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Church
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Resource Centre

Sermon

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Proclaiming the Cross in Colombia Today: Good Friday Reflections

From their current life experience came accounts that were all too similar to Good Friday's suffering of the innocent and violence by the powers of this world. These pastors living in and around Bogota, Colombia, were struggling with the weight of what they are called to bear during this era of darkness and death in their country.

Patricia spoke powerfully from her wheelchair, narrating the harrowing experiences of widows she ministers to. She exhorts the Colombian church to take further action in responding to the plight of women victimized by the enduring political violence.

Edith, another pastor from a violent, impoverished neighborhood, shares with determination through choking tears of the recent disappearance of her own daughter,

A third pastor, who has lived under death threats for years, could not bring himself to speak.

Yet another pastor, Islandes Losada, of the Sinai Mennonite Church, was under threat of death and miraculously escaped his persecutors several years ago. Indeed, he says, "there is a price to pay for following Jesus."

How can North Americans find the ability to ponder in their spiritual hearts these testimonies from Colombian sisters and brothers? Are U.S. Christians ready to grapple with new challenges and avenues of faithfulness that may emerge for

them as those who live under the reign of the same God, but at the other end of the political connection?

"How do we proclaim the cross in Colombia today?" was the question the Mennonite churches of Bogotá sought to answer in a united and emotional Good Friday service held at the Teusaquillo church in the downtown area of the city.

This congregation has received hundreds of displaced persons from all around the country in recent years. Many of them have come in a terrible state of trauma and fright because of ongoing threats against their lives. Here they have heard the Good News of Jesus and have found new resources to continue living. The church has helped many save their lives by seeking alternatives to their situation, in some cases directing them to refuge within or outside the country.

Each congregation present contributed to the Good Friday afternoon service: a flute orchestra from "Venga Tu Reino" (Thy Kingdom Come) in Villas de Granada; a crucifixion drama from La Victoria; special music from "Fe y Esperanza" (Faith and Hope) in Diana Turbay, the Santa Marta and Teusaquillo congregations; and congregational singing led by the Berna music group.

Patricia Rosero, pastor of the Santa Marta church, is the first to share a reflection on the Word. Patricia is a capable, articulate woman who studies in the Mennonite Biblical Seminary of Colombia. But more than capable she is courageous. She pastors in a dangerous area of the city, rife with paramilitary and guerrilla militias, common delinquency and drug dealers. A former pastor of the church who later worked for Justapaz -- the Mennonite center for justice, peace and nonviolent action -- had to move out of the neighborhood because of threats against his life and a short term kidnapping by armed men.

Pastoring there in itself qualifies Patricia as a courageous woman. But Patricia is wheelchair bound and suffers from a degenerative disease. In the past she was fitted with a prosthesis in Cuba at low cost as a service of the Cuban government. Because of the 40-year blockade against them, however, the Cubans don't have the apparatus she now needs. Treatment in Colombia is prohibitively expensive for her very meager income. In spite of everything, Patricia travels half-way across the city on public transportation to study at the seminary and then at 9:00 p.m. takes the buses back to her home.

Her text was Luke 23.28-29: "28 Jesus turned to them and said, 'Women of Jerusalem! Don't cry for me, but for yourselves and your children. 29 For the days are coming when people will say, 'How lucky are the women who never had children, who never bore babies, who never nursed them!'" She spoke with passion of the thousands of women displaced by violence who pour into the cities of Colombia. These are widowed women, women who have lost their sons in Colombia's ongoing warfare, women heads of households, women who mourn their disappeared and assassinated family members. These are women whose stories we have heard time and again in our churches. These are the women who carry a cross of violence against them in Colombia. These are women Jesus comforts.

Edith Acuña, the first woman to be ordained by the Colombian Mennonite Church, pastors the "Jehová Sama" (The Lord is Here) Church in Ciudad Bolívar. This is a sprawling, densely populated area of the city, with perhaps 1 million inhabitants. It has the highest percentage of poor people of anywhere in Bogotá. Poor access to public services, unpaved streets, illegal housing and the highest rate of violence in the city characterize this area where her church ministers.

In Ciudad Bolívar, both the paramilitary forces and the guerrilla actively recruit young people for their armies, with promises that don't always materialize. Young people are also the victims of what is euphemistically called "social cleansing", meaning they are selected for assassinations because they are thought to be drug users, petty thieves or possible guerrilla recruits. Last year, just in the first three months, there were 88 homicides in Ciudad Bolívar -- including 38 young people between 16 and 23 years of age.

Edith spoke of the meanings of the cross throughout history, concluding with vivid examples from her own life. Five years ago, her oldest daughter's husband was on a trip to his home area. Armed men stopped the bus and made Alonso and four other men dismount. He was never heard from again. Edith took in her daughter and her three children in her tiny home.

A year later her second daughter's husband was accused of a crime he knew nothing about, and has been in prison since. Edith took in Emilce and her small daughter also.

Two weeks before Holy Week, her son's brother-in-law, a young man active as a worship leader in another congregation was riddled with bullets by the army, who claimed they had killed a guerrilla. The weight of these experiences, combined with not having any fixed income to support all the extra family members in their small home, have put a mark of suffering on Edith and her husband, Edgar.

Edith then shared with the Good Friday audience that ten days earlier her second daughter, Emilce, 27, didn't return home after work in early afternoon. The family had heard nothing. "We now know how to look for the disappeared, but there is no trace of her...the pain is unspeakable, but I know that I am one of millions of mothers bearing this burden," Edith shared.

"Having someone disappeared for five years is a terrible experience," Edith told the author. "I don't want to go through that again." But here she was preaching about the cross through her own indescribable grief. The church wept with her and surrounded her with prayer and consolation. Days later we gave thanks when her daughter reappeared safely. Apparently the pressure of events on her created a traumatic stress reaction that led her to withdraw and isolate herself for twelve days.

"I know of churches that will not receive displaced people," said pastor Islandes Losada. "Many people have left our churches because of the ministries we have undertaken. And perhaps

there are others wanting to leave. Perhaps you feel like throwing in the towel and you ask, 'Is it worth it?'. But then he led the congregation to Hebrews 12 and based his reflection on verse 2: Let us keep our eyes fixed on Jesus, on whom our faith depends from beginning to end. He did not give up because of the cross! On the contrary, because of the joy that was waiting for him, he thought nothing of the disgrace of dying on the cross, and he is now seated at the right-hand side of God's throne.

"To keep up our resolve we must keep our eyes on Jesus, on his example. He bore the cross because he could look ahead to the results," proclaimed Islandes. "The chorus 'Because He lives, I can face tomorrow' attests to our faith and strength," Pastor Islandes expressed as he led the congregation in singing from the depths of their Christian hope.

Declining to speak was Jaime Meza, pastor of the Fe y Esperanza Church in Diana Turbay. He just wasn't feeling up to it, he said. His life has been under threat for some time, but in recent months, the circle seems to be closing in on him. It's like a cat and mouse game. The church has looked for alternatives for him without an apparent solution. Jaime, and his wife, Luz Marina, who are the parents of two adolescent daughters, were in the service receiving the strength and comfort of the Holy Spirit and of the gathered congregation.

As the Mennonite Church shares the pain and suffering of the Colombian people, it is learning the meaning of the words of Paul in 2 Corinthians 4:7-11: "Yet we who have this spiritual treasure are like common clay pots, in order to show that the supreme power belongs to God, not to us. 8We are often troubled, but not crushed; sometimes in doubt, but never in despair; 9there are many enemies, but we are never without a friend; and though badly hurt at times, we are not destroyed. 10At all times we carry in our mortal bodies the death of Jesus, so that his life also may be seen in our bodies. 11Throughout our lives we are always in danger of death for Jesus' sake."

For Mennonites and Brethren in Christ in Colombia and throughout the Global South, the cross intersects with daily life in hundreds of ways. They are not trying to be heroic. Some are unwilling victims of a system that deals out death and that follows the dictates of decisions taken far away from their countries. Others are simply accepting the consequences of living out their commitment to follow Christ.

But is the cross a heavy burden for the church to carry in Colombia, Congo, Zimbabwe, Eritrea, Liberia, Sierra Leon, Sudan, and Vietnam? By no means. The cross is prelude to new life, to resurrection. Quaker writer George Fox centuries ago wrote a book with the suggestive title, No Cross, No Crown. In the church's weakness the Lord's strength is shown and God's glory descends so that these churches can say with the apostle Paul, "We faint not." And even more, as the apostle writes, 4 Although he was weak when he was nailed to the cross, he now lives by the power of God. We are weak, just as Christ was. But you will see that we will live by the power of God, just as Christ does. (2 Cor 13.4).

If someone asks Patricia, Edith, Islandes, and Jaime what it means to proclaim the cross in Colombia today, they can give a few answers. But they may wonder what it means to North American Mennonites.

The Body of Christ is a worldwide fellowship. An opportunity to pray and act in solidarity as a Body of Christ is coming up on May 21 and 22. On these days a coalition of Colombian and North American churches and organizations -- including the Mennonite churches of Colombia and MCC -- invite you to participate in Days of Prayer and Action for Colombia.

Will you help us carry and proclaim the cross of Jesus Christ? Pray with us for peace for our communities and our country. Act with us for peace that shows God triumphant. Help tell our stories, the victories in serving the Lord of the "last and the least" and the challenges that come with being faithful to the gospel of peace in a land of enduring conflict.

We are providing resources for North American believers to pray and worship with us at www.peaceincolumbia.org

Will you bear witness with us for the transformation of U.S. policies that escalate violence into policies that will lay a foundation for peace with justice? And will you seek out ways to remember our pastors and our people in the challenges they face as God's purposes are worked out in history?