



# The Vine

September 2015

*Becoming a community through which God's healing and hope can flow to the world*

## **First Mennonite Church of Champaign-Urbana**



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Compiled by: Amber Anderson

The following letter was sent from the Inter-church Dialog for Peace to the major participants in the Colombia peace process. There are many hopeful signs in Colombia as the 40<sup>th</sup> cycle of peace talks began in Havana, Cuba on August 20, 2015. To date only the FARC (Revolutionary Armed Forces of Columbia) has been directly involved with the peace talks but the second, smaller guerrilla group, the National Liberation Army (ELN), is at least exploring the option of joining the peace talks. This letter was signed by 46 religious leaders in Colombia. There were many Lutheran pastors including Pastor Sergio Talero from El Divino Redentor and Pastor Israel Martínez (former pastor of El Divino Redentor), who is listed as the pastor San Marcos in Bucaramanga. Jenny Neme, Director of Justapaz, also signed the letter. I talked to her at Mennonite World Conference and she reported that Pastor Israel was living next door to El Divino Redentor and is doing well. Among the 84 international signees was César García, General Secretary of Mennonite World Conference. We are asked to keep this process in our prayers.

August 24, 2015  
Bogotá, Colombia

Juan Manuel Santos  
President of Colombia

Humberto de la Calle  
Head Colombian Negotiator in Havana

Sergio Jaramillo  
Colombian High Commissioner for Peace

Frank Pearl

Commissioner for Exploratory Dialogues  
with the National Liberation Army – ELN  
Timoleón Jiménez  
Commander of the Revolutionary Armed  
Forces of Colombia – FARC-EP

Luciano Marín

Head Negotiator of the Revolutionary Armed  
Forces of Colombia – FARC-EP

Nicolás Rodríguez

Commander of the National Liberation Ar  
my – ELN

### **Regarding: One month of the FARC-EP's declaration of a unilateral ceasefire and the Colombian government's order to de-escalate the armed conflict.**

Greetings,

We have completed a month (July 20 to August 20) since the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC-EP) declared a unilateral ceasefire and since the Colombian government ordered a de-escalation of the armed conflict. During this time we, along with the Frente Amplio por la Paz, Constituyentes por la Paz, Red de Universidades por la Paz and Comunidades Construyendo por la Paz (CONPAZ) have verified these commitments after having been publicly invited to do so by the FARC-EP with the knowledge of the Colombian government.

During these four weeks, in the midst of uncertainty, we can state that it is still essential to work towards a solution based on peace and justice to this armed conflict.



It has been a month of hope for the exploratory talks between the Colombian government and the National Liberation Army (ELN) that we greeted in our July 6 letter expressing our hope that these negotiations will soon begin. We await an announcement from ELN commander Nicolás Rodríguez – according to media reports only hours away – and we are encouraged by discreet, yet optimistic, overtones from the Colombian government.

As we finished writing this letter we heard of the FARC-EP’s acknowledgement of their responsibility in assassinating Genaro García, a community leader from the Community Councils of the Pacific (COMPA). Even as we raise our voice to decry this irreparable damage and loss of life we see hope in the fact that that the FARC-EP guerrilla group has accepted their responsibility for this regrettable and painful act. We interpret their acceptance of responsibility as being at the core of hoping for peace with justice. We believe such hope to be present in all who are committed to this peace process, including both parties to the armed conflict.

We also find this same hope in the many lessons learned during this month of verifying the ceasefire and de-escalation in coalition with other civil society organizations who seek to build peace.

We are encouraged by the strength of the gospel that states: “Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God,” and “Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.” God desires peace and justice.

We are joyful to be able to present a positive verification report. Both the FARC-EP and the Colombian Armed Forces largely complied with their commitments and moved from bellicose language to that of co-existence and peacebuilding. This has been, as the Conflict Analysis Resource Center (CERAC) has already stated, the least violent month of the past forty years of armed conflict in Colombia.

It seems we have started to live with less anxiety in relation to the armed conflict. For this reason we appreciate the FARC-EP’s decision to extend their unilateral ceasefire and we urge the Colombian government to extend their de-escalation beyond not carrying out aerial bombardments to also include restricting land-based operations. In other words, we encourage the Colombian government to deepen the de-escalation

and reciprocate the FARC-EP’s proposals towards a bilateral ceasefire and bilateral cessation of hostilities.

Maximizing military gains seems to be giving way to a decreasing hostility that saves lives of women, men, girls and boys as well as saving nature from the ravages of war. Thus, one civilian’s, five guerrillas’ and two soldiers’ deaths, though few in comparison to previous months, are extremely grievous seen from the perspective of our faith, of an ethics of life. These deaths could have been avoided. Their blood, just as that of Abel, shed by Cain, calls out to heaven.

With the strength of our Christian faith, in memory our ancestors, in communion with the faithful of our churches and with our sisters and brothers from congregations and communities of faith, we lift up our cry calling for a bilateral ceasefire leading to a bilateral cessation of hostilities. You can count on our prayers, our effort and our energy for the dialogues to flow towards that goal.

In our observation during this month, along with other organizations that joined in the verification, we looked to the different regions and communities of Colombia and noted with concern eight events carried out by armed groups – paramilitaries or neoparamilitaries – that killed five people, including two children.

We want to draw attention to the presence of these paramilitary armed groups as they could destroy the agreements reached through the goodwill of the two sides in Havana or the dialogues with the ELN.

Our society still remembers the violent deaths of dear sisters and brothers, committed to their ideals, who believed in previous peace agreements and participated in political activities only to be assassinated. If this paramilitary threat is not handled we fear that the cycle of violence could simply continue.

We reiterate our call to the Colombian government and the ELN guerrilla to start official dialogues so that the end of the armed conflict might be whole.

We restate our commitment to do all that is possible to achieve peace with justice, according to the will of God who desires that righteousness and peace kiss and that swords be beaten into plowshares.

Cordially yours,  
Interchurch Dialog for Peace – DiPaz





# A Year in Bangladesh

Katherine Crosby

As most of you know, I recently completed a one year SALT term with MCC in Bangladesh. For most of the year, I lived about 130 km north of Bangladesh's capital city of Dhaka in the city of Mymensingh. My official assignment there was to work with one of MCC's partners called Shanti Mitra, which means "friends of peace" and is an organization that works in the community to merge the transformation of individuals and society toward what they call "justpeace." A lot of the work they do revolves around teaching workshops to university students about topics like family relationships, mediation, how to recognize and handle emotions, knowing our value, or taking care of the environment. Many of these university students are then trained to teach similar classes in several nearby primary schools. One great thing about Shanti Mitra is what I like to call their ethos of creativity: that people learn most deeply through the creative process, whether that involves song, dance, poetry, art, or connecting our own stories to what we know and learn. I was able to be a part of an art project where we created plaster masks in the form of different expressions: fear, courage, hope, despair, joy, sorrow, anger, love, hatred. I found it rather profound the way a mask literally built on my face in the shape of anger or joy could, if I listened, reveal the people or places that elicited anger or joy in me. My specific responsibilities at Shanti Mitra were largely administrative: writing a newsletter (in English) for donors and visitors, teaching English classes to the staff, writing reports for the website, and eventually creating a manual of the games we used in the workshops. These workshops were rightly conducted in Bangla, so my role in them was mostly that of an observer. I was learning the language and slowly mastering, "What did you eat for lunch?" but was in no position to easily have conversations about peace and conflict.

I would be remiss if all I told you about was my "assignment," which provided a framework for many of my experiences, but said nothing of the other learning I did. MCC would be glad for me to tell you that this is, of course, part of the purpose of SALT: to be challenged and changed by living and working alongside people with a different reality than our own. To have a fuller awareness of what it means to live as a global citizen and, I would emphatically add, as a global citizen of the empire. To embrace difference and to gain in ourselves a greater capacity for compassion, resilience, and love. I did gain these things in beautiful ways, and I'm grateful for them. But I'll be honest: it's pretty messy to be in the middle of it.

I continue to sort through some of these other realities I witnessed:

Climate change caused largely by wealthy, far away nations that destroys this precious earth along with many Bangladeshi homes and livelihoods.

International power disparities and the imperialism that accompanies them, not just through the empire-building of colonization, but also through the empires that rule now via economics, politics, ecology, and often even development and aid.

The economic and physical violence inflicted on the masses while political elites trade dialogue for abstractions and power.

And, the violence and discrimination committed against women in Bangladesh and around the world.





Right now I'm somewhere in between Joan Chittister's blessing that, "God [may] give you the grace of a burst of holy anger," and...what I think is just anger, especially in regards to this last one. I'm encouraged by the hospitality of Bangladeshi women, grasping my arm and leading me into their homes, even if it is to insist that I eat an unfathomable amount of white rice.

I thought I had at least a pretty good intellectual grasp on many of the realities above before going, but I was often struck by the disparity between the "ideas" I cling to in pseudo-awareness and the reality of my more visceral understanding of the world. I tell you about each of them (if briefly) in the hope that it might continually deepen our understanding of power and how we engage the inconsistencies of its use.

In her book, *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*, Annie Dillard follows Ezekiel to the suggestion that we must go "up into the gaps." "The gaps," she says, "are the

spirit's one home, the altitudes and latitudes so dazzlingly spare and clean that the spirit can discover itself for the first time like a once-blind man unbound. The gaps are the cliffs in the rock where you cower to see the back parts of God; they are the fissures between mountains and cells the wind lances through, the icy narrowing fiords splitting the cliffs of mystery." I think perhaps she means that the gaps are where both God and self are found. She goes on, though, to talk about what happens when we return from these gaps: "...and you'll come back, for you will come back, transformed in a way you may not have bargained for - dribbling and crazed." I think this year was one of those gaps for me. Sometimes upon returning I feel a little dribbling and crazed, but I understand a little more, to quote Dillard again, that "The universe was not made in jest but in solemn incomprehensible earnest. By a power that is unfathomably secret, and holy, and fleet. There is nothing to be done about it, but ignore it, or see. And then you walk fearlessly, eating what you must, growing wherever you can..."

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## Men's Retreat 2015 Kindling the Gift of God, Prayer: its Problems and Potential October 16-18

Come spend a weekend away from it all at Camp Friedenswald's 2015 Men's Retreat. Experience the beauty of the natural world while catching up with old friends and making new ones. **Alan Kreider** of Elkhart, IN will speak on the power and problems of prayer, and **Hal Hess** of Cincinnati, OH will lead us in music. Activities include primitive fire-building, nature hikes, an outdoor service project and the annual Friedenswald Mennothon. Come to relax, be challenged and have a great time! Cost is \$150 and men 25 and under register for free. See you there.

For more information call [269-476-9744](tel:269-476-9744).

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**REMINDER:** with the start of school, it's also time to start using the church libraries again. Check out a book!

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