Stumbling toward peace in Colombia

Churches continue to work at the grassroots to see the peace deal implemented.

by Philip Jenkins in the January 16, 2019 issue

Wilmer Pérez, left, and Eder Cristian, right, former FARC militants who have become active in a church in a transition zone in Colombia. Religion News Service photo by Julia Friedmann.

Christian churches in the Global South are often deeply involved in their nation's politics to a degree that can puzzle North Americans. Such activism owes something to their distinctive theologies, but it chiefly reflects the extreme weakness of the state and official structures in those nations. You can hardly separate church from state when the state has become a cipher. In those cases, political leaders neglect religious concerns at their peril.

Recent events in Colombia illustrate this kind of deep political commitment. With a population of 50 million, Colombia is a major presence on the map of world Christianity. Its Roman Catholic population—some 35 to 40 million strong—is on a par with that of France and larger than Poland's, and only in 1991 did a new constitution end the church's established position as the official state religion. A flourishing Catholic devotional life focuses on several vastly popular shrines and pilgrimage places. There are in addition perhaps 8 million Protestants, chiefly Pentecostals and evangelicals.

Those churches have long had to deal with daily threats of violence and terrorism. Leftist guerrilla movements emerged in the 1960s, some inspired by liberation theology, and one group in particular, FARC—the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia—became a potent rival to the state. Particularly traumatic was FARC's use of kidnapping to raise funds, a tactic that created a grave sense of danger among families owning even modest property. FARC activities inspired a homicidal response from far right militias and death squads, which adopted the slogan "Death to Kidnappers." Alongside those forces were the legendary depredations of drug lords and cocaine cartels.

By the 1990s, the country was in chaos, with much of the territory outside government control. Those struggles resulted in an estimated 250,000 dead and missing, and they displaced 7 million people, many of whom fled to the slums of Bogotá and Medellín. FARC and its allies killed many Catholic priests, including Cali's archbishop, Isaías Duarte Cancino.

As the government lost prestige and power, the churches, both Protestant and Catholic, gained ever more popular respect. The Catholic Church especially remained the one truly national institution, with parishes and churches in every remote corner of the country. Catholic clergy naturally played a critical role in everyday life, while the hierarchy encouraged a lengthy peace process. As talks between the various factions dragged on in Cuba, clergy intervened regularly to ensure that delegates never forgot the victims of violence.

Pope Francis made peace in Colombia one of his most cherished goals, and his visit to Havana in 2015 contributed to a breakthrough. Under a comprehensive peace agreement, rightist groups would dissolve, and FARC would renounce violence. FARC activists would receive lenient treatment, allowing the movement to evolve into a legitimate political party. This wonderful development ensured that Colombian

president Juan Manuel Santos won the 2016 Nobel Peace Prize.

But consummating the agreement proved difficult, and at every stage religious politics and concerns were central. Before it could be formally implemented, the deal had to be approved in a referendum, which provoked a bitter national debate. Despite the role of church leaders in promoting the deal, many Catholics (including clergy) were appalled at the generous treatment accorded to FARC members, who had carried out so many heinous attacks.

Much to the shock of the governments and international agencies that had so painstakingly brokered the peace, Colombia's surging culture wars threatened further disruption. In recent years, Colombia has adopted quite progressive policies in matters of gender and sexuality, and the country legalized same-sex marriage in 2016. Such developments deeply alienated conservative Catholics and especially evangelicals, who mobilized to fight the peace agreement that the government desired so strongly. Some opponents claimed that the peace deal contained clauses that would advance LGBT rights; others protested that the deal omitted any specific reference to God or Jesus. This passionate resistance was enough to swing the referendum vote against the peace deal. The hair's-breadth decision—opponents of the deal won with just 50.2 percent—would certainly have been different without the campaigning on culture war issues.

Even so, the churches continue to be active, and the Vatican pressed all sides to continue the peace process. The government soon signed a revised peace deal with FARC, so that at long last, peace now prevails in Colombia. Pope Francis made a special point of visiting the country in 2017 to defuse remaining grievances and especially to soothe the continued grievances of conservative critics. He appealed to those conservatives by beatifying priests murdered by FARC.

But it is at grassroots levels that the churches have been most active in reconciliation work. Throughout the country, priests have had to deal with the problems of thousands of former guerrillas in search of homes and jobs, and more particularly, of peace and forgiveness. Only such efforts can bring true peace to one of Latin America's most important nations.

A version of this article appears in the print edition under the title "Brokering peace in Colombia."