

Promoting peace with justice with the Presbyterian Church of Colombia

The Presbytery of Seattle overtures the 224th General Assembly (2020) of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) to take the following actions on behalf of the Presbyterian Church of Colombia in support of lasting peace with justice at this critical moment in that country's peace process:

1. Direct the Stated Clerk to communicate with Colombia's President Iván Duque the PCUSA's profound concern about increased violence and threats towards community leaders, ex-combatants, human rights defenders, church leaders, and journalists, and urge him to ensure the letter and spirit of the peace accords are fulfilled and new dialogues are initiated with the ELN guerrilla group. Encourage the Stated Clerk to invite other world ecumenical leaders to write similar letters.
2. Request that the (co-)moderator(s) of the 224th General assembly visit the Presbyterian Church of Colombia as soon as possible as an embodied expression of our oneness in Christ, to learn about the current state of Colombia's peace process, and to educate the PCUSA about what they learn.
3. Direct the Office of Public Witness and the Presbyterian Ministry at the United Nations to build upon their support for the cause of peace in Colombia, taking the actions they consider most strategic and beneficial, including
 - a. Organizing one or more webinars on the issues facing Colombia and its neighbors, particularly the international tensions with Venezuela.
 - b. Advocate for the United States to support and fund the holistic justice system established as part of Colombia's peace process and the mechanisms for reincorporation of former members of the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia into civilian life.
 - c. Renew the calls of the 218th General Assembly's Report on Human Rights in Colombia, particularly for "ending the aerial fumigation for coca crops and focusing on programs that provide higher levels of support for farmers to convert to alternative crops and that reduce demand for drugs in the United States."
4. Call on PCUSA congregations to pray for just and lasting peace in Colombia, to educate themselves about the peace process, to support PCUSA mission co-workers appointed at the request of the Presbyterian Church of Colombia, to visit the Presbyterian Church of Colombia in its three presbyteries and varied ministries, and participate in the Colombia Mission Network.
5. Express our gratitude to the Presbyterian Church of Colombia for:
 - a. Bearing bold and faithful witness to the gospel and maintaining steadfast hope in a nation struggling to overcome violence and practice reconciliation.

- b. Giving and receiving hospitality and common service - signs of God's grace - through mission partnerships with PCUSA churches and presbyteries and through the Colombia Mission Network.
- c. Receiving mission co-workers appointed by Presbyterian World Mission to work with them in theological education and in promoting peace and reconciliation.
- d. Receiving Young Adult Volunteers and nurturing them as they discern God's presence and action in their own lives and in the lives of our Colombian neighbors.
- e. Inviting US volunteers to walk with them in faithfulness through the Colombia Accompaniment Program. For over 15 years this program, administered by the Presbyterian Peace Fellowship, has been a mutually-transforming expression of gospel solidarity.

Rationale:

Presbyterian witness and partnership in Colombia

For more than 163 years, since the first Presbyterian worship service was held in Bogotá in 1856, the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) and its predecessors have been engaged in ministry with our Christian siblings in Colombia. Today, the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) supports ministries of peacemaking, education, and evangelism with the Presbyterian Church of Colombia through two denominational mission co-workers, Young Adult Volunteers, the Accompaniment Program administered by the Presbyterian Peace Fellowship, advice and support from the Presbyterian Foundation, and the presbyteries and congregations that participate in partnerships and in the Colombia Mission Network.

The Presbyterian Church of Colombia [gives strong and vital witness](#) to the teachings and ministry of Jesus Christ and has called on us for support in its ministries with the most vulnerable Colombians in this crucial time of advancing peace with justice following the [historic peace accords](#) with the FARC guerrilla group (Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia) signed in 2016. The Presbyterian Church of Colombia has a national Peace Commission which outlined specific requests for accompaniment, advocacy, and prayer from the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) in January 2020. The actions proposed in this overture reflect those requests.

Challenges to Colombia's Peace Process

The peace accords, whose government implementation was halting from the start, have been [intentionally weakened](#) by Colombian President Iván Duque and the ruling party since his election in 2018. Key provisions of the transitional justice system have been attacked, and

incipient dialogues with the ELN guerrilla group (National Liberation Army) were derailed almost immediately after Duque's inauguration.

The past two years have brought an [alarming increase in murders and threats](#) against Colombia's grassroots community leaders, human rights defenders, and land rights activists, reaching an average of one such assassination per day in the first month of 2020. Mass displacement is also on the rise again, adding thousands to the over 7 million people (around 15% of the national population) forcibly displaced from their homes and lands over the last three decades of Colombia's internal armed conflict. Ex-combatants of the FARC who laid down their weapons in the first months of 2017 have also been under attack, with 173 of them murdered from the time the peace accords were signed through the end of 2019.

Nearly 100,000 farm families involved in coca production signed up for the [voluntary illicit crop substitution program](#) the Colombian government established as agreed in the peace accords. The overwhelming majority (94%) of the families--who live in some of the most remote and underserved locales in Colombia, with few roads or other infrastructure--complied with the terms of the program, voluntarily eradicating 87,000 acres of coca crops. But by mid 2019 the government had only provided complete payments to 10% of them, while 40% of the families had yet to receive any of the promised compensation. Advocates and participants in the crop substitution program represent a significant portion of the community leaders killed in Colombia in recent years. To the consternation of rural communities and human rights groups, the United States government has urged Colombia to return to aerial fumigation with glyphosate, a practice previously suspended due to its ineffectiveness at eradicating coca crops and its harmful effects on human health, food crops and the environment.

Further complicating the stability of the region are tensions with the government of Venezuela. Around 4 million Venezuelans have opted to emigrate since 2015, seeking employment, food security and medical care, with the largest portion of them currently living in Colombia. The governments of Colombia and the United States have been publicly pushing to force a change in Venezuela's government since early 2019, adding the spectre of [potential military incursion](#) to the difficult humanitarian situation faced by Venezuelans, both at home and abroad.

Needed support from the PCUSA

In this context of threats, violence, and egregious human rights violations, the Presbyterian Church of Colombia remains faithful in promoting the Good News of the Prince of Peace, partnering with other churches and faith based organizations to accompany vulnerable communities of farmers, displaced persons, migrants, and ex-combatants, teaching skills for nonviolent action, advocating with the government, calling all to peaceful and negotiated solutions, and working toward reconciliation and peace.

Letters of support and financial contributions are valuable, but the physical presence of official delegations from the highest levels of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), the ongoing presence of mission co-workers appointed at the request of the Presbyterian Church of Colombia, and

regular visits by local church and presbytery groups provide an irreplaceable testament to our unity in Christ and a tangible expression of the message that our siblings in Colombia are not alone. As they continue to stand boldly for a new future for their country, they do so at personal risk, demonstrating their unwillingness to be dissuaded by violent actors. They ask us to increase our visibility in accompanying them and Colombia's most vulnerable citizens in this crucial moment for the cause of peace.

Foundations in PCUSA polity and previous General Assembly actions

In the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) we understand the joyful privilege of membership in Christ's church to include "lifting one another up in prayer, mutual concern, and active support," and "working in the world for peace, justice, freedom, and human fulfillment" (*Book of Order*, G-1.0304). Our siblings in the Presbyterian Church of Colombia are inviting us to join them in faithful praxis, in ways well aligned with our own constitution.

- In a broken and fearful world the Spirit gives us courage
to pray without ceasing,
to witness among all peoples to Christ as Lord and Savior,
to unmask idolatries in Church and culture,
to hear the voices of peoples long silenced,
and to work with others for justice, freedom, and peace.

(*Book of Confessions*, "A Brief Statement of Faith," 10.4)

The Presbyterian Church of Colombia has grown increasingly vocal and engaged in promoting peace and human rights through direct service and accompaniment of the most vulnerable communities in the context of Colombia's internal armed conflict, as well as public declarations, pastoral letters, and political advocacy with the Colombian government and international bodies. In this vital and courageous ministry, which has led to death threats and intimidations for numerous church leaders over the years, they have welcomed the accompaniment and solidarity of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) in various ways, including the following General Assembly actions:

- The 210th General Assembly (1998) of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) called upon the Colombian government to "make strenuous efforts to curtail the violence and provide protection and assistance to those affected" (*Minutes*, 1998, Part I, p. 663). In addition, the assembly encouraged "access for international human rights organizations and the office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights and humanitarian assistance" (*Minutes*, 1998, Part I, p. 663).
- The 213th General Assembly (2001) responded to the United States involvement in the crisis in Colombia. Specifically, the assembly "declare[d] it morally repugnant for the U.S.

and its allies to grant large amounts of aid to a military with Colombia's grievous human rights record, while waiving the obligation of the Colombian government to meet acceptable standards of human rights as a condition of continued aid (*Minutes*, 2001, Part I, pp. 54, 471).

- The 216th General Assembly (2004): "Join[ed] with the Presbyterian Church in Colombia, other Christian churches, and other Christian organizations in calling for the redirection of United States Military aid into social, educational, health, and developmental assistance in the hope that peace would be restored. ... Decr[ie]d the characterization of human rights workers as terrorists" (*Minutes*, 2004, Part I, pp. 70-71, 861).
- The 218th General Assembly (2008) approved a Report on Human Rights in Colombia prepared by the Advisory Committee on Social Witness Policy at the direction of the 217th General Assembly. It provided a detailed list of actions to take in advocacy, prayer, and humanitarian aid at a time when the flaws in Plan Colombia's anti-drug policy and military aid had been abundantly documented. One of these actions--ending aerial fumigation--is directly quoted in item 3(c) of this overture because this policy objective had been achieved but is now being reversed.
<https://www.pc-biz.org/#/search/1625>
- The 219th General Assembly (2010) called on the United States government "to assist with a process for the negotiation of a peace accord in Colombia in order to end Colombia's internal armed conflict which has lasted more than fifty years and which is a threat to the entire Andean region." <https://www.pc-biz.org/#/search/3285>