October 2018 — Venezuela: Where do we go from here?

Valdir França, Area Coordinator, Latin America and the Caribbean Presbyterian World Mission

At their synod assembly in April 2018, the Presbyterian Church of Venezuela (IPV) tackled the delicate question of how to position the church in relation to the difficult and deeply divisive problems facing the country.

When the Rev. Sarah Henken and Dennis Smith, mission co-workers in the region, paid a pastoral visit to Venezuela in 2016, they noted that Venezuela was experiencing “deep political and economic polarization” and that the IPV, an integral part of Venezuelan society, had also experienced such polarization within its membership.

Henken and Smith said the Venezuelan church expressed that it deeply valued its more than a century of partnership with the PC(USA), and hoped to strengthen that relationship during this difficult time. They indicated the IPC seeks to maintain its own unity and testimony of hope and pastoral accompaniment to the people of Venezuela.

Since that visit in 2016, the economic and social situation in Venezuela has not improved. I visited the country in 2017, along with the Rev. Dr. Darío Barolín, executive secretary of the Alliance of Presbyterian and Reformed Churches of Latin America (AIPRAL). AIPRAL is a regional body related to the World Communion of Reformed Churches (WCRC) and it, too, is committed to walk with the Venezuelan church during these challenging times of economic crisis and extreme food insecurity.

The Presbyterian Church of Venezuela traces its history to schools and churches established with help from U.S. Presbyterian missionaries at the close of the 19th century. In 2016, after more than a century of partnership, Presbyterian World Mission and the Presbyterian Church of Venezuela established the Venezuela Mission Network. This network seeks to encourage mission partnerships between U.S. and Venezuelan congregations, through such activities as praying for one another, sharing faith stories, and exchanging pastoral visits and resources. (Photo by Yoharlys Zarahy Cribeiro Bracho)

When the IPV Synod met in April 2018, representatives crafted a bold pastoral letter, assuming “a prophetic voice of proclamation and denunciation.” The letter begins by proclaiming: “Our goal is to transcend mere discursive critique and simple catharsis and engage in a solution-oriented and transformative way that aligns with our understanding of the citizenship we are called to practice in this land of grace where we dwell and where the Presbyterian Church of Venezuela ministers.”

The letter concludes with a call to prayer from 1 Thess. 5:17, along with a reference to the Spirit of God in the work of creation in the first two chapters of Genesis: “To pray without ceasing, with all prayer and supplication, in full awareness that, even in the current time of chaos, the Spirit of God moves over the face of the waters. And above the chaos, God calls into existence that which can give form to all that is amorphous, that which can shine light into the darkness, placing all in its proper place, in the time and space where life springs forth and is revived, to the glory of God.”

This is our common future: to accompany our sisters and brothers in Venezuela in this difficult time — as they are committed to accompanying us — and together to create spaces for encounter that can, in the words of the letter, “re-dimension the present moment, understanding it as Kairos, God’s time, called by sacred scripture and through a proactive understanding of our reality to exercise our role as emissaries of peace, bearers of the message of reconciliation. ‘So we are ambassadors for Christ, since God is making his appeal through us; we entreat you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God’ (2 Cor. 5:20 NRSV).”