

**The Pastoral Ordination Process
of an Indigenous Woman and
The Organization of a Local,
Multiethnic Church**

**The Experience of the Kaqchikel Presbytery of
Chimaltenango, Guatemala and
*The Church of the Beginning / Ri Nab'el***

Written by Blanca Margarita Valiente de Similox,
Ordained Pastor of the Kaqchikel Presbytery of
Chimaltenango, Guatemala and the
National Evangelical Presbyterian Church of Guatemala
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Translated by Bonnie Clarke, Presbytery of Baltimore, USA, April, 2002

Introduction

“To Honor, Honor”

This present work is the product of a field study resulting from the personal experience of a woman who, against adversity, limitations, economic, political, social and religious obstacles, found inspiration in her evangelical faith, her ethnic identity, her gender, and class consciousness.

The relevance and importance of this work is that it be fulfilled, put into practice, and then analyzed; that its story be interpreted, narrated, and presented to ourselves as testimony. We do this so that today’s men and women might find inspiration in it and be guided by it as they serve their churches on the personal level. It should also become part of a general knowledge in the Evangelical Church of Guatemala, other countries, and the Presbyterian Church of Guatemala.

This work’s importance is historical in the country and in the National Presbyterian Church, because apart from its historical contribution, it is an example of the opportunities that the writer provided not only to Evangelical Presbyterian women, but also to other marginalized, discriminated, and excluded groups. Beginning with the signing of the Peace Accords, this work can guide the way and process that will make possible a multiethnic, multicultural, and multilingual nation.

The Kaqchikel Presbytery, in carrying out the ordination of a woman, a long suffering and tenacious woman, is honoring the memory of all the people – men, women, countrywomen, indigenous women – who dreamed long ago about a more humane country where the signs of the Kingdom of God were a reality. Similarly, this ordination encourages other women with equal expectations, that if it is possible, we could see the fruits of our work if we do it according to basic precepts this testimony presents.

In this work, there is a serious reflection on the theological, biblical, and political, which in the end, is a theological synthesis of life and the more current aspects of life’s journey that normally Christians and Christian churches, in general, neither take into account, promote, nor recognize.

The aspects that remain unfinished will be the work that other women’s future research will provide to complete this author’s vision regarding the theological, ecclesiastical, and ethno-cultural.

Methodology

“From within and from underneath, like a theoretical element of research”

This work is historical and devoted to a single subject. It is a primary document in that the author is the principal subject of this research. It is her personal experience, immersed in the problems of racism, machismo, discrimination and exclusion in general.

The methodology is participatory and active in process. It is from within and from underneath like a scientific element under investigation. The result of this process is that this research is meant to be useful, concrete, and immediate.

It begins with the idea that knowledge is a fact expressed in nature, in objects, in people, in processes, and in practical life. Knowledge is the product of experience that puts us in contact with objective reality.

Knowledge is also social because we all act in relation to others. The one that knows and is known permits himself to interact, not only with himself, but with the other, setting himself up to emit and receive at the same time.

Finally, this knowledge is transformational in that it overcomes reality and proposes a process of looking for a better life, a distinctly different society in which women – like the principal characters of this essay – develop all their capacity and creativity without the religious, economic, political, social and ethno-cultural impediments.

An old African proverb says, “Every old man and woman that dies is a library that burns”. “The dangerous memory of our villages “(García Márquez) similarly expresses the collective recovery of our historic memory. It is like a key for the transformation of our reality. The past is ahead, right in front of our eyes because we know it and we have lived it. Our future is looking backwards because it hasn’t arrived yet, but we will live it immanently.

The legacy of experience this work recalls helps us to journey better and faster in the building of a multiethnic, multicultural, and multilingual nation to which we have a right.

Chapter 1

The Framework and Historical Development of this Work

1. My Historical Pilgrimage In the Midst of Obstacles, Hopes and Joys:

The Year 1974

“The Bible shows that God gives understanding to those that seek it.” This was one of the first things that I looked for when I arrived to these Kaqchikel lands. It was a foreign land to me; intrusive and unknown. The first thing I did was find a church where I felt safe. This was the Central American Church.

I participated in that church for a year, but I did not find what I was looking for. What I found was the same old discrimination, racism, and exploitation of women in which only the pastor [male] dispensed the Word, and the women were submissive. My old church, Mount Sinai in Quetzaltenango, was pastored by Mr. Noah Reyes. Mount Sinai was a Pentecostal Church where I accepted Christ when I was eight. I had different experiences therein, and I wanted to experience something new. But within that [Central American] church, I couldn't find it. I left feeling very sad because I knew that there was a God of peace and love, but I could not find him there.

As a child I had learned many chapters in the Bible. I knew the books of the Old and New Testament. I sang happily to that living God, but I did not find him. I only heard about him, but I could not see him.

The Year 1975

I went to the Catholic Church where I met many people who were open and kind. I worked with them in a social ministry. Each week, we distributed food, medicine and clothing to the needy people in the villages. There I learned to share and see how it is when a people are suffering in poverty, and how many of them there are! I also learned that I had to do something for myself and to have a plan, a strategy, where I could share all that I learned from the Catholics. I remember much about these women who helped me when I told them where I had come from, but that I didn't know where I was going nor what to do. My experiences with doña Martita, Rosita, doña Cony de Salazar and Amalita were very important. They were members of the Pot and Pan Club with much to do and take care of. But one day, I began to gather kids from my Zone #3 of Chimaltenango and tell them about the God I had heard of. I wanted to them to hear about God too.

My two children, Byron and Ronaldo, were helping me open the doors of our house to others. They prepared the place where we used to go to gather for each activity. The first family was the Juarez family. Cándido, Aminda (deceased), Telma, Oscar, Luisa, and doña Ofelia were a very plain and respectful family. The next was the Morales family or the “Majunches” as they were known in the town; Ana, Armando, Gerber and Luchy. The Figueroa family of Maco,

Ubaldo and Licha; also the Chojoláns and the Xecs. With the Xec children we undertook another activity of biblical reflections in which we taught as well as heard their thoughts and opinions which they shared with their parents. On our first Christmas, we put on plays with all the children and they invited their parents. We shared donuts and coffee, and it was something wonderful.

We worked with the help of Global Vision of Guatemala to alleviate some of the need that these children, their families, and their communities had. Every afternoon we gave them refreshments. Our group had grown to 80 children with their families, and many more came to participate.

The Year 1976

As time passed, we saw the need to attend to the youth in our area of Zone #3. We formed a group under the auspices of ICTHUS that met in the evenings to reflect on and share what was happening in and outside their homes. We saw the need of those who were not cared for adequately by their families, their need for pastoral guidance, their need to belong, to be listened to, both the young men and women.

Families that I remember from 1976 are: Mirna and Ricardo Guzmán, Veronica and Esperanza Vielman, Saúl, Maynor and Noemí Cuellar, Saúl and René Pérez, Mirium, “el Fito”, Soyla and María Marroquín, Juana, María Morales, Ismael Figueroa (deceased), Chevi, Campero, Chino, Nacho, Marino, Tulio (deceased), Neto (deceased), Canche, Irma, Tono, José, Lexa, Chello Xec, the Palacios, the Tols, the Chinchillas, the Simaj, the Avendaños and the Tols (Juan, Salvador, Dionisio, Gloria). We related to and worked with these 23 families. We had family gardens, for which we gave them seeds and horticultural training. We raised rabbits and chickens with each group caring for the animals. We went hiking, took trips and went camping to different places. We went to the Pacaya volcano, to the ocean, and to Panajachel. We visited fun places from Quetzaltenango to Chimaltenango. We celebrated Christmas with tamales, grapes and wine. Everything was so happy. The youth had changed. They were on the edge of adolescence where one does not know if they are children or youths. They needed lots of guidance. Something very important was to see how they analyzed the Bible. All they wanted was respect and a chance to be heard although, sadly, alcohol and cigarettes was what they used frequently.

Then came the earthquake of 1976. All the youth had to help their neighbors since we all had been affected by it. Some cleared debris while others dug out the dead and wounded. We all went to live in the streets because it was safer. There was no water or electricity, and constant aftershocks. Everyone was looking for food. I remember people carrying around their huge hoes in case they had to help dig someone out. From Guatemala City, ICTHUS Central sent us tools and picks, as they had not been as hard hit as we had. Days passed, but there was always communication. It was a new experience to feel as though the earth was moving. Then the Motagua Fault passed through our Zone #3, and all the houses collapsed. But we saw the hand of God at work since no one was hurt, only the houses. We knew God was protecting us with his great power.

Everyone was moving on. Some went to study, others to work, and some changed churches, but all with a different outlook. Some married and started families. How happy it made me to meet them occasionally and hear them tell of their different experiences.

The Year 1978

The violence [Civil War of Guatemala] intensifies day by day. There is no let up. We hear about assassinations, kidnapping and offenses against the people. We see the need to organize within our church because these were the times when pastoral help was most needed. We began to bring together whole families like don Lorenzo Chopen and his family; also doña Teresa Batz and her children, don Calixto and his family, and youths such as Axel, Corina, Henry, Saúl, Neto, Fidel, and other families. We met at night, and then we began to have Sunday classes.

We relied on a place to meet, but we gave no name to our little church group. There was a need to formalize the group with a name. We talked things over, and we decided to hold a contest in which each family agreed to submit a name for the group on the following Sunday. And so it happened that doña Teresa Batz's family won the naming contest. The winning name, "Here We Begin", was fine-tuned to "The Beginning" which we also express in our Kaqchikel Mayan language as "*Ri Nab'el*". That's the way the story ended for this winning family. They are doña Teresa Batz and her children, Juan, Ana, Rebeca, Luis, and Francisco. They are a very down-to-earth family and very devoted to the church.

"The Beginning"- *Ri Nab'el* church is set up on the same model as the National Evangelical Presbyterian Church of Guatemala but with Mayan-Kaqchikel emphasis. It is guided by a Council of Elders to which don Lorenzo Chopen, don Calixto, and doña Batz were first elected. As a church it remained opened to anyone who wished to learn about and study the Bible. Because of this distinction, we had Catholics, Evangelicals [Protestants], and anyone else who wanted to come to know God. We became an open space where the only requisite for participation was "to have a commitment to God and people". Our first church, the Evangelical Presbyterian-*Ri Nab'el*, came to be known for its service activities. We think with our hearts and hands, spirits and bodies. As the Bible says, "You are the temple of the Holy Spirit".

Other people and communities heard about our church in Chimaltenango and invited us to attend their churches.

We tackled all this work with much brotherly love, and as I Cor. 13:4-6 says, "Great things awaited us". It is difficult to move ahead when marginalization, machismo, racism, and inequality rule. But it is true that we women did that which the Bible calls us to do; provide pastoring within the church. I know it is not easy, but also it is not hard. A woman with a home is limited in many ways. But when there is a will and a desire, she does it.

My First Experience Was in the Colonia Santa Ana. There I shared with a group of women who wanted to know about the work of the church and to participate in it. We began hand sewing flowers that we sold in order to be able to help with home finances. I also learned how to forage for firewood to be used in the home. I shared their poverty with them, walking 1 ½ km to work with them in their neighborhood, rain or shine. The women I worked with were La Toya, La Chonay, doña Naty, doña Olga, doña Margo, doña Flora, doña Luz and doña Marula.

Another neighborhood where I worked was Socobal with the large Montúfar family. Among them I learned what malnutrition does to children, pregnant women, and unemployed men. There we showed them how to eat soy products, like soy bread, milk and cheese, for protein. Also we deloused the children and managed to get the women of that area to go to health centers for prenatal care. We taught them how to grow vegetables in flower pots and tend home gardens. All the while, we continued studying the Bible, especially passages with women's themes such as Luke 8:1-5, where Mary Magdalene is released from her seven demons. We read about Joanna, Susanna and other women who made decisions about their own lives.

Mount of Olives was an indigenous community that had been affected by the eruption of the Acatenango volcano. They fled their town because everything – their houses, crops, and animals- had been destroyed. Left with nothing, many women and children came to the park in Chimaltenango to set up temporary living quarters. After several days, the mayor gave them a bit of land where they could live. The work began, the first committee was organized that would look after the temporary help these people received. Then came the construction of houses on which our Presbyterian church worked through the auspices of Global Vision. Among the 80 families (500 people) that received assistance, our church was able to give pastoral care, water, wood, adobe and food.

One of the greater satisfactions was to have constructed a small school and found a teacher for it through appeals to the Education Supervisor of the State. There existed a water tank so that the women could do their laundry in the public wash area. The water came from a river's source in another town. Everybody worked hard but happily because things were starting to return to normal. We worked with the refugees from Acatenango for five years. We worshipped together with the Catholics and Protestants and met together to study the Bible. Oh how I remember that community! Then a deadly sickness struck – typhoid fever. Many women and children died. I remember arriving one morning to take sick people to the hospital. It was run by a “gringo” doctor¹ who helped us so much. I remember them calling me “señora” in this new community, and whenever I arrived, the children greeted me warmly. The women learned how to sew their own blouses and napkins and border the edges of their *guipiles*². I also remember the plague of lice that made all the children's hair fall out because the teacher did not know that medicine had been applied to the children's heads, and she neglected to wash it off in a timely fashion. What a learning experience! I remember the committee of women I served with: doña Chila, doña Adela, doña Juana, doña Pancha, doña Julia.

Colonia Las Flores: This was another neighborhood that brought me work. Every week I held Bible study classes for the children and did manual labor with their mothers. Every Thursday, we gathered together for refreshments and to share experiences in our women's group. We helped in getting potable water to the area. There is a plaque in the area that recognizes the work our women's committee of the Presbyterian church – *Ri Nab'el* has done. We gave a class to twenty women on cutting and sewing garments, and five of them still earn a living from the classes we gave them. It is so satisfying to see the fruits of all our labor. I met many people of different customs and beliefs, but I always respected their faith. What I looked for was ways in which I could help people understand what God is doing with us and that there is a God of love and life.

¹ Carol Berhost, the hospital's director and namesake, was a kind and understanding doctor.

² The *guipil* is the Mayan woman's blouse, heavily embroidered with one's regional design and color scheme.

Families I knew in Colonia Las Flores were: Galindo, Estrada, Can, Zapeta, Turcios, Pajarito, Mulul, Morales and others. It is sad to remember those times. I'd like to remember those times, not of the pain but of the unity and love that existed.

The Year 1980

We lived in an area of conflict where discrimination against indigenous people was carried out by the army. Violence was growing, and it was most visible around Tecpán, Poaquil, San Martín, and Comalapa. These towns suffered kidnappings and disappearances. In Tecpán, we worked with sixty women. In Poaquil, we knew of many brothers and sisters who had been assassinated. And what can be said of Comalapa and San Martín where whole towns were damaged: markets, schools, and churches were burned.

We heard talk of a major offensive against the indigenous peoples. The army had not been able to exterminate them with their regular schemes, so they increasingly began forced recruitment of youths. The officers would enter a home and snatch people away any time, day or night. There was no let-up. Tension kept mounting. Gunshots could be heard everywhere.

Military detachments were established in Tecpán, in the area now known as Comalapa. They came to San Martín and Chimaltenango. The Military Base #302 still exists on the property where the Pedro Molino School stands today. There were snitches everywhere. It could be the ice cream man, the trash collector, the mailman, the baker, or many more that went about. You had to go about your business very carefully. We couldn't talk too much or too often. It was best to just observe but say nothing or you might be marked as a partisan of the resistance later. Many families were affected, and they came to the church looking for help knowing they would receive different treatment.

I remember the time that three women, with babies on their backs, came asking for lodging. They came from San Martín, under cover of darkness, having slept in ravines along the way so as to avoid being discovered by the army who had just taken their husbands away. They had come looking for their men.

We chatted with them for a while and showed them where they could stay. By midday, a group of 100 women and children arrived. It was so painful to see their condition. The children had conjunctivitis, coughs, diarrhea, bruises and fever. The women were desperate from not having eaten for two days. The local firemen were called in to help us seek out medical attention, medicine and food for these people. The firemen, under the caring leadership of Captain Fermín, met our needs. They brought the most ill people to a little hospital. They got help for the young and old women who had been raped. I remember the story of the old woman, Nanita, who pleaded for mercy on her knees with a soldier who wanted to violate her. He responded by hitting her so hard in the head, with the butt of his machine gun, that it felt as if her eyes had been knocked out of her head. She fainted and remained unconscious until the next day. When she came to, she realized the whole town was fleeing, so she left with them.

There were so many traumas. Youths were so afraid of what was happening. We had to hide them. We found work in the town for others who refused to go back to their communities. I never dreamed I would care for so many people: people broken, sick, and violated. It reminds me of the biblical passage in which Hagar fled into the desert with her child, Ishmael. It is a terrible and lamentable thing to see when the army mistreats its own people.

I remember a morning when I happened upon two women who were looking for the Presbyterian church. They asked me if I knew the “señora”[minister’s wife]. I brought them to the church and heard their story. “Imagine, a week ago, the army came by night and assassinated my husband and my only child [her grown son]”, said doña Francisca. The woman, with her daughter-in-law, was from the village of Bola de Oro. They were so frightened. They kept on crying and asking for pastoral help. They wanted to rent a house in Chimaltenango, unwilling to return home. The daughter-in-law had seven small children and was pregnant. There were times when we just didn’t know what to do.

The violence grew worse in 1983-1984, affecting even more families. A teacher from Cerro Alto was abducted, and his wife was left with six children to care for. Later we came to know this community of Cerro Alto and saw what we needed to do there. We spoke with five families and agreed to meet to console one another as well as to prepare. From these meetings grew the women’s group of Bola de Oro. Real evangelization and consciousness-raising for everyone, including me, began. We were forced to look at the reality of our situation as women: exploited, oppressed, poor, and indigenous.

The first step was to know our rights and responsibilities; to meet to study the Bible together. We had already felt the first wave of torture, assassinations, and spousal abduction. We had to do our part; organize ourselves.

We worked in groups secretly because group gatherings were prohibited. Our armament was the Bible which defended our action constantly. The wives of men in the Civil Patrol were sent to infiltrate our meetings, and they were evangelized. They could gather no incriminating evidence against us because they saw with their own eyes the material we used; songs and leaflets that make one hear and understand the Gospel. There was nothing with which they could accuse us.

As time passed, the group grew. We were forty five women with a clear conscience and a sense of mutual equality. They sent their children to the school. We had to take advantage of the opportunity the church opened up for these families.

I remember our first Christmas. We worked so hard to make many floral arrangements. We sold them to collect money to cover our expenses. Women and young women made tamales at the Central Presbyterian Church in Chimaltenango because the place was considered safe. Everything was ready, but there was this feeling. We had never prepared such a Christmas fiesta, yet husbands, sons and brothers would not be present. In sorrow we cried together. But we knew we had to have hope that these times would change; that we would leave our children a better life than the one that been thrust upon us.

Our example served to encourage other communities to dare to join together. They called us to help them start a women’s group. We met with them every week. This was the **El Rosario** group led by our sister Alicia Cajón and her family. Little by little, other families wanted to know what we talked about and what we did in our group, what we thought about the home, the economy or health issues. There was so much poverty and illiteracy. We worked so hard to help this community.

San Jacinto sprang up from the work of the El Rosario group when they realized how beneficial it could be to meet regularly. We went there to help San Jacinto’s women organize with the permission of doña Pilar’s husband, who was the deputy mayor. There was more assistance given to this group, but the Civil Patrols always controlled us. We began organizing the women with craft work and providing refreshments for the children. Our biblical studies followed. Every week they had new ideas that they shared with everyone; always discussing

ideas about the country's situation and our rights as women. This group grew to 50 women; all indigenous.

2. We Organize as a Presbytery

The Year 1987

The Kaqchikel Presbytery was formed, including the church in Tecpán, Central, Alotenango, Comalapa, San Rafael, and Zone 3 of Chimaltenango. The following pastors were ordained for their communities:

Tecpán	Pastor Ignacio López
Central Church	Vitalino Similox
Alotenango	Manuel Saquic Vázquez
Comalapa	Victor Tuctuc Gómez
San Rafael	Lucio Martínez Pic
Chimal. Zone 3	Antonio Otzoy

I remember the arrival of our brothers from the Presbyterian Synod of Guatemala and other Presbyteries for the organization of the Kaqchikel Presbytery. Because of the living conditions of those times, people were looking for pastoral help. They knew the Presbytery cared for people in search of justice and human rights.

When we first became a presbytery, there was much to do in addition to caring for the church and the congregation. We had to look at the three urgent needs of agriculture, housing, and education. Now that there were more [lay] people working as if they were pastors, they dedicated their time to mobilizing improvement in those areas. The Bible studies continued each week in the congregations.

In addition, each congregation started up a committee for human rights for their protection. Each week they reported what had transpired in their area and referred urgent cases to the Kaqchikel Presbytery. We realized that to be united and organized was the best defense. With better communication, we could see to each one's need. I hope other presbyteries did the same. In those days, it was necessary to be committed to the Kingdom of God in order to find solutions to problems and fulfill the Word of God which says, "You are the temple of the Holy Spirit".

In our church, now organized under the Presbytery, our major concern was not so much about church structure as it was about the people, their daily lives, announcing the Good News [of the Gospel], and denouncing the injustices and outrages committed against our church brothers and congregations. We know that the church is the worst offender when it comes to marginalizing and violating women's rights. We are not taken into account and we are treated as if we don't exist. What account does the church think it is going to give to God when it is asked how it treated women? It is doubtful that the church will own up to its exploitation and marginalization of women, for that would be admitting to its racist and male chauvinist attitudes and policies. When we compare the church's treatment of women to the importance with which Jesus accorded to many women, the disparity is very clear. Those were some of the

contemporary issues against which our Kaqchikel Presbytery struggled in Chimaltenango at that time.

We also provided [discussion] space for people who wanted to know about the condition of things, now that the war was escalating. We met these needs head on, and here we are by the grace and help of God.

The Year 1987

The Kaqchikel Presbytery cared for everyone who came and asked for pastoral help. I remember many displaced persons made their way to Chimaltenango because the army kept up the assassinations, the torture, the kidnapping of men, women, youths, children and the elderly. They killed entire families.

One day, families from San Martín Jilotepeque and its environs came to us. They had been bombed and burned out. Of the families, I remember the family of don Alejandro Atz with his five children: Marta, Sarbelio, Gilberto, Naty, and his youngest daughter. They had come to us, terrified, because the army had come in the middle of the night and bombed their house. Those that could run hid in a ravine for three days. But his wife didn't make it. As she fled, a bomb exploded her to pieces. When the rest of the family emerged from the ravine three days later, they went to look for her. All they could find were a few remains that the dogs and vultures hadn't gotten to. They dug a grave and buried her remains where they'd found her, behind the kitchen. They marked her grave with some stones to keep the dogs away and fled from the evil army towards the state's capitol city, looking for help. That is how they came to our Presbytery in Chimaltenango. They found a room to rent and barely came out. We met with them on Sundays for singing and Bible study. We talked about the injustice of our situation in which our government and army were against us.

The family of don Pedro Mizo arrived with his wife and children; Marcelina, La Chella, La Cata and his wife, Alicia Perén. The army was pursuing them so they fled by night, hiding out in ravines and subsisting on acorns. After several days, they arrived in Chimaltenango and found our Presbytery. They had heard we were the only place to trust where they could get pastoral help.

After a few days, we found them a place to stay. Don Pedro, a brother in Christ, was very helpful around the church and often gave his testimony about how God had rescued his family from their community of Patzaj in San Juan de Comalapa. He was conscientious about his church work until the day he had an accident. We brought him to intensive care at Roosevelt Hospital for he was nearly dead. After much time there, he returned to Chimaltenango. He continued to care for his family and his church until the day he disappeared. We don't know what happened to him, but his family was left fatherless.

When I write these stories, it is so difficult. My eyes and throat still cry as I remember that which can no longer stay inside me. The stories will always be in my mind. They will never be erased.

The family of don Gaudencio Atz and his three children came to us. His wife had been assassinated by the soldiers, causing he and his children to flee. Don Gaudencio is a bricklayer and a very good man. He has remarried and has eight children and lives in Chimaltenango now. He participates to this day in The Beginning – *Ri Nab'el* church.

The family of doña Vidalia Mejía shares a similar story. Originally from San Martín, she and her husband left Chimaltenango for San Lucas Tolimán. But their suffering was so great, they came back to Chimaltenango. Our church found them a place to live in the town of Mount

of Olives where she, her husband, their children (Marta, Tina, Chepe, Felix and Augusto), and their son-in-law stayed. One night, her husband left with some men and never came back. They don't know if he is dead or alive. She only knows that after his disappearance, the army kept pursuing them.

Don Anastacio Atz was from San Martín. He came to Chimaltenango looking for “la señora” [the writer] hoping to find a safe place to stay and pastoral help. So many came looking for help with housing, education and medical care because so many people were sick.

Don Vinicio Colorado, a widower from San Andrés Itzapa, also came to our church in need. We helped him, and he stayed on to help at the church for many years.

Sebastián and doña Naya, as they are known, came from Chichicastenango with their family. They sought refuge from the army that pursued them because they had organized groups and towns [against the repressive regime].

Doña Marina Poz, a widow from Cantel, Quetzaltenango, came to us with her two children. She needed care for one who was very sick. She has remained in the church to this day.

Don Vidal Jutzutz came with his family from Santa Cruz Balanyá. He joined the group of displaced persons at our church and worked hard to fight against and overcome repression.

All these families formed the Council of Elders of the *Ri-Nab'el* church: Lorenzo Chopen, Alejandro Atz, Gaudencio Atz, Felix Jutzutz, Vidalia Mejía and Pedro Miza. This group worked and succeeded in buying 15 parcels³ of land which 15 families would cultivate. They also bought another parcel of land for housing. They divided it into lots and would give it to the most needy of displaced persons. They were: Alejandro and Sarbelio Atz, Marcelina Miza, Alicia Perén, Marina Poz, and Vinicio Colorado.

The recipients were given the land under the condition that they would pay for a part of it; Q.1,500 for each lot. It was a communal effort to buy building materials, build homes, buy more land, and keep the project going. We were in many marches, outings, forums, workshops, and demonstrations. We walked from Chimaltenango to Guatemala City getting to know the streets of the big city and seeing the objects of our protests against the government. We went to military zone #302 to demonstrate, having overcome our fear, and uniting together to say what we wanted.

The Presbytery kept on working, enabling our members, apprising them of the national situation, how we were doing, and what we had left to do. We talked about the National Dialogue when it began. We met to study events and to understand what terms constituted a real dialogue. We discussed what would be helpful to the people; all groups of people. Churches and congregations reflected on all these things.

3. Ecumenical Cooperation Arrives To Help Our Church and Presbytery

The Years 1987 – 1990

As the Kaqchikel Presbytery, knowing of the suffering and need, we were worried for our brethren. We helped to organize the Brotherhood of Mayan Presbyteries and the Conference of Evangelical Churches of Guatemala [CIEDEG] as national vehicles for bringing our proposals to the National Dialogue and for obtaining funding for much needed projects.

Handicraft Projects:

³ The parcel of land mentioned is a *cuerda* which measures 30x30 meters

We relied on handicraft [indigenous] projects. Eight communities that made them are Tecpán, Panabajal, Pacorral, Comalapa, Cojoljuyu, Central, Bola de Oro and San Jacinto. Each uses its own designs. Our testimony was heard by the United Church of Canada and the Presbytery of Baltimore. These churches and other ecumenical organizations, through CIEDEG, began to give help to our projects.

Agriculture:

We sowed and harvested corn, beans, peas, carrots, strawberries and flowers. The communities that benefited from agricultural products are Tecpán, Pacorral, Panabajal, Cojoljuyu, Poaquil, El Rosario, Bola de Oro and Central.

Minimum Shelter:

Minimum shelter for the most destroyed towns at that time was provided for El Rosario, El Durazno, San Rafael, Tecpán, Alotenango and Ciénega Grande.

Other Projects:

Other projects are: breeding of hogs, chickens and goats. In Cojoljuyu, Tecpán, Labor de Falla, Chisiguán and Ciénega Grande, all the workers are women who work these projects in co-operatives or in common fashion.

Nurseries for Seedlings:

Seeding culture and the ability to replant or sell the product to support one's needs. Many practice hydroponics in which seeds are planted in boxes in a growing medium of rice pulp, sand and water. They plant radishes, celery, cilantro, parsley and mint. The women grow the seedlings in their homes and consume what they need. It's a new experience for them.

Literacy Training:

Literacy training for older women has been very successful. They learned to read and write. CONALFA [the National Commission for Literacy] helped with this project.

Lorena Stoves:

Twenty five of these have been constructed in cement for home use. The women are able to use less firewood, vent the cooking smoke out of the home, and they can sit or stand, rather than kneel, to cook.

Education:

In Labor de Falla, a two-room primary school was built with help from the Baltimore Presbytery. In use at present, this whole project was run by the women's committee of that area.

Construction:

A Protestant church was constructed at Pacorral through the efforts of twelve families, all of whom are indigenous men and women.

Scholarships:

Scholarships for children and youth, two per congregation, have been made available to Comalapa, Pacorral, Central, Bola de Oro, Cerro Alto, Labor de Falla, Monte de Olivos, Quisayá

and San Jacinto. The scholarships are financed by the Walton Scholarship Program of the U.S. through the Presbyterian Synod of Guatemala.

Health:

The Herbert D. Valentine Medical-Psychological clinic, named for the man who helped make the clinic possible, serves the Kaqchiquel Presbytery and the community in general. Consultation services and medicines are available at a very low price. The clinic staff makes village health visits because we know how difficult it is for our brethren to travel to the clinic in Chimaltenango. **Mental health care** is available for post-war trauma which so many children and youth have suffered. The youth are being trained in mental health.

The Year 2001

The Theological – Technical School:

The desire to open a school stems from the current need for us to study, especially since during the war, there was no time. Now that there is the opportunity, we must take advantage of it. Already there are 25 students, men and women. We have plans to have our own school building where we can accommodate more people. Thanks to CIEDEG, Pastor Vitalino Similox, and the Presbyterian Mayan Brotherhood, we are encouraged and given a hand in realizing this dream. These people of conscience know how important education is, especially to us Mayans.

The Year 1995

In 1995 I was named President or Moderator of the Kaqchikel Presbytery for a five year term. We started the year with great hope, meeting with the Executive Committee and planning what we would do with respect to our six churches and 10 congregations. We divided up the work, having the task of caring for everyone. Our goal was to keep working for human rights. Now that we were going through the worst of times, a human rights office was opened. It was run by Pastor Manuel Saquic, and his assistant was my son, Ronaldo Similox. The office received many complaints from families, women, farmers, and indigenous persons.

The Presbytery was staffed with seven people to attend to the needs of the people. We had been working well for six months, when the unthinkable happened on Friday, **June 23, 1995**. On the way to the office, while still at a distance, I became ill, overwhelmed with exhaustion and anxiety. I told my son, Ronaldo, and he decided not to go to the office [the Human Rights Office]. I remained in the market, across from the government office. I went to sit in the park. I remember that doña Mila, a woman who sold newspapers, said “hello” and remarked how rare it was to see me resting in the park. Pastor Lucio Martínez came down from the office to ask me what was wrong and why I wasn’t going in to work. I said I wasn’t feeling well. He went to the bank. Then Napoleón, the secretary, came by. He said his sister was sick, and he wanted permission to bring her medicine as he had promised his mother he would do. He also said, “Manuel [Saquic] sent me to say, ‘I would have come over to say hello, but he [Manuel] had to leave [the Human Rights Office] because his wife had taken ill’”. “He asked for an advance and permission to leave, which we gave him”.

I said to Napoleón, “Tell Manuel that we’ll talk on Monday, and I hope his wife will be feeling better”. I signed some checks for Napoleón, and he left. Ronaldo came by to accompany

me to the market, and then I went home. It wasn't until that night, when I could not fall asleep, feeling so hot, that I took a bath at midnight. My husband, Vitalino, had gone to Honduras and would not be back until Saturday or Sunday. We were to have worship service at Central Church on Sunday.

On Monday I didn't go to the office. It wasn't until Tuesday afternoon that Lucio [Martínez] called me with the news. Mrs. Saquic had told him that her husband, Manuel, had never arrived home last Friday.

Early Wednesday morning we met at the office and I told the staff, "Dead or alive, we have to find him [Manuel Saquic]". We formed four groups which began the search; to the coast, to the west, to Guatemala City, and throughout Chimaltenango. They looked in hospitals, jails, firehouses, and even asked at the cemetery for Manuel's whereabouts. Days passed and we still didn't know what had happened to him.

As a woman, I felt very bad that I was the one in charge at the Presbytery when this thing happened. Every day I asked God to give me strength. I hoped that we would find Manuel one way or the other.

We never thought that the army in Chimaltenango had kidnapped Manuel that Friday, June 23, at 2:00 in the afternoon. It was near the park because that is where we lost his trail. He was taken to the military zone #302 on the Alameda in Chimaltenango.

One eye witness told us that very morning at dawn, they removed his dead body from Zone #302, and buried it at the Rincón Grande at San Andrés Itzapa. Other witnesses told us that on Saturday [6/24] he was in the morgue, and by Sunday, his presence there was announced at mass. As no one recognized the body, he was buried in an unmarked grave at the Chimaltenango cemetery. Even though we had reported his absence to the police, to the Public Ministry, nobody said anything. They knew, but they remained silent.

The search continued, and they said he was hanging from a tree in a ravine. The police came as did the attorney for Human Rights, MINUGUA. We arrived with the family, but we could find nothing. We searched all afternoon, into the night, and all the next day. For many days we went out looking for Manuel, and others joined us in the search, sharing our pain.

One day as I was sitting in the market place, a woman from San Jacinto asked me, "Why are you so sad, doña Margo?" I answered, "I'm not only sad, but so tired because we have not found Manuel." "Oh", she said. "My father says that at the cemetery there are two unmarked graves." I told her that we had searched and asked at the cemetery many days and nothing had turned up. But we had not asked about unmarked graves. At the office I told them about my recent conversation, and they said this was impossible because we had been asking all those days.

At home I told my family this news, and they said the same thing. I went to bed, and that night I dreamed Manuel appeared to me and asked, "Why are you so sad? I am here, look at me", he said. Then the vision ended.

I got up early the next morning and went with my son, Ronaldo, to look for Manuel's body in the cemetery. We arrived at 8:00 am. No one was around. We went to the morgue and called to a man we saw coming toward us. He asked what we wanted, and we said we were looking for a brother. He said he thought he had our man right here – he had put him [the body] in a black bag himself. When asked about the body's condition, the man said [the corpse] had 33 stab wounds, a broken jaw, burned feet, and had been here since We left and called the office. Don Lucio was there and he went to fetch the Saquic family while we notified friends.

Half a day passed. So many people came to the Presbytery in solidarity. It was so hard to believe. Manuel had brought up the case of Pascual Serech, who had been assassinated in 1994 in Panabajal, by the military commissioners, for being the first president of the Human Rights Committee. Victor Román was in charge of that place, and he directed everything according to his whim and fancy. So many people from Panabajal had been tortured and assassinated, and he [Román] didn't like the fact that Manuel Saquic was following Serech's case.

In addition, the judge, who authorized a search of Victor Román's house, was assassinated on a Saturday at the entrance to the University of San Carlos in Guatemala city. The judge had two young children in the Chimaltenango elementary school, and the thugs had done what they wanted with impunity. When we spoke with the commandant of the military base, he said that [the judge's children] weren't children at all – they were a baker and a butcher. These soldiers did not tell the truth about anything.

In any event, the Serech case continued, without Manuel Saquic, but with the help of MINUGUA, the Human Rights Commission, national and international solidarity, the archbishop, and many more.

The Serech case continued and the threats began. Five letters from the Jaguars for Justice⁴ arrived saying, that if we didn't leave the country within 24 hours, what had happened to Manuel Saquic would happen to us. We had never thought about leaving the country. This is the land of our ancestors. We would never leave. Now that we were clear as to what our work should be, we made the tough decision to stay, to have faith and hope that things would someday change and that the enemy would be defeated.

We decided to denounce all the army's atrocities in Chimaltenango. We argued about our denunciations because we had already seen so many of our friends die in this filthy civil war. But they could not shut us up. We told everything; who had done what against the people of our community, to Mario Enríquez, the Minister of Defense.

A year later, on August 2, 1996, our pastor, Lucio Martínez, died because of the psychological pressure he suffered during that year. He had kept up with the Serech case; formed a commission with the governor, the national police, the attorney for human rights, the army, MINUGUA, COPREDEH, the Office of Human Rights of the Archbishop of Guatemala, and the Presbytery in order to be able to get information and conduct the kind of investigation that each case warranted. Time passed, and we realized that as a Presbytery, it [the investigation] was keeping us so preoccupied, that we withdrew from the commission.

Eliseo Calel, an able young man who was studying law, took up the case. He sought court action for six months until he obtained an order to arrest Armando Tucubal. Tucubal was sentenced to 20 years in prison for homicide. He appealed the case but was condemned to 30 years in prison because the assassination of Pascual Serech was found to be premeditated and treacherous. However, only Armando Tucubal went to prison for the murder of Pascual Serech. The proceedings against Victor Román remain open because he fled and is still at large. His son, Edwin Román, is in the U.S., and Carlos Román also changed address. To this day, they are fugitives from justice, but not from the justice of God. We know that someday, sooner or later, they will pay for their part in the assassination of Manuel Saquic Vásquez

⁴ A paramilitary group, of the extreme right wing, that operated at the national level, assassinating many people.

Chapter 2

The Biblical-Theological Basis for this Work

**From the Perspective of a
Theological Journey and
From Life**

1. My process of apprenticeship and pilgrimage toward my training for pastoral ordination: An inspired journey in the Word of God.

I realized that a woman can not speak in public, much less in church. Men did everything. Women are supposed to be silent and obedient.

What a sad situation this is because it is as if women

do not exist. [Male] pastors [that believe this] are chauvinists and racists. [They think] women are to serve by cleaning the church, occasionally collecting the offering, and always walking behind the men.

When I read the Bible with other eyes, beginning from [all] the suffering and struggle, I realized that women play an important role in God's plan. The disciples were amazed when Christ spoke to a woman. It was not an insignificant moment. Jesus was breaking all the societal norms by speaking publicly with a woman [the woman at the well] who was, in addition, a Samaritan and a sinner. Christ was demonstrating that salvation was as much a woman's right as a man's. This was wisely interpreted by St. Paul in Galatians 3:28 and Romans 2:11 when he said, "There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave or free, male or female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus".

St. Matthew (8:14-15) shows us the loving action of Christ. Matthew lets us see the tenderness, humility and love of Jesus; first when he touched St. Peter's mother-in-law and then when we discover what Christ's action has achieved. It doesn't say that she got up on her own account. It indicates that Christ raised her up. I can imagine the kindness of our Lord. Again he breaks social custom and tradition by helping, touching and raising up this woman. There are many such women spoken about in the Bible, and we can list them.

The Bible says, "...and how can they hear if no one proclaims the message to them?" We as women think about leaving other occupations and surrendering ourselves entirely to the work of the Lord. In those days of crisis, there was so much demand for pastoral help. We women said, "Where are the pastors?" They all were praying, singing within the church, protecting themselves so that nothing would happen to them. They were so afraid of dying that they never risked themselves for their brothers. Everything was about the Will of God. Likewise, they are still saying that, "They [those being oppressed] have done something [to incur God's wrath], and that is why they are suffering". Left up to the men, no one would have come to the aid of our brothers [the indigenous people]. But we, as women, went to the fore as did the prophetess and judge, Deborah. We began to win the battle against the murderous army. We went to the streets. We raised our voices against injustice. Where were the pastors of so many churches who preached justice and love? You who read my article might be one of those who continue to hide in your church. We women defended the human rights of the indigenous people with wisdom.

Ordination is not a gift given to women, but a right [that they have earned] for their more than twenty five years of fighting [for justice] in the communities; walking each step, bringing

**The defiance of a
woman in times of war**

light and life [sol y agua], attending to problems, caring for the sick and suffering with them. We have been mourning their dead, their kidnapped and vanished loved ones, their tortured and assassinated ones. We learned that we have to help our neighbor, not just with words but with actions that show our love and hope because we women are bearers of life, abundant life.

I would like to say that God has given many privileges to women. I would like to mention those that I have learned, studied, reflected on and inspired me on my pilgrimage, side by side with my indigenous Kaqchikel sisters.

2. Women and their responsibilities to those in need:

In Acts 9, we meet Tabitha, a woman who dedicated her time to serving widows and the needy in the church. At the least, if many women dedicated themselves to this kind of work, they would be accomplishing a great task. I show them that apart from obtaining a title, there is much work to be carried out.

3. Women as servants:

Romans 16:1 speaks of Phoebe, a woman of service in her church. It is obvious [the passage] is not speaking of a deaconess in the sense of one who has been ordained or holds an official church title. But it is speaking of a woman, a widow, an older woman, a well respected woman.

4. Women in public life:

Deborah is a very special case among women. God used her to ask Barak to go out into battle. But we see the irresponsibility and cowardice of this man when he says to Deborah that he will not go into battle unless she accompanies him. Deborah, understanding his fear and cowardice, showed him how a woman could lead the charge and how we women just need the opportunity [to show our leadership skills].

5. Women in family life:

Moses' mother, and the mother and grandmother of Timothy are women who speak by example just as many of us women have been examples to our children and husbands in the nurture of the spiritual life.

6. Women as administrators:

In this respect, men should take off their hats to women in recognition of their considerable administrative talents. Since the time of Christ, women have served without hoping for anything in return. Such is the case of Mary Magdalene, Joanna and Susanna in Luke 8:2-3. I ask, what are many women doing in their churches, even when their pastor is not preaching the truth?

With all these, and many more women whom the Old Testament mentions, we affirm that God granted, and still grants today, many privileges and opportunities for Christian women to work and serve in their churches.

With that said, I think that God is endowing women with privileges in these days because there are many men who have been left behind in their ministry, thinking but not acting. We have been women who have played a very important role in our country, as has been seen in the peace process. We never saw the pastors [male] declare the Good News, nor did they denounce the injustices that our country lived through. To this date, to be a pastor is to be one not only in name but also in commitment to God and one's people.

As a woman, I can tell you that my obligation is to God and my people. I wasn't born by chance. I am the fruit of a clear and strong consciousness. I had the support of my family. I didn't do things alone. I had the companionship of my husband and the trust of my two [older] children. I always consulted with them in all things. I never neglected either my husband or my children. As a woman, I never felt alone. I always had my family's support, and the hand of God was with me. We suffered through this armed conflict, this filthy [civil] war, and still we live in an area of conflict. But we are resolved to be here until the end of our days, working, exposed to whatever comes our way. This postwar era has left us with so many traumas to overcome that we still need the help of our brothers in faith. We now have a medical-psychological clinic that sees to these cases and cares for many of our brothers.

7. Hagar; Hope for survival – an example that inspires me as a Kiché [Quiché Maya] woman in the Kaqchikel lands.

The fact of my being here, among the Kaqchikel Maya, is why I accepted and dared to share with you my life, my experiences, and the impact of my faith on my life during the past twenty five years.

The reflection I share with you is evidently the fruit of these years; years in which I was able to see how the devastating war left my beautiful country of lakes, volcanoes and desert wasteland. I have been able to see how the economic block, imposed by the U.S. government, and the inadequate economic planning of the Guatemalan government have created such profound shortages. It is fair to say that we have survived and continue to exist only by the grace of God.

What I know about survival, what I have learned from our communities and twenty five years experience, is that when we lived through armed conflict, the fear we felt when we heard dogs bark, or when night came [was terrible]. Tensions mounted when we heard about the army's activities; assassinations, tortures, kidnappings, and cruel slaughters in our villages.

But at the same time, survival means active solidarity among people. It means an explosion of immense creativity among the people who must look for new ways to respond to needs. It means a new ethic in which the women of the community lose their fear of speaking words of consolation and strength so that they will not think they are lost and alone.

I will always bear in mind the women from whom I learned so much, from whom I learned to read the Bible. The first such woman, from whom we would learn so much, was a woman in a precarious and desperate situation. From her, we could learn something about survival, about the struggle for life over hope and obstinacy, and about God's role in our survival. I'm referring to Hagar. She is the woman about whom we studied in our workshops, reflections and Bible studies. She is the one who inspired us and strengthened us in our anguish. She is the one with whom so many women can identify.

Who is Hagar? We find Hagar in chapters 16 and 21 of Genesis. She is the foreigner, the Egyptian woman, probably indigenous, the poor slave of Sarai [Abram's wife].

Far from home and isolated from her people, she lives a life of dependency, poverty and slavery. She can not shape her destiny with her own hands because she is the property of others until Abram and Sarai lose their patience with God's promise to provide them with a child. Sarai suggests to Abram that he sleep with Hagar to produce an heir. Even though that action, at that time, in that culture, was nothing extraordinary, Hagar did not even have dominion over her own body. Although this action could improve her status in the household, there remains the fact that it lessened her integrity as a person.

Abram took Sarai's suggestion and slept with Hagar. The resulting pregnancy brought much conflict into the household. Hagar's pregnancy opened her eyes to her [importance] even though she had to remain subservient to her mistress. Although the Bible describes Hagar as an arrogant and proud woman who didn't know her place, more likely she was a woman who had come to esteem herself in positive, liberating terms. But Sarai took offense at this readjustment in the power structure between herself and her slave. Sarai complained to Abram who allowed his wife to treat her slave as she thought best. Sarai mistreated Hagar.

What could Hagar do with this new sense of self worth? She took her destiny into her own hands and fled from the oppression of her servitude toward liberty in the desert.

In the desert, at a spring on the road to Shur, an angel of the Lord appeared to Hagar and said, "Hagar, slave of Sarai, where have you come from and where are you going?" Hagar, who knew where she had come from said that she was running away from her mistress, Sarai. She knew she was running away from oppression and slavery, but she had no well defined plan or strategy to follow. She didn't even know where to go. Then the unbearable happened. The angel of God ordered her to return to her mistress and humble herself before Sarai. The angel promised Hagar that she would become the mother of countless descendants and that her child would be called "Ishmael" which means "God hears" [your cry of distress]. Although her son was promised to become a strong and brave man, this did not disregard the cruel reality to which the angel was sending her back; slavery and oppression.

When I read this passage long ago, I found it unbearable. How could this be that God, whom we know as love, who guides us toward liberation and abundant life, would send this poor woman back into a life of exploitation, abuse and oppression? I couldn't stand the thought of it. But after living in the communities [indigenous and oppressed], I saw that this was Hagar's only realistic option. What would become of a single woman, pregnant with her first child, without help, a plan or preparation? Surely she would have died in the desert. Her new found liberty would have brought senseless death to her and her child. So Hagar returned to the tent of Abram and Sarai. She bore Abram a son, and he named the child Ishmael.

Years passed and finally Abram and Sarai, after covenanting with God, are called Abraham and Sarah. By God's intervention, they receive the official, legitimate heir; Isaac. When Isaac is weaned, Abraham held a great feast in which Ishmael, Abraham's illegitimate child, is present. Sarah cannot stand seeing the two boys together nor can she support the idea that they share Abraham's inheritance. Sarah tells Abraham to dismiss Ishmael and his mother.

This remedy had not occurred to Abraham, but God supported Sarah's idea. God had remembered his promise to Ishmael through the angel in the desert. God had promised to make a great nation of Ishmael also, but this could not happen if he stayed in Abraham's household. Ishmael had to become independent. So Abraham gave Hagar a skin of water and sent them away.

Take your destiny in your hands and leave the oppression behind. Go forth toward liberty and leave slavery and humiliation behind.

The exiles left, bound for the desert under different conditions than Hagar's last trip there.

However, they lost their way and soon ran out of water.

Ishmael became dehydrated, and Hagar could not stand to see her son die this way. She began to cry about the injustice of her circumstance, her aloneness, her inability to prevent her son's death in the desert. Her hope was running out. Her survival, and all she cared about, was threatened by all-encompassing death.

Hagar is in a situation in which thousands of Guatemalan women and men find themselves today. The same is true of millions of Central Americans, Latin Americans, Africans, and Asians who are living "in the desert", surrounded by death on all sides. It is the same for women who have been violated, abandoned or exploited, single mothers, mothers with sick children and victims of war. This hopeless desperation is also felt by mothers whose children have disappeared or been tortured or assassinated. Homeless men and women, refugees, migrants, the disenfranchised; all of these are Hagers lost in the desert, barely surviving. Hagar's tears, multiplied by all who suffer unjustly, flow like salty rivers through our countries. Many Hagers do not survive.

We found out about communities of indigenous people that were completely destroyed like Pachay, Las Canoas and others. Their communities were burned, and it was the women who cried out like Hagar in the wilderness. What can we learn from Hagar's desert journey when we are faced with desperate circumstances? Where is God? From whom do we learn to recognize God in the midst of so much death?

In our community Bible studies, we discovered the message for Hagar is a message for our times also. God does not remain absent. God hears the cry of the desperate who suffer. God's angel called to Hagar from above and said, "Do not be afraid, for God has heard your son's cry for help. Lift the boy up, and take him by the hand, for I will make him into a great nation". Although Hagar did not speak directly to God, God responded to the plea. God did not abandon her as Abraham had. God is at Hagar's side; at the side of her dying son; at the side of all suffering people. God does not strand those barely surviving. God accompanies us, but that does not mean all our problems will be miraculously solved, nor will peace and justice be established in a wink. The fact that God accompanies us in our misery and in our survival does not mean that there is nothing for us to do. As in Hagar's case, we must stop crying and get up. We must go to our children and tend to their needs; give them water to drink.

In Genesis, the author describes it so simply and beautifully. God opens Hagar's eyes and she sees a well of water. The water was there all the time, but she couldn't see it on account of her desperation and sadness. Once she is able to see the water, she fills the skin and gives Ishmael a drink. Thus she rehydrates him, restores his physical wellbeing, and saves his life.

For Guatemalan women, the well of water is very significant because it is a sign of life amid death in the desert. Like Hagar, we sometimes do not see the signs of life around us because of the depth of our sadness and affliction.

In our Bible studies, we promised ourselves to become vigilant in order to discover the signs of life, however small, so that we would not lose the hope and the will to live. In addition, we understood that God's nearness in our misery did not mean there was nothing else to be done. Therefore, we promised to immerse ourselves in the reconstruction of our country, in the defense of our lives, in the creation of peace and justice, and in the saving of the lives of our children and all the children and youth affected by exploitation. We learned from Hagar that we must fetch water, although it is heavy, and we must work hard to save life.

I think that we must remain united for the purpose of surviving and getting to the bottom of human rights issues. In these matters, we have a lot to learn from Hagar's story.

Also, it is urgent for us to believe strongly that God remains close to those who suffer and are exploited; women, children, and men. God never abandons us. Rather He accompanies us on our journey through the desert of life.

It is also imperative for us to never lose sight of the springs of water; those symbols of life which are so hard to see while we are enmeshed in alarming situations where our most basic human rights are being violated. These visions are given to us at the very moment we must renew our efforts to survive by "fetching the water" of life.

With respect to our specific questions about which rights are precisely "rights of survival and about the efficacy of working for human rights", the text I referred to teaches us the following:

We cannot deny that Hagar's physical integrity was violated by Abram's sexual act as well as by Sarai's mistreatment of her maidservant. These violations are never condoned by God. Even though, at the time of her ejection from Abram's household, the scripture does not say God helped her, it would be blasphemous to think that God was in agreement with the way Hagar's physical personhood was violated. But once the crime had been committed, the child [Ishmael] was born, and he did not have to suffer further consequences.

"God will make a great nation from him". In order to fulfill that promise, Hagar had to temporarily go back to the oppression of slavery until the child was old enough, capable, competent and prepared to weather the conditions of true liberation.

With respect to our work for human rights, it seems important to reflect on the conditions that permit a transition from a state of violation to a state of protection of physical integrity. What are the conditions that guarantee a lasting respect for human rights and how can we create these conditions? Hagar did not have a well-defined strategy, but we must define what conditions can be created so that the human rights of all, especially our humble brothers and sisters, are respected internationally.

A second point is the significance of the [Hagar's] well of water. This spring is not only a sign of life and hope as we saw before, but also a concrete expression of God's concern for our basic needs. God did not open Hagar's eyes in her moment of agony to show her a flower or a precious stone. God showed her exactly what she needed to survive at that moment; water.

God knows what we need at the minimum; water, food, health, air. Even though we have to keep in mind that in the Kingdom of God there is no limit to the basics, Christ came so that we could have life and life in abundance (John 10:10). We see many examples of this in both the Old and New Testaments.

The Kingdom of God is compared to great banquets with succulent dishes and excellent wines. In the Kingdom of God there will be no scarcity. Although the Kingdom has not yet arrived fully, God remains concerned for our basic necessities.

A third point is this. God wants Hagar, a foreign woman in another's land, to become part of a community, and he promises her uncountable descendents which will subsequently pass to her son. In order for that promise to be fulfilled, Hagar and her son must leave the familiar oppression of Abraham's household and wander in the desert in order to create a new nation. This woman, who is a foreigner, exploited, violated and marginalized, will be the mother of a great nation that will spring from her nearly dead son. God will do this.

Today I can identify with Hagar. I came to this area without definite plans, and today I see a great Kaqchiquel nation. I see brave women and men organized as a Presbytery, ready to

contribute to the establishment of justice and peace. Even though these do not yet exist in a true sense, the process that will change the historic conditions has been initiated and it will progress, little by little, until we reach real liberation.

The significance of the end of [Hagar's] story is this: "His [Ishmael's] mother got him a wife from Egypt (Gen. 21:21). With this action, Hagar the Egyptian confirmed the birth of a people or a nation [that God had promised her]. She and her son became part of that people. Genesis 25 gives us the 12 names of the 12 sons of Ishmael and tells us that they "lived in the land from Havilah to Shur, near the border of Egypt as you go toward Asshur". The scripture also says that Ishmael, at the age of 137, died in the presence of all his brothers indicating that Hagar gave birth to other sons that became part of that nation. To belong to a people, to survive as a people, is vitally important to being human.

That is how we feel as K'aqchikeles. United with twenty one other peoples, we form the great Mayan Nation.

With Hagar's last act, the act of finding a wife for her son (Gen. 25), she assures the formation of a nation and guarantees the continuation of her own life as well.

These times are full of multiple nuclear threats and dangerous global environmental contamination which affects the ozone layer that protects us from the sun's harmful radiation. We fear for the mere survival of our planet as well as see the acts of global terrorism touching the most powerful nation in the world. It is necessary to remember Hagar's act of saving life and securing the continuation of her own life. Hagar, a poor, foreign, enslaved, violated woman; a tenacious survivor, teaches us how to fight in defense of life. From her experience, we can understand that God does not abandon the barely-living. God is with us and accompanies us in our struggles. God is here, this very day, expressed in this very action.

Hagar gives us a sign of hope, of survival; precursor of the Kingdom of God.

They are identified in the gravest moment of their persecution. "We had to flee and hide ourselves from the persecution of the army. We were hidden away in 1986 in the community of Bola de Oro, a village 6 km from Chimaltenango."

8. Women and Calvin: in the eyes and experience of a Kiché [Mayan] woman living in Chimaltenango lands.

It was 1:00 in the afternoon when commissioned soldiers detained us and accused us of being communists or guerillas. We were detained in the Chimaltenango school. They interrogated us and told us that we were the ones who had been directing the subversive propaganda that was being given to the women of the area. They accused us unjustly. A youngster realized that we'd been abducted and sounded the alarm to our community. Many women came and tried negotiating our release. Our captors said we had to die according to the negotiations. The women armed themselves with sticks, rocks and gas, and surrounded the elementary school saying that they would burn down the school. If we were going to die, everyone in the school, including the commissioned soldiers would die with us. The soldiers became afraid because they knew these women were capable of doing such a thing!

Around 6:00 pm we were set free; don Lúcio Martínez, Antonio Otsoy, and myself. I was the one accused of spreading unrest among the women of the town.

Another day, we went to precinct #302 in Chimaltenango to demand our rights. We knew we had freedom to worship and move about freely. It was legal to go any place we wished. They stamped and signed some papers, by means of the commandant, the mayor and the governor, so that the commissioned officers would respect our rights.

An important achievement here was that after this incident, the wives of the said commissioned officers came together as a group and participated in our weekly Bible studies. For this reason, I say that Calvin identifies himself with us women because we see how such a person, a shaper of our faith, identified himself with the suffering of persecuted and oppressed Christians. He was not just a speculative [“armchair”] theologian. He lived his faith in community, and this touches our lives in the 1980’s.

In Genesis 1:26, God says, “Let us make man ...” God is speaking about both sexes because women are men’s compliment, or the other half of man. That the woman was also created in the image and likeness of God is clear. But when God designed woman as a suitable helper for the man, God is not designating man to be woman’s superior because “man” is understood to mean both sexes or humanity in general.

With respect to all this, we realize that Calvin remained informed of everything that went on around him.

The same realization [of what was going on around us] occurred to us women. We began to understand what was going on all over the country and the roots of all this injustice. We saw ourselves as refugees, displaced, and just like those of the CPR (Communities of Population and Resistance of the Quiché and Ixcán [Mayan groups]). I realized I should become part of the Multiparty Commission⁵ to find out about the situation of our brothers in other mountainous regions of Guatemala. Something very special I found out about these brothers was the resistance [they put up], despite their lack of homes, clothes and food. They lived very aware of the realities of the country, and yet they never felt their fight was in vane. They knew that they would triumph over the oppressive army with the help and assistance of the national and international community.

That which came to light:

Calvin, like Jesus, was concerned about women and thought that women should play an important role in the church and in society. We demonstrated this in the 25 year struggle with the church and congregations where we [women] have put up with the worst [treatment]; where we have been threatened and marginalized by many churches and pastors who said that our work was not Christian, and where we were accused of taking the Liberation Theology line when we hadn’t even been taught what that was. We only saw the suffering of our people and marched together [in solidarity against it].

We were criticized roundly, but no one, not even any pastor, asked us why or for what reason [we acted as we did]. But now we say it and tell about it [our motives and objectives] because we want you to reflect on it and put into practice [these ideas] in your churches with your brethren and not just be bench warmers. We want you to commit yourselves to spreading the Good News in our country, not just by telling people that God loves them, but by seeing to the needs of the people of this country.

⁵ This Commission was founded by representatives of the Episcopal Conference of Guatemala, the Conference of Evangelical Churches of Guatemala (CIEDEG), who appointed me to serve, the Solicitor of Human Rights, the Unity of Syndicated and Popular Action (UASP), the Movement for Social Nationalism (MSN), and other persons.

We are aware of [this country's] illiteracy, of its lack of housing, health care, job opportunities, education for hundreds of children and land for agriculture. There is much to do, brother pastors. There must be "praying, but acting [in practical ways at the same time]". That is the only way we will bring about the Reign of Justice that we all desire.

9. A woman's ordination; from the perspective of a woman who tirelessly struggles for human rights and for the rights of women who are peasants, indigenous and Christian.

There is some acceptance in the church toward women, especially when we see how each one has her gift and is respected. Therefore, men and the church should accept this. Since their sharing of the Gospel and their dedication to the church shows their ability and their gift of faith, each woman should be judged by her understanding. As women, we have been called to God's ministry. As I understand it, if women are barred from answering that call, then we are not fulfilling that which the [the Gospel] teaches.

As Martin Luther says, in baptism we all can be ordained (men and women) for ministry and service to God. A woman's right to serve can not be restrained or prohibited. Since the work needing to be done does not come about by chance but as a result of the conditions we live under, women can not always go to the pastor and tell everything [that has happened] to them. We need someone to confide in, another woman or [female] pastor to whom we can tell how we are hurting, that we are afraid, or to ask, "What will become of us? Without doubt, being a woman, I know that we do not always feel comfortable sharing confidences with a male pastor.

"My ordination, as a Minister of the Word and Sacrament, is not a gift. It is a right that I earned during 25 years of service."

From my experience, I can tell you that we women keep quiet about many things that happen to us, that silence us, what we feel when we are offended. But if there were many ordained women, I think that the church would be another thing altogether; [a place] where we could share a trust, where we could feel good. But up to this point, this does not exist. As a woman, I've heard many women, and I know their testimonies. But [they ask], who will listen to me? When I suffer, when I'm offended, I have to forge ahead carrying my cross because there are things that are just not said. Only God understands and knows. That is why I say that in this new century there must be many women ordained. There is so much to be done. The war left us many traumatized women and young women, and no one is caring for them. The pastors [male] don't know what women are feeling or what they suffer day in and day out.

If God has called women to the ministry of Word and Sacrament, I think it must be necessary. I remember when I was in Ixcán with the CPR's (Communities of Villages in the Resistance movement), I was asked to lead the worship service and baptize 15 children on the banks of the Ixcán River in the mountains. The brethren were happy that someone had finally arrived who could baptize their children. Even though I was not ordained at the time, according to the rules of the church, [I performed both tasks because] I was already ordained by the right of my conviction and calling given by God. This was recognized by the community.

It was a very special experience for me because I had done everything except baptisms, and so I performed it then. Twenty five village families met, and it was lovely to hear the birds and the monkeys that surrounded our ceremony. The marimba's echo could be heard inside the mountain where the Catholic brothers celebrated the mass. It is so sad to remember that time in which [those in] the resistance had to hide out in the mountains.

Chapter III

Organization of the local church

1. The Process of Organizing a local, multiethnic church. The experience in our church, “The Beginning – Ri Nab’el”.

As it was expressed in this historical narrative, we constructed and organized the Ri Nab’el church along the practice of complementarity; each person with a [specific] function.

I was chosen for an active pastoral roll of visiting, providing care, projects and activities. My husband, Vitalino, took care of the training duties, the formation of the church, and the running of it. He did this on Sundays only, which was enough for me since I was responsible for my duties during the week. Naturally, Vitalino worked to support not only our family but also to fund the activities of the church.

This is the work that we accomplished during the past 25 years.

To culminate my [ordination] experience, the Ri Nab’el church and the Presbytery asked if I’d had personal experience in organizing the church according to the procedures of the National Evangelical Presbyterian Church of Guatemala.

Our church was organized according to the Presbyterian Church and the Kaqchiquel Mayan Culture.

I was able to accomplish this with the support and active participation of 15 church families. Our church favors the family as the active nucleus of decision making. We do not separate families from their church or religious functions. On the contrary; we united and promoted everything to foster family unity. This is the cultural principle around which the church revolves.

After six months of work, according to the cultural norms of the Kaqchikel which includes consulting and finding agreement among the elders and employing their wealth of experience and understanding, we installed our council of elders. They are:

1. Lorenzo Chopen -a 68 year old man with a history of more than 20 years of church activity.
2. Dominga Paz -a 45 year old woman with more than 10 years of church participation.
3. Teresa Batz -a 45 year old woman with 25 years of church activity.
4. Félix Jutzutz -a 40 year old man who had dedicated over 20 years to the church.

There are 15 families in all that make up the church. They are the families of:

- | | |
|-------------------|----------------------------|
| 1. Vidalia Mejía | 9. Juan García |
| 2. Teresa Batz | 10. Vidal Jutzutz |
| 3. Marian Poz | 11. Vitalino Similox |
| 4. Saúl Pérez | 12. Dominga Paz |
| 5. Félix Jutzutz | 13. Lencho and Angelina |
| 6. Gaudencio Atz | 14. Sebastián and Bernarda |
| 7. Lorenzo Chopen | 15. Alejandro and Sarbelio |
| 8. Enrique Miza | |

Our church carried out various church activities such as:

- Sunday worship from 9 am to 12 pm
 - Eucharist every six months with our members
 - Studies about national issues, since as Christians we must stay informed
 - Work in the community to further development
 - Work and study for men and women (since we are aware of gender issues)
- on the topics of:

Evangelization
Christian Education
Christian Service

It is very important for our churches to deal with these topics because, as one can see from the quality of life of each brother, we can not just pay attention to the care of the spirit when the whole body will benefit from that which strengthens living conditions, health care and education. The basics are very important for thoughtful living in awareness of one's situation.

The Central Church [of the Kaqchikel Presbytery], known as "The Beginning – Ri Nab'el", has been active because as pastor, I visit those who missed Sunday worship. I go to see these people in the company of the Council of Elders. We cheer them up and we attend to their particular needs or problems. We don't just visit once and let them be. Pastoral care continues to support them.

Another aspect [of church activity] is that on Sundays, each person lays out their needs, and between one and another, we offer support. Also, each tells the group about the work they have done throughout the week.

2. Mayan spirituality, fountain of inspiration for my pastoral work and for the organization of our multiethnic and ecumenical church.

As a woman, I have been guided to understand my *Nahual*, my gift, since I was conceived. The core of my existence came from the Quiché [Mayan group] soil. I am indigenous, of indigenous parents and grandparents of the Mam [another Mayan group] and Quiché people.

The fire is that which gives me strength. The air gives me life. The water gives me breath. Mayan spirituality is an encounter with one's past; with the past of all those who have gone before me.

I passed through the fire so that I could see my responsibility. Grandmother Moon was present from the four cardinal points. I see the sun leave and the night arrive. The Grandfather taught me to respect nature. In the communities I learned the custom of gathering in the harvest and how to store the corn so it doesn't spoil. I also learned how to prepare food from that same corn. I learned to invite neighbors in to eat and how to store the ears of corn. We light candles and place them at the four cardinal points; red and yellow ones to the east and west, white and black ones to the north and south. These represent the source of the sun, the air, the rain, and the night, respectively. We light incense to make ourselves distant from bad thoughts.

As women, we identify ourselves not only with our native dress and our language, but also with our customs concerning menstruation and pregnancy. If we count [the time] by moons, we know that a baby boy or girl will be born at the new moon. The same thing happens in nature. If trees are cut down during the full moon, its wood will not rot easily. To plant flowers and fruit, it is the same.

We [Mayans] know that much [of our culture] has been lost, but now there is opportunity to revive it.

In the [Kaqchikel] Presbytery and in the Church of "The Beginning –Ri Nab'el", we highly respect Mayan spirituality since during the years of the armed conflict; it protected us and guided us on a good path.

We give thanks to Grandfather Fermín who guided us right up to his last days. "Grandfather, you are not dead but only separated from us [because] we still see and feel [your presence]. Thank you for speaking to us, reminding us and encouraging us to keep on moving forward. You told me that you would not leave me and that I would have to be strong. Thank you for your advice. The fruit of this is my son, Ronaldo, who received the *vara*⁶ and carries with him the teaching he got from you, Grandfather."

In 2001, Sister Felicita and don Antonio Ovalle came to fill the physical vacuum left by Grandfather Fermín. Today these two are with us, and doña Felicita is an active member of our church and of the Presbytery.

⁶ The *vara* refers to the Mayan custom of passing on wisdom and authority as symbolized by a small cloth sack of red seeds.

Chapter IV

The act of giving recognition to the people, the organizations and movements that made my ordination as pastor possible

For all these experiences I would like to give thanks to:

1. God, for being the author of my life.
2. My mother, Brigid Valiente, (deceased), for showing me the right road since my journey began at age eight.
3. My pastor, Nóe Reyes, (deceased), who provided guidance for me until my wedding day. May you rest in peace.
4. My father, Carlos Ixcot, who opened my eyes to the reality of life at age 13; that one has to struggle to survive with [the help of] all your friends and family.
5. My husband, Vitalino Similox, for his love and accompaniment right up to the present.
6. My children, Byron, Ronaldo, Paolo, and Layla for their solidarity and understanding, and for all their love.
7. My son, Rubén, [deceased], who from above walks with me and cares for me. He is with me always in memory and is part of my life each day.
8. My brother, Ramiro, who taught me to be a woman of strength and not to be afraid of anyone. May he rest in peace.
9. The communities where I gained experience; where my school was; where I learned to cry as well as to laugh. I knew such wonderful people, all full of love and appreciation. These are the people from Bola de Oro, Cerro Alto, Labor de Falla, El Rosario, San Jacinto, El Durazno, Ciénega Grande, San Rafael, Central, Tecpán, Poquíl, Pacorral, Panabajal, Comalapa, Cojoljuyú, Zone 3 and Alotenango.

For their solidarity, I wish to thank:

10. The Presbytery of Baltimore, USA, for their pastoral, moral and economic help.
11. The United Church of Canada for their prayers and pastoral accompaniment during difficult times.
12. The Disciples of Christ, USA, for the accompaniment and support in our fight for human rights.
13. CIEDEG, for its support during all the years we lived and shared both the good and bad times together. They have touched us with laughter as well as tears. Thank you to all.

14. The Fraternity of Mayan Presbyterians, for the understanding they accorded me during the ten years I served as Secretary. I learned to share with different sisters from other Presbyteries. I remember with much affection:

Sister María Luisa de Ajanel, a Kiché
Sister Azucena de Pop, a Kiché
Angela de Ajanel, a Kiché
Rosario Díaz Vicente, a Mam
Sara de Pérez, a Kiché
Mirium de Ajanel, a Kiché

15. The Mayan Presbyterian Sisterhood, from whom I learned to defend our ethnic and gender rights within our Presbyterian Church of Guatemala. Today this group continues to be an instrument of accompaniment, reflection, and action for indigenous women of the Presbyterian faith.

My respect and recognition of URNG, for conducting the peace process that left us a political instrument, the Peace Agreement, with which we can fundamentally change the situation in our country through an historic process.

In recognition of URNG for conducting the peace process that culminated in the drawing up of the political instrument that today marks the way toward overcoming the structural and historical causes of racism, poverty, discrimination, machismo and sectarianism.

I will always remember the importance of our URNG friends. They taught us to have a clear and open conscience, and to have principles and ideals. Ever since I was a youngster of 13, I knew about them.

I saw the first revolutionaries fall; Moses Cifuentes, a young and active man from Sololá; “El Gordo”; “Beto”, and others. At a young age I learned from them to be an activist and to be strong of character. I learned to not be afraid of either men or women, but to understand that all of us are equal with the same rights.

I am especially grateful for George, who guided me throughout all the years of difficulties.

I also give special acknowledgement to Gedeón for understanding us and giving me his solidarity and support in the fight.

I am grateful to Bruno and Oscar, friends that I admire so much for their skill and how far they’ve gone how much they achieved. May God bless them. They are examples for my youngest children Paul and Layla.

To Abel, from the village of Comalapa, I am thankful for his accompaniment in doing pastoral work with our indigenous brothers. Each in his own way, I worked from an evangelical faith perspective and Abel always respected and supported that.

I give thanks to Rómulo, a tremendous friend and helper, who named his first daughter Margarita in my honor.

Many thanks, also, to Chaparrita, a woman much admired for her skill, her dedication to her work, and her bravery. May God keep her in his glory.

To Gustavo, the “Gordo”, a very loving and likable man who went to be with his mother in the hereafter.

Without doubt, there are many companions that I don’t remember now. But this day is such a happy one for me because it gives me the chance to dedicate this pastorship to them, this act of ordination toward the ministry of the Word and Sacrament.

I will always remember those anonymous companions who died in hopes of seeing a new Guatemala, a new nation, justice claimed by their blood, all that we still actively strive for.

Conclusion

In this present work we find, as in real life, the practical intertwined with [theoretical] thought. They nourish each other, and their synthesis is the foundation for an alternative way of arriving at being recognized as a [female] pastor or minister of the Word and Sacrament.

This work is a first contribution of its kind that sister Blanca Margarita Valiente makes to our Presbytery in addition to her love of her work, her dedication, her personal life and her family. Today her contribution helps us, who were not part of her experience, to gain a more profound understanding of her contribution.

The Kaqchikel Presbytery respectfully receives this contribution and offers it to the service of other churches in the Presbyterian Synod of Guatemala, to the Protestant churches in general in our country, and to the service of friends in other countries who are in solidarity with us. We offer it also to the Mayan Presbyterian Brotherhood and to the Conference of Guatemalan Churches (CIEDEG).

This work is offered in recognition of the ecumenical, social and indigenous groups who have identified themselves with the struggle and today feel a satisfaction [concerning its outcome]. This work acknowledges their economic support and moral solidarity during [our troubled] past.

The significant findings of this work are its theological perspective on life, its journey, and the embracing of a vision for women. This is a vision of the Christian, indigenous woman who fights for peace, justice and human rights.

We recommend that this work be studied and analyzed. We encourage other women to engage in similar work, cataloging their experiences and showing what women are capable of, especially indigenous women, for there is such a lack of this kind of material.

We hope you understand the contribution of all the groups which have impacted the Kaqchikel Presbytery and the author: the National Presbyterian Church, the National Evangelical Church and other sister churches around the world.

About the Author

I was born in Quetzaltenango, Guatemala, June 9, 1951. In 1968 I married Pastor Vitalino Similox Salazar. To date, we have been married thirty three years.

We had five children, of whom the first has gone to be with the Lord.
Rubén Vitalino Similox Valiente
Byron Eleazar Vitalino Similox Valiente
Ronaldo Otoniel Similox Valiente
Paulo Rubén Similox Valiente
Layla Jimena Chumil Similox Valiente

Vitalino and I have 2 daughters-in-law. They are:
Pahola Yanina Rimola de Similox
Noemí Cuellar de Similox

Our three grandchildren, whom we adore, are:
Andrea Pahola Similox Rimola
Byron Fernando Similox Rimola
Alejandra María Similox Rimola

The author, on her ordination day, November 4, 2001

