

## Peace Sunday 2016 message for TUMC

This morning's Peace Sunday message comes to us from the pastor of the Teusaquillo Mennonite Church in Bogotá Colombia, a congregation that Jacqui became part of as a young teenager, a congregation that Mayren and Carlos were members of for numerous years as young adults, and the congregation where Diana and Luis Alberto went to receive support and guidance when they needed to flee Colombia due to death threats.

Before I [Tim Schmucker] share the message, I want to offer some context that Alix Lozano, a Colombian Mennonite theologian and pastor, seminary professor and church leader, shared at Conrad Grebel College earlier this year at the Global Mennonite Peacebuilding conference. Alix, by the way, was the first woman ordained in Colombia several decades ago.

What is Colombia's context, her problem? Succinctly, Colombia is crisscrossed by multiple forms of violence: social, political, economic and the ubiquitous presence of illegal and legal armed groups who have been in conflict and war for more than 60 years. The armed groups have used and combined many different forms of violence. All have committed war crimes and crimes against humanity, making civilians the main victims of the conflict. There are estimated 7 million victims. Women make up 51% of the 4.6 million internally displaced persons, and 48.6% of the 123,066 disappeared people are women.

At the macro level, Colombia has for the past six decades lived a conflict that is seen and experienced in numerous forms of violence: armed groups, domestic violence and violence against women, displacement, political exclusion, economic inequality, social fragmentation, segregation, etc. This violence in turn corresponds to structural and cultural factors that generate new forms of conflict

and further violence, resulting in a vicious circle, an endless cycle of generating violence.

At the micro level, Colombian communities experience violence directly, structurally and culturally. This violence is expressed in multiple ways: tearing the fabric of relationships, gender inequality, and intolerance among religious groups, among others. This kind of deeper violence is borne primarily by women who suffer directly, and who have also been excluded historically within a male patriarchal system and religious orthodoxy.

After 4 years of talks between the Colombian government and the oldest guerrilla organisation in Latin America, the FARC, they signed the Peace Agreement on September 26<sup>th</sup>, which was then taken to a national referendum on October 2<sup>nd</sup> where the Colombian people would endorse the peace accords. However, after a campaign of misinformation led by Colombia's former yet still very powerful right-wing president, the Peace Agreement was rejected by the slimmest of margins – 50.2% – 49.8%.

This is the context from which the pastor of the Teausaquillo Mennonite Church sends us at TUMC the following Peace Sunday message.

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Dear Brothers and Sisters, Friends at TUMC:

We are happy to be in touch with you and to be a part of your service on this Sunday as you celebrate Peace Sunday. We tend to devote the month of September to topics related to peace. But every day is a day for peace to germinate.

Over the years we have come to believe that a church that wants to be a Sanctuary of Peace church should take into account three elements: First to be a

People of Peace; second to have a Message of Peace; and third to be a Place of Peace.

Being a People of Peace means that as a church we learn what it means to be just in our relations within the church. It means resolving our differences in a non-violent manner. It means being in solidarity with those in need, receiving the stranger and outcast, being kind and forgiving; inviting more people to belong to this people of peace in the will of Christ. This is what Colossians 3.12-16 says about being this kind of people.

***12** You are the people of God; he loved you and chose you for his own. So then, you must clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, and patience. **13** Be tolerant with one another and forgive one another whenever any of you has a complaint against someone else. You must forgive one another just as the Lord has forgiven you. **14** And to all these qualities add love, which binds all things together in perfect unity. **15** The peace that Christ gives is to guide you in the decisions you make; for it is to this peace that God has called you together in the one body. And be thankful. **16** Christ's message in all its richness must live in your hearts.*

Our congregation seeks to teach our children, young people, and adults these values in discipleship and baptism classes, in Sunday School, in our preaching and teaching and life together. Our prayer life is fundamental to ask the Holy Spirit to help us be a people of peace.

Being a People of Peace is our first testimony. It shows what we are as a people. What we are is our first word to the outside world. It is a welcome word to hear and it is a welcoming word for the world. Because if our church life is

characterized by rivalries, power plays, strife and injustice, those who might join us are full of those kinds of examples in the outside world and probably won't be interested in more of the same.

The second element is to have a Message of Peace. On this point we remember Jeremiah 29.7 where the prophet gives the Jewish people in exile in Babylon some advice: *7 And seek the peace of the city where I have caused you to be carried away captive, and pray to the Lord for it; for in its peace you will find your peace.* The peace of the city or country has to do with shalom, which is wellbeing in all aspects.

In a country like ours with such a long history of terrible violence, how refreshing it is to find a church which says clearly and unambiguously: "Peace is the will of God." We have to be clear about that in our teaching and preaching. For many years we have helped young men faced with military service to choose conscientious objection and we have worked since the late 80s for legislation which recognizes the conscientious objector. Much progress in this respect has been made in the past 25 years.

Our message, of course, needs to be holistic. We have welcomed the internally displaced families. Our Justice and Peace Committee has helped many people find refuge in other countries. The Canadian government, Mennonite Central Committee, and the Canadian Mennonite churches have been fundamental actors in making possible this ministry for persons persecuted by violent groups here.

Our message of peace and wellbeing includes a lunch program at the Comedor Pan y Vida (Community soup kitchen "Bread and Life") for 120 children and another 10 adults which operates Monday to Friday in a very marginal

neighborhood called San Nicolás, ~~in a neighboring city called Soacha~~. For about eleven years we operated a feeding program for street people on Saturday nights. We have meetings for women around the topic of “Caring for one another”.

Our message of peace includes a program called Puentes para la Paz (Bridges for Peace) which we mostly carry out in a province called Aráuca helping to organize and strengthen what we call “Citizens’ Commissions for Reconciliation and Peace.” Aráuca has been hit very hard during these years by the war which has ravaged our country for the last 60-70 years. When we started this work there, we told them, “if peace can come to Aráuca it can come anywhere in Colombia.” We are hopeful with the recent peace talks since there has been presence of two guerrilla groups, armed forces and paramilitary groups, in that province. Exacerbating the situation is the presence of multinational corporations extracting petroleum. But the Citizens’ Commissions for Reconciliation and Peace are testimonies in that situation that things can be different, and it gives citizens the opportunity for a different kind of relationship and action.

That’s our Message of Peace.

The third element of being a Sanctuary of Peace church is to be a Place of Peace. Over the centuries in different contexts and times the Christian churches have sought to limit warfare or protect potential victims. Of course we take our cue from the cities of refuge the Israelites had in the Old Testament. There are different ways of being a Place of Peace, but one way we have found for the last 16 years is our weekly Moment for Peace in which we pray for peace and reflect on different aspects of national life every Wednesday afternoon from 12:30-1:30. We end this time with a simple lunch in which we invite everyone to participate, as our witness to the fact that God gives food so that everyone can eat.

On the national scene as you know we have had rollercoaster days: up and down, with new twists and turns every day in terms of the peace process. But we are confident that God's will will be done, and God's will for humanity is peace, is shalom.

This past September 21st, as we do every year, we celebrated the International Day of Peace, Nonviolence and Ceasefire, established by the United Nations. We call our celebrations "Pan y Paz" -- Bread and Peace to highlight the need for economic justice to have a more stable peace. This year we had a team from different churches preparing a peace walk through the downtown area of Bogotá. In a small park where we arrived we then had different events to point to the call to peace.

Although the referendum of the peace accords with the FARC lost to the No's by a tiny margin, there have been efforts to create a broader consensus that hopefully will have more backing. We are also glad that new talks will be taking place with the ELN, the other major guerrilla group. There will undoubtedly be many obstacles, but we must persist in this path to peace, first by being a People of Peace; second by having a Message of Peace; and third by being a Place of Peace.

We are happy to know that you as a congregation seek to be faithful to your calling to be a witness to the love of God in Toronto. We wish you all the best, and God's rich blessings.

Fraternally,

Pedro Stucky, pastor, Iglesia Menonita de Teusaquillo, Bogotá, Colombia