

## Colombia Days of Prayer and Action

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Reflection for Circle of Mercy April 11, 2010

In July of last year our family moved to Colombia to serve with Mennonite Central Committee. Colombia currently bears the most serious humanitarian crisis in the western hemisphere and we felt called to peacemaking efforts in this war-torn country full of exquisite beautiful and resilient people. Both Greg and I are assigned to work with displaced people—of whom Colombia has over 4 million. These are men, women and children who have become refugees inside their own country. Fleeing for their lives in the face of terror and assassinations, they have left behind their homes, land, livelihoods, extended kin, and history. Over our brief nine months of living here, the reflections I'll share today have been growing in me. Thank you for creating a safe space to birth them and for holding Caleb, Ascher, Greg and me so gently in prayer and friendship along our way.

This month we join hundreds of churches across the United States in the Colombia Days of Prayer and Action, an annual effort cosponsored by Witness for Peace and Mennonite Central Committee. Our commitment is to awake anew to the complex realities of violence—socio-political and economic violence—that Colombians experience in large measure due to military funding and training from our US government. As North American Christians we are called to prayer and political action resisting current policies and offering alternatives to these collective sins.

Our first home in Colombia was in an extremely impoverished and politically volatile region of the North Coast. The experiences of living and working in the region were overwhelming. Our family witnessed tragic levels of poverty in Sucre, the third poorest of Colombia's 36 departments. The corruption in the region was overt and unveiled. Four of the last five governors of Sucre have been indicted for fraud; one of them is married to the owner of Caleb and Ascher's private school there. Leaders like these are among the architects of a terrifying new political party born in prison on the North Coast that is funded by narco-trafficking money and inextricably connected to the paramilitaries. Despite national media coverage of their shady origins, fear, vote buying—just a \$10 payment will do, and an ill-informed electorate left Sucre voting overwhelmingly for this new party in recent March congressional elections. My limited work on the North Coast gave me windows into trauma and terror as expected.

What I wasn't expecting was how I would, for a time, lose my voice, in the face of this context. Serving with MCC includes attempting to offer partnership to local people in need, but at least as important is how we who are called here share the story and truth of we see around the globe with our world back home. Conversion of our own hearts and awareness-building among North Americans are the most significant contributions our service term can offer here in Colombia. So finding myself mute for so many months has been especially hard to accept. I was hurting to badly to write. I was stinging from expressions of the Christian church that spoke more to me of trauma and retaining the sins of others than of forgiving them or calling on a Liberating Christ in the midst of suffering. And I was bound not to write of all this to you at the time in order to protect our colleagues and their important work on the Coast. Now in Bogota for almost a month, our freedom to share and the space to reflect and untangle these stories is liberating. In you, at Circle of Mercy, we have a faith community that is awake, honest, and ready to listen to our testimony; I count that as nothing less than a miracle.



Maria is 46 years old; heavy-set, though fast paced in her gait and speech; and far less exacting in her personal appearance than the typical Colombian woman. She's got no time for painted nails, Maria's loaned her beauty to the struggle for justice and truth telling in this massacre-scarred region. Afro-Colombian and biracial, Maria's features tell the story of the slave trade here on the Atlantic Coast of Colombia. In her own body, this woman bears witness to ancestors from three continents and centuries of oppression, betrayal, and incredible resilience.

Maria speaks with a strong *costeño* accent and doesn't mince her words. Her mission is a dangerous one: educating communities of the Atlantic Coast who have experienced massacres about what their rights are and what reparations are legally due them. She teaches folks who can't read and would have to spend a full week's wage to pay transport to their department's capital city, how, in the most concrete and understandable terms, to proceed with demanding their rights from a national government infamous for writing just laws that then go unenforced and unheeded. Empty promises, she calls them.

But the promises of the paramilitary group that is stalking and threatening Maria are far from empty. She's been receiving death threats for over two years. In the months I got to know her, these threats escalated in frequency and severity. Once I had a whole day and part of a night with Maria and another rural community organizer she was mentoring. We traveled together to the most remote place I've ever been: a rural village several hours beyond Sincelejo. Ruttled dirt roads turned to mud pools from a recent rain and our jeep got sucked into one and had to be pulled by out by tractor and chain (which took all day to procure and left my two young MCC male colleagues attending to the project).

In the meantime, Maria, the other young organizer, and I walked on to our destination, fording several swollen creeks and slipping our way over mud and steep terrain for several hours—barefoot lest our shoes get swallowed. It was an incredible opportunity for me to listen and ask questions in the absolute safety of our private hike and then to later watch Maria in action with a community of 50 adults who hung on her words and were galvanized by her passion and compassion. Had our family stayed on in Sincelejo, I was slated to return regularly to this community and conduct trauma healing workshops with these courageous people who are still regularly threatened and abused by various military, guerilla, and paramilitary “actors,” as they are called here. Maybe one day some years from now, I'll have the chance to engage that work. I hope so.

I asked Maria, as we walked, if she were frightened: alone with two other women in the middle of a militarized zone, no cell phone reception, no vehicle, no way home and all this with a price on her head. She laughed and said that having me along (with my blue eyes, US passport and MCC connections) made this the safest day she'd had in months. We were silent after that for a while...honoring the danger and the losses her calling require of her and pondering a world order in which my citizenship assures unearned safety nets while hers guarantees closed doors abroad and terror at home.

While our family lived in Sincelejo, the threats toward Maria and her family intensified; yet she was unyielding in continuing her community education. Silencing truth through terror is the goal of those who pursue Maria, and the armed groups here in Colombia are masterful at it. Late this fall, Maria's 14 year old daughter was hand delivered an embossed envelope in the middle of a school day. The frightened teenager who handed it to her, himself no student but a poor kid from the streets was likely paid more for this delivery job than he could make in a whole day selling fresh fruit, ran off as Silvia opened the envelope there in her schoolyard. It held an invitation to her mother's funeral specifying the date, time and place—not just another chicken scratch note with misspelled words like other death threats this young girl had seen before, but a professionally printed invitation orchestrated, obviously, by professional assassins.

Our supervisor, himself threatened like this for decades, made it possible for Maria and her family to go into hiding shortly thereafter: six weeks away, for things to cool off and for the family to recuperate. But by late January, Maria was back in Sincelejo and working again. With 53 documented massacres just in her regional catchment area, there is a sense of urgency among those who risk their lives for justice here. My last exchange with Maria was a sweet one. I don't think she'd be judgmental of our decision to leave the Coast for Bogota. “Take care of your children,” she told me, “They are our future, after all.” I told her to do the same, knowing, both of us, that her advice was meant as much for herself as for me.

The day we left Sincelejo at the end of February we heard word that things were yet worse for Maria—these veiled words in a place where an absence of specifics is more disconcerting than a dramatic story scared us for her. And since then, word is that her family has fled to another South American country. Maria's face is not on your worship table, and though I have photos of her, I dare not send them electronically; but this courageous sister of ours is another of the displaced people we remember today.

### **IN UNISON: *“Peace be with you. As God has sent me, so I send you.”***

Here in Bogota, a local Mennonite church has for many years held a weekly bible study and lunch that welcomes displaced folks and all those who seek peace to come together for reflection, sharing, and the breaking of bread. This time is called Moment for Peace and many folks who come are so poor that the bus fare, needed to get from the outlying slums in which they live into the inner city where we work, is a hardship. Thus a simple bowl of soup for lunch is a welcome offering—those who can are asked to pay 25 cents to offset costs but most folks can't afford to contribute.

Bible study in this context is rich and the stories that folks are hungry to tell are unfathomable until you hear them again and again and again from so many different people. Many of these displaced folks are under threat of death even now in Bogota where they continue to be stalked and terrorized.

Thus lots of them have no address, sleep in different houses each night of the week, consciously take different buses to the same destination, and use aliases even among us at Moment for Peace. These people aren't alone though--folks don't live alone in Latin America. They are part of families and are often dragging one to five children with them from location to location—narrowly escaping the attack of one cousin's home and passing on then to another uncle's place by night—children in tow but obviously unable to attend school, make friends, or know where home is.

But many of these displaced people are not following a calling to social justice and community action like Maria's. They were simply in the wrong place at the wrong time long ago back in their hometown when someone was abducted by the paramilitary or cornered by guerillas and threatened until they gave the soldiers food. Some of these folks are guilty of nothing more than volunteering in a leadership development seminar for church youth or saying no to corruption at some very small scale in their rural community. Few of them would describe themselves as activists—frankly, many who would have already been killed or fled the country.

Of the faces you will send to President Obama this week and take home with you tonight, at least a third are displaced folks who attend Moment for Peace each week here in Bogota. Greg and I sit beside these men and women every Wednesday. We study the bible together, listen to their stories, hold their infants while they eat and play with their toddlers while they have listening sessions with lay counselors from the church trained in active listening and supportive counseling. Their tears, their hunger, and their longing to return home—though some have been on the run for 10 years now—are real to us.

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How can 4 million people have stories like this and the world do nothing but add fuel to the fire through further military aid? How could our President Obama have approved even more new US military bases on Colombian soil just since we arrived here? The answers are complex and interwoven. The answers lie in our nation's insatiable hunger for cocaine (the US consumes 80% of the world's cocaine and 90% of that is made from coca cultivated by starving Colombian *campesinos*). The answers lie in the 6 billion dollars of military aid Colombia has received from the US since Plan Colombia was created under Clinton. The answers lie in the multinational corporations who pay paramilitary groups to terrorize rural farmers off their lands thus amassing huge tracts for mining, drilling for oil, and planting monocrops that not only leave farmers hungry but promise land depleted of its nutrient value in less than 30 years.

Impunity for military and paramilitary groups in Colombia is almost guaranteed. The armed soldiers we see on the streets each day sport canteens and apparel that says US on it. Mandatory military service (for those too poor to pay their way out of it) is a given here. As I walk through the subway each day here in Bogota I can see police stopping young men under 25 to check their identification cards and complete background checks to see if they've complied with their mandatory military service. Young men in rural areas are at risk of being picked up off the streets and conscripted into paramilitary service. Mothers attempt to keep sons at home and evangelical churches on the coast "protect" their vulnerable youth by having near nightly worship services. Unemployment in Colombia is the second highest in all of South America and the crime of being 20 years old and unemployed leaves one at great risk here just as it does here in North American inner cities. Colombian young men will be armed with US guns to clear a way for narcotraffic patterns while their North American brothers find employment in the drug trade on your end of the border.

Sometimes folks at Moment for Peace talk about the gift of having somewhere safe to come and be and share their story. (Could there be infiltrators in our midst? Most certainly.) But what the displaced find at this humble Mennonite church is a body of folks they can trust and a few hours where they choose to let down their guard and be fed. They mentor and encourage one another and always bible study here becomes a time when the elusive peace Christ offers is named and praised in overt ways. All are welcome and there is no hint of evangelism in this place, a relief for me after the breadth of what we witnessed on the Coast; yet the very act of reading scripture, listening to the stories of those longing to be heard, and saying no to death and betrayal and yes to life and trust IS evangelism—the kind in which I want to participate.

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Jesus doesn't promise us hope. He doesn't promise a clear path to justice. What Jesus offered his disciples, locked away in their fear that night, and what he offers us, both in Colombia and in Asheville, is God's peace. How incredible that you, as a congregation, are reflecting upon a powerfully crafted Peace Church statement right now. Greg and I will be sharing in your process and dialogue from afar and celebrating the courage and depth of this congregational journey.

In verses 20 and 21 of John chapter 20, the disciples are rejoicing at recognizing Jesus as the Risen Lord. Their relief and belief must of have been immense! But immediately Jesus resumes his role as teacher, again offering them peace and then saying, "...as God has sent me, so I send you." A charge to action—to peace in action. "Oh no," the disciple in me says, "What will you have us do Jesus? The stakes are so high. We've locked these doors behind us for a reason. They'll kill us...like they killed you. Just having known you is reason enough for them to kill us. What sort of peace in the face of this government sponsored death machine?"

And where is God already sending you all in peace? To prisons and jails. To rivers and watersheds that need protection. To the homes of infants and toddlers with disabilities. To board rooms and city council meetings. To exam rooms and delivery rooms and the streets to offer health care. To safe havens for women in recovery. To public school classrooms as teachers and as students. To CSA gardens and sustainable agriculture. To Mexico City accompanying a displaced child. To afterschool tutor programs. To therapy sessions of those aching with trauma or those in need of healing bodywork. To Fort Benning each November and sometimes to Alderson. To science competitions and gymnastics meets; soccer tournaments and wrestling matches. To theatre productions and college visits. To Carol and Blan's garden for spring planting. To inner city Washington, DC with college students and legislators. To the desk where you write poems, books, articles, and peace statements. To scarred mountain tops lopped off by greed. To Cuba. ....your witnesses to peace bless us, friends. Part of the Light we need in Colombia is shining through you.

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Jesus continued, "Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained." I read this as the directions manual for the Peace and the Sending. We cannot hold onto anger or blame and find the "forgiveness fuel" needed for this journey. Truth telling, yes. Speaking truth to power and walking straight toward the Jerusalem consequences IS the Jesus story. But forgiveness is where our nonviolent power lies; it's the missing ingredient in our Peace recipe.

What does that look like here in Colombia where the layers of corruption, culpability and political impossibility for hope are so thick one can barely breathe? For me right now it looks like more disciplined and frequent prayer and like active efforts to humanize "the enemy", "the other" even as I reject his or her actions and goals. It is not hard for me to forgive scared teenagers indoctrinated in war training and looking for a wage and a sense of identity. It is not hard for me to forgive the young men in Sincelejo who recently held our dear Latin American MCC friend hostage for over an hour at gunpoint after mugging him. The fear and anger and scarcity that lead to such violence makes sense to me. Forgiveness of opulently rich Colombians and US business people is the challenge I face. Forgiveness for politicians here and at home who turn a blind eye on corruption while profiting from it or who sell their vote and their souls to the war machine is much harder for me to find.

But that is when I'm reminded that forgiveness and complicity are NOT the same thing. Forgiveness need not mean tolerance of injustice any more than peacemaking must look like passivity. Action and resistance and risk taking are the natural fruits of Christ's peace. It is the soil in which they are planted that makes all the difference in our harvest. And that leads us back to Christ's words in John. Will our activism be rooted in the soil of anger and holding on to sins and blame. Or will it be cultivated in the soil of forgiveness?

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So I thank you deeply for your action tonight as you write to our President (and perhaps other law makers) imploring them to send humanitarian aid rather than weapons to Colombia, imploring them not sign away small farmers' livelihoods in a free trade agreement with a country riddled by human rights

violations. I thank you for crafting and reflecting on the Peace Church statement before you as a congregation. I thank you for living out each of your callings in your parts of the world.

And I pray you will join me in what is not the *next* step but the *first* step, backing up if necessary as I too-often have to do, and rooting our lives with Jesus

in deep prayer,

in the disciplines that make space for peace,

in knowing forgiveness and peace and power in a new way through the silence spaces where God can hold us, feed us, heal us, and ready us for those places each of us are being sent.

**IN UNISON:** *“Peace be with you. As God has sent me, so I send you.”*

Amen.