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## ELECTION 2000

### Lessons from Selma

BY REBECCA RICH

**Historically, Anabaptists have had an aversion to voting because our primary allegiance is to God, not to human institutions.**

Two years ago I took a summer course on the civil rights movement in the United States during the 1950s and '60s. Our learning happened experientially as well as intellectually, as we traveled throughout the South for three weeks, meeting with civil rights activists of varied ages, genders and races to hear about their experiences with the movement.

One of the most moving experiences was visiting the small Voting Rights Museum in Selma, Alabama. Selma entered the national consciousness on March 7, 1965, when Alabama state troopers attacked civil rights workers with clubs and tear gas as they tried to cross the Edmund Pettus Bridge. The activists were on their way to the state capital of Montgomery to demand equal voting rights. Five months later, President Lyndon Johnson signed the Voting Rights Act into law.

During the group discussions following our Selma visit, one student from Bennett College, a historically black women's college in Greensboro, North Carolina, reflected on the importance of voting. She pointed out that 95 percent of Bennett students voted

in the last presidential election, compared with 49 percent of the nation as a whole. She told stories of Bennett president Dr. Gloria Randle Scott walking across campus on election day with a bullhorn, pulling students out of class to exercise their right to vote. I tried but failed to

imagine a similar situation on a Mennonite college campus.

While most Mennonites have had the privilege of voting in the last eighty years, many have chosen not to exercise that privilege. Historically, Anabaptists in the United States have had an aversion to voting because our primary allegiance is to God, not to human institutions. But according to 1989 statistics in *The Mennonite Mosaic*, 79 percent of Mennonites believe we should vote in local and national elections.

Perhaps we have come to realize the impact public policy has on the lives of all Americans. Or perhaps we wish to recognize the non-violent struggle of African-Americans to gain equal voting rights. Most importantly, we might see advocacy as a way to communicate the message of the Gospel, which the Mennonite *Confession of Faith* confirms as "calling the nations to move toward justice, peace, and compassion for all people."

In this issue of the *Memo*, we identify issues that may be important to Mennonites in the upcoming election and note the presidential candidates' positions on those issues. We also hear from a variety of Mennonites who tell us about their basis for deciding how they will vote in the upcoming election and how their faith impacts that decision. We hope this will be a helpful tool as you make your own decisions about the upcoming election. ■

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BY J. DARYL BYLER

**What does it mean today to be conscientious citizens of the world's only military and economic superpower?**

## Too Turned-off to Turn Out?

More than 90 percent of Iran's eligible voters streamed to the polls in 1997 to elect moderate president Mohammad Khatami. In an equally impressive turnout this spring, Iranian voters elected a reform-minded majority to their parliament. In many European countries, between 70 and 90 percent of registered voters go to the polls.

By contrast, less than half of the eligible U.S. voters bothered casting ballots in the 1996 presidential election. Eight million fewer Americans voted than in 1992. And just over one third of the registered U.S. electors voted in the 1998 congressional contests. Some political pundits predict a dismal turnout for the 2000 presidential race.

Why the difference? Do Iranians and Europeans sense that more is at stake? Do they feel greater ownership in the political process? Are the choices more clear-cut? Have Americans grown too complacent or cynical about politics? Do they believe that the candidates are all beholden to the same monied interests?

In their responses to the *Washington Memo* inquiry about the 2000 election (see pages 6–7), Anabaptists also reflect ambivalence about voting. Lindsey Robinson, Lancaster Conference leader, remembers the African American struggle for the right to vote and today is a regular voter, even though the choices are increasingly perplexing.

But few others express excitement about the opportunity to vote or about the choice of candidates. One says he will vote for the "least imperfect" candidate. Another for the "lesser of two evils." A third for the candi-

date who will be "least damaging for the country."

This Anabaptist hesitancy about voting reflects something deeper than the current cultural cynicism. It is rooted in a long-held uncertainty about how to best engage the governing authorities who wield the power of the sword. This tension can be traced to the earliest Mennonite confessions of faith.

What does it mean today to be conscientious citizens of the world's only military and economic superpower? The U.S. government, with means to do great good, so often squanders its resources in ways that inflict pain on vulnerable peoples around the globe.

In *The Christian Witness to the State*, John Howard Yoder offers some salve for the sensitive conscience. Yoder says that voting, especially in national elections, should be understood as a way to express "likes and dislikes," not "as final and responsible participation in the making of government decisions about how the sword of the state is to be used." In a two-party system with limited choices, "the voter chooses not a position of principle but the less objectionable of two competing oligarchies."

But how does one vote responsibly when both major-party candidates support the death penalty, massive increases in U.S. military spending and economic policies that lead to global domination? The waters seem uncommonly murky this year when looking at the major-party candidates. Indeed, several respondents hinted that they may vote for a third-party candidate. Perhaps this is the best way for Mennonites to faithfully reflect the desire for something new.

Anne Meyer Byler, a long-term Mennonite peace and justice activist from Goshen, Ind. challenges us to look for candidates whose "words and actions . . . reflect concerns . . . in the life of Jesus." She notes that both liberal and conservative Christian voters must "leave their 'comfort zones' when trying to follow Jesus' lead in the world of politics." Hard choices, prayerful choices, await us on November 7. But the hard work only then begins. Jeff Hackman of Salem, Oregon writes astutely: "I tend to think that praying for and witnessing to politicians is more effective in the long run than voting." ■

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WASHINGTON MEMO is written by Mennonite Central Committee U.S. Washington Office staff. It interprets national legislation and policy, seeking to reflect biblical concerns for justice and peace as represented in the work and statements of MCC U.S. and Mennonite and Brethren in Christ churches. All biblical quotes are from the New Revised Standard Version, unless otherwise noted.

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To contact the MCC U.S. Washington Office, please see our address on the back page. See our weekly commentary at [www.thirdway.com](http://www.thirdway.com)

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# Catching a Money Loophole

*"Your princes are rebels and companions of thieves. Everyone loves a bribe and runs after gifts. They do not defend the orphan, and the widow's cause does not come before them." (Isaiah 1:23)*

Sixteenth century Anabaptist leader Menno Simons urged authorities to govern justly and without partiality. Present-day Mennonites speak and act out of God's concern for justice for the oppressed and disadvantaged, often the least popular and powerful. Large financial contributions in politics may not directly translate into hostility toward the disadvantaged. But big dollars do influence priorities and agendas.

Outright bribes within our current political system are not condoned or legal. Yet, there exist enough legal and legislative loopholes to empower a peculiar addiction—the political belief that large sums of money are needed to make elections and governance work.

Modest reform did close one loophole this summer. A new law now requires tax-exempt groups formed under Section 527 of the tax code—"527 committees"—to disclose their activities. These committees have been established by private groups, industry, wealthy individuals, political leadership, and candidates. They have been able to raise and spend millions—conducting phony issue ads favoring or opposing candidates, partisan voter registration and get-out-the-vote drives, polling, travel, and transfers of funds to national party soft money accounts—without publicly reporting their existence, sponsorship, contributions or expenditures.

In the Sept.–Oct. 1998 *Washington Memo*, we stated: "Micah decries the practice of public officials seeking bribes and 'the powerful dictat[ing] what they desire' (Micah 7:3). [A bribe] 'deprives the innocent of their rights' (Isaiah 5:23) and causes leaders to 'push aside the needy' (Amos 5:12). God admonishes the Israelites not to distort justice, show partiality or accept bribes, asking them to pursue 'justice, and only justice' (Deuteronomy 16:19–20)."

A reader wrote in the same issue, "Until the country as a whole manages to clean up its 'politicians for sale' we will largely be unable to make much positive impact toward issues of peace and justice." Perhaps we can heed both warnings and hope that public efforts can encourage our politicians not to run after big money. ■

BY DAVID M. WHETTSTONE

For more information, see:

The Center for Responsive Politics  
[www.opensecrets.org](http://www.opensecrets.org)

Common Cause  
[www.commoncause.org](http://www.commoncause.org)

Federal Election Commission  
[www.fec.gov](http://www.fec.gov)

Public Campaign  
[www.publiccampaign.org](http://www.publiccampaign.org)

Public Citizen  
[www.citizen.org/congress](http://www.citizen.org/congress)

## CAPITAL QUOTES

*"Wouldn't you like a little bit more time to thoughtfully consider whether we want to involve ourselves in this particular civil war?"*

—Senator Slade Gorton (R-Wash.) on the floor of the Senate during the debate over military aid to Colombia. His amendment to reduce the package was soundly defeated.

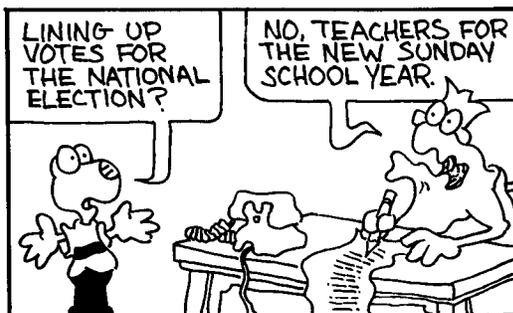
*"How many Colombians, who today are alive, have dreams, and sweat doing odd jobs, will die with [this] decision of the United States Congress?"*

—Exiled journalist Alfredo Molano, days after the military aid package was approved.

*"If we pour concrete in Alaska now, in my humble opinion, we should all pour concrete in the cavity of our brains. This system is not ready for prime time."*

—Senator Joseph Biden (D-Del.) regarding proposals for the construction of a national missile defense system.

## Pontius' Puddle



# Where Do They Stand?

## The Presidential Candidates

Very often it is difficult to sort through the maze of campaign rhetoric. Here, we attempt to clarify the candidates' stances on a range of issues. We encourage readers to raise these issues directly in town hall meetings.

Included here are the positions of the two major-party candidates for president, George W. Bush (Republican) and Al Gore (Democrat), as well as two third-party candidates, Pat Buchanan (Reform) and Ralph Nader (Green). For complete information on issues and candidates, see Project Vote Smart's website at [www.vote-smart.org](http://www.vote-smart.org) or call 1-888-VOTE-SMART.

### Climate Change

*Buchanan:* "Under the treaty on global warming Al Gore brought home from Kyoto, the United States must radically slash its use of fossil fuels like oil and coal, while no commensurate cut is demanded in the fossil fuel use of 132 'underdeveloped countries,' including China."

*Bush:* "I oppose the Kyoto Protocol; it is ineffective, inadequate and unfair to America because it exempts 80 percent of the world, including major population centers such as China and India, from compliance. America must work with businesses and other nations to develop new technologies to reduce harmful [greenhouse gas] emissions."

*Gore:* "Through the power of free markets, through good old-fashioned American ingenuity, we will dramatically reduce pollution and reverse the tide of global warming—while creating more jobs, not fewer jobs, for our people."

*Nader:* "Our response to global warming must include the following: increased use of renewable energy and diminished use of fossil fuels, especially for electric power generation; improved fuel efficiency of all vehicles; improved efficiency of all appliances and industrial equipment; the elimination of all subsidies for fossil fuel and nuclear development and production."

### Cuba

*Buchanan:* "I would isolate and ostracize Fidel Castro . . . but I would try to aid the Cuban people . . . Our sanctions may today be the main pillar of Castro's power. [I would] declare an end to all sanctions against Cuba on the sale or transfer of U.S. food, medicine or goods essential to a decent life . . ."

*Bush:* "Food and medicine exports should be exempt from any *new* [emphasis added] unilateral sanctions. . . . [But] I'm going to leave the sanctions on [Cuba]. . . There should be no changes in U.S. policy toward Cuba until three conditions are met: free elections, free speech and freedom for political prisoners. . . ."

*Gore:* "I have always considered myself kind of a hard liner where Castro is concerned. . . . But openings to the Cuban people, especially in things like communications and food, medicine, I think that serves the purpose most people in our country would like to see us concentrating on."

*Nader:* [Has spoken in favor of ending the embargo on food and medicine.]

### Death Penalty

*Buchanan:* "The death penalty should be used only in cases of brutal and heinous crimes like premeditated murder. Both the U.S. and state governments should keep the death penalty as both a deterrent and a just means of retribution and punishment."

*Bush:* "I support the death penalty for violent criminals who commit heinous crimes because we must send a strong message that the consequences of violent criminal behavior are swift and sure. More than 60 federal crimes are already subject to the death penalty, and I do not believe that needs to be expanded. I will appoint an attorney general who will vigorously enforce the tough federal laws already on the books."

*Gore:* "The Clinton-Gore administration has supported efforts to expand the death penalty. As president I would continue to support the death penalty and expansion of it where appropriate."

*Nader:* "[The death penalty] does not deter. It is severely discriminatory against minorities, especially since they're given no competent legal counsel defense in many cases. It's a system that has to be perfect. You cannot execute one innocent person. No system is perfect. . . . [It] costs more to pursue a capital case toward execution than it does to have full life imprisonment without parole."

### Gun Control

*Buchanan:* "The Second Amendment guarantees the individual right to own, possess, and use personal firearms, and as President I will ensure that this right is not compromised. . . . Convicted felons should forfeit their right to own firearms, but sportsmen, hunters, and law-abiding Americans should

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be allowed to use guns for pleasure or personal or family safety. Private ownership of guns gives the citizens of this free republic the means to protect life, liberty and property and I will fully and faithfully protect that right.”

*Bush:* “I believe law-abiding citizens who pass rigorous background checks and a firearm proficiency test should be able to protect themselves and their families. This decision is best left to individual states. I believe the federal government should enforce tough laws to keep guns out of the hands of criminals, juveniles and others who should not have them.”

*Gore:* “We must not loosen the restrictions on concealed weapons. I believe that, after all the gun violence we have seen, simple common sense dictates that we must have stricter gun control measures to keep guns out of the wrong hands, without unnecessarily imposing on the rights of law-abiding hunters and homeowners.”

*Nader:* “You have people who are killed or injured with guns and you have law-abiding people who want to use certain kinds of guns for self-defense. How do you blend the two? First, make sure the weapons are designed safely with trigger locks. . . . Two, strong law enforcement so that they’re not falling into the hands of the criminal element. Three, you look at a weapon the way you look at a car. You’ve got to know how to handle it. You should be licensed. . . . And four, there are certain weapons that should be banned. If you do all that, both interests will be protected.”

### **Iraq Sanctions**

*Buchanan:* Favors lifting sanctions. “According to this U.N. official, 500,000 children have died prematurely because of malnutrition or hunger or disease as a consequence of being denied medical treatment because of these embargoes and blockades. That is a horrendous moral issue.”

*Bush:* Favors keeping sanctions. “Saddam just needs to understand that if I’m the president, he’s going to have a problem. That’s what he needs to understand.”

*Gore:* Favors keeping sanctions while improving the oil-for-food program. “We have made it clear that it is our policy to see Saddam Hussein gone. We have sought coalitions of opponents to challenge his power from within or without.”

*Nader:* Favors lifting sanctions, at least partially. “You don’t bring a dictator to his knees by killing children. . . . If you want to entrench a dictator, just cut off food and medicines.”

### **National Missile Defense**

*Buchanan:* “The U.S. must not allow a 30-year-old anti-ballistic missile (ABM) treaty, with a defunct Soviet Union, to prevent us from defending our people from a nuclear missile attack. Test a ballistic missile defense until it works; then build it, without apology. U.S. security is paramount.”

*Bush:* “America must build effective missile defenses, based on the best available options, at the earliest possible date. Our missile defense must be designed to protect all 50 states and our friends and allies and deployed forces overseas from missile attacks by rogue nations, or accidental launches.”

*Gore:* “The more limited system is not only in our national interest, we believe that it is in the best interest of Russia. . . . I still have some hope that we will be able to reach agreement with them on a modification to the ABM Treaty that will allow us to go forward without changing it unilaterally.”

*Nader:* “There are far more devastating, insidious ways to bring in nuclear weapons . . . into the country, the so-called suitcase approach. We’ve spent \$60 billion as a nation now dealing with missile defense, and have come up with nothing. It’s a program designed to enrich the giant munitions corporations who are really behind it all . . . . Let’s have a children defense program to deal with the horrible poverty and the horrible deprivation of millions of American children.”

### **International Economics**

*Buchanan:* “Open-borders free trade . . . deepens the division between rich and poor. . . . Between 1972 and 1994 the real wages of working Americans fell 19 percent. . . . A second cost of global free trade is a loss of independence and national sovereignty. . . . Debt forgiveness is a fancy phrase for shifting the total burden of defaulted debts off Third World regimes and onto the backs of American taxpayers. . . . If anyone should be forced to ‘eat’ these incredible losses of foreign aid loans, it is . . . international bankers at the International Monetary Fund (IMF), World Bank and other globalist institutions . . . .”

*Bush:* “Economic freedom creates habits of liberty. . . . We [must] negotiate new market-opening agreements. . . . The World Bank and the IMF . . . should not impose austerity, bailing out bankers while impoverishing a middle class. . . . These institutions must be more transparent and accountable. . . .” [No stated position on debt relief for poor countries.]

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## IN OTHERS' WORDS

Via the MennoLink and BICLink email networks, the MCC Washington Office asked, "What is your basis for deciding how to vote in the upcoming U.S. presidential election? What place does your faith have in this decision?" Here are selected responses which we have edited for space.

"Often both major-party's candidates are light-years away from positions that I feel promote Kingdom values . . ."

## "On What Basis Will You Decide?"

"MORE AND MORE I AM CHOOSING to give my vote to the party which best corresponds to my faith commitment. . . . We are to be a community of believers that acts out God's love for humanity, Christian service 'in the name of Christ' and loyalty to God's kingdom above all others.

"So I will look for a candidate who will address military buildup . . . who sees our nation as a community with a responsibility to all of its members, especially the poor and the marginalized. . . . who will refocus America's leadership in the world . . . using our wealth to build up poor countries . . . who is serious about the environment. . . . I am an idealist . . . But I have some pragmatism within me. So I'll choose the best of a very imperfect group of candidates. . . ."

Doug Amstutz,  
Scottsdale, Pennsylvania

"MY BASIS FOR VOTING IS FEAR, the *Philadelphia Inquirer* endorsements and party loyalty. I'd vote for Ralph Nader if my stand on the issues is any indicator; but I'll probably vote for Gore, because a Republican president with a Republican Congress scares the pants off me.

"Frankly my faith has nothing to do with it. My values underlie my fears—that more money will be spent for arms, that fewer poor people will have a chance to make a good life for themselves, that more interventions internationally will be based on might and fewer will be based on humanitarian goals. . . ."

"So I vote according to what I think will be least damaging for the country. . . ."

J. Lamar Freed  
Philadelphia, Pennsylvania

"I COMPARE THE POSITIONS of the politicians with my positions on the issues. My positions are influenced by my study of the life of Jesus and the stands taken by leaders in the Anabaptist churches. . . . I also try to find out the sources of each candidate's money. Which groups would they listen to more once in office?"

"Often both major-party's candidates are light-years away from positions that I feel promote Kingdom values, such as the death penalty and military spending. Often it seems that the Republicans' position on abortion issues are closer to mine, but the Democrats are closer (a little) on foreign policy and social policy. In that case, I either choose 'the lesser of two evils,' or look at the minor-party candidates.

"I tend to think that praying for, and witnessing to, politicians is more effective in the long run than voting. . . ."

Jeff Hackman  
Salem, Oregon

"MY FAITH . . . MAKES ME PLACE A HIGH value on aid to the poor, the sick, and other disadvantaged or needy groups. . . . Over the years I have noted the behavior and philosophy of each of the major political parties: which does more to benefit the poor and disadvantaged. I vote for the presidential nominee of the party that has the best record.

"I would not go so far as to say that personal morality and character do not matter at all, but I do not insist on a saint, simply someone of good character. . . . I find it difficult to assess personal morality. In any case, that is God's business, not mine. My business is whether the candidate is likely to work effectively to improve the social welfare."

Frances Magrabi  
Wellman, Iowa

"THE BASIS WHEN I VOTE has to be words and actions of candidates that reflect concerns I see in the life of Jesus. . . . I believe following Jesus means being 'consistently pro-life,' supporting: life imprisonment and not death for death row inmates, a free

## NEW STAFF MEMBER

The MCC U.S. Washington Office welcomes Elisabeth T. Harder for a 2-year assignment. Elisabeth is a May 2000 graduate of Bethel College in North Newton, Kansas, where she majored in global peace and justice studies. She is from Mountain Lake, Minnesota and her home congregation is First Mennonite. Elisabeth was an intern in the Washington Office last summer. Welcome, Elisabeth!

range of prenatal services and adoption options for women carrying a child they do not want, alternative service . . . and alternative payment as a conscientious objector to tax payments for war preparations . . . .

“Jesus cared about women, children, and sick people who counted for little . . . . To me this translates into necessary provision for single parents, their children, and the elderly; ‘living wage’ legislation . . . and universal basic health care for all citizens. Jesus also wanted people to take responsibility for their lives and situations. . . . So both ‘liberal’ and ‘conservative’ Christian voters are challenged to leave their ‘comfort zones’ when trying to follow Jesus’ lead in the world of politics.”

Anne Meyer Byler  
Goshen, Indiana

“WHEN THE CHRISTIAN goes to the polls to vote, he or she will vote, not for the candidate who promises to do the most for him, but for the candidate who promises to do the most for those who are less fortunate than he is, that is, the poor, homeless, sick, unemployed, and others on the margins of society.”

Leonard Nolt  
Boise, Idaho

“I AM A LIFELONG DEMOCRAT, so I usually support the Democratic candidates. However . . . I am becoming increasingly disturbed with the Democratic attitude on certain moral issues, i.e., support for abortion. Where a candidate stands on social

justice issues (especially civil rights) is the determining factor on whether he/she gets my vote. As an African American, I am a conscientious voter who votes in all national, state and local elections. I take the right to vote seriously because I can remember when African Americans did not have the right to vote and struggled to obtain it.

“If a candidate professes to be a Christian, then I am inclined to vote for him/her. . . [But] if a nonbeliever is right on these issues and a believer is wrong, then I will vote for the nonbeliever. I think it was Martin Luther who said, ‘I’d rather be governed by a competent pagan than an incompetent Christian.’”

Lindsey Robinson  
Harrisburg, Pennsylvania

“MY MAIN DECIDING FACTOR is the moral character of the candidates and the basics of their thought processes. It’s not on specific responses to particular issues. The way they think will determine how they respond in unknown circumstances . . . I want to feel confident that they can think it through and make a wise decision. They can give a list of things they support that seem good, but if they are dirty and rotten and looking out for their own good or if they can’t think things through to determine future ramifications of their decisions, those few good things don’t do us any good. . . .”

Shannon Wagner  
Harrisburg, Pennsylvania

**“I believe following Jesus means being ‘consistently pro-life’ . . .”**

**“I think it was Martin Luther who said, ‘I’d rather be governed by a competent pagan than an incompetent Christian.’”**

## **Where Do They Stand?**

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*Gore:* “Through our vigorous engagement of free markets, we have advanced fundamental freedoms and fairness around the world. . . . We want to build a trading system that includes strong safeguards for workers, for health and safety, for children and for a clean environment. . . . We need the IMF to work with countries that are at risk. . . . We would like to see . . . decisive progress toward debt relief for the world’s poorest and most indebted countries.”

*Nader:* “The World Trade Organization undermines our legitimate local, state and national sovereignties which enable America to lead the way in worker, consumer and environmental standards. . . . In contrast to its austerity measures for people in poor countries, the IMF provides free insurance to big bankers, bailing them out when their foreign loans go bad. . . . The IMF is even more oblivious to concerns of debtor nations . . . The IMF’s policies have inflicted extreme suffering on the world’s population.” ■

**NO JOKE!**

April 1-3, 2001

Mark your calendar now for the annual spring seminar sponsored by the MCC U.S. Washington Office. This year's theme will be poverty and economic justice. Watch for more details in upcoming issues of the *Memo*.

**SOUND THE TRUMPET!**

ISSUE	SUMMARY	ADVOCACY NEEDED
DEBT RELIEF FOR POOR COUNTRIES	Congress must appropriate \$435 million this year in order to keep the current debt relief program on track. The decision will be made in September, either by a conference committee on the foreign aid bill or in end-of-session negotiations with President Clinton.	If you contact Republicans, ask them to urge their leaders to support the \$435 million amount. If you contact Democrats, ask them to urge the President to make the \$435 million an imperative in his negotiations with Congressional leadership.
SOLIDARITY WITH COLOMBIAN CHURCHES	Colombian Mennonite leaders recently wrote to North American churches, asking for expressions of solidarity and opposition to U.S. military aid. In response, a message of solidarity to the Colombian churches has been circulating for signatures since July. It will also be distributed to the U.S. Congress.	Endorsements of the solidarity statement by individuals and congregations are needed by September 30, 2000. For more information, email <a href="mailto:rschlabach@mcc.org">rschlabach@mcc.org</a> or call 202-544-6564.

**USEFUL ADDRESSES**



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