

## **Report on Partnership Meetings in Venezuela March 22-28, 2017**

David Boshart, Linda Shelly from Mennonite Mission Network, Peter Stucky and Oscar Herrera both from the Colombian Mennonite Church traveled to Caracas, Venezuela to consult with the developing network of Mennonite congregations in Venezuela. Fifty-sixty representatives of these churches gathered at a government-owned conference center for a three-day retreat in the city of San Felipe in the state of Yaracuy. San Felipe is about 3.5 hours west of Caracas. Over the course of the three days, representatives from each of the three regions (Caracas, Yaracuy and Isla Margarita) presented reports describing the life and work of their churches. In their reporting, the churches outlined their goals for the coming year.

The church in Yaracuy, Comunidad Menonita de Centro, is looking for a space they can own. Also, they want to continue the seminary and workshop training. A woman from the church participated in the Sister Care leadership training in Colombia recently and wants to share that ministry in her community. They want to work to address economic challenges in their community exploring the development of a cooperative. They have a time when they are sharing the Word of Life, a radio program.

The churches from Isla Margarita reported that their goals in the coming year are to create space for the churches to meet together, to do Vacation Bible School with the children, to strengthen enrollment in the seminary program, to grow in evangelism, as well as to purchase the property for the churches' programs and ministries. Impressed by the church's ministry to homeless people and people dealing with addictions, the Mayor of the city of Porlamar asked the Mennonite Church to oversee the process of helping homeless people get off the streets. They are willing to do that but they have to be discerning about accepting these kinds of requests without becoming cooped politically.

The church in Caracas reported that they plan to continue to minister to the homeless people at Plaza Bolivar on Friday evenings with food and clothing distribution. They want to continue to develop leaders to teach cooperative games for peace in the public schools. The after-school tutoring ministry of the church is receiving a growing number of referrals for students from the public schools. The church is supporting the Anabaptist Women Doing Theology in Latin America movement. The church is also wanting to continue to develop the course offerings of their seminary.

The birth of this network is can only be described as movement of God's Spirit among people who are seeking to take the teachings of Jesus seriously. Many have been guided by the Christian classic *In His Steps* by Charles Monroe Sheldon and *Community and Commitment* by John Driver. The churches developing in disparate regions of the country have found one another through courses offered by Mennonite leader Erwin Mirabal and the Colombian Mennonite seminary. (Erwin Mirabal is the identified leader and visionary for this movement. Erwin supports himself through his business that sells ball bearings to various industries on the mainland and Isla Margarita. Almost all the leaders in this movement are self-supporting, financially.) A recurring theme of respondents from Yaracuy was the joy they felt as they encountered the wider family of Christians who are sharing the same journey as communities who are serious about following Jesus.

During most of the second day of the gathering, Peter Stucky led the group in a Bible Study on the religious and political leadership groups in the New Testament and contrasted the commitments of these groups to the qualities of the leadership Jesus demonstrated. He then asked participants to work in small groups to do an assessment of the cultural, social, and political context of Venezuela. In part 2, Peter asked groups to consider the questions, "How can we be faithful to the proposal of God, to what God wants here and now?" and, "What does the scripture tell us is the task of the church in this moment in Venezuela?" This workshop concluded with an appeal to the churches to understand God's call to them to a people of peace, proclaim a message of peace, and to be a place of peace.

Back in Caracas, Peter, Linda, David and Oscar met with Erwin, his wife Haydee, and Euclides and Darlenis Bauza (from Isla Margarita) to receive reports from the past year and consider proposals for the coming year:

### **Financial Report**

Erwin presented the financial report for the partnership for 2015-2017. The incredible inflation creates so many difficulties. When one changes American dollars one needs to invest it immediately in something that has value or the value of the changed money deteriorates. Reputable economists in Venezuela predict that it is possible for the country to experience an additional 1,500 percent inflation. When Erwin receives dollars, he gives each region their allotment, they manage the money and provide receipts and reports to Erwin.

Erwin continues his secular sales work on the mainland as well as on Isla Margarita. Euclides helps with deliveries and collection on the island as well as managing the cash flow for ongoing sales. A lot of businesses have closed in Venezuela because they do not have access to dollars to buy materials. Families receive “clops” from the government (bundles of essential goods – rice, coffee, butter, flour, chicken, etc.). Distributors, including the National Guard, remove products from the “clops” in order to resell them at a higher price. This is a bigger business than the drug sales. The result is that families receive incomplete “clops” unawares.

### **Socio-Political Assessment of the Context in Venezuela**

So far, Venezuela has not seen much on the way of violence, but the longer the government delays elections (national elections are supposed to be held next year, the regional/local elections were supposed to be last December), the chance of violence in the country increases. Erwin says that their fear for their children is that violence will increase and youth will be recruited into violent protest. (Interestingly, the day after we left Venezuela, the country’s high court ruled that the opposition-led legislature was “invalid.” This created a great deal of protest around the country and by midnight on Saturday the court had reversed its ruling).

The government has not gotten involved in the churches, for the most part. Some have been threatened with oppositional messages, but they are largely threatening larger/mega churches. Some have asked why the Mennonites go to the Plaza Bolivar and minister to the people on the street where there are government informers. Erwin does not want his church to directly oppose the government, but the church intends to be faithful to the call of the Gospel to serve the poor regardless of what the government does in response. In a context of government control, the church finds that the less information they provide, within the law, the more latitude they have for their ministry. A government lawyer has begun to attend worship services at the Mennonite church in Caracas. It’s not clear what the motive is. Erwin gave him a special invitation to attend this past Sunday to see the delegation from other congregations and hear Pastor Peter Stucky’s teaching. But he did not attend this time.

Desperation is causing theft in unusual ways. Recently in Paraíso, a man got on a bus and demanded everyone to take off their shoes. He put the shoes in a bag and left to sell them. The churches in Margarita are trying to work together to do cooperative food production but the prices of the raw materials are always

inflating. So when they sell their products, the price of raw materials has risen to the point that they can't purchase them with their profits. No one in Maria Elena's church on Isla Margarita is employed, except for Sister Aura, who is on a retirement pension. People look for work and find day work occasionally. Over the past year, the average weight loss of Venezuelans is 18 kilos – about 39 pounds. Where people used to have three meals a day and a snack, today people are not only reducing the amount of food on the plate. They typically have breakfast later in the morning and combine lunch and dinner. Many people eat only once per day. "The dogs out on the street eat better than the dogs in the house." It makes the people feel impotent when people come to the door asking for whatever might be shared but there isn't enough to be shared. People are planting fruit trees in different churches so that people can eat their own fruit, but the production is often not sufficient. It takes time for trees to bear fruit. Even so, people are not getting the diversity of foods that are needed for a healthy diet. The school is not able to provide adequate food for the children; the government continues to encourage the school to lessen the portions for school lunches. The people can cultivate vegetables and fruit on their land, but there is often a shortage of water. Last year, they were eating mainly mangos ("the fruit that takes away the sound of the stomach"). Euclides reported that the stomachs of the people became distended and they began to look like "malnourished people." Later in the season when they opened the mangos, they were spoiled by worms. Last year there was a great grace of God during a serious season of drought. There was an abundance of mangos and sardines. Everyone was eating mangos and sardines. Unfortunately, the fatty acids in sardines accelerated unintentional weight loss.

Agricultural experts say that the primary reason Venezuelan farmers are not producing as much as they could is because when it is time to harvest, the National Guard, policemen and firemen will stop farmers on the way to the market and ask for "their" portion. Farmers are discouraged in their production because of the amount that gets stolen from them before they can get it to market. The government attitude to shortages is to say, "Let see how they (the farmers) will resolve their challenges." A lot of productive land in Venezuela is fallow due to the inflating costs of inputs for planting that constantly outstrip the profits of the prior harvest. The politics of the state have not focused on agriculture. They have supported monoculture production and focused too much on petroleum, but the government has not made good use of the petroleum

profits. While this whole situation is very difficult, it has some value in that it has sensitized the church community to the importance of mutual aid.

Haydee Mirabal described the paradox that in the midst of this current crisis, the church is growing. The youth are hurting and they see great need and few options. It is causing them to mature quickly and they are reaching for hope. This is the moment for the church to offer youth alternative ways of responding to crisis. It is necessary to think about what the church will offer the youth by way of alternatives to destructive pursuits. One of the things the learning center has focused on during vacation was sexual abuse prevention. Linda shared the electronic resources from Circles of Grace in Spanish language.

### **Reflection on the Progress of the Ministry**

Erwin asked the partners for their responses to the work of the Venezuelan church over these years. Peter responded that he is very happy with the development of the church and the vision. This work is a model example of not beginning with starting churches but beginning with theological education. This work is producing a lot of fruit. The Colombian Mennonite Churches goes beyond praying for the Mennonites in Venezuela by supporting theological education. But he wonders how IMCOL might provide more support. We consider whether it would be possible to offer a professor who might come from the North (someone like Caleb Yoder). It appears that you have the potential to expand in theological education beyond the current capacity. Perhaps the partnership could work toward this end. They also might consider someone from Colombia (like Alix or Sarai) who could come and help with advancing the theological education program.

Erwin said, “We’ve received a vision through the seminary classes from the Colombian seminary and through the work of John Driver so I can say without a doubt that there is a power in this message of the Sermon on the Mount. I *feel* what God is doing in these networks who are seeking this vision and there is great power in this message and it creates great trust in God. And this keeps us going in this work. In this work, people don’t give their loyalties to a party or ideology, but they give their loyalty to a kingdom that is so much more. That’s why we need to penetrate the neighborhoods of the city and that this (our community) cannot be an intellectual ghetto.”

Maria Elena shared that one of her sisters was talking about how the church can grow and she said, ‘Sister, let’s have a (evangelical) campaign.’ But Maria Elena said, “No, we need to prepare ourselves so we can know how to

meet those who we will come. The country is full of half-way formed evangelicals. We do no good if we simply continue in that way. So I began taking the classes so that my church could be prepared to help people become true followers of Jesus.” Euclides said, “Regarding the Sermon on the Mount, it’s not always that we haven’t heard this message before. It’s also that Erwin has a way to present this message, because of his study, and it is this way of presenting the Sermon on the Mount that people are responding and we are anxious for this person to give these classes. On Margarita many of the churches that are receiving these classes have been established for a long time. But when they receive this message it’s like their eyes are opened, scales fall from their eyes. So it is very important that we choose our teachers carefully.” Maria Elena says, “Sometimes I become timid in the face of the evangelicals’ certainties because this teaching sometimes ‘crashes against the chest’ when you first hear it. But when you taste this message, you begin to become more confident and secure in proclaiming this message.”

### **The Caracas Property**

The arrangement has been to rent the current property in Caracas for two years. The owner has told Erwin that she wants to sell the property. During the time that they were renting, the owner was trying to provide the documents of ownership so they could buy the building (the property does not include the apartment where Erwin’s daughter Helena is living even though the apartment is directly over some of the rented property). The owner wasn’t able to come up with the documents. At the end of the two-year lease, she asked them if they were going to buy it. Erwin believes that the rent has been overpriced. He told the owner that they could not continue to pay the rent at the same rate. After several exchanges negotiating the value of the property, the owner offered the property for a much reduced price. Erwin wonders how she would work at the property documents. She offered to give them half ownership of the property this year and when she comes back to the country to satisfy the requirements of her visa, she would do what was needed to produce the ownership documents and then she would sell them the other half the second year when the documents are delivered. Haydee has a sister who is an attorney who could research the utility history to determine the chain of ownership. Erwin is concerned that the current owners were long term renters and when the owner died, they assumed ownership of the house or some other assumption of ownership that was not documented. This is quite common in Caracas. Erwin wants to do all the negotiation with the party who is the documented owner.

## **Cooperative Games for Peace**

This year, the church wants to develop the Cooperative Games for Peace ministry. They are working to complete the permission to enter the public schools. They would like to develop a uniform to identify those who are doing this work and a budget for transportation in Yaracuy, Caracas, and Margarita. These teams would not only include the churches in the Mennonite community, but teams could also include people who are not from Mennonite Churches but who are trained by Haydee. Haydee shared a brochure that describes the program and objectives. Euclides is negotiating with the school administrations in Yaracuy and Isla Margarita. This will be the program in focus for the ministry in Caracas this year.