



# Peace and Reconciliation Theology

Peer-to-peer  
workshop report

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13–17.11.2023  
Bogotá, Colombia





# Contents

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<b>Executive Summary</b> .....	3
Key recommendations .....	6
<b>1. Introduction</b> .....	8
<b>2. Truth and Reconciliation</b> .....	11
2.1 How do religious actors understand reconciliation?.....	11
2.2 Listening and standing with the victims for reconciliation.....	18
2.3 Peacebuilding in Colombia: Reflections from the Truth Commission on Listening to the Victims .....	21
<b>3. Gender Justice</b> .....	24
3.1 Peacebuilding in Colombia: Reflections on the Role of Women in Peacebuilding .....	30
<b>4. About co-creation of peace and reconciliation theology</b> .....	33
4.1 Theological Reflections: What is the Meaning of Doing Theology?.....	33
4.2 Theological Reflections: Truth-seeking.....	35
4.3 Opportunities and Challenges – Role of the religious actors in the current peace dialogues in Colombia .....	38
<b>5. Conclusions and Recommendations</b> .....	44
<b>References</b> .....	49

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# Executive Summary

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**T**his report presents the findings from the peer-to-peer dialogue on peace and reconciliation theology, held in Bogotá, Colombia, from November 13–17, 2023. The workshop was part of Felm’s “Branches of Peace” Initiative, which seeks to explore the unique aspects of theology for peace and reconciliation from the contextual perspectives of religious actors. The initiative emphasises co-creating theology through collaborative and participatory reflection.

The objectives of the workshop were to understand gender justice and its role in peace work, deepen relationships among participants and other actors, and create knowledge and co-create theology. These objectives were interrelated and mutually reinforcing, as they all contributed to the overall goal of developing and deepening theological understanding related to peace and reconciliation.

Participants of the workshop expressed a desire for joint learning, dialogue, and collaboration to co-create a theology of gender justice, peace and reconciliation that could inform their peacebuilding efforts. This workshop offered spaces for critical reflection, peer experiences exchange, and trust building that contributed to identifying commonalities and points of debate around theology and how it applies to social and political realities.

The workshop used different methods to achieve these objectives, including:

- Peer exchange and dialogue to reflect upon the intersection between religious and faith-inspired peacebuilding and the context for those efforts.
- Extending the space for dialogue and relationship-building beyond formal discussions.
- Bringing together all levels of knowledge and experiences by working with methods that allowed exploration and co-creation.

One of the key themes for reflection was reconciliation and its role in peacebuilding. The definition of reconciliation varied across regional contexts, but common themes included openness to dialogue, prioritizing justice, promoting a holistic approach, and challenging the status quo. Reconciliation was seen as a process with three stages Memory and Coping, Justice and Restoration, and Apology and Reconciliation. Active listening was a cornerstone of this process, involving immersion in the



*One of the key themes for reflection was reconciliation and its role in peacebuilding.*

communities, understanding their histories, and acknowledging their narratives. The path forward was to walk alongside the communities, learning and growing with them.

Understanding gender justice is a key consideration for peacebuilding, which faces challenges both within and outside the church. The rise of fundamentalism, which unites various religious groups against the rights of women and sexual minorities, is one such challenge. It promotes a rigid

interpretation of the Scriptures, rejects critical analysis, and reinforces oppressive patriarchal structures. Religious extremism, partly due to churches' loss of power from external influences, has increased.

A key aspect of the gender justice agenda for peacebuilding is addressing the unequal opportunities for participation faced by individuals and communities, as well as the divisions related to gender issues globally. Including men as allies is crucial in dismantling patriarchy and challenging violent expressions of



Besides providing spiritual accompaniment, churches work to support those who have been wounded and who are not being heard. The church of Parroquia Alemana San Miguel Arcángel.

masculinity. However, gender justice advocates emphasised the need to respect and protect spaces dedicated to women's rights, ensuring they are not undermined while considering the role of men in advancing gender justice.

Central to these discussions was the co-creation of theology, which focused on the broader framing of theology rooted in real lives and experiences, particularly those shaped by conflict and injustice. Theology was seen not only as a way of describing reality but as a tool for transforming it. As highlighted by workshop participants, a liberating theological approach must recognize and engage with differences—whether in beliefs, gender, ethnicity, or socio-economic status. These differences significantly influence how faith is accessed and practiced. Therefore, it is essential to foster ongoing dialogue between academic and grassroots communities, avoiding the idealization or romanticization of their struggles. This continuous exchange is fundamental to building a strong theology of peace and reconciliation. As one of the objectives of the workshop stated, the workshop fostered deepened relationships through the co-creation of theology. It addressed the discussion about overarching framing of theology, which originates from real lives and experiences, especially those amidst conflict and injustice.

This report summarises the key findings of the workshop discussions and provides recommendations on how religious actors can contribute more effectively to sustainable peace, recognizing their privileged access to communities and their differential approach to rebuilding social connections in societies affected by violent conflicts.



"Total peace is not a state-able issue, but community issue." (Gloria Elema Domico, Etno-education programme) Listening to the voices and experiences of Indigenous peoples and other marginalized communities is essential to fostering understanding and reconciliation.

## Key recommendations:

- **Reframe Reconciliation:** Encourage a shift in understanding reconciliation as a journey, not a singular event. This journey encompasses three key stages: Memory and Coping, Justice and Restoration, and Apology and Reconciliation.
- **Promote Gender Justice:** Center the voices and lived experiences of women, particularly those from marginalized communities, in peacebuilding and reconciliation efforts. Challenging patriarchal structures in religious and social systems and promoting gender justice as non-negotiable in peace and reconciliation. Gender justice should be viewed as essential, not secondary, to the broader goal of social justice.
- **Develop a Theology of Hearing:** Prioritize the development of a theology of hearing within the ministry of justice and peace. This should emphasize the importance of believing and acting upon what is heard.
- **Emphasize Active Listening:** Recognize active listening as a fundamental aspect of peacebuilding and reconciliation processes. This involves immersing oneself in the communities, understanding their histories, and acknowledging their narratives alongside and within our collective story. This process can help to challenge our own preconceptions and societal constructs. This also involves creating inclusive spaces for women to share their experiences and be actively heard.

- **Diverse Leadership:** Strive to produce theologians and leaders who challenge traditional dynamics of inequality and domination. Encourage different perspectives and innovative theological approaches.
- **Engage with Communities and Promote Community-Centred Scripture Reading:** Be receptive to communities and learn from their experiences. Sensitivity to their needs and realities is crucial. Encourage and embrace an understanding that the use of the Bible as a tool for the community, by the community. Its reading and interpretation can transform lives and allow for the redefinition of certain life events at both individual and collective levels.
- **Recognize and Accept the Diversity of Cosmovisions:** This recognition forms the foundation for transformative processes, fostering respect for diversity and indigenous wisdom in the pursuit of societal change. This is emphasized as an important step.
- **Enhance Progressive Theological Training:** In Latin America, there is a need to enhance and expand progressive theological training, which often faces opposition from more conservative religious traditions. This will foster a more inclusive and progressive approach to peacebuilding.
- **Develop Eco-Theology and Eco-Spirituality:** Facilitate learning and sharing of different spiritualities and knowledge with indigenous and Afro communities. This includes the development of eco-theology and eco-spirituality, which integrate respect for the environment into theological understanding and spiritual practice. ■





# Introduction

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The Peace and Reconciliation Theology Peer-to-peer workshop was held in Bogotá in November 2023 and hosted by the Finnish Evangelical Lutheran Mission (Felm) and the Iglesia Luterana de Colombia (IELCO). It was a unique opportunity for participants from different global contexts and backgrounds to engage in peer-to-peer dialogue on the topic of peace and reconciliation theology. The workshop was part of Felm's Branches of Peace Initiative, which aims, to reflect, co-create, and document theology in a collaborative and participatory way alongside its partners. Participating partners included Zimbabwe Council of Churches (ZCC), Evangelical Lutheran Church in Jordan and the Holy Land (ELCIJHL), Mekane Yesus Seminary; Ethiopia, Iglesia Evangelica Luterana de Colombia (IELCO), Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA), Lutheran World Federation (LWF) Church of Sweden (COS), World Council of Churches (WCC) In addition to partners, there were also participants from Universidad Javeriana, FLM Choco, Embassy of Finland in Colombia and a LWF Peace Messenger from Evangelical Church of the Augsburg Confession in the Slovak Republic. The participants expressed the following expectations for the workshop:

- **Learning from Diverse Experiences:** Participants from all regions expressed a desire to learn from diverse experiences and contexts. This includes understanding gender issues, theological components, law and human rights, and reconciliation and peace.



- **Dialogue and Collaboration:** Participants from emphasized the importance of dialogue and collaboration. They were interested in experience exchange, building trust and mutual understanding, and sharing their own experiences and challenges.
- **Theology and Its Application:** Participants from showed interest in theology and its application to their social and political realities. They wanted to understand the role of theological components in gender work, law and human rights, and peace and reconciliation.
- **Gender Justice:** Participants from expressed a desire to gain contextual information and perspectives related to gender justice. They wanted to understand gender issues in a contextualized approach and translate their theological reflections into concrete practices that address the needs and rights of the victims of violence, especially women.
- **Peace and Reconciliation:** All participants shared a common expectation of understanding the progress of churches and organizations, and of getting updates and external perceptions on their work. They also sought to build a community-based theology with strong ownership that could be scaled to other contexts and aimed to create reflections that would lead to practical change.

The workshop had three main objectives: to understand gender justice, to deepen relationships, and to create knowledge. These objectives were interrelated and mutually reinforcing, as they all contributed to the overall goal of developing and deepening theological understanding related to peace and reconciliation.



Participants emphasized the importance of dialogue, collaboration, and trust-building. They expressed a strong interest in exchanging experiences, learning from diverse contexts, and addressing key issues such as gender, theology, law, human rights, reconciliation, and peace.

The first objective was to understand gender justice and how it was related to peace and reconciliation. The participants explored the ways gender justice enhances peacebuilding efforts and how peace and reconciliation could promote gender justice. The participants also learned from the experiences and contexts of each other and how they address gender issues in their own work.

The second objective was to deepen relationships among the participants as well as between them and other actors working on peace and reconciliation. An emphasis was placed on fostering meaningful conversations that built connections and trust where learning occurred through interaction.

The third objective was to share the knowledge and insights gained from practical peace and reconciliation work with communities and to co-create theology. The workshop provided participants with a space to share, discuss, and reflect on both the practice and theology of peace and reconciliation. By documenting these reflections in theological diaries, the workshop fostered the co-creation of theology. Three participants wrote daily reflections on the workshop's themes and later met to share and deepen their insights. At the end of the week, all participants joined a collective discussion to identify common themes from the diaries. The goal was to ground the theology of peace and reconciliation in the lived experiences of churches and communities, making it a concrete and contextual part of local churches and faith communities.

These diaries, along with the broader reflections presented in this report, will serve as valuable resources for future peacebuilding and reconciliation efforts by partners in various contexts. They provide insights into a shared understanding of the role of religious actors in peacebuilding and the theology that will inform that work.

The workshop was particularly valuable in providing a space for reflecting on the peacebuilding efforts of Felm's Colombian partners, as well as the lessons learned from the participation of Colombian religious actors in various dialogue and peace initiatives over the past decade. The Evangelical Lutheran Church of Colombia, which has integrated a strong theological foundation into its peacebuilding work, could offer valuable insights to guide the efforts of other religious actors globally. Overall, the workshop was a chance for the participants to learn from each other, reflect on their own contexts, and collaborate on finding solutions and actions that would promote peace and reconciliation in their regions and beyond.

In the following chapters, this report explores the key themes of the workshop, beginning with truth and reconciliation, then moving to gender justice, and the role of religious actors in peacebuilding. Each chapter presents the main points of the discussions and highlights the insights participants emphasized, drawing from their own experiences. ■



# Truth and Reconciliation

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## 2.1 How do religious actors understand reconciliation?

One of the main themes of reflection selected for the workshop was how to define and foster reconciliation. Reconciliation is a complex and multifaceted concept that can have different meanings and implications depending on the context and the perspective of the people involved. However, some common themes can be identified across the reflections of the participants from different regions and cultures, such as the importance of dialogue, empathy, justice, truth-telling, respect, and healing.

For example, for participants from Palestine, reconciliation is seen as a process of having an open conversation and having empathy towards others, especially in conflict settings. It requires seeing things from each other's perspective and coming with open hearts, ready to change as much as possible even in challenging situations. Reconciliation also involves talking to each other and learning from the exchange of experiences, deepening the connections and the possibility of seeing each other.

Similarly, for the participants from Finland and Sweden, reconciliation is based on truthfulness, justice, and mutual respect. People need to have connections and personal relationships between them, and they need to acknowledge the harm, and the grievances caused in the past. These participants highlighted the relevance of

understanding reconciliation from a holistic perspective, which refers to the idea of reconciliation not only between human beings and God but also between ourselves and other beings that live with us.

For the participant from Ethiopia, reconciliation is at the heart of Christianity, as the cross reminds of reconciliation between God and humanity. Reconciliation is a gift from God, but also a responsibility for humans to seek peace and harmony with each other. Reconciliation is a way of life that reflects the love and grace of God.

For the participant from the United States, reconciliation is not simply a resolution of conflict, but an arduous exercise of faith. It acknowledges that multiple truths can exist in a context and that it is necessary to cultivate a multifaceted narrative that includes the voices and stories of the marginalized and oppressed. Reconciliation can challenge the status quo in its call for truth telling, justice and societal transformation. Seeking a process of truth and reconciliation can shift the power dynamics in a society that has been built upon systems that value zero sum narratives and binary constructs.

For the participant from Brazil, reconciliation is intrinsically bound to justice, as it cannot emerge without the other. Reconciliation is a process of restoring the dignity and the rights of the victims and of holding the perpetrators accountable for their actions. Reconciliation is also a way of overcoming the structural and systemic violence that pervades society.

For the participants from Colombia, reconciliation is informed by the learnings from the indigenous community which has a close connection with approaches that incorporate a holistic and cosmic perspective. Reconciliation is a way of healing the wounds and the traumas caused by the armed conflict and restoring balance and harmony with the environment and the spiritual forces. Reconciliation requires openness to dialogue and exchange of experiences, as well as establishing trust and taking responsibility for violent actions towards the community. Reconciliation is a precondition for peace, as it aims to establish relations in a society that has been torn apart by war. Reconciliation is also a way of reconciling what has been broken from the social, political, and cultural perspectives, building bridges, and loving others, celebrating the differences among people.

Furthermore, for the participant from Argentina, reconciliation is a topic of debate and reflection, especially for women victims of sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV). Reconciliation raises questions about the possibility and the desirability of forgiveness and reconciliation with the perpetrators, and the implications for the victims' well-being and dignity. Reconciliation also challenges the notion of forgiveness as an ideal of living according to religious principles, as it can create an added layer of pain and struggle when the victims are not able to live up to that. This approach to reconciliation also invites peacebuilders to think beyond the rebuilding of relations with others, to encompass those contexts and scenarios in which there were no relationships between the perpetrators and the communities. This was a perspective shared by the Colombian participants.

For the participants from Zimbabwe, reconciliation is a theological concept that reflects what it means for a church to be present in society as a prophetic voice, discussing issues of justice and liberation of those affected by war. Reconciliation is a way of witnessing the gospel and the kingdom of God, and of participating in the mission of God in the world. Reconciliation is also a way of addressing the root causes of the conflict and the violence, and of promoting a culture of peace.

Although the understanding of reconciliation may vary across different contexts, there are shared themes in the participants' reflections. First, it emphasises the



*Reconciliation is a way of witnessing the gospel and the kingdom of God, and of participating in the mission of God in the world.*

importance of openness to dialogue and seeing things from each other's perspective. Second, it prioritises justice, including the acknowledgement of past harm and grievances, perpetrators' accountability, and restoring the dignity and rights of victims. Third, it promotes a holistic approach that focuses on healing, restoring balance and rebuilding relationships beyond human beings to include God and the environment. Finally, it frames reconciliation as a challenge to the status quo and a call

for transformation and justice. This involves cultivating a multifaceted narrative that includes the voices and stories of the marginalized and oppressed, and it also involves overcoming structural and systemic violence.

It was noted that it is impossible to discuss reconciliation without considering the role of forgiveness. Most discussions about how to reconcile with those who have harmed communities naturally lead to questions about how, or if, forgiveness should be a part of that process.

The participants agreed that the concept of forgiveness is multifaceted and complex. It is a process, not an event, and it can be romanticized, particularly in religious contexts, such as the gospel. For instance, domestic violence is an example where forgiveness is not enough.



Recognizing and addressing the unique roles of national and international actors is key to fostering effective collaboration and advancing the peacebuilding process.

It cannot be given too easily or forced; there is a process that needs to be lived. There is grace in sitting with forgiveness, and sometimes the act of not taking revenge is a significant step towards forgiveness. It is important to remember that forgiveness is a choice, not an obligation. The idea of forgiveness should be managed carefully because some feel they must forgive to be accepted by God. This can create an additional layer of suffering for those who identify themselves as religious or spiritual.

Moreover, forgiveness is impossible without naming truths and the harm that has been caused by the actions of perpetrators. This is a crucial part of the reconciliation process, and it has the potential to contribute to a transition from the painful past with broken relationships into a rebuilding of those connections. In contexts affected by a violent conflict, the relationship between perpetrators and victims is not the only thing that needs to be restored; it is also the social fabric of the society. Repairing those broken relationships requires justice and restoration.

Thinking about reconciliation as a journey can be helpful to move beyond the understanding of it as a fixed point in time. The following three phases of the journey of reconciliation that were discussed in the workshop provide insight in this.

**MEMORY AND COPING:** Talking about something that is in the past is a way to understand, shape and co-create the individual and collective memory and narrative around violent conflict and its consequences in social connections. However, looking back and not moving forward can be deeply damaging and prevent the exploration of a future without violence. Hence, having a perspective that focuses on supporting the processes of coping with the past is essential for peacebuilding and reconciliation. These can include developing tools within oneself and in the community to assist in the process of moving forward.

1. This may be a challenging endeavour but is important to undertake it. Psychosocial and psychospiritual support can positively contribute to these processes.

**At a practical level, to promote this step in the spaces in which the participants work, the following strategies were identified:**

- Timeline exercises aiming to identify moments in which the community suffered a breaking point.
- “Circulo de la palabra” (The circle of words) seeks to create a safe space within a community to share commonalities in the life story and offers an opportunity for individuals from diverse cultures to be able to dialogue peacefully.
- Storytelling exercises using art-based techniques such as the traditional songs of the communities (music that narrates key moments and/or aspects of the community and/or their culture).
- Documentation exercises focusing on the shared cultural symbols of a community to reconnect with important aspects that were forgotten.
- Using ceramics and painting to represent breaking points in the life of the individuals can be a cathartic exercise that potentially contributes to healthy coping. This should be tailored to the needs of victims and perpetrators with the support of mental health professionals.
- Photo voice methodologies contribute to victim’s reclaiming their agency to tell their story and build memory from it.
- Implement community-based psychosocial support.

2. **JUSTICE AND RESTORATION:** It is important to include justice in the discussion (not only as a punitive issue) but as a measure to restore the victims. Both involve the holistic restoration of relationships, starting from an understanding of wrongdoing that acknowledges the impact on people and relationships of violence. It involves a set of guiding principles, reparation, accountability, and engagement to build, maintain, and repair healthy and just relationships.<sup>1</sup> This approach emphasises that addressing violent conflict and building peaceful communities requires understanding the contexts that lead to conflict. It also requires creating contexts that promote peace.

**At a practical level, to promote this step in the spaces in which the participants work, the following strategies were identified:**

- Conduct exercises of social cartography.
- Accompany processes of rights revindication.
- Strengthen churches' ability to facilitate restorative justice processes on socio-economic grievances.
- Support efforts to revindicate restorative justice with an ethnic perspective. Restorative measures could include symbolic, material, and economic components.
- Explore alternatives to penal justice, for example, in Colombia the equity justice approach - mediation, conciliation, and peace judges - offers insight on the possibilities of this approach.
- Foster the restoration of the social fabric through effective and tailored to needs faith-sensitive psychosocial support.
- Promote truth-telling processes.
- Capacity building for religious actors to contribute to transform unjust societal structures.





3. **APOLOGY AND RECONCILIATION:** Promoting an apology approach is a potential way of moving beyond the forgiveness approach that places the responsibility for change and gives the first step to mending the relationships and social tissue broken by violent conflict on the victim. Hence, the responsibility relies on the perpetrators and opens a space in which forgiveness is not understood as mandatory but as a process that can bring plenty of positive aspects to life. This is a crucial step to emphasize how the lack of acknowledgement of harm done and accountability are obstacles to justice, restoration, reconciliation and ultimately, to peacebuilding.



*Promoting an apology approach is a potential way of moving beyond the forgiveness approach that places the responsibility for change.*

**At a practical level, to promote this step in the spaces in which the participants work, the following strategies were identified:**

- Contextual readings of the Bible incorporating or from a perspective that revindicates the ethnic communities' myths and cosmovision.
- Community-based psychosocial support that incorporates cultural and faith inspired relevant practices.
- Inform peacebuilding efforts by theological thinking that reflects the liturgical and faith practices of the religious actors and the communities they serve.

## 2.2 Listening and standing with the victims for reconciliation

In the journey of peacebuilding, the act of listening to victims is a pivotal first step in the search for truth. However, it is not the end but the beginning of a transformative process. The act of being listened to places the person in a vulnerable state, and peacebuilders must be prepared to act responsibly and empathetically. A listening exercise that does not give benefit or dignity to the communities is unethical. Hence, the process of listening and the spaces created to do so should benefit the ones who are sharing their story.

Active listening and understanding the complex and multi-layered nature of truth as a collection of individual and collective narratives are cornerstones of this process. It involves an immersion in the communities, understanding their histories, and acknowledging the collectively experienced and explored narratives that comprised the multiplicity of truths. There is not a one-size-fits-all methodology; the path forward is to walk alongside the communities, learning and growing with them.

Promoting spaces for self-listening and inter-discourse listening is also crucial. Victims are diverse, and their stories are unique. It is transformative to listen to their commonalities, and talking to others allows peacebuilders to identify different aspects of their experiences. Moreover, listening is not just about the verbal story but also about other practices. Many victims of armed conflict see themselves as survivors rather than victims.



*Victims are diverse, and their stories are unique. It is transformative to listen to their commonalities, and talking to others allows peacebuilders to identify different aspects of their experiences.*

Helping them listen to themselves can be more constructive than encouraging them to narrate what happened, which could revictimize them.

However, challenges and damaging practices in the process of listening to the victims need to be recognized and prevented. Communities often feel exhausted from sharing their testimonies in different spaces. They aspire to be recognized as agents of change and they are eager to lead the processes to shape their future. It is problematic to design, implement, and evaluate peacebuilding and development efforts without the communities, ignoring their existing resources and their inputs. Furthermore, many failures in peace and development work can be traced back to the lack of inclusion of the perspectives, needs, interests, and concerns of the communities. It comes from a simplification of the realities, problems, and strategies.

A theology of hearing must be developed for the ministry of justice/peace that emphasises believing and acting upon what is heard. Often the perspectives of gender justice, women, and LGBTQ+ people are not heard. Particularly in the context of sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV), religious actors and churches often resist listening to the stories of violence in their congregations. A fear of opening a ‘Pandora’s box’ exists, particularly as the processes of naming and addressing SGBV within churches are perceived as threats that could divide the church.

Sometimes, not opening a space for listening is the responsible thing to do if there is no clarity on what to do with what is shared and how to address it responsibly. The possibility of causing more damage is high if it is only done to comply with the idea of listening to others. Hence, capacity-building and training of service providers in congregations and persons involved in churches’ peace work are relevant in this context, and it should not be assumed that churches know how to do these listening exercises and how to provide the psychosocial support required in the aftermath. Building from the communities’ resources and tools is crucial. For instance, the spiritual beliefs and practices of the communities can be a key mechanism for coping with challenges. Supporting this can help people continue believing and surviving.

Nevertheless, the role of religiousness in leading political positions that aim to silence transformative processes is also a concern. Furthermore, it is important to discuss how the processes for transforming social structures and practices are led peripherally, but not at the core of the institution, which remains androcentric, patriarchal, and hierarchical, and continues to prevent the people who listen from being transformed deeply and meaningfully. It depends a lot on where you listen from - your position matters.

In conclusion, listening to victims is a critical part of the peacebuilding process, but it is just the beginning. It is equally, if not more, important what follows listening: active engagement, promoting self-listening, recognizing survivors, and responsibly managing the information received. Regional perspectives provide valuable insights into how these processes can be adapted to local contexts and needs.

**At a practical level, to promote active listening for truth-telling, the following strategies were identified:**

- **Multi-layered Truth:** Truth is not singular but multi-layered, complex, and challenging. This suggests an understanding that truth can have multiple sides and interpretations, reflecting the complexity of the reality of individuals and communities.
- **Narratives from the Margins:** The focus should be on narratives from the margins, including women and minority voices. This indicates a commitment with truth-telling that includes perspectives often overlooked or silenced, acknowledging that these voices can offer important truths.
- **Collective Experiences:** The importance of exploring collective experiences to name and embrace multiple truths should be encouraged. This suggests a recognition that truth emerges not just from individual experiences, but also from the shared experiences of communities.
- **Opposition to Structural Oppression:** Gospel narratives from the margins should be characterised by their opposition to structural oppression and supremacist systems. This implies a commitment to truth-telling that challenges oppressive power structures and advocates for justice.
- **Faith in Action:** The understanding and experience of faith is informed by the individual and collective experiences of challenges, pain, and suffering in conflict affected contexts. This has been opposed with a commitment towards showing empathy and compassion in the face of adversity. A Christology that embraces this approach underscores the belief that truth-telling involves not just speaking truth, but also acting in ways that challenge oppression and promote justice.
- **Aim for Decolonization:** Aiming for individual and communal decolonization as part of the lived faith experience should be promoted within the organizations working on peacebuilding. This indicates a commitment to transformative change, truth-telling and to build a gospel narrative from the margins seeking to dismantle colonial mindsets and structures and affirm the value and dignity of all people.





"It is not a question of truth, but a question about that when we know the truth, how it changes the way we act". Francisco de Roux, Chair of the Commission for the Clarification of Truth, Coexistence and Non-repetition.

## 2.3 Peacebuilding in Colombia: Reflections from the Truth Commission on Listening to the Victims

The workshop participants were privileged to meet with Father Francisco de Roux, President of the Truth Commission in Colombia and to discuss the key findings and learnings of the process.

The Colombian Truth Commission was established as part of the 2016 peace agreement, and it has worked tirelessly to shed light on the five decades of atrocities and human rights violations. The Commission's final report, presented in June 2022, is a significant milestone in addressing the country's history of armed conflict.

The report is based on interviews with victims, armed actors, and public servants involved in the armed struggle<sup>2</sup>. It highlights the causes of the conflict and exposes its painful reality. The Commission affirmed that without truth, reconciliation is not possible, and without reconciliation, the risk of repetition remains real.

The report also contains recommendations for how the country can move forward, even as fighting continues, despite the 2016 peace deal.

The main recommendations of the Colombian Truth Commission's final report are as follows<sup>3</sup>:

1. **Implementation of the Peace Agreement:** The Colombian government should advance in the implementation of the peace agreement, strengthen humanitarian assistance measures, and guarantee a territorial approach with an emphasis on ethnic and gender issues.

2. **Security of Former Combatants:** The security of former combatants should be guaranteed, and progress should be made in negotiations with the National Liberation Army (ELN).
3. **Improvement in Justice Administration:** Emphasize improvement in four areas, including the independence of the institutions in charge of investigating human rights violations, adjustments to investigation methodologies, creation of an investigation support mechanism, and the establishment of limits to the extradition of persons implicated in other crimes to guarantee victims' rights.
4. **Creation of an independent commission** to examine the risks of co-optation and corruption of the Attorney General's Office and that this office assumes all investigations so that they fall under the jurisdiction of the ordinary justice system.
5. **The Colombian government** should promote concrete transformations in the security apparatus to reduce militarization, with a new doctrine that prioritizes human rights. This includes the separation of the National Police from the Ministry of Defence.
6. **The Commission** recommends continuing to build from the communities' resources and tools. The spiritual component of the communities is a key mechanism for coping with challenges.
7. **Trust** is an important issue that requires more work. The communities often do not trust the state and its institutions.

The Colombian Truth Commission has been instrumental in addressing the aftermath of the armed conflict in Colombia. The Commission's primary role was to listen to the victims, acknowledge their immediate suffering, and seek explanations for their tragedies.

In instances where the Commission could provide answers to pertinent questions, it affirmed the evidence, assuming the moral obligation of truth-telling, despite contradictions, risks, and threats in the cases where a conclusion or evidence was elusive, the Commission left the discussion open, encouraging the continued pursuit of truth.

Recognizing the need for broader awareness, the Commission initiated a national educational mobilization. This initiative aimed to bring the victims and their right to truth to the forefront, despite the challenges posed by the reluctance of political and economic elites, the broad civil society, and the added challenge of the COVID-19 pandemic. Through thousands of conversations, educational programs, social networks, and major media outlets, the Commission was able to reach a wide audience. This mobilization led to a significant shift in the Colombian society. Resistance and fear of the truth gradually gave way to a growing interest in understanding and accepting the humanitarian crisis that had affected millions of Colombians. Thousands came forward to share their testimonies with the Truth

Commission, leading to a broader understanding of the human suffering underpinning the country's economic development, political organization, and state institutions. The Commission's work culminated in a general acceptance, across different political and social perspectives, that a change was necessary.

The Colombian Truth Commission has had a profound impact on the nation's peacebuilding efforts. The Commission confronted difficult questions about the role of civil society, the state, political parties, and guerrillas in the conflict. This led to a collective introspection about the country's identity and values.

The Commission's recommendations for non-repetition sparked a national conversation about the political, cultural, and structural changes necessary for peace and reconciliation. The Commission's work is not the definitive "TRUTH", but rather a document and an idea that serves as inspiration for continued efforts towards dignity for all.

**The workshop participants reflected the Applicability of the Colombian Truth Commission's Lessons Learned for Diverse Regional Contexts noting the following:**

1. The Colombian Truth Commission's experience underscores the importance of standing with victims from all sectors, keeping independence from the executive government, judicial power, and legislative bodies, and focusing on identifying the profound causes of violent conflict.
2. Its composition, including the presence of the church, increased trust. The moral authority of the church, represented by Fr. de Roux, played a crucial role in building this trust.
3. Prioritizing trust-building, dedicating efforts, and resources for mobilization to increase support for its actions, and an understanding of all dynamics that could influence the process are essential for its success.
4. Incorporating a differential approach that recognizes the diverse experiences and needs of women, youth, indigenous people, and LGBTQ+ people is crucial for ensuring recommendations are inclusive.
5. Perseverance and resourcefulness in the face of challenges, including persecution, human rights violations, lack of acknowledgment from the government, and the reluctance of key stakeholders to engage in a truth-telling process must be foreseen to develop strategies to mitigate its impacts in the process and to overcome them. ■

# 3



## Gender Justice

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**T**he second key theme for the workshop was gender justice, as it is a crucial issue for peacebuilding, globally as well as in the context of Latin America, where many people have suffered from gender injustice and violence. Liberation theology, which emerged as a response to the oppression and marginalization of the poor and the oppressed, can offer a historical entry point for this agenda. Liberation theology challenges the dominant structures and ideologies that perpetuate injustice and inequality and calls for a radical transformation of society based on the values of the gospel.

Some of the primary sources of liberation theology are the voices and experiences of the people who have been oppressed and excluded, such as women, LGBTQ+ people, indigenous people, and Afro descendants. These voices demand recognition, dignity, and participation in the decision-making processes that affect their lives. They also bring their own perspectives and contributions to the theological discourse, challenging the patriarchal and hierarchical interpretations of the Scriptures and traditions.

There is a widespread false perception that there is a lack of female theologians. This perception has been reinforced by a lack of policies within the field of theology to effectively include women. However, some initiatives aimed at promoting gender justice from a theological perspective exist and deserve more recognition.

For example, in Colombia, the Ecumenical Group of Women for Peace, which is composed of Catholic and non-Catholic women, have engaged in dialogues with



women leaders of the armed groups. They have been working together to build an agenda for gender justice that addresses the root causes of the conflict and the multiple forms of violence that women face. Their work underscores that peace processes are more than shaking hands between the parties in conflict. They require a comprehensive and inclusive approach that respects the human rights and needs of all the people, especially the most vulnerable and marginalized.

Gender justice is not only a matter of social and political change but also of personal and spiritual transformation. It requires questioning assumptions and prejudices and examining how we relate to ourselves, to others, and to God. It also encourages rethinking theology and its practices as well as creating spaces where everyone can express themselves and where diversity is celebrated and valued.

However, gender justice as a key consideration for peacebuilding still faces many challenges and obstacles, both inside and outside the church. One of them is the rise of fundamentalism, which unites different religious groups against the rights and freedoms of women and LGBTQ+ people. Fundamentalism promotes a rigid and literal interpretation of the Scriptures and rejects any critical or contextual analysis. It also reinforces the patriarchal and hierarchical structures and norms that oppress and exclude women and others.

The participants identified some of the key questions that should guide the discussion around the role of religious actors and theology in dismantling gender injustice are as follows:

- What are we doing in our theology and our church?
- Are we producing theologians and leaders who are doing theology differently, or are we reproducing the same dynamics of inequality and domination?
- Are we creating spaces where women and girls<sup>i</sup> and others can speak for themselves, or are we speaking for them?
- Are we empowering women and others, or are we silencing and ignoring them?
- Are we aligning our actions and our language with the principles of gender justice, or are we using the language of empowerment without changing our practices?



*Gender justice is not only a matter of social and political change but also of personal and spiritual transformation.*

<sup>i</sup> It is important to acknowledge that women are not a homogenous group. In case on women, girls, men and boys as well as others we must also note how e.g. age, ethnicity, race and disability affect person's identity and status in community.

One of the tools that can contribute to addressing these questions is contextual Bible study, which invites a reading exercise of the Scriptures in dialogue with specific contexts and experiences. Contextual Bible study can help to discover the transformative message of God in the lives of people. Moreover, an exploration of the non-negotiables for individuals and communities can allow for raising diverse issues, including power, status, masculinity, and violence, and challenge the attitudes and behaviours that prevent people from living in harmony and justice.

Nevertheless, it is crucial to highlight that women should have a real say in the spaces in which gender justice is discussed and that they need resources and support to do so. Hence, creating safe spaces for women in their churches and communities, where they can share their stories and struggles and where they can find healing and hope, is imperative in future efforts towards gender justice and peacebuilding.

**In the workshop, the representatives of the University Javeriana shared an example of contextual bible reading for gender justice, implemented as a part of their theology research in Colombia:**

- **Aim:** building a contextual reading of the bible, which means to interpret the scriptures in relation to the lived experiences and realities of the people, and to discover the liberating and empowering message of God for them.
- **Key considerations for implementation:** establishing trust as a key issue in participatory research, which implies to respect the time and the pace of the participants, and to acknowledge their knowledge and wisdom. This impacts the timeline for implementation, which can take from 6 to 12 months at least.
- **Approach:** fostering a space in which women were able to identify the types of GBV in the biblical stories, but also in their own context. For example, they analysed the stories of Tamar, the daughter of David who was raped by her brother, and Rahab, the prostitute who helped the Israelites to conquer Jericho.
- **Results:** the stigma associated with rape and prostitution was an important challenge identified, which made some women reluctant to identify with the characters. However, in time women wanted to share their own experiences of SGBV before discussing further about the stories. Women also realised how men make decisions on the body of women stripping them away of their agency.



The participants emphasized that gender justice is not solely a women's issue, but a concern for all, including men.

Another challenge of the gender justice agenda for peacebuilding is the inclusion of men and their role as allies in deconstructing patriarchy and violent masculinity. Some organizations that have been leading work on this in Colombia are Colectivo Masculinidades de Colombia and the Casa Bartolome de las Casas. There is broad recognition of the need for intentional work with men on women's rights and simultaneously of the need to discuss how to deconstruct patriarchal masculinity. Gender justice advocates stressed the importance of respecting the forums, spaces, programming and funding that supports women and women's rights, and not to co-opt or undermine them in the process of thinking through men's role and contribution to gender justice.

Furthermore, the gender justice agenda should be cognizant of the relevance of establishing bridges and peer-exchange spaces as well as coordinating advocacy efforts that contribute to addressing the challenges faced by LGBTQ+ people. Particularly, how transgender people experience multiple forms of discrimination and are targeted with violence. The know-how and networks of multiple secular civil society organizations (CSO) with feminist backgrounds can support queer theology exercises grounded in a broader feminist theology, which can help to fight against the regressive discourses that deny the rights and dignity of LGBTQ+ people. More importantly, it

is imperative to create safe spaces in which a diverse array of identities is recognised before God. It is especially important to provide concrete support to transgender people to live their religious identity, be part of the ministry and live their religion beyond the boundaries of the transgender religious groups.

One of the central aspects of the gender justice agenda for peacebuilding should be to identify and address the divisions faced today in communities globally concerning gender issues. Some of these are detailed below:

- Socio-cultural biases against women are prevalent in many societies. These biases can result in the marginalization of female children, potentially leading to severe consequences. The socio-cultural context together with poverty, conflict situations restrict the opportunities and choices available to women and girls, subjecting them to harmful practices such as genital mutilation and child marriage.
- The misuse of religious texts to justify and reinforce cultural biases against women is evident in certain religious communities. For instance, some congregations may pray for male offspring, while others interpret the Scriptures in a way that supports male dominance over women, even condoning intimate partner violence (IPV).
- The media is used to divide and oppress as it promotes a distorted and unrealistic image of women and men and creates stereotypes and expectations that are harmful and oppressive. The media also manipulates the information and the opinions of the people and influences their political and social choices.
- Fear is a powerful tool to divide as it creates mistrust and hostility among people and prevents them from working together for a common goal. The fear also affects the church, where some men are afraid to lose their status and privilege if women's rights are recognized and implemented. This fear is based on a victim-perpetrator model, which assumes that there is a zero-sum game between women and men and that the empowerment of women means the oppression of men.

The reflection on gender justice and peacebuilding also invites critical questioning on the process of transitional justice and restoration and reconciliation in the context of SGBV, which is a widespread and serious problem in many countries, especially in those affected by armed conflicts and political instability. SGBV is particularly challenging to address due to the patriarchal model of the family and the church, which often silences and blames the victims and protects and excuses the perpetrators. SGBV also involves complex and sensitive issues, such as the role of the state and the law, the accountability and repentance of the perpetrators, the healing and empowerment of the victims, and the restoration and reconciliation of the relationships.

Some of the questions and challenges that should be faced in these processes are:

- How to think about the process for women and girls who have suffered SGBV from an intimate partner, for example husband and/or father or other male relative? How to deal with the cases of men who do not confess nor apologize for the violence they inflict, and who expect to be forgiven and reconciled without any consequences or changes?
- How to emphasize not only listening to but believing the women and girls who experience GBV, inside and outside the church, and who often face retaliation or threats of retaliation if they speak? How to create safe and supportive spaces where women can share their stories and struggles, and where they can find justice and healing?
- How to give women and girls the platform and the voice that they deserve, and not let men speak on their behalf, as it happens in some contexts where women cannot express their wants, needs, and concerns, even in cases of GBV?
- How to address gender justice not only in terms of women, but in a broad sense that encompasses the diversity of sex and gender, which is not easy in Latin America, where there is strong resistance and rejection of LGBTQ+ people, and where they face multiple forms of discrimination and violence?



*How to create safe and supportive spaces where women can share their stories and struggles, and where they can find justice and healing?*

## 3.1 Peacebuilding in Colombia: Reflections on the Role of Women in Peacebuilding

The role of women in peacebuilding in the Colombian context has been crucial so far, given the unprecedented inclusion of a gender approach as transversal to the 2016 peace agreement<sup>4</sup>. Presently, women, including former combatants and peace signatories, are reclaiming leadership positions to shape the peace dialogues with the remaining armed actors in Colombia.

The current president, Gustavo Petro, is pursuing what he has named a ‘Total Peace’ policy<sup>5</sup>. This ambitious plan aims to end the violence that has plagued Colombia for decades. The plan for achieving this comes through brokering simultaneous ceasefires with various armed and criminal groups, and then trading judicial leniency and other benefits for permanent disarmament. The plan involves significant advancement in the implementation of the peace agreement with the former Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC), resuming peace talks with the National Liberation Army (ELN), and establishing dialogues with Colombia’s drug-trafficking militia “Clan del Golfo,” criminal groups, and the FARC dissidents. Petro’s proposals offer an ambitious approach to negotiating with armed groups, implementing prior peace accords, and pursuing national unity amid debilitating socio-political polarization.



"It may be difficult to remember, but even harder to forget. You cannot forget something that is not remembered". Women carry diverse experiences and roles in both conflict and peacebuilding. Nidia Arcila Astaiza, former FARC guerrilla and signatory of the Peace Agreement and María Eugenia Mosquera: Woman rights defender, Legal representative of CONPAZCOL.

Religious actors and other key stakeholders involved in the existing peacebuilding efforts need to prioritize the effective inclusion of women as protagonists and agents of change, not as mere victims of the conflict. Recognizing and amplifying the specific peace proposals designed and implemented by women is a starting point for shifting that pervasive narrative. Working collectively and ensuring gradual but meaningful changes through steady peacebuilding efforts, which are closely linked to grassroots-level initiatives, is the main recommendation from women to motivate and empower the broad civil society to continue to engage in peace and reconciliation processes.

**Meaningful peacebuilding proposals made by women, for women that were shared as examples:**

- ‘Casa Madre’ (the Mother House) was established as a sanctuary, a place of healing. Despite being in a territory controlled by the Gulf clan, it provides a safe haven. This initiative is led by the Mesa Interétnica por la Paz to empower leaders from peasant, Indigenous, and afro descendants’ communities to foster peace at a grassroots level.
- The Weapons Exchange for Toys initiative, which aimed to protect girls, has supported several girls, previously involved with outlaw groups, to leave, complete their education, and become leaders in their own communities.
- In Buenaventura, displaced communities led by women are developing plans for safe relocation and return to their territories. In the Naya River, women have mobilized and organized themselves to draft proposals that can be presented at current formal negotiation spaces with diverse armed actors.
- Economic initiatives focused on sustainable livelihoods using traditional food products, such as those prepared using *papachina*, a tuber like yam and cassava, from which flour is extracted. This, along with fishing and seafood, forms the basis of their autonomous economy.
- Ancestral cuisine and creation of spaces for storytelling and memory-making where cooking opens a space for experience exchange that can help to heal the emotional wounds associated to the violent conflict.



However, these women peacebuilders also face many challenges, such as the persistence of violence and fear due to the failure to expedite the implementation of the 2016 peace agreement and the pronounced exclusion from the decision-making spaces. GBV is also a key obstacle to their leadership. Unfortunately, the lack of effective measures from the government to protect women and girls persists, especially in the context of social and peace activism, where they risk their lives for their leadership and advocacy. The only protection that women have is the network that they have created with the churches, friends, family members, and their communities.

Encouraging communities to address and rectify acts of aggression – as well as to acknowledge that patriarchy is a part of the shared history while striving to overcome it - is essential for peace. Similarly, recognizing

that violence within ecclesiastic environments is a pressing issue. As churches and ecumenical organizations with the capacity to facilitate peace, there is a responsibility to reflect theologically and listen to the voices of victims, contributing to addressing the injustices women continue to face.

The women engaged in community level peacebuilding noted that faith and spirituality serve as sources for strength and resilience for them in their peacebuilding work in Colombia. Women believe in God but also in other spiritual forces.

Their spirituality is often rooted in liberation theology, which sees God as a poor and oppressed God who is with them and for them. These peacebuilders highlight the diversity and richness of their cultures and the challenges that they face to preserve them, such as the indigenous women and children losing their cultural identity because they were forcefully displaced to the cities. ■



*The women engaged in community level peacebuilding noted that faith and spirituality serve as sources for strength and resilience for them in their peacebuilding work in Colombia.*



# 4



## About co-creation of peace and reconciliation theology

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### 4.1 Theological Reflections: What is the Meaning of Doing Theology?

Theology is not an abstract or detached exercise but a method of perceiving, executing, and acting in the world based on faith and lived experiences. From the perspective of a participating feminist theologian, it is crucial to critically examine the oppressive aspects of some theological traditions and voices, particularly those that silence or marginalize women. There is a need for continuous dialogue between academic and grassroots communities, without idealizing or romanticizing their struggles. Theology is a tool for transforming reality, not merely describing it.

Theology cannot be conducted without engaging with the realities of those who suffer, such as victims of violence against women. The Word of Life is proclaimed not



Christian rites and rituals, along with embracing the sacred and the mystery, can serve as valuable resources for community peacebuilding.

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*Theology originates from the real lives of real people, especially those living amidst conflict and injustice.*

as a visible entity, but as an experience in flesh and blood. Theology originates from the real lives of real people, especially those living amidst conflict and injustice. This is the cornerstone of a robust theology of peace and reconciliation.

There is no claim to have the final or definitive word on theology, but there is recognition of different perspectives and interpretations based on various contexts and experiences. The diversity of theological voices should be respected, but there are also criteria to discern what constitutes good and bad theology. Academic theology is not privileged over the theology of the people who live their faith in their everyday lives. The experiences of those on the margins must be heard and valued. In doing so we are challenged to align with those who are most vulnerable and marginalized, and to scrutinize the power dynamics in the conflicts faced. This perspective is also brought to the reading of the biblical text, which is enlightened by the life of the people and vice versa.

The process does not stop at speech but must progress to action. The belief is that theology must effect change in the lives of people and the world. Actions are taken

in the hope and love of Christ who unites and provides grace. Love for oneself and neighbours should be practised, as well as caring practices for personal well-being and that of others. A Christology that reflects and centres the experiences of those in the margins should be embraced, and the gifts of the Spirit that reside in these experiences are acknowledged. Theology is conducted in a cycle of seeing, doing, and acting, always open to new insights and challenges.

Theology should be understood not only as a means of understanding reality but also as a method of transforming it. Living in a patriarchal society that has idealized the “poor” and produced oppressive theologians, even among women, there is a need to balance the academic and experiential aspects of theology and hold oneself accountable for perspectives and actions. It is necessary to acknowledge the differences that exist, not only in terms of beliefs but also in terms of gender, ethnicity, and socio-economic status. These differences have implications for how faith is accessed and practised. For instance, Paul’s statement that in Christ there is no male or female, Jew or Gentile, slave or free, was a radical affirmation of the inclusion of women and other marginalized groups in the Christian community. Paul was not discussing equality in the modern sense but about the dignity and value of all people as made in the image of God. This is the basis of the defence of human rights, not an external agenda imposed by the United Nations or other institutions. Theology should be conducted in a way that respects and embraces the diversity of God’s creation and seeks to change the structures and systems that oppress and exclude others.

## 4.2 Theological Reflections: Truth-seeking

Investigating the intricacies of human conflict in search of truth requires complete impartiality. Without freedom from material or ideological biases, the independence necessary for truth-seeking is unachievable. Besides, those leading truth-seeking efforts must find ways to maintain comfort and independence. For example, within the Colombian Truth Commission a daily 30-minute period of silence in God’s presence was practised and shared by commission members. This routine cultivated the wisdom and bravery required to act, regardless of the consequences.

The question “HOW DARE YOU?” echoes in the minds of truth seekers worldwide. How can one claim humanity, enjoying safety and comfort, while remaining apathetic to the millions of children, women, and men ravaged by violence and war? In an interconnected world where everyone is a neighbour, how dare one call oneself human? This is not a question of truth, as the truth is already known. The real question is, being aware of the truth, why does one continue the current behaviour? This unsettling question can be framed in various ways. For Christians, it

takes on a new dimension: How dare one call oneself a follower of Jesus if those injured on the road to Jericho are ignored? However, amidst this challenging journey of truth-seeking, there is also joy, inner peace, the strength to persevere, and the experience of continuous renewal. Life arises from death. The victims, the survivors, have expressed their deepest gratitude. Trust and acknowledgement have also been gained from those who have admitted their participation in war crimes.

Two dynamics are at play in the world when we survey conflict and discord. The first emphasises love, promoting peace, connection, and reconciliation. The other extreme prioritizes military solutions, securitization of problems, and war responses. These two dynamics coexist and continue to interact, but there is an invitation to

collaborate, respect differences, and establish a dialogue between these opposing sides. This approach must include all those defending human rights and dignity, building a community amidst differences. For religious actors working in peacebuilding currently and in the future, this endeavour should be a reflective exercise aimed at reinventing and rediscovering community-based liturgical practices. The aim is rooted in finding a common language grounded in the Lutheran tradition that would echo in the work of gender justice, peace, and reconciliation.

The theme of being reconciled in Christ emphasises the power of unity and peace. Peace is not something that can be created; it is a gift from God. Efforts are focused on

restoring peace, reflecting Jesus's mission to bring peace to the world and restore what humanity has destroyed. God is both holy and judging, yet also holy and loving. God forgave David, but he remained accountable to God. Being loving and merciful does not eliminate accountability. The book of Ephesians speaks of the transformative work of God through Jesus. Reconciliation is through the blood of Christ, which restored the relationship with God and broke down barriers between people. Jesus established peace by building connections between all, and everyone is called to be ambassadors of reconciliation. The contribution lies in the ethics of the gospel, contributing without the pretence of baptism or conversion.



*The theme of being reconciled in Christ emphasises the power of unity and peace.*

### **Reflections on Theological Perspectives in Peacebuilding:**


- The **Theology of Negotiation** questions the extent to which we negotiate for peace and justice, and what should be negotiable for their sake. It challenges us to reconsider our non-negotiables to achieve peace. For instance, in Ethiopia, ethnicity is considered non-negotiable.
- The **Theology of Denial/Resistance/Resilience** encourages us to reject the status quo when it opposes truth and justice. This theology, exemplified by Luther's resistance to the Pope, calls for resilience in the face of adversity. It acknowledges the crucial role of courageous women as the real hope of each community.
- The **Theology of Hope**, as emphasized in Colombia, posits that Christian theology is fundamentally a theology of the future. It urges us to believe and listen with faith, to believe that conflicts can be resolved, and to act in ways that foster a better future.
- The **Theology of Trust** emphasises the importance of trust in moral issues, ethics, and relationships. It highlights the trust built with victims and acknowledges the recovery of trust in political, societal, cultural, and religious institutions as a central theme for peacebuilding.
- The **Theology of Listening** underscores the importance of listening to victims. Peace and reconciliation are only possible when we listen, act, and treat others with respect. It reminds us that God hears prayers and listens to the oppressed.
- The **Theology of Connection** fosters stronger relationships through a new logos. It is important to use language that contributes to connecting not only through shared values but also through diverse life experiences which enable an individual and collective self-awareness making possible living alongside one another.
- The **Theology of Reconciliation** recognizes that the goal is fostering a transformation that promotes peace. It emphasises the centrality of the cross in our liberation and the reconciliation achieved through Christ for the restoration of the inherent dignity of human beings.



## 4.3 Opportunities and Challenges – Role of the religious actors in the current peace dialogues in Colombia

The ‘total peace’ approach of the current Colombian government has opened the space for all armed actors to negotiate with the government. Simultaneous peace dialogues are ongoing with the National Liberation Army (ELN in Spanish) and the Estado Mayor Central (EMC). The dialogue process with the National Liberation Army (ELN), Colombia’s second-largest guerrilla group, formally was reinitiated on November 21, 2022, by the current president Gustavo Petro. Former attempts at peace talks were not successful, and the last effort ended in 2019 during the Duque government. This effort resulted in continued violence in communities located mainly on the Colombian-Venezuelan border, Arauca, Catatumbo, Choco, and other parts of the Pacific region, where this guerrilla has been historically active.<sup>6</sup>

Meanwhile, the Colombian government and the Estado Mayor Central (EMC) of the FARC-EP announced an agreement to establish a Peace Dialogue Table. During the installation of the Table, the parties discussed and approved a national, bilateral and temporary ceasefire<sup>7</sup>. It includes the participation of different stakeholders to verify the fulfilment of those ceasefires<sup>8</sup>.

A photograph of a large, leafy tree in a misty, mountainous landscape. The tree is the central focus, with its branches spreading out. The background shows rolling hills and mountains shrouded in mist, with a bright sky and some clouds. The overall scene is serene and natural.

Theology should be understood not only as a means of understanding reality, but also as a method of transforming it. It should be conducted in a way that respects and embraces the diversity of God's creation and seeks to change the structures and systems that oppress and exclude others.

The role of religious actors in peacebuilding has been highlighted in the recent efforts led by the Petro presidency within its 'Total Peace' approach. For instance, the World Council of Churches (WCC) was appointed as a permanent accompanier for peace talks with the Estado Mayor Central (EMC) FARC-EP in Colombia. This appointment was made alongside the Roman Catholic Colombian Episcopal Conference, the United Nations Mission in Colombia, and the Organization of American States. The WCC's main task is to accompany and encourage the process and maintain relationships with the negotiators from both sides on behalf of the international ecumenical movement.

The WCC's involvement in the peace process is part of a broader effort to express solidarity with the Colombian government, churches and people as they collaborate in the design, implementation, and advocacy for the construction of peace in the country. The WCC's role in the peace talks is seen as crucial, providing accompaniment and, where necessary, leadership and moderation.

Similarly, the Episcopal Conference has a formal role in the peace dialogues with the ELN. It has been involved in facilitating dialogue and trust-building between the ELN and civil society, especially in the regions where the ELN has a strong presence. The Episcopal Conference has helped to organize and participate in regional and national encounters, workshops and forums that bring together different sectors of society, such as victims, women, youth, indigenous people, Afro-Colombians, environmentalists, academics, journalists, and religious leaders. The aim is to discuss the causes and consequences of the armed conflict and the proposals for peace and reconciliation<sup>9</sup>.

Beyond the official and institutional representation of the WCC and the Episcopal Conference, religious actors participate in various ways. For the ELN, there is a national participation committee comprised of members of the two parties along with participation from civil society organizations (CSOs). Religious actors are represented in the committee through the Episcopal Conference, DIPAZ, the Evangelical Confederation, and the Interreligious Table for Peace. There is not only the participation of Christian denominations but also a diversity of religious actors at the local and regional levels in collaboration with other CSOs.

For the EMC peace dialogues, there are two main areas of participation. First, the mechanism for verification of the bilateral ceasefire, where churches are asked to exercise an observant role to determine whether the ceasefire is in place in the territories where the churches have a presence. Second, the negotiation table moves around the country to include the participation of CSO. Here, the churches can participate in shaping the agenda for the dialogue. In the territorial work, IELCO can generate transformative proposals in collaboration with other CSO stakeholders.

The success of the WCC's role in the ongoing peace dialogues requires coordination of their efforts both internally and internationally. Internally, this can be achieved through the ecumenical platform DiPAZ, the Interchurch Dialogue for Peace

and the ACT Colombia forum. The WCC cannot effectively operate independently and requires the support of other churches to maximize its impact in the current peacebuilding scenario. Therefore, it is important to think about how to manage the responsibilities and the collaboration. To facilitate this, a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) is under preparation to clarify roles and how to work together.

Furthermore, the ACT Colombia forum can provide feedback to the WCC and support advocacy efforts. Collaboration with the Lutheran World Federation (LWF) in Colombia and Venezuela provides a space to gather not only with other churches and ACT but also with other stakeholders accompanying the process

permanently. This facilitates more effective support for those churches that are working on peacebuilding. Other efforts are focusing on research with universities, think tanks, and seminars, including the theological seminar of IELCO. This information can be an input for the larger process to provide a new narrative of the theological experiences of communities in peacebuilding.

There are differences in the roles between national and international actors. These differences need to be acknowledged and addressed to ensure effective collaboration and progress in the peacebuilding process.

The church's involvement in this stems from historical reasons. The church suffered persecution, so being involved in peace is not separated from living through its own conflict. The religious actors are linked to the communities and are a part of them, and that is why they should remain key stakeholders in this conversation of peace.

The workshop contributed to a timely discussion on the role of the church in peace and reconciliation, not only in Colombia but globally. In the context of Colombia, the current mechanisms have underscored the unique opportunity to contribute to the scenario of peace and reconciliation. This is a powerful message for the rest of the churches in terms of inspiring efforts in the broader faith-based community to take these reflections to the next step and use those reflections to



*The workshop contributed to a timely discussion on the role of the church in peace and reconciliation, not only in Colombia but globally.*



inform future efforts in peacebuilding in other regional contexts. It is crucial to provide clear tools to the congregations on how to work together, even those coming from different backgrounds, to build a common understanding of being Christian in terms of peace and reconciliation. The main issue here is how to work in networks and express key beliefs and practices to contribute from a human rights approach to social transformation.

The church sectors have remained faithful in accompanying the reconstruction of the social fabric that has been broken in conflict-affected communities. They are rebuilding it based on the affirmations of human rights and international humanitarian law. In Colombia, all the churches must coordinate their work in the territories. Besides providing spiritual accompaniment, they are considering how to support those who have been wounded and who are not being heard, through church-led initiatives focusing on grassroots-level dialogues to find a common vision for the future. This is key for nations to be able to transform themselves. Leveraging theology to enact change and building a reconciliation and peace theology is an important step to mobilize religious actors, have a unified voice, and promote transformative change.

**An example of religious actors' collaboration amidst violent conflict:**

- In February 2022, Russia launched a full-scale invasion of Ukraine and began occupying more of the country.
- Slovakia, a neighbouring country with Ukraine, prepared to help fleeing refugees, particularly mothers with children.
- The state of the Slovak Republic was unable to respond to this situation.
- The Evangelical Church of the Augsburg Confession in Slovakia responded almost immediately, setting up a booth at the border shared with the Catholic Church.
- Many church workers, including pastors, took turns at the booth to effectively help those in need.
- The Evangelical Church offered accommodation options for refugees and set up blessing boxes containing necessities at the border.
- The Evangelical Diakonia organised Slovak language courses for refugees, summer camps for children, and helped find work for mothers, integrating refugees into ordinary life.

## Fundamentalisms

Religious extremism has increased in recent years, partly due to the loss of power that the churches have experienced because of external influences. Some churches have radicalized to reclaim their influence, and their voices have dominated the public discourse, creating a feedback loop. The idea of Christianity as a return to a specific morality is used as a strategy to regain power. However, progress is inevitable, and religious extremism is a reaction to the perceived power shift by the right.

In Latin America, there is a need for more theological exchange, especially with feminists and feminist lawyers who seek theology that can be applied in public spaces. As new masculinity has only emerged in the last four decades, men need to listen, create private and safe spaces, and ask more questions. The backlash in human rights is a symptom of the threat to human rights that have been achieved over the years.

The history of the Catholic Church in Colombia is a story of sinners and saints, marked by solidarity and compassion amidst pain. In the last century, both clergy and laity were involved in the violence between political parties, as conservative Catholics fought with their liberal and socialist counterparts, and against Protestants who were supported by the liberals. Since the 1960s, Catholics and members of different churches have dedicated themselves to working for social justice, peace, and reconciliation, despite many of them being assassinated.

The evangelization of the country was carried out violently, particularly against indigenous people and people of African descent. Because of this history, the presence of black and indigenous people on the Truth Commission was crucial. They created a document for their own people, providing a rich approximation of the historical challenges faced by these communities.

The churches, starting with the Catholic Church, have until now been reluctant to acknowledge their contribution to the violence, whether through action or omission, and to ask for forgiveness. This must change, as they are the main public moral authority. If the churches ask for public forgiveness, it will pave the way for political parties, companies, and the military to recognize and ask for forgiveness.

In the United States, there is still a pressing need to address the colonizing past and the Christian churches' responsibilities through a liberation theology based on a Christian commitment to transformation. Experiences of mutual transformation through encounters are essential to reach a turning point for action aimed at deconstructing all the processes they want to pursue. Simultaneously, churches in the United States that are often the most vocal in the media are those who wish to promote a "return" to a specific, usually conservative moral framework in order to maintain power within society through political. The rise in religious fundamentalism is akin to a wounded animal that is cornered and more dangerous, the lashing out of which symbolizes a response to the shifting power dynamics and lessening representation within society. In LWF-member churches, fundamentalism is uniting



An important objective of the workshop was learning from each other's experiences and co-creating together.

opposites, with the Catholic Church uniting with new Pentecostal churches against rights for women and LGBTQ+ people. This raises the question of what they are doing in their theology. Inside the church, they are conducting the same liturgy and the same rituals, and everything remains the same. The processes that seemed transformative outside religious institutions and congregations do not translate into transformation and critical questioning of the beliefs and practices within. Furthermore, although it is recognized that men should be involved in the process of advocating for gender justice, what women in religious spaces have seen is that men have learned the feminist discourse, but their actions failed to follow those principles.

Similarly, in some churches, the key questions and perils to address relate to SGBV within the churches, where having openings for women who want to denounce these phenomena is not enough. More importantly, it requires creating safe spaces and networks that empower women to safely challenge the structures that oppress them. For example, sharing experiences with different stakeholders, for instance, with feminist activists, to understand the fundamentalisms and debate with them using the language and tools that are relevant to them. This exchange of theologies is crucial for striving for change and an increase in critical thinking within religious institutions.

Overall, fundamentalisms are potentially linked to the literal reading of the Bible, and that is the main source of divisions within the religious actors' spaces currently. For example, the rejection of practices such as *mambeo*<sup>ii</sup> because it is deemed bad in the eyes of God, as it is not mentioned in the Bible. However, this does not mean that indigenous communities have not walked with Jesus for a long time. This highlights the need for a more inclusive and understanding approach to religious practices and beliefs. ■



# Conclusions and Recommendations

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- **Reframe Reconciliation:** Encourage a shift in understanding reconciliation as a journey, not a singular event. This journey encompasses three key stages: Memory and Coping, Justice and Restoration, and Apology and Reconciliation.
- **Develop a Theology of Hearing:** Prioritize the development of a theology of hearing within the ministry of justice/peace. This should emphasize the importance of believing and acting upon what is heard.
- **Emphasize Active Listening:** Recognize active listening as a fundamental aspect of peacebuilding and reconciliation processes. This involves immersing oneself in the communities, understanding their histories, and acknowledging their narratives.
- **Contextualize Efforts:** Understand that there isn't a one-size-fits-all approach to peacebuilding processes. Efforts should be carefully tailored to the specific context and needs of the communities involved.
- **Self-Reflection:** Regularly evaluate the theology and practices within the church. This includes assessing whether the church is fostering an environment of equality and inclusivity.



Different forms of art serves as a powerful path to reconciliation.



*Ensure that the church's actions and language align with the principles of gender justice.*

- **Diverse Leadership:** Strive to produce theologians and leaders who challenge traditional dynamics of inequality and domination. Encourage different perspectives and innovative theological approaches.
- **Inclusive Spaces:** Create spaces within the church where all members, particularly women and marginalized groups, can express their views and experiences. Avoid speaking for them, but rather facilitate their self-expression.
- **Empowerment:** Actively work towards empowering all members of the church. This includes recognizing and addressing any instances where individuals may be silenced or ignored.
- **Gender Justice:** Ensure that the church's actions and language align with the principles of gender justice. Avoid merely using the language of empowerment without implementing practical changes.
- **Continuous Improvement:** Regularly review and update church practices to ensure they are inclusive and empowering. Be open to feedback and willing to make necessary changes.
- **Foster Emotional Dialogue:** Ensure the management of emotions in spaces for dialogue, especially where diverse perspectives exist. This is a key aspect of maintaining a healthy and productive dialogue.
- **Implement Self-Care Plans:** Develop a written self-care plan that includes theological considerations about the body and the importance of self-care. This plan should encompass strategies for physical, psychological, and social protection.

- **Address Regressive Agendas and Manage their Emotional Impact:** Acknowledge and address the emotional impacts of regressive agendas. Emotions are a key factor for fundamentalism to thrive, so their management is essential. Similarly, actively determine the necessary advocacy measures to counter fundamental religions or regressive human rights agendas. This requires things that bring people together and promote unity.
- **Engage with Communities and Promote Community-Centred Scripture Reading:** Be receptive to communities and learn from their experiences. Sensitivity to their needs and realities is crucial. Encourage the use of the Bible as a text for the community, by the community. Its reading and interpretation can transform lives and allow for the redefinition of certain life events at both individual and collective levels.
- **Redefine Academia's Role within Theological Thinking:** Address the challenges academia faces in moving beyond the abstract and incorporating popular knowledge into its reflections. There is a need to interpret theological texts from the perspective of communities and rethink academia's role in engaging in constructive dialogue.
- **Reinterpret Values within Projects:** This provides opportunities to redefine human rights norms. It allows indigenous communities to find alternatives to harmful practices from their own cosmovision while respecting their autonomy.



A route to reconciliation. There isn't a one-size-fits-all approach to peacebuilding processes. Efforts should be carefully tailored to the specific context and needs of the communities involved.

- **Consider the Concept of Ethics and Hierarchies:** Ethical hierarchies can create divisions and judgments, often preserving the world's political order and certain relations. These principles collectively emphasize the importance of internal change, redefining values, and careful consideration of ethics and hierarchies in community development and cultural preservation.
- **Recognize and Accept the Diversity of Cosmovisions:** This recognition forms the foundation for transformative processes, fostering respect for diversity and indigenous wisdom in the pursuit of societal change. This is emphasized as an important step.
- **Enhance Progressive Theological Training:** In Latin America, there is a need to enhance and expand progressive theological training, which often faces opposition from more conservative religious traditions. This will foster a more inclusive and progressive approach to peacebuilding.
- **Provide Scholarships:** Offer scholarships for individuals to study theology in Latin America. This can help cultivate a new generation of peacebuilders who are well-versed in theological perspectives on peace and reconciliation.
- **Develop Eco-Theology and Eco-Spirituality:** Facilitate learning and sharing of different spiritualities and knowledge with indigenous and Afro communities. This includes the development of eco-theology and eco-spirituality, which integrate respect for the environment into theological understanding and spiritual practice.
- **Include Youth in Peacebuilding Efforts:** Young people bring fresh perspectives and innovative ideas. Their inclusion can make valuable contributions to peacebuilding efforts.
- **Truth-telling and narratives from the margin:** Organizations working on peacebuilding should adopt a comprehensive approach to truth-telling that includes recognizing the multi-layered nature of truth, seeking out marginalized narratives, exploring collective experiences, opposing structural oppression, and aiming for individual and communal decolonization as part of their commitment to 'faith in action'.



**Research and documentation are needed to enhance the knowledge and understanding of peacebuilding in different contexts. The research and documentation should include:**

- **Case Studies:** Case studies can provide in-depth insights into specific situations, contributing to a richer and more nuanced understanding of peacebuilding in different contexts.
- **Systematization of Experiences:** Experiences need to be documented and systematized to inform future work, allowing to learn from past successes and challenges. The risks of forgetting what has been learned and achieved, of valuing academic knowledge over community knowledge, and of extractive practices - going to the community, hearing from them, taking what they say, publishing it, and leaving the communities alone in their struggles - need to be avoided.
- **Theological Diaries:** Theological diaries can help to reflect on the experiences, explore theological questions and ideas, and track the personal growth and development in the context of peacebuilding. ■



*Theological diaries can help to reflect on the experiences, explore theological questions and ideas, and track the personal growth and development in the context of peacebuilding.*





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