

Christian Mission in Zones of Armed Conflict: A Case Study

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Introduction

My presentation will address the question of what is the appropriate face for international Christian mission in contexts of armed conflict. My work is based on my experience working with Christian Peacemaker Teams in Palestine and Colombia, and my work with economic development projects in Haiti.

Christian Peacemaker Teams (CPT) places teams of trained volunteers in zones of armed conflict to accompany unarmed communities who are at risk of violence from armed groups. The idea is that we reduce the threat of violence and empower communities to act on behalf of their own survival. CPT is ecumenical with roots in the historic peace churches (Mennonite, Church of the Brethren, and Quaker) and founded on a spirituality of non-violence and the dignity of human life. Most people who work with CPT would not describe our work as “mission,” because of that word’s association with supremacist projects and colonialism. However, I will propose in this paper that the work of CPT is one way to practice Christian mission that is neither of the above.

I recently returned from Colombia, where I was conducting a research project on what CPT accompaniment does for the communities we accompany, from the perspective of the communities themselves. I spent time in two different communities, both of which are located in guerrilla territory and which have been hit very hard by Colombia’s long-running civil war, and I interviewed 21 community leaders.

In this presentation I will first briefly tell the story of one community, Micoahumado, in order to give you some context. Then I will talk about the role CPT has assumed in this community, and what leaders say international accompaniment has done for them. I will also talk about “next steps” for Christian mission in post-conflict situations: what we can do once we kick out the armed groups, in order to continue to work for the survival of the community. Finally, I will touch on the theology and spirituality that are the basis for this work, and in what ways CPT work can be seen as Christian evangelization.

The Micoahumado Story

Micoahumado is a municipality (sort of like a county) located in guerrilla territory, in the region of the mighty Magdalena River. It lies in the northeastern part of Colombia, near the Atlantic Ocean. The people cultivate coffee and various other kinds of beans, and mine for gold. The population of about 7,000 is campesino, living at a subsistence level without many basic services, including health care, secondary education, and reliable electricity or phone service.

The people there tell me that they feel abandoned by the state. The government invests in the war by sending its troops, but does not invest in community development.

The guerrilla showed up in the area in the 1970s and began dominating the region in the 1980s. The situation in Colombia is complicated, and the more I study it, the more complicated it becomes. So I will not attempt to give you a complete analysis of why they are fighting in the short time allotted. But suffice it to say that the people, who had been living there for a long time

but still lacked proper titles to their land, feared the state would seize their farms from them, and so in the beginning many saw the guerrilla as a force that could protect them. And in the beginning, the guerrilla was taking on a social role, such as building schools and roads. However, as time passed, they became more powerful, more dominating, and more vertical in their organizational structure. People lost confidence in them, but there was also no functioning state structure to replace them.

Beginning in the mid-to late 1990s paramilitary forces began incursions into the area. The human rights workers and community leaders that I have spoken with in Colombia believe, with hard evidence to back them up, that para-military forces are effectively illegally acting on behalf of the Colombian armed forces. Para-military forces are responsible for most of the human rights violations attributed to the war.

One of the leaders in Micoahumado told me of his personal experiences with paramilitary forces. Let's call him Juan. Juan is an artisan gold miner, and in the 1990s he had set up his own mining operation with two partners. Four different times paramilitary forces entered into the different communities where he was living with his wife and children, and four different times the whole family had to flee, leaving behind everything. With the first displacement, Juan lost the small mining business he had spent 10 years building. On the second occasion, paramilitary commanders captured him, and along with another community leader, took him to a slaughterhouse located on a riverbank. Juan was forced to watch while paramilitary forces used a chain saw to cut his companion up into pieces. They cut him up alive. Juan escaped by jumping into the river. His capturers shot at him, but Juan survived, emerging downriver hours later, bloody but alive. Juan and his family eventually ended up in Micoahumado.

In December of 2002, 600 paramilitary troops entered La Plaza, the central town in Micoahumado, and started burning it. They occupied the town and blockaded it so that no food or medicine could enter. In response, guerrilla forces, who were located in the surrounding forests, destroyed the town's water supply and dropped bombs, several of which landed near the local elementary school.

The townspeople had survived a number of such operations, and many, like Juan, had survived multiple displacements. But this was worse than most, and the leadership agreed that something had to be done. Some people wanted to flee, but many had nowhere else to go, and some, like Juan, were tired of running. There has been so much displacement in Colombia that the entire campesino way of life is at risk. But this community was determined to preserve their lifestyle, and on their terms.

Town leadership called in the parish priest, Padre Joachim. Padre Joachim had spent the previous several years helping the community to organize what they call a Constituent Assembly. It is essentially a representative body that works together to solve local problems. Because of the assembly, the people of Micoahumado had some experience working to jointly solve problems, and they had a leadership structure in place.

The leadership also called in Padre Francisco, the Jesuit director of a regional organization, called Programa de Desarrollo y Paz, that had been working in the community to help them to come up with their own economic development plans, independently of any armed groups.

Padre Joachim and Padre Pacho (as he is called) sat down with community leadership and together they devised a plan to dialogue with the armed groups. Part of that plan included calling for accompaniment by international groups, including Christian Peacemaker Teams. To make a very long story very short, the community “commission on dialogue,” along with accompaniment by the Catholic Church, CPT, and other groups, held conversations with all of the armed groups, including the Colombian armed forces. They began with the guerrilla, and got them to agree to fix the water supply and leave the area. The paramilitaries agreed to leave if the guerrilla would leave. As a result, the community has not seen any serious violence since, although the guerrilla is still present in the area.

Today the community continues to work on its own economic development plans, and CPT continues to accompany them. CPT maintains a regular presence in the central town, La Plaza, and also in the outlying areas. They are in the Micoahumado region for approximately one week every month.

Why invite international accompaniment?

I asked this question to every single member of the community leadership that had been present at the dialogues, as well as to Padre Pacho. (In 2003 Padre Joachim received very serious death threats from paramilitary forces and his bishop removed him from Colombia altogether. There has not been a parish priest in Micoahumado since.)

Another part of the question is: why specifically Christian accompaniment? There are other accompaniment groups; most of the others are secular. What does Christian accompaniment bring that the other groups do not bring?

I received four main answers:

1. Outside accompaniment makes the community feel less isolated and less alone in their struggle. This feeling gives them the strength to continue working for their own survival, rather than displacing. This comes from on-going presence and relationship with the accompanying groups.
2. Outside accompaniment provides a kind of “umbrella” that covers local people, because it is thought that killing someone from outside the region would exact a political cost that the armed groups, especially those affiliated with the Colombian state, would not want to pay.
3. Outside accompaniment provides witnesses. These witnesses can tell the community’s story to the international community, to other NGOs and churches, to the press, and to foreign governments, especially the in United States, whose policies profoundly affect how the conflict is conducted. Everyone I spoke to assumed that CPT does this.
4. Outside accompaniment, especially Christian accompaniment, educates the community. CPT brings in Christian values, such as non-violence and respect for all human life, that are immensely important in a conflict zone. In a context where dialogue is needed, Christian values demand that all people are respected equally. In a context where young people are joining armed groups out of either poverty or revenge, Christian values teach that there is an option to choose nonviolence. Christian values also teach them that they have human rights, and they have a right to demand that those rights be respected. I was

told that CPT does this in a very humble way, through relationship and presence, and through living these values. This is the manner in which CPT is also evangelizing.

The Importance of On-going Accompaniment

CPT continues to accompany Micoahumado. Although there is no longer open fighting in the municipality, the community believes our ongoing presence is a deterrent to future incursions by armed groups. The presence of CPT also continues to serve the spiritual functions noted above: it makes the community feel that they are in relationship with people from the outside, that they are not alone, and that they are accompanied in their struggle for survival.

I believe there is another role for ongoing accompaniment that does not lie within the mission of CPT. Communities like Micoahumado, and Tiquisio, the other community where I conducted my study, are in need of economic investment from entities other than armed groups, in order to provide a sustainable living for themselves into the future.

Both communities have development plans, but neither community has the resources to fully implement them. Communities like Tiquisio and Micoahumado are perfect candidates for congregations or parishes who are looking for an international mission, who want ongoing relationship, and have some resources to invest in a community's future. There is not time in this presentation to talk about what that might look like, but I do want to plant the idea that mission in this context not only involves working to eliminate the threat of violence. It also needs to include investment in the community's future.

The Theology and Spirituality of CPT Mission

I have alluded to the theological underpinnings of CPT's work already. I see us as grounded in an understanding of the dignity of human life. Genesis 1:26 tells us that all people are created in the image and likeness of God, regardless of religion, social location, race, gender, or anything else that people might try to use to divide each other. What this means practically is that it opens up the space to hear the perspectives of all groups in conflict.

In addition, viewing the dignity of human life as a theological starting point leads us to a commitment to support the life-sustaining, life-giving projects of the community itself. It makes us less concerned about what kind of church people attend, and more concerned about whether or not people are flourishing, and what we can do to help them in their own plans to flourish.

In a 1995 essay¹, Brazilian missiologist Paulo Suess refutes the notion, made popular by Pope John Paul II, that there exists anywhere a "culture of death." People are not pro-death, but rather the forces of death interrupt peoples' projects for life. Padre Pacho told me stories about some of his dialogues with armed groups, when all sides were given the space to articulate why they were doing what they were doing. What he found was that each had a vision for a better future for Colombia. They were not looking for death and destruction; they were looking for a better future for their children. Their mistake, it seems to me, is similar to the one frequently made by mission groups: they thought they could impose their own vision.

¹ Suess, Paulo, "El Evangelio en las culturas: camino de vida y esperanza," *Evangelizar desde los proyectos históricos de los otros: Diez ensayos de misionología*, Quito, Ecuador: Abya-yala, 1995, pp. 129-147.

We are all pro-life, and the question for mission in the 21st century is how to support life in all contexts, and especially in contexts where the survival of whole communities, and indeed of entire cultural traditions, is in question. In supporting life we begin by first listening to the community itself, to see how we can support its own life-sustaining projects.

This brings us to a second important theological theme in the work of CPT: presence. More than anything else, a ministry of accompaniment is a ministry of presence, and everything else we do flows from our presence in and relationship with communities at risk. My image of presence comes from Luke's Gospel, chapter 10, the story of Martha and Mary.

...Now as they went on their way, he entered a certain village, where a woman named Martha welcomed him into her home. She had a sister named Mary, who sat at the Lord's feet and listened to what he was saying. But Martha was distracted by her many tasks; so she came to him and asked, "Lord, do you not care that my sister has left me to do all the work by myself? Tell her then to help me." But the Lord answered her, "Martha, Martha, you are worried and distracted by many things; there is need of only one thing. Mary has chosen the better part, which will not be taken from her." (Luke 10: 38-42, NRSV)

Instead of being distracted by our own agendas, however laudable they might be, the better path is to listen to Jesus, who, as we know from Matthew 25, takes the form of the most vulnerable, the most marginalized, and the most isolated people in the world. Mission in the 21st century must first be present to them, develop relationship with them, and listen to them, and then must respond by supporting their projects for life.

In closing, I want to emphasize is that the heroes of this story are the leaders in Micoahumado, who bravely stood up, and are still standing up, to the armed groups, and the priests and local NGOs who back them up. CPT exists to support their work, and not to direct it.

Kim Lamberty is a leader with Christian Peacemaker Teams. These remarks were part of a panel on mission in particular places at a conference on "Resisting Mission: Redefining Engagement," held January 23, 2009, at the University of Chicago Divinity School. More information on the conference is at <http://divinity.uchicago.edu/programs/mission.shtml>