DAVID HOLLENBACH

Lessons from the wounded edge

Colombia’s image is that of a country where violence, illegal drugs and poverty are rife. But when members of the Catholic Peacebuilding Network visited, they found that through grass-roots Church-based initiatives the troubled country has become a school for peace.

Halfway through a recent international meeting of the Catholic Peacebuilding Network in Bogotá, the capital of Colombia, participants heard news that cast deep shadows over the gathering. Eleven kidnapped provincial deputies had been killed.

Colombian president Álvaro Uribe accused their kidnappers, the left-wing Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia, better known simply by their Spanish acronym Farc, of killing the deputies in cold blood. Farc claimed that it grew, so it is now providing psycho-social support for women throughout the entire region, and for men as well.

Most recently Amor has begun pursuing peace through its members’ exercise of active citizenship (ciudadanía). Thus Amor is a form of action for peace that reaches out to those nearby to create a supportive alternative community in the middle of the conflict, while reaching up through active citizenship to influence those in power to stop the fighting.

Catholic bishops have also been active on these larger structural and political levels over the past decade and a half. The Episcopal Conference of Colombia issued a “Ten-point Plan for Peace” in 2002 which stresses that respect for the human rights of every Colombian in a shared life together is essential to peace. Thus the poor and the excluded have a special claim in efforts to secure peace. In particular, the bishops commit the Church to the victims of the violence: the kidnapped, the displaced, widows, orphans.

The bishops identify the deep economic inequalities of Colombian society as one of the...
chief historical roots of the conflict, and call for sustainable development that will benefit all. They condemn the lack of respect for humanitarian law that should protect innocent civilians from conflict-related murder, kidnapping and displacement. They denounce corruption, the drug trade, the use of violence, as a form of terror and racial discrimination against Afro-Colombians as “social sins”, offences against human dignity that impede the pursuit of peace. In addition, bishops have established the National Conciliation Commission, which seeks peace through dialogue with both guerrillas of the Left and paramilitaries of the Right. This commission is independent of the bishops’ conference. Members of the bishops’ own Peace Commission are actively involved in discussions with Farc, others carry on negotiations with the ELN (in English, the National Liberation Army), and still others are working for the demobilisation of the paramilitary forces.

This demobilisation is regrettably far from complete, and paramilitary terror is still a reality. In addition, President Uribe recently released a number of Farc guerrillas, including the government’s “Foreign Minister” Rodrigo Granda, as part of an effort to secure a reciprocal prisoner release by Farc. Granda was granted shelter at the headquarters of the bishops’ conference in Bogotá before he travelled to Cuba for security purposes. The bishops remain strongly critical of Farc, the ELN, the paramilitaries and of notable aspects of government policy, but these criticisms do not prevent them from participating in dialogue when it promises to bring an opening to peace.

Church leaders also advocate an approach that seeks reconciliation. Mgr Hector Fabio Henao, director of the National Office of Social Ministry, stresses that lasting peace requires dealing with the roots of conflict through a “pedagogy of reconciliation”. This requires that justice be done to the victims of the conflict and, in the longer term, by restoring what they have lost. In particular, occupied land must be restored to the millions of displaced people from whom it has been taken. In fact, little of the land seized from poor campesinos has been returned even as paramilitaries are being demobilised. Failing to return this land, or at least to grant the displaced the economic resources they need to start rebuilding their lives, will mean that the demobilisation of the paramilitaries is a false peace likely to erupt violently once again. Without the minimal justice of the return of land, resentments will grow and conflict continue.

Peacemaking requires telling the truth about what has happened to the victims. Telling the truth is also a prerequisite for forgiveness of the perpetrators. Amnesty cannot be genuine forgiveness without the cessation of injustice and without bearing witness to the crimes against humanity committed by the powerful. Impunity leads to further conflict, not to peace. Thus the Colombian bishops recently declared their commitment to accompany the victims of the violence in defence of their “right to reparation and memory”.

When one asks a Colombian to explain some aspect of the conflict, the response often begins with the words, “It’s complex ...”. Sad to say, the Government of Colombia, with American and European assistance, has tried to reduce this complexity by heavily emphasising the military dimension and dealing with it primarily by military force. President Uribe pledged to bring the conflict to an end with an iron fist (mano dura). The United States has been supporting this approach with high levels of military assistance accompanied by chemical defoliation of coca and poppy crops.

Since the Colombian conflict has many forms and multiple agents, efforts to bring peace must take many forms and be the work of multiple agents. This suggests that the US Congress is now on the right track in seeking to redirect American policy in Colombia to one that gives more emphasis to economic and humanitarian responses to the conflict and less to a heavily military response.

The Church in Colombia does its peace-building work through groups ranging from displaced campesinos to the leaders of local women’s organisations and credit groups, to the leadership of guerrilla and paramilitary groups, to the Colombian Government and other governments and international organisations. These initiatives address diverse aspects of the conflict, so they hold promise of contributing essential components for a durable peace.

As debates about peacemaking in regions from Colombia to Iraq go forward, all of us can learn from the multi-dimensional and multi-levelled approach of the Colombian people and their Church, with its members from among both the displaced in the barrios and the powerful who make governmental and international policy. Its mission of building peace needs to be carried out on all these levels.

David Hollenbach SJ is director of the Center for Human Rights and International Justice at Boston College, in Massachusetts, USA. He was a participant in the Catholic Peacebuilding Network Conference in Bogotá.