and many moral problems swirl around the churches here, these small efforts to break down barriers and work together are testimonies to Christ’s reconciling presence among us and in the world.

Peter Stucky is the President of the Colombian Mennonite Church and pastor of the Teusaquillo Mennonite church.

Working Without Prejudices For The Same Cause

by Ricardo Torres

As an MCCer I firmly believe that inter-church relationships should go beyond simple ecumenism (Ephesians 2: 14–18). We should take advantage of every opportunity we get to build bridges. For example, relationships can be built through service, as happens in Honduras with the Catholic church.

When we began our restoration work with young people who were linked to gangs, we realized that we could not do it alone but should make a joint effort because the gang problem was winning the war against the Honduran government and was terrorizing the general population. Besides, other institutions were doing rehabilitation work in other areas and this was our chance to learn from other experiences.

La López Arellano is a colony in the Municipality of Choloma in the Department of Cortés on the northern coast of Honduras. During the 1990s this colony was famous all over the country for being highly dangerous. I arrived there in 1998 because of my connections as a Mennonite Central Committee (MCC) volunteer working in the Peace and Justice Project. There is a Mennonite church in the colony, a Catholic parish, and several other denominations. The Mennonite church and Catholic parish are geographically the closest.

I remember that the young people in our program in La López would tell me that they wanted to erase their tattoos, they needed jobs, and they were tired of all of the violence. They began to express numerous needs which, truth to tell, scared me because I did not know how we could respond on our own to all of their requests. We had to prove to them that our program was a serious one with every willingness to support them, but we also wanted to teach them that not everything is easily available and that they needed to do their share in order to change.

Concerned about the need to erase the tattoos, we began looking for help. In 1999 we heard about the program *Adiós Tatuajes* (Goodbye Tattoos) run by a Catholic parish in another part of the Department of Cortés and we immediately went there to watch the process and ask for their help with the young people in our area. The coordinator of the Suyapa program and the Priest David Labuda set out to train us in how to erase tattoos. A group of Mennonites from La Ceiba and La López received the training

twice, including some practice time. We proposed that the Catholic group carry out a tattoo erasing campaign in La López and they accepted. This campaign lasted two days and around 200 young people went to get their tattoos erased. It was wonderful to experience such a *marero* (gang member) turnout. This parish program later helped us to organize our own clinic for erasing tattoos which is now in operation in La López.

Working together brought us into contact with Monseñor Rómulo Emiliani, Auxiliary Bishop from San Pedro Sula, who invited us to talk together about how to work more efficiently and together with young people linked to gangs. As we held meetings with the bishop we also talked with the priest from La López and some of his helpers from the parish, hoping that our joint efforts would provide support for the young people and avoid the random killings carried out by secret groups.

The *Adiós Tatuajes* program soon spread to various parts of the country and that is how a clinic was organized in the city of La Ceiba. When we heard that the program already existed in that parish, we immediately decided to refer tattooed youths to that clinic, since our restoration program extended to other parts of the country. We also began to work jointly with the coordinator of the clinic. For example, Catholics and Mennonites organized a forum called “Gang Issues in the City of La Ceiba” in which 30 non-governmental organizations (NGOs) participated. It was also a remarkable experience because, for the first time, a young person linked to the *Mara Salvatrucha* (Salvatrucha Gang) was there and he sent an open letter to society expressing his needs and saying that gang members are also human beings who need a chance. In this letter they asked for the forgiveness of society for all the damage they had caused. I felt privileged to read this letter publicly before the media.

This youth restoration work continues to generate a great deal of hope in some parts of society. That hope may come because of the innovative methods, because of the results, or because of the joint work with some of the Catholic parishes where the program has been introduced. The common people are willing to help us and they find this relationship in which Mennonites and Catholics are united by one purpose to be attractive.

It was remarkable because a young person linked to the Salvatrucha Gang asked for the forgiveness of society for all the damage caused.

This youth restoration work continues to generate a great deal of hope.

All of these experiences among different faith perspectives are enriching for those who are still looking for a church space.

The Mennonite church in colonia López has played a key role in the work being done there. Even though some of the members of the church are against ecumenism or the Catholic- Mennonite relationship, others are very willing to work together. For example, in 2003 the young people from the La López Parish and the Mennonite church organized a big peace march for the whole colony. It was something never before seen in that area. Some 800 people went out on the streets to say “no” to violence and the arbitrary killing of young men, and “yes” to peace. It was wonderful to see Father Canales and Pastor Villalobos heading the big march. Special care was taken to march through areas where gang members and other young people had been killed. Everyone carried little white flags, colorful signs, or wore T-shirts with peace-making messages. It was truly a sign that Christ came to bring the good news of peace to everyone—to those who were far away as well as to those who were close. The march ended up in the Common Hall with singing and clapping. From up front you could see a lot of happy people, people with hope who were ready to continue working for peace. A nun from the parish prayed for peace, a pastor did the same, everybody raised their flag and sang as one “I ask You for peace for my city; I ask for forgiveness for my city; I humble myself and seek Your face; To whom can I go, Lord, except to You”. Early next morning the social cleansing groups killed two young people of our group from the La López area to show their anger for what we

had done. However, we continue with our restoration of young people and public denouncements of the killings of *mareros*.

Today the Peace and Justice Project and the La López Mennonite Church have grown in number and in commitment thanks to their participatory spirit. There continue to be good relationships with the Catholic parishes of La López, Chamelecón, La Ceiba and the Dioceses of San Pedro Sula, with Caritas, and with the Tocoa Colón Parish legal aid, and others. To be truthful, any one church, parish, NGO, or institution is made up of people, and it is the people who push forward these ideas of unity, fraternity, brotherhood, companionship and solidarity. Priests are moved from one parish to another, personnel changes in institutions, other people come with new ideas and bring different perspectives with them. So we need to be aware that relationships can change, depending on the spirit of openness of the new people who arrive.

All of these experiences among different faith perspectives are enriching not only for those of us who try to share the gospel the way Jesus did, but also for those who watch us and are still looking for a church space for reflecting with God. After all, the calling of the church is to be a channel for God’s transforming work in this world.

Ricardo Torres is from Colombia and worked with Mennonite Central Committee in Honduras as a Conflict Resolution Trainer from 1997 to 2000, and from 2002 to 2006.

Creating Space for Dialogue: MCCers Speak on Interfaith Work in Latin America

by Laura A. Schildt

In October of 2004 Daryl Yoder-Bontrager and Saul Murcia proposed a study that would draw from the wisdom and experience that Mennonite Central Committee (MCC) current workers and alumni have gained as they worked in Latin America and often stood in the gap between faith traditions there.

This report draws on 20 interviews and owes much gratitude to the MCC workers and alumni who shared stories and carefully reflected on their MCC experiences. Within this article, the indented sections set off by black dots are taken directly from the interviews.

INTRODUCTION

To understand the present-day challenges that face the church, whether Catholic, Protestant, Mennonite, or other, we must reflect on the history of these relationships. The future can hopefully benefit from our experiences. In the words of Nancy Guthrie, “As MCC looks at relationships between Catholics and Protestants, I hope MCC will listen carefully to the successes as well as the failures and chart a path to wholeness.”

The historical lines between Catholics and Protestants in Latin America were drawn long before anyone living today was born. These divisions are enacted and reinforced

today as if they happened within our own lifetime. The research presented here is intended to encourage a broader understanding of Catholic/Protestant relations in Latin America and is directed specifically at the intersection of MCC's work and the socio-cultural dimension of religion.

CREATING SPACE

Throughout the history of MCC in Latin America, MCCers have done the work of bridge building by creating and strengthening existing spaces that bring together Catholics and Protestants.

- I was very interested in having the Mennonite pastors that I was working with learn from Cantera and the other way, so I set up several seminars to discuss the housing project and to reflect on the work that was done after Hurricane Mitch. That's the kind of role that I think MCC can play, that of bringing people together. I personally felt that these seminars between the Mennonite pastors and Cantera were appreciated by both sides. They would probably not have gotten together otherwise.

Many respondents mentioned that when both Catholics and Protestants were working together to meet their shared common needs or were united around a common desire to work for peace; this objective became the focus, not their differences in theology.

- We focused much of our work on developing a peace-building program and organization. We formed a team and coordinated with the Baptist church, the Catholic church and other denominations to form a space for the peace-building program based on the philosophy of non-violence.
- While the priests/pastors and community leaders may have been waging small battles to keep or regain territory and people, we focused on the people's health. The bible reflections we began our meetings with spoke to all of us, as did our shared stories and studies regarding our work. I tried to not use the "us" and "them" language, but point out our commonalities and similar struggles. We all worshipped the same God.

There was a fair amount of name-calling back and forth that wasn't very helpful. We tried to relate to both groups in our work with tuberculosis patients. The expectation on the part of the Mennonite church members was that we would try to convert the Catholics, but we didn't necessarily see that

as our role and felt the tension as we sought to be salt and light and bring the "cup of cold water" in the name of Christ.

Although it is clear that both Catholics and Protestants were brought together through MCC programs, other examples show that the opposite result is also a reality. In the following story we can see how an MCC water project brought religious tension to the surface.

- MCC was working to do a water project in a small community of probably 50 families and 8 or 9 were Protestant. The project was to be for the whole community, no matter what religion you were, but in the end the Protestants basically did not help to put in the water system. Within a year that system fell apart because the Protestants were saying that if it wasn't of their church, it was of the devil. They didn't quite go that far but it was sort of implied. They were happy to have the water but then because of the water pressure and where it goes and some were using more water, finally someone started cutting at the pipes and the whole project collapsed. It was a success but a year and a half later it was a disaster.

This story helps clarify the importance of addressing religious tension. Identifying how religious issues can influence the execution of projects and programming can prevent undesirable effects.

Connecting people's programs is a way that MCC has intentionally worked to create spaces for interaction and dialogue.

- Recently I found out that the communities of La Linea and San Nicolas are in frequent contact. These communities are far apart, but both received Work and Learn (WAL) teams from Alberta, Canada, and both sent representatives on an exchange delegation to Alberta. During that week together they bonded and have stayed in touch. La Linea is partnered with MCC through the Emmanuel Baptist Church and San Nicolas through CEBES (Catholic). These are concrete signs of MCC's people-connecting and bridge-building skills and facilitation abilities.

The inclusiveness of MCC's approach is an important part of its ability to be a bridge.

- In Mexico, either you are Catholic or Protestant. Where we were, we could have been green men from outer space, we just weren't Catholic and therefore we were suspect. One of the biggest dynamics was that they figured we'd come in and build only for the evangelicals. Well, we used

I was so careful not to talk about my faith because if I'm coming out with a missionary, I didn't want to impose anything on them. I just wanted to support them. I think they saw me as odd because I didn't use the terminology. I didn't talk and I didn't share things and I think they couldn't figure out who I was and what I believed. I wish I had said more. I think that would have made me more supportive. I had so many red flags up about all these missionaries coming and doing stuff. I kind of wish MCC would say, I think it is important to talk about those things more and not to evangelize, but to support them where they are at because it is so important to where they are. A lot of people were confused . . . are they Christian, are they Catholic, what are they?

—Jennifer Murch served with MCC Nicaragua from 1997 to 2001.

MCCers have done the work of bridge building by creating and strengthening existing spaces that bring together Catholics and Protestants.

MCC sometimes plays a difficult role with local Mennonite churches who don't understand our commitment to building bridges and want all MCC resources and workers channeled to them. It's a challenge to live our priority of relating to Anabaptist churches without allowing those relationships to make our focus too narrow.

—Susan Classen served with MCC Bolivia from 1981 to 1984, with MCC El Salvador from 1984 to 1994, and with MCC Nicaragua from 1996 to 2003.

Being committed to listening and respecting other traditions increases the ability of MCCers to act as a bridge.

exactly the same criteria for that church as we did for the rest of the town.

- In Central America, I think MCC is in a unique role because of the faith diversity of both its volunteers and partners. The fact that MCC includes non-Mennonite volunteers, both Protestant and Catholic, made a big impression. The placement of volunteers with Protestant, Catholic, and non-church agencies was part of this ecumenical example. When we brought our partner organizations together for workshops or activities, it was often a unique and positive ecumenical experience for them.

As MCC models ecumenism among workers and partners, the space that MCC's presence creates draws organizations, associations and individuals into contact.

- MCC in El Salvador usually sponsored a conference or two a year on topics such as mental health or peace making, in which we invited representatives from our partners. I can't tell you how many people came away from these conferences with prejudices dismantled because they had become friends with a person of a different denomination.

When space is created which connects representatives who are not like-minded or like-situated, there is the possibility for change.

- In each country there were Mennonites who were uncomfortable with working with Catholics and with MCC working with Catholics. We tried to be a "bridge" between the divide and bring folks together as appropriate.

We have heard many examples above from MCC workers about the creation of space. Thinking strategically about these spaces, whether they be hospitals, schools, the clean-up site after an earthquake, offices, an individual's home or a church building, will increase MCC's potential for constructing positive interaction between faiths. It is in these spaces that can be planted the seeds of change.

ARTICULATING OUR IDENTITY

In the five-year dialogue between the Catholic church and Mennonite World Conference from 1998-2003 Mennonites and Catholics explained their own traditions to each another. The dialogue was firmly grounded in the strong religious identity of both religious bodies as the basis for discussion.

MCCers in Latin American have articulated their tradition and faith in many formal and

informal interfaith settings. The clear articulation of this tradition has helped to strengthen relationships.

- When I told the community that I was Catholic, there was primarily nothing but acceptance on their part toward me. I remember a comment following my testimony. "If I'd been Catholic in the way that JoAnn is Catholic, I wouldn't have needed to become an Evangelical."
- There was a church leader who, although he was accepting of me, wanted to ask me additional questions about my position on infant baptism and the pope. It actually ended up being a very strengthening conversation between us.
- There were a lot of questions to me from my co-workers about what is this Mennonite stuff. Why is my family living out in Machiari in this little house instead of in the capital city, and so a lot of those questions came from seeing how my family lived.
- My role was conversational. Sometimes I would help explain what different churches believed.

Being committed to listening and respecting other traditions enhances dialogue and increases the ability of MCCers to act as a bridge.

- A key strength is not being judgmental. I was very comfortable with MCC as a volunteer because I could be myself and explain to others my beliefs while appreciating the faith of others and their experiences of God. I think MCC needs to state clearly who they are and what they are about. This may align them more with Protestants/Evangelicals in Latin America but this must be done with humility and a willingness to learn from both Catholics and Protestants.

While many have shared about their religious identity, simultaneously MCCers in some settings have felt cautious about sharing their faith considering the history of missionaries in Latin America:

- In Bolivia, there were people who didn't even know MCC was a Christian organization. To them, it was just another NGO that does development work.

The clear articulation of "who we are" and "what we believe" can strengthen existing relationships and aid in supporting Catholics and Protestants alike in their Christian journey. The lack of clear articulation can lead to confusion on the part of MCC partners and friends.

Clarity, establishing trust, credibility and maintaining relationships with both Catholics and Protestants is an important part of MCC's role as a connector. Nonetheless, this position can sometimes produce discomfort and requires holding in tension diverse expectations and relationships.

- I believe many times MCC's strong connections with the local Mennonite churches can get in the way of more freely serving and working with other churches.

In countries where Mennonite groups were larger and less understanding of ecumenical work, MCC has had to walk a fine line between the Mennonite church and other groups. Balancing relationships requires strong but not rigid ties with both groups.

MCC volunteers confirm that the clear articulation of one's identity is an important part of living and working in an interfaith context. How can MCC encourage and prepare workers to be simultaneously clear about their identity as well as respectful and open to receive and learn from other faith traditions?

COMMON GROUND

Many MCCers agree that an important part of dialogue is the identification of common points between different faiths. Gospel values such as service and loving one another are essential and could be the foundation of relationships between different faith groups.

- I would love to see churches focus on Gospel values. Most of the churches so focus on building their own kingdoms, empires and turf that it gets in the way of serving those in need and loving one another. I think MCC and the Mennonite churches' focus on discipleship and service is important to working with each church. MCC should try to call forth the best in each church to live, once again, the Gospel values of service and selfless love.

In addition to MCC's role as mediator or bridge builder is that of church leadership. Leaders model, initiate, encourage and support change. Catholic and Mennonite leaders have set an example by modeling dialogue and the establishment of common ground in their 1998-2003 meetings. Visionary and respectful leadership in reconciliation processes is important in small communities as well as in the larger church institutions.

- Concretely I visualize spaces of dialogue and both churches creating bonds to inter-vene and transform their social reality with democratic, dynamic and creative church leadership.

- It is important to have leaders that are willing to speak well of the other side.

Finding common ground is challenging work and requires thoughtful preparation. If interfaith work is implicit in the MCCers experience, how can the organization be intentional about preparing workers to act as mediators to establish common ground between individuals and communities?

MCCers agree that the role of being a bridge and finding common ground between faiths should be specifically addressed and supported by MCC through preparation, training and education.

A VISION OF RELATIONSHIP

One of the primary strengths of MCC over the years has been the formation of relationships and attention given to them in the grassroots community.

- I see the grassroots building of local relationships and collaboration that is so basic to MCC's approach as foundational for all other ecumenical projects and dialogues. That approach may sometimes tie MCCers' hands when primary Mennonite or other Evangelical partners want to veto collaboration with Catholics. But that approach has also been and should continue to be the key to building Mennonite-Catholic and Protestant-Catholic relationships.

As MCCers live and move in the grassroots community they bear witness to ruptures in relationships. Sadly, many of the bitter divisions in the church in Latin America contribute to the tension in relationships within families and communities.

- While in Bolivia I lived in a community that had no organized religion. It was a fairly cohesive community on many levels. Unfortunately, both a Catholic priest and evangelicals started to organize and their presence fractured the community. It even led to one death in the community.

At times MCCers have experienced religious bias and tension in relationships themselves with Catholics or Protestants.

- On a Work and Learn (WAL) team I experienced religious bias from some of the North American participants which was shocking to me. I remember one young couple who asked, "Are we going to a Catholic community or a Christian community?" They had tracts in hand. It was quite surprising. I had to "come out" as a Catholic!

We may need to be more open with all faiths about why we work with Catholics or why we stay with Mennonite churches that seem so conservative . . . I believe MCC needs to maintain its strong identity and connection with Anabaptist congregations and agencies where they exist no matter how non-Anabaptist their own identity may be. That is the only way we can be a bridge.

—Ann Hershberger served with MCC Nicaragua from 1985 to 1990.

Maintaining relationships with both Catholics and Protestants is an important part of MCC's role as a connector.

The fact that MCC includes non-Mennonite volunteers, both Protestant and Catholic, made a big impression.

Finding common ground is challenging work and requires thoughtful preparation.

First moves toward building relationships involve moving away from the polarizing “us-them” language and taking steps toward seeing the “other” not as the enemy.

- The focus moves from seeing the “other” as the enemy, and moves towards working together to advance God’s kingdom as brothers and sisters in Christ. Both groups work individually and together in confronting issues of poverty, injustice and moral problems.

While the possibility to play an important role is present, MCC workers also need to be careful with this role. We can’t force our ideas about the changes we want to see. MCCers can provide space but must be aware of the role churches can play in initiation of change.

- The idea has to be theirs. If we come in with an idea, it’s not their idea.
- I would like to see MCC continue to offer opportunities to cross boundaries but to encourage each church to work on it locally, reaching out to other churches in their communities. Perhaps MCC could offer mediation services between churches or suggestions of ways churches could work together locally. Not always having MCC be the initiator, but to serve as a resource for church partners who want to initiate an ecumenical event on their own. I would hope that in five years you would have the priest, pastors and other leaders of the distinct churches initiating their own inter-denominational dialogues and activities.

Thus, the nature of MCC’s role can be to encourage churches to work locally and to offer to be a resource to those who work together.

Building credibility and personal relationships is foundational to interfaith work. Out of the strength of relationships emerges the possibility to dream of mutual respect and reconciliation. In these relationships we must let go of the preconceptions and grievances we hold against one another. We must be open to the possibility of living in new ways with one another. Reconciliation is the willingness to invite transformation first in oneself and then in others.

MCC faces the future of interfaith work with a solid foundation. By encouraging the involvement of all actors and by supporting initiatives that amplify people’s worldview, MCC can plant seeds and help facilitate the learning process. How can MCC capitalize on its solid foundation? What is its vision for the relationships that have been cultivated? What is MCC’s vision for the potential role that MCCers and the organization can play in dialogue and reconciliation?

Laura A. Schildt lived for 3 years with MCC in Olinala, Mexico and presently works with MCC in Santa Cruz, Bolivia. She delivered an expanded version of this paper at the MCC Peace Committee Meeting in Akron, Pennsylvania, March 17–18, 2006.

Radical Ecumenism

by Arturo Orrego

We need to see the other as someone that is different but filled with spiritual riches.

To speak of ecumenism in the 21st century has become an essential item on the agendas of different religious conferences, seminaries, universities and churches, despite many types of reticence and fear concerning the topic.

Ecumenism has become a kind of “fashion” in the historic churches and in their story. It is common to see the sharing of space, services, breakfasts, chapels, and the appearance in photos of religious leaders of different confessions. I believe that all this is very important to set the stage for the necessary dialogue and encounters. Nevertheless we should ask ourselves if all this “executive and formal” ecumenism is not simply

responding to a passing fashion and feeling the need to be in the vanguard.

There are some elements from my perspective that are essential to understand ecumenism from an Anabaptist perspective in the 21st century and that will help to free us from this “formal” ecumenism.

Understanding difference as a gift, not a threat: Human beings have learned to fear difference. Everything that does not contain plans and visions consistent with our own understanding appears to be a potential enemy. We should therefore begin our analysis with a negative perspective in mind. This is evident in the preconceptions that many Anabaptists have of Catholics, and

vice versa. To conquer this destructive tendency, a change of vision is necessary. We need to unlearn our preconceptions, and learn to see the other as someone that is different but filled with spiritual riches. We need to see the differences as a gift from God and not as a threat.

Ecumenism strengthens identity: One of the fears that it is common to hear in Latin America from some members of both Catholic and Anabaptist congregations is that ecumenism makes us lose our identity, that it is a strategy for forming only one religion.

However, there is nothing more helpful to strengthen our identities than ecumenism. Only when human beings find themselves with “the other” can they strengthen, discover, and broaden that which is within them. Only when we get together and hear each other can we completely appreciate the gifts of our own traditions, and strengthen and grow within ourselves.

Ecumenism is testimony of the love of God: The history of Latin America, especially the history of Colombia, has been marked by death and blood, not only because of economic exploitation that has broken out into internal wars and the deaths of thousands of people, but also for the religious fragmentation that has replicated the war models of the political powers.

It is common to hear evangelical Christians from the 1950s and the 1960s speak of the way they were persecuted—some died—by Catholics, and to hear also strong and reactionary phrases from Protestants toward Catholics in the 1980s. The mutual dislike and separation has reigned for centuries, reproducing the logic of the world and its powers.

From that background, ecumenism is perhaps the best way to give testimony and to be carriers of peace in a society that is fragmented by poverty and violence. Perhaps it is the way to speak with acts of reconciliation and forgiveness which are so alien to the reality of the public powers of our society.

To conclude, it is important to remember that ecumenism is not merely part of the intellectualized discourse of the Anabaptists, nor is it a passing fashion. Rather, it was part of the practice of the Anabaptists of the 16th century who did not speak of ecumenism, “they practiced it.” They practiced it when they saw their executioners as humans that they had to love, and when they saw Muslims as their brothers and sisters and refused to fight against them. They practiced it when they saw each one as their brothers and sisters, independent of their religious creed, nationality or beliefs.

Arturo Orrego pastors the Veraguas Brethren in Christ church in Colombia. He is also a teacher and musician.

Ecumenism is perhaps the best way to be carriers of peace in a society that is fragmented by poverty and violence.

Purifying the Memories

César García

When we talk about the Catholic-Mennonite dialogue it is necessary to acknowledge the resistance among many Latin American Mennonites to the possibility of such an interchange. In some places it is argued that the previous dialogues between the Catholic church and other Christian confessions of faith have been limited to the academic realm, without extending into the church body and society in general. The documents produced by the Pentecostal-Catholic Dialogue (1972 onward), the Evangelical-Catholic Dialogue (1977 onward) and the Baptist-Catholic Dialogue (1984 onward) are not well known.¹

Nevertheless, it is in chapter three of the 1998–2003 Catholic-Mennonite Dialogue document, that it becomes tremendously rel-

evant given the context of conflict and violence in countries like Colombia. The possibility of reaching the people and of affecting the society that surrounds us is made a reality since this chapter focuses on forgiveness as a means to heal the memories. In the words of Alexander Pope, “To err is human, to forgive divine.”

In Colombia, words like *reconciliation*, *peace and justice* are continuously analyzed. Nevertheless, it is in the church where they achieve their full meaning. Forgiveness and love towards those who are considered our enemies are indispensable parts of a truly restorative process. The Scriptures are their purest source, particularly the life and teachings of Jesus. Sadly, we need to admit that in our church history the practice of these words has not always been present.

It is necessary to review our history, to heal our memories by asking and granting forgiveness for years of violence.

The effort put forth by the churches to serve as mediators in armed conflicts is unquestionable. Society recognizes an inexhaustible wealth of topics related to peace in the Biblical teachings. It is time for the followers of Jesus to be witnesses of reconciliation and forgiveness, starting at home. We cannot pretend to shed light about peace and justice when these do not occur within our own church-to-church relations. As Henry Nouwen comments:

Anyone who wants to change a society runs the risk of putting himself above it, becoming more aware of the weakness in others than of his own. The reformer who is convinced that things must be different is determined to change the world. But at the same time is tempted to think that he himself does not need to change. Instead of seeing himself as another member of the society that needs to change, he can approach it with the imaginary construct of a savior who thinks that he is invulnerable and is always in possession of all that is true and just.²

The origin of the conflicts in which Colombia is steeped can be traced to the violence unleashed between 1948 and 1958, a decade in which the mingling of political and religious interests resulted in serious damage to Mennonite communities caused by Catholic believers (in some cases instigated by the clergy)³. Regrettably, even today some remnants of that decade are still felt in the form of religious discrimination in remote regions of our country.

Just as the most recent Catholic-Mennonite Dialogue document suggests,⁴ it is necessary to review our Colombian church history, healing our memories by asking and granting forgiveness for years of physical and verbal violence. It is important to develop joint

committees to work on relevant issues related to our relationships in Colombia. Interdenominational dialogues in Latin America have emphasized the need to address not just religious persecution but also the subject of proselytizing. One obstacle to dialogue is the way Evangelicals evangelize, which has resulted in an unjust accusation by the Catholics of proselytizing.

Now is the time to begin a process of explaining and practicing reconciliation between our churches in such a way that it can become a light of hope for Colombian society. As the 1998-2003 Catholic-Mennonite Dialogue concludes, it is indeed possible to experience reconciliation and to heal the memories.

May Jesus propel and encourage us in this task!

César García is the President of the Mennonite Brethren Church in Colombia, and co-pastor with his wife Sandra of the Torre Fuerte Church.

Notes

1. Schweitzer, Louis. *Le Dialogue Catholiques-Évangéliques: Débats et Documents*. France: Excelsis, 2002. pp. 27–31.

2. Nouwen, Henri. “Un ministerio creativo.” In Robert Jonas. *Escritos Esenciales*. Spain, 1999. p. 222.

3. De Bucana, Juana B. *La Iglesia Evangélica en Colombia: Una historia*. Colombia: WEC International, 1995. p. 129–164.

4. Mennonite World Conference, and Pontifical Council for Promoting Church Unity, *Called Together to be Peacemakers: Report of the International Dialogue between the Catholic Church and Mennonite World Conference, 1998–2003*. p. 45.

Mennonites and Catholics in Dialogue

by Ivan J. Kauffman

For many of us who have participated in these conversations it has seemed like a miracle.

Something that would have seemed impossible even twenty years ago is happening. Mennonites and Catholics throughout the world are in serious conversation—from the Vatican and the Mennonite World Conference to local congregations.

And these conversations are about the great issues that have divided Mennonites and other Anabaptists from the Catholic church for the past 500 years—Christian involvement in warfare, the baptism of infants, the need for adult conversion, the freedom of

the local congregation, the persecution of religious dissenters, including the Anabaptists in the sixteenth century.

For many of us who have participated in these conversations it has seemed like a miracle—both that they have taken place, and that they have progressed as rapidly as they have and with such genuine good feeling. It truly appears that a new era in Mennonite-Catholic relationships has dawned, after centuries of conflict and name calling.

At the center of this new process has been the international Mennonite-Catholic dialogue which began in 1998. Seven Mennonites and seven Catholics from around the world met together each year for five years to discuss the issues that divided them.

A member of the Mennonite delegation, Neal Blough, a pastor and theologian in Paris, described these week-long sessions as “nervous in the beginning, but very quickly honest and forthcoming.” He adds, “I vividly remember the occasions when we were tense or angry with each other, and then went to a meal together and finished the day in prayer.”

Blough says, “It wasn’t always easy but we may have found a model for how to speak when we have important disagreements.” He adds that in Paris where he regularly is in contact with Catholics they “do not consider Mennonites to be a sect. They respect our peace witness and other aspects of our theology. They do not expect Mennonites to become Catholics.”

At the end of the international dialogue a book-length report was published, entitled *Called Together to Be Peacemakers*. It carefully describes the results of the five-year long dialogue, highlighting what Mennonites and Catholics could agree on and what they still disagree on. The report is available in English, Spanish, German and French on the internet. (See www.bridgefolk.net/theology/mwc-pcpcu.php). A summary version has also been published for use by local congregations.

At the same time a grassroots dialogue between Mennonites and Catholics emerged in North America, beginning with a meeting in 1999. Since 2002 there have been annual summer conferences attended by 60 to 100 persons, roughly half Mennonites and half Catholics. Now called Bridgefolk, this unofficial group is now incorporated and has its own website (www.bridgefolk.net). It meets regularly at Saint John’s Abbey in Collegeville, Minnesota, the world’s largest Benedictine community, where Abbot John Klassen, himself descended from a family that once was Mennonite, has lent the prestige of the abbey to this effort. This is an important support in the Catholic community. Bridgefolk has also met at Eastern Mennonite University.

The conference in the summer of 2007 will be held at the Associated Mennonite Biblical Seminary in Elkhart, Indiana, and a theological colloquium sponsored by Bridgefolk will meet immediately after at the nearby Univer-

sity of Notre Dame. The colloquium will bring leading Catholic and Mennonite theologians together to discuss the international dialogue’s report.

Other local dialogues have also taken place in the past eight years. One of the most significant has been in Colombia. Another has taken place in Winnipeg, Manitoba, where Dr. Helmut Harder, Mennonite chair of the international dialogue, has been active. And there have been others in eastern Pennsylvania, Iowa, and in Northern Indiana. Additionally, numerous individuals, both Catholic and Mennonite, have become involved in the dialogue and have formed important ties with persons and institutions in the other tradition.

What has come from these dialogues thus far?

Perhaps the most significant outcome for Catholics has simply been to discover that the Anabaptist-Mennonite tradition exists. To the vast majority of Catholics, Mennonites are unknown or are identified with the Amish and other conservative groups. This dialogue has started to change that.

For Mennonites, perhaps the greatest result has been to find that the leadership of the Catholic church considers them part of the great worldwide Christian family. Pope John Paul made this very clear in 2002 when he asked the President of Mennonite World Conference (MWC) to take a prominent role in the World Day of Prayer for Peace which he planned and held in Assisi as his response to the events of September 11, 2001.

In places where Mennonites have been looked down on, and even persecuted by local Catholics because they were regarded as members of a “sect,” participation in this dialogue is the strongest proof possible that the international leadership of the Catholic church in Rome does not regard Mennonites in this way.

What lies ahead? Catholic authorities at the Vatican have indicated they want to continue the dialogue and the new pope Benedict XVI has said he supports it. The Mennonite World Conference has asked its constituent members to study the report and to suggest ways to move forward.

Perhaps most important for the future, the MWC Executive Committee has proposed that one way to move forward in forming a new relationship between the Catholic church and the Mennonite community would be to engage in some sort of joint peacemaking activity. The fact that the first

Resources for further reading

Mennonite World Conference, and Pontifical Council for Promoting Church Unity, *Called Together to be Peacemakers: Report of the International Dialogue between the Catholic Church and Mennonite World Conference, 1998–2003*. Edited by Willard Roth and Gerald W. Schlabach, and published by Pandora Press as part of the Bridgefolk Series, 2005.

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Schreiter, Robert J. *The Ministry of Reconciliation: Spirituality and Strategies*. Orbis Books, 1998.

Zimmerman, Earl. “Renewing the Conversation: Mennonite Responses to the Second Vatican Council.” *Mennonite Quarterly Review*, January 1999.

For the following items, see the Bridgefolk website: <http://www.bridgefolk.net/theology/resources.php>

Blough, Neal. “The Church as Sign or Sacrament: Trinitarian Ecclesiology, Pilgram Marpeck, Vatican II and John Milbank”.

Nation, Mark Thiessen. “John Howard Yoder: Mennonite, Evangelical, Catholic”.

Schlabach, Gerald W. “Between the Times, Between Communities: Eucharistic Theology for the Bridge”.

Schlabach, Gerald W. “The Bridgefolk Movement in Ecumenical Context”.

That the first five years of dialogue led to a report entitled “Called Together to Be Peacemakers” is surely important.



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five years of dialogue led to a report entitled “Called Together to Be Peacemakers” was a surprise to almost everyone involved in the dialogue, and is surely important.

The Bridgefolk process in North America continues to gather momentum, and draws new people, both Catholic and Mennonite to its conferences each year. The 2007 meeting at Notre Dame, sponsored by the theology department there, is a major step forward. The dialogues taking place in other nations are equally important.

And the friendships that are forming between individual Mennonites and Catholics throughout the world are laying the foundations for new relationships that cannot now be foreseen. An international Mennonite leader who attended one of the Bridgefolk conferences commented afterwards, “This is clearly a work of the Spirit,” and that thought has been echoed by many others.

But the greatest impact this dialogue may have will be to provide a model which other churches which share the Mennonite form of church organization can use to engage in their own dialogues with the Catholic church.

If that were to come about it would surely greatly expand the worldwide Christian community's ability to bring peace to the world. How can we be peacemakers in the world if we are not at peace among ourselves?

Ivan J. Kauffman is an independent writer who has been involved in Mennonite-Catholic ecumenical dialogue for the past decade, and was an advisor to the Catholic co-chair of the Mennonite-Catholic international dialogue. He served as executive secretary of the Mennonite Central Committee Peace Section 1966–68.