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**Report of the Living Letters Visit to Uruguay and Bolivia  
July 8-17 2009**

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Living Letters are small ecumenical teams visiting a country to listen, learn, share approaches and challenges in overcoming violence and in peace making, and to pray together for peace in the community and in the world. A team consists of 4 - 6 women and men from around the world who have witnessed violence in its various forms and are engaged in working for just peace. A Living Letters team will be successful when those visited can affirm "we are not alone!" - and when team members feel they have received much from those who they visited to encourage.



# **International Ecumenical Peace Convocation**

**Kingston | Jamaica | 2011**

## **Introduction**

**We participants in the Living Letters visit to Uruguay and Bolivia, have decided to report by way of drawing the attention of those who are shaping the agenda of the 2011 International Peace Convocation to the main issues which we have identified as a group at the end of that remarkable experience for which we are very grateful. By so doing we hope to express our deep solidarity with those who have not only given us hospitality but also allowed us to share in their pain, struggles and hopes.**

### **1. Violence Against Women**

**According to the first draft of the Ecumenical Declaration for a Just Peace, evil takes different forms as it penetrates our reality. This may be in different forms of violence, understood as a violation of the space every being needs to exist. It may also be in the abuse of human power that disempowers others or subordinates them to one's own interests. Finally, we can distinguish structures of hostility that emerge from imbalanced powers and the abuse of power.**

**In contrast to this, God's peace – in Hebrew Shalom – includes truth, justice, safety and well-being for all beings. Women and men as God's images are equally called to cooperate in working towards a just peace in God's economy. This is especially true for the relationship between men and women.**

**Concerning the situation of women, church organizations in Uruguay and Bolivia give us alarming news. In their societies, they distinguish different forms of violence against women which correspond with the categories mentioned in the final document of the *Decade to Overcome Violence*:**

**Ecumenical women's organizations in Uruguay and Bolivia state that hostile structures are based upon hierarchical relations that tend to polarize men and women and therefore provide a breeding ground for the abuse of power and all kinds of violence against women. They identify as hostile structures the traditional sharing of work between men and women that leaves no freedom of choice for the women. Such patriarchal structures which impose subordinate roles on women in families and society can be seen as a consequence of colonialism in Latin-American societies but can be identified even in pre-colonial indigenous communities. Especially in Bolivian society, which is in transition from a patriarchal order based on the power of men to command and the obligation of women and children to obey towards a new, more participative and equal order, violence is a sad accompanying phenomenon. As a consequence ecumenical women's organizations in Bolivia call for churches to create ecumenical spaces in order to analyze the roots of inequality between women and men and of the violence practised on women in societies in transition like the Bolivian society. They challenge churches to investigate the cultural roots of discrimination against women. Ecumenical women's organizations in Uruguay and Bolivia call for governments to create instruments to implement the just participation of women in economy and society.**

**Ecumenical women's organizations in Uruguay and Bolivia identify hostile structures in theological concepts that are based upon a dualistic view of women and men, defining "the female" as motherly and caring and "the male" as powerful and strong, thus creating hierarchies between the sexes. They criticize traditional theological concepts which strongly connect sin with female sexuality. This traditional theological anthropology is still widely spread in Christian communities – both Catholic and Protestant -, leading to the exclusion**

of women in the church and paving the way for violence in the family and sexual violence against women. They criticize a soteriology that abuses the Theology of the Cross, emphasizing suffering as the way to salvation and thus justifying women's suffering theologically. Ecumenical women's organizations in Uruguay and Bolivia call upon their churches to engage in an adequate interpretation of the Bible overcoming the patriarchal interpretation in order to create a consciousness of equality and dignity between women and men. They challenge their churches to overcome their own hierarchical structures that lead to the exclusion of women – for example from the ordained ministry - , thus representing forms of structural violence against women. They challenge churches to engage in Christian education that is based upon a new understanding of women and men, each being an image of God with their own dignity. They call upon churches to provide women's shelters and legal, psychological and pastoral care for women and children suffering from violence in the family and sexual violence.

Ecumenical women's organizations in Uruguay and Bolivia identify the abuse of power in the mass media, promoting stereotypes of women's roles and qualities. They call for the churches to speak out openly against media that promote erroneous and even distorted images of women and to support Christian mass media that are engaged in promoting educational programmes aimed at overcoming hostile structures that provide space for violence against women.

## **2. Violence Against Indigenous People**

Bolivia is a country of various indigenous peoples who are in majority, but who have been dominantly ruled by others in about 200 years. Consequently, this has led to continuous poverty for the majority of the people and obstacles regarding feasibility of exercising their religion.

The Living Letter Team conducted several meetings with a range of Christian denominations who are committed to working on these challenges. The mission of the church is to carry out intermediary work between the poor and the rich in order to mitigate the welfare gap.

A substantial amount of people are still living in traditional subsistence communities practicing their ancient traditional religion. The Aymara culture embodies a lifestyle and a political structure which gives guidelines to the way of thinking. It appears that youths raised in the Aymara culture possess their traditional culture, which they want to retain, in addition to be Christians. These two dimensions don't give the impression of being problematically contradictory to each other.

Bolivia has a dominant culture due the 178 years of republican life, even if that was just a political artifice from the state, today has a set of historical cultural and popular milestones that makes the identity predominantly urban. The cultural differences were never integrated to the symbolic world and to the State organization, legally recognized. Structures of power are under predominant monopoly of the official identity which talks about the Bolivian identity. In this sense, the identity built from the state was mono-cultural and for that, racist and exclusive. Since 2000, the cultural and racial differences have been made visible and the intolerance against other was more obvious.

Who were the most affected?

The affected were who belong to the minorities, indigenous communities, etc. Sometimes those groups are not small groups but even though, they were refused. There is a social, labor, racial, sexual, religious and ideological discrimination. Prejudice is against certain communities and individuals who belong to those communities are refused before they can say anything. They and their different background are generalized and refused. To refuse peoples because of their ideas is one of the biggest treats to human dignity and development. Having different ideas, options and thoughts shouldn't be considered wrong, but it is wrong if someone like to convert another by using force, treats, war, insulting groups or laughing of their believes, ideas, just because we don't agree with them.

While we do not learn to live together, we won't see any change in this world. A way to not discriminate is to listen to and to try to understand different thoughts of other peoples.

According to the new constitution, the Roman Catholic faith no longer occupies the status of being the official state religion. All religions are equal in terms of rights. In that light, the public sphere is open to manifestation of religions. This has led to greater equivalence and equity between the respective denominations and everybody is entitled to attend. Political events have traditionally started with a catholic mass, which has been transformed into an ecumenical event. The celebration of an anniversary in La Paz consisted in an ecumenical ceremony leaving displaying space for traditional religion, Christianity and other religions in a ritual lasting almost an hour. Some of the Living Letter Team witnessed this occasion. Apparently, we are observing the emerging stage of an interreligious dialogue as a part of a roadmap to future contemplation of all peoples as equal in terms of respect, merit and value.

### 3. Violence Against Children and Youth

By 2002 39% of Bolivians were under the age of 15 - <http://earthtrends.wri.org> . Going by this statistics, it would mean that the number of young people under the age of 30 would be more than half of the population. Uruguay is also in a similar situation where a relatively large number of the population is youth. One of the biggest challenges of this demography is unemployment which in turn enhances poverty. These are catalyst of escalation in crime and violence as more and more young people find ways of survival.

These challenges are not only in Uruguay but across Latin America. According to the International Encyclopedia of Adolescence Vol 1, “unemployment in the formal sector is a large problem among young people in Uruguay, particularly those who are young, uneducated, and female (UN 2003). Young people are the first to lose jobs during an economic decline and the last to get them back during a recovery. The economic recession that hit all of Latin America in 1999 forced a large proportion of young people to emigrate to find work, and those who stayed faced low wages and a mismatch between qualifications and job availability (CIA 2005; UN 2001) Unemployment is high in Uruguay, with almost 20% of the total population unemployed in 2002 and almost 43% of the economically active youth between the ages of 14 and 19”

The Living Letters Team that visited Uruguay and Bolivia was able to witness some of these challenges. They interacted with some of the young groups and children in church and civil society settings. For example, la Obra Ecumenica, is an educational center for young people. It's an ecumenical centre, supported by the Lutheran church, Salvation Army, Pentecostal

among the council of churches of Uruguay among other churches. The center caters for orphans, school drop outs and “rebellious” youth who may refuse to go to school. It caters for food, does counseling and organizes youth friendly activities like watching movies, listening to music or art. This helps rehabilitate some young people to go back to school. The team also visited “Insituto de Buena Voluntad.” An institute supported by the Methodist church and caters for disabled children.

In Bolivia, the team visited the Lutheran church which has a children center about 10 miles away from Santa Cruz. The children are mostly orphans, children from poor immigrants who cannot afford basic needs like food and education. The Catholic Church too in Santa Cruz has a similar programme. In both scenarios, the main challenge is that the churches can only cater for a small number of children, yet the numbers of children in need of such support is many.

In both countries the team expressed their solidarity with the churches in their efforts to contribute in overcoming the difficulties. In deed the IEPC will be about celebrating some of the efforts that the churches continue to undertake. However, it will also be a platform to consolidate ideas that can generate sustainable peace. For, “Peace is more than just the absence of war. True peace is justice, true peace is freedom. And true peace dictates the recognition of human rights.”-Ronald Regan. It’s the presence of basic human needs; food, water, shelter, laments, education and security for all among others.

#### 4. Economic globalisation and violence

For the members of the Living Letters delegation sent to Uruguay and Bolivia, violence – and in a special way domestic violence that hits particularly women, children and youth – is closely connected with poverty. This was immediately experienced in exclusion areas such as Barrio Borro, in Montevideo, Proyeto 3000, in Santa Cruz, and El Alto, in La Paz.

The Latin American subcontinent has been traditionally characterised by societies whose wealth distribution profile reflected until the middle of the twenty century the polarisation between the colonial elites and the subservient masses. The different attempts at liberal development – which culminated in the neoliberal programmes implemented all over the region during the 1990s – left almost untouched the structures of poverty and were not formulated by and with the contribution of those whose historical protagonism is essential for life-affirming economic changes: the excluded.

The delegation noticed that the emergence, in many Latin American countries, of democratic elected governments which are programmatically committed to human rights, social justice, and redistribution of wealth is a new encouraging reality and also a sign of hope. However, these new attempts to really democratise the struggle against the root causes of poverty have not yet produced results that may lead to a decline of the kind of violence related to the secular plague of poverty in Latin America.

For this reason, the Living Letter delegation insists on the importance of clearly addressing the relation between economic globalisation and poverty-based violence in the preparations for and message from the International Peace Convocation.

## 5. Diversity and Violence

We have realised that the countries we have visited have used existing ethnic, religious, social and political diversity to justify terrible and profound existing economic and social inequalities.

It is a scandal that one third of the Uruguayan population live in a situation of extreme poverty; or that in Bolivia, those who have economic power pretend to ignore the laws related to the rights of indigenous and aboriginal people, going as far as threatening to divide the country. This situation has encouraged a significant number Christians and churches to denounce and ask governments to work for the common good. There is no more bigger scandal than to keep silent or do nothing against such a situation.

We, Christian women and men, recognise and respect the diversity of our origins, beliefs, choices, which make us unique and shape our face. This is based on the conviction that all human beings are equal in rights and obligations. Diversity and difference are not to be taken as synonyms for inequality and exclusion.

As Christian women and men, we deem to be an essential part of our stewardship to support the efforts made by believers and churches towards the respect of diversity and differences. This is a way of promoting equality of rights and opportunities among people who are *similitudo luminis increati*.

Only through the exercise of this stewardship can we become a token of reconciliation and peace because without justice it is not possible to reach that peace which eliminates violence and that reconciliation that makes us sisters and brothers in one single human community.

## 6. Political Violence

The term politics has various interpretations, however, we reach consensus on that, as an activity inherent to the human person, is a broad and multifaceted disposition tending to work in a society using organized public power to effectively achieve beneficial goals to the whole of it. From this perspective, politics is one of the noblest activities of man as social being, since it involves a *work of service to others* in pursuit of progress and improvement as individuals and social tissue. Thus, politics and violence can never be associated, as the motivations and objectives of both are essentially different. Unfortunately today there are forms of politics that overtly or tacitly are associated with violence, thus distorting the main objective of human political activity.

We found that in the countries we visited there are still vestiges of political violence that still continue weightless and latent by substantially limiting the focus of healthy and legitimate politics. These remains should be removed naturally, purifying the social stigma resulting from coercion and violence exercised by past totalitarian regimes. The wounds still fester and societies, having been shamefully silenced memory, lack a natural physiology as body and social tissue. Memory must be purified and debts settled in justice and openly, making use of democratic institutions and the constitutions of the countries in pursuit of restoring order in the past unbalanced by undemocratic processes. This is the only way to restore the social body's health and avoid more forms of violence that are caused by open wounds and memories betrayed.

**Politics is an activity inherent to human nature and its aim is high, for it is the common good, the good of all. So, it is not legitimate the use of public authority, which source is the entire people, to satisfy the interests of certain classes or elites to the detriment of progress and welfare of the whole. These actions, being unjust, are opposed to the ultimate goal of politics, and are forms of exercising violence on certain sectors that have historically been subject to abuse of all kinds. Also political forms based on populism and demagoguery are against the dignity of the social entity and the human person, tacitly provoking violence in a population that is usufruct in their indigent situations for the perpetuation in power of a sector or particular political caste.**

**Living letters strongly recommend the proper treatment of the issue of political violence in South America in all its forms, at the convention in Kingston, Jamaica, in order to give voice to the voices that have been -expressly or tacitly- silent in the past and now through mechanisms anti or pseudo-democratic, to restore the rights of those who have been forcibly deprived of them, to re-establish the order of institutional democratic justice according to the constitution of nations, and finally to remove all form of political violence inflicted on persons or social groups, avoiding thus the compliance of the high objective of politics, which is the common good through service to the fullness of the people.**

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