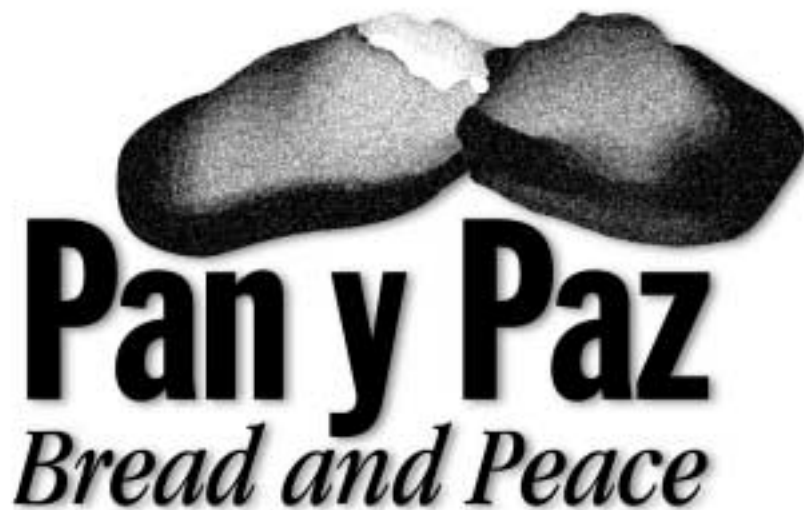


An Invitation to North American Mennonites



In times of increasing violence Colombian Mennonites are taking a public stand for peace. You are invited to join them. Time is short, so please respond now.

The intensifying crisis

Colombia is in the midst of a four-decade-old civil war and economic crisis. President Uribe won recent elections by promising a hard line against the guerrilla groups, thus approving a state of siege that suspends important constitutional rights. To force insurgent groups to negotiate, military violence has increased. In turn, the guerrillas are stepping up civilian attacks and kidnappings. Both the government and the illegal armed groups are pressuring civilians to take sides and participate in the conflict.

Escalating the conflict is the U.S. Plan Colombia aid package. Its stated aim was to reduce coca production, but mostly it benefits the military: to date, \$2 billion U.S. in training, intelligence systems, and military hardware, including helicopters, guns, and spare parts. As of this summer, the U.S. government is allowing all counter-drug assistance provided in the past to be used to fight illegal armed groups.

Mennonites testify to God's way of nonviolence

In the midst of great injustice and violence the Mennonite Church in Colombia boldly lives out a faith of love and nonviolence. This 50-year-old body—including some 18 churches—refuses to accept the armed path as a way out of Colombia's crisis. Rather, the church is committed to caring for victims of violence and working toward a real peace—one with social justice.

For their stance they face real and immediate danger. More than 20 Christian leaders have been killed this year and armed groups are forcing churches to close. This summer, Gabriel Montes, a volunteer with Justapaz, the Mennonite peace organization, was killed.

As the conflict intensifies, Colombian Mennonites have felt called to make a public declaration of faith, a witness to their government, armed groups, and other citizens.

On Saturday, Sept. 21—the UN International Day of Peace and Nonviolence—the church will declare: "We will not fight. We will not

side with any of the armed groups. Neither, however, will we stop caring for the victims or seeking a nonviolent alternative to war through confronting the death-dealing powers and dialoguing with those responsible for the bloodshed."

A fast for peace and life

On Sept. 15, the Colombian Mennonite Church will publish a declaration of faith and peace (see back page) in Colombia's three most widely read newspapers (covering the whole country). It will invite participation in a *Fast for Peace and Life*, including a public event at Bogotá's largest public plaza to break the fast with a shared meal: a reminder that food and peace go together. When material goods are shared, not only is there enough to go around, but it is also God's way of making justice and peace.

If sufficient funds are raised, the church will place reminder announcements in the newspapers and on the radio during the days leading up to the event.

An invitation to North American Anabaptists

Colombian Mennonites are inviting North American Anabaptists to take part in this action for peace. Here are ways to participate:

1. Join the Colombian church in a prayerful fast on Sept. 21.
2. Contribute to the costs of the fast-breaking ceremony and publicity: projected cost is \$10,000 U.S. Send gifts to arrive by **Sept. 11** to: Peace and Justice Support Network, Pan y Paz, Financial Services, Mennonite Mission Network, PO Box 370, Elkhart IN 46515-0370. Questions? Call Ed Burkholder, MMN, 574-294-7523.
3. Organize times of prayer, biblical reflection, political analysis, letter writing, and a parallel fast-breaking ceremony in your church or community. Worship materials and other helps are available on the Peace and Justice Support Network web site: <http://peace.MennoLink.org>.
4. Prepare a declaration to be read at the Colombian event. E-mail to Janna Bowman [jannalbowman@yahoo.com].
5. Send your statement, with an explanatory cover letter, to your local newspaper and the U.S. and Colombian governments. Letters to the editor could explain why your congregation is holding this event and invite community members to participate. Sample letters are available on the Peace and Justice Support Network web site: <http://peace.MennoLink.org>.

DECLARATION

*In recognition of the Universal Day of Peace and Nonviolence,
September 21, called for by the United Nations:*

As followers of Christ, son of God, whom we recognize as God above all gods, we affirm our biblical and historical commitment to walk the path of peace, nonviolence and love for neighbor—especially the weak, marginalized and our enemies.

WE WILL NOT PARTICIPATE in war initiatives in the name of seeking peace. We believe that obligating all Colombian civilians to take sides in the armed conflict, whether on the side of the State or one of the illegal armed groups, is a false alternative to war. All are using the same logic of weapons and violence.

WE REFUSE to participate in any armed group, and we refuse to pay so that others do so on our behalf.* We oppose the militarization of the economy and support the right to conscientious objection to all armed service.

WE BELIEVE that peace building is the responsibility of everyone. We will continue to seek a peace with justice for all people through the promotion of conversations and actions with whomever is willing to consider nonviolent, negotiated solutions. Only this will lead to true reconciliation in Colombia.

WE ENCOURAGE the government, the armed groups and the media to give up their war-like attitudes and begin genuine peace talks with real concessions towards the building of a new country. Colombians needs genuine guarantees for dignified human treatment within legal and social justice, including housing, employment, land rights, security, education, health care and democratic freedoms.

WE CALL the international community, especially citizens of the United States, to 1) stop contributing to the war in Colombia through the provision of finances, weapons, helicopters and logistical support; and 2) contribute to the well-being of the world through approving and supporting the International Crimes Court.

WE INVITE the Colombian movements of human rights, peace and nonviolence to mend their divisions and take on a more proactive role in creating peace in our country.

In the same way we invite all Colombians of good will to join the creation of a great movement of “A Million Artisans of Life, Nonviolence and Peace.”

PAN Y PAZ (BREAD AND PEACE): We invite all Colombian citizens to fast and pray for peace on Saturday, Sept. 21, and to break the fast at 4 p.m. in community in a public act at the Plaza de Bolivar. Bring bread, not bullets! Bread for the poor, not bombs!

SIGNED BY:

Peter Stucky, President of the Colombian Mennonite Church

Ricardo Esquivia Ballestas, Director of Justapaz: Christian Center for Justice, Peace and Non-violent Action and President of the Human Rights and Peace Commission of the Evangelical Council of Colombian Churches (CEDECOL)

* New legislation under President Uribe includes a high war tax as well as actions that pump up the military, arm civilians, and set up a network of government informants.