Truce: Churches engage with gangs in El Salvador

Text and photographs by Paul Jeffrey in the April 15, 2015 issue

JOB SKILLS: A hair salon in San Salvador employs graduates of a training program at St. Francis of Assisi Catholic Church that reaches youth affected by gang violence.

When I told the taxi driver that I wanted to go to San Salvador's Mejicanos neighborhood, he told me no. It was simply too dangerous. My pleas got me nowhere, so I called a contact at the Catholic church where I was headed. I put him on the phone with the *taxista*, and after a long conversation the driver finally agreed. He'd been told exactly which route to take. If we were stopped along the way, we were to say we were going to St. Francis of Assisi Church, which is considered neutral territory in a landscape bloodied by ruthless gangs and those who pursue them.

Neutral territory is hard to find these days in any discussion of Central American gangs, which got their start when young people who had fled the regions' wars returned from the United States, bringing with them an identity and culture they'd formed as protection against other gangs in U.S. cities like Los Angeles. Mixed with a postwar economy that failed to ameliorate poverty, along with an abundance of leftover weapons and shifting patterns in drug traffic northward, within a decade the gangs in El Salvador helped boost levels of violence back to what they were during the civil war. Gang members from the two dominant groups—the MS-13 and Barrio 18—fought each other for control over territories where they forced transport companies and businesses to pay "the rent" or suffer the consequences.

While the gangs weren't the only violent actors, with their stigmatizing tattoos they were the most visible, and they quickly became scapegoats for a long list of social evils. With U.S. funding, governments in the region's Northern Triangle—Honduras, El Salvador, Guatemala—instituted a military response of violent repression and mass imprisonment. Merely looking like a gang member—what authorities called illicit association—was enough to earn young men long sentences in overcrowded prisons plagued by suspicious fires that killed hundreds.

Dubbed *mano dura*, the "iron fist" approach, these repressive policies were widely popular. "People grew tired of the death and violence caused by the gangs, and they wanted to hear that someone was going to instill order and put the delinquents in prison. That repressive discourse became mandatory for politicians, as it gets a lot more votes than talking about prevention. People wanted to hear about vengeance and repression, not peace or dialogue. And that's what they got," said Felix Arevalo, a Baptist pastor in San Salvador who has worked on dialogue with gang members.

"Gang members were satanized. People thought the only solution was to kill them," said Pio González, a Catholic priest in San Salvador's impoverished San Luis Mariona neighborhood.

The problem was that *mano dura* didn't work. As heavily armed soldiers dragged gang members out of their homes and swept them off city streets, violence only increased. As prisons filled, cities like San Salvador and San Pedro Sula (in neighboring Honduras) started boasting some of the highest murder rates in the world.

Churches in El Salvador responded in several ways. Evangelical groups worked to convert gang members who were in prisons, and in many neighborhoods the only way to leave a gang, other than by dying, was to convert to evangelical Christianity. Yet gangs keep a close eye on former members who convert; any indication that it's a ruse leads to fatal consequences.

Catholics, long joined at the hip with the country's most conservative sectors, were a little more conflicted about gangs. In many ways the Catholic Church represented the exclusion and repression that helped foster gangs. Yet Archbishop Oscar Romero and the progressive sectors that produced Christian-based communities were heavily invested in poor neighborhoods where the gangs thrived, and they set up several programs focused on keeping kids out of gangs.

It was a priest in one of these marginal neighborhoods who first tried to bridge the gap between the gangs and a government that seemed hell-bent on exterminating them. Antonio Rodríguez, a Passionist priest from Spain, came to El Salvador in 2000. He set up shop in the dangerous Mejicanos parish, starting programs to rehabilitate current gang members and job-training programs that sought to give youth viable alternatives to being recruited into the gangs. The Mejicanos neighborhood alone produces about one-tenth of the country's emigrants, and church activists there sought to provide options to succumbing to gang culture or leaving.

Rodríguez also sought to change the public debate about gangs by suggesting that they were a product of an unjust society. "There is not violence because there are gangs," he said. "There are gangs because there is violence."

In 2009, during the early months of the center-left administration of President Mauricio Funes, Rodríguez spearheaded a quiet but officially sanctioned effort to begin dialogue with the gangs. That effort ran aground on the shoals of geopolitics, however, as one of Rodríguez's key sponsors, Manuel Melgar, the minister of justice and public security, was isolated and eventually forced out of power under pressure from the United States, which chastised the government for Melgar's alleged role in a 1985 attack on U.S. military personnel during the civil war. The effort at dialogue fell apart, and Funes responded to public insecurity by stepping up repression, which led to greater gang violence. At one point Rodríguez read a public statement from the gangs that unleashed a torrent of accusations that the church was coddling delinquents.

Although the government officially eschewed dialogue with the gangs, Melgar's replacement, former defense minister David Munguía, tried a different tack. He enlisted Raúl Mijango—a former guerrilla leader turned politician turned disaffected activist—to talk with the gangs privately. Mijango embraced the role, but felt he needed someone from the church to lend a hand.

"The church is one of the few institutions that still has moral authority in this country," he told me. "We needed it to generate confidence in the process of dialogue, because no one had any trust in the government or political parties."

Mijango's recruitment pitch was rejected by several bishops who were leery of being attacked like Rodríguez until Fabio Colindres, the church's military bishop, agreed to

help. It was an unlikely trio: Munguía, a hard-line general; Mijango, a former guerrilla; and Colindres, a conservative Catholic bishop. But the men took the mission seriously, and in March 2012 they brokered a formal truce between the country's two largest gangs. The murder rate soon dropped from almost 15 per day to about five per day.

The government initially denied having any role in the truce, but six months later Munguía admitted that he had helped arrange the transfer of several gang leaders to lower-level prisons, making it easier for them to communicate with their comrades on the street. Visitation was loosened, and soldiers were removed from the cellblocks. There were rumors of other concessions. In a country where hatred of the gangs runs deep, swapping murders for better prison conditions wasn't popular. Many interpreted it as a humiliating nod to the political capital the gangs had acquired through violence.

Nonetheless, the truce held steady for some 15 months before it began to unravel. Many observers blame its ultimate demise on opposition from the country's huge private security companies, which lost business as street violence dropped. "Those who grow rich from the blood and suffering of our people have converted insecurity into giant profits, and throughout the region they constitute one of the fastest growing business sectors," Mijango said.

Another culprit was the country's news media. "They have an ethical problem. Is their mission to tell the truth, or to sell the news? Unfortunately, in recent years a mercantile perspective has prevailed in the media, converting them into those who murder with information," Mijango said.

Carlos San Martin, a Spanish priest in Mejicanos, agrees, noting that yellow journalism has become the norm in El Salvador. "The news media make violence seem to be only a product of the gangs. They don't pay much attention to gender-based violence, domestic violence, and other forms of violence that don't originate with the gangs. That encourages the population to perceive the gangs as the principal or only violent actor, when it's really much more complicated," he said.

Resistance to the truce also grew among gang members, who relied on money gained by extortion and threats of murder.

Mijango suggests that the U.S. government, always a political force to be reckoned with, was never a big fan of the truce. "Violence in our streets is always used to

justify foreign intervention in our lives and in our economy. Without violence here, the United States wouldn't be able to come and impose its security policies on us," he said.

Munguía was eventually removed from his post by the country's Supreme Court, which ruled that a military official couldn't head the civilian police. Munguía returned to his job as defense minister pursued by allegations that the military had trafficked weapons to the gangs. His replacement, Ricardo Perdomo, did everything he could to discredit the truce. And as it unraveled, the murder rate climbed.

None of this was good for Bishop Colindres's public image. He'd already been shunned by other bishops who, church sources told me, were a bit envious of his public profile. When Colindres publicly washed and kissed the feet of gang members during an Easter week rite in 2014, his street cred among gang members soared, but the country's media pilloried him for coddling criminals. He withdrew from the process of dialogue and refuses to talk about it today.

The next church leader to fall from public grace was Father Rodríguez. In 2014, at the behest of Perdomo, Rodríguez again tried to negotiate between the government and the gangs. But for reasons that still aren't clear, Perdomo turned against him and had Rodríguez arrested in July 2014 for smuggling phones into prisons. The government also released embarrassing recordings of the priest's telephone calls with imprisoned gang leaders. When Rodríguez left the country in September as part of a plea bargain to get him out of prison, most Salvadorans were glad to see him go.

His colleagues think he was betrayed. "Padre Toño [Rodríguez] did good work. His biggest mistake was confiding in government authorities, who stabbed him in the back," said González, who says it's still not clear what motivated the government's actions. "As some here have begun to say, a right-wing government kills priests, while a left-wing government throws them in jail."

San Martin, who took Rodríguez's place as head of the St. Francis parish, says Rodríguez was guilty by association.

"Anyone who gets close to the gangs is seen with suspicion. Padre Toño lived that in his own flesh," San Martin said. "Here in the parish people understood this better, as they'd seen his work and his dedication to resolving the problems."

San Martin’s parish continues its job-training program, but even the perfect job candidate can have problems if that person comes from the wrong neighborhood.

“When youth go to get a job, if they say they’re from a certain zone, the interview is over. If you say you’re from Montreal [a gang stronghold], you’re simply discarded,” San Martin said. “And if you can’t find a job, you’ve got three options. One, you accept that you’re going to live in absolute poverty without a future. Two, you get involved in the dynamics of delinquency that give you certain guarantees and protection. Or, three, you migrate.”

Javier Contreras, 19, learned bartending at a vocational training center.

The parish has had some success working with companies to develop openings for graduates of its training program, but sometimes even corporate goodwill is not enough to overcome demographics. “People have told me I should move if I want a job,” said Eduardo Javier Contreras, a 19-year-old graduate of the parish’s bartender training program. “Employers ask me where I live, and when I tell them they say that won’t work. Most bartenders work nights, and the employer gives you a ride home after closing. But no one wants to drive through my neighborhood.”

Life may get more difficult soon in Mejicanos. At the beginning of this year, the national legislature approved a packet of new laws strengthening the powers of police and prosecutors in the fight against gangs. Government officials told police officers—who wear ski masks when patrolling neighborhoods with gangs—that they need not worry about being second-guessed when they use their weapons to shoot gang members. Bodies of executed gang members started to appear along

roadsides, reminding many of the social cleansing carried out by death squads in decades past.

In Mejicanos the Passionist priests aren't easily scared off. They took charge of the St. Francis church in 1979, immediately following the martyrdom of two priests serving the parish. Although Father Rodríguez is gone, other members of the order remain. "It doesn't make sense to remember someone crucified 2,000 years ago if we don't accompany those who are crucified today," said San Martin.

Although the latest renewal of *mano dura* seems to be backed by many in San Salvador, some activists suggest such popular support constitutes an indictment of the church's failure to do its job.

"The church preaches what people want to hear, which is hope for personal salvation and forgiveness for their sins, not the sins of others," said Baptist pastor Arevalo. "The church responds to a religious market that doesn't demand a call to forgive our enemies or work for peace even at the cost of our lives. The market demands a vindictive god, a repressive god, so that's what the church offers."

Although it may not be popular, Arevalo and others continue working behind the scenes to make peace. They helped facilitate a new truce that gang leaders called a "unilateral gesture of goodwill." It took effect on January 17, and the results were evident immediately. According to the National Civilian Police, there was an average of 14.1 murders per day between January 1 and 17 of this year, but 7.6 murders per day between January 18 and 29. On January 22 there was no murder reported in the entire country—something that hadn't occurred in more than two years.

The Catholic bishops—all of them, not just Colindres—jumped on board February 1, announcing that they supported dialogue with the gangs. Auxiliary Bishop Gregorio Rosa Chávez announced the new posture, saying that gang members in El Salvador "have a right to be included, to be heard, for they are persons and they have families."

Rosa Chávez said the church wanted to "change the focus" of how society was responding to the gangs and criticized the repressive measures adopted by the government. "When one wants to find solutions to violence by using more violence, it won't work. We've got to break the molds and change paradigms, or else the deaths will keep piling up, increasing the pain of the families."

Rosa Chávez pointed out that the country’s civil war was finally brought to an end through dialogue between the government and rebel groups. “Why can’t we overcome violence today by following the same path?”