The New Peacebuilders

Shifting Violence, Shifting Peace in Northern Central America

Robert Brenneman

The Anabaptist tradition is well known as a historic "peace church," with many local congregations and national denominations around the world embodying the peace tradition in a variety of ways.[1] For some Anabaptists, a commitment to peace has taken the form of nonresistance, including and especially as conscientious objection to conscription during a wartime draft. Other Anabaptists have put peace into practice by engaging in nonviolent action in the tradition of Gandhi and King. Still other Anabaptists have promoted conflict transformation as a means of finding creative paths through and beyond complex political standoffs.

Most such interpretations of what it means to be a historic peace church share a common assumption—that peacemaking involves a set of actions taken in the midst of political turmoil or outright war. This essay pays attention to peacemaking of another kind: building peace during simmering postwar crime and inequality-driven violence. Using a set of five interviews conducted with Anabaptist peacebuilders in northern Central America,[2] the paper argues that much of the work of building peace in the twenty-first century—including peacebuilding that saves lives—is occurring far from identifiable "war zones" and political hot spots. A work of qualitative sociological research, the essay seeks to leaven discussions of peacebuilding in North America with stories and

Robert Brenneman is Professor of Criminal Justice and Sociology, and Director of the Honors Program at Goshen (Ind.) College. His research focuses on the impact of violence on human flourishing. His book, Homies and Hermanos: God and Gangs in Central America *(Oxford, 2011), takes a close look at the lives of sixty-three former gang members, many of whom joined an evangelical congregation as part of their attempt to extricate themselves from gang violence.*

1 J. R. Burkholder and Barbara Nelson Gingerich, *Mennonite Peace Theology: A Panorama of Types (Akron, PA: Mennonite Central Committee Peace Office, 1991).*

2 Three of the interviews were conducted with Anabaptists from Guatamala City and two from Honduras. An additional interview (not directly represented in this essay) was conducted with an Anabaptist pastor from El Salvador.

first-person accounts of building peace in communities wracked by violence in one particular area of the Global South—Guatemala City.

The essay does not contend that all Central American Mennonites self-identify as "peacebuilders" (although many do so), nor that the individuals whose voices are lifted up here are representative in a numeric or scientific sense of the whole of the Anabaptist communities in Central America. Rather, these individuals represent a handful of local pastors and lay leaders who have sought out training and support as they attempt to put peacebuilding into practice in their own communities.

Research Question and Methods

This essay, which began as a public lecture, chronicles the lives of five Central American peacebuilders—Yanette Palacios, Ondina Murillo, Belinda Rodriguez, Ben Sywulka, and Willi Hugo Perez—people who see their work and their calling as a matter of cultivating peace in their households, their churches, and their communities. The research for the essay involved interviewing six Central American community leaders, all of whom have been involved in some way in a local Mennonite congregation.

The interviews were conducted online via Zoom and lasted approximately forty to ninety minutes. They were subsequently transcribed for analysis of shared themes using MAXqda software. All of the individuals interviewed for this work were known to the researcher prior to the interviews. The goal of the research was to better understand how the challenges brought on by violence have changed during the past three decades, and, relatedly, how Central Americans who see themselves as committed to peace and/or nonviolence might understand changes in their own work and/or approach.

The method—semi-structured interviews with a small number of activists/practitioners—cannot allow for sweeping claims about changes in the nature of violence or peacebuilding. Rather, the goal was to understand how *religious peacebuilders* from a particular denomination have come to see and understand the nature of the challenges they face.

Context

Deaths from war and conflict are on the rise. In 2022 approximately 200,000 people worldwide lost their lives due to war, terrorism, and conflict of some kind. That number is atrocious, inexcusable, and horrifying. It's also a stark increase from 2021. Nevertheless, what might be even more shocking and horrifying to many is the fact that according to the UN, "the global burden of homicide [in

2022] was nonetheless twice as large as the burden of conflict deaths."[3] In many parts of the world that have not known war for decades, homicides have long replaced war as the most frequent and likely cause of a violent death. This is particularly true for Central America. And it can be seen in Yanett's own personal life story below. For these reasons, it's worth taking a moment to reflect on what we know about violence around the world today.

One way to grasp the extent of the violence in the world is by examining it in numerical form. In the most recent global homicide report put out by the United Nation's Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC),[4] the authors state that between 2019 and 2021 an average of 94,000 people lost their lives in war and conflict violence each year. Another 22,000 thousand people worldwide lost their lives due to terrorism. During that same time, an average of 440,000 people died each year as casualties of homicide. In other words, *almost four times as many people* lost their lives by homicide during this period than lost their lives due to the violence of conflict or terrorism.

Homicide rates have remained fairly consistent for the past twenty-five years. And while violent deaths resulting from conflict are on the rise—and we should pay attention to this rise—they are still nowhere near as common as death from non-conflict-related homicide. The discipline of sociology seeks to identify patterns in social life. An examination of the phenomenon of global homicide across space, using the global homicide report, clearly shows that the highest known rates of homicide occur in Latin America as a region.[5] No other part of the world has such an astronomically high rate of death by homicide.

While time does not permit a thorough exploration of the root causes of global homicide, it is worth summarizing very briefly what the Global Homicide Report has to say about the roots of homicidal violence. The authors argue that the underlying driver of homicidal violence is a dangerous cocktail of (a) high socio-economic inequality, (b) weak institutions, and (c) widespread firearm availability. In Central America and the Caribbean, these particular factors are widespread, helping to explain the alarmingly high levels of violence in these countries.

In short, although there is a lot more that could be said about global homicide, (1) far more people die violently away from war zones than inside them, (2) inequality is a key driver of that violence, and (3) Latin America as a region leads the world in rates of death due to violence.

---

3 "Global Study on Homicide, 2023," *United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime*, https://www.unodc.org/unodc/en/data-and-analysis/global-study-on-homicide.html.

4 "Global Study on Homicide," https://www.unodc.org/unodc/en/data-and-analysis/global-study-on-homicide.html.

5 "Global Study on Homicide, 202," https://www.unodc.org/unodc/en/data-and-analysis/global-study-on-homicide.html.

So how are Central American religious peacebuilders dealing with the "new violence" of today? This essay utilizes learnings from interviews with six Central American pastors and lay leaders who are involved in addressing the violence within their own communities. Their interviews can help us think about what being peacebuilders can look like far from the scene of war and political hostilities.

North American Connections

This journal issue pays special attention to the connections between North American and Latin American Anabaptist institutions and their missional efforts. Three of the five peacebuilders highlighted below—Yanett, Ondina, and Belinda—are students or graduates of SEMILLA, an Anabaptist educational institution located in the heart of Guatemala City.

SEMILLA began as a seminary in 1984 and has blossomed over the past five decades into a multi-faceted educational institution that offers

- theological formation for Central American pastors and lay leaders from Cuba to Panama,
- intercultural education and Spanish instruction for North American students and private individuals,
- a guest house for travelers and students, and
- a "School of Peace" with a diploma in peace studies following a two-year cohort model of both online and in-person coursework.

Although its ecclesial roots can easily be traced to the work of Anabaptist missionaries and mission boards going back at least to the 1950s, SEMILLA has been a Central American-owned and -operated institution from the beginning, with a board composed of representatives from each of the dozen or so Anabaptist denominations in the region. But in the early years, considerable leadership and funding—including two rectors in the 1980s and 1990s—came from the United States.[6]

Perhaps even more important than the crucial leadership of early leaders (and the financial support that came with them) was the founding in 1991 of the Central American Study and Service (CASAS) program, which brought North American students, individuals, and families to Central America to study culture, history, and politics of the region and to build ties with local Anabaptist families and congregations. Thousands of North American college-age students and other interested Anabaptists have passed through the doors of SEMILLA by way of the CASAS program, and many of these individuals carry the memories, relationships, and theological-ethical perspectives from their Central American

6 Amzie Yoder came from Indiana and was supported by Eastern Mennonite Missions. He was followed by Juan Martinez, who came with support from the Mennonite Brethren churches of California.

sojourning into their respective institutions of work and worship. Put differently, SEMILLA has engaged in far-reaching "South-to-North" missional efforts through its CASAS program.

Furthermore, the large and growing CASAS "alumni network" provides a resource that can be tapped for financial support, expertise, and new students in much the same way alumni of North American colleges and universities help to fund future generations of undergraduates in their "alma mater." In 2002 "Friends of SEMILLA" was created as a US-based network of individuals committed to provide financial stability for SEMILLA and allow for the creation and expansion of new programs. The creation and expansion of the CASAS program also strengthened institutional ties with North American colleges and universities in the Anabaptist tradition since students receiving academic credit for their studies needed articulation and credit agreements to facilitate these credits. North American faculty also frequently traveled to CASAS with their students, forging long-standing institutional and fraternal ties between their institutions that often resulted in intercultural collaboration.

One such collaboration, the *Escuela de Paz* or "School of Peace"—in which four of the five persons profiled below either attended, graduated, or taught—began as a collaboration between SEMILLA and Bluffton (Ohio) University. According to Paul Neufeld Weaver, Director of Global Education and Professor of Education and Spanish at Bluffton University, the program began as joint venture between Bluffton University, SEMILLA, and REDpaz—a Central American Mennonite peacebuilding network. Nevertheless, according to Neufeld Weaver, "In practice, it was a SEMILLA program with collaboration of Bluffton in providing professors for seven courses during the first two cohorts." A lifelong educator, Neufeld Weaver described his own experience teaching in the School of Peace as "the best of [my] 40+ year career."[7] Thus, Bluffton, an Anabaptist liberal arts college in Ohio, was able to utilize its faculty expertise and institutional energy to help SEMILLA realize its goal of building networks of Central American peacebuilders equipped to collaborate across a region that continues to see alarming levels of personal and structural violence.

Interviews with Central American Peacebuilders

Yanett Palacios: From Political Violence to Gang Violence

Yanett Palacios is a fifty-something Mennonite pastor from Guatemala City. She and her husband together pastor a Mennonite church in zone 6, a sprawling and densely populated sector of Guatemala City that ranges economically from working class to impoverished squatter settlements. The church where Yanett

7 Paul Neufeld Weaver, email message to author, November 7, 2024.

and her husband have actively pastored for the past fifteen years is called Roca de Salvacion—Rock of Salvation Mennonite Church.

But Yanett didn't always live here. She grew up in rural Nebaj, K'iche', of the northwest rural region of Guatemala. She was born into a family of *campesino* peasant workers who farmed small plots of land in this indigenous region of the country where war was an everyday reality of their lives.

In an interview for this project, Yanett described how as a twelve-year-old she watched as her grandfather was assassinated right in front of her. And her grandfather was not the only one of her relatives lost to the war. This region of the country was deeply impacted by the violence of the armed internal conflict in the 1970s and early 1980s in Guatemala. Some were killed by the army and others by the guerrillas. Yanett told me how hard it was to grow up watching the war rage around her.

In addition to the violence committed mostly by members of the military, and to a smaller degree by members of the Marxist guerrilla fighters, poverty—intense grinding poverty—was an everyday reality in the K'iche' region where Yanett grew up. She describes the difficult experience of watching whole families picking cardamom all day long in the hot sun even though only the father was paid. Her mother used to sell breakfast to workers and families who could afford to buy something before going off to the fields. Yanett remembers begging her mother to give away the modest breakfasts instead of charging for them. This, even though her own family had very little money and couldn't afford to be giving things away. Nevertheless, she wanted to do what she could because the poverty was so intense.

Yanett told the following story in response to this question that began each interview: "What does 'peace' mean to you?" She answered in this way: "When I was a youth and I heard the word peace, I thought of absence of war. Absence of conflict. Absence. Because that's what we lived through in that time. For me that was peace." Today Yanett sees peace differently:

> Now I see peace as something much deeper, which begins when I have peace within me. To have peace in my home with my children. Not just the absence of conflict. If my children don't have food, they can't have peace. If we're losing a loved one, we can't have peace. So I think that peace is something much, much deeper that we have to be discovering every day.

So why has Yanett's thinking about peace changed? The answer has to do partly with theological education—Yanett is, after all, a graduate of the SEMILLA seminary's School of Peace—but it also stems from a shifting social context. Like millions of other Central Americans, Yanett left the countryside and moved into the city. Violence in Guatemala City is still a part of everyday life, but it has taken a different form. The violence that Yanett, her congregation, and her community confront comes mainly in the form of gang violence, extortion, and domestic violence. Here is Yanett's voice again:

> What we're seeing [for example] is that someone puts up a little business out of their home. Then the owner gets killed because they didn't pay the extortion. And then you have a single mother who has to figure out how to survive, so she has to work outside the home, leaves the kids by themselves. . . . She goes out very early and comes back very late, only bringing enough to eat. This is what's happening.

Pastor Yanett's story is indicative of the wider shift in violence that's occurring across Central America and all around the world—a shift from the political violence of the 1970s and 1980s to the entrepreneurial violence of today.

Ondina Murillo: Peace as God's Mission

One theme running through the six interviews was a broader, more inclusive definition of peace and peacebuilding than is typically used in North America.

Veteran peacebuilder Ondina Murillo defined peace in this way:

> I am of the mentality, because of what I have lived and my work, that peace is well-being. Well-being for the person, and for their surroundings . . . in every sense. Economic well-being, mental well-being. Well-being in one's health. That's what I think.

Ondina is a seventy-seven-year-old former Director of the Project for Peace and Justice of the Mennonite Churches of Honduras. She spent years working with gang members in multiple cities of Honduras, then shifted toward working with adults in prison. Before that she was an elementary school teacher. When asked "How does peace relate to God's mission in the world?" Ondina responded:

> Peace *is* God's mission. They don't relate to each other. It *is* God's mission. God has given us the ministry of reconciliation, so no—it *is* the gospel.

In effect, Ondina believed that the question itself was in error, or, in any event, needed restructuring.

Belinda Rodriguez: Acting Locally

The Project for Peace and Justice—locally known as the "PPyJ"—is also the institutional home of Belinda Rodriguez. Belinda is the current director of the PPyJ. She is also a psychologist, a mother, and a fearless advocate for justice, especially for women who have experienced violence. Under her leadership, the PPyJ is currently spearheading multiple projects, including the following:

1. An internationally funded project helping gang members in two communities leave the gang, find employment, and encourage other youth to stay clear of the gangs;
2. A campaign to prevent teen pregnancy and the abuse of young girls;
3. A project in public schools introducing education about bodies and sexuality.

This last project recently attracted the ire of a local parents' organization called No se metan con mis hijos—"Stay Clear of My Kids." The organization commenced a social media campaign accusing Belinda and her team of promoting abortion and promiscuity in the schools, an accusation that prompted the school administrators to invite Belinda to publicly explain her program and clarify their goals. Although it was a difficult ordeal, Belinda reported that the experience gave her the chance to clarify for parents what the education campaign was aiming for, and once the parents and school leaders heard from her, they invited her to expand the program in the school.

Belinda also leads a coalition of seventeen nonprofit leaders in support of a policy in the local government protecting against sexual assault and teen pregnancy and promoting gender equality. The policy eventually passed with the support of local leaders. Asked if she has ever felt endangered by the work she does, Belinda said she has never had to take serious risks. But she followed this response with multiple stories that appeared to contain considerable risk.

For example, she was recently summoned to court to promote justice for the family members of a victim of femicide in a case that was going nowhere because witnesses were too scared to testify. "The key witnesses were afraid," she said, "and asked us to accompany them. We approached them so that they wouldn't feel so alone and so to show the prosecutor our support for making an example of this case." Similarly, some years ago Belinda had to travel to another city in order to visit a police chief so that she could inquire why a local Mennonite pastor had been roughed up and interrogated by police who wanted to know more about that pastor's gang ministry. No one else, not even the local Mennonite pastors, were willing to take on the risks associated with questioning a police chief face-to-face.

Belinda's experience shows the messiness and the risks associated with working for peace in today's Central America. For although peace can be defined broadly, as in the case of Ondina, Central American peacebuilders know the importance of *acting* locally.

Ben Sywulka: Blooming Where You're Planted

Not all Central American peacebuilders address violence locally. One Central American who does not currently live in Central America is Ben Sywulka. Ben and his wife, Mari Martinez, are currently residents of Goshen, Indiana, where they have lived since 2020. Ben was born and raised in Guatemala, but his parents are of European heritage. He attended college at Stanford, worked briefly at Google after graduation, and then returned to his native Guatemala to work as a social entrepreneur. Although he grew up Evangelical, when he married Mari, a lifelong Guatemalan Mennonite, she won the denominational tug-of-war and they landed at Casa Horeb Mennonite church.

Today, Ben is a software designer, social media guru, and perennial networker who cares deeply about Guatemala and its ongoing transition toward peace and democracy. When asked to define peace, he responded:

> I tend to see [peace] through the perspective of Shalom . . . a kind of harmony with oneself and with others. Well-being. To have enough.

While his definition of peace is broad, much like Ondina's, his tools are of a different sort altogether. They involve workshops with business and civic leaders and politicians—and carefully worded blog articles on divisive political and cultural issues.

Looking back on his work, Ben states: "When I was working to improve citizen-government communication, I began learning about innovation, and I discovered a great deal of tools that sought to find more effective strategies by way of co-creation." Indeed, innovation is Ben's touchstone, a word and an approach that allows him to elide—temporarily, at least—some of the thornier pitfalls that keep people in an ideologically divided society from hearing each other.

Like Yanett, Ben is well aware of the deep political divisions in Guatemala, and he has made it his mission to try to gently bring understanding that spans some of those divides. His phone and his laptop have been his most important tools of late. In December and January, during the run-up to the run-off election and afterward, Ben published a series of articles about the importance of building and safeguarding Guatemala's institutions. These articles were read, shared, tweeted, and re-tweeted by tens of thousands of Guatemalans. Notably, some of those readers were among the most powerful and skeptical members of the business community, whose skepticism posed a major threat to the installation of Guatemala's remarkable new President, Bernardo Arevalo.

A brief detour here into Guatemalan politics is necessary. In 2023 Guatemala experienced a remarkable election cycle in which Arevalo, a sociologist and self-described social-democrat, surprised almost everyone by garnering just enough votes to force a run-off election with the first-place candidate—a heavily favored former first lady with strong campaign funding, much of it from questionable sources. As soon as it became clear that Mr. Arevalo and his grassroots party, SEMILLA (not to be confused with the Anabaptist seminary of the same name), actually had a chance at winning the election *without* dark money, his popularity took off.

This popularity, along with Arevalo's deep commitment to democracy, social justice, and equality, frightened many of the elites and social conservatives, who began campaigning actively against him, both before his victory in the run-off and afterward. So great was the worry among elites and others that a small group of corrupt justice department officials began an active campaign to keep him from being inaugurated. In response, a group of well-organized indigenous leaders from the Mayan highlands emerged and began a series of national strikes calling

for the resignation of the corrupt justice department officials and demanding that Mr. Arevalo be seated as the next president according to electoral law.

When I interviewed Ben, it was just days before the inauguration was to take place and it was not yet 100 percent certain that the president-elect would be inaugurated or that the inauguration would take place without violence. By that time, several of Ben's articles had been read tens of thousands of times and he had met with soon-to-be President Arevalo several times. Ben's articles are unique in that they are pitched for an educated audience but not written for an "expert" or scholarly audience nor an audience that has entirely made up its mind. He takes pride in seeking to bring people to the table from very diverse ideological camps. Perhaps this is why the new president has sought Ben's advice already on multiple occasions.

Ben's work involves "blooming where you're planted." He uses a unique skill set and *social location* to encourage dialog and progress toward peaceful and just processes and solutions. Ben believes that empathy is crucial:

> As long as we don't allow ourselves to learn to understand the social ethic of the persons we disagree with, and to value that ethic that they have very different from our own, it's going to be very difficult to have peace.

Willi Hugo Perez: Finding Hope

Willi Hugo Perez is a quiet man in his upper fifties, the current rector of SEMILLA, the seminary. Trained first as a sociologist and then as a theologian, Willi is intimately familiar with the state violence of the 1970s and 80s—a violence that touched his own family. One day, when he was just a teenager, army officials arrived at his house and, in his very presence, took the life of his father. Willi reports that that moment shaped his life. He tells of how watching his father get killed by army officials sent him into a spiral of rebellion, anger, and resentment. He was angry at God and angry at the world. It was only his mother and her deep faith, grounded in the evangelical Friends tradition, that helped him get out of this spiral of anger:

> I remember that she was constantly praying for me and trying to get me to wake up. "Look, we have to forgive as Christ himself, as Jesus forgave his enemies even while dying on the cross. . . ." I found that so hard to understand. [She would say] "You have to be careful that you don't become the very thing that you hate. You're becoming just like the enemy that you hate."

One of the most important lessons to be learned from Willi—a lesson that was reiterated in our interview—is that peacebuilders can be clear-eyed about the challenges as well as disappointments they face yet still find hope to continue and even go deeper in their work. As a sociologist, Willi has an understanding of the depth of challenges facing Central America today. He spoke of the deep disappointment he experienced recently when he learned from his friends at the

Martin Luther King (MLK) Seminary in Nicaragua that the Ortega administration was shutting the seminary down.

The administration of Daniel Ortega—a former revolutionary, then president, now dictator—has amassed vast power over virtually every sector of Nicaraguan life, including its religious and educational institutions. Institutions that refuse to toe the line get shut down like the MLK Seminary, or, as in the case of the Jesuit University, UCA, they experience a hostile takeover from government administrators friendly to the administration.

Willi also expressed a deep concern over the rise of authoritarianism in El Salvador. In 2022 the Salvadoran government created a "State of Emergency" that included a suspension of constitutional rights, such as the right to a speedy trial or the right to legal counsel. That state of emergency was supposed to last only thirty days. Instead it has lasted three years and resulted in the imprisonment of over seventy-two thousand gang members and suspected gang members.

To house these individuals, the Salvadoran government has built massive new prisons, including the CECOT or Terrorism Confinement Center, which has now become notorious as a destination for immigrants detained and deported by the Trump administration. Even before the high-profile deportations from the US, hundreds of innocent Salvadorans had been jailed without trial in what the vice president himself calls "collateral damage."[8] Violent crime has gone down dramatically, however, making President Nayib Bukele one of the most popular presidents in the world and allowing him to run for and win a second term in office, in direct violation of the country's constitution.

Willi's position as rector of an Anabaptist seminary that spans several countries in Mesoamerica, puts him in daily communication with church leaders from across the region. He described a recent conversation with Mennonites from El Salvador who are torn; they know that innocent people are in prison, but they are also happy for the possibility to move much more freely and without fear of gang violence in their own communities. Pastor Samuel Martinez, also a School of Peace graduate who I interviewed for this project, struck a similar tone. Willi, for his part, expressed empathy with those who are understandably pleased with the newfound security, but also a deep concern over the erosion of institutions and the rule of law.

Finally, Willi expressed concern about democracy and the rule of law in his own country. The day of our interview was, after all, the day before Guatemala was to inaugurate Arevalo, and the concerns about threats of violence and

8 Angeline Montoya interview of Felix Ulloa, "Felix Ulloa, Vice President of El Salvador: 'There Are Innocent Victims in Every War,'" *Le Monde*, August 15, 2022, https://www.lemonde.fr/en/international/article/2022/08/15/felix-ulloa-vice-president-of-el-salvador-there-are-innocent-victims-in-every-war_5993680_4.html.

institutional chaos were real. He named co-optation of state institutions and organized crime as *the key threats to peace in Guatemala:*

> Behind all of this is organized crime and the narco-traffic and other networks of politicians and, sadly, even religious leaders who have created a situation of great risk for our fragile democracy, which makes this moment one of the most important and most serious that Guatemala has had to live through since the armed conflict.

Toward a Theology of Hope

If this were a purely social scientific paper, now might be a good time to delve into an explanation and analysis of Central America's organized criminal networks—what the UNODC calls Transnational Organized Criminal Networks—but the main goal of this project lay in providing a clearer understanding of what Central American Anabaptist peacebuilders are *actually doing* in their own context. Thus, it seemed useful to ask Willi what seemed like an obvious question after hearing example after disturbing example of hope-sapping situations. "What is a tiny denomination, dedicated to peace, supposed to do? How should we respond in the midst of such massive, sprawling, and complex challenges?" His response included three points and a story.

1. First, Willi said, the church needs to be an agent of consciousness. The role of Anabaptist congregations is to awaken the conscience of the surrounding society to take account of what is going on. Effecting massive change may not be the immediate goal. Willi likened this approach to that of yeast, which, though very small, spreads throughout the dough, changing the very nature of the whole loaf.
2. Second, the church must educate its children and youth. Willi was not alone on this point. Several of the peacebuilders interviewed for this study emphasized the importance of teaching children and youth to value peace and finding ways to plug them in to efforts for promoting peace and justice in their own communities.
3. Third, Anabaptists must join the struggle with others who have already begun and are hard at work. The church doesn't need to start its own movements or institutions. Sometimes the best thing that can be done is to join efforts with the work of others.

And finally, Willi ended with a story. Though a quiet, extremely mild-mannered individual, Willi becomes animated when he preaches, typically closing his sermons with a simple but powerful story or anecdote. This time his story was based on his own experience while driving home from a meeting with indigenous Mennonites in the rural north of the country. It was October of last year and the indigenous leaders had called a nationwide strike to protest the

actions of a corrupt attorney general who was actively trying to undermine the election results.

> I was at an activity for K'iche' Mennonites, and when I returned at night, I got stuck at a road block [protest]. I had to stay there for several hours, almost all night long at the blockade. But I was encouraged by what I saw, how these people, who were protesting because they believed in something that they longed for. Something new. . . .
>
> There we were, long lines of vehicles that were sitting there at two or three in the morning. And then people from these tiny villages nearby started coming out, and many were bringing jugs with hot chocolate and bread, to distribute to the people sitting in line, those of us waiting, and they said, "We have to have faith in our country, that it's going to change." . . . It's so easy when faced with our reality to lose faith and hope, but we have to see more carefully in order to be renewed.

This research began as a means of "telling the stories" of Central American peacebuilders and the challenges they face in 2024. As a sociologist who had spent a decade largely outside the Anabaptist tradition, I found that their stories both inspired me and motivated theological reflection. They also provided insights into the diversity of forms that peacebuilding can take in the twenty-first century.

Without trying to be prescriptive, this essay, in a nod to Willi's method, will close with three points and an anecdote from my interviews with six Central American peacebuilders.

1. For the Central American Mennonite leaders interviewed for this project, religious inspiration undergirds a commitment to building peace. Peace, for them, is never very far from an understanding of the Jesus portrayed in the Gospels. Again and again in the interviews, the Central American peacebuilders brought up both the example and the teachings of Jesus as founder and cornerstone of their own commitment to studying for, working for, and building peace in their own communities. For them, Jesus is not a side gig. He is the main story, and the inspiration for their action.
2. A second theme voiced in the interviews is that working for peace can be understood to mean many, many things. Although peace exists alongside, or, rather, as part and parcel of the Christian gospel as a motivator to act, that action can take myriad forms.
    - It would be easy to imagine that, given the absence of open war or conflict, the Anabaptists of Central America would have moved on from the topic of "peace" to address other matters or to find other language or themes to inspire them. If peace meant only the absence of war, that might be true. But the participants in this project spent little time trying to "explain" or "justify" why their work

on behalf of young women, or their actions in favor of democracy, were actually peacebuilding. They didn't need to. For them, peace is a broad concept—a kind of conduit for naming the work that we all must do on behalf of the reign of God. It is the way the church participates in bringing into reality God's vision of right relations and human flourishing.

3. A final theme, one that was not named but rather became apparent during the course of the interviews, involves the importance of adult education. Indeed, the role played by SEMILLA's School of Peace in promoting peacebuilding throughout the region and beyond is crucial. The school has yielded impressive fruits. Four of the six people interviewed for this project are graduates of the School of Peace.
    - Of course, this preponderance of interviews is in part due to the fact that the author's social networks are shaped by SEMILLA. But the success of the School of Peace has continued to attract students from across the region. Most of the graduates and current students are adults in their thirties, forties, and fifties, including pastors and lay leaders from across Mesoamerica who have an interest in understanding and promoting peace in their own contexts. And so it is important to name the fact that dozens of Latin Americans have made significant sacrifices in order to be a part of the School of Peace and that with each cohort a new learning community is formed and networked—one that challenges and inspires each member to commit themselves to a faith-inspired journey, the outcome of which can't be foreseen at the beginning.

Planting Seeds of Hope

Concluding on a note of hope, Willi closed the interview with a story that has helped him maintain a sense of hope in difficult times:

> Once, my friend Jacobo Schiere [Dutch Mennonite] told me that one of the great cathedrals of Holland took 430 years to build and that the architects, the designers, couldn't see it finished. They could only see the blueprints. Sometimes I think that's how we should approach our work for justice, for peace. Perhaps the architects and the craftspeople of peace in our time won't get to see our work finished. Maybe we're simply laying the groundwork. Laying the groundwork and doing the work that future generations will be able to see. Right now, in the present, we're planting seeds.

Hope can be difficult to find in 2025, but the work of SEMILLA and its School of Peace continues to plant seeds of hope in communities throughout the Central American region. Anabaptists from around the world would do well to pay attention to such stories as a means of engaging in the work of sowing hope in their own contexts.