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### *Peacemaking amidst urban violence in Brazil*

C. Rosalee Velloso Ewell (Brazil)

It all started with a flirt between two teenagers on a dusty street of Londrina, Brazil. It ended with one person dead, another death-listed and an entire family on the run.

Londrina is the third largest city of the southern part of Brazil and ranks first in its state (Paraná) for quality of life. It is so well organized that if you arrive at our airport and take a taxi to a hotel across town, you will not even see a slum. The poor shanty towns are well hidden and kept at the outskirts of town so that you must 'want' to see them in order to get there.

Violence in Brazil at the dawn of this new century is different from what it was 35 years ago. Drug trade and drug-related violence have taken over the cities, even the most developed

ones. It is a violence that affects all social and economic levels of society, adding death and fear to the already impoverished and destitute within Latin America and around the globe.

In order for the church to be the church in the 21st century, it must learn ways to be good news amidst such violence. At the local level, what do peacemaking and conflict-resolution between drug lords look like? What alternatives do individual Christians and Christian communities have in urban or mountainous regions such as those governed by the drug traffic? How do we read the biblical texts within these contexts?

Three very different voices come to play in this reflection on the Christian witness to the world of violence: the

Warner Brothers film, 'The Matrix'; John Alexander, founder of Church of the Sojourner, San Francisco, USA; and Willie James Jennings, African-American theologian.

'The Matrix' can be a very useful tool to use when working with youth involved with gangs and drug cartels. The themes of 'what is really real' and 'being on the winning team' open the door for discussions about belonging, about family and people-hood, and about Jesus.

In our context, the world of violence is so apparent, so real in every aspect of life that it poses as ultimate reality. Such a world suggests that there are primarily two ways to deal with the violence. Borrowing from Jennings, we can either try to escape this world of violence or we can try to eradicate it.

In Latin America we have tried both, sometimes offering 'spiritual' benefits as a way of escape, or literally running from the violence, such as the family mentioned at the very beginning of this study. According to Amnesty International, Colombia has the highest number of displaced people in the western hemisphere (nearly five million) and is quickly rising to the top of the global ranks as well. These are people who have had to flee their homes due to the drug wars and violence against basic human rights. Most are extremely poor campesinos, Afro-Colombians, and indigenous groups.

There have also been many attempts at eradication, ranging from macro-level US bombing of entire mountain slopes, to local level police raids, to the shooting of a teenager. Such attempts might try to eradicate drugs, but rarely do they not involve other forms of violence. Some churches

also work at eradication, either preaching a 'just say no' policy and sponsoring retreats and workshops on the evils of drugs. Most Christians are ill-equipped and do not know what to do when faced with this world of violence.

In the New Testament texts, the gospel imperatives of peacemaking and reconciliation have one very essential requirement: being joined to Jesus. It is only because we have been called by Jesus and reconciled to the Father, through Jesus, that we are enabled to seek out a third way, an alternative to the world's options of escape and eradication. Jennings calls Jesus' way that of encounter.

Jesus breaks into the false realities that the world of violence has set up. He does not simply draw us a picture or point us toward what he wants, toward a new heaven and a new earth. Rather, Jesus enacts this in his life, making it possible for us to be joined to this living in what is really real, to living in the kingdom of God.

In Luke chapter 5 Jesus calls Simon Peter, James, John and Levi, the tax-collector. At the end of each narrative it says, 'They left everything and followed him'. The twelve apostles are named in chapter 6 and we read about their mission in chapter 9. The twelve and their master do not conform to any one mould within society at that time. They will not be zealots or Pharisees, leaders or peasants. Jesus refuses to have himself or his followers' identities determined by the world around them. Leaving everything and following, that is, being joined to Jesus meant having Jesus reset the agenda, the tactics and the strategies for encounter with the world. Peacemaking and reconciliation also demand that Jesus set

the agenda and the strategies, with the understanding that he has also given his disciples the power and the authority to live this encounter (Lk. 9:1-2, 24:49).

In the world of violence how we understand ourselves and our community is usually determined along national, political or economic lines. In the drug trade one's belonging is determined by whether a person is aligned with one cartel or another. In Londrina, rival gangs vie for control of different regions of the city and young teenagers are offered a sense of belonging, security, and hope if they agree to join one group or another. They have few alternatives.

There is an amazing change that takes place in the apostles' lives in the first four chapters of the book of Acts. The stories narrate, if you will, a conversion of the disciples to this way of encountering the world of violence. Even after they had been called, seen and witnessed all that Jesus had done, they ask, upon seeing the resurrected Christ, 'Lord, is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?' (Acts 1:6). Jesus' reply seems calm and collected on the printed page, but actually, he probably took Peter by the shoulders and shook him strongly saying something like 'Man, don't you get it? Our rules are different! You're part of a new gang now!'

Yet, by the time we get to Acts chapter 4 the disciples have understood—they 'got it'. It is clear from their sermons, from their words before the Council and their life in community that being called and joined to Jesus inaugurates a new type of self-understanding, both for the person and the gathered community. If once they were

zealots, tax collectors, Pharisees or peasants, now in Jesus, they encounter that world with the words of Jesus, 'Peace be with you'.

Peacemaking as encounter is anything but passive. It demands presence in the world, discipline and boldness. In one of the most beautiful prayers in the New Testament (Acts 4:24ff.) the transformation of the apostles is made evident. In their prayer for boldness it is clear that they no longer belong to the categories of this world but are members of a new gang, who with boldness and the power of the Holy Spirit are enabled to encounter the world with the reconciliation of God.

At the local, street level, the gospel imperative of peacemaking in the world of drugs is most evident among those Christians who see their ministry and their community as being joined to a new gang. John Alexander used the language of 'new gang' early in the 1970s in San Francisco as he worked to rescue people from street violence and to bring them to Jesus' kingdom. In order to reach out to youth who are threatened by the violence of the streets, various ministries today also use the language of gangs and belonging to bring these youth to a new gang. Often this is done through sports or art or music. The children in Londrina, especially those in the world of poverty and injustice, have very few alternatives. They have to be given a sense of belonging and worth, thus having their identities transformed by the good news of the gospel.

My friend, Marcio, does this by opening his home to those on the street. His garage is now a workshop for teaching different arts, sports, even soap-making. It is through these regu-

lar, daily activities that peacemaking takes place; it is in these ways that the world of violence is stripped of its façade and its falseness is overcome by the truth of the gospel.

Our church has a girls' choir in that same part of town from which the family had to flee. The teenager who flirted with the brother of a drug lord was friends with the girls in our choir. Two years ago, within a matter of hours, three members of the church had to load up a small truck with the meagre belongings of an entire family (elderly grandmother, mother, aunt, uncle and five children, ages 2-17) and move them to another place for fear they would be murdered if they stayed. It was our hope and prayer that at this new place they would be brought into a new community and begin to learn a new sense

of peace and of belonging. The girls' choir is a new gang for about 40 children between ages 7 and 19. It is peacemaking in practice, giving them tools not only for music, but for a new life with one another and with God.

In Romans 5:1ff. Paul talks about the peace we have with God through Jesus Christ. Through this peace we stand in grace and are given the hope of sharing in God's glory. This grace in which we stand is our new gang. It is the peace given to us by our Lord Jesus Christ and with which we are called to encounter the world of violence. It is a sense of belonging to a new people, a new gang, that is different and takes precedence above any other loyalty, whether of family or country, gang or cartel.

## *The gospel amidst ethnic violence in Burundi*

Emmanuel Ndikumana (Burundi)

### 1. Burundi: Beautiful but in pain

Burundi is known as the 'Heart of Africa', not only because of its location near the centre of Africa, but also because the country itself is shaped like a heart. It has been described as the Switzerland of Africa because of its beautiful lakes and Mountains. Together with Rwanda and Uganda, it is known in the history of Christian missions as the locus of the historic East African Revival of the 1930s and 1940s. Together with its 'twin',

Rwanda, Burundi was considered one of the world's most evangelized countries; the very model of successful evangelism with more than ninety-three percent of its population considering themselves to be Christians.

Despite the apparent successful evangelism, however, the country has been experiencing recurring bloody ethnic violence for decades, resulting in widespread poverty, the spread of HIV-AIDS, and other problems. This case study illustrates, through the writer's personal story and experience