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**8,500 miles
by bicycle to
Paraguay 2009**

MWC Executive expresses support for Colombia Mennonite peace work

Manila, The Philippines—The Mennonite Church of Colombia is prepared to take risks to work for peace in their conflicted country.

That was the report from Peter Stucky from Colombia to the MWC Executive Committee meeting here in August 2008.

In response, the committee affirmed Mennonite World Conference support for the peace efforts of its member churches in Colombia, including Mennonite, Mennonite Brethren, and Brethren in Christ, as well as other churches in the country.

Stucky, who represents Latin America on the Executive Committee, noted that Colombian Mennonites have several initiatives aimed at building bridges between warring factions. The church also hopes to draw in other people who believe that the conflict needs to be solved through dialogue.

“The Mennonite Church of Colombia has been very clear that it is the church’s vocation and mandate to dialogue with any armed group that is willing to do so in the search for peace for Colombia,” Stucky told the Executive Committee.

Moral support, spiritual cover.

Because contacts with militants implies risks, the church is seeking help from international church bodies “to give moral support, to offer solidarity, and, most important, to give spiritual cover,” he said.

Stucky brought a proposal from the Mennonite Church of Colombia asking MWC to express its support for the church’s peace initiatives, including contact with the armed parties to urge humanitarian action and constructive conversations to seek peace and justice.

“The initiatives reflect these churches’ desire to remain true to their calling of being salt and light in a country whose soul cries and pleads for peace in the on-going con-

flict. The Executive Committee has no choice but to support [the proposal], even though to some it might appear risky and uncomfortable,” said Danisa Ndlovu, MWC vice-president and president-elect.

Conflict has devastated Colombia for 60 years resulting in thousands of violent deaths, disappearances, and kidnappings each year. An estimated 3.5 million people have been internally displaced, and many more have fled the country.

The Mennonite Church has worked closely with other churches on peace education and with organizations and coalitions in human rights efforts. It has contacted guerrilla groups—the FARC (Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia), the ELN (National Liberation Army)—as well as the AUC (United Self-defense of Colombia), a paramilitary group, and the Colombian military.

Bridges between armed parties.

According to Stucky, the intent of these contacts has been to build bridges of communication among the armed parties as well as between them, the church, and civilians.

Stucky said that the church has discussed its initiatives with Colombia’s First Lady, who listened sympathetically. It has also begun contact with a guerrilla leader made possible by a church member who lives near that particular leader.

The government has made it clear, however, that anyone contacting the FARC will be considered a military target, Stucky noted. He said having the support of international church bodies, including MWC, would reduce the risk to church members.

“MWC support is a way of actively praying for these peace efforts and being prepared to speak on behalf of the churches when others criticize the risks they take,” Nancy Heisey, MWC president, said as the Executive Committee took its action.

A privileged and unequalled ministry:

When I was

by Peter Stucky

To live the gospel and to live as an Anabaptist are not two different things. Rather, Anabaptism provides a specific way of understanding what it means to follow Jesus. Anabaptism is no better or worse than the perspectives of other families of faith, but for the Iglesia Christiana Menonita de Colombia, Anabaptism is a perspective that enriches and orients us in the midst of the great tensions that we suffer in Latin America.

This is particularly true for the Mennonite Church of Teusaquillo in Bogotá, where I am pastor. This group formalized its intention to become a church in an apartment in Chapinero, an area of Bogotá, in 1977. From the beginning, the idea was to cultivate a community vision rather than a traditional church. Little did we realize at the beginning that God would have something surprising, destabilizing and redemptive for our church to help us realize this dream.

That “something” was the appearance of very needy and excluded persons from our society. These were internally displaced persons, then those whose lives were threatened, the handicapped, prisoners, street people, and undernourished hungry children. Many of these lived as they did because of the conflict in our country.

It was in 1997 that the reality of the cruel, unjust, and heartless internal displacement in Colombia burst onto our

Cover: *Lars Akerson (left) and Jonathan Spicher, students at Eastern Mennonite University, Harrisonburg, Virginia, USA, set out on January 6, 2009, for an 8,500-mile bicycle ride to Asunción, Paraguay, for MWC’s Global Youth Summit and Assembly 15 in July.*

photo by Jim Bishop

displaced, you took me in

church. This came when displaced persons from the Bellacruz Hacienda in the Department of Cesar seized buildings at the Colombia Institute of Agrarian Reform (INCORA) in Bogotá for a place to live. With the help of a brother from the congregation, we began to visit these displaced persons, promoting children's activities, and, in general, trying to make their situation there a bit less burdensome.

One of those people was in grave danger of being assassinated. As the result of our work, Manuel Narvaez and his family came to our church, and we did what we could to help. A humble sister in the church provided lodging and a place to hide in her house. This provided some protection until they could leave for asylum in Belgium. Manuel miraculously escaped assassination, reportedly by the paramilitary in the heart of Bogotá.

Since that time we have experienced many cases of truly miraculous divine interventions in favor of persons who have placed themselves under the care of God and the church, God's people. We have seen the God who liberated Peter from jail and execution by Herod in the Book of Acts exercise the same saving power by liberating at least six people from what seemed to be certain abduction and death.

For many who came to our church, this was the first time that they had the opportunity to really hear and become acquainted with the Good News of Jesus Christ for their lives, and dozens—perhaps hundreds—have responded with enthusi-



Among those of the Mennonite Church of Teusaquillo working to alleviate suffering in Bogotá, Colombia, are Peter Stucky (left), author of the article on this page, and his son Jonathan, who writes about the church's fight against hunger on page 4.

asm and joy. This was true even though they had lost so much: years of life and effort, lives of relatives, life plans, self respect, stability.

Opening our doors to these displaced persons proved to be a jolt for our congregation. Extending our arms to those in danger brought a collision of cultures which demanded intense attention, a great amount of time, lots of love, and abundant economic resources.

For some long-time members, it was not easy to accept the new arrivals. These persons felt displaced in their own church with a lack of pastoral attention. They felt insecurity for themselves and for their children. Some left the church. However, the great majority of the members responded admirably. Their attitude broadened as they realized that God was doing something new and important. Indeed, the presence of displaced persons in our church touched our sensibilities profoundly and affected our comfortable way of living.

Eventually, we formed a Justice and Peace Committee to guide the church in this work. One of the first things this group did was to provide a time for prayer and reflection. Held at noon on Wednesdays, this time came to be called, "A Moment for Peace." This was

developed because we thought it was important for a peace church and for Mennonite institutions working in the area to get together weekly for prayer for peace in Colombia.

At first five or six attended. Then the Moment for Peace expanded to 10, 15, 20, 40, 60, and more. Many were displaced persons, and they told their families and friends about the time of prayer for peace, and these also came. People who had never been to a church came to the Moment for Peace and discovered there a way to be Christian and be concerned about social reality, justice, human rights, and a new world.

Obviously, this work required constant discernment because these were paths that we hadn't planned or traveled before. There were concerns about security, questions about manipulation, about the adequacy of our solutions, etc. Eventually the Justice and Peace Committee began to feel uncomfortable, even a bit guilty or uncertain about its relation to the church. This was because they realized that to a great extent they were responsible for the profound sociological change that had upset the church and caused some members to leave. And there were all sorts of questions: Who

Courier / Correo / Courrier (ISSN 1041-4436) is published quarterly by Mennonite World Conference, 8, rue du Fossé des Treize, 67000 Strasbourg, France.
Publication office: *Courier*, 616 Walnut Avenue, Scottsdale, PA 15683-1999, USA.
Periodical postage paid at Scottsdale, PA.
Printed in USA.

POSTMASTER: Send address changes to 616 Walnut Ave., Scottsdale, PA 15683

was really attending the worship services? When might some dangerous incident occur? Would our children be secure in this church? Besides, who said that this type of intervention is the work of the church? Would it not be better to stick to something more traditional instead of things that are so dangerous and even political?

With this burden, the committee asked for an appointment with the governing council of the church, composed of five marvelous women at that time. Committee members expressed their doubts and their hesitations and asked for advice from the council.

These five women listened carefully and then, with the clarity of the Holy Spirit, said: "In spite of the doubts that have taken place in the church, this is from the Lord. This is precisely what

the church should do. With these people that have arrived at the church, we have had the privilege of meeting the Lord Jesus Christ, who has come in those who are displaced, handicapped, persecuted, hungry, and incarcerated. These events have renewed the church and permitted us to have a privileged and unequalled ministry. What you have done has been very good." The members of the Justice and Peace Committee left that meeting with renewed strength and new energy.

The work continues. Many of the people who have come to our church would be able to hate some or all sides of the current conflict: the guerrillas, the paramilitaries, the armed forces. Some may have participated in one of these groups in the past.

Some come with a great deal of distrust towards others in the church. But in the new community of Jesus, they have learned to forgive. Around the Lord's table, they make real the words of Ephesians 2:14—"Christ is our peace. He made the Jews and the Gentiles one single people, destroyed the wall of separation, and annulled in his own body the enmity that existed."

Peter Stucky is pastor of the Iglesia Menonita de Teusaquillo (Mennonite Church of Teusaquillo) in Bogotá, Colombia. He also serves as a Latin American representative on the MWC Executive Committee. This article is adapted from a presentation Peter made to the Central American Anabaptist Mennonite Consultation (CAMCA) in 2007.

Feeding the hungry is a matter of justice

by Jonathan Stucky

When Jesus was faced with 5,000 hungry people in the desert, he found them something to eat through a miracle. Something similar has happened in the Teusaquillo Mennonite Church in Bogotá, Colombia.

Bread and Life is a ministry that arose from the concern several of us had about hunger in our country. More than 40% of Colombians live in poverty and have little to eat, many as the result of being internally displaced by the armed conflicts in many areas.

In 2005, three of us—Emilio, who had been forced to flee from his home in an outlying city by paramilitary forces; Teresa, an elderly woman with a burden for the hungry; and I visited a small project begun by a foreign student in Bogotá. This student would cook 20 meals once a week and go out and share them with the homeless she saw in the street. However, she was leaving the country soon.

We three decided we wanted to continue this ministry. Teresa said, "I

will give \$15 dollars; let's cook some meals." So the next Saturday we made 30 meals, prayed for them, and went to the streets. The next day we shared with the church community what we had done, and by the following Saturday we again had money to cook more meals—plus other people to help.

We have never stopped. Today we make 300 to 400 meals each week and have 20 to 25 volunteers, many of whom have been internally displaced or are unemployed and find in this activity a way of feeling useful again.

As this program developed, our concern about reaching other populations also grew. We wanted to extend the program to other vulnerable communities. So when Carmenza, a woman from church told me she felt strongly about working with children, we decided to begin another ministry to feed children. She had worked for Habitat for Humanity and knew people in a neighborhood that is part of the Bogotá "misery belts." She and I visited that neighborhood, where we found extreme poverty and lots of children critically undernourished.

We decided to rent a house in the neighborhood. We only had enough money for two months' rent, but we felt God was leading us there. Again we began experiencing God's faithfulness: someone gave us some chairs, others tables, pots, plates—everything we needed for the work. In mid-2006 we began with 30 children ages 3-14. Today we have two feeding programs for children that feed 120 on a daily basis. We purchased one of the houses and we continue to feed around 400 homeless people every weekend.

Food is the right of every human being. God is generous and provides enough for everyone. The ministry of Bread and Life is our affirmation that the image of God is in every person and must be protected. Feeding the hungry is not a matter of charity; it's a matter of justice.

Jonathan Stucky is a member of the Mennonite Church of Teusaquillo in Bogotá, Colombia, where his father Peter serves as pastor. This article is adapted from a presentation Jonathan made last year to the Manhattan Mennonite Fellowship in New York City.

Trying to say no

by Ernst Bergen

as told to Phyllis Pellman Good

Paraguay held a presidential election on April 27, 2003. Two days later, the newly elected president, Nicanor Duarte Frutos, invited my wife Lucy and me to his quinta, his weekend house in Atyrá about 30 miles outside of Asunción. We took our two-week-old son, David, with us. On the way we worried that we would be the only guests and that Nicanor would ask us to commit to some position within his government. We were relieved to see lots of cars in the parking lot when we got to the house.

When we walked in, about 30 people were there, so we relaxed. It was an election celebration which the president's wife, Gloria, had organized. She had invited a Christian band to play. We felt comfortable. The event had a Christian, almost Mennonite, atmosphere. Gloria is a member of a Mennonite church, a sister congregation to the church we attend. She and Lucy had learned to know each other by working together on some joint church projects for women.

For four years Ernst Bergen served in the Paraguayan government, first as Minister of Industry and Commerce and later as Minister of Finance.



We tried to sit far away from the president, but he spotted us and asked us to come sit near him. Some time later Nicanor got up, tapped my shoulder, and said, "Come with me, Ernesto." We went out across the lawn into the darkness.

He looked at me and said, "Ernst, I want you to be my Minister of Industry and Commerce (MIC)." I remember replying, "Mr. President, you are totally insane!" Immediately he said, "Yeah, yeah, that's the way you Mennonites are. You are very good at sitting in the bleachers and watching a soccer game. You are willing to criticize what's wrong with the government. You throw rotten oranges at the players who

make mistakes. In fact, you seldom applaud the good moves."

He went on and on with a dramatic critique of the Mennonite function and role in Paraguay. I was fast enough to say, "Mr. President, let's get serious. If you think a Mennonite should take the job, I have another candidate for you. He is better prepared, he speaks English, he has stronger businesses, and he has several brothers in his businesses who can run them while he serves in your administration."

Nicanor replied, "But I want you to be my minister."

I finally persuaded him to invite the guy I suggested. He gave me a week to try to convince my acquaintance. He

On August 15, 2003, Ernst Ferdinand Bergen became Minister of Industry and Commerce in the government of Paraguay. He served at the invitation of Paraguay's President Nicanor Duarte Frutos.

After he held that position for 21 months, Ernst was asked by President Duarte to become the country's Minister of Finance. That post is perhaps the most beleaguered spot within the government. Paraguay is a developing country and has two great needs, among many: to legalize its fiscal practices, and to bring relief and opportunity to its many poor people, including its large farming (campesino) class.

Ernst served in that position from May 19, 2005, until July 30, 2007, the longest tenure of any Finance Minister in the last three governments.

Ernst Bergen's grandparents were German and Polish Mennonite refugees who found a home in the

Paraguayan Chaco as World War I ended. Ernst grew up in Filadelfia, Fernheim, a Mennonite colony situated in the inhospitable wilderness of the Chaco. He had no interest in government or politics. He is a Mennonite and, for reasons of history and theology, shared his people's concerns about being involved in government.

But, at the age of 39, Ernst Bergen became a trusted confidant of President Duarte and reluctantly joined his government. In his two cabinet-level positions, Ernst helped to begin an important financial and economic recovery for the country.

*The article which begins on this page is an accounting of Bergen's struggle to accept the invitation to be part of the Duarte government. It is adapted from a new book, *Jumping Into Empty Space: A Reluctant Mennonite Businessman Serves in Paraguay's Presidential Cabinet*, © by Good Books (www.GoodBooks.com). Used by permission. All rights reserved.*

mentioned that one of his friends knew my candidate well and that he would ask him to try to persuade the guy, too. But he went on to say, "I'm anticipating that your candidate won't accept, so I'd like you to continue to think about serving in my government." After a week, the president called to inform me that my candidate had not accepted—which I already knew. So we started talking again about the possibility of me becoming his minister.

I asked the president for two weeks to think it over. I tried to consider the invitation responsibly. I told myself that I needed five groups to say "Yes" in order for me to agree to take the position.

First, I considered my relationship to God. I asked God to give me internal peace whatever the decision.

Second, I wanted to know what my family thought. What would be best for them? I was especially concerned about Lucy and our children—Daniela, who was then 13, Samuel, who was 10, and David, who was one month old. I knew that a "Yes" would bring a completely different life for our family.

The third group were the businesses I was part of. Certainly, if my businesses went down while I was Minister of Industry and Commerce, my credibility would be damaged.

The fourth group were my friends. If I entered government, I would absolutely need good friends, and I would especially need their support when I faced crises.

The fifth group was my local church. It was of primary importance to me. I considered it crucial to have the blessing and support of my congregation in this decision.

I should clarify why all of this was so jarring—no one had ever been called from the Mennonites in Paraguay to the status of Minister in the national government. This was a cabinet-level appointment.

Mennonites, who had suffered extremely in Russia in the early decades of the 20th century, had looked after their own self-government in the Chaco for years. That was part of the agreement with the government of Paraguay when they settled as refugees in the country's wilderness. For the most part,

Mennonites, especially those with a clear Christian profile, had not been involved in political leadership outside their own colonies. Those few who had participated to some degree faced crises, including relating to their congregations.

Amidst the considerable confusion of those days, I found it helpful to think of these five primary groups as I tried to sort out my decision. I had some friends, I still have them, whom I call any time and say, "Please pray hard for me, because I am not so good at praying. I'm not very effective." These friends are apparently closer to God, so I delegate praying to them. And they do their duty!

This whole strategy within myself was to find peace about not becoming the minister. I was looking for a "No." A few things attracted me to the position, but they were minor. My prevailing attitude was that I was not interested. At that moment, my life was in an optimum situation. I felt at peace, useful in what I was doing.

Now came the answers.

Lucy turned a blank check over to God. She said, "If this comes from God, he will give us the strength to do it. So we must see if this comes from God." I didn't like her answer. I wanted her to say "No!" so I could say, "My wife says, 'No!'"

My parents promised me that if I took the commitment, they would support me, but that I shouldn't take the job if I didn't want to.

My mom was sitting in the yard when I called to tell her and to ask what she and my dad thought. She told Lucy later that the day before I called, she had had a kind of vision, and she isn't the kind of person to have visions! She had a feeling that the Lord said to her, "I want to use your son; I want to take him away from you." She said, "No way." This happened three times. Then she perceived God saying, "Would you oppose my will?" At that point she said, "Okay, take him, but protect him." She was crying, she told Lucy.

I loved the businesses I was in, and I had a special struggle with God concerning them. I knew some businessmen who went into government, and their businesses had gone down. So I told God that I would leave my busi-

nesses if I took the cabinet position. Doing so meant taking both a personal financial risk and a personal risk of integrity. I would be giving up my income and my business reputation.

I had a severe struggle with God, trying to convince God that it wouldn't be responsible for me to step out of my businesses. I was sure this was an important "No." I argued, "Listen, God, I have really begun developing social responsibility in my businesses, and if I step away now, I'll put my employees at risk. They'll lose some of the stability they've begun to realize."

Then I remembered our business slogan, "Growing Together in Order to Serve," and I understood that this might be an opportunity to let that actually happen. In that moment, God showed me what a coward I was. I used a beautiful Christian slogan to work with my employees, but when it was my turn to become an employee, I wasn't interested at all.

I consulted with my group of friends, some of whom were our executives in our businesses. They had a clear understanding of our country, its needs, and its overall situation. Their message to me was, "If you want to do something for the poor of the country, then you should do it." They understood the cost they would bear if I were to do this, so I was impressed that they were encouraging me to take the position. I got a promise of their moral support. But they agreed that things would not be easy.

Although the church community is very crucial to me, I didn't want to ask it for advice until I had cleared up some of my business involvements. Asking the church after I had consulted with others did not indicate that it was of lesser importance to me.

The pastor of our church was my brother, Holly. I asked him how I should get the advice of the congregation. We agreed that I would ask to meet with the board of elders. I invited them all to our house. For my local congregation, this was a new and not-so-easy situation. The leaders had taken the traditional position of being basically critical about involvement in government. So this would be a fascinating meeting.



President Nicanor Duarte (right) confers with Ernst Bergen during a cabinet meeting.

Our congregation had done some theological studying about Christians in politics, and also about how to reach consensus. So we had a bit of background for this moment.

There was another reason why this was not a totally foreign subject for us. The president's wife, Maria Gloria Penayo Solaeche, was a member of our church's Spanish-speaking congregation. The board of elders who met at our home that evening oversaw both congregations—the German-speaking one, to which I belonged, and the Spanish-speaking one, to which Gloria had belonged for a number of years. But despite that, the board didn't feel cornered or squeezed by the First Lady's membership. Our discussion boiled down to this question: Which is more responsible for me—to say "Yes" or to say "No"?

The eight of us in the meeting didn't disagree so much as deliberate.

Is this an opportunity for service? This is an invitation to someone not affiliated with a political party or with the military. We can't give a blank endorsement for political activity, but maybe there are times that it's okay. Public service should always serve others and should not be entered for any other reason.

At the end of the evening, the group recommended that I accept. They wanted to see that good resources were contributed to the new government.

Not long after that, I had another encounter with God about what I should do. I remembered my grandparents coming to Paraguay without anything and the Paraguayan people opening their arms to them. And the local people continued to be supportive and generous to the Mennonites who moved into Paraguay. Over time my people had gained considerable success, both socially and economically. I realized that God had not brought our immigrant people into Paraguay just so they could make a good living. I suddenly understood this clearly from God.

God wasn't asking me to sacrifice or make a specific contribution. God was giving me the privilege and the opportunity to offer back to the Paraguayan people some of the good that I had received, and some of the generosity and hospitality that my people had received. Suddenly I had a change of mood. The invitation to serve in government no longer felt like an obligation to avoid, but a privilege to return some of the good that had come to me from this country and its people.

I made a deal with God. I said, "Okay, this is a privilege, but I want you to help me to be faithful. I want you not to permit me to abandon you at any moment in this process. I want you to help me stay close to you the entire time I'm in the government." And that's what I communicated to my church when I was asked to give my testimony. I said, "I don't know if I will stay days, weeks, months, or years in the government. I am asking God that when I leave, I will have grown closer to him and more faithful to Jesus than I am today. That's the most important part for me."

And then I sat down at my computer and wrote a list of conditions and requests for the president. This, in summary, is what he would have to agree and commit to in order for me to do the job as well as I could:

- God will continue to be my first and ultimate authority.
- The well-being of the population will always guide and inform my decisions ahead of party interests.
- I need the liberty to choose my own team.
- I will need access to the president and his personal counsel, since I don't have political experience.

We set an evening to meet at the president's home. He and I went to one room; Gloria and Lucy to another room. I had my list along, and we went over the items point by point. I wanted to make sure he understood every one. I was prepared for him to tell me how impractical my requests were, or that he would try but couldn't promise to go along with all that I was asking.

When we finished reviewing the list the president said, "In addition to what you have asked, I give you my full personal and political support so that together we might have success." Later on I realized that I hadn't asked for this backup, but it was the most important thing of all. After he agreed unconditionally to do all that I asked, he said, "Well, Ernesto, let's pray to God about this."

He started praying, and I was very impressed by his prayer. In fact, I could not pray at that point, so I thanked him, and we went to be with our wives.



Paraguay
2009

Ten named to lead Assembly Bible studies

Asunción, Paraguay—Ten persons from around the globe will lead morning Bible studies and preach sermons during worship services when MWC's Assembly 15 meets here in July.

Nancy Heisey, current MWC president, will be the keynote speaker at the opening celebration on July 14. The Saturday, July 18, service will feature president-elect, Danisa Ndlovu.

Heisey will address the over-arching Assembly 15 theme, "Come together in the way of Jesus Christ," based on the key assembly biblical text, Philippians 2:1-11. Ndlovu will return to that text for his Saturday night presentation.

Each day during the Assembly will have a morning Bible study and an evening worship service with study leaders and speakers from different regions:

Wednesday: Elfriede Verón, Paraguay; and Nzuzi Mukawa, Congo.

Thursday: Antonio Gonzáles, Spain; and Ditrich Pana, Paraguay.

Friday: Jenny Neme, Colombia; and Elizabeth Soto, Puerto Rico / USA.

Saturday: Chris Marshall, New Zealand; and Danisa Ndlovu, Zimbabwe.

Assembly Gathered will conclude on Sunday morning, July 19, with a mass outdoor rally in Asunción. The National Coordinating Council, com-

posed of representatives from MWC member churches in Paraguay, is planning that service on the theme, "On the way together; first stop—Asunción." Alfred Neufeld from Paraguay will preach.

Bible study leaders and worship service speakers

Nancy Heisey, current MWC president, teaches biblical studies and church history at Eastern Mennonite University, Harrisonburg, Virginia, USA. Nancy grew up in a Brethren in Christ missionary family among the Navajo people and has been a part of the Anabaptist family since her baptism at age 13. Educated at Messiah College, Eastern Mennonite Seminary, and Temple University, Nancy and her husband Paul Longacre have two daughters and three granddaughters.

Elfriede Verón teaches biblical exegesis, hermeneutics, Greek, and New Testament at the *Instituto Bíblico de Asunción*, a regional campus of the *Universidad Evangélica del Paraguay*. She is currently working on a doctorate in education. Elfriede grew up in a Mennonite family in the Chaco in

Paraguay and has studied in Paraguay, Argentina, and the United States. She and her husband, Juan Silverio Verón, a pastor, are the parents of three daughters and a son.

Nzuzi Mukawa is academic dean and a professor at the missiology school in Kinshasa, Congo. He is also associate pastor of Batela Mennonite Brethren Church of Kinshasa. Born and raised in a Mennonite family and church in Kinshasa, Congo, his father was a pastor and his mother a church leader. Nzuzi has studied in the Congo and the United States and has served the Mennonite Brethren church as a youth leader, evangelist, and church planter.

Antonio Gonzáles director of research and publications at *Fundación Xavier Zubiri* in Madrid, Spain. Born and raised in a Roman Catholic home and school in El Salvador, he entered a Jesuit order, intending to become a priest. In 1999 in Guatemala, he discovered and was influenced by Mennonites from the Latin American Anabaptist Seminary and two years later made the difficult decision to leave the Jesuits. He found a home in the Brethren in Christ Church. His



Nancy Heisey
Keynote address
Opening celebration

Tuesday, July 14

Elfriede Verón
Bible study leader
Philippians 2:1-11
Theme: "The way of Jesus Christ"
Wednesday, July 15

Nzuzi Mukawa
Evening speaker
Micah 6:1-8

Wednesday, July 15

Antonio Gonzáles
Bible study leader
John 17:16-26
Theme: "Uniting in Christ"
Thursday, July 16

Ditrich Pana
Evening speaker
Acts 2:46-47

Thursday, July 16

Jenny Neme
Bible study leader
Isaiah 58:1-10
Theme: "Servant of the Lord"
Friday, July 17

studies and address worship services

graduate studies have been in Spain and Germany. He is married and with his wife has felt God's call to evangelism in Spain.

Ditrich Pana this year will become president of *Convención Iglesias Evangélicas Unidas—Enlhet Paraguay*, an office he previously held for nine years. Pana, who speaks six languages, preaches in his mother tongue, Northern Lengua, on his radio program, *La hora evangélica* (Evangelical Hour). He currently works in a dairy product manufacturing plant. Pana is a member of the National Coordinating Council and of the Program Planning Committee for Assembly 15. Ditrich and his wife Mariacita are parents of five and the grandparents of four.

Jenny Neme is director of the Center for Justice, Peace and Nonviolent Action, JUSTAPAZ, a ministry of the Mennonite Church of Colombia. She is a member of the Coalition Against Children Enrolled in Armed Conflict and of the Conscientious Objection Group. She has worked in a security organization for girls at risk of going into the streets and as an assistant at the Legislative

Council of Bogotá. In 1992, she met Mennonites and began attending the Mennonite Church of Ciudad Berna with Ricardo Pinzon, a member there whom she later married. Since 2000 she is part of the Committee for Justice and Peace of the Mennonite Church of Teusaquillo, which works with victims of violence in Colombia. Jenny and Ricardo have one daughter.

Elizabeth Soto, a native of Puerto Rico, currently lives in Lancaster, Pennsylvania, USA. She is coordinator of Field Education at Lancaster Theological Seminary and also works at Lancaster General Hospital. She serves occasionally as a chaplain at Women's & Babies' Hospital. Elizabeth and her husband, Frank Albrecht, served two three-year terms with the Colombia Mennonite Church, where she was pastor for two years at the Armenia Mennonite Christian Peace Community. She also worked with Mennonite Central Committee for 15 years. Elizabeth and Frank have two teenage daughters.

Chris Marshall is associate professor of Christian Studies in the Religious Studies Department at Victoria

University of Wellington, New Zealand. Previously he taught for 19 years at the Tyndale Graduate School of Theology in Auckland. Marshall was involved in the leadership team of the London Mennonite Fellowship and since returning to New Zealand has retained close links with Mennonites in Britain and Australia. Chris and his wife Margaret have two adult sons.

Danisa Ndlovu, MWC vice-president and president-elect, is a pastor, teacher, and bishop of the Brethren in Christ Church in Zimbabwe. He grew up in an area of Zimbabwe now called Sikwambidzi and received his primary and secondary education in Brethren in Christ schools. Danisa has studied in Kenya, South Africa, and the United States. He and his wife Treziah are parents of three children: Thinkgrace, Trustworthy, and Devotion.

Alfred Neufeld is dean of the Faculty of Theology at the *Universidad Evangélica del Paraguay* and an ordained minister in the Concordia Mennonite Brethren congregation in Asunción. He also teaches at the *Instituto Bíblico de Asunción* and has served as a visiting professor at the Theological Seminary Bienenberg in Switzerland. In collaboration with his wife Wilma, Neufeld wrote *What We Believe Together*, the study guide of the seven "Shared Convictions" agreed upon by the global Anabaptist church and adopted by the MWC General Council in 2006. Currently, Neufeld chairs MWC's Faith and Life Commission and the National Coordinating Council for Paraguay 2009. Alfred and Wilma are the parents of four children.



Elizabeth Soto
Evening speaker
Mark 10:35-45
"Living like Christ"
July 17



Chris Marshall
Bible study leader
Ephesians 4:1-6
"Go together in the way of Jesus Christ"
Saturday, July 18



Danisa Ndlovu
Evening speaker
Philippians 2:1-11



Alfred Neufeld
Closing service
Outdoor rally
Sunday, July 19



Paraguay
2009

photo by Lindsey Roeshley



With well wishes from friends on a rainy January 6, Lars Akerson (left) and Jonathan Spicher begin a six-month, 8,500-mile bicycle ride from Harrisonburg, Virginia, USA, to Asunción, Paraguay, to attend the Global Youth Summit and Assembly 15.

Two aim to bicycle 8,500 miles to attend Assembly 15

Harrisonburg, Virginia, USA—Lars Akerson and Jonathan Spicher are well aware of the challenges and risks that are facing them. But they feel confident that they'll persevere "with God's protection and the support of family and friends."

On January 6, Akerson, 22, and Spicher, 20 pointed their 27-speed touring bikes southward with plans that six months and 8,500 miles later they'll arrive in Asunción, Paraguay.

There they plan to attend both the Global Youth Summit (GYS) and MWC's Assembly Gathered.

It's an adventure, certainly, but more than that the pair will seek to raise funds to help more young adults from other countries to attend GYS.

Along the way they also anticipate doing service projects as they are able, in keeping with the GYS theme, "Service: Live the Difference."

Akerson is a 2008 graduate of Eastern Mennonite University, where he majored in mathematics and liberal arts

with a minor in Spanish. Spicher plans to return to EMU this fall as a senior premed major.

They plan to bicycle through North Carolina, Alabama, Louisiana, and Texas in the United States. Then crossing into Mexico, they will go through Guatemala, El Salvador, Honduras, Nicaragua, Costa Rica, Panama, Ecuador, Peru, Bolivia, and, finally, Paraguay.

"Our main concern is the last leg of the trip," Akerson said. "We'll spend much of the last two months biking in elevations up to 14,000 feet above sea level."

"We will be vulnerable, but we're relying on persons' hospitality and intentionally depending on God and others for safety and protection,"

The pair has set up a web site, <http://americas.bikemovement.org>, where they will provide regular updates, personal reflections, stories, and photos.

—Jim Bishop, information services,
Eastern Mennonite University

GYS 2009

Youth from around

For two days prior to MWC's assembly, youth from around the globe will gather in Asunción, Paraguay, for the second Global Youth Summit (GYS). The first, held in 2003 in Bulawayo, Zimbabwe, in connection with Assembly 14, drew more than 200 delegates and participants. GYS planners hope for more than 800 at the July 11 and 12, 2009, event.

According to Elina Ciptadi-Perkins, chair of the planning group, "GYS offers opportunity for intercontinental discussions on faith and life issues relevant to young people, opportunities for community service, and countless occasions for intercultural interaction."

To offer young people an example of what they can expect at GYS 2009, Elina interviewed two alumni of GYS 2003—Jessica Mondal from India and Louise-Anne Porciuncula from the Philippines.

What is GYS to you?

Jessica: GYS is an opportunity for youth to voice their opinions and be heard. It is an opportunity to make new friends and discover things that bind us together across cultural differences.

Louise-Anne: I learned what youth in church had to say about the issues around them. It was also an exciting event where I met young people from around the world.

GYS 2003 taught me how to be more sensitive to the issues in the church, especially those concerning the youth. I also learned that intergenerational dialogue is important, for every church.

What was best about GYS 2003?

Jessica: I liked the continental discussions, because I learned so much from the delegates from other countries within Asia. I also loved being part of the youth choir created a day after GYS was finished. MWC

the globe to discuss issues of faith and life

allowed us to do many things on the stage during the assembly, and that gave me a sense that we were accepted.

But above all, I loved the experience of doing the delegate assignment, because I learned so much about young people and even about my own country!

Louise-Anne: Doing the delegate assignment and discussing issues with delegates from other continents was also eye-opening. It was great to listen to what young people in my church had to say, and then listen to what other young leaders were experiencing in their own countries.

And the worship sessions were simply amazing. Seeing people from all around the world singing to God was very inspiring!

Did GYS help shape you for the roles you are in today?

Jessica: Yes. During GYS I discovered that, although we are different, we are one in the Lord, and this taught me to understand and accept other people with an open mind.

Louise-Anne: It helped boost my confidence, which definitely helps in my work as a teacher

Anything you want to say about GYS 2009?

Jessica: I hope all who attend go home with a sense that they have participated in one of the most significant conferences in their lives. I pray that the theme, "Service: Live the Difference," will become real to them.

Louise-Anne: I hope participants have

an amazing experience and carry that passion back to their home churches. May they be sensitive to God's guidance and just enjoy the experience!



Jessica Mondal
GYS 2003 alumnus
India



Louise-Anne Porciuncula
GYS 2003 alumnus
Philippines

Promoting MWC's Assembly 15 for credit

Twenty theology students in Asunción are promoting Paraguay 2009 at no cost to MWC, thanks to the generosity of the two Mennonite seminaries in Asunción—*Instituto Bíblico de Asunción* (IBA) and *Centro Evangélico Menonita de Teología Asunción* (CEMTA). Both schools combine with the Baptist seminary to form the Faculty of Theology of the *Universidad Evangélica del Paraguay*.

The students have visited 20 Mennonite Spanish-speaking congregations in the rural areas of southeastern Paraguay. Their program, called *Equipo Promocional de Apoyo* (EPA), translates literally as "Promotion Team for Support." Some students receive academic credit for this work, since it is integrated into their course work.

After a steep learning curve of their own about MWC, the students report they found it exciting to explain who Mennonites are, basic Anabaptist beliefs, an outline of the world family of faith. They concluded with a call to get involved in the world assembly.

The students discovered that most people in the congregations they visited had no idea whatsoever of an organization called MWC. Many did not even know

they belonged to a conference. But they quickly warmed to the notion of belonging to a family beyond their own communities.

One pastor strongly encouraged his congregation to participate in the assembly and even held an impromptu offering for MWC.

The students soon discovered that the main stumbling block was cost. The registration fee of approximately \$100 (US) is, for some people, more than a week's wages.

In the second stage of this program, students will visit Mennonite congregations in the greater Asunción area to promote the assembly and to encourage members to open their homes to lodge assembly participants.

Magali Moreno, office manager of the MWC office in Asunción and coordinator of EPA, says, "It is a tremendous blessing to have this group of students willing to help MWC by visiting and promoting the assembly. They get to distant places all over the country, and the congregations rejoice at the invitation to this family gathering."—*Ray Brubacher, Assembly 15 international coordinator*



Paraguay
2009

Who are the Paraguayan hosts for Assembly 15?

by Carmen Epp

Many people in Paraguay are already involved in preparations for the MWC's Assembly 15. Among them are conference leaders, pastors, leaders of Mennonite organizations and institutions, church members, students, business people, and housewives—all drawn from the eight host member conferences.

Sub-committees are planning for food, lodging, transportation, facilities, children and youth programs, service opportunities, Global Church Village, and more.

The eight Mennonite conferences hosting the assembly are all members of MWC. All eight developed as the result of Mennonite immigration into Paraguay in the 1920s, 1930s, and 1940s.

Three of these conference are made up of congregations of German-speaking Mennonite immigrants or their descendants:

- The *Vereinigung der Mennonitengemeinden von Paraguay* (Conference of Mennonite Churches, or General Conference) has 20 congregations with a total of about 7,300 baptized members. The congregations were founded by immigrants from Canada in the 1920s and Russia in the 1930s and 40s.

In Menno colony, founded by immigrants from Canada, there are 15 congregations. There is one in each of the Fernheim, Friesland,

Neuland and Volendam colonies, which were founded by refugees from Russia, and there is one congregation of this conference in Asunción.

- The *Vereinigung der Mennoniten Brüder Gemeinden Paraguays* (Conference of Mennonite Brethren Churches) is made up of seven congregations with just over 1,800 baptized members. These are located in the "Russian-Mennonite" colonies of Fernheim (3 congregations), Friesland, Neuland, Volendam, and one in Asunción.

- The *Evangelische Mennonitische Bruderschaft* (Evangelical Mennonite Brotherhood) consists of one German-speaking mother church in Fernheim colony with five Spanish-speaking annexes (daughter churches) in greater Asunción. They have a total of about 900 members.

The close contact between indigenous groups and immigrant settlers in the Chaco in north-west Paraguay and direct mission work to indigenous groups has resulted in the establishing of three conferences:

- The *Convención de las Iglesias Evangélicas Unidas—Enlhet Paraguay* (Conference of United Enlhet Churches) consists of 14 churches and three annexes in the Chaco, with slightly more than 4,000 baptized members from different ethnic groups (Lengua North, Lengua

South, Toba-Maskoy and Sanapaná).

- The *Convención Evangélica Hermanos Menonitas Enlhet* (Conference of Enlhet Mennonite Brethren Churches) has seven congregations in the Chaco, with approximately 2,000 baptized members who speak Lengua North.

- The *Convención Iglesias Evangélicas Hermanos Menonitas Nivacle* (Conference of Nivacle Mennonite Brethren Churches) consists of nine congregations in the Chaco and about 2,300 baptized members. Their language is Nivacle.

Church-planting efforts of the German-speaking Mennonites and Mennonite Brethren, mainly in the eastern part of Paraguay, resulted in two Spanish-speaking conferences:

- The *Convención Evangélica Menonita*

Paraguaya (Conference of Paraguayan Mennonite Churches) has 25 churches and 22 annexes (developing churches) with approximately 1,350 baptized members.

- The *Convención Evangélica de Iglesias Paraguayas Hermanos Menonitas* (Conference of Paraguayan Mennonite Brethren Churches) is made up of 48 congregations and an estimated 2,500 members.

We as Paraguayan hosts do not need to wait for Assembly 15 itself to experience a diversity of languages and cultures in our global family of faith. It is part of our Paraguayan reality.

Carmen Epp is on the staff of the MWC Asunción office, working on translations and Assembly Scattered planning. This article is adapted from the January-March 2009 issue of the MCC Peace Office newsletter.

In a meeting in 2004, leaders of eight Paraguay Mennonite conferences learn what it means to host an MWC assembly.





Mutahiya Monique extinguishes a fire after burning documents in a reconciliation ceremony among church leaders in Congo. Looking on is Mutahiya Kamba, moderator for the occasion.

Inter-Mennonite gathering in Congo focuses on relationships, self-reliance

Kinshasa, Democratic Republic of Congo—How can the church be self-reliant and responsible for its own health and well being?

This was the dominant theme at the second annual Congolese Inter-Mennonite Forum for Conversation (CIFC), held here in November 2008.

The forum has just completed the second year of a three-year process in which Mennonites from three Congo conferences are reflecting on the kinds of relationships they would like with Mennonites around the world.

The initial day of the forum was a joint conference with members of the Congo Partnership Council, a roundtable which brings together the Congo churches and other Anabaptist-related churches and agencies engaged in the Congo.

Throughout the four-day event there were lively exchanges about who is responsible for the church and what should be the relationship between clergy and laypersons. While participants affirmed there should be inter-dependence and sharing of gifts among churches of different parts of the global family, there was also a consensus that such relationships need to be based on self-reliant and self-supporting churches, congregations, and individuals.

The CIFC process involves 10 reflection groups located in areas of Mennonite concentration throughout the country. Once each year representatives from the groups gather for several days of review, evaluation, and future planning.—*Tim Lind, MWC Church-to-Church Relations Coordinator*

Congo Mennonite Church leaders reconcile in document-burning ceremony

Kinshasa, Democratic Republic of Congo—“May Jesus Christ be praised, who has won the victory over this conflict!”

With those words, Pascal Kulungu, facilitator of a mediation commission, summed up what happened at a reconciliation service held in November 2008.

The ceremony involved three pastors: Adolphe Komuesa, national president of the Mennonite Church in the Congo (CMCo); Fimbo Ganvunze, former national president; and Ambroise Kabeya, CMCo provincial president for East Kasai.

During the ceremony all three pastors committed themselves to understandings they reached with the help of the mediation commission. To dramatize putting an end to the legal and other actions

that had resulted from their differences, a pile of letters and other documents from the four-year-long conflict were brought to the platform in a wheelbarrow and burned. CMCo women leaders then poured sand on the flames to extinguish them. The three pastors knelt for prayers and then embraced.

Meetings, phone calls.

The reconciliation process—which grew out of a February 2008 meeting sponsored by MWC and the national Protestant Ecumenical Council of Congo (ECC)—was led by a mediation commission. The commission’s work included organizing 38 formal meetings, 20 gatherings of smaller groups, 265 individual interviews, 26 letters, and 288

telephone calls, placed any time from 4 a.m. to midnight!

“I am deeply grateful for the wisdom and the persistence of the mediation commission, the engaged participation of ECC leaders, and the grace and humility manifested by the three CMCo leaders during this remarkable event,” said Nancy Heisey, MWC president, who participated in the ceremony.

As a part of the reconciliation process, the three church leaders—together with eight CMCo provincial leaders, the president of the ECC, and the president of MWC—signed a declaration that among other things guaranteed the following commitments:

- That in the future all conflicts will be handled within the church rather

than in civil courts;

- That the decisions of official church bodies and the church constitution will be respected by all;
- That all signatories are firmly committed to unity and peace in the body of Christ and the church and will work toward that end.

Long-term work. ECC and MWC have disbanded the joint mediation commission. Both organizations continue to work with CMCo leaders on longer-term processes aimed at removing root causes of conflict and promoting good governance in the church.

CMCo will hold a national assembly in February 2009 to consider proposed changes to the church constitution in light of these agreements.



Miriam Book (left), pastor of the Salford Mennonite Church, accepts an Alsatian pottery plate from MWC general secretary Larry Miller (center) and associate secretary Pakisa Tshimika. MWC gave the gift as an expression of thanks for the congregation's donating part of its expansion campaign to MWC.

Church's building plans included donation to MWC

Harleysville, Pennsylvania, USA—Salford Mennonite Church recently completed a major remodeling and expansion of its facilities. As part of the plans, the congregation agreed to donate a portion of the campaign goal of \$3.3 million toward church buildings for congregations with fewer resources.

While the congregation still holds a mortgage from the project, members decided it was now time to follow through on their commitment.

The congregation sent \$9,000 to its sister church in Mexico City, Dios Con Nosotros, to assist that church in developing classrooms for children's education. At the same time, Salford Mennonite sent \$24,000 to MWC for its Global Church Sharing Fund.

This fund makes it possible for churches with more resources to share with those that have limited funds.

Ken Byler, chair of Salford's Campaign Committee, states, "It has been exciting to see these funds now made available for churches in developing countries."

Last April, the Salford church experienced this excitement first hand when Larry Miller, MWC general secretary and Pakisa Tshimika, associate general secretary visited the congregation. Also with them was Tom Frank, an MWC communication and marketing consultant.

After receiving a gift of an Alsatian pottery plate from MWC in an expression of appreciation for the contributions, Miriam Book, lead pastor of the congregation, expressed the "wish that other congregations in North America who contemplate building will join us in sharing their abundant resources with our sisters and brothers around the world."

Anabaptist themes prominent at WEA general assembly

Pattaya, Thailand—In response to an invitation from the World Evangelical Alliance (WEA), MWC sent two representatives to the WEA General Assembly held here in October 2008.

The assembly, which takes place every six years, drew some 500 delegates from more than 100 nations.

MWC's representatives were Mulugeta Zewdie, Ethiopia, chair of MWC's Peace Commission; and Alfred Neufeld, Paraguay, chair of the Faith and Life Commission.

"I was impressed by how many typical Anabaptist issues are being wholeheartedly embraced at this moment by the leadership of WEA," said Neufeld at the close of the assembly.

Neufeld and Zewdie,

along with Ron Sider, an Anabaptist leader from the USA, worked together on a peace-building and reconciliation task force.

The task force developed a resolution, adopted by the WEA later in the meeting, which states: "God's mission is the reconciliation of all things through Christ, and he invites us to participate with him in the pursuit of right relationships."

The resolution's vision statement calls for "all evangelical churches and Christians to actively engage in peace building and reconciliation, in obedience to Jesus Christ."

The World Evangelical Alliance, founded in 1846, is the largest and oldest global association of non-Catholic Christian groups.

Mennonites in Asia plan celebrations of 175 years of Christianity in region

Haarlem, the Netherlands—Mennonites in Mandailing, North Sumatra, and Indonesia will celebrate 175 years of Christianity in 2009.

In 1834, a Dutch army chaplain in Pakantan reportedly baptized two Batak boys, who became the first Christians in North Sumatra.

That same year, the Dutch Mennonite Mission opened a mission field there but was unable to find missionaries or finances for the work. So from 1871 till 1928, seven Russian Mennonite missionaries served in this remote area. When the last one, Peter Nachtigal, died in 1928, there were four congregations with about 400 members.

After World War II, Mennonites from Java maintained contacts with the

small congregations. But by 1976 membership had decreased, and the congregations joined the Protestant Christian Church of Angkola (GKPA).

In August 2008, a Dutch Mennonite, Alle Hoekema, and Paulus Hartono, an Indonesian Mennonite, visited the area after Dutch Mennonites promised to help victims of two earthquakes which caused the loss of many lives and considerable damage.

They found that Christians in Sumatra are taking that first baptism 175 years ago as an occasion for a celebration. They are inviting all to attend, particularly descendants of the Mennonite missionaries who served in Mandailing.—from a report by Alle G. Hoekema



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Volume 24 • Number 1

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Courrier / Correo / Courier, published quarterly by Mennonite World Conference in English, Spanish, and French editions, is available free on request. Send all correspondence to C/C/C, MWC, 8 rue du Fossé des Treize, 67000 Strasbourg, France. Email: Strasbourg@mwc-cmm.org.

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The complex reality of Mennonites in Vietnam

The Vietnam Mennonite Church's new legal status—celebrated at a government-approved general assembly in November 2008—does not include all those in Vietnam who have been drawn to the Mennonite family of faith.

In addition to the 6,000-member government-recognized church, a network of unrecognized churches is active in evangelism, children's and youth work, women's ministries, music, and worship.

Although the non-recognized churches enjoy more latitude than previously, several of their members are in prison. These churches recently sent a request to the government, signed by 101 leaders, asking for release of imprisoned members on humanitarian grounds.

Two persons have already been released. The others are reportedly under consideration for release or reduction of sentences.

The separation of Vietnamese Mennonites into recognized and unrecognized groups has emerged out of events over the past five and a half years.

In July 2003, 47 church leaders desiring to identify with the Mennonite church and its confession of faith came together from different house church networks that had no legal status at the time.

Pastor Nguyen Quang Trung was elected president of this uniting church. Pastor Nguyen Hong Quang, leader of one of the larger house church networks, was elected as vice-president and general secretary.

During the following year several members of this newly organized church were imprisoned following a confrontation with security police at the home of Pastor Quang, who was one of those arrested.

While Pastor Quang was still in prison, the government took steps to offer legal status to the Mennonite church. Because of his imprisonment and other circumstances, a number of Pastor Quang's associates chose not to participate in the process. This led to a division into two groups, which has continued to the

present. Both groups claim Mennonite identity.

However, still more recently, some of Pastor Quang's associates have joined the process of legalization and have become part of the legalized church.

The non-recognized Mennonite church continued to operate during Pastor Quang's imprisonment. Pastor Quang was released and is now active in organizing training and education programs for church leaders in his church as well as for other non-recognized evangelical house churches. A Training School for Ministry is based in their central facility in District 2 of Ho Chi Minh City.

Pastor Quang reports 40 persons enrolled in a three-year program, which includes biblical studies, ministry training, Christian living, and civic involvement. More than twice that many, including many presently involved in ministry, attend an annual training session. The most recent session was held in November 2008.

This network of unrecognized churches continues to be very active in evangelism and various kinds of service work. They also have a special commitment to a Christian scouting program.

Both the recognized and the unrecognized groups have locations where they meet for worship and ministry. They are organized into a number of districts around the country and include many minority believers in addition to ethnic Vietnamese.

Both the legally recognized church and the non-recognized church desire prayers of the international community.

Help with the costs of *Courrier - Courier - Correo*

C-C-C is published by Mennonite World Conference on a non-subscription basis. However, readers are invited to contribute approximately \$35 US, \$40 CAD, or 30€ toward the costs of printing and distribution. Those with more are invited to give more on behalf of those in the MWC family who have less.

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Isaiah 58:1-10:

Seeking the world that God wants

by Jenny Neme

This is another in a series introducing the morning Bible studies scheduled for Assembly 15. These introductions, written by the Bible study leaders, are intended not only to prepare those who will attend the assembly but also to unite the global church in a common study of the Scriptures.—Editor

In recent months, different issues affecting people all over the world have caused great alarm. We have heard of natural disasters devastating entire villages and leaving thousands homeless. We have heard of wars and armed conflicts claiming a great many lives. Furthermore, the rampant economic crisis, true for everyone in the world, primarily impacts the poor in poverty-stricken countries.

God's words of request in Isaiah 58:1-10 are relevant to a world in crisis. We need to try to understand the meaning of God's words in these times of great upheaval and suffering.

- *"Shout loudly, do not be quiet"* (verse 1). God urges Isaiah to determine what is happening and to seek responsibility for the injustices suffered by the people. Likewise, God is calling us as believers to speak up and condemn injustices.

This is about "calling a spade a spade" whenever acts are committed which infringe human dignity. As

churches, we are called to reflect on how much time we really spend discussing what is happening in society, why these things occur, and who is responsible.

- *"Make clear to my people their evil doings"* (verse 1b). This is a call for a new awareness. In this day and age, injustices are silenced for various reasons. Silence conceals reality. Society becomes used to pain, or injustice is concealed when threats are involved. Yet God urges Isaiah to become aware of the existence of sin and injustice.

- *True fasting* (verses 6-10). God's invitation to Isaiah implies reviewing the action being used to confront injustice. This reflection applies to us as believers as well. What are we doing as a church to work against the injustices experienced by our people?

The passage says that people usually ask for better laws and better leaders. This is fine. However, as a church, we cannot avoid the responsibility we have of understanding and acting to overcome injustice. We pray and preach the gospel, but to what extent are we sharing our bread with the hungry, offering something to drink to the thirsty, providing support for victims of armed conflicts or natural disasters, giving shelter to the homeless?

These days call us to reflect on the prophetic work of the church—on the

link between announcing the Good News and denouncing injustice. We are invited to act for change and to seek the world that God wants for his people.

The worldwide Anabaptist community would do well to reflect on three questions in light of what is happening around the globe today:

1. How can we make possible a more active and dynamic environment within churches and church organizations that would constantly enable us to reflect on and examine the issues of our times?
2. Are there any experiences in the Anabaptist context that enable us to learn and broaden God's true fasting?
3. Will we as Anabaptists be "the repairers of broken walls and the restorers of dwellings in ruins" (verse 12)? What challenges does doing so pose for us in a world in crisis?

Jenny Neme is director of the Center for Justice, Peace and Nonviolent Action, JUSTAPAZ, a ministry of the Mennonite Church of Colombia. She will lead the Friday, July 17, Bible study at Assembly Gathered.



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