

# Visit to Colombia, Venezuela and Ecuador



National Council of  
Churches of Christ USA  
and  
Church World Service

## ECUMENICAL LEADERS FROM THE UNITED STATES VISIT COLOMBIA, VENEZUELA, AND ECUADOR

Ecumenical leaders from the National Council of Churches of Christ and from Church World Service of the United States visited Colombia, Venezuela, and Ecuador from August 21-30, 2010 so that United States churches could come to know the reality of the displaced victims of violence and Colombian refugees in the region as well as to talk with leaders from churches and civil society and Congressional and government representatives to explore ways of working together to achieve peace in Colombia and lessen tension in the Andean region. The visit was organized by The National Council of Churches of Christ (USA), Church World Service, the National Boards of the Latin American Council of Churches (CLAI) of the countries visited, the Ecumenical Network on Latin America for Migration, Refugees, and Displaced People as well as the Church and Society Observatory of the Reformed University in Colombia.

The ecumenical delegation was comprised of the Rev. Dr. Michael Kinnamon, General Secretary of the National Council of Churches of Christ in the USA (NCC); Bishop Johncy Itty, President of the Board of Directors of Church World Service of the United States (CWS); Rev. José Luis Casal, Secretary of the Executive Committee of NCC and General Missioner of the Presbytery of Tres Ríos of the Presbyterian Church (USA); and David Leslie, President of the Ecumenical Committee on Immigration of the NCC and CWS and Executive Director of Ecumenical Ministries in Oregon. They were accompanied by leaders of churches and universities interested in the Andean region: Rev. Dr. Matt Samson, Professor of Anthropology at Davidson University in North Carolina; Rev. Dr. Dale Patterson, Pastor of the Hackberry Creek Presbyterian Church; Nancy Cecilia Casal, National Moderator of Presbyterian Hispanic/Latina Women in the United States; and Ian Leslie, a student of Political Science and International Relations at the University of Oregon.



Rev. Casal and Dr. Kinnamon with  
Methodist pastors in Bogotá

strengthening relations with Latin America and their support for overcoming the humanitarian crisis in Colombia.



The ecumenical delegation at the monument  
of Simón Bolívar in the Central Park in Caracas



The delegation with the Minister of Defense of Colombia (to the left of Dr. Kinnamon)

The delegation, along with leaders of the churches in Colombia, was received by Dr. Rodrigo Rivera, the Colombian Minister of Defense. The Minister shared the government's perspective in relation to the armed conflict that continues in Colombia and confirmed that they have open arms to dialogue for peace that should be preceded by the cessation of armed actions and terrorist activities and the laying down of all arms by the guerrilla groups. The delegation of leaders from the United States shared their worries about the amount and destination of United States military assistance to Colombia and their desire that a majority of the assistance be humanitarian aid for those affected by the conflict. The same message was presented to the officers of the US Embassy in Bogotá. There the delegation was received by the Chargé de Affairs, Mr. S. Ken Yamashita;

the Political Counselor, Mr. Mark A. Wells; and the Adviser for Human Rights, Ms. Amanda Porter. Mr. Yamashita spoke about the search for peace in Colombia, signaling that the principle objective should be the repairing of the social fabric that has been significantly weakened by the long protracted conflict. Mr. Wells added that peace talks should happen in many different sectors, including the social, economic, religious, and political sectors. Dr. Kinnamon, the General Secretary of the NCCC(USA) responded by saying that the churches in the United States joined in one voice for the search for peace for Colombia and the region in which all these sectors are present.

The delegation also met with representatives of the following groups, Colombia-Europe-United States Coordination Group for Human Rights, with the organization of Mingas, and with the Inter-Ecclesial Commission for Justice and Peace. The delegation heard the testimonies of displaced persons from the region of Cacarica. They also visited the Roman Catholic Bishop's Conference. The group also met with leaders of the organization Colombians for Peace and Senator Piedad Córdoba of the Liberal Party. The Senator gave a report on the recently discovered mass graves in the region of La Macarena and also requested assistance from the delegation in visiting Colombian paramilitaries incarcerated in the United States who fear for the lives of their families in Colombia.



The delegation visiting the Roman-Catholic Episcopal Conference of Colombia in Bogota

On the way to Venezuela, the delegation met with representatives of ecumenical organizations and leaders of churches in Medellín who informed them about the situation in that populous city. They told of their possible work together for the defense of the displaced peoples inside the city and with refugees in the border areas with Venezuela and Ecuador, as well as the support the churches and civil society in moving forward the process for peace in Colombia.



Members of the delegation in a live radio program in Caracas, Venezuela

**In Caracas, Venezuela**, the delegation met with leaders of churches in Venezuela to strengthen ecumenical relations and to understand the reality of the country.

The delegation had the opportunity to meet with the Vice Chancellor and Vice Minister for Foreign Affairs Temir Porras Poncelaón, who shared information about the main issues on the Venezuelan government's agenda in relation to its neighboring countries and with regard to the relations between Venezuela

and the United States. At one point in the conversation, the Vice Minister stressed that the ideals of the Bolivarian government of Venezuela are in line with the principles of the Gospel of Jesus Christ, and showed an openness to the participation of Protestant and Evangelical churches in the construction of a new society in which they are engaged in the Bolivarian government of the country.



The delegation with the Vice-Minister for Women's Development, Dr. Nora Castañeda

The delegation was also received by the Vice Minister for Women's Development and President of the Women's Bank, Dr. Nora Castañeda who offered a comprehensive and detailed perspective on the opportunities that the Bolivarian government offered women for their intellectual, economic, and social development. At one point in the conversation the Vice Minister affirmed that the principles used in her programs for working with women are the same that are present in the Word of God.



From here the delegation left for the Fabricio Ojeda Endogenous Center, where they were given a detailed look at the different plans for community development that the Center offers. The leaders of the Center stressed that self-sustainability and self-development are central concepts to the work of the development centers like theirs that exist throughout the country.



The National Assembly of People's Power was the setting for a meeting with ECUVIVE, a Venezuelan ecumenical organization that takes care of the needs of refugees, principally Colombian, that are present in the country. The delegation received detailed information about the conditions of refugees and displaced persons in Venezuela. The next day, the Director of International Relations of the National Assembly of People's Power guided the group on a tour of the Capitolio, the birthplace of Simón Bolívar, and other places of interest in historical Caracas. A meeting with the group Colombians for Peace in Venezuela closed the

circle of meetings and visits in this country.

**In Quito, Ecuador** the delegation participated in a workshop analyzing the situation of Colombian refugees in Ecuador organized by CLAI which included ecumenical leaders in Quito, representatives of non-governmental organizations that work in human rights and with migrants, as well as representatives of the government who work in the area of refugees and migrants.



Dr. Kinnamon and Bishop Itty addressing the workshop about Colombian refugees in Quito, Ecuador at the offices of CLAI

At that meeting, Dr. Kinnamon, General Secretary of the NCC, outlined a plan of six points that opened a line of work between this organization and CLAI. Between the points outlined, Dr. Kinnamon stressed the desire to inform and orient the churches of the United States about the reality of the problems of internal displacement and Colombian refugees in the area and the need to advocate to the United States government for an increase in humanitarian aid instead of the disproportionately high military aid. The Rev. Nilton Giese, General Secretary of CLAI responded to his counterpart suggesting a meeting at the border in order to make bilateral decisions regarding new forms of cooperation to resolve the

grave problems that originate from the displaced persons and refugees in the area. Giese explained to the visitors that the long-term solution to the conflicts in this region would not be solved by military presence, “what the region needs is economic investment, the presence of governmental services that favored the development of communities and the creation of better means of access for trade to make possible a reevaluation of the traditional agricultural products so that they may be an alternative to growing coca.”

As an excellent close to the meetings to these three countries, the delegation, together with Ecuadoran leaders and leaders of CLAI, were invited by the Chancellor and Minister for Foreign Affairs of Ecuador, Dr. Ricardo Patiño to a luncheon at the headquarters of the Foreign Ministry. In that conversation the Chancellor spoke about relations between Ecuador, Venezuela, and Colombia as well as relations with Cuba and, of course, with the United States. The Chancellor had positive words to say about the new Colombian government in the search for a regional peace and he asked the delegation to join the efforts to achieve a genuine and lasting peace in Colombia. He questioned the need for a North American military presence through the



From right to left, Dr. Kinnamon, the Ecuadorean Chancellor, Dr. Ricardo Patiño and some of his advisers



Lunch with the Ecuadorean Chancellor

seven bases that are being used in Colombia, to which Dr. Kinnamon responded that “the National Council of Churches of Christ does not support the construction of military bases in Colombia. On the contrary we will take our voices to the different levels of the administration in which we have a presence asking that the majority of the economic aid from our country to Latin America may go to projects of humanitarian aid, the environment, and social welfare.”

As an end to the visit, a joint statement is in process which calls for a “shared global security” in which the investment in arms gives way to an investment in resources for development. It calls for US foreign aid to focus on humanitarian aid, with

an emphasis in the problems that exist because of the violation of human rights in Latin America, especially in Colombia, Mexico and Honduras. It calls for a normalization of the relations with Cuba, the elimination of the economic embargo and a review of the case of five Cubans imprisoned in US jails. It also emphasizes the need for continued humanitarian aid for the reconstruction of Haiti.

The document establishes the need for Immigration Reform in the United States and also in Latin American countries such as Mexico, Costa Rica, and the Dominican Republic, holding up the ideal of the “universal citizenship.” It invites a change in focus in the war on drugs where the problem is analyzed in an integral, comprehensive way - including the issue of consumption. The document also warns of world climate change, calling for respect and care of creation, underlining the responsibility of churches within the process. The document ends with an invitation to continue these interchanges in the future for the benefit of both regions and for the churches in Latin America and in the United States of America.



Bishop Itty officiating in an Episcopal church in Quito, Ecuador. On the left, Rev. Nilton Giese, CLAI’s General Secretary

**Rev. Milton Mejía**  
**Observatory of Church and Society**  
**Reformed University of Colombia, Barranquilla**

**Rev. Jose Luís Casal**  
**National Council of Churches USA**