



Peace Sunday 2018 Worship Resources

Prepared by the
MWC Peace
Commission for
23 September 2018

Theme and texts

a. Theme:
A renewed peace church welcomes the stranger

b. Why this theme was chosen:

Throughout the biblical narrative we encounter a God who reminds his people to show hospitality to others, especially those who are the most vulnerable in society – the widow, the orphan and the alien (or stranger). God reminds his people that they too were once vulnerable – strangers in a distant land, enslaved and oppressed. And yet, through a generous act of hospitality itself, God saves them from these conditions and reminds his people to likewise be hospitable toward others who might be foreigners, vulnerable, enslaved or oppressed.

This message is apt in today's world of rising nationalisms, self-interest and self-preservation, all of which fly in the face of God's reminder to be open to and welcome the stranger.

c. Biblical text:

Matthew 25:31–46
Deuteronomy 10:12–22

d. Relationship between the theme and the biblical texts:

The Deuteronomy text highlights an instance whereby God reminds his people as to what is expected of them in relation to those who are vulnerable because they too were once vulnerable. The Matthew text highlights that to welcome the stranger and help those who need help is to do it for Jesus Christ himself!

2

Prayer Requests:

- Pray for the many people who are on the move globally, fleeing situations of violence and seeking a better life for themselves and their family. We pray for their safety, for the situations in their home countries, and to know how to welcome, support and stand in solidarity with them in their journey. We pray especially for Angola, DR Congo, Kenya, Colombia, the Middle East, Europe and North America where governments and citizens are overwhelmed by high numbers of displaced people and displaced people, and divided on how to respond. Lord, have mercy.
- For the many countries around the world that believe that the key to self-preservation is to disassociate from others, focusing on themselves alone. May we learn how to recognize the humanity and dignity in others and see how their humanity shapes and determines our own.
- May reconciliation and forgiveness characterize the church. Mennonites in Indonesia are also working with the government and the Muslim majority on peacebuilding interfaith dialogue. May we all follow



Vikal Rao

this example of learning to know those of other religions, the strangers, in our own neighbourhoods.

- For the organizers of the Global Church Partners Forum being planned for 17–19 October 2018 in Rome that will focus on Children on the Move. May this forum be a space where faith communities can commit toward tackling the realities that many children face around the world.



3

**Song
Suggestions**

From the MWC International Songbook:

- #24 La Paz de la Tierra
- #22 Kirisuto No Heiwa
- #8 Senzeni Na?
- #34 Laudate Dominum
- #51 Love God, Love Each Other
- #11 Sizohamba Naye
- #52 Be Thou My Vision

4

**Additional
resources**

www.mwc-cmm.org/peacesunday

**a. Additional
resources
in this package**

- Gathering/
Benediction (p. 3)
- Prayers (p. 4)
- Sermon Notes
(p. 5)
- Stories and
Reflections (p. 11)

**b. Additional
resources
available
online:**

- Pictures
(including
all used in this
package)



Mim Wenger



Novita Dwi Saputri

5

Activities

- “Look who’s coming to dinner”:
 - Create two sign-up sheets: the first for those who are interested in hosting others for a dinner; the second for those who are interested in going to somebody else’s place for dinner.
 - The planner randomly matches names of the two sheets to facilitate people sharing a meal together.
- “This is my life”:
 - Create a space within the worship service for people (especially newer people) to tell their life story and journey.
- Memorial garden:
 - Create space to place a symbolic item, like a brick or a plant, to remember people who have died. This can make the observance of grief a part of the community practices.
- Light a candle of remembrance:
 - During the worship service, invite members to light a candle of remembrance for those who have decided to embark on the perilous journey – sometimes resulting in death – to a new land in search of a better life.
- The lighting of the candle can also be a symbol not only to remember but a commitment to help and support those on such journeys.
- Visit an Immigration Detention Centre:
 - Organize a visit to an immigration detention centre or refugee camp to learn more about refugees and immigrants entering your country. Visit with the people being held there and learn why they wanted to leave their country and come to a new country.
 - See how you and your church can help, sponsor and/or support some of the people and families caught in this legal process. Write letters to them and see how you and your church can walk with them in their struggle.
- Letter writing campaign:
 - As a church, organize letter writing campaigns to government officials calling for different and more humane practices toward immigrants, refugees and those who are most vulnerable who need our support.

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Suggested liturgies for gathering and benediction

Gathering/Call to Worship

Praise the One

Praise the One who hears the cry of the poor,
who lifts up the weak and gives them
strength.

Praise the One who feeds the hungry
and satisfies the longing of those in need.

Praise the One who holds with tenderness the
orphan and widow
and gives the stranger a land and a
home.

(#683 from Hymnal: A Worship Book. Used
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Closing Prayer

Leader: Jesus taught us to speak of hope as
the coming of God's kingdom.

**All: We believe that God is at work in our
world,
turning hopeless and evil situations
into good.**

**We believe that goodness and justice
and love will triumph in the end
and that tyranny and oppression
cannot last forever.**

**One day all tears will be wiped away;
the lamb will lie down with the lion,
and justice will roll down like a
mighty stream.**

Leader: True peace and true reconciliation are
not only desired,
they are assured and guaranteed in
Christ.

**All: This is our faith.
This is our hope.**

*(Canadian Catholic Organization for Development and
Peace, Toronto. #711 from Hymnal: A Worship Book*.
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Reconciling God

Reconciling God,
who holds the brokenness of the world in a vast
embrace,
restore us to your side,
so we may offer healing and hope beyond our
borders.

In the name of Jesus. AMEN

*(Lois Siemens, taken from Sing the Journey**, #130. Used
with permission.)*



**Mennonite Church Jhilmila Saraipali, a unit church of
Bhartiya General Conference Mennonite Church celebrates
Peace Sunday in 2017. Photo: Vikal Rao.**



Prayers

Confessing

God of all nations

Leader: God of all nations,
Your love is without limit and without
end.
Enlarge our vision of your redeeming
purpose for all people.
By the example of your Son,
make us ready to serve the needs of the
whole world.

**All: May neither pride of race nor
hardness of heart
make us despise any for whom Christ
died
or injure any in whom Christ lives;
through the same Jesus Christ our
Lord. AMEN**

*(#142 from Sing the Journey**. Originally published in Book of Common Order of the Church of Scotland, ©1994 Panel on Worship, Church of Scotland. Used with permission.)*



Alexander Neufeld (Germany) and Joji Pantoja, chair of the Peace Commission (Philippines), pray for Alphone Komuesa (DR Congo) at the MWC General Council meetings in Kenya 2018.
Photo: Wilhelm Unger.

O Prince of peace

Leader: O Prince of peace,
from peace that is no peace,
from the grip of all that is evil,
from a violent righteousness...

People: deliver us.

Leader: From paralysis of will,
from lies and misnaming,
from terror of truth...

People: deliver us.

Leader: From hardness of heart,
from trading in slaughter,
from the worship of death...

People: deliver us.

Leader: By the folly of your gospel,
by your choosing our flesh,
by your nakedness and pain...

People: heal us.

Leader: By your weeping over the city,
by your refusal of the sword,
by your facing of terror...

People: heal us.

Leader: By your bursting from the tomb,
by your coming in judgment,
by your longing for peace...

People: heal us.

All: Grant us peace. AMEN

(Source unknown. #697 from Hymnal: A Worship Book. Used with permission.)*

* Hymnal: A Worship Book (Elgin, Illinois: Brethren Press; Newton, Kansas: Faith and Life Press; Scottsdale, Pennsylvania: Mennonite Publishing House, 1992).

** Sing the Journey (Scottsdale, PA: Mennonite Publishing Network, 2005).



Sermon Notes

A renewed church welcomes the stranger

Deuteronomy 10:12–22; Matthew 25:31–46
–Willi Hugo Pérez (Guatemala)

Migration is a great social challenge at the moment. Millions of people are on the move in search of better opportunities and life experiences. Many people are forced to migrate when the conditions that support life and well-being in their own countries are adverse. They leave homes, families, friends, their clan and their land behind.

The causes are multiple: violence in many forms, wars, persecutions, economic injustices, poverty, unemployment, natural disasters. People face many hardships, abuses and violence when they migrate illegally. They face traumatic experiences, even to the point of death. If they are fortunate enough to reach their destination, they encounter environments, languages, people and cultures that are very strange to them. Many are not welcomed and are punished with rejection, hostility, exploitation, marginalization and loneliness.

What does it mean to be a stranger?



Eight congregations of Iglesia Evangelica Menonita Hondureña celebrate Peace Sunday 2017 with a march where they shared messages of peace, sang and prayed for peace.
Photo: Belinda Rodriguez.

By definition, the stranger is someone who is not from our land, who is not one of us. This can have negative connotations. For many, a stranger is an invader, someone who does not belong, is different, and not accepted.

The stranger does not have a family or a home. They do not have rights, are not able to accomplish things with the same freedom as those of us in our own home or country.¹ As a result, many face a cold reception, disdain, the pain of being unwelcome and excluded.

How do we understand our mission, and how do we respond when confronted with this reality? The Word of God lights the way and orients our response and mission and is good news for the stranger as well. In the Word, we find that God identifies with the strangers (those who have left their land and those who are marginalized) because they belong to God.

In light of Deuteronomy 10:12–22 and Matthew 25:31–46, we are challenged to examine our positions, responses and actions in response to the cause of the stranger. Let us explore these texts in order to discover what they have to say to us.

God identifies with the stranger and marginalized people (Deuteronomy 10:12-22)

When looking at the Old Testament, we find that God identifies with the stranger in a special way. In Genesis, God calls Abraham to emigrate to new lands (12:1). In Exodus 3, we see how God listens to the cry of the Israelites as they suffer as strangers in Egypt, and decides to intervene by sending Moses to liberate them (v. 9–10).

The experience of being a stranger is so engraved in the memory of the Israelites that the New Covenant states: “You shall not oppress a resident alien; you know the heart of an alien, for you were aliens in the land of Egypt” (Exodus 23:9).



One text that summarizes this issue and communicates what God expects of His people in relation to strangers is Deuteronomy 10:12–22. It shows how God identifies with marginalized strangers. God, who loved the Israelites so much by liberating them from their oppression as strangers in Egypt, expects the people of God to respond with justice in their dealings with strangers.

This text is part of a larger one that encompasses Deuteronomy. 10:12–11:32. The people of Israel are exhorted in this section previous to receiving the laws of Deuterocanonical Code (chapters 12–26), and before entering the promised land.

In other words, it is preparation for what is to come. Here, the character of God is exposed: God is all powerful, glorious and majestic; God is love, mercy and justice (10:14,17,18). There is insistence that the people must be completely loyal: walk in God’s path, love God and live out the commands. Such faithfulness is nothing less than a loving response to God, since it is God who loved first and chose the Israelites to be light and a blessing to the world (10:15).² The importance of instilling these teachings in the following generations is highlighted (11:18–21)



To celebrate the International day of Peace, Anabaptists in Colombia join with others to march for “Pan y Paz” (Bread and Peace). Photo: Anna Vogt.

so that it may go well with them and they may receive blessings in the land to which they are headed (11:22–30).

Deuteronomy 10:22–22 defines the essence of being and the necessary attitude of participants in the covenant, and lists God’s faithfulness, love, mercy and justice as key elements of faith.

On one hand, God is the Creator and Owner of all that exists, who sovereignly loved and chose Abraham, Sara and their descendants to form a people of light and blessing to all other peoples. An essential trait of God is that God’s love and justice are made manifest in concrete ways toward the widow, the orphan and the foreigner, subjects who – in the past, like now – represent those who suffer oppression, marginalization and exclusion.

On the other hand, God’s people must love, worship, follow and faithfully obey God. This should be expressed through concrete attitudes and actions of love and justice on behalf of the widow, the orphan and the foreigner.³

It must be noted how God’s love for God’s people embraces the stranger. In the same way, the love shown by the people of the covenant toward God must also be shared with the stranger



Bihar Mennonite Mandali Tumbagarha celebrated Peace Sunday 2017. Photo: Bihar Mennonite Mandali Tumbagarha congregation.



or immigrant. The love that unites God and Israel finds an important beneficiary in the marginalized stranger – a symbol of the weak, excluded and needy. The foreigner, the migrant – the stranger who lives in need, vulnerability and anguish in a strange land – is a beneficiary of God’s love and mercy. For this reason, they should also occupy a special place in the just, loving and obliging heart of God’s people.

Israel must not forget that they were once strangers in Egypt, until God, in mercy, intervened with concrete justice and liberation, caring for them, providing for them and blessing them in their exodus towards the promised land. So, there is no other way to repay this work than with love and justice on behalf of those who live in similar situations, in this case marginalized foreigners.

Jesus identifies with and is found in the marginalized stranger (Matthew 25:31–46)

In the New Testament, we also find references that speak about how God identifies with strangers. Just as the Israelites were strangers in Egypt, Jesus and his family were refugees in that same country during times of persecution (Matthew 2:15). From then on, migrants and foreigners of all times can identify with Jesus in order to find hope and dignity.

A text that communicates well how God identifies with the strangers is in the Judgement (Matthew 25:31–46). In the scene, the mysterious presence of Jesus among the marginalized foreigners is brought to the fore; they are among the small and vulnerable who God loves and for whom God seeks justice.

The text is part of Jesus’ fifth address (Matthew 24 and 25) and is directed at the disciples. The speech weaves together the events of the fall of Jerusalem with the end of the present age and the coming of Jesus. It is illustrated with vivid images and parables – the faithful and wicked servants (24:45–51), the wise and foolish virgins

(25:1–13), the talents (25:14–30), the sheep and the goats (25:31–46). In this way, the disciples, symbolizing the New People, are challenged to a life of absolute faithfulness, total love, obedience and witness, while they patiently watch and wait for the coming of the Lord in the midst of tribulation and a confused world.

This is how we come to Matthew 25:31–46: having instructed the disciples on how to be prepared and live in expectation, Jesus provides a vision of the drama of the final judgement. The text is subdivided as follows:

- The coming of the Son of Man. The gathering and separation of the peoples. (vv. 31–33)
- “Come, you who are blessed by my Father”. Blessing the just. (vv. 33–40)
- “Depart from me”. Separation of the unjust. (vv. 41–46)

The glorious coming of the Son of Man, Jesus (v. 31). During the first coming, he came to this world emptying himself of everything, in humility and poverty, as a servant. Now he returns as King and Judge, in power and glory. The



The Timotius youth commission of the GKMI church in Yogyakarta, Indonesia, hosts a theological conversation with Muslim friends about the fears Christian and Muslim groups have of each other. Photo by Timotius Youth, Lorenzo Vicario E. Felicyano.



suffering servant is now the exalted Christ on the throne, surrounded by an entourage of angels and servants, come to judge the nations and to reign over them forever.

All peoples are brought together, later to be separated (vv. 32–33). Everybody comes before the Son of Man: Jews and Gentiles, Christians and non-Christians. The Judgement pertains to all. This transcends the narrow perspectives of religious sectors that consider themselves to be privileged and different. Everyone, including those who came to know Christ and those who did not, share the common destiny of humanity: to be judged by him.

And so, the separation of humanity into two groups is completed: the just and the unjust. Here an image from ancient agricultural and pastoral practices is used: a shepherd separates the sheep and the goats into separate pens at sundown. The sheep are the favoured ones. (In the Bible, the term “shepherd” is used to refer to God and Jesus, and “sheep” refers to the people of God). In this way, the good and just people are separated from the wicked and unjust people.



At Peace Sunday 2017 celebrations at Mtshabezi Brethren In Christ Church in Zimbabwe, the bishop commissions a borehole at the adjacent Ekuphileni Bible Institute of the Brethren In Christ Church. Traditionally, they mark Peace Sunday by commissioning institutional or community infrastructure with a peace-related name. This has contributed to strengthening awareness of the centrality of peace to development. Photo: Sibonokuhle Ncube.

The just are placed on the right, a place of honour and blessing, while the unjust are sent to the left, a place of condemnation and dishonor.

Blessing the just (33–40). The Judge pronounces his verdict, explaining his reasoning (v. 34). Then he explains the works of justice and mercy that have led to the inheritance of the kingdom (vv. 35–36). They served others without realizing that they had served Jesus, who is present in every needy and suffering person. This brought them eternal favour and blessing from God (v. 40). For all these reasons, they are viewed with pleasure and are worthy of enjoying the Kingdom (Matthew 5:5,9).

The separation of the unjust (41–46). In the same way, Jesus speaks to those on the left and gives them the bad news that they will be forever separated from God. They are condemned to live without God because they did not feed the hungry, or visit those who are sick or in prison. What’s interesting is that they ask the same question (v. 44). They ask as an excuse for their lack of love. The answer is similar: “just as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to me” (v. 45). This is the reason that they are denied the opportunity to be in God’s presence. For it is true that whenever we turn our backs on our most needy neighbours as a result of selfishness or indifference, we also turn our backs on God and in so doing we are separated from God’s presence.

This shows us that God judges us in accordance with our response to human need. Even so, there are certain principles that we should consider in relation to the responses that we provide:

- The works of love and justice referred to are signs of genuine spirituality in the eyes of God. The actions of the just were disinterested; they helped as a natural response on the part of one who is unable to do anything but love their neighbour.



- These are not isolated incidents. They are illustrative of the justice and mercy that we must seek to cultivate. The expressions of mercy are unlimited, just as the needs in the world are unlimited.
- These works are not named as the only condition for salvation. Rather, they are the sign of the presence of the Spirit and the love of God in those who carry them out (even when those who do them are not labelled as Christians in accordance with human religious criteria). There are “non-Christians” who have God, and people who claim to be Christians but do not emanate the presence of Jesus in them. Only those who know the love of God are able to give themselves in love to others.
- Actions such as these become the measuring rod against which we are judged. But love is the underlying value. Actions such as these are only the concrete outward expression of love.⁴ Cultivating and practicing these acts is part of being ready and prepared for the coming of the Lord.

So, who are the “least of my brothers”?

Firstly, there are adequate bases to indicate that the text refers to Jesus’ disciples (Matthew 10:40–42; 12:48–50; 18:6,10,14; 28:10). His brothers are those that follow him, announce the gospel, and suffer for him. Matthew was writing at a time of persecution and tribulation for Christians. Many were dispersed and suffered. Today as well, there are many Christians who suffer, are persecuted, live as strangers and need help.

At the same time, “the least of my brothers” includes all people in need. In other words, the weakest, the poor, vulnerable, marginalized and needy of this world in general.

And amongst the least and most needy is the stranger: millions of strangers, immigrants, foreigners, refugees, that are crying out for justice and mercy. And Matthew raises up this

mysterious presence of Jesus amongst the strangers, those who are rejected and marginalized, who are put in prison, whose children are taken from them, who have no clothes, food or water. Jesus identifies with them because he too experienced in the flesh being a stranger. And he judges us in accordance with our response to those who suffer these needs.

God stands before us in the form of the person who is a marginalized stranger, needy and afflicted, in search of loving solidarity. Every day, we come before God’s blessed presence. As such, every day we are saved or condemned without realizing it. Based on our response, we either draw near to God or are separated from God.

Implications for the Church and her pastoral mission

These texts (Deuteronomy 10:12–22; Matthew 25:31–46) demonstrate that the Word of God is good news and responsibility.

It is good news for the strangers, migrants and needy who suffer without a homeland, with whom Jesus identifies.

It is responsibility for the church, the New People, who are called to live in absolute faithfulness to God, to love and follow God, and to show



To celebrate the International day of Peace, Anabaptists in Colombia join with others to march for “Pan y Paz” (Bread and Peace). Photo: Anna Vogt.



**Members of the Timotius youth commission of the GKMI church in Yogyakarta, Indonesia, enjoy discussion and share dinner with Muslim friends.
Photo by Timotius Youth, Lorenzo Vicario E. Felicyano.**

6. Cooperating with other churches and institutions in the work that they do on behalf of the well-being of strangers.

In conclusion, an ancient Hassidic story illustrates this truth well:

One day an old rabbi asked his students how they could tell when the night had ended and the day had returned. One student responded, "It's when you can see an animal at a certain distance and be able to tell whether it is a lamb or a dog."

"No" responded the rabbi.

Another said: "It's when you can see a tree at a certain distance and be able to tell whether it is a fig tree or a palm tree."

"No," replied the rabbi.

The students were perplexed and had no other answer to propose. So, they asked, "when is it?"

"It is when you can look at the face of a stranger and see a friend. Because if you don't see that, it is still night."

Let's work to be the faithful, just and loving church that identifies with the stranger, the needy and the marginalized. If we do that, then we love and serve Jesus and those whom Jesus loves.

–Willi Hugo Pérez is the MWC representative for Latin America – Central America region, and president of SEMILLA (Latin American Anabaptist Seminary), Guatemala. He has previously served as a professor of theology and of political studies, and as director of REDPAZ (Mesoamerican Anabaptist-Mennonite Network of Peace and Justice).

Endnotes:

- 1 Jiménez, Pablo, *La Predicación en el Siglo XXI*, Editorial Clie, Barcelona (España), 2009. P. 204
- 2 See Sánchez, Edesio, *Deuteronomio, Comentario Bíblico Latinoamericano*, Editorial Kairos, Buenos Aires (Argentina), 2002. P. 239
- 3 Sánchez, p. 240.
- 4 See Schmid, Josef, *El Evangelio según San Mateo*, Editorial Herder, Barcelona, 1967. P. 508-510.

God's justice and mercy through concrete acts on behalf of the well-being of the stranger and the marginalized.

How can we respond to these challenges?

1. By being a loving and welcoming community to strangers, embracing them with hospitality and seeking their well-being. Be a home for those who are marginalized. Be a loving and peaceful home for those who have none, who are without family or homeland. Be a community where they feel welcomed, accepted, protected and loved.
2. Creating concrete projects and initiatives: helping with adaptation to our environment, getting work, getting legal paperwork, etc.
3. With our prophetic voice and promoting political advocacy in defense of their rights, respect, life, dignity and well-being for immigrants.
4. With help and pastoral accompaniment for families that have migrated from other places and have been torn apart.
5. Keeping the topic present in our Bible studies, liturgies, prayers and intercession.



Stories and Reflections

Welcoming my enemy

–Safari Mutabesha (DR Congo)

I come from a people called the Banyamulenge. We are cattle herders and live in the high mountains of Eastern Congo overlooking Lake Tanganyika.

Over the years, my people have been forced from one area to another in search of green pastures for our livestock. When the Belgians ruled this part of Africa, we lived in what is now Rwanda. However, a severe famine forced us from our land and eventually we moved to the mountain slopes of Mulenge in DR Congo.

After years of peace there, my people began to feel the effects of racial and political conflicts in the region and we were mistreated because of our ethnic background. In the past 20 years, many of the Banyamulenge have been targeted and killed. My people are unloved and unwanted.

In my own home, my father was a pastor, and I was the leader of the church choir. I loved training the young people to sing, but one day I had a dream and God spoke to me: “Your time in this church is over.”

I told my father about my dream and he released me to go. So I walked into the nearest town and I was directed to a Mennonite church. I immediately knew that this was my new home.

Eventually, I began to lead the choir and to train young people. It was among these Mennonites that I also learned the importance of forgiveness and the work of peace and reconciliation.

I knew that this would be a part of my future ministry.

During this time, it was not easy for me as a Banyamulenge. My people continued to be mistreated. My own life was threatened many times.

Then, in 2003, while my parents were fleeing from their home, they were murdered. I decided that it was time for me to leave also, so I fled to Burundi, where I lived for three years in a refugee camp.

After that, I returned to Congo for six months, to see if the atmosphere had changed toward my people. But it was too difficult, so this time I fled to Malawi, where again I made my home in a refugee camp.

In Malawi, the refugee camp was full of conflict and hopelessness. Even among the Christians, there was much division and strife. People of different ethnic groups kept to themselves. Witchcraft was predominant.

Among these refugees, I began to exercise my gift as an evangelist. And people began to respond.

During my first year in the camp, I started a church. With a small group of disciples, we would go door to door throughout the camp, inviting people to follow Jesus.

I often shared from Ezekiel, where the prophet talks about how God had driven his people from



**Celebrating World Fellowship Sunday 2018 in the
Mennonite Brethren Church of Malawi.
Photo: Mennonite Brethren Church of Malawi.**



Decorations by Springdale Mennonite Church, USA, for their Peace Sunday 2017 worship service. Photo: Mim Wenger.

Today, our church is built on this foundation of the peace and forgiveness of Christ.

We are preaching this gospel and God is blessing us. Now there are 11 more churches in this area. I love what God is doing here. It brings my heart so much joy to see these churches thriving.

To God be the glory!

—Originally published by MB Mission in Witness (Winter 2017). Used with permission.

Welcome as a prelude to peace in Colombia

—Alix Lozano (Colombia)

their land and dispersed them among the nations because they had forsaken him, but that he also would offer them forgiveness: “A new heart I will give you, and a new spirit I will put within you; and I will remove from your body the heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh” (36:26).

So the new church was a gathering of soft hearts, and we became very focused on Jesus’ teaching of forgiveness and loving our enemies. Our message was simple: because God loves us, we must love one another.

During this time, a man joined our church. He was also a refugee from Congo. When he first arrived into the camp, I received this man into my home. After some time, I learned that he was the one who had murdered my parents in Congo.

I knew that my own teaching – the teaching of Jesus – was being put to the test. It was my desire to be a part of a church that took Scripture seriously and was based on peace and reconciliation. If God forgave me, I had to forgive others.

So, I forgave this man for what he had done to my family.

All people at different stages and different moments of life seek spaces of welcome, healing spaces, spaces of acceptance, inclusion and transformation. Political violence, delinquency, invisibility, domestic violence, sexual abuse and poverty are some of the sources of stress, isolation and trauma present in the realities of the Colombian people.

At this time, Colombia is experiencing a peace process, where the reintegration of ex-combatants in civil society is *fait accompli*. The role of spaces, circles and groups as instruments of the welcoming and transforming love of God is very



Iglesia Cristiana Menonita de Colombia event in Bogotá, Colombia. Photo: Anna Vogt.



pertinent, both in times of peace and in times of peacebuilding. We remember the biblical text of 2 Corinthians 1:4 which says, “[God] consoles us in all our affliction, so that we may be able to console those who are in any affliction with the consolation with which we ourselves are consoled by God.”

In fact, throughout the New Testament, much emphasis is given to the Greek concept of *philoxenia*, defined as love of the stranger. *Philoxenia* is more than just tolerating the other, without loving her or him; it is desiring his or her good. *Xenos*, which means “strange” as well as “stranger,” refers to the foreigner, the immigrant and the exiled. It can be attributed to any human being who is a stranger, who needs welcoming in a strange land. This word is also the root of the term *Xenophobia*, which means rejection of the stranger, the foreigner. In diverse parables and teachings of Jesus, one finds reference to the responsibility to welcome others and offer them a home.

In Luke 10:38–42, Jesus is on the road and is received in a home, the home of his friends. He rests and is served and welcomed. He takes advantage of the friendly atmosphere to teach with love. The women, Martha and Mary, have a special moment with the Teacher which gives us much to reflect on. In that home, Mary and Martha experience conviction and special strength.

Martha and Mary each have a distinctive way of welcoming and showing hospitality to Jesus. Martha does this through her concrete responsibilities as lady of the house, from the starting point of what is “normal,” that is, the norms of hospitality and welcome; she is a symbol of those in society who believe that everything is solved by fulfilling one’s duty. Thus the criteria for judging the behaviour of others is simply to determine whether or not they have done their duty.

Mary also fulfills the custom of welcome and hospitality, but she does it in a very different way, with a novel attitude born from her heart. She is

attentive to the presence of the other, in this case Jesus, by sitting by his side, listening to him, and offering him a personal relationship; but she does this outside of the social norm, what is legal or cultural. In doing so, Mary chooses “the better way,” breaking with tradition. She acts from what is human, from what is closeness, from what is a posture of listening and seeing the needs of the other, which were also her own needs.

It is important to note that Jesus does not judge Martha, as sometimes is believed, but rather invites her to see, hear, and listen for new ways of relating – a welcome that humanizes, where BEING is more important than DOING.

The call of the Spirit, *Ruah*, is to be welcomed, to give welcome and to offer peace to people who come from different spaces as a prelude to the path of reconciliation in Colombia, which has taken on this peace process, where government and guerrillas have decided to put an end to the armed conflict.

–*Alix Lozano is a Colombian Mennonite pastor and theologian and the co-founder of the Ecumenical Women’s Group of Peace-Builders (GemPaz). This reflection is taken from the [Days of Prayer and Action for Colombia 2017 worship packet.](#)*

(This story was also posted by the Mennonite Central Committee Latin America and the Caribbean Region here: <http://www.mcclaca.org/welcome-as-a-relude-to-peace-in-colombia/>)



Iglesia Cristiana Menonita de Colombia event in Bogotá, Colombia.
Photo: Anna Vogt.



Lord, make us instruments

–Adi Nugroho (Indonesia)

“Month of Peace” is a very slick theme for activities in the church. However, after holding a series of events, proclaiming ourselves agents of peace, we must not become arrogant, nor forget that being peacemakers is an ongoing, ethical calling.

Christ calls us to be peacemakers in our daily lives. Month of Peace should be the culmination of the peace we are doing every day – a time to celebrate our actions throughout the whole year.

GKMI Yogyakarta’s Timotius youth commission celebrated with peace-themed activities throughout April and May 2017. GKMI Yogyakarta is a small Mennonite congregation in a city famous for its many universities and as a centre of Javanese culture. In the past, Yogyakarta was known as the “city of tolerance,” but lately there have been acts against minorities.

‘Anti-tolerance’ hardliners began to emerge in 2017. First there were mass demonstrations and social media mobilizations against the Chinese Christian governor of Jakarta. Then in early 2018, terrorists attacked three churches in Surabaya.



The Timotius youth commission at the GKMI church in Yogyakarta, Indonesia, makes meals with friends from other religions for the Muslim fast breaking and they share it with people in the slums.
Photo by Timotius Youth, Adi Nugroho

Java has a culture of neighborliness and mutual aid, yet some people show their prejudices against their own neighbours. A few kilometers from our church, ‘anti-tolerance’ hardliners even wanted to attack a peaceful action. Thankfully nothing happened.

Instead of being reactive and participating in hurtful activity, we in Timotius are choosing to be proactive by making a series of interfaith dialogues among youth from other religions, including Islam, Hinduism and Buddhism. We hope to have similar dialogues with youth from the Confucian and Catholic communities in the future as well.

We learned many things when we sat together and talked. We learned that we have many prejudices against one another that are not true.

For example, when we talked with Buddhist friends, one Timotius member asked: “Do Buddhists worship statues?” They laughed and then answered our questions with a sense of friendship.

The same was true when we talked with a Hindu youth group. Not only did we have things to learn about them, but they also had questions about Christianity.

They asked: “Do Christians have three gods?” “Why is Jesus supposed to die?” “My friend said, only Christians can go to heaven. Is that true?”

These dialogues have provided the opportunity to discuss our faith with one another in an atmosphere of warmth and openness. New friendships have emerged as a result.

Nindy, one of the participants from Timotius who is a student at Duta Wacana Christian University, reflects on her experience:

“What I gained, certainly, were new friends, new knowledge, new insights. I realize that every religion actually teaches goodness, harmony



between humans and even with the earth. From the very beginning when religion was created, there are no bad religions. Arrogance is bad. In fact, we can learn from other religions and apply it in our lives. I hope that all the participants can now be a bridge for people to learn from each other and know about other religions. So that we can respect each other more as human beings, not easily consumed with the divisive issues of ethnic and religious differences and feel the beauty of difference by still being yourself .”

Sharon, who studies psychology at Gadjah Mada University, said:

“Instead of seeing a case only from one perspective, I learned to recognize diversity and try to accept it as something natural, to have more respect for various beliefs. I value this new experience...to see the difference in a positive way. Hopefully, we can all have a more positive impact for the diverse life in Indonesia by better appreciating various views.”

We concluded our series of innovative fellowships with the theme “Lord, make me an instrument” presented by Koh (Brother) Rudi taken from Isaiah 6:8: “Then I heard the voice of the Lord saying, ‘Whom shall I send? And who will go for us?’ And I said, ‘Here am I. Send me!’”

We learned to let go of the self and allow ourselves to be sent by God. When Isaiah was chosen, it did not mean that he was better than those around him. Rather, Isaiah’s attitude was one of unyielding love because of his loyalty to conscience.

Thus, to become peacemakers, we must know God more deeply so that we can offer the beauty of the relationship with the God who we know through Jesus. Without such recognition, what we offer is nothing but falsehood.

The religious context in Indonesia continues to be complex, even though we talk about being “unified in diversity.” Unfortunately, we still hold



**At a “Month of Peace” event, members of the Timotius youth commission discuss “Christianization & Islamization phobia.”
Photo by Timotius Youth, Lorenzo Vicario E. Fellicyano.**

onto prejudices of “the other.” This is a challenge as we continue to work at building deeper and more meaningful relationships so that strangers become friends.

Soli Deo Gloria!

—Adi Nugroho is a member of the Timotius youth commission at the GKMI (Mennonite) church in Yogyakarta, Indonesia.

Migrant prophets teach care for those on the margins

—Peter Sensenig (United States)

Kenya, over the last several years, has been a flashpoint for Christian-Muslim conflict in East Africa, with the militant group al-Shabab’s lethal attacks in Nairobi, Garissa, and elsewhere. With each incident of terror the tension increases.

But Kenyan Mennonites are finding hope in small incidents of transformation. A major part of the challenge is that Kenya has received waves of refugees from Somalia over the last quarter century. Many of these people land in the largest refugee camp in the world (Dadaab) – or in the Eastleigh neighbourhood of Nairobi. There, at the Mennonite-initiated Eastleigh Fellowship



Center, Christians and Muslims interact in many different ways.

Yusuf, a Kenyan Mennonite who teaches English in Eastleigh, has regular discussions about faith with young Somali men in the neighbourhood. One day, one of his conversation partners became very angry and slapped him hard across the face.

“I prayed to God that I would not be angry,” Yusuf says. “And I just continued the discussion.

“Later, the other guys who were there came to me to say that they were sorry, and that they were surprised that I was not fighting. I said to them, ‘You don’t know how much Christ has forgiven me, and he called us to forgive.’

“It became clear to me at that point that peace is the best witness,” Yusuf says. “And from that time my relationship changed with those men.”

A woman who pastors a Mennonite church in Eastleigh confesses how hard it is to stay when so many other churches have left the area. There was a series of bombings in 2014, and tension can be very high at times.

But she worked for many years in Eastleigh, teaching at the fellowship centre and helping young Somalis with immigration issues. Now those Somalis have children of their own and bring them to the centre, and they still refer to her as “Mama Rebecca.”

There is hope that these sorts of transformative relationships are spreading, even as violent incidents dominate the news.

Occasionally the fruit of these loving friendships blossoms in astonishing ways. One such incident occurred when al-Shabaab militants stopped a bus in northern Kenya, and ordered the Muslims and Christians to separate. The passengers refused. The Muslim passengers protected their Christian neighbours, and one Muslim man even lost his life in the attack.



Timotius youth from the GKMI church in Yogyakarta, Indonesia, and Muslim friends read Holy Scriptures (Bible and Qur’an) about decision making, peace and justice at a “Month of Peace” event. Photo by Crew YIPC, Novita Dwi Saputri.

This new paradigm for neighbourliness reflects the best in both faith traditions – to love and obey God, and to love and protect one’s neighbour.

Migrant prophets

This new paradigm of neighbourliness, which is ultimately a practice of welcoming strangers – refugees, displaced persons, immigrants – may be one of the most important interfaith issues in our world. Welcoming vulnerable strangers is one of the deepest commonalities we share as Muslims and Christians.

Central to our faiths are two prophets – Jesus and Muhammad – who were both displaced people. To these we might also add the prophet Moses, who was a castaway as a result of genocide.

We can notice three things about Jesus and welcoming strangers.

First, Jesus was born into a covenant that was revealed in the context of migration, beginning with the prophet Abraham and climaxing in the central event of the Old Testament, the Exodus from slavery.

According to the Bible, immigration is a covenant between God and humans. This



covenant was a gift and a responsibility; it reflected God’s goodness to them but also called them to respond to strangers in the same way that God responded to them in their slavery: “You shall also love the stranger, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt” (Deuteronomy 10:19).

Second, Jesus was himself a refugee, fleeing from a murderous king into the land of Egypt. What a stunning reversal of the Exodus story! The land that held the children of Israel in slavery for 400 years became the land that received the vulnerable refugee Jesus the Messiah.

Third, Jesus’ experience as a refugee surely impacted his view of the world. As someone who had been an outsider and a stranger, he spent his life challenging the divisions that kept people on the outside.

In his life and ministry, Jesus went beyond borders of all sorts – clean/unclean, saints and sinners, rich and poor. Jesus’ life was about calling into being a community of generosity that would reflect God’s unlimited love for all people.

This central teaching of Jesus is captured well in Matthew 25: “I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, a stranger and you welcomed me, naked and you clothed me, ill and you cared for me, in prison and you visited me” (vs. 35–36). Jesus fulfills the original calling on God’s people, to follow God’s example as deliverer and provider for our fellow humans.

Prophet Muhammad, an orphan, joined a long line of prophets whose obedience to God resulted in hijra, the qur’anic term for migration. He identified as a migrant, saying that he is like a traveller who stays for a short time to rest under the shade of a tree and then continues on his journey.

The Qur’an speaks on behalf of the oppressed and weak people on earth, saying, “Was not the



Women praise the Lord during a worship service at a Kenya Mennonite Church congregation. Photo: @realfoto_Kenya

earth of God spacious enough for you to flee for refuge?” (4:97). In other words, God owns the land, and those who have authority should take care of refugees.

In the sixth year of the Muhammad’s prophethood, he sent 83 members of his community to find refuge from the Meccans in the Christian kingdom of Abyssinia (modern-day Ethiopia). When the Meccans asked King Negus to deliver the migrants over to them, the king protected the Muslim immigrants. His kindness is praised in several qur’anic verses. This incident is an important example of mutual love between Muslims and Christians.

Our central prophets – Moses, Jesus, and Muhammad – were displaced persons. Our Scriptures tell us of God’s special concern for people who have been marginalized. We must recognize that caring for immigrants is central to living out our faith.

—Peter Sensenig, along with his spouse Christy and two children, works with Mennonite Board in Eastern Africa in a majority-Muslim area of Tanzania, teaching peace studies in an interfaith centre at a university. He also has the opportunity to take part in Muslim-Christian dialogues in different parts of the East Africa. The above reflections emerge from such dialogues.



Remembering peace in South Korea

–Yongha Bae (South Korea)

Mennonite Church South Korea (MCSK) commemorated peace week at the beginning of April. Twelve brothers and sisters from MCSK travelled to pray and carry the peace message to Jeju Island and the city Jinhae-gu.

Jeju is an island with painful memories. Due to the slaughter caused by the U.S. military as well as the regime of president Rhee Seung-man, Jeju residents still have 70-year-old scars.

Although it is a beautiful island with many different kinds of flowers and trees, the indigenous people feel the pain underneath the beauty. The massacre happened almost everywhere; almost every family lost at least one family member. Sadly, the Christian church was forefront of the massacre. For this reason, Jeju residents still do not welcome the church.

About 500 people were slaughtered in one place one day. More than 30,000 people lost their lives. However, the facts about the massacre itself – which affected every town – was concealed for 70 years. Even the activity of remembering the day April 3 was subject to severe surveillance for many years.



The group from Mennonite Church South Korea who travelled to pray and carry the peace message to Jeju Island and the city Jinhae-gu. Photo: Jungyeol Bae.

Regardless of this historical fact, each year, these beautiful cherry blossoms and yellow flowers all over the island are natural reminders of the truth and the pain of the land.

The members of the MCSK group gathered on the beautiful island and prayed together. They prayed for the inter-Korean summit and the summit between North Korea and the United States.

The MCSK group visited several places where this massacre happened, including the April 3 Memorial Hall. Several students within the group had trouble believing that these brutal and sad events actually happened.

That evening, we watched Jiseul, a movie made by Jeju residents. The movie provided different meaning to the watchers as it recounted the seriousness of the stories. It was a restless night.

In closing the day, participants gave these responses to the question: “How can I make peace in my life?”

- Know the truth.
- Keep remembering.
- Participate a signature movement.
- Make a peaceful school. I want to create a school without violence and threatening.



To celebrate the International day of Peace, Anabaptists in Colombia join with others to march for “Pan y Paz” (Bread and Peace). Photo: Anna Vogt.



- Stay awake and pray for peace. Violence takes root in the soil of silence and tolerance.
- People can be with the victims in sympathy.
- Share the historical truth with the people around you.
- As a small action, put on a badge or symbol and share the stories.
- Listen to victim's voice and their anger and pray for them and with them.

After Jeju Island, we flew to another city to participate in a peace rally.

The last day of this short trip, our group marched peacefully in Jinhae-gu. The city is famous for its cherry blossom festival every spring – and for its important naval base for Korea and the U.S. During the festival, there are military parades and tours of the naval academy and vessels.

In Jinhae, our group marched and shouted, “Remember Jeju 4.3” and picketed with the slogan “Let go of war. Bring peace.” Although it rained while we were in Jinhae, MCSK brothers and sisters were grateful to take action as a peace church

Everyone in every country seeks peace, but the way it comes about seems to be different. The MCSK, which is only two years old, is glad to



The group from Mennonite Church South Korea march and share a message of peace in the city of Jinhae-gu.
Photo: Yongha Bae.



As part of their Peace Sunday celebrations, Springdale Mennonite Church, USA, share an international-themed lunch fundraiser following the worship service.
Photo: Mim Wenger.

belong to the historic peace church. We hope to continue to bring peace to the world and to continue journeying toward peace in coming years.

May the peace of Christ be with you all!

—Yongha Bae is general secretary of Mennonite Church South Korea. He coordinated this peace tour for a group of junior high and college students and adults.

Welcoming the stranger in Syria

Alain Epp Weaver (United States)

“What does the Lord your God require of you?”
(Deuteronomy 10:12)

This past winter, I had the opportunity, as part of a Mennonite Central Committee (MCC) monitoring visit, to see how Syrian churches are responding to God’s question by welcoming strangers in their midst.

On 17 February 2018, I traveled to a town in rural Hama in central western Syria. In the basement of the town’s Greek Orthodox church,



I met two good friends and former neighbours, Jamal and Kamal, along with around 30 other Syrians. [Real names of the people and the town not used for security reasons.]

All who had gathered at the church that rainy winter morning had ended up in this predominantly Christian town of 12,000 inhabitants after fleeing their homes to avoid the fighting and death of the Syrian war, now in its eighth year. They had come to the town from across Syria: few parts of the country have been spared fighting.

During the course of the bloody Syrian conflict, over 11 million Syrians have been uprooted from their homes, more than half of Syria's pre-war population. Five million Syrians have ended up as refugees outside of the country, while another six million are displaced within Syria.

Many families have been forced from their homes multiple times.



Iglesia Evangelica Menonita Hondureña teachers and parents join in a reforestation activity on Peace Sunday, raising awareness about the importance of caring for nature as part of being at peace with our environment. Photo: Belinda Rodriguez.

The war has left people searching for shelter.

It has also left people looking for food: more than two-thirds of Syria's population relies on some form of humanitarian assistance to make ends meet, while more than six million Syrians face acute food insecurity.

Jamal and Kamal had arrived in the town from Raqqa, a city in eastern Syria. In Raqqa, Kamal and Jamal had lived for many years as good neighbours. Kamal and his family are Christian, while Jamal and his family are Muslim.

When Islamic State forces were preparing to invade Raqqa in 2013, Jamal went to Kamal with the urgent plea that they both gather their families and flee for safety. Together, Jamal, Kamal, and their families eventually found shelter in the town where I met them.

Through Syrian churches like the Greek Orthodox congregation where we gathered, MCC has provided regular food parcels and monthly cash allowances to thousands of families like Jamal's and Kamal's, helping them meet basic needs.

"This is a good village," Jamal told us. "The people here give without discrimination between Christians and Muslims."

By opening their town to uprooted people, the townspeople have followed in the way of the God who "loves the strangers, providing them with food and clothing," and who tells God's people that doing what God requires means also loving strangers (Deuteronomy 10:11–19).

To love God and to work for peace, these Syrian churches testify, means welcoming strangers.

— *Alain Epp Weaver is director for strategic planning at Mennonite Central Committee.*

