

Letters from Overseas

Matthew Heesing Writes from Colombia

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It's always hard to explain why I am here in Colombia.

When people ask me, I usually respond by saying that I'm here to build solidarity with the people and United Church partners of Colombia.

But the phrase "build solidarity" seems to leave people with more questions than answers. And I understand why—it's more of an abstract concept than a tangible response.

Solidarity?

What is that?

And how in the world do you build it?

To try and explain, I'd like to start with a Bible story. It's one that, for me, really captures the essence of what solidarity is.

Moses, with God's help, has just led the Israelites out of their slavery in Egypt, and into the dry, dusty, middle-of-nowhere desert. Ever since their exodus across the Red Sea, however, the Israelite people have constantly found a reason to complain: complaining that life was better in Egypt, that there's no water, that they're sick of eating only manna, and now, at this point in the story, that there's no meat.

Because of all this, Moses is troubled. Exhausted. Frustrated. Angry. Lost.

And alone.

Moses releases all of these emotions above in a powerful prayer to God, found in Numbers 11:10–15.

And how does God respond?

He tells Moses to gather 70 elders from the Israelites, and get them to stand with Moses at the Tent of Meeting.

Before anything else, God gets 70 people to come stand with Moses.

Now, when I first read this story many years ago, I thought: "Well, that's helpful." You've got thousands of Israelites grumbling and complaining, wishing that you had never brought them out of Egypt...and God's solution is to get 70 people to *stand* with you? How is that going to help? What difference will that make?

But now I realize that simply having someone stand with you can make all the difference in the world.

And if you've ever been through an extremely rough time, or had someone close to you go through a life-shattering experience, you know what I mean. When you are going through a divorce, or have lost your job, or have had to say farewell to a loved one, or have been through any number of similar experiences...you don't need someone with all the answers.

But having someone stand with you, or sit with you, or walk with you, or just be with you, can make all the difference in the world.

And so, that's what God does. God gives Moses people to stand with him. These 70 elders wouldn't have understood exactly what Moses was feeling, or what he was going through. They may not have grasped the whole situation. And they didn't hold the answers on how to solve it. But Moses didn't need people to jump into action, to start problem solving, to tell him clichéd phrases that it was going to be all right.

But Moses did need someone to stand with him.

Reminding him that he was not alone.

For a more contemporary example, there's a beautiful scene of solidarity in the story of the Lord of the Rings.

Frodo and Sam have almost made it to Mount Doom to destroy the One Ring. It's been a long journey, and the strain of carrying the One Ring is beginning to take its toll on Frodo. He's exhausted, he's troubled, and he's just about to give up.

But then there's Sam, Frodo's faithful companion. Sam doesn't understand the hardship of carrying the ring, nor can he take the Ring from Frodo and carry the burden for him. Sam doesn't hold any answers either: he's just as lost at what to do, or where to go.

But Sam walks with Frodo.

And, in walking with Frodo, Sam gives him the strength to keep on walking. Helping Frodo to know that he is not alone.

There is such a power in presence. In just being with someone, whether it means standing with them, or walking with them, or sitting with them in silence, or just being with them, sharing life.

Presence is powerful.

When I arrived at the office of CEPALC, my first full day in Colombia, I found a sign waiting for me in my office.

MATTHEW HEESING:

Welcome to Colombia. Welcome to CEPALC.

Thank-you for your presence.

"Thank-you for your presence."

I don't for a moment pretend like I fully understand the complex realities of Colombia. And I don't pretend like I have the answers. I don't understand the burdens people carry, or how to make their burdens any lighter. I can't even fluently speak the language.

But, many times in life, that's not what is needed.

Many times in life, what's needed even more is presence. Someone standing with you, walking with you, being with you...helping you to know that you are not alone.

That's what solidarity is all about.

And so, for me, solidarity is formed at 1:00 in the morning, playing Rock Band with a 15-year-old Colombian youth.

Or going bowling with a Colombian family.

Or sharing a home-made meal at a co-worker's house.

Or being squished in the back of a car with three other adults.

Listening to five continuous hours of salsa music on a road trip.

Or improvising with a children's music group.



Solidarity is formed by filming a music video in the rain.
Visiting with fellow patients in a hospital emergency room.
Making a roommate scrambled eggs, and receiving the gift of homemade soup from friends.
Playing "How Great Thou Art" with an electric guitar, electric bass, drum set, and violin.
Holding children's hands, as we walk back from a park.
Walking in the dusty dirt of a farmer's field.
Taking photos alongside Indigenous women.
Beat-boxing with co-workers.
Browsing markets with friends.
Celebrating a 50th birthday party with a co-worker's family.

Solidarity is formed in sharing cookies with a boy on the bus,
and squishing under an umbrella in a thunderstorm.
It's formed in laughing,
and crying,
flying kites,
and eating empanadas.

It's formed in sharing communion around a common table, a meal that reminds all of us that we are not alone, through broken bread and shared cup.

That's what solidarity means to me.

And that's why I'm here in Colombia.

Thanks be to God.

Matthew Heesing

*To learn more, visit Matthew's blog (www.colombianjourney.wordpress.com).
Photos of last year's Youth for Peace trip to Colombian partners can be seen on our photo site (<http://unitedchurch.smugmug.com/Colombia>).*

Matthew Heesing is a United Church of Canada overseas personnel serving with the Latin American Centre for Popular Communication (CEPALC) in Colombia. The work of this global 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.

