Today many rejoice in the new air that is breathed in Colombia. Winds of Peace are blowing—winds of common welfare, of “vivir sabroso” (“living joyfully with dignity”)—as proposed by the Petro-Márquez election campaign—and of seeking new avenues of development and justice for this beloved country. However, the road has not been easy. What you see today is the result of many tears, community engagement, and its accompaniment by civil society and peace organizations. What is perceived today has cost the lives and wellbeing of many men and women. The humility of their life experiences has been powerful enough to cancel the cycles of hate and to open people to deep forgiveness.

I want to introduce you to a humble but powerful testimony from a guerrilla fighter in the mountains of the Antioquia Province. His name is Ismael, and this is how he, in his career of violence and combat, was able to find the freedom that peace gives us:

I was walking in the jungle with my companions. That heartless paramilitary had my sister. He called me to come out of hiding, and when I didn’t come out, he killed her, cut her into pieces, and threw them into the bush. I couldn’t wait for the day when I could find him to do that to him and a thousand times more . . . but when I was in jail, I asked if anyone knew him or had seen him. Years later, I knew the gospel and became a Christian, but I kept looking for the one who ended my life that day he murdered my sister. Over time, he was also put in jail, and I already saw the day of my revenge. God had given me a new heart, and I had a lot of faith in Him, and I prayed and felt His Peace, but I couldn’t forgive him. I finally found him and heard him narrate to other prisoners how he had killed an “indiecita” (“little Indian girl”) in the field. So I stood in front of him. I felt sweat running down my forehead, and my hands turned into knives, ready to stab them in his neck. And suddenly, the biblical text came to mind:
“My peace I leave you, my peace I give you, not as the world gives it, I give it to you…”

When I opened my mouth, I could only tell him that that was my sister and that day he had also killed me, but God had made me a new creature and that I forgave him in his name. There I hugged him, and he stood there, paralyzed. A month later I found out that he had asked for a transfer and I never saw him again.

Today I know that I did a lot of damage because I also suffered much of it. With this hug, I ask your forgiveness for what I did. I am willing to continue walking in the reconciliation that only God can give.

Then, Ismael hugged Blanca, the widow of a combatant he killed in a skirmish between the FARC and another armed group fighting for control of territory near the city of Granada. She listened attentively and with tears as Ismael displayed all of his emotions and thoughts that afternoon. Ismael could ask for forgiveness as he could forgive the one that killed her sister years ago. He hugged Blanca in front of a delegation of leaders from the United Church of Christ and the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ). We were there as a gesture of solidarity and accompaniment. We all got submerged in tears and in songs of praise to the God who continues to summon us to be deep and embrace the challenge of creating peace in times like the ones we live in today.

Peace would always result from breaking chains of injustice and letting righteousness reign in social structures. But also, peace has to do with the freedom of our troubled hearts. It is based on our willingness to hug and to be hugged by a God who calls us not to be afraid (John 14:27). Peace advances out of the pain of the victims and the perpetrators. And they know about the roots of the Colombian conflict and are committed to its solutions. As a leader commented, after leaving the place: “The power of forgiveness leads the community into a new development process.“

May it be so for all of us.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR
Angel Luis Rivera-Agosto is the Global Ministries Area Executive for Latin America and the Caribbean. Global Ministries is the common witness of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) and the United Church of Christ.
The United Church of Christ has more than 5,000 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.