

Colombia Mission Network Meeting
October 1-2, 2007 Louisville
To redouble efforts to support the hope of peace in Colombia
Milton Mejía

First, I want to thank you, in the name of my family, for your help and support since you have made us feel like a part of you. When we visit your presbyteries, congregations, and homes, as well as when we communicate by phone and e-mail, we have been able to understand more what it means to be part of the family of faith in Christ.

If it were not for the hardship of experiencing displacement and exile, we would have enjoyed even more the support you have given us and the way you have received us. Our hearts are in Colombia, and in our prayers we ask God, "How can we serve You and maintain our commitment with those who suffer in our country while we are not there?"

In second place, I want to share how we have felt, and our impressions about how you see Colombia, as we share the reality of our country in the presbyteries, local churches and ecumenical meetings in which we have participated. First I will share that which we see at the level of the policies that the US has been implementing in Colombia. Next I will share how we felt in the churches, and finally some recommendations from the ecumenical meeting in Washington, and the value of the work for Colombia in the last 10 years.

In this ecumenical meeting the representatives of the organizations that continue to follow up on what is happening in Colombia, especially in regards to Plan Colombia and the Free Trade Agreement, told us that for the first time in almost 8 years, there will be a possibility of change in the policies that are being implemented in relation to Colombia. In order to achieve this, they will be working on the elements of a Plan Colombia for the Victims of Violence, the situation of the Afro-Colombians, and the violations of human rights and the attacks against the union workers.

In June, when the vote in congressional committees came up, a new package of support for 2008 was achieved, changing the percentages from 80% for military and 20% for social programs to 60% for military and 40% for social and humanitarian programs and, in general, achieving a reduction of resources. It remains for this to be ratified in the joint meeting between House and Senate in the next weeks, and afterwards by President Bush. Given that the work has been directed towards holding back the support to Colombia, some look on this as a small achievement that has been possible by a new Congress, through work by many organizations over various years where the churches have played a very important role.

The other subject is the FTA, where they have achieved stoppage of the process of approval via the environmental & industrial demands included by the Democrats and by the work of human rights organizations and unions which have made evident the human rights crisis in Columbia, especially in regards to the situation of the unionists. They have made evident the way the crisis is linked to sectors in the government, and the support of the paramilitaries and the drug traffickers. Nevertheless, there are worries owing to the reality that, even if there were changes made, important themes were not included in relation to agriculture, medicine, union guarantees and control of the multinationals. Some consider that changes in regards to the environment and labor are not sufficient in order to protect large sectors of the population, as well as to protect the environment, in those countries that are in the process of approving the agreements.

The Colombian government is spending millions of dollars in diplomacy and in US lobbying firms in order to show that the situation in Colombia has gotten better and to denigrate the indications of links with the paramilitaries. This indicates that, if we want to assure the small changes that have been achieved and in the future modify the politics of the government of the US towards Colombia, we ought to redouble our efforts in this work.

In our experience in the churches, looking to explain the situation of Colombia and mobilize the people, we see that it has not been easy to show the situation of our country given that there is little information. The people know about drug traffickers and the struggle against terrorism, but it is very difficult to explain how an armed conflict is maintained for so many years, and the situation of the poor in a country like Colombia.

On the other hand, we have seen that, to the extent that we share and educate about the reality of Colombia and about the things that the community and the churches are doing to tell the gospel as good news of peace, interest arises and we are asked, "What can we do?" In an attempt to respond to this question, Carol, our English teacher in San Angelo, Texas, impressed us. She prepared letters to send to all the representatives and senators from Texas in order that the members of her church might sign their names, and then she would send them along. Today I believe that she is ready to go as an accompanier. Another woman of the First Presbyterian Church in Midland obtained a personal interview with one of the Republican Representatives from Texas. This is very difficult to do now because generally they attend to these matters with a person from their "team", and we know what the position of the Republicans towards Colombia has been.

We see a lot of interest, and we believe that there is a very large potential among the church members and in the presbytery meetings where we have participated, but it is necessary to respond to the question that they are asking, "What can we do?" How do we follow up in order to fuel the interest and assure actions that will support the communities and churches in Colombia that are contributing to the search for peace?

Finally, I want to share some of the recommendations that arose in the meeting of March 14, 2007 in Washington, where around 30 persons from organizations and churches that have been involved in the work of Colombia for the last 10 years participated:

We recognize the tension between joint work and complimentary work among the churches, in the US as well as in relation to the churches in Colombia. Nevertheless, more important than all this is the challenge of learning together how to do mission, to serve, and to work for justice and peace for the victims of the violence in Colombia.

Until now the group that has received the attention has been the displaced, but issues arise and new groups, like the Afro-Colombians and the indigenous, come into view, and it is necessary to respond.

It is necessary to expand the work among the church members and to educate them in order that they might go to work and connect with their representatives. In this sense, the experience of CRLN is able to help, since they have many years of experience and have been able to create a methodology of sending information, and they propose very concrete tasks. It is important to think about how to approach the candidates for president of the US.

It is important to share and understand the experiences of sanctuary, the Salt & Light Churches, the fellowships between churches, the accompaniment programs and to strengthen this advocacy work from the perspective of truth and justice. We must continue the work with the leaders of the churches so that they make statements about the situation of Colombia. As for those who have already done so, it would be good for them to update their declarations.

We seek to strengthen the participation in the "Days of Prayer and Action for Colombia" and continue the delegations to Colombia, as well as of Colombians to the United States in order to strengthen the organizing experiences of the victims.