

**Colombia:**  
**Living in the Security of God's Presence**

**March 3 – March 9, 2010**

**Lenten Study 3**

## Colombia Factsheet

- Colombia is the northern-most country of South America, with ports on both the Pacific Ocean and the Caribbean Sea. It is rich in natural resources, with an abundance of oil, natural gas, coal, nickel, and emeralds. Its agricultural riches include coffee and flowers, and there are vast forest and river resources.
- Colombia has been subjected to a long-running conflict between leftist guerrillas and government forces. Dissident right-wing paramilitary squads, drug trafficking gangs and common criminals also contribute to the complex unrest that has plagued the South American nation. Some argue that the root of the problem is the struggle to control land – 30% of the land is in the control of right-wing, paramilitary drug traffickers.
- According to UN figures, Colombia ranks second for countries worst affected by internal displacement.
- In a population of 43 million, 64% of the population live below the poverty line. Poverty and large scale internal displacement, due to conflict, threaten many Colombians' food security. Threats to rural populations by illegal armed groups increasingly restrict movement and limit access to markets and agricultural land, and consequently food and other goods.
- Colombia is home to 4 million internally displaced persons, the second highest in the world (after Sudan). The highest rate of displacement since 1985 occurred in the last four months of 2008, despite negotiations between the government and the paramilitary groups. More than 270,000 people were forced from their homes because of the violence, meaning an average of 1,500 people fled daily. Since 2009, turf wars over coca crops in the border region of Narino have intensified and many thousands of people have been displaced, some across the border to Ecuador. Internal displacement overwhelms existing services; both locals and displaced people suffer.
- Colombia has a high number of killings – some 2,500 to 3,000 a year; four decades of armed conflict; and grave violations of humanitarian law. Human Rights Watch estimates that 200,000 people were unlawfully killed between 1998 and 2003. Drug-related violence is the second largest cause of death, after cancer. Approximately 97 percent of the crimes go unpunished.
- There is an inequitable distribution of wealth with two-thirds of the population living in poverty, while a small portion has an exorbitant amount of wealth. These economic injustices exacerbate the conflict.
- Church members are also among the 4 million people who have been forced to flee. A recent Mennonite publication, "A Prophetic Call," compiled by MCC partner organizations Justapaz and the Commission for Restoration, Life and Peace documents more than 300 violations against church leaders in 2007. Other community activists – indigenous leaders, leaders of displaced people, human rights and other activists are also targeted – in 2002, 184 trade unionists were assassinated.

**Sources:** *World Food Programme, Medecins Sans Frontieres; BBC, Human Rights Watch, Justice for Colombia*

*A 2010 Lenten Study compiled by the World Council of Churches, the World Student Christian Federation and the World YWCA <http://women.overcomingviolence.org>.*

## Psalm 91 (NRSV)

<sup>1</sup>You who live in the shelter of the Most High,  
who abide in the shadow of the Almighty,

<sup>2</sup>will say to the Lord, 'My refuge and my fortress;  
my God, in whom I trust.'

<sup>3</sup>For he will deliver you from the snare of the fowler  
and from the deadly pestilence;

<sup>4</sup>he will cover you with his pinions,  
and under his wings you will find refuge;  
his faithfulness is a shield and buckler.

<sup>5</sup>You will not fear the terror of the night,  
or the arrow that flies by day,

<sup>6</sup>or the pestilence that stalks in darkness,  
or the destruction that wastes at noonday.

<sup>7</sup>A thousand may fall at your side,  
ten thousand at your right hand,  
but it will not come near you.

<sup>8</sup>You will only look with your eyes  
and see the punishment of the wicked.

<sup>9</sup>Because you have made the Lord your refuge,  
the Most High your dwelling-place,

<sup>10</sup>no evil shall befall you,  
no scourge come near your tent.

<sup>11</sup>For he will command his angels concerning you  
to guard you in all your ways.

<sup>12</sup>On their hands they will bear you up,  
so that you will not dash your foot against a stone.

<sup>13</sup>You will tread on the lion and the adder,  
the young lion and the serpent you will trample under foot.

<sup>14</sup>Those who love me, I will deliver;  
I will protect those who know my name.

<sup>15</sup>When they call to me, I will answer them;  
I will be with them in trouble,  
I will rescue them and honour them.

<sup>16</sup>With long life I will satisfy them,  
and show them my salvation.

## **Living in the Security of God's Protection**

One of the worries of many people and especially of our governments is how to live protected from the different threats and dangers that exist today in our world.

I personally believe that there are many reasons to live being worried. When we read or see the news, we realize that threats of war, terror, sickness, and economic crisis are abundant.

Our governments and very wealthy people spend a lot of money on arms and vigilance in order to have security and protection, but the question is: can arms and vigilance give us security? And how can we live in security and protected from so many threats?

Our experience and the Bible tell us that arms and vigilance do not guarantee security, but rather endanger our lives and the world.

An example is the situation of Enrique Petro, a farmer from Colombia de Uraba; one of more than 15,000 people who were forced by paramilitary groups in collaboration with the Colombian army to leave, displaced from their lands by threats and assassinations.

In the land that belonged to these displaced farmers, national and international economic groups, with the support of the Colombian government, initiated the cultivation of palms to produce fuel, or as they call it today, biodiesel.

Enrique Petro has never accepted the loss of his land. He was able to encourage a group of farmers to return, even though the government never guaranteed security and the paramilitary groups threatened them by saying that if they returned, they would kill them. They looked for help from human rights organizations and churches in Colombia, Europe, Canada and the United States.

I had the blessing of participating in the return of the displaced in which nearly 120 families and a group of companions from various organizations from Colombia and other countries reclaimed their land. During the return, which lasted several days, one morning a song awoke me that said, "without God we are nothing in the world, without God we can do nothing, not even the leaves of the trees move if not by His power."

It was Enrique Petro who was singing, and when I asked him what this song meant to him, he told me that it was God who was protecting him from the threats and gave him security to continue ahead in his purpose of regaining the land.

I also remember Saray, a displaced woman who arrived in Barranquilla fleeing threats from paramilitaries. In Barranquilla, she was one of the leaders of the organizations working to return the displaced people to their land. Saray and her husband received new threats and had to flee a second time to another city in Colombia to protect their lives.

I asked Enrique and Saray if they were afraid and how they could feel protected by God in the face of the army and the paramilitary groups. They answered me with words very similar to Psalm 91.

Studying Psalm 91, we can see that the person who wrote it is in a situation of danger. We can see that the dangers are many like the traps of the hunter, terror, arrows, pest, plague and a thousand and ten others things that can do him harm.

But with many dangers this person describes the protection from God as being in the place of the highest defender, a sheltered place like an all powerful shade. He calls on God for refuge and strength. The affirmation is that we can live in a place whose destiny is guaranteed by God.

He affirms that God frees him from the traps of the hunter and from frightening plagues, sheltering him with His feathers and giving Him refuge with His wings from which he will not be fearful of the dark of night, nor of the arrow of the day, nor of the plague that destroys at mid-day. Here the emphasis is on the protection of the dangers of life during the night as well as the day.

In others words there are six images of the protection of God. God is like cover, shade, refuge, strength, feathers or wings, shield and armor that guarantee that nothing can overcome the love of God..

Psalm 91 shows us that there are many dangers and threats; but God guarantees that we can live securely if we trust in His protection. The testimony and life of Enrique Petro shows us that this protection from God continues with people who dare to trust in Him.

Today we know that the threats against Enrique, Saray and against people who return to their land continue, but we know that confidence in God remains firm, and that God, permitting the presence of accompaniers from national and international organizations, maintains and strengthens the guarantee of protection of the displaced without any kind of arms.

More displaced farmers return to their land in Colombia and in other countries. Consciousness is awakening that they need to be supported now if they return to their land. The cultivation of palms that is putting the biodiversity of this region in danger has to be stopped.

Brothers and sisters, the Bible and the experience of men and women of faith who dare to trust in God tell us that we can also put our confidence in God, and that we should celebrate with joy because in this world, which has so many threats, we can live with the security of the presence of God.

But it also says that united with others we can help to be shelter, shade and refuge by accompanying communities that have their lives threatened. This protection gives testimony to our faith in God.

And so together, we the churches, the displaced people in Colombia and you can celebrate and give thanks to God because we can live and enjoy the security of living in the shelter of God's presence.

The Rev. Milton Mejia is a Presbyterian pastor and a professor of theology at the Universidad Reformada in Barranquilla, Colombia.

## **Liturgy: Claiming the right to life and health in a region of death**

*Identify Colombia in the atlas or on the globe. Put out products from Colombia – maybe coffee, or (in the USA) cut flowers. You may also want to download one of the pictures of the young people from Colombia from the study site.*

### **Gathering Prayer**

God bringing light and banishing fear,

We light this candle as a sign of our willingness to be your light in the world.  
We remember before you the peoples of Colombia, their abundant land, their struggles for peace and justice. We bring before you the people whose story we have witnessed.

In Jesus, you teach us that death is overcome by love and courage. Give courage to those who seek to rebuild communities shattered by violence and terror; give hope to those whose everyday life is beset by poverty and threats; give justice to those who ache for freedom and life.

We ask it in the name of Jesus, our brother and our friend,  
Amen

### **Reading: Psalm 91**

You who live in the shelter of the Most High, who abide in the shadow of the Almighty,  
will say to the Lord,

**‘My refuge and my fortress; my God, in whom I trust.’**

For he will deliver you from the snare of the fowler and from the deadly pestilence;

**He will cover you with his pinions, and under his wings you will find refuge; his faithfulness is a shield and buckler.**

You will not fear the terror of the night, or the arrow that flies by day, or the pestilence that stalks in darkness, or the destruction that wastes at noonday.

**A thousand may fall at your side, ten thousand at your right hand, but it will not come near you.**

You will only look with your eyes and see the punishment of the wicked.

**Because you have made the Lord your refuge, the Most High your dwelling-place, no evil shall befall you, no scourge come near your tent.**

For he will command his angels concerning you to guard you in all your ways.

**On their hands they will bear you up, so that you will not dash your foot against a stone.**

You will tread on the lion and the adder, the young lion and the serpent you will trample under foot.

**Those who love me, I will deliver; I will protect those who know my name. When they call to me, I will answer them; I will be with them in trouble, I will rescue them and honour them. With long life I will satisfy them, and show them my salvation.**

### **Prayers for Colombia**

God of hope – who consoles our pain, we have seen and heard the testimony of millions of displaced and refugee people – women, children men, indigenous, and afro-descendants whose bodies carry the marks of death and terror.

God of justice – who walks with us, our faith and our commitment to Jesus has led us to solidarity and exile. Our bodies carry the scars of fear, violence, poverty and rejection – they are our cross.

God of life – who works with us for peace, destroy the weapons of war and the trade agreements that displace and destroy your creation.

We are your people who yearn to return to our land and, like Jesus, be resurrected.

Amen

*Source: Milton Mejia, exiled Colombian Presbyterian Pastor*

For a country which has been ravaged by war, death and violence for many decades...

**Spirit, bring peace and justice**

For poor farmers and their families who produce both legal and illegal crops, trying to survive...

**Spirit, bring peace and justice**

For the Colombian government, that it may seek just solutions, respectful of the dignity of the poor and vulnerable...

**Spirit, bring peace and justice**

For the US government, that its policies would focus on social and economic renewal, instead of military solutions...

**Spirit, bring peace and justice**

For ourselves and all citizens of the world, that we might advocate fair and sustainable solutions....

**Spirit, bring peace and justice. Amen.**

*Source: Education for Justice, a Catholic social justice organisation*



Creator God,

We pray for the peacemakers in Colombia, the churches, and all people who in countless ways seek to right the wrongs, heal the wounded and sick, speak the truth, and protect the vulnerable. We give thanks for those who are empowered by their faith to be peacemakers. We ask that you would protect them from all harm and danger. God, give us strength as we seek to be voices for peace in Colombia, strengthen our efforts to bring forth words of truth, compassion and peace that we receive from our Colombian brothers and sisters. Bring us all to do justice, to love kindness, and to walk humbly in your ways, through Christ our Lord. Amen.

*Source: Lutheran World Relief*

### **Blessing**

May God the creator, who danced creation into being, dance with us.

May God the redeemer, who lived for justice, live in us.

May God the sustainer, who offers hope, offer hope through us.

Amen