

Bridging a Divided Church

Introduction This is a July 2, 2008, *Christian Peacemaker Team (CPT)* net release by Pierre Shantz about an interfaith delegation which he and Sandra Rincon led. His reflection and CPT pictures are used with permission.

Since [Martin Luther](#) initiated a reformation in the 16th century, Catholics and Protestants have argued and fought, sometimes to the death, about whose church shall lead us to salvation. In many contexts it is impossible to hold an ecumenical service because one tradition will not recognize the other. Colombia is no different. Resentment on both sides has pushed a great divide between the two.

The Catholic Church has held the reigns of religious and state power, excluding the Protestants. Up until 1991 the Colombian constitution recognized the Catholic Church as the only church. Meanwhile, entering Latin America with a message that Catholics are idol worshipers, Protestants have managed to make the word Christian synonymous with Protestant. The Protestant church used theology of resignation as a political strategy to counter the spiritual awakening of liberation theology.

In the past several years efforts at reconciliation have borne some

fruit. Anabaptist churches in Colombia and the Conference of Bishops have held meetings sharing statements of apology and recognizing pain and hurt.

Recently our team in Colombia hosted a delegation of leaders from the [Colombian Mennonite Church](#) and a mix of priests, scholars, and candidates from the [Basilian community of Colombia](#). Both groups are part of CPT’s support community, yet as co-leaders

Sandra and I prepared to lead this mixed delegation. We

felt nervous, wondering whether these Catholics and Protestants would integrate. The first day or so, we didn’t see so much interaction happening. But our fears didn’t last long. On

the outing to the rural area, the delegation quickly joined together in planning a time of prayer with the community they were visiting. Then in the evening both Mennonites and Catholics laughed together, sang songs, and poked fun at each other — sharing stereotypical jokes about each others’ churches.



Representatives of the Mennonite Church, Congregation of St. Basil, and Jesuit Community discuss peacemaking in Colombia.

“I was expecting a bunch of old, bald, robe wearing stuffy priests” expressed one of the Mennonites. “I was expecting Bible thumping religious fanatics” said one of the Basilians. At one of the closing reflection times, I shared that I felt privileged to be part of a group that can laugh and poke fun at their own churches and doctrines. What is taken seriously is the common faith and understanding that God is Love and on the side of Justice.

The delegation ended with a public action including aspects of both traditions. Both Pastor and Priest prayed for and blessed the bread that everyone present shared. In a context where an “ecumenical Eucharist” is eyed with skepticism, this simple act of breaking bread together reminded us why we all are Christian. In the end Catholics and Protestants in Colombia still go to different churches. Some even look at the other with dislike. But this delegation of 14 Mennonites and Basilians broke the stereotypes and shared the true identity of whom we are.

(See [photo album](#) of this CPT bridge building delegation.)

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