



World Fellowship Sunday 2019

Worship Resources

Prepared by MWC member churches in Latin America & the Caribbean for 20 January 2019 or at any time convenient for your congregation.

Theme and texts

a. Theme:
Justice on the Journey: Migration and the Anabaptist-Mennonite Story

This theme connects with the MWC Renewal 2027 theme for 2019, and with the MWC Peace Sunday 2018 theme.

b. Why this theme was chosen:

Nearly 500 years ago, Anabaptists were persecuted because they claimed primary citizenship in God's kingdom. Anabaptists recently celebrated 100 years of presence in Latin America and the Caribbean. First came missionaries, then large-scale migrations into the region, and then mission by the newly-founded churches.

Latin America is experiencing a large displacement crisis, where organized crime, violence and poverty are forcing thousands to flee their homes. Migrants, including Anabaptists, face hardship as they seek safety. Our churches are investing in missional outreach to these vulnerable people.

c. Biblical texts:

Leviticus 19:33–34
Luke 4:18–21
1 Peter 2:11–12

d. Relationship between the theme and the biblical texts:

Anabaptist Christians today are called to follow Jesus in his ministry of justice-making. This includes welcoming migrants. In Latin America, Anabaptist churches are composed of both those who have been migrants, and those who welcome migrants. It is not easy to be or have been displaced, nor is it easy to welcome these strangers. God is faithful in the midst of these stories of uprootedness and change.

2

Prayer Requests:

a. Prayers from MWC members in Latin America & the Caribbean

- Pray that local churches commit to action in support of migrants in their communities during this year.
- Pray for Honduras, El Salvador, Nicaragua, Mexico, Colombia and Venezuela, the countries from which the greatest number of people are trying to escape from violence or leaving in search of economic opportunity.
- Pray for the countries receiving Latin American migrants, such as Brazil, Ecuador, Peru, Colombia, Mexico, the USA and Canada.

b. Suggestions on how to pray from Latin American culture

- In some traditions, for congregational prayer, every person stands and prays out loud at the same time. They end with a song or by reciting the Lord's Prayer together.
- Sometimes the worship leader divides the people into small groups and distributes a different prayer request to each group.



Galen Lehman

c. Prayers from MWC:

- Give thanks that Anabaptists around the world are united in faith in God's kingdom across language and cultural differences.
- Pray that Anabaptist churches all over the world will be responsive to the needs of newcomers in their communities.
- Give thanks for the growing networks in the MWC family: mission, service, health, peace and education.
- Pray that MWC members who are suffering persecution and hardship may have the courage and hope to persevere.



3

Song Suggestions

Lyrics and music available online:

- Cristo te necesita para amar
- Te pido la paz
- Tenemos esperanza
- Enviado soy de Dios
- Somos el Pueblo de Dios
- Great is the Faithfulness/Grande es tu fidelidad

From the MWC International Songbook 2015:

- #3 Hamba Nathi/Come walk with us
- #11 Sizohamba Naye/We will walk with God
- #27 Canción para resistir
- #48 Total praise

4

Symbolic worship activities or visual resources

- Decorate the front of your church with items typical of the places from where migrants come to your country. Include the places from where church members have migrated recently or long ago.
- Latin cultures value spending significant worship time in songs of praise, testimonies and prayer. See Additional Resources for more suggestions.

Asociación Iglesias Cristianas Mennonitas de Costa Rica



Iglesias Evangélicas Mennonitas de Oriente

5

Offering

- In many churches, in addition to the cash offering, people are invited to bring food supplies to share with those in need.
- In Venezuela, where cash is very scarce, people contribute their offering by mobile bank transfers.
- MWC invites congregations to take a special offering for our global Anabaptist church community on World Fellowship Sunday. One way to think about this offering is to invite every member to contribute the cost of at least one lunch in their community in order to support the networks and resources in our global faith community of MWC. This humble expression of thankfulness can support the ongoing ministry of God through MWC.

6

Additional resources

www.mwc-cmm.org/wfs

a. Additional resources in this package

- Suggested liturgies for gathering and for benediction (p. 3)
- Poems and prayers (p. 4)
- Biblical background for sermon content (p. 7)
- Latin American testimonies for sermon content (p. 13)
- Latin American cultural suggestions (p. 19)
- Ideas for study time or Sunday school (p. 20)
- Additional resources (p. 21)

b. Additional resources available online:

- Pictures (including all used in this package)
- Videos

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Suggested liturgies for gathering and benediction

Gathering

- We welcome each one of you to this gathering, where we all have the same nationality as children and heirs in the kingdom of God. We are grateful for God's love and mercy to all, no matter where we come from. Everyone is welcome to this place, and to feel at home.
- Jesus is our example, who was a migrant as a child, excluded and killed as an adult. As followers of Jesus Christ, we are invited to understand that we are pilgrims, citizens of another kingdom, not of this world. Many of us have also been migrants, or have ancestors who have been migrants. As a church, we are called to love, empathize and to act, lest we, too, exclude others by our own indifference.
- We are gathered to worship in gratitude for God's faithfulness.
- We are gathered to affirm our commitment to being an open-door church that facilitates the welcome to those who are our sisters and brothers no matter where they come from. A church that contributes to a change of attitude and mentality in our society.
- Lord Jesus, today you call us to welcome the strangers and the sojourners who come to our land, escaping from oppression, poverty, persecution, violence and war. Like your disciples, we too are filled with fear, doubt, even suspicion. We build barriers in our hearts and in our minds. Help us with your grace to banish fear from our hearts, that we can welcome those who are refugees with joy and generosity while responding to their needs.



A time of prayer at the 2017 Cono Sur (Southern Cone) gathering of Mennonite churches in South America.
Photo: Henk Stenvers.

Benediction

- Let us go now from this place of worship into the world as citizens of the kingdom of God. Go proclaiming the peace of Christ which passes all understanding. Go caring for the sojourner in our land and in the world.
- May the source of our inspiration be Christ Jesus, who in his love of the poorest and most needy demonstrated welcome and inclusion. May everything we do be done as if we are doing it to Jesus, and because we are one in Jesus.
- Go in peace, knowing that God is faithful in everything.



Poems and prayers

Responsive Prayer

Text: Luke 4:18-21 (NRSV)

Leader: ¹⁸ The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor;

All: Forgive us, Lord, for the times our actions have not been consistent with the message of Good News to the most vulnerable.

Leader: He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives,

All: Forgive us, Lord, for the times we have not looked after the needy, the marginalized and the exiled due to our lack of love and lack of commitment to your Word.

Leader: and recovery of sight to the blind,

All: Forgive us, Lord, for the times our works have not been motivated by your love.

Leader: to let the oppressed go free,

All: Forgive us, Lord, for the times we have not stood on the side of your justice and truth on behalf of the exiled and the outcasts.



Celebrating World Fellowship Sunday 2018 at Ibagué Mennonite Church in Colombia. Photo: José Antonio Vaca Bello.

Leader: ¹⁹ to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.

All: Help us, Lord, to put your Word into action, taking the Good News to all who suffer in a foreign land.

Leader: ²⁰ And he rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant, and sat down. The eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on him.

All: Lord, we commit to ensuring that the preaching of your Word becomes a reality in our daily life, through the witness of our actions on behalf of those who suffer displacement due to violence and social injustice.

Leader: ²¹ Then he began to say to them, "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing."

All: Lord, we commit to taking the Good News to all who suffer the pain and loss of displacement. Hallelujah, yours is the Glory and Honor forever and ever! Amen.

(Luz Amanda Valencia, pastor of the Ibagué Mennonite Church in Colombia)



Young Anabaptists participate in a workshop at the 2017 JUAMCA (Juventud Anabautista Menonita Centro Americana – Central American Mennonite youth conference) event. Photo: Oscar Suárez.



Poem: A new day will come

Include a different reader for each paragraph of the following poem, with each reader lighting their own candle from one Christ candle at the front.

A day will come
in which living will not be a heavy burden
but rather a wonderful experience of abundance
for all people,
no matter their origins, color, country or religion;
a day when freedom will not be a dream
but rather a happy reality for all people;
in which equality will not be called into question
irrespective of people’s culture, social status, sex
and wealth,
nor will it require affirmative action;
a day in which fraternity
will be the best expression of citizenship,
dignity and respect.

A day will come
in which human rights
will not need defenders or laws,
because all of us will carry them in our bones;
a day in which justice
will bloom in every nook and cranny
and we will be able to see in every direction;
a day in which there will be no more refugee
boats,
nor Lampedusas*, nor refugee camps,
or barriers, or walls, or deaths
on the seas, in the deserts or the far-flung cor-
ners of our countries;
a day in which all the borders will disappear
and human beings can move freely in the world,
from here to there, as we do in our own home.

A day will come
in which we can live together harmoniously,
move freely,
dialogue,
respect one another,
share,
critique,

help one another,
enrich one another,
sing,
dream,
work,
choose where to be,
and choose to be different.

A day will come in which
on all the walls and posters,
in all the magazines, newspapers, radios and
televisions,
society will feel new in every way;
a day in which we worship, and love is
respected,
because it means that it has taken root
in each and every one of our hearts.

May this day come soon, Lord!
We have already imagined it!

(Florentino Ulibarri, published by ediciones feadulta.com, <http://www.feadulta.com/es/buscadoravanzado/item/4404-llegara-un-nuevo-dia.html>)

*A Lampedusa is a cross made from the wood of refugee boats washed up on the shores of an Italian island in the Mediterranean Sea, first made by Francesco Tuccio as a show of solidarity with refugees fleeing Eritrea and Somalia and which he offered to survivors as a symbol of hope (<https://cafod.org.uk/News/International-news/Lampedusa-crosses-refugees>).



Members of Conferencia Evangélica Mennonita, Inc. in Dominican Republic send greetings to MWC. Photo: Mariano Ramírez.



Prayer of the migrant

My Lord,

Here I am on the path heading north.

I bring with me everything and nothing.

I have my roots, which have already been taken out of the land you lent to me. I leave my homeland, my friends, my family.

I leave my people and my culture.

I don't have much left: I only bring my backpack, but I carry it full of faith, of dreams, of hope.

I also bring a heart full of sadness. One day I wish to return, back to my loved ones. I don't know if I will arrive to the land of my dreams.

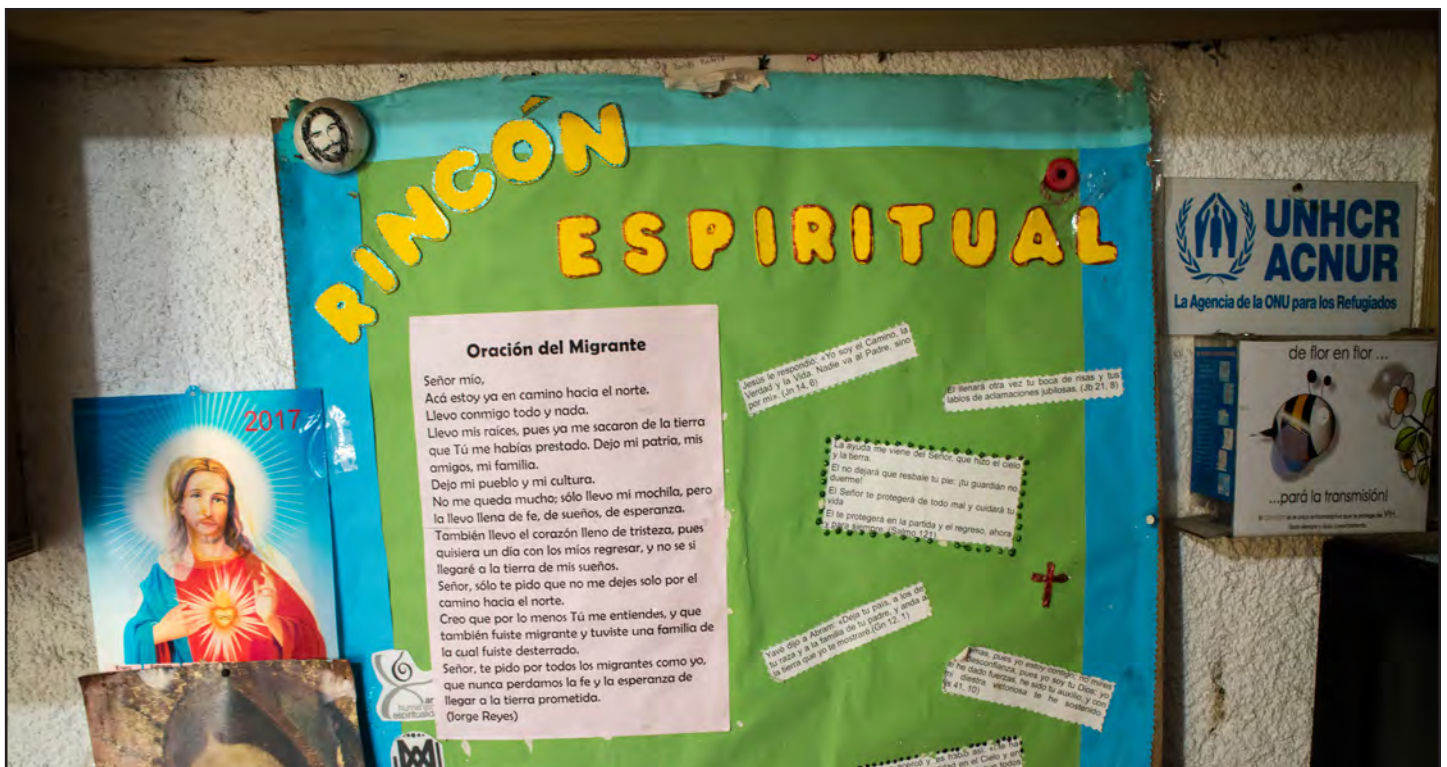
Lord, I only ask that you do not leave me alone on this path heading north.

I believe that at least you understand me. You were also a migrant and had a family from which you were exiled.

Lord, I ask for all the migrants like myself that we will never lose the faith and the hope of arriving to the promised land.

(Signed Jorge Reyes, this prayer was posted on the "spiritual corner" of a bulletin board at Casa Tochan, a migrant shelter for young men in Mexico City.)

Anna Vogt, photographer, <http://www.mcclaca.org/moving-together/>



The "spiritual corner" of a bulletin board at Casa Tochan, a migrant shelter for young men in Mexico City. Photo: Anna Vogt.



Biblical background for sermon content

General Biblical Context: What to say about the foreigner?

There are 3 different Hebrew words used for stranger or sojourner in the Old Testament and each one is translated differently:

- “*Ger*” is often translated as sojourner, as a person from another land who lives among the Israelites. It is used 92 times in the Old Testament, with clear instructions that the sojourner is to be treated equally to citizens in the land. This is the word that is used in Leviticus 19, along with many other instructions for the Israelites to care for the sojourner, the widows and the orphans.
- “*Toshab*” is often translated as foreigner, and is used only 15 times in the Old Testament. These foreigners are not to be taken advantage of but to be treated similarly to the sojourners.
- “*Nakar*” is often translated as “stranger,” and occurs 35 times in the Old Testament, usually with instructions that the Israelites should not have anything to do with the strange gods of other lands and other peoples. This includes the references in Ezra 10 where the Israelites are instructed to send away foreign wives with strange gods.

The New Testament Greek uses two different words for stranger or sojourner, but they do not carry as much difference in meaning as the Hebrew words.

- “*Paroikos*” is used just 4 times in the New Testament, and includes anyone without citizenship. This is the word used in 1 Peter 2.
- “*Zenos*” is used 14 times in the New Testament, and generally refers to strangers or sojourners, people who live in the land but come from somewhere else.



Iglesia Menonita José Maria Caro in Chile celebrated World Fellowship Sunday 2018 by washing each other's feet as Jesus did. Photo: Iglesia Menonita José Maria Caro.

In the Old Testament, the instructions were clear for the Israelites to treat very well the sojourners and foreigners who lived among them. However, at points in the history of that period, the Israelites were instructed to deal severely with those who occupied lands promised to them or who would lead them to follow other gods, just as there was severe judgment and consequences for the Israelites themselves who followed other gods.

It is in the New Testament, in Jesus Christ, that we gain a fuller understanding of the extent of God's mercy. We are called to practice love, even to our enemies (Matthew 5:43–48), and in love to attend to those in need (Matthew 25:31–40) – even as Jesus himself did. Luke's reporting on Jesus' call to ministry in Luke 4 shows Jesus' emphasis on liberation from oppression of many kinds. Peter reminds us that as Christians we are to now live as foreigners in the world, with a powerful testimony to share with the world. The testimony of our Latin American sisters and brothers illustrates how, when the church reaches out to migrants with acts of love, it is a way of “bringing good news” to them (Luke 4:18), giving



them the opportunity to meet Jesus, and find renewed hope and direction for their lives.

Background to the passages:

Leviticus 19 is a chapter with a collection of different laws, many with specific applications of what it is like to live out the Ten Commandments. The requirement that appears in verses 33 and 34 to treat the foreigner or sojourner who lives among the Israelites with the same respect and fairness as the Israelites themselves is one that is repeated many times throughout the Old Testament. See Exodus 22:21; Leviticus 23:22; Deuteronomy 24:19–21; Jeremiah 22:3; Zechariah 7:10; Malachi 3:5. A significant aspect of this requirement to love the foreigners among them was the reminder that they too had once experienced what it was like to be foreigners. This can be a helpful reminder to those of us who now are called to welcome foreigners who migrate to our lands.

Luke 4:18–21. Many theologians identify the book of Luke as the Gospel that spells out the “preferential option for the poor.” The message is directed towards vulnerable groups, establishing their dignity, freeing them, including them in God’s ministry to the world. (See the first three chapters of Luke. There, the shepherds, Joseph, Mary as a pregnant unmarried woman, and two



Children from Faith Mennonite Church, Spanish Town, Jamaica, participate in morning prayers to begin their day at the Church Preschool. Photo: Galen Lehman.

elderly people in the temple, are mentioned. All of them represent some form of disadvantage in a society where the differences were very marked). In this context, Luke begins the ministry of Jesus with him reading from the book of Isaiah (61:1–2): announcing that the kingdom of God will put an end to diabolical oppression. In the context of this book (and perhaps the whole New Testament), this is very concrete and at the same time spiritual, as well as economic, social, cultural, emotional and physical. The year of the Lord’s favour, or grace, refers to Jubilee: the year of justice, when even slaves and strangers are put on an equal footing in the people of God. The year of Jubilee is to be both liberating and missional (See Leviticus 25). The ministry of the Messiah is holistic, concerned not only with individual salvation but also salvation for interpersonal and social relationships that is made manifest through justice for all. It is God’s *shalom*. It is utopia made real. It is in this sense that Jesus says: “Today the scripture has been fulfilled” (Luke 4:21), because this Jubilee is only possible under the lordship of Christ.

1 Peter 2:11–12. Peter’s letters were written while always keeping displaced people in mind: the brothers and sisters of the diaspora of the early church, those who have lost their



Church members of the Chato Chico congregation in Peru send greetings to Mennonite World Conference. Photo: Henk Stenvers.



Iglesia Anabautista Menonita de Buenos Aires in Argentina celebrating World Fellowship Sunday 2018.
Photo: Iglesia Anabautista Menonita de Buenos Aires.

homeland, the poor, those who have no one to count on other than a community of faith. In this sense, in 1 Peter 2:9–10, the condition of rootlessness is dignified through loving titles such as: a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God’s own people. These phrases proclaim the mighty acts of him who called people out of darkness into his marvellous light. On the one hand, this is a text about the unique family of God, living under the lordship of one King, regardless of condition or nationality or geography. At the same time, this is a text that honours the status of being displaced, persecuted and humiliated. These people are the children of God, his priests, people who belong to another nation, another kingdom, a state that trumps any geopolitical, social or cultural status. Yet in spite of this honouring, they should not forget that they are foreigners, pilgrims “passing through this world” (verses 11 and 12). In other words, they are defenseless and abandon themselves to the Lord for the great work of reconciliation. They have broken with idolatry to the empire and they wait upon the Lord who is full of good works.

The primary idea that runs through both the Old Testament and the New Testament is that God’s people are to remember that God cared for them and saved them when they were helpless. As a result God’s people should care for the helpless

people around them, since God’s people know well what it is like to be oppressed and mistreated. God’s people are foreigners and strangers in the world, and for that exact reason God’s people are called to open themselves and to be hospitable to foreigners.

- As God’s people we are to live as pilgrims, foreigners and sojourners in the land, because our primary citizenship is that of belonging to the kingdom of God and not to any nation-state.
- Because we know what it is like to be foreigners and sojourners and to be cared for by God, we are called upon to care for those who live as foreigners and sojourners among us, and to treat them very well.
- Many Latin American Anabaptist churches were begun by sojourners and migrants 25 or 50 or 75 years ago. And many who initially became a part of Anabaptist congregations broke with the prevailing religious culture, thus in some ways experiencing being foreign in their own lands. All of them knew the challenges of being foreigners in the land, and also the blessing of God’s faithfulness. Now they are being called on to welcome other migrants to their lands.



Young Anabaptists participate in a workshop at the 2017 JUAMCA (Juventud Anabautista Menonita Centro Americana – Central American Mennonite youth conference) event.
Photo: Oscar Suárez.



- See Exodus 23:9; Deuteronomy 10:18-19; Deuteronomy 24:21-22; Ephesians 2:12, 19.

Luke 4:18–21 and 1 Peter 2:9–10 deepen our understanding of what it means to welcome and love the sojourner and foreigner in our midst. In the example of Jesus, it means “to bring good news to the poor. to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, and to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favour.” And 1 Peter picks up on this theme, saying that we are called to give witness to the mighty acts of God, calling all people from darkness into God’s marvelous light. Our welcoming love to the sojourner and migrant is an active love, which begins by being sensitive to the needs of the other. Our Anabaptist churches and agencies around the world offer many examples of this active love, sharing the good news of the Gospel, bringing education, health care, trauma healing, development, working for peace, practicing nonviolence and hospitality, development and emergency relief. These acts of love are offered to the strangers and marginalized in our midst and to people in other lands. We can give thanks for these manifestations of the Spirit of the Lord upon us (Luke 4:18) and affirm our calling to witness to God’s Spirit at work (1 Peter 2:9).



Celebrating World Fellowship Sunday 2018 in Venezuela.
Photo: Iglesias Evangélicas Menonitas de Oriente.

Today’s context:

There is much hardship in the experience of leaving one’s home to arrive in a new land.

- “You only leave home when home is the mouth of a shark.... You only leave home when home won’t let you stay,” from the poem *Home* by Warsan Shire.
- Home becomes the mouth of a shark, for example, when crime and internal warfare make it too dangerous to stay; when the economic policies and practices of national and foreign governments, corporations and transnational banking institutions make it too hard to make a decent living; when religious, social or political intolerance make it too difficult to live by conscience; and when race and social class become causes of exclusion.
- Many who leave home reach a new country or a new region of the country itself in conditions of suffering (hunger and misery) in the poorest social strata. Being a foreigner under these conditions is depressing since it is being in a new place or country without being invited, without family or work ties, in extreme conditions that lead the human being to feel the abandonment, mistreatment, solitude and



A worship service at MBG Filadelfia, part of Vereinigung der Mennoniten Brüder Gemeinden Paraguays.
Photo: Delbert Warkentin.



in some cases emotional, psychological and physical (sexual) violence.

- Language can be a difficulty, but even when the language is the same, local people always recognize that one is not from there by the accent or by cultural sayings, resulting in discrimination and rejection.
- For the foreigner under these conditions, impatience becomes part of the baggage the foreigner carries, because of the anguish and vulnerability. All this makes the foreigner feel abandoned, insecure and not welcomed.
- Eating becomes a struggle because of the lack of resources. Being at the mercy of others makes one feel helpless. That portion of the biblical text “because I was hungry” (Matthew 25:35) becomes vital. It is necessary that those who know Jesus Christ turn their faith into life for the foreigner. Going from door to door begging for bread, water, clothing; begging for a place where the body and spirit might rest – this leads to despair.
- Arriving in a country because of socio-political violence at home means the foreigners are at risk of becoming victims of those who enslave the foreigner through payments in order

to survive. Many women who are in extreme conditions sometimes see their only option to supply the basic needs of their family is to subject themselves to male abuse by turning to prostitution.

- Many migrants – who struggle with hunger, feeling powerless in the midst of violence, and the inability to improve conditions for their family – come to despair.

There is much evidence of God’s faithfulness evidenced in the resilience, courage, generosity and faith of those who migrate and those who welcome them.

- At the same time, migrants display amazing resilience, giving testimony to the truth of the psalmist’s words in Psalm 23:4 and echoed in Isaiah 40:31. The experience of arriving in a new land and being cared for on arrival becomes a gift of grace and mercy from God.
- Inspiration and hope come from the Body of Christ. There is the blessing of being sustained by the prayers of those who have stayed behind and of those who receive the migrants, a blessing of the assurance of God’s faithfulness.
- Migrants find hope that sustains them in the assurance of God’s presence and through the prayers, love and practical assistance in the places where they arrive. There is much blessing provided by Anabaptist sisters and brothers who welcome migrants, with church projects funded by their local congregations, and by sisters and brothers Anabaptist-Mennonite mission and service agencies.
- There is the blessing provided by migrants who arrive and bring their gifts to share with people and churches in their new homes. Our churches have confirmed the truth stated in Hebrews 13:2, that in showing hospitality to strangers, they have indeed received the visit of angels.



**The gathered congregations worship with exuberance at the Jamaica Mennonite Church annual conference.
Photo: Galen Lehman.**



Questions for reflection:

- Luke 4 is Jesus’ summary of what his ministry will be. Is our ministry like that of Jesus? What does serving in the manner of Jesus look like? What does it look like to do it in our own way?
- How does our local congregation and our church denomination demonstrate our commitment as a church to follow Jesus? What moves us to compassion and action to respond to the pain of our neighbours who are migrants?
- Hebrews 13:2 reminds us that in welcoming strangers, we may very well be receiving angels. How has your church experienced this?
- We often focus on the migrants and on the refugees when they land in our country and on our doorstep. What could we do to also learn and teach about the economic structures, political ideologies and actions that create the conditions which force people to migrate or reject them when they seek to migrate? In what ways can we contribute to necessary change?
- Our Latin American sisters and brothers note that there are people within our own societies that are excluded, living as “foreigner” within their own land. How are we relating to them, welcoming them and bringing them God’s good news?
- In what ways are we, the people of God, like migrants? How does this impact our view of God and our faith? How might this inform our thoughts about how we are to treat the foreigner among us?
- It may very well be that to attend to a stranger – be it a migrant from abroad or a needy and marginalized person from our own community – takes out of our “comfort zone” and may expose us to criticism from fellow citizens.



**Singing and worshipping together at the 2017 Cono Sur (Southern Cone) gathering of Mennonite churches in South America.
Photo: Henk Stenvers.**

How have you as a church helped each other in this?

- Is it possible that discrimination exists within our faith family?
- How might your church become informed by organizations, Christian or not, that work to protect the rights of migrants? How can you support them?

A round of prayers on behalf of displaced people and migrants could be said at the end of the sermon. At the same time, give thanks for God’s faithfulness to them and to us, and also for the manifestation of God’s care through the many service activities of our churches and institutions. Then end with our call as the people of God to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favour.

–Compiled by Rodrigo Pedroza (former YABs Committe member for Latin America, Mexico); Pablo Stucky (MWC regional representative, Latin America – Andean region, Colombia); with contributions from Arli Klassen (MWC regional representative coordinator, Canada).



Latin American testimonies for sermon content

From foreigner to family

Sometimes people are excluded and marginalized, “strangers or foreigners” in their own land. Society has its “foreigners,” people it puts aside, regarding them as strangers who do not conform to social norms. The gospel approaches these people and invites them to participate. The gospel invites the church to treat them with dignity, hospitality and with attention. Marginalization annuls them. The church gives dignity that affirms their identity as beloved. The church invites them to enter the community of the kingdom of God. The church moves them from that foreign place to being at home.

— *Comunidad Cristiana Menonita El Paraíso, Caracas, Venezuela*

“We have learned...”

The problems in Venezuela affect the economy, relationships, health services, crime, insecurity, public services, corruption, politics, malnutrition and inflation. We decided to come to Colombia to improve the living conditions of our families, look for new opportunities and have a change in

our lives. On arrival, we suffered a heavy emotional blow when we saw other Venezuelans living in a state of begging. It was hard to compare the economy of Colombia to Venezuela: we suffered a lot when we saw the amount of food in supermarkets, stores, marketplaces and warehouses, food that is not available just across the border in our own country.

Thank God, we are very grateful to the people who welcomed us in their country. We have received no assistance from the state. We did not intentionally decide to come to the church. Rather, we think it was God who brought us here, since we did not know that the Mennonite church existed. Now Carlos has been baptized and is a member of the church. We have known God here in this church. Every day, we receive a word through the pastor and the children’s ministry. We have received unconditional support, a lot of love, and accompaniment every day from Riohacha Mennonite Church.

In this church, we have learned to listen to the Word of God through devotions, Sunday school and prayer vigils, and we have learned to live in community, to help each other. We have learned to accept our change of life. We have learned to value people, our family, our friends, those who help us every day. We thank God first for all the support received in this place, to the pastor for teaching the Word, to the Sunday school teacher for allowing us to help out in the work with the children. We have learned a lot about caring for people who are elderly, which is the ministry of the Mennonite church in Riohacha. We have learned about brotherhood and unity. We have learned to love God. For this reason, we thank the Mennonite church for taking us in and giving us the opportunity to continue growing spiritually.

— *Venezuelan migrants welcomed to the Iglesia Menonita de Riohacha, Colombia*



Volunteers from the Mennonite Church in Caracas, Venezuela, distributing food at a hospital.
Photo: Red de Misiones Menonita de Venezuela.



Mennonite Church in Isla Margarita, Venezuela distributing arepas (corn pancakes) to people in an improvised housing settlement. Photo: Red de Misiones Menonita de Venezuela.

A place to grow

Andres came to the Iglesia Menonita Teusaquillo in Bogotá with an angry and fearful heart, sensing that at any moment those who killed his brother and father would appear on the streets of Bogotá. By feeling welcome and recognized for who he was, Andres began to open himself up to the church community. With opportunity to explore new understandings, he let go of hate and found dignity in rebuilding his own life. Andres' testimony demonstrates the importance of a welcoming church that is willing to listen to people's stories and provide a place to grow in community and in faith.

— Iglesia Menonita Teusaquillo, Bogotá, Colombia

Love God through people

Waves of Mennonites living in Russia/Ukraine fled in the 1920s and again in the 1940s. Hardships from the two world wars and the Communist government drove many Mennonites to seek a better life elsewhere. Many families were forcibly displaced. Fathers and brothers were taken away or killed. This is a testimony of one person who experienced this displacement and migration:

I was born in Russia on August 30, 1924. I was four years old when I had to leave Russia. ... I

came to Paraguay with my parents in 1927. ... It was very, very difficult at the beginning. ... My father was a teacher in Paraguay and I started to attend the school. In 1952 my husband, the teacher Fritz Kliewer, my children and I moved from Paraguay to Nuevo Witmarsum, Brazil. My husband was the person in charge of education (in our Mennonite community). Three and a half years later, after returning from a Mennonite conference in Paraguay, he suffered a heart attack and died. His dream had always been to edit a magazine, which he achieved when he started to publish *Bibel und Pflug*. ... I was married again in 1967 to a farmer named David Nikkel. After eight and a half years of married life my new husband died of a stroke. He was a very devout man. ... He told me before he died, very peacefully: "...Love God. When can we love God? Only through other persons. We can't subject or apprehend God, we can only love Him by means of our neighbours. Tonight I'm thinking about all the persons I have known, and I believe I have loved them. In this way I have been able to love God."

— Testimony from Melita Legiehn Nikkel on Mennonite migration experience

(Excerpt by Jaime Prieto Valladares from Mission and Migration: Global Mennonite History Series/Latin America, Good Books, 2010, page 62.)



A worship service of a congregation of Conferencia Menonita de México. Photo: David Wiebe.



The Quito Mennonite Church Project with Refugee People offers workshops on peace education and values that are directed towards refugee and Ecuadorian children. Photo: Daniela Sánchez.

From fear to joy

The Iglesia Cristiana Menonita de Quito in Ecuador has a project to welcome and support refugees. Many of them are from Colombia, fleeing situations of danger to their lives, but they also come from other countries as well. Mennonite Central Committee provides financial support for the project, while Mennonite Mission Network, the Central Plains Mennonite Conference (USA) and Iglesia Cristiana Menonita de Colombia (IMCOL-Colombian Mennonite Church) provide ongoing accompaniment and support to Iglesia Cristiana Menonita de Quito.

These are two testimonies:

Surrender to life and its flow

Clara arrived in Ecuador with her family from Tumaco, an area of Colombia marked by violence. In Tumaco, she obtained a teaching position at a school and found for a time the tranquility and economic stability she wanted. But soon she and her family were the target of threats and extortion by an armed group, because they had not given the required “contribution.” The armed group wanted to kidnap her children and recruit them for the guerrilla movement. Clara was threatened with death. The International Red Cross helped

Clara and her family to flee Colombia and come to Tulcán, then to Quito.

Because all of her places of safety and welfare had collapsed, she was now on the streets, asking for help to survive. None of her many academic degrees served her at this time. She stayed locked up in her house with her children and companion because she felt that she was still being persecuted, that Ecuador was not a safe place either. Her son, a brilliant young man in school, did not accept an opportunity to study because he was afraid that the group from Colombia would find him and kill him.

How could Clara live with so much fear? How could she make life continue to flow in the midst of all this pain?

That is the task the church is working on with Clara and her family. Clara is in a therapeutic process that helps her untangle the emotional knots and accept her new reality, not with resentment and resignation, but from the surrender that allows her to align with life and its flow. Clara and her family participate faithfully in the church, because they have felt loved and welcomed. The church’s project has given them all the emergency aid they have needed.

A day of Pentecost

José, a refugee, a poet and politician, arrived at our door from Puerto Tejada with his entire family. They had to escape from Colombia because José was an activist for the rights of people who are Afro-Colombian. He also denounced the environmental contamination that several companies were causing to the water sources of their city. Both the paramilitaries and the owners of these transnationals began to persecute him. José’s family received several death threats, felt that their lives were in danger, and decided to leave for Ecuador to protect their lives.



Although in Colombia he and his family had been part of a Pentecostal church, José began to attend our Mennonite church. He came with all the spontaneity and elation of our Pentecostal brothers: he prayed and sang aloud, and he made a little more “noise” than we are used to in our congregation. At the beginning we said “what hubbub this is,” as on the day of Pentecost in Acts 2, but later, this joy has become a blessing that spreads and that gladdens our meetings. José has so few material things to live on, but he has plenty of gratitude, joy, encouragement, which he hands out generously every Sunday to each sister and brother. José sells his books of poems, and this income allows him to survive in Ecuador and continue to share his life and testimony of faith and trust despite all the adversities that have come into his life.

—*Iglesia Cristiana Menonita de Quito, Ecuador*

The song remains: Hope in Honduran gang territory

For more than 20 years, gangs clashed in Chamelcón neighbourhood in San Pedro Sula, Honduras. The main street served as an invisible border, marking off the territory of the two dominant gangs. Even for people who weren't in gangs, it was dangerous to cross the street.



**Pastor José Fernández of the Mennonite church
Vida en Abundancia in Honduras. Photo: Oscar Suárez.**

This neighbourhood is home to Vida en Abundancia, a Mennonite church. In 2008, the congregation felt called to start a primary school to shield the children from the influence of gangs. However, the violence continued. Police and gangs fought in front of the school and even once inside the school before classes began. In 2013, threats to the security of the teachers and students was so great that the school had to close. The church accompanied its 38 students in the process of changing to schools outside the community.

In spite of all the fear in the community and reduced size of their own congregation, the church was determined to spread hope. Unable to influence the school anymore, the remaining members went beyond the safety of the church building to carry out activities in all corners of the neighbourhood, making “God-music” stronger than the sound of weapons.

The leader of the gang that controlled the territory heard the song and was drawn to seek out the pastor. With some trepidation, pastor José Fernández presented himself as the one the gang leader was looking for. “No one touches this pastor,” the gang leader instructed his followers. That moment strengthened the church’s resolve. Little by little, young people began to arrive at the church fleeing the horror of that world of violence and resentment.

Hope began to grow again. People began to return. Last year, the school reopened. Adolescents being developed in a mission program also contribute to the community.

The little church that remained steadfast in spite of hardship is flourishing, trumpeting out a song of hope to drown out the sound of violence.

—*As told to Oscar Suárez, YABs committee member for Latin America*



A ministry of inclusive hospitality

A Scripture: “Now this was the sin of your sister Sodom: She and her daughters were arrogant, overfed and unconcerned; they did not help the poor and needy” (Ezekiel 16:49, NIV).

A story: A refugee complained bitterly to God because they had not let him in a church and God responded: “Don’t feel bad. They don’t let me in either.”

Using this Biblical passage and short story as reference points, I write this simple note from my own personal testimony to contrast these texts.

Colombia, where I currently live, is the only country in the Americas today that still lives with the disastrous effects of an internal conflict that has lasted 60 years. These include the tragic number of more than 200,000 violent deaths, 82,000 missing people, 5,000,000 internally displaced people, and more than 6,000,000 victims (figures taken from the National Center for Historical Memory, a government entity charged with keeping all the information related to the country’s law on victims and land restitution). Although it has been possible to reach a peace agreement between the ex-guerrilla group the FARC and the national government, the challenge that remains is implementing it, as well as preparing to receive nearly 1,000,000 Venezuelan refugees from our neighboring country that is going through a socio-political crisis.

Threats and uncertainty

After living for many years in Bogotá, in 1986, my wife, our children and I moved to a small town called San Jacinto, in the northern part of the country in the Caribbean region.

There we acquired a farm, house, agricultural machinery and vehicles, and with my wife and four small sons, we lived from my law practice, agriculture and journalism. We supported the social and grassroots work of the peasants in the region.



**Venezuelan migrants welcomed to the Iglesia Menonita de Riohacha, Colombia.
Photo: Iglesia Menonita de Riohacha.**

Due to my work with the campesinos (local small farmers), I was accused of being an ideologue of the guerrilla movement. The local police commander, and later a paramilitary group called “Death to Kidnappers” (referring to the guerrillas), began to persecute me and threaten me on a regular basis.

In March 1988, the Colombian National Army and the police joined forces to raid our home. The death threats increased. Our friends avoided us. The banks wouldn’t serve us. Living there became unbearable. Because of the death threats, we found ourselves forced to move to the nearby city of Cartagena, losing everything we had acquired with our labour.

There in Cartagena, we received hospitality from one of my uncles, who opened his home to us. In his patio, with support from the Mennonite church, we built a dwelling to reside in while the storm passed.

But the situation of a displaced person, whether displaced internally or internationally, is quite difficult. You are leaving behind your territory, friends, family members, job, belongings, culture, contacts and good name. Additionally, you enter an unknown territory, which is threatening and inhospitable; a world full of prejudice and stigmas.



From being considered an upright person, suddenly, you are suspected of terrorism and criminality which creates great fear among your neighbours. You enter into an environment of fear, not only due to your displacement, but because all the people surrounding you – your friends, relatives and churches – all fear that they may be mistaken for or pointed out as the enemy and declared “military objectives,” threatened and hurt.

The fear impregnated in others is what most affects the person who is displaced as it paralyzes those people and hinders hospitality and solidarity. Many church people want to be hospitable, but they have families, small children, debts and mortgages, and are afraid of endangering their lives and threatening the stability of those who depend on them. They say that if they were alone, they would give their lives to help, but in these conditions, it would be irresponsible of them and unfair to their children.

In July 1989, we arrived once again to Bogotá; beaten down, but not defeated. A displaced and threatened couple with four children. We arrived in a city affected by terrorism, full of the living dead begging at every intersection, boys and girls abandoned in the streets, the threat of crime; surrounded by areas of racist and discriminatory poverty.

The central government had used the excuse of war to suppress most civil liberties and ordered raids and arbitrary detentions each day in the city and in the country. Distrust and fear reigned in the city. The ancient Chinese strategist Sun Tzu said “War is the art of deceit,” to which American politician Hiram Johnson famously added, “where truth is the first victim.” This makes it difficult to believe in someone and even believe in God.

Shelter and welcome

However, today my family and I are alive thanks to decisive action by a group of people belonging to the Teusaquillo (Bogotá) Mennonite Church, headed by pastor Peter Stucky. Although they had young children and people under their responsibility, they overcame fear of stigmatization and of being declared supporters of the guerrillas, and organized themselves to offer inclusive hospitality that sheltered us and gave us enough energy to awaken our power of resilience and recover.

It is when we practice these acts of hospitality that the damnation of Sodom is broken and the beautiful phrase of Jesus becomes reality: “For I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me.... Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did for me” (Matthew 25:35–40, NRSV).

But it did not end there with the assistance to one family who were members of the church. The concept of inclusive hospitality expanded. No one was excluded and there was always a place for the stranger, the traveller and those who suffer. Inclusive hospitality opened the doors of the church and created an entire ecclesiastical ministry to support hundreds of displaced people who arrived fleeing their lands after losing their belongings and their hope. “The refugee [or displaced person] is the living messenger of misfortune, bringing with him the image, smell and



In Costa Rica they celebrated World Fellowship Sunday 2018 with a joint worship service in Sarapiquí.
Photo: Asociación Iglesias Cristianas Menonitas de Costa Rica.



Worship service at MBG Concordia, part of Vereinigung der Mennoniten Brüder Gemeinden Paraguays. Photo: Manuel Eckert.

to the city of Quito, Ecuador, which receives hundreds of Colombians who flee the country seeking refuge.

To create, initiate and maintain a ministry such as this, open to any person regardless of where they come from, what they believe, what political ideology they have, whether their persecutors are guerrillas or paramilitaries means a great risk. Sometimes, members of the congregation stop attending. However, we are convinced of the coherence between the mandate of Jesus and the right of asylum. The community is strengthened and new leaders emerge open to hospitality.

It is gratifying to be a historic, Anabaptist peace church where no refugee will protest to God for being denied entry, and like Job we can say, “I have never turned away a stranger but have opened my doors to everyone” (Job 31:32, NLT).

—Ricardo Esquivia Ballestas is a lawyer and a member of the Colombian Mennonite Church, with more than 45 years of experience in peacebuilding from a community and ecclesial base. He is director of Sembrandopaz (Planting Seeds of Peace) and works with returned communities in the Colombian Caribbean.

A version of this article first appeared in Courier/Correo/Courrier April 2016.

taste of the tragedy of war, genocide, slaughter and abandonment of their home because of violence.” (Javier Jurado, member of the Arjai Association, an initiative of philosophy students).

For many years, this ministry of the Teusaquillo Mennonite Church has functioned in Bogotá. Hundreds of people have been assisted and comforted. From there, dozens of displaced people have been sponsored by the Canadian Mennonite church and today enjoy a new and tranquil life in that country. This ministry also expanded

Latin American cultural suggestions

- In many Latin congregations at one point during a worship song the whole congregation is invited to get up and leave their seats to go and greet each other during the song. There are songs that talk about the community of faith that are used for this. This is a beautiful moment in the worship service when everyone gets up and walks around, hugging each other and shaking hands. Often before this song begins visitors to the congregation are introduced so that everyone can go welcome them during the greeting song.
- Sometimes for the Scripture reading in the worship service the pastor or worship leader reads one verse from the passage, and then the congregation reads aloud the next verse from their Bibles (or from a screen). They continue alternating like this as they read through the entire passage.
- In many congregations there is time during each Sunday worship service to share testimonies. Anyone who wants to from the congregation is invited to share how they have seen God at work in the past week or any prayer requests they have. It is encouraging to hear people share answers to prayer and small and big ways that they see the Lord present in their lives.



Ideas for study time and Sunday school

- Ask people to research and share their own family migration history and identify the signs of God's faithfulness in their family story.
- Ask people who have moved elsewhere to serve and share the gospel to tell their story.
- Invite people to think about how many people from other countries they have met during the last few days on the street, on the bus or at their workplaces, and to share a bit about those encounters.
- Invite a person from another country to share their experience as a migrant about what has helped them to adjust to the local culture. What are the biggest challenges they face?
- Design a space inside the church to represent the long and painful path that migrant people have to go through to find safety. Create a path full of obstacles, such as notices, photographs, newspapers, footprints, old shoes, large bags/suitcases, baby blankets to show challenges of migration.



Members of Conferencia Peruana Hermanos Menonitas cook a meal for a church event. Photo: Henk Stenvers.

- Post questions along the path. At the end, invite people to share their reflections and action commitments. Write on small cards to pin to the wall/bulletin board, or on a large paper fixed to the wall.
- Use photos and charts to show the immensity and complexity of the migrant experience. This includes not only people moving from other lands, but also those who are marginalized and excluded within our own societies.
- Prepare a typical food or snack item from the countries of origin of migrated families (recent or distant past) in your community. Invite all worship participants to contribute toward MWC the cost of the food.



Deolal Ramdial teaches summer Bible school to kids from the Charlieville Mennonite Church community in Trinidad. Photo: Galen Lehman



Additional resources

“The Stunning Scale of Latin America’s Migration Crisis”, *Americas Quarterly*, June 20, 2018
<http://www.americasquarterly.org/content/stunning-scale-latin-americas-migration-crisis>
(English)

“Moving Together” Pictures and Stories, online photo essay from June 2018 by MCC Latin America and the Caribbean
<http://www.mcclaca.org/moving-together/>
(English)

“Prayers for Peace in the World”, 2017 worship resource by MCC Canada
<https://mcccanada.ca/learn/what/peace/peace-sunday-2017>
(English)

“Migration”, collected by MCC Latin America and the Caribbean
<http://www.mcclaca.org/category/advocacy/migration/>
(English and Spanish)

“World Refugee Day worship liturgy, 2018 worship resource, by Brian Dyck of MCC Canada
https://mcccanada.ca/sites/mcccanada.ca/files/media/common/documents/world_refugee_day_worship_resource_2018.pdf
(English)

“In Search of Mercy,” *The Mennonite*, by Anna Vogt, 22 May 2018
<https://themennonite.org/feature/in-search-of-mercy/>
(English)

“Home,” poem by Warsan Shire
http://www.care.org/sites/default/files/lesson_1_home-poem-by-warsan-shire.pdf
(accessed 30 July 2018)
(English)



The MWC Deacons delegation shares a meal with members of Conferencia Peruana Hermanos Menonitas. Photo: Henk Stenvers.

MWC Peace Sunday 2018 worship resource
<https://mwc-cmm.org/peacesunday>
(English, Spanish and French)

Renewal 2027, MWC commemoration initiative webpage
<https://mwc-cmm.org/renewal2027>
(English, Spanish and French)

Mission and Migration: Global Mennonite History Series: Latin America, by Jaime Prieto Valladares, Good Books, 2010
(English and Spanish)
<https://mwc-cmm.org/article/global-mennonite-history-series>

