

The Colombian Peace Accords and the Church

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A Colombian refugee here in Quito—let’s just call her Valeria—who is connected to the Quito Mennonite church where I work, recently told me that the conflict in Colombia can be summed up as an injustice. It is neither just nor fair, she said, stating the reality of her own life situation, that one must leave everything one had only because some people think their ambition for power gives them the right to take a person’s life.

According to most sources, Colombia has entered a post-conflict, or post-peace, period since the November 24, 2016, revised peace accords were signed between the *Fuerza Alternativa Revolucionaria del Común* (Common Alternative Revolutionary Force, or FARC) rebels and the Colombian government. The agreement was later ratified by congress on November 30, 2016. Since the signing of the peace accords, there have been many more stories like Valeria’s, told by people who, likewise, have left Colombia, or who have moved to other parts of Colombia to start new lives. According to the United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR), the number of Colombian refugees entering Ecuador has continued to hold relatively steady over the past few years, and the number of internally displaced people within Colombia has actually increased. One of the main reasons for this is increased violence in the parts of the country where rebels had controlled territory. Now these territories, which are ideal for growing coca and poppies for drug production, are being occupied by criminal gangs.¹

The Mennonite church in Colombia has been deeply committed to the work of spreading Jesus’s commandment of peace, and the Mennonite churches in Ecuador and Venezuela have given a loving embrace to Colombian refugees over the years. This being said, what has been the voice of the Christian church, and particularly the Mennonite church, through Colombia’s political process

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1 Alma Guillermoprieto, “The Healing of Colombia,” *National Geographic* 233, no. 1 (January 2018), <http://libproxy.bridgeport.edu/login?url=http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?>

and now in the time of post peace? This essay reflects on this question by reviewing the contentious peace process and listening to the voices of Colombian Mennonites. As I will show, these reflections teach us that our hope in the midst of the transition from violence to peace is in Jesus.

The Peace Accords and the October Plebiscite

The talks that produced the peace accords in Colombia started officially in August 2012. Colombian President Juan Manuel Santos's government and the FARC had had preliminary talks beginning in 2011. Over the next four years, talks in Havana, Cuba, would generate a 297-page document delineating a peace deal and subsequent disarmament, and a pathway for guerrillas to reenter society and the political sphere. Steps were also laid out to consider victims and others who had been affected by the violence and to deal with the perpetrators of crimes against humanity. International peace and negotiation experts took part in the entire process. A noteworthy point is that there were no women included in the process until September 2014 when a Sub-commission of Gender was appointed even though the majority of victims from the conflict have been women.²

The final peace agreement was presented in Havana in August 2016. To allow the Colombian people to decide to ratify the proposed peace accords, President Santos proposed a national plebiscite, or referendum, on October 2, 2016. The question posed in the plebiscite was, "Do you support the accord that puts an end to armed conflict and constructs a stable and durable nation?" The "no" vote won by less than half of a percent. Complex issues and misinterpretations surrounded the actual vote. There was also very low turnout—less than 40 percent; on the day of the vote, many areas that had been most affected by violence experienced harsh rains and flooding that likely kept people away from the polls, which closed at five o'clock p.m.³

Subsequently, a modified version of the peace accords was ratified by the Colombian congress in November 2016. Between then, when the peace accords went into effect, and January 2018, only 18 percent of the actual accords were advanced. In that short window of time, however, substantial changes took place in Colombian life. Almost nine thousand weapons were turned over to

2 Donny Meertens, "Gender and Land Justice in Colombia: Challenges for the Post-peace Accords Era/Justicia de Genero y Tierras en Colombia: Desafíos para la Era del 'Pos-acuerdo,'" *European Review of Latin American and Caribbean Studies/Revista Europea de Estudios Latinoamericanos y del Caribe*, no. 102 (October 2016): 89–100.

3 "Qué dice de Colombia que haya habido 62% de abstención en el histórico plebiscito por el proceso de paz," BBC Mundo, October 3, 2016, <https://www.bbc.com/mundo/noticias-america-latina-37539590>.

UN forces,⁴ and in 2017, Colombia saw its lowest homicide rate in the past thirty years.⁵ As pastor Peter Stucky of the Mennonite church in Teosaquillos, Bogotá, puts it: “When you look at wards of military hospitals completely empty, and no longer having victims of war and also being able to travel, these are huge benefits.” Stucky also points out that during this entire post-accord process, the FARC have largely upheld their part of the deal, and now it is up to the government to uphold their side. Even though they may have done little so far, it is a start.⁶

The Mennonite Church as It Works for Peace

Since Valeria and her family have come to Ecuador, they have received food rations, school supplies, and other support from the Refugee Project at the Quito Mennonite Church. Valeria told me that the mission and work of the Mennonite church in Quito is a great help for people in her situation, because in addition to providing material assistance, the church is offering spiritual support—a wonderful refuge for people who are disoriented.

This is just one of many ways that the Mennonite church in Colombia has been an incredible example of peace over the years. In 1987, the church started working toward formalizing the option of conscientious objection to armed military service. In 1991, they worked to incorporate conscientious objection into the constitution.⁷

The Mennonite church has also worked with mediation in formal and informal settings. Formal mediation has taken place in partnership with the National Council of Peace, *Consejo Nacional de Paz*, “and in a context of public, open and participatory peace policies.”⁸ Oscar Herrera from the Colombian Mennonite Church (Iglesia Menonita de Colombia, or, IMCOL) Mission Committee expresses how the Mennonite church has been working with dia-

4 “La ONU Revela Cuántas Armas Han Entregado Las FARC,” CNN, August 15, 2017, <https://cnnespanol.cnn.com/2017/08/15/la-onu-revela-cuantas-armas-han-entregado-las-farc>.

5 “Tasa de Homicidios en Colombia en 2017 Es la Más Baja en 30 Años,” *elcolombiano*, December 26, 2017, <http://www.elcolombiano.com/colombia/tasa-de-homicidios-en-colombia-bajo-en-2017-GX7918080>.

6 Peter Stucky, personal interview by the author, October 26, 2018, Quito.

7 Esperanza Hernández Delgado, *Intervenir antes que Anochezca: Mediaciones, Intermediaciones y diplomacias Noviolentas de Base Social en el Conflicto Armado Colombiano* (Bucaramanga: Universidad Autónoma de Bucaramanga Instituto de Estudios Políticos, 2012).

8 Hernández, *Intervenir antes que Anochezca*.

logue and bringing together the rebel fighters and the Colombian government for many years, even before the peace accords started to be formed.⁹

The Mennonite church, together with other actors, also lobbied intensively for the “yes” vote in the October plebiscite to ratify the peace accords. The Mennonite church joined other voices in praising the signing of the peace accords and organized forums and talks and participated in marches supporting the peace accords and the “yes” vote. Herrera explains that “the Mennonite church supported the Yes [vote] . . . but there were some churches of other denominations that supported the No [vote], supporting the leadership of [the previous president], Uribe Velez.”¹⁰ Officially, the Mennonite church in Colombia put out a statement urging fellow Christians and all citizens to vote “Yes.” The National Committee of the Mennonite Christian Church of Colombia recognized “that peace is built with long-term commitment and that war, as described in James 3, only responds to a diabolic wisdom that feeds confrontations and all kinds of evil; [we] affirm that God will reward those who seek peace among people, giving them peace and justice.”¹¹

Yes or No

Many people supported the “no” vote, including many Evangelical Christians. Evangelical leaders stated that the peace accords promoted values they were opposed to, such as gender and LGBTQ issues, and that the accords put their ideals of traditional family at risk.¹² Some of the disputed sections of the accord included the following:

That the implementation be made taking into account the diversity of gender, ethnicity and culture, and that measures be adopted for the populations and the most humble and most vulnerable groups, especially children, women, people in condition of disability and victims, and especially by the same territorial approach.

That gender equity be promoted through the adoption of specific measures

⁹ Oscar Herrera, personal interview by the author, November 11, 2018, Quito.

¹⁰ Herrera, personal interview, November 11, 2018.

¹¹ “Manifiesto del Comité Nacional frente al Plebiscito: Iglesia Cristiana Mennonita de Colombia,” 2016, <http://www.imcol.org/index.php/2014-12-28-21-35-21/noticias-imcol/94-manifiesto-del-comite-nacional-frente-al-plebiscito>.

¹² Meertens, “Gender and Land”; Natalio Cosoy, “El Rol de las Iglesias Cristianas evangélicas en la victoria del “No” en el plebiscito de Colombia,” BBC Mundo, October 5, 2016, <https://www.bbc.com/mundo/noticias-america-latina-37560320>; “Las FARC no Retrocederán en Enfoque de Género,” *Semana*, October 11, 2016, <https://www.semana.com/nacion/articulo/las-farc-no-están-dispuestas-a-retirar-de-los-acuerdos-el-enfoque-de-genero/498710>.

to ensure that women and men participate and benefit on an equal footing from the implementation of this Agreement.

Recognize and take into account the needs, characteristics and economic, cultural and social peculiarities of territories and rural communities—children, women and men, including people with diverse sexual orientation and gender identity—and guarantee social-environmental sustainability.¹³

CEDECOL (The Evangelical Conference of Colombia) released a statement with specific objections to the text; they agreed that the accords do not specifically contain the words “gender ideology” but that they do leave a focus on gender and other terms such as “*gender diversity, gender identity, and perspectives of gender . . .*”; thus overloading its application guaranteeing the right of women and generating ambiguity and confusion.”¹⁴

Many people repeated this perception of an imposed gender ideology, some even accusing the UN of insisting on it being in the peace accords. Others went as far as inventing things that weren’t in the accords, saying that the document supported abortion, for example, when the word abortion never appears in the text.¹⁵ The UN did support inclusive language in the document, and the idea of gender equity actually complies with many international accords and with the Colombian constitution, but there is no evidence of an imposed gender ideology in the accords.

Stucky points out that the “no” votes were not limited to conservative churches or Evangelicals. He cites the example of the city of Bogota, home to many Evangelicals and conservative churches, as a case in point, where the “yes” vote won by a large margin.

The Catholic church in general had a more hands-off approach, not officially taking sides with the “yes” or “no” vote but still encouraging people to vote, although it was pretty clear to many that Pope Francis was openly supporting the peace accords.¹⁶ On the other side of the fence, many in Catholic groups were very much against the peace deal. For months leading up to the vote, some Catholic television stations ran advertisements supporting the “no” vote. And a

13 Cosoy, “El rol de las iglesias cristianas evangélicas.”

14 Pablo Moreno, Sandra Liliana Palacios, and Edgar Castaño, “Propuesta de Ajuste de los Acuerdos de Paz,” CEDECOL, October, 13, 2016, <https://cedecol.net/wp-content/uploads/2016/10/PROPUESTA-MESA-NACIONAL-IGLESIA-EVANGELICA-FINAL.pdf>.

15 Gimena Sanchez-Garzoli and Cristina Camacho, “Debunking the Myths about ‘Gender Ideology’ in Colombia,” Washington Office on Latin America, October 25, 2016, <https://www.wola.org/analysis/debunking-myths-gender-ideology-colombia/>.

16 Katy Watson, “Pope Visits Colombia Seeking to Heal Divides,” *BBC News*, Bogotá, September 6, 2017, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-latin-america-41174077>.

conservative politician, José Galat, was even quoted as saying that the bishops who supported the pope were denying the truths of their faith, and “those who deny our faith are not Catholics.”¹⁷

Many people insist that conservative Catholics and Evangelicals tipped the vote against the peace accords. Francesco Manetto states, “Although there were no explicit pronouncements during the campaign, some sectors of the Catholic community and the votes of the Evangelicals, representing some 10 million Colombians, tipped the balance in favor of the No.”¹⁸

Others accuse Uribe, the ex-president, of using the Evangelicals and conservative Catholics for his political maneuvering. Uribe had been an outspoken opponent of Santos since the peace talks started. Then, Stucky states, Uribe used the October plebiscite to “link the Peace Accords with an entire discussion, what the Evangelicals call ‘ideology of gender,’ that had nothing to do with the plebiscite or the Peace Accords.” An entire religious conflict was created. As Lester Kurtz states: “Because of its significance, individuals and collectivities invest a great deal of themselves and their energies in a religious conflict. Ironically, however, what is highly personal is clothed in cosmic rhetoric: ‘It is not for my interests that I take this stand, but for God’s sake!’”¹⁹

Peace at Long Last

After losing the plebiscite, the FARC and others said they would not back down and would not change their stance on gender issues. They went as far as saying that the issue of gender was a fundamental part of the peace accords.²⁰ But the issues that people in the “no” camp had against the original peace document were not only about gender and sexual orientation. Many accused the accords of going soft on perpetrators of crimes against humanity, even though the accords explicitly state: “It is not allowed to amnesty crimes against humanity, or other crimes defined under the Rome Statute.”²¹

17 Francesco Manetto, “El Papa Francisco, la paz y la división de la Iglesia,” *El País*, September 8, 2017, https://elpais.com/internacional/2017/09/07/colombia/1504752541_375899.html.

18 Manetto, “El Papa Francisco.”

19 Lester R. Kurtz, “From Heresies to Holy Wars: Toward a Theory of Religious Conflict,” *Abimsa Nonviolence* (March/April 2005): 145.

20 “Las FARC no Retrocederán en Enfoque de Género,” *Semana.com*.

21 “Texto completo del Acuerdo Final para la Terminación del Conflicto y la Construcción de una Paz Estable y Duradera,” Oficina del Alto Comisionado para la Paz, August 24, 2016, <http://www.altocomisionadoparalapaz.gov.co/procesos-y-conversaciones/Paginas/Texto-completo-del-Acuerdo-Final-para-la-Terminacion-del-conflicto.aspx>.

Finally—after the October 2, 2016, vote—the government worked with different leaders and interested populations to make adjustments to the document and then presented them to the FARC negotiation team, who changed several points. The resulting agreement included making clear the penalties for perpetrators of war crimes; limiting the Special Peace Jurisdiction slightly; excluding certain crimes from the transitional justice system; not including the entire accord as part of the Colombian constitution; extending the rural development program five years; and, finally, adjusting language on gender equity to prevent misinterpretation.²²

What Now?

The current stance of the Mennonite church is to continue supporting and working toward the full implementation of the peace accords. According to Stucky, the churches believe that the “peace accords are good and have already produced huge benefits for our society.” But there is still a lot of work to do; many other churches in Colombia don’t necessarily feel the same way, and the Mennonite church, it would seem, is in a small minority. According to Stucky, other churches are no longer focused on the peace accords and do not see them as a priority to be completed. A huge gap exists between what is going on with the post-peace work in Colombia and what is being preached and shared from scriptures—“between the situation we are living and the interest of the churches in that situation.” Stucky goes on to explain that many other, especially Evangelical and Pentecostal, churches are focused on the traditional gospel, on “prosperity, growing, healing and don’t read the scriptures from Jesus, instead more from the old testament and spiritualistic emphasis.”

As previously stated, there are still many armed groups in Colombia, and they are now taking over territories where the FARC once had strongholds. Many of these groups are considered illegal, whereas the FARC and the still active *Ejército de Liberación Nacional* (ELN)²³ are considered to be involved in political warfare. The other groups might be paramilitary groups or also soldiers that disbanded from the FARC. There are also many delinquent groups involved in the drug trade or drug-related activities. The situation is getting more and more complicated as the years go by. Stucky states that the Mennonite church’s position on all of this is markedly different from other NGOs, especially since the church plans to be involved in Colombia for many more years—indeinitely, really.

Herrera highlights the Mennonite church program called “Bridges of Peace” that has striven to bring the ELN and the government together to have

22 Sanchez-Garzoli and Camacho, “Debunking the myths.”

23 Currently talks have completely broken down between the ELN and the government.

talks, although the initiatives have stalled at times. The church's Anabaptist theology requires that members be in contact with the society where they are living and worshiping, rather than staying only within the walls of the church. Stucky points out that the "church understands God's priority for peace for human kind, that it is not just an outer peace, it is an inner and outer peace." The Mennonite churches know that they must work for peace, that God's will is going to be accomplished, and that God's followers must pray and align themselves with God's purpose. In his closing, Stucky shares the following:

We need to keep on working and praying for peace, bringing hope to the country and being a factor of consolation and humanitarian aid to those who are suffering. The victims of the powers that be change, so at this point we have plenty of victims from Venezuela also. The other thing about the church is that one realizes that ideology from left or right tend to be bad counselors. They talk and promise and attack each other. The folks that get trampled are the common folks.

Nicolas, another Colombian refugee in Ecuador, agrees with Valeria. He tells me that the conflict in Colombia is a war of power, not so much of money. The various groups seek power in order to impose fear in the community and thus maintain submissiveness. Fear that is infused into the community is compounded by the authorities' complicity and lack of commitment.

Nicolas has also received support from the Mennonite Church in Quito and says that the missionary work of the church is a very great endorsement. He says, "all of us here come looking for hope and . . . the church improves things and God is the only one who gives true hope. The support of the mission of the church helps give us more strength to move forward."

These two final statements are powerful testaments to how the church leaders and political leaders could have responded during the October 2 plebiscite in Colombia. Groups pursuing political power could have offered hope instead of imposing fear. And the church, instead of listening to the left or right, could have been looking to Jesus to help them decide to vote "yes" or "no."