

## Letters from Overseas

### Chris Ferguson Writes an Advent Letter from Colombia

December 2011

On Thursday, December 8, people here in Medellín celebrated the festival of the Immaculate Conception of Mary. Although unseasonable rains washed out the first night of the “Velitas,” some folks did gather in the streets and put out long lines of paper lanterns and candles welcoming the Virgin. Some just arranged the lights on their balconies, but there was a huge sense of disappointment through the country.



The second night was drier, so the family groups were able to sit in quiet vigil outside with their doors wide open, awaiting Mary to usher them toward the birth of Jesus. Just about everyone takes part. It is as much of a cultural as a religious celebration.

The deep calm and spiritual expectation accompanying this tradition is striking in a country beset by profound poverty, economic disparity, and over four decades of armed conflict and spiralling violence. Colombia now has the largest gap between the rich and poor in Latin America. Many of those sitting in hopeful vigil are among the over five million who are internally displaced. They sit thinking of the multitudes of family members scattered around the world as refugees. They also think of the “doubly victimized,” people displaced by the violence who are displaced for a second year by flooding and landslides caused by the torrential rains, a product of climate change.

They no doubt ponder the confusing double message that although all want peace, the government tells them that the only way to have it is to deepen the conflict with the rebel groups rather than to negotiate. Watching the candlelight dance in the dark announcing the coming of the Prince of Peace, many no doubt think about the repression against Indigenous peoples and smallholding miners who are being pushed out by Canadian mining companies bringing with them ecologically destructive practices.

Medellín is famous for its lights. The whole city nestled in an Andean mountain valley participates in the “Alumbrado”—the Lighting. Everything seems to shift and focus on Christmas and the Lighting. It is over-the-top impressive and moving, bright and brash. Blinking, shining, glowing, there are coloured lights and sparkling metal designs just about everywhere.

It is a jarring contrast with the violence, and a commercialized distraction to the ongoing inequities and injustices, but it is more.

It echoes the biblical text “a people who have walked in darkness have seen a great light.” The humanitarian crisis is growing out of structural injustice affecting millions of people, and is heaped on top of the actions of a government that refuses to seek a non-violent, negotiated solution to the armed conflict. The violence is omnipresent and devastating. Yet, there is the light...

Communities of the displaced and victims of the violence are joining together in renewed efforts to demand their rights. They struggle to make a faulty government program work properly to return lands to their rightful owners. It is risky. Some Indigenous people, people of African descent, and human rights defenders and community leaders have been killed.



And in this stirring and moving toward the light, in this unwillingness to accept the suffering and injustice, where are the churches?

Well, that is why I happen to be in Medellín seeing the amazing festival of lights. Inspired by other programs, the Colombian churches who form part of the Latin American Council of Churches have heeded the call to accompany community groups that are moving beyond violence to rebuild a just and peaceful society.

They have called on the global ecumenical movement to join them. The PEAC, The Program of Ecumenical Accompaniment in Colombia, adds an international and ecumenical dimension to the Colombian churches' accompaniment of communities that are standing up for their rights and organizing to protect themselves in the face of reprisals and repression. The leadership comes from the communities themselves, and the Colombian church accompanies and supports them. In turn, the local churches have asked for an international presence to provide protection that will make it possible for the communities to become artisans of their own futures.

The program is not yet off the ground but I have had the privilege to meet with people in the community where the program is likely to start with its first group of international accompaniers. I was there with the Bishop of the Methodist Church of Colombia at a meeting in the Methodist congregation of San Onofre. This area suffers brutally at the hands of the paramilitary who are said to be in league with the government and transnationals, and have driven peasants off their lands and grab the mineral and natural resources.

A woman stood up in one meeting and said that people have "an almost insurmountable fear" to demand their rights. Another man said that the presence of international church people "allows us to breathe again and gather hope to move forward to provide our own protection."

Hope and fear seen in the light cast by the Christmas candles—the Lighting—recall the words of the messenger speaking to the shepherds in the deep darkness: "Be Not Afraid..."

Chris Ferguson

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Visit our global partnership photo site (<http://unitedchurch.smugmug.com>) to see pictures from Colombia.

**Chris Ferguson** is a United Church of Canada global mission personnel associate serving with the Methodist Church of Colombia. The work of this ecumenical partner and the work of overseas personnel are made possible through your gifts to the Mission and Service Fund of The United Church of Canada.

