

Open letter from the United Evangelical Pentecostal Church of Venezuela to the brothers and sisters of the Rocky Mountain Conference United Church of Christ and the Disciples of Christ Church of the United States.

Dear Brothers in Christ:

For more than four decades the UEPV has maintained a fraternal and fruitful relationship with the Disciples of Christ Church of the United States. In recent years we have had the joy of strengthening fellowship with the Rocky Mountain Conference of the United Church of Christ and the Rocky Mountain Region of The Christian Church (Disciples of Christ). We give thanks to God for this invaluable partnership founded on respect and our common vocation to serve the "least of these". As the originating document of our relationship with the UCC states: "The Pentecostal – Disciples – United Church of Christ alliance has the sense of being a partnership for liberation. It is important that this alliance not focus itself on the function of re-establishing a traditional missionary relationship. It should better serve to deepen the concept of mission and of the missionary... In line with cooperating with the poorest part of humanity, such that it is converted to an example of human and Christian sensibility." This is the spirit in which the Reverends Ramon Castillo and Daniel Sevilla, by your kind invitation, have come to visit on our behalf. This is also the spirit in which we want to share the reflections contained in this letter. We feel it necessary to express our concerns to the churches and the people of the United States regarding the manner in which you conduct your relations with other countries. We love the people and the churches of the United States. We know that the people of the United States are a hard working people, gentle and generous, but we consider that having acquired such power from an economic, technological and military point of view, that your true collective soul has become intoxicated and this has convinced you that your values and achievements are desirable for the rest of the world. Throughout your history, but above all following the Second World War, an important part of the citizens of your country have been teaching you to define yourselves by a messianic mission. When a people have been captured by the idea that they are impregnable, great even and what's more, sole proprietors of the truth, self-criticism becomes unthinkable.

At times one comes to think that a considerable part of the citizens of your country believe, with the naiveté of children, that you have never caused anyone any pain and that if you had it was based on noble objectives. One only has to remember the long history of segregation and genocide of rich indigenous cultures, provoked by conquest and expansion to the West. The crusade that destroyed native cultures, violated their lands and demoralized entire peoples. In this very country men, women and children have been subjected to the most ignominious segregation only for having a different color of skin. We need to remember the Reverend Martin Luther King, this apostle of liberty, and the dreams born in this great country which by virtue of his commitment to the marginalized have been transformed into a heritage for humanity. We have to listen to the voice of King, who from a small cemetery for blacks in Atlanta, continues crying out for justice not only for his brothers and sisters of color, but also for those children torn apart by the missiles of the more than 150 armed conflicts which continue unabated for millions of inhabitants across the planet, or for the hunger which assassinates more people than these same wars.

Let's not think that this is a thing of the past. The lands of indigenous peoples in many parts of the earth continue to be devoured by multinational corporations. Thousands of displaced persons

who abandon their lands are forced to sleep in the open, without latrines, doubled bend over the heat of the sun, without the most basic of health services, without human rights. Thousands of indigenous peoples continue to die from diseases brought to them by the whites. Is this not a modern form of slavery, a modern genocide? And if this is so, how is it that the freest people on earth cannot see it? Is not questioning yourselves, being self-critical, correcting your errors honorable and wholesome exercises for an intelligent people? According to figures supplied by the United Nations Organization for Food and Agriculture, 1000 people in this world die every hour from hunger, which is 5 million children every year. Is this just, ethical or Christian? Is it pleasing to God that because of the excessive ambition of a few, that many of God's children should be subjected to situations of profound misery?

Dear brothers and sisters, we recognize that in our country we have committed many errors which today we are working to remedy. We too are guilty of the genocide of indigenous cultures from the moment the first Europeans set foot on these lands. We are guilty of not having utilized the immense resources which God has given us in service of the weak. In almost 100 years of petroleum exploitation, we have squandered the equivalent of 12 Marshall plans, and the result has been a high level of poverty that today affects almost 80% of the population. The churches, for their part, have been too concerned with their institutional security or in their numerical growth than to be witnesses of Christ and to find effective ways to be of service to the people. In recent decades, the people of Venezuela have been drastically trying to turn this situation around. We have decided to use our resources to abate the marginalization and poverty in our country. At this moment, we have increased those resources designated for education and, in the last two years, successfully taught more than 1 million of our fellow citizens to read and write. More than 700 hundred thousand youth and adults who had abandoned their studies have taken them back up with the support of special programs implemented by the State. Many of the churches of the UEPV have, with enthusiasm, joined this national effort. The health services that were out of reach to the majority of the population are improving, most notably focusing on those places where a doctor has never been seen. Here it is important to highlight the participation of our brothers and sisters from the Disciples and the UCC in health brigades within the popular sectors of our country. On the other hand, by means of just laws, the people of the countryside are being endowed with land, technical assistance and social services.

We are witnesses that these political and social advances have been made without political prisoners, detained journalists, and closed media outlets in a climate of democratic freedoms without precedent in the history of our nation. The institutions of the State, including the current constitution, have been legitimized in nine fair and free elections in the last 6 years. In general, the religions and churches enjoy absolute freedom of worship and some have involved themselves in the social programs of the State in the struggle against poverty.

This does not mean that these changes which have just begun to be visualized have been achieved without obstacles. No justice oriented change in the social structure can be made without affecting the interests of those who have had control and a monopoly on wealth. The defenders of the old social system, between those incredibly powerful businesses of communication (media), disaffected militaries, privileged trade unions, as well as the hierarchies of the traditional church have reacted in defense of their privileges. In April of 2002 the government of our country was overthrown by a military clique in combination with some of the business leaders and with the intervention of external factors. The President was sequestered and a dictatorship was imposed who detained, persecuted and assassinated many of our citizens.

Thanks to God, those members of the Armed Forces who remained loyal to the constitution and,

above all, the valor of our people who dared to defy in the streets the flying bullets of the kidnapers, the President was reinstated in his position in only 48 hours. The reaction of the popular sectors, without precedent in the modern democratic history of our countries, was silenced by the private media of the country, but disseminated by the foreign media.

But a few months following the coup d'état, despite repeated calls by the institutions of the State to a democratic dialogue in order to avoid the crisis, the same factors this time with the antagonism of the hierarchy of the petroleum industry and the transnational companies that operate in our country, called a insurrectionist strike. Do you know of any country that has been subjected to a general strike for 62 days, their basic industries sabotaged by their own management, their refineries paralyzed, their tankers kidnapped, their oil pipelines obstructed, their oil exportation abruptly interrupted for the first time in almost 100 years and their computer servers destroyed, whose people have not fallen into anarchy, chaos and desperation and whose government has stayed strong until overcoming the economic crisis which generated a loss of more than 18 billion dollars and more than 70,000 jobs? Beloved brothers and sisters, thanks to our God and the strength of our people, this bitter experience, far from debilitating us, has made us morally and ethically stronger and has permitted us to rescue our petroleum industry which today is at the service of the many instead of the few.

Despite the forces working to isolate Venezuela from the international community, our country is gaining the respect of those nations promoting Latin-American integration, convinced as we are that we shall be freed together or no one will be free. In this process of integration we have in our hearts the people and the churches of the United States that are in solidarity with us in these struggles. Against the media propaganda, national and international, that tries to portray us to the world as a culturally backward people, governed by a populist group or by an autocrat without a soul, Venezuela responds with humility but with firmness, following the historic example of our liberators. We insist that we have the right to choose our own destiny; to live in freedom, to make our own decisions in matters economic, political and cultural, resolving to struggle against poverty using the resources that God has given us and exercising our sovereignty with respect for other peoples without kneeling down before any power, as powerful as it can be. In this, we know that we can count on your prayers and your support.

Brothers and sisters, all of us are responsible before God to construct such a world that injustice will not be an excuse for terrorism and where terrorism will not be an excuse for aggression against another people. It is necessary to accept that we are on a planet full of cultures, systems of government, religions, languages and pluralistic cultures and that nobody possesses the right to impose not even a single thought on the world because no one is sole proprietor of the truth. The truth is something that we construct day by day amongst us all, taking into account our differences, measured by that which makes us most viable, human and makes our societies just. Only mutual respect of our differences can bring peace, justice, community and fellowship. God created human beings to live in a paradise, but our selfishness and our ambitions have paralyzed this project of God throughout human history. Therefore it is our inheritance to restore paradise and to make real the hope for the Kingdom of God. We should not be afraid to talk for if we call out, the very stones will speak. We should only be afraid to become part of that which we hate. We must resist sin, share our experiences in the struggle and demand justice as a foundation for constructing peace. (Isaiah 32:17)

We finish this message in fraternity, partnership and solidarity with the words of Paul to the Ephesians: "For he is our peace; in his flesh he has made both groups into one and has broken down the dividing wall, that is, the hostility between us." (Ephesians 2:14)