



Peace Sunday 2019 Worship Resources

Prepared by the
MWC Peace
Commission for
22 September 2019

Theme and texts

a. Theme:

**A peace that
surpasses all
understanding...**

b. Why this theme was chosen:

Nelson Mandela is credited with saying that “something always seems impossible until it’s done.” Sometimes our pursuit toward peace seems unrealistic. Sometimes we cannot imagine how it might be achieved. And yet, we are called to pursue peace even if and when it does not make sense. And sometimes amazing and wondrous things happen when our conduct is worthy of the gospel of Christ (Philippians 1:27).

This year’s Peace Sunday resources will focus on those times when the peace of Christ surpasses what we may perceive as impossible – in short, a peace that surpasses all understanding.

c. Biblical text:

Philippians 4:6–7

Other texts:
Isaiah 12:2–6;
Luke 1:46–55

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Prayer Request

- As many of our governments around the world have recently undergone elections, we pray for new and reaffirmed leaders. May they be wise, would renounce the allure of power, cooperate with others, and seek the peace and wellbeing of all their citizens. May we remember that God’s reign surpasses borders.
- “For he is our peace; in his flesh he has made both groups into one and has broken down the dividing wall, that is, the hostility between us” (Ephesians 2:14). May we rely on the Holy Spirit to make us people of peace who follow Christ in breaking down hostility between people who disagree.
- “There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear.... those who love God must love their brothers and sisters also” (1 John 4:18a, 21b). May we receive the love of God and out of the overflow of his grace, love other. In so doing, may we triumph over fear and divisions.
- In Colombia, the government is neglecting to deliver on the aid and development terms of the peace process that called an end to a half-century of armed conflict with a Marxist inspired group, FARC. Pray for the will to fulfill the peace accord. Pray that violent actors would lay down their arms.
- “As a world-wide community of faith and life we transcend boundaries of nationality, race, class, gender and language. We seek to live in the world without conforming to the powers of evil, witnessing to God’s grace by serving others, caring for creation, and inviting all people to know Jesus Christ as Saviour and Lord” (MWC Shared Conviction 7).



JKI Injil Kerajaan

May God help people whose current reality is unsustainable, forcing them to look for other options. May God grant friendly and welcoming arms to those searching for hope. May God release people from anxiety about welcoming new brothers and sisters.

- May God help us listen to perspectives of those on the margins of society. May we see God’s story through the lenses of those who are oppressed. May this perspective help us to better understand the good news that transforms us and brings peace.



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Song Suggestions

From the MWC PA 2015 International Songbook:

- #37 O Senhor É A Minha Força
- #9 Woza Nomthwala Wakho
- #22 Kirisuto No Heiwa
- #24 La Paz de la Tierra
- #53 Nothing is Lost on the Breath of God
- #1 Ewe, Thina (sending) adapted by Neal Blough:

Let us follow in his footsteps. Let us follow in his footsteps. (4X)
 1. On the cross he conquered the forces of evil
 2. The empty tomb is the guarantee of our freedom... Let us follow in his footsteps

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Additional resources

www.mwc-cmm.org/peacesunday

a. Additional resources in this package

- Gathering/ Benediction (p. 3)
- Prayers and hymns (p. 5)
- Sermon Notes (p. 8)
- Stories and Reflections (p. 12)

b. Additional resources available online:

- Pictures (including all used in this package)



Bahati Mutabesha



Henk Stenvers



Ebenezer Mondéz

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Activities

- **Worship circle** – Have the whole congregation, or children’s group, arrange themselves in a circle. When the circle is created, spend some time praying, singing, or sharing the ways people have experienced peace or hope for peace within their community or the world.
- **Peace tree collage** – Post or attach a tree trunk on a wall (perhaps with Philippians 4:6–7 on it). Give colourful sticky notes to members of the congregation, or children’s group, so that they can write or draw how they have seen peace embodied or practiced in the past year. Invite them to place these sticky notes onto the trunk and/or branches in order to create a colourful tree.
- **Silent meditation** – Spend time in silence praying for peace and justice for our world.
- **Prayer walk** – Walk through the neighbourhood, stopping to pray for the community in different places. Focus particularly on areas where there has been violence.

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Suggested liturgies for gathering and benediction

Call to Worship: (A, B, or C)

A. Listen to the invitation of the prophet Isaiah:

Come, let us go up to the mountain of the Lord,
to the house of the God of Jacob; that he may
teach us his ways.

He shall judge between the nations, and shall
arbitrate for many peoples;

They shall beat their swords into ploughshares,
and their spears into pruning hooks.

Nation shall not lift up sword against nation,
neither shall they learn war any more.¹

(Based on Isaiah 2:3-4)

Let us pray...

B. Welcome to you who are poor in spirit!

Welcome to you who mourn!

Welcome to you who hunger and thirst for justice!

Welcome to you who are peacemakers!

Welcome to you who suffer and endure what
cannot be endured in the name of Jesus
Christ!

God, in Jesus, wishes each one of you welcome.

It is he who wants to bear the burdens of our days
with us.

Let us open ourselves up to his presence this
morning, so that his joy will grip us by the
grace of his Spirit!

Let us pray...²



**Conferência Intermenonita em Angola celebrated
Peace Sunday 2018. Photo: Gomes Miranda.**

C. Antiphonal reading followed by songs and prayers of praise:

Group A: Come, let us praise the Lord

Group B: May our spirits rejoice in God, our
Savior.

Group A: God, the All Powerful, has done great
things for us. His name is holy.

Group B: His mercy is for those who fear him from
generation to generation.

Group A: God has brought down kings from their
thrones and lifted up the lowly.

Group B: He has filled the hungry with good
things and sent the rich away empty.

All: Let us glorify the Lord. Let us rejoice in God,
our Savior.³

(Based on Luke 1:46-55)

(Janie Blough, France)

¹ Ruth C. Duck and Maren C. Triabassi, eds. *Touch Holiness* (Cleveland: Pilgrim Press, 1990), 3, quoted by Arlene M. Mark, ed., *Words for Worship* (Scottsdale, Pa.: Herald Press, 1996), 5.

² Silvie Hege, ed., *Paroles et prières pour le culte*, Editions Mennonite, 11.

³ *Ibid*, 2.



Sending Prayer

Lord, God of justice and peace, help us to beat our swords into ploughshares, and our spears into pruning hooks.

Guide us from doubt to faith and from death to resurrection. Transform our despair into hope and lead us from fear to confidence.

Encourage us to pray and work together, to laugh and cry, to give and receive, to dream and act.

May our hearts, the world and the universe be filled with your love, your peace, your pardon, and your blessing.

(From Antoine Nous, La Galette et la cruche, prayers and celebrations, tome 3, Réveil Publications, 2002, 151)

Benediction

May the peace of God that passes all that we can imagine keep your hearts and your thoughts in the knowledge of the love of God and of his Son, Jesus Christ, our Lord; and may the blessing of God the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit remain with you forever. Amen.

(Janie Blough, France)



**Mennonite Church Jhilmila Saraipali, a congregation of
Bhartiya General Conference Mennonite Church celebrates
Peace Sunday 2017 in India. Photo: Vikal Rao.**



Prayers and hymns

Prayer for Peace Sunday

Thanksgiving

Thank you, Lord God, for giving us free access to you in prayer.

Through prayer, you give us the freedom of expression without fear, because you are our Father of peace,

O God, who can be compared to you?

From age to age you are God and you reign in absolute peace,

Yes, you are Yahweh *Shalom*, Eternal peace.

You are also called the Prince of peace.

You are peace and the source of peace, you bathe in eternal peace.

And those who obtain peace incarnate your image of peace, because they are called your sons and daughters.

Confession of our sins

And yet, God, we have not reflected this image.

We have not always obtained this peace,

Yes, we repent of the sins we have committed against peace.

We ask forgiveness from those we have offended and harmed, those among whom we have caused discord and division.

We ask forgiveness for pride, jealousy, ambition and greed that sometimes resulted in being unfaithful to our mission as peacemakers.

By way of repentance, we offer ourselves anew as a living sacrifice, acceptable to God to promote the divine plan of love, pardon, reconciliation and peace to every human. Give us this grace.

God of mercy, give us your eyes of compassion and mercy to see the terrible ordeals of humanity: wars, terrorism, refugees, floods of immigrants, famine. Come and help us in our indifference.

Prayer for unity

O God of peace.

We pray that each local church and all of the churches together will commit themselves totally for peace in the world,

for justice and the integrity of creation, for the rights of those who are weakest and for the needs of those who are marginalized.

As you prayed for us to be one, yes, we want to be one.

We pray for the unity of Christians according to the will of Christ,

that rivalries among us would disappear so that we might live in communion and be a sign of the unity desired by God for the family, for the church, and for society;

that we might be more effectively committed to peace and the total well being of humanity.

Yes, God our Father, whose goodness surpasses all goodness, in you we find peace, tranquility, and harmony.

Reconcile your divided servants; grant us your Spirit of unity that we may be one.

Make us one in love and fraternal communion; one among ourselves and one with others; one in the peace that comes from you and brings harmony to all things; one in the grace, love and mercy of your beloved Son who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit.



The Mennonite Brethren church in Malawi celebrates Peace Sunday 2018. Photo: Bahati Mutabesha.



Prayer for tolerance

Prince of peace!

Grant that we might be peacemakers. You told us to love without exclusion.

Grant that your church might be disposed and available to know and appreciate the values of other religions, to dialogue with them and all men and women of good will, so that all nations and peoples will understand each other and work for peace.

We pray that we ourselves and all of our fellow humans might grow in respect for the dignity of the person and their inalienable rights.

Holy God, you have bound us together in a common life. Help us, in the heart of our battles for justice and truth, not to confront each other in hatred and bitterness, but on the contrary, to work together in tolerance and respect.

Yes, Lord, imprint on us your love for those who are different from us.

Prayer for the environment

God, Creator of the universe and all things, our profound peace also depends on the good management of our environment.

You made us your partners and co-workers, trusting us and entrusting us with your creation.

Give us wisdom and respect to use natural resources in such a way that nothing will suffer from our abuses and that creation will not turn against us by way of uncontrollable upheavals, but that as a result of good management, future generations might praise you for your goodness and the gift of creation.



Celebrating World Fellowship Sunday 2018 in the Philippines.
Photo: Xander De Leon

Supplication

O Lord God, in view of all that we have submitted to you, we want to have certainty, peace and tranquility because you reassure us that we have nothing to fear, absolutely nothing, because you are God.

You know our needs even before we tell you.

Nevertheless, it pleases us to call on you because you are our Father.

Grant us your peace, not like the peace the world gives, but the peace that penetrates soul and spirit, joints and marrows, feelings and thoughts of the heart; the peace that shapes our intelligence and fills our thoughts with all that is true, all that is honourable, all that is right, all that is pure, all that is kind, all that merits approval, that is virtuous and worthy of praise.

O Eternal One, fill our beings with the values that form the basis of true peace, genuine peace in the image of the Prince of peace. Amen.

(Siaka Traoré, Burkina Faso)



Prayer of confession of faith, commitment and consecration

Prayer 1: Commitment to peace

O sovereign Lord, your way is the way of peace.

Blessed is the one who walks in it, because on this path we find mercy, love, justice, humility, obedience and patience.

Peace clothes the naked, feeds the hungry, gives a drink to those who are thirsty, takes care of the poor, reproves, threatens, comforts and admonishes. She is sober, honest, chaste and upright in all her ways. None takes offense at her and she leads to eternal life.

(Menno Simons 1496-1561)

“The Twenty Fifth Psalm Explained by Way of Supplication,” (1537)

Prayer 2: You will always be with me

I trust in you, Lord, for I know that you are a faithful God for all who trust in you.

When I am in darkness, you are my life.

When I am in prison, you are with me.

When I am abandoned, you comfort me.

When I am in death, you are my life.

When others curse me, you bless me.

When they afflict me, you reassure me.

When they beat me, you lift me up.

And even if I walk in the dark valley, you will always be with me.

(Menno Simons 1496-1561)

“The Twenty Fifth Psalm Explained by Way of Supplication,” (1537)

Hymn

Like A River Glorious

1. Like a river glorious, is God’s perfect peace,
Over all victorious, in its bright increase;
Perfect, yet it floweth, fuller every day,
Perfect, yet it groweth, deeper all the way.

Chorus:

Stayed upon Jehovah, hearts are fully blest,
Finding, as he promised, perfect peace and rest.

2. Hidden in the hollow of His blessed hand,
Never foe can follow, never traitor stand;
Not a surge of worry, not a shade of care,
Not a blast of hurry touch the spirit there.

3. Every joy or trial falleth from above,
Traced upon our dial by the sun of love;
We may trust him fully all for us to do.
They who trust him wholly find him wholly true.

4. True pleasures abound in, the rapturous sound;
And who’ver hath found it, hath paradise found.
My Lord Jesus to know and feel His blood flow
'Tis life everlasting, 'tis heaven below.

Yet onward I haste to the heavenly feast:
That, that is the fullness; but this is the taste!

(Frances R. Havergal, England)



Sermon Notes

**“A peace that passes all understanding”
“The peace that surpasses all understanding”**

Sermon notes for Peace Sunday
–Rebeca González Torres (Mexico)

Background to the Letter

The Writer

This is a profound letter written by Paul. Rarely do we take the time to think about the conditions under which this letter was written in Philippi, but it is important to analyze the context of the author a bit in order to understand the why and the intentions behind the words.

Paul is sent to prison, not for a crime like endangering public safety or slandering a fellow citizen, but for preaching the gospel. His faithfulness to his calling and vocation lead him into an extreme situation that results in a prison sentence. His stay in prison while awaiting trial and a verdict creates such uncertainty about the future for him that it comes through in his words, “dying is gain” (Philippians 1:20-24). Just as death is a preferable outcome for any prisoner under extreme conditions, the challenge becomes to remain alive and make sense of suffering. Paul’s conviction about his mission and purpose in life enables him to overcome the situation and go beyond himself so that the mission can be accomplished in spite of the circumstances (1:12-14).

Paul refers to two people who are accompanying him during this difficult time. One is Timothy (Philippians 1:1) and the other is Epaphroditus (2:25) who is sent as Paul’s representative to the church and from whom he received help in his hour of need.



**Celebrating World Fellowship Sunday 2019 in the Netherlands.
Photo: Jacob H Kikkert.**

The Setting

There are a number of first-century literary texts that speak about ancient prisons. They were cramped spaces, with little air movement, over-crowded, dark, gross and unsanitary. Prisoners were subjected to physical and mental torture, chained up with irons about their hands, feet and neck. They were under military guard and sometimes even chained to a soldier. Execution was often delayed in order to torture the prisoner more, allowing them to live with uncertainty as to when they will be condemned (Philippians 1:20). Prestigious prisoners had it better since they were free of chains. However, according to the testimony in Acts (16:22-24), the imprisonment of Paul and Silas was not that of the privileged classes. So, this gives us an idea of what kind of experience Paul was living through as he wrote this letter.



The Recipients

This letter is written to the church in Philippi, mainly addressed to the bishops, deacons and other interested parties. The use of words like bishops and deacons indicates that the Church was already fairly organized with some kind of established structure. It is possible that this organization was influenced by the structure of other Greek groups (1:1-2). It is a church that was founded by Paul and to which he feels very close (4:1). The letter is full of compliments and words of love and friendship (1:3,12). Something that stands out in the letter is the invocation to rejoice which makes us ask: How can Paul invoke joy and urge his readers to rejoice while being in the predicament that he is in? Another question that arises is: What difficulties have led this church, which has provided so much satisfaction to Paul, to lose their joy so that Paul must call them to recover or maintain it?

Loving another with whom one has a history full of experiences, satisfactions and mutual growth is what can urge one to put one's self aside and think about the other even under hurtful and risky conditions, as was the case with Paul. This is one of the reasons why Paul is not thinking about where he is, or his possible death, or the daily suffering of this terrible place. His concern for others is what motivates him to write and encourage them to continue growing until they reach their goal (3:12-15).

I would like to highlight three important ideas that this letter shows us are of concern to Paul:

1. To be careful of religious people who impose rituals (the Jews) as if this were more important than following Jesus (3:1-10);
2. To continue to be joyful in the Lord (3:1); and
3. To demonstrate his gratitude for all the support that they have given him during these difficult times by sending them Epaphroditus (2:25-30).

It is through these lenses that we can enter into the text for this year that invites us to review and find important dimensions of the peace that surpasses all understanding.

Philippians 4:6-7

Introduction

What crisis situations exist in life that will lead us to experience the peace of God?

Reina is the name of a Cameroonian woman who braved the journey from her country, as many others do, in order to pursue the "American Dream" that she believed would result in an abundant life and well being. The first country where she landed was Brazil. Here she could stay for a year and one half, working and saving money so that she could continue her journey towards the USA. She tells how difficult it was because she could not speak Portuguese. But she learned it and her will and dressmaking skills enabled her to work as an upholsterer. In this way she was able to earn a bit of money and also make some friends.

She started her journey through Latin America, suffering hardship, hunger and dangers. Soon her money was up and she asked a Brazilian friend to lend her \$100 USD that she promised to pay back. In this way she was able to continue. The journey was long and filled with danger. She says that in Panama she was given only one hour to cross the country, and she was deported many times before she managed it. She says that the most dangerous country for her was Colombia. It was risky passing through guerilla zones and crossing abandoned places and she saw many people around her die. In Nicaragua, she was robbed and was given only a handful of rice when someone had compassion on her. There were many good people in Mexico who helped her, but there were also places that had to be traversed very carefully.

When she finally got to the border, she applied for asylum and was taken to a detention center where she stayed for one year (GEO Detention Center in Aurora, Colorado).



There she had everything she needed. She learned more Spanish and some English. Even so, relationships were difficult because she had no family and no future. She couldn't keep her process going because she had no identification papers. She thought that they were stolen from her along the way. But, her faith increased and she had hope that God would help her. A stranger by the name of Maria, who lived in the USA, offered to help her and be her support, but for that she needed identification.

And not just in those who experience it, but that they are also moved to inspire and motivate those around them to live and experience that peace that only comes from above? But, how is does this peace come about?

I. A call to experience this peace that passes all understanding.

Paul is in prison, in chains, under conditions that probably most of us have never experienced. In any critical situation two ways of living with the difficulties can be observed: a) Be the victim: only look at yourself, suffer for yourself and tell all those around you how much you are suffering so that they see your condition. Be a victim and wait for others around you to move because of what has happened to you, or b) Take care of yourself and get to work. Another way, be concerned about yourself while always thinking about those around you and those who are left out.

A crisis situation creates uncertainty and pain about the future (it could be physical or emotional). However, love for others, be it for family, friends, church, etc., enables the person to overcome the situation and leads to deep reflections on their own behalf and on behalf of those around them. It is the presence of God that nourishes and orients, producing a peace that can be felt, making the impossible possible; a peace that allows the heart to trust, be secure, be saved and be well, in spite of the circumstances.

The chains, the military watch, the physical space of prison, the uncertainty about the sentence – whether life or death – do not prevent Paul from lifting his eyes and seeing his beloved brothers and sisters in Philippi and being concerned for them.



Peace Sunday 2017 celebrations at Mtshabezi Brethren In Christ Church in Zimbabwe. Photo: Sibonokuhle Ncube.

Reina didn't have any and she asked only one thing, that Maria call her friend in Brazil to tell her that she has not forgotten her debt and that when she leaves the detention center she will work to pay back what she owes. It is in this way that Maria called Brazil, explained Reina's situation and to her great surprise discovered that Reina left her identification in Brazil! A miracle! This enabled the process to continue and allowed Reina to be released to continue her political asylum process. At every turn in the story, the phrase "Only God" would come out of her mouth. With every situation that she mentioned she would say, "Only God saves, heals, cares for, loves and frees." She said it with such conviction and firmness, and her eyes shone with the joy, surprise and admiration that goes with seeing the miracle in every situation where God intervened. There was no human explanation, only the sincere faith in the One in whom she believes.

How can there be so much peace in the midst of so much suffering?



II. How this deep peace comes about

Accompanying with love and friendship

Paul is accompanied by Timothy, and he tells us about this in different moments and circumstance, including now in prison. It would seem that the condition of prisoner allows him to have the presence of Timothy. He also received Epaphroditus (3:25-27) who represents the beloved church in Philippi. They send resources to meet Paul's needs and through Epaphroditus he receives the affection that the church sends to him (4:15-17).

Reconciliation (4:2-3)

Paul pleads with his loyal companion (whose name is not mentioned) to be a mediator for two women who worked with Clement and others in forming a group to preach the gospel. Now Euodia and Scyntyche have their differences and are separated. Paul in prison knows about this and sends these lines to promote reconciliation. He understands the importance of people living in the peace of God through dialogue and reconciliation.

Rejoicing (4:4-5)

The situation in prison does not stop him from rejoicing as he remembers the church that he loves and he asks them too to rejoice in the Lord, insisting: "Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice." This insistence is a call to pay attention and do it. The chains cannot limit the joy that our memories of close relationships with people far away produce.

Do not worry but pray (4:6)

Paul could be communicating worry in this letter, but it is the complete opposite. The letter reflects a Paul who trusts fully in the Lord in the midst of his adversity. Even though the circumstances are difficult and the future is very uncertain, he trusts and has faith in the Lord.

With all of the above we can experience that deep peace that surpasses all understanding.

III. The surpassing peace

Verse 7 begins with an "And", the purpose of which is to show what it means to experience the peace that surpasses all understanding.

"And", means: Accompany in love and friendship, be reconciled, express joy, don't worry; rather, pray. All of this leads to an experience of the peace that surpasses all understanding.

This declaration comes out of extreme conditions like: the prison of Paul, the route Reina traveled through Latin America while facing the threat of death, the 16th-century Anabaptists who could sing in the face of death and historical figures near and far who, through their life and witness, demonstrate the peace that passes all understanding.

Conclusion

Today, extreme situations can be found in every land and context. This beautiful passage echoes in our lives again calling us to live the peace that passes all understanding and guarding our hearts in Jesus Christ, who is our Lord.

What extreme situation do you live with in your context when this profound peace of God is felt?

May you bear witness to your experiences of the peace that surpasses all understanding in the midst of crisis and conflict that life produces.



**Honouring local church leaders at Renewal 2027
in Costa Rica in 2019. Photo: Liesa Unger.**



Stories and Reflections

**Lessons from the crossfire:
Remaining faithful to God’s peace**
–Andrea Moya (Colombia)

Colombia is in the early stages of a peace process signed in late 2016 between the largest guerilla group and the national government. Even though many of us had high hopes that the peace agreements would bring a turnaround in the country’s history of violence, many armed actors remain and proliferate cases of political corruption and assassinations of social leaders and human rights defenders – all of which hinder our human rights and divine calling to peace. Colombia’s context of violence impacts our whole society, including church communities, especially those in rural areas caught in the crossfire of armed groups (legal and illegal) and abandoned by the state.

The passage in Philippians 4:7 encourages us to trust in the promise of the peace of God, a peace that transcends all understanding. One church community I visited in the southwestern region of the country during this post-agreement stage embodies trusting in God’s peace. The town’s residents have been witness to armed clashes since the 1960s. The latest clash between two insurgent armed groups lasted six days. When I got to the community, about three days after the clashes had ended, I met various church leaders of the area. Some of these leaders included an indigenous *campesino* (peasant farmer) couple who had come from the side of the mountain where the clashes had occurred. I greeted them and asked them how their week had been, they responded “Very well, because of the grace of God.”

Upon further discussion they shared that the clashes were deeply affecting their community. Many people were afraid to leave their homes since curfews had been installed by the armed groups.

Several members of the community were being asked to leave their land. That land is what the armed groups fight to have control over: rich and fertile soil perfect for illicit crop cultivation.

Yes, this couple’s church community up in the mountain was facing the real effects of war once again, yet they remained faithful and trusting in the peace of God. They organized community prayer nights from seven at night until three in the morning several nights that week, trusting God with their fates. They also kept encouraging the members of their community to keep growing food and vegetable crops and not to submit to illicit crop cultivation. They were also organizing with other church leaders in the area to plan nonviolent methods of resistance. They were not going to be displaced; this was their land.



To celebrate the International day of Peace, Anabaptists in Colombia join with others to march for “Pan y Paz” (Bread and Peace). Photo: Anna Vogt.

The couple shared with me that they were very thankful for God’s protection that week since no one from the church community or the general community had been caught in the crossfire (although there were some deaths from either side of the armed groups). “All we can do,” they said, “is to share the message of God through Jesus so that this violence and war may end.”



This is exactly what they do. This community embodies the promise of God’s peace, which surpasses all understanding. It does not make sense to pray, to take care of the land or to organize to keep a community rooted when there is a war that is seeking to tear people apart, to destroy crops and to displace communities, yet these are the actions of peace this community understands as following the way of Christ.

The clashes between the two insurgent armed groups have ceased for now, but the armed groups and their dispute over control of the territory remains. The church community also remains, demonstrating that God’s peace is active and alive even in the middle of strife and uncertainty, even in the crossfire.



Brothers and sisters worshipping together at Renewal 2027 in Costa Rica in 2019. Photo: Len Rempel.

Each Step is a Prayer

–Valerie Showalter (USA)

Each step is a prayer.

Each step is a supplication to the God who knows what it means to wander for months or years on end, searching for a land of promise.

Each step is a sacred protest, calling out to God for mercy and justice.

Thus millions of prayers were raised, as friends flew west from nations such as Cameroon and Senegal, as friends walked north from the barrios of Honduras and El Salvador, seeking an answer to their requests to God.

Earlier this year, I spent time with a delegation of fellow Mennonites at the U.S./Mexico border with New York-based New Sanctuary Coalition (NSC). NSC suggested we used the “friends” as a way to reshape the narrative of how we name those who seek abundant life and our relationships with them.

In their journeys toward the southern U.S. border, our friends embodied a desire to experience lives free from abuse. Lives free from war. Lives spent with one’s children or parents. Most of all, these friends sought *life* itself.

At the San Diego/Tijuana border, though the pace of the journeys slowed, the prayers did not falter. If anything, the prayers grew more fervent as our friends now faced a barrier they had dreamed of reaching, the entrance to the “Promised Land.” The real and numerous barriers for entry were often more significant than they had imagined – they were more significant than I had imagined, a U.S. citizen with some awareness of immigration law. Many friends, having walked for months already, now found themselves at the border for additional months, waiting their turn until their number was called (an illegal system that deliberately slowed migrants’ entries into the U.S. immigration system.)



While still in Mexico, many who sought asylum were prepared by sympathetic U.S. immigration lawyers for their “credible fear interview” with Immigrations and Customs Enforcement. The entirety of friends’ asylum cases rested on this interview. With their fate hanging in the balance in proving their “credible fear,” how do our siblings from the majority world hear Paul’s invitation to the Philippians in 4:6?

When Paul urges the believers to “not worry about anything, but...let your requests be made known to God,” what does that mean for those who face long stays in deplorable detention centres? Or those who are required to await their court hearings “*al otro lado*” – on the other side in Mexico?

The hope that Paul encourages here is not to be found in the human-made immigration system’s ability to mete out true justice. Rather, Paul reminds the believers of the God-who-suffers-with-them, whose profound empathy cannot be kept out of *hieleras* (“icebox” detention cells), who knows the pain of the refugee fleeing violence, and who knows the complete heartbreak of a child separated from their parent.

Paul’s words echo in believers’ hearts in the U.S., too, as he reminds us of the God-who-dissolves boundaries. Faith communities here rally to pray and act in hope that God’s love will break down the barriers that divide us from one another. There’s a fire in the step of those who provide sanctuary, who march for change, who accompany friends to court for hearings.

Together, we do not worry that the U.S. immigration system will be just: it won’t be. In all that we do, we open our hearts and minds and bodies to pour out our hopes to God. Whether from the north or south, east or west, each step we take is a prayer.



Praying together at the Renewal 2027 event in Costa Rica in 2019. Photo: Ebenezer Mondez.

A prayer that the hard border between us will crack under the weight of God’s love. A prayer toward melting calloused hearts and unjust systems. A prayer toward setting the captives free. A prayer for the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding and draws us into deeper community with one another and God.

Each step is a prayer.

