

### Colombian Congregations: Healing, Restoring, and Peacebuilding

The Church Coordination for Psychosocial Action (CEAS—an acronym for the name in Spanish) began as an initiative of the Mennonite, Mennonite Brethren, and Brethren in Christ churches of Colombia. The intention was to provide a training resource for Anabaptist churches and organizations wishing to respond to the spiritual, psychological, and social needs of internal refugees fleeing from the war in their home communities. When people fled to the large cities, some came to our churches. They came with all the strengths and resources that life had given them, but also with a load of sadness, loss of community, questions about how a loving God could have allowed this to happen to them, a longing for justice, and the fear—often justified—that the threat they were fleeing would resurface in the city.

We observed that quite independently of any training CEAS might offer local congregations on how to provide pastoral and social care, refugees began to attend church services, became involved in church activities, and exercised new strength to carry on. They were able to forgive but also to work actively for a just peace, and they found new meaning and life in Jesus Christ. This led us to embark on an interview project with those living in forced displacement and actively participating in an Anabaptist church. The interviews aimed to understand the qualities of church life that allowed people to experience healing (spiritual, psychological, social, and even physical) in the midst of enormous loss and trauma, and while having to start life in a new setting and, in many ways, a new culture.

Understanding that healing is necessary for both individuals and society to move forward after a long period of armed conflict, we structured the interviews around a model of healing presented by psychiatrist Judith Herman<sup>7</sup> and adapted by Carolyn Yoder<sup>8</sup> for peacebuilding contexts. Herman describes how violence and trauma affect people's sense of safety and control over their lives, their trust in basic relationships and social networks, and their sense of meaning, value, and purpose. Conversely, the resilience and agency of people are aided by safety, order, and the ability to act with efficacy; by reconnecting with relationships and social networks; and by reaffirming meaning, recognition, and valuing themselves. In peacebuilding contexts,

---

<sup>7</sup> Judith Herman, *Trauma and Recovery* (New York: Basic Books, 1997).

<sup>8</sup> Carolyn Yoder, *The Little Book of Trauma Healing* (Intercourse, PA: Good Books, 2005).

healing opens up possibilities for reconciliation and re-engaging society—necessary steps for people to build anew.

Our analysis of the interviews demonstrates that people are able to experience healing in contexts of forced displacement when given the opportunity to be part of an open and accepting community. Many churches in Colombia are those face-to-face communities that have served as refuge for victims of the armed conflict. People's responses illustrated the amazing simplicity of ways in which the local congregation can be an avenue for the healing Spirit of God, and illustrated how the congregation becomes the body through which people encounter Christ. What is more, although the interviews did not inquire into the impact on pre-existing church life, informal observation indicated that the experience was transformative for church members as well.

In interpreting our findings, we found a biblical lens to be very helpful. In the biblical narrative, we see the anguish and longing for God when the Israelites are driven from their home (Lamentations 3, Psalms 79, 137) and when Job has lost everything (Job 2, 19); faith and resilience (Psalms 23, 91); hope in the prophets' messages (Micah 4:1-4); and Jesus' coming to incarnate God's love (John 1:1-14, Ephesians 2:17-19), and to charge the church to carry on the work of love and reconciliation (Ephesians 1:23, 2 Corinthians 5:18-20).

Being a welcoming and healing community is intrinsic to the nature and calling of the church. We recognized the value of putting our findings in a form that would enable us to share them with the churches, and identified thirteen characteristics that can be cultivated and strengthened among all members:

1. welcoming
2. providing a safe space
3. expressing sincere interest in the other
4. recognizing and giving opportunity for people to express their pain
5. providing biblical orientation for understanding and responding to what has happened

6. helping to recognize God's presence in difficult circumstances of life
7. encouraging service in behalf of others
8. offering opportunity for people to orient and find strength for their lives
9. inviting people to consider their values
10. accompanying acts of courage
11. encouraging people to consider their life plan
12. instilling courage and hope, and
13. fostering engagement, relationships and a sense of community.

We organized the characteristics into a simple study guide, one page per characteristic, in which we present an excerpt of a refugee's testimony, a related biblical text, and an activity to deepen the learning experience. We then published the guide and shared it with local congregations.

What we have found is that using the guide has made possible personal healing and community strengthening, not only for refugees but for many others for whom experiencing their own sorrow and strength is equally healing and inspiring. The implication is that this material is helping churches address profound needs common to our human condition while enhancing their ability to receive people whose life experience has brought particular pain, and, by doing so, helping them find hope and vision for fullness of life.

*Nathan Toews serves with Mennonite Central Committee in Bolivia. Paul Stucky is Coordinator of the Church Coordination for Psychosocial Action (CEAS) in Bogota, Colombia.*

### **Constructing the Path of Reconciliation in Colombia**

As a majority population in Colombia, and historically victims as well as caregivers and agents of life, women in Colombia have developed their own