

WITNESS FOR JUSTICE

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“Never Forget”

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“Never forget!” The words echo loudly for me each September 11th, especially this year as our nation marks the tenth anniversary. The tragedy of 9/11 is something I will never forget, and dare say few will for years to come. I remember exactly where I was when I heard the news and witnessed the most profound images of grief, heroism, and unity. There are close to 3,000 reasons never to forget the harrowing events of 9/11, and many more if you consider loss of life and toll taken on our nation with the subsequent “wars on terror” and wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. This year, however, the words “never forget” triggered memories for me from a very different context. These were not images from 2001, but rather from just days before. Ten days prior to 9/11/11, I returned from Colombia as part of a UCC/Mennonite delegation to the Afro-Caribbean coast. The trip sought to strengthen our advocacy work on Colombia by visiting first-hand communities that had experienced violence at the hands of guerrillas, paramilitaries, and other armed actors. Violence, disappearances, threats, and natural disasters have forced churches and entire communities to displace over the past twenty years, creating the largest internally displaced person (IDP) crisis in the world. The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, UNHCR, office

lists the internally displaced people in Colombia at over **3.5 million**.ⁱ The toll of such violence, mass displacement, and poverty is impossible to describe. Yet, in the midst of such pain, we witnessed the power of the human spirit through the generous hospitality and joy in several remote villages whether they had been displaced or remained a “resisting” community.ⁱⁱ

We asked what message they want to send to the U.S. government and churches. The most common response was “*do not forget us...*,” which I heard as a call not only to our delegation, but to the U.S. government and international community which has too often turned a blind eye to Colombia’s needs. Passage of a Free Trade Agreement with Colombia that pays little attention to human rights is the most recent example. The continued financial support from the U.S. that comes overwhelmingly in the form of military aid remains the major problem. More needs to be done to change these policies.

The phrase “*never forget...*” has taken on new meaning for me. It reminds me not only of the loss and hope experienced on 9/11, but calls me to remember and be in solidarity with people and nations currently living through events that will forever alter their fate and consciousness. Whether it is in Colombia, Somalia, Japan, or the Middle East, people call us not to forget them or their struggles. This type of remembering is a way for us to continue our healing process from 9/11 by sharing our pain and hope with the rest of the world. Let us never forget...

ⁱ <http://www.unhcr.org/4dfa11499.html>

ⁱⁱ UCC partner organization, Justapaz, seeks to “remember” by documenting the suffering and hope of Colombian churches. Download the 2011 document at <http://www.justapaz.org/images/documentos/pc5.pdf>

The United Church of Christ has more than 5,277 churches throughout the United States. Rooted in the Christian traditions of congregational governance and covenantal relationships, each UCC setting speaks only for itself and not on behalf of every UCC congregation. UCC members and churches are free to differ on important social issues, even as the UCC remains principally committed to unity in the midst of our diversity.