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# Responding with Integrity in Times of Darkness

## Violence in Ecuador and the Church's Response

Peter Wigginton

Some of the church members received the news on TV. Others heard on the radio or from a WhatsApp group. There was a police operation that night in the church neighborhood. Later, social media videos showed the yellow tape, the bodies, and police lights . . . right across the sidewalk from the church doors in Manta, the large coastal city in Manabí province of Ecuador.<sup>1</sup>

### Background

Scenes like this have become more and more common in Ecuador. We have heard anecdotes from other church members of pastors receiving extortion threats and even pastors being kidnapped. There are more cases of local authorities being assassinated and more cases of extortion.<sup>2</sup>

All of this highlights the dark reality that Ecuador currently finds itself in. The ensuing ethical discussions and reflections are just as dark and heart-wrenching.

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1 "Cinco Fallecidos y Dos Heridos En Una Noche Violenta Manta," *Primicias*, October 25, 2024, <https://www.primicias.ec/sucesos/fallecidos-heridos-noche-violenta-manta-24octubre-81993/>.

2 "Los Tiguerones Cobran Peaje y 'Renta' Extorsiva de USD 200 a Los Vecinos Del Noroeste de Guayaquil," *Primicias*, November 10, 2024, <https://www.primicias.ec/seguridad/tiguerones-peaje-extorsion-arriendo-flor-bastion-noroeste-guayaquil-82849/>. See also David Alire Garcia, "Ecuador Prosecutor Gunned Down as Violent Crime Wave Persists," *Reuters*, October 25, 2024, <https://www.reuters.com/world/americas/ecuador-prosecutor-gunned-down-violent-crime-wave-persists-2024-10-26/>.

But what good is ethics (or theology, for that matter) if it cannot give us some light in difficult situations? If we start posing questions like, Should a church cooperate with organized crime in order to continue being a church?, we know we have entered a terrifying realm, one in which we must listen closely to the movement of the Holy Spirit.

## Perspectives on Responding to Violence: Outcomes vs. Duties

Let's take a hypothetical but realistic situation where a church leader in Duran, Ecuador, is approached by gang members. These gang members say that if the church wants to keep their doors open they have to pay a monthly bribe, or *vacuna* (extortion money), to cover the cost of the gang "protecting" the church and its operations. This practice, recently imported to Ecuador in the past year and a half by gang members who have been influenced by and have relations with Colombian cartels, is now standard in Central America and Colombia.

In this scenario, if the church leaders were to use ethics based only on goals or outcomes, the process would seem rather simple: The church's goal is to continue being a church, so they would have to pay a bribe or extortion. If the church closed her doors, the goal of sharing the gospel would no longer be realized, which would mean the church had failed. But by paying the extortion money, the church could continue her work and achieve the goal.

Other perspectives might include looking at the situation with a focus on duties: "Our duties are to be good citizens, so we cannot pay the bribe. Instead, the church must close, or maybe move to another location." Other types of ethical frameworks can provide additional interesting perspectives, such as figuring out how to be a peaceable community, how to have patience, hope, and justice in this situation.

## A Virtue/Integrity Ethics Perspective

Instead of looking at these ethical dilemmas through a framework of outcomes or duties, however, I would like to invite reflection from a point of view that theologian and author Stanley Hauerwas considers within a virtue or integrity ethics perspective. First of all, from this point of view the community is authoritative. This is one of the principle reasons I think this perspective is of value, since it means that the Ecuadorian churches need to reflect on their reality and communal narrative to be able to come up with their responses; the narrative of the community is what ends up modeling what the ethics and values actually are.

But first a little bit more on the situation in Ecuador.

### *COVID-19 Pandemic: New Drug Cartels and Increasing Violence*

Many academics and experts on security point to the COVID-19 pandemic as a turning point in the Ecuadorian reality. In particular, during that time a lot of

drug product was held up in Colombia and in Peru, which resulted in consumers in Ecuador, Brazil, and other places not having access to their drug of choice. At the same time, however, the Ecuadorian government charged the military and police with focusing on sanitation rather than drug policing, so new drug corridors began opening up and Ecuadorian gangs brokered new relationships with Colombian, Mexican, and Albanian cartels.<sup>3</sup> This caused Ecuadorian gangs to be more and more fractured, sparking endless turf and route wars in the coastal and Amazonian parts of the country.

Not surprisingly, over the past few years the rate of violent killings (per 100,000 population) has grown more than 400 percent.<sup>4</sup> In 2024 the homicide rate dropped slightly, but Ecuador was the second-most dangerous country in South America because of dramatic increase in violence in Trinidad and Tobago. (In the report, Trinidad and Tobago is considered part of South America.) Haiti and Jamaica in Latin America also had higher homicide rates in 2024.<sup>5</sup> In 2023 Ecuador was officially the most dangerous country in South America and second to Jamaica in all of Latin America. This follows a trend of Latin American countries becoming more and more dangerous on average as a region.<sup>6</sup> Late in 2023, Guayas province—home to Guayaquil, the largest city in Ecuador—ranked as the most dangerous place in the world.<sup>7</sup>

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3 Jorge Mantilla and Renato Rivera, “Post-Insurgencies and Criminal Subcultures: The Influence of Colombian Organized Crime in Ecuador’s Armed Conflict,” *Small Wars Journal*, May 16, 2024, <https://smallwarsjournal.com/2024/05/16/post-insurgencies-and-criminal-subcultures-influence-colombian-organized-crime-ecuadors/>.

4 Ryan C. Berg and Rubi Bledsoe, “In the Eye of the Storm: Ecuador’s Compounding Crises,” CSIS, April 24, 2024, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/eye-storm-ecuadors-compounding-crises>. See also Alexander Clapp, “A Journey through the World’s Newest Narco-State: Drugs Transformed Ecuador from a Latin American Success Story into a War Zone,” *The Economist*, November 22, 2024, <https://www.economist.com/1843/2024/11/22/a-journey-through-the-worlds-newest-narco-state>.

5 Mario Alexis González, “Pese a Una Importante Reducción de Los Crímenes, Ecuador Cerró 2024 Como El Segundo País Más Peligroso de Sudamérica,” *Primicias*, January 31, 2025, <https://www.primicias.ec/seguridad/ecuador-segundo-pais-muertes-violentas-sudamerica-88761/>.

6 Robert Muggah and Katherine Aguiere, “Latin America’s Murder Rates Reveal Surprising New Trends,” *Americas Quarterly*, June 18, 2024, <https://americasquarterly.org/article/latin-americas-murder-rates-reveal-surprising-new-trends/>.

7 Benedict Vigers, “Guayas, Ecuador: The Least Safe Place on the Planet?,” Gallup.com, October 18, 2024, <https://news.gallup.com/poll/643817/guayas-ecuador-least-safe-place-planet.aspx#:~:text=The%20port%20city%20of%20Guayaquil,highest%20rates%20in%20the%20world.>

## Ecuadorian Anabaptist Mennonite Response to Increased Violence

Where does all of this leave congregations in Ecuador? As Anabaptist Mennonites who reflect seriously on Jesus's commandment to love enemies, in what ways are we called to act in a place that has suddenly grown so violent around us? Church leaders are starting to engage in more and more challenging conversations about this. In some rough neighborhoods (like the one mentioned at the beginning of this essay) people are deciding not to go to church because of fear. As Jesus followers, what can or should we be scared of?

If a local faith community receives a threat from gang leaders, they must ask themselves a few questions: If we pay the extortion money, how are we being peaceable? It's pretty much guaranteed that the money will go to fund illicit, violent things, probably in the church's own community. But if the money is not paid, violence may be directed toward church members. And if the church community reaches out to authorities, there is a chance that the situation could be resolved, but there is also the chance that authorities may be on the gang's payroll, in which case they may ignore the situation and the gang may retaliate. The potential for violence is great in many of these situations.

Prayerful patience can be a great virtue in this process, since there are no easy answers and the pressure on the community can be unbearable in these situations. As a Christ community we are also called to act justly. If we are in a community where gangs are terrorizing families, hurting children and the elderly, how can we continue being a church in the community without speaking out or confronting such injustice? At the same time, speaking out may increase the chance of violence against the faith community. Because of this very real risk, churches in some Colombian or Central American communities have decided to "live and let live" with the cartels. But this would fly in the face of what we would consider peaceableness or justice by potentially being complicit in horrifying acts by the cartel. At the same time, shuttering the church (with the blessing of the cartel) and stopping the life-giving work the church may be doing could also be a grave injustice.

The cartels are known to have their own religious cultures or even deities, saints, or gang leaders who are deified. These mechanisms are key to solidifying trust and membership in the gang,<sup>8</sup> to provide a place for young children and young men in particular to feel like they belong. It is simpler for gangs to do this in areas where young men and children don't have community ties or, since many families are fractured, where there are fewer opportunities for income or supporting a family.

If boys don't feel like they belong in society, where will they go? Churches would seem like an excellent option to counter this emptiness of belonging—in

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8 Mantilla and Rivera, "Post-Insurgencies and Criminal Subcultures."

particular, the Anabaptist tradition and community where belonging is supposed to be so highly valued. But the evidence points to this not being the case.

So how can churches counter the draw that gangs and cartels are offering to children and young men? The church should present the most irresistible offer—a community of saints, a community of believers united by love for one another and love for our Savior. But, like Lecrae, a Christian rap artist, once stated on his podcast, “I can’t just tell people they need Jesus; they will ask, will Jesus pay my bills?”<sup>9</sup> We need to rethink how we support and build communities where people actually feel like they belong. Hauerwas states:

For the church to adopt social strategies in the name of securing justice in such a social order is only to compound the problem. Rather the church must recognize that her first social task in any society is to be herself. At the very least that means that the church’s first political task is to be the kind of community that recognizes the necessity that all societies, church and political alike, require authority. But for Christians our authority is neither in society itself nor in the individual; it is in God. As a result the church must stand as a reminder to the pretensions of liberalism that in spite of its claims to legitimate authority, some necessarily rule over others as if they had the right to command obedience.<sup>10</sup>

This means that without a true grasp of the biblical narrative, along with Anabaptist “vibes” on—or Anabaptist approach to theological interpretation in—the Ecuadorian context, the churches may go astray. The church in Ecuador must find and claim its authority as a peacemaker. It must find this authority in its own context, and especially in its own attempts to be church—to “be herself,” in Hauerwas’s terms—in this new violent context. There is plenty of prayer, reflection, Bible study, and discernment these communities will need to go through, but unfortunately many people tend to focus only on the power and salvation of Jesus and leave the rest for some other day. Even with very diverse communities across Ecuador, the church can still provide mutual support in this work of studying the biblical narrative and constructing their own communal narratives.

## Building a Theology of Peace in Ecuador

In particular, the Ecuadorian church has the task of defining and constructing its own theology of peace narrative that will grow out of their current reality. Toward this end, below are four focus points inspired by conversations with the

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9 Lecrae, “Should You Listen to Secular Music? Deep End Podcast,” YouTube, 50:55, August 2024, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yI9fIwyRn74&list=PLL4U\\_ramCTGqeX0Nr6nENps-F12gmpZRt&index=16](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yI9fIwyRn74&list=PLL4U_ramCTGqeX0Nr6nENps-F12gmpZRt&index=16).

10 Stanley Hauerwas, *A Community of Character: Toward a Constructive Christian Social Ethic* (University of Notre Dame Press, 1991), 136.

Ecuadorian Mennonite Peace Building team from various Anabaptist church conferences here in Ecuador that I have been working with the past several months.<sup>11</sup>

1. The church must respond with courage! Continuous fear of others, of the unknown, of uncertainty surrounds us. Obviously, in a situation of extortion there will be constant, real fear. Luke 12:32: “Do not be afraid, little flock, for your Father has been pleased to give you the kingdom.”
2. The church must combat lies and ignorance and confront misinformation with truth. At times the threats of extortion might not even be real; they may be lies to incite fear (see point 1). Striving for truth will be an essential tool for the church in this time of uncertainty. Ephesians 4:25: “Therefore each of you must put off falsehood and speak truthfully to your neighbor, for we are all members of one body.”
3. The church must combat the human tendency toward apathy and mediocrity by practicing extreme love. Acedia is a true vice in this day and age, and one of the most corrosive vices that affects the church. Acedia is not only not caring but also not caring about not caring—about love of God or love of others and can go as far as not caring about ourselves or God’s creation. To combat acedia, the church must show extreme love and mercy. Revelation 3:14–16 tells us about not being hot or cold: “These are the words of the Amen, the faithful and true witness, the ruler of God’s creation. I know your deeds, that you are neither cold nor hot. I wish you were either one or the other! So, because you are lukewarm—neither hot nor cold—I am about to spit you out of my mouth.”

Showing extreme love is probably one of the most powerful (and fearful and uncertain) ways a church could respond to a case of extortion. Would a gang leader respond likewise with mercy to an action of mercy and extreme love? It could be dangerous for a church to respond to a gang not by paying extortion but instead by saying we will love you!

4. In order for a church to respond with courage, truth, and love, it also needs to build a sense of belonging (this would be important to do before a situation gets to the extreme of extortion and bribes). Building a community of belonging, as stated before, is an extremely important tool for the churches to combat evil. Ephesians 4:3 reminds us that we belong to each other in peace: “Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace.” This may sound simple, but how do we, in practice, foster a space for the Holy Spirit to create

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11 Scripture references are quoted from the New International Version of the Bible.

bonds of peace in a community? A space where kids and young men will be drawn in and built up, especially when so many in their communities feel like they do not belong?

By being courageous, speaking truth, showing mercy, teaching others about bonds of peace, and being children of God, we can perhaps show how we belong to each other since we are brothers and sisters, children of God. This process should be complemented by peaceableness, patience, and justice to transform the current narrative of the churches that is a result of living in fear accentuated by uncertainty of what is true and an overwhelming sense of apathy stemming from hope that maybe things will be ok if they can just maintain the status quo.

### Responding to Extreme Violence with Extreme Love

In the end, the above points don't provide a simple answer of how the church should respond to a situation of a *vacuna*, because they are general guidelines that could take infinitely different forms. For instance, I can imagine an extreme scenario where a group from the church goes to a gang leader's home with several pots of food, maybe their favorite casserole. This type of action showing extreme, radical (maybe even irresponsible) love is what is needed to create a rupture in the status quo of these types of situations. It goes hand in hand with speaking truth, not giving into lies and uncertainties. This type of action (even baking a casserole) has to be done with an extreme amount of courage.

I think these general guidelines provide a first step and could be a starting place for communities responding to violence, from the bodies on the street across from the sidewalk of the church in Manta to the church in Duran that is struggling with violence in their community. Although the highland churches are not confronting the same glaring levels of violence, even they are experiencing a heightened perception of violence, stories of extortion, and higher drug use. These are new realities that the church will have to confront using the same principles of courage, truth, love, and community.

A big challenge will be how to bring the various Ecuadorian Anabaptist (and beyond) church communities together to respond to this violence as one community. For instance, one community might recommend just focusing on goals, keeping the church open at all cost, while another might believe it's their duty to not cooperate at all with any armed group no matter what. This kind of debate is necessary, but if diverse communities approach the response to extortion and violence from different stances, they will likely experience this as an added challenge to forming a strong communal relationship.

## **Overcoming the Darkness of Violence**

As Ecuadorian Mennonites, our mission will need to, in part, include being a prayerful patient presence in this time of crisis, embodying ethics of truth, confidence, love, and community amid the darkness of violence. We must also act decisively, showing how even so much uncertainty and dismay can be overcome with extreme love and being present for one another.