

Brueggemann's Prophetic Imagination and Venezuela's New Song

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Here at our home congregation of *Iglesia Cristiana Menonita de Quito* in Ecuador, my wife, Delicia, and I, in our work with Mennonite Mission Network, regularly support various ministries: Delicia helps with Sunday school and, together with Colombian refugees, also organizes a project sewing cloth diapers for refugee babies and cloth menstrual pads for refugee women. I help with the church worship group—most of whom are Colombian refugees—and also assist with teaching a discipleship class. We recently baptized six people who went through the discipleship class, all of whom were Colombian refugees. In the children's Sunday school, it's not unusual for only one or two Ecuadorian children to be present among the predominately Colombian and Venezuelan refugees. This diversity reflects the makeup of the congregation; if we include ourselves (I was born in the United States, and Delicia is from Bolivia), there are about five or six nationalities attending our church on an average Sunday.

Ecuador has been a place of human mobility; for more than fifty years, the country has received Colombian refugees because of the violence and war in Colombia. Over the years, Ecuador has also turned into a popular destination for retirees from North America and Europe. In my conversations with migrants from many different places (not just Colombia and Venezuela), I have generally heard people speak favorably of Ecuador and about Ecuadorians as being great hosts and helpful people.

Over the past two years, however, with the mass movement of Venezuelans entering the country, these sentiments have changed radically; unfortunately, many of the people with whom I have shared more recently do not have positive feelings about Ecuadorians. Many appreciate Ecuador, and also Quito as a city, but feel that *Quiteños* are rude or even hostile. It is unfortunate that so many people feel this way.

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In a recent *New York Times* article, Jose Maria Leon Cabrera describes how xenophobia has been increasing dramatically in Ecuador and in the Andean region, spurred on unfortunately by social media and, in several cases, by the government.¹ Fighting xenophobia becomes much more difficult when people such as government leaders, who are supposed to have some level of moral authority, are increasing the levels of xenophobia instead of lessening it.

A Colombian refugee shared with us recently about the reality of being a migrant. She explained that she had come to Ecuador with her family because her husband's family had been threatened. "I don't know when I will see my mother and sisters and brothers again," she lamented. Her young son, with tears in his eyes, added, "Please pray for my aunt who is in Colombia."

According to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), there are currently 70.8 million people forcibly displaced in the world. This figure includes refugees and internally displaced persons. At the end of 2018, according to UNHCR, there were 7.8 million internally displaced people in Colombia. Until the end of 2018, there were also 101,564 refugees in Ecuador, most of them being Colombians.² Although peace agreements are ratified and moving forward in Colombia, the violence there has not abated, so Colombian refugees continue entering Ecuador—about one thousand each month according to some estimates.³

The reality in Venezuela is also sobering; the high incidence of crime⁴ is only one of the problems facing the oil-rich nation; the country also suffers from hyperinflation (estimated to have reached 1,000,000 percent by the end of 2018), power outages, very little food and medicine,⁵ and a public transportation system that has nearly collapsed.⁶ Political polarization has also been

1 J. M. Leon Cabrero, "La xenofobia en Ecuador empuja a migrantes venezolanos a salir del país," *New York Times*, January 28, 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/es/2019/01/28/ecuador-ibarra-venezolanos/>.

2 UNCHR Statistics, The UN Refugee Agency, 2019, http://popstats.unhcr.org/en/overview#_ga=2.228567390.298240806.1542129677-558422399.1542129677.

3 "Ecuador acoge más refugiados que toda América Latina en su conjunto," EFE/El Comercio, June 19, 2018, <https://www.elcomercio.com/actualidad/ecuador-refugiados-americalatina-colombia-cancilleria.html>.

4 Ciara Nugent, "How Hunger Fuels Crime and Violence in Venezuela," *TIME*, October 23, 2018, <http://time.com/longform/hunger-crime-violence-venezuela/>.

5 "Venezuela Crisis: How the Political Situation Escalated," BBC, August 8, 2019, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-latin-america-36319877>.

6 Vivian Sequera and Mayela Armas, "Weary Venezuelans Rely on 'Dog Cart' Transports as Buses Succumb to Crisis," Reuters, July 17, 2018, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-venezuela-transportation/weary-venezuelans-rely-on-dog-cart-transport-as-buses-succumb-to-crisis-idUSKBN1K72BJ>.

extreme in Venezuela, as in much of Latin America, perhaps reflecting a world trend.

Dr. Alan MacLeod from the London School of Economics and Political Science *Latin America and Caribbean Centre Blog* writes that there are four main factors contributing toward the polarization in Venezuela: 1) A history of class hatred and conflict encouraged by (former) President Hugo Chávez; 2) the stymied opposition that has tried many times to push out the governing party, not always using the most legal means; 3) US support of the coup in 2002 in addition to several other activities against the government; and 4) the highly partisan local media.⁷ The people most affected by this extreme polarization—average Venezuelans—have now been pushed to flee the country because of the economic violence or, less frequently, because of a threat against their lives for intentionally or unintentionally becoming involved with the political opposition.

Currently, the United Nations estimates that more than four million of the thirty-two million inhabitants of Venezuela have left the South American country,⁸ with over three hundred thousand of these emigrating to Ecuador and one million to Colombia.⁹ (And note that most people consider these estimates to be conservative.) In 2018, Ecuador granted ninety thousand refugee visas to Venezuelans, and officials say the number of Venezuelans and Colombians entering the country continues to increase.¹⁰

The Reality of Churches in Venezuela

There are two main Anabaptist church groups in Venezuela. The leaders of these congregations are focused on building their churches—an extremely difficult undertaking. In the November 2018 Andean Anabaptist Gathering in Cali, Colombia, several church leaders shared about the difficult realities in their churches: One pastor in Caracas, for example, shared that in the past two

7 Alan MacLeod, "Who Is to Blame for Polarisation in Venezuela?" The London School of Economics and Political Science, Latin America and Caribbean Centre, February 12, 2019, <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/latamcaribbean/2019/02/12/who-is-to-blame-for-polarisation-in-venezuela/>.

8 "Venezuela Situation," UNCHR, 2019, <https://www.unhcr.org/en-us/venezuela-emergency.html?query=venezuela>.

9 "Se duplica el número de venezolanos que intentan llegar a Ecuador durante el fin de semana," *El Espectador*, August 24, 2019, <https://www.elespectador.com/noticias/el-mundo/se-duplica-el-numero-de-venezolanos-que-intentan-llegar-ecuador-antes-del-lunes-articulo-877681>.

10 "Éxodo venezolano debe enfrentarse regionalmente," *La Hora*, October 14, 2018, <https://www.lahora.com.ec/noticia/1102193218/exodo-venezolano-debe-enfrentarse-regionalmente>.

years he had lost the entire governing board of his congregation due to people leaving the country, and, as a result, he has had to start over. Another pastor observed, “This is the history of our church council; the leaders that we train and rely on have always left.”

Meanwhile, other pastors expressed their hope for change and that their only wish was to stay in Venezuela. The churches have been blessed by showing solidarity and extending their tables to people in need. One church leader told the story of a man who had been living on the street and had started attending the church. Soon the man was baptized. A few months later, he passed away and the church held a memorial service for him. His sister and several of his friends from the street attended the service. We need to remember our afflicted and downtrodden brothers and sisters in Venezuela. Our commitment to them is embedded in our faith; as Gustavo Gutiérrez states, this is a “prophetic option that has its roots in the unmerited love of God and is demanded by this love.”¹¹

Christ’s Body Responds to the Reality of Migration

We must pray for Venezuela, but prayer alone is not enough; we must also grieve. As Walter Brueggemann explains in his book *The Prophetic Imagination*, the prophet Jeremiah grieved for his nation of Judah and allowed his nation to also grieve, cutting through their numbness; through his prose, Jeremiah was able to penetrate through to the “pain of God.” In this reality, God is not a powerful enemy or a liberating king but rather a “helpless parent who must stand alongside death.”¹² We must stand in solidarity with Venezuela, since pain can help us break through the numbness that is prevalent around the world, and embrace the future. If we stay complacent or rely only on prayer, we will not be able to feel God’s pain or the sorrow of the Venezuelan people. As Brueggemann says, “Pain and regret denied only immobilizes.”¹³ He goes on to explain Jesus’s sorrow. We must learn from that sorrow to help Venezuela in its desolation.

We must grieve with people who, because of lack of food, are eating only two, or, in many cases, one meal a day. We must grieve with families who pay for taxis or medical care with a few kilos of sugar or cornmeal. We must weep with the mother of the nine-year-old girl with epilepsy, who cannot find anticonvulsant medicine in the country. We must weep with the families who cry out in disgust that they cannot get medicine for their diabetic father and

11 Gustavo Gutiérrez, *Theology of Liberation: History, Politics, and Salvation*, trans. Caridad Inda and John Eagleson (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2014), 14.

12 Walter Brueggemann, *The Prophetic Imagination* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 2018), 55.

13 Brueggemann, *Prophetic Imagination*, 56.

must wait and hope for friends to come from Colombia with insulin. We can recall the weeping Jesus, who knew, especially as complacent as we are in our realities of satiation, that “weeping must be real because endings are real” and that “weeping permits newness.”¹⁴

Finally, Brueggemann defiantly proclaims that Jesus’s “weeping permits the kingdom to come. Such weeping is a radical criticism . . . ; weeping is something kings rarely do without losing their thrones. Yet the loss of thrones is precisely what is called for in radical criticism.”¹⁵

As God’s church mourns with Venezuela in order to cut through the numbness, we must be amazed and moved by a hopeful doxology:

You who bring good news to Zion,
 go up on a high mountain.
 You who bring good news to Jerusalem,
 lift up your voice with a shout,
 lift it up, do not be afraid;
 say to the towns of Judah,
 “Here is your God!”
 See, the Sovereign Lord comes with power,
 and he rules with a mighty arm.
 See, his reward is with him,
 and his recompense accompanies him.

(Isaiah 40:9–10)¹⁶

As members of the body of Christ, we must mourn with Venezuela so we can pass through grief and become hopeful. Doxology is the faithful embrace of God—the real and honest leader—and rejection of the imposter.¹⁷ God will carry Venezuela: “I have made you and I will carry you; I will sustain you and I will rescue you” (Is 46:4). And Venezuela will have a new song, a new hymn. Brueggemann suggests several texts from Isaiah that can be this new hymn:

“Forget the former things;
 do not dwell on the past.
 See, I am doing a new thing!
 Now it springs up; do you not perceive it?
 I am making a way in the wilderness
 and streams in the wasteland.

(Isaiah 43:18–19)

14 Brueggemann, 57.

15 Brueggemann, 57.

16 All Bible verses in this article are quoted from the *New International Version*.

17 Brueggemann, *Prophetic Imagination*.

Even youths grow tired and weary,
and young men stumble and fall;
but those who hope in the LORD
will renew their strength.
They will soar on wings like eagles;
they will run and not grow weary,
they will walk and not be faint.

(Isaiah 40:30–31)

These words remind us that we are safe when we wait on the Lord and allow the Lord's timing to play out. If we try to go on our own, we will not succeed. Also, this is a "critique of every effort to reorganize on our own."¹⁸

The Quito Mennonite Church as an Example of Organizing and Waiting on the Lord

For many years, the Quito Mennonite church has walked alongside refugees in Ecuador who have fled from places like Colombia, Iraq, Syria, Democratic Republic of Congo, and now Venezuela. The church has offered a place to listen, a place to mourn, and a place of doxology in weekly worship services and other spaces. They have offered a gentle guiding hand in the complicated reality of being an undocumented person in Ecuador. The church has given blankets to children who are cold in their new reality of living at eight thousand feet elevation on the flanks of the Pichincha volcano. Cloth sustainable diapers and loving encouragement have been offered to mothers who have no other recourse for their nursing babies. Pencils and school supplies have been supplied for eager, bright children. And, of course, at least meager food supplies have been provided for families who are not satiated.

This work with refugees is a hope that God has given to the church. It's an opportunity for us as members of the body of Christ to be amazed. We must remember Luke 6:21: "Blessed are you who weep now, for you will laugh."

Those who have truly grieved—Colombians, Venezuelans, and many other migrants from around the world—can share that grief with all of us and help us move on to amazement and a hopeful doxology, worshiping God and being carried from Bogota to Caracas to Damascus, on the wings of eagles.

18 Brueggemann, 72.