

Mission to Guatemala

This is the first in a series of short info-profiles about our visit to Guatemala in February, 2001. We hope to share the background of our relationship, the experience of our visit to this wonderful land and how deeply the needs of our Guatemalan brothers in Christ touched us.

Kaqchiquel-Baltimore Partnership

Years before we visited Guatemala in Central America this past February, the Presbytery of Baltimore began a relationship with Mayan Presbyterians, initiated by our Executive Presbyter, Herb Valentine. While studying Spanish in Guatemala in 1988, Herb met Antonio Otsoy, Secretary of the brotherhood of Mayan Presbyteries. Otsoy revealed to Herb the dream of 300 Mayan families of the Kaqchiquel Presbytery: to purchase their own land and farm it cooperatively. In a country where native Mayans have been systematically oppressed since the Spanish conquest of 1523, this was “to dream the impossible dream”.

However, after jointly securing a \$30,000 grant to purchase 45 acres in 1993, the Baltimore and Kaqchiquel Presbyteries pledged a partnership of empowerment built upon Christian principles of compassion and community: *When our brothers hurt, we all hurt. When our brothers rejoice, we all rejoice*. Within a year’s time, the partnership was tested upon the assassination of Manuel Saquic, a reformist Kaqchiquel pastor, by Guatemalan Government death squads. While unable to bring Pastor Saquic’s assassins to justice, the Baltimore Presbytery pressed the 207th General Assembly to establish a Martyr’s Fund to support any martyred pastor’s family in any part of the world. On our recent trip, we met often with one such family, that of Pastor Lucio Martinez, whose death, shortly after his visit to the Baltimore Presbytery in 1996, was linked to emotional stress following his witnessing of violence committed against one of his daughters.

Semi-annual visits to the Kaqchiquel Presbytery have continued since 1996 to establish presence, promote trust and friendship, encourage action from dream, mourn the dead and missing, provide resources, and raise consciousness of the Mayan’s situation. Limited financial support has continued, and a medical/psychological clinic was recently established.

To date, over 80 Maryland Presbyterians have visited the Guatemalan mission area under the past leadership of pastors Herb Valentine, Jim Richards, and more recently, Bob Ferguson . There is a travel spot waiting for you if you wish to see, firsthand, the impossible dream becoming a reality. For current travel information, contact Rev. Bob Ferguson, Deer Creek Harmony Presbyterian Church, P.O. Box 321, Darlington, MD 210324 or go to “Traveling Mercies” link.

Written 3/01

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Mission to Guatemala – Part 2

Guatemala – The Land and People

The Baltimore Presbytery's mission partnership with the Kaqchiquel Presbytery of Guatemala develops richer meaning with an understanding of the people and their land. Guatemala lies between Mexico and El Salvador and spans Central America from the Pacific Ocean to the Caribbean Sea. The Northern Plain juts anvil-shaped into Mexico's tropical rain forests where chicle trees yield the base for chewing gum manufacture. The Pacific Lowlands, increasingly populated by farm hands, produces sugar cane, cotton, cattle and produce. The volcanoes of the Central Highlands dot this mountainous region with smoking peaks, fertile soil, and frequent earthquakes (the devastating earthquake of 1976 killed over 23,000 people). This most highly populated area yields corn, coffee, beans, and squash for crowded pockets of Mayan Indian communities in the west, and Ladino people in Guatemala City and east.

Guatemala's indigenous people, the Maya, were a people who developed a very advanced society between 1,000 BC and 900 AD. Maya means "People of the Corn", and this staple not only provided them nourishment, but formed the basis for their creation story, counting system, time calendar, astrological knowledge, pictorial written language, societal order and religious worship. An unknown force caused a great upheaval among the Maya around 900 AD. Religious centers were abandoned and survivors fled to the Highlands to live in isolated pockets where subsistence farming was difficult on the steep hillsides. In the 1520's, when Spaniards came looking for gold and converts to Christianity, they found little precious metals but plenty of Mayan slave labor to work the land. The People of the Corn no longer could claim the land, which grounded their identity, as their own. This continues to powerfully impact Guatemala today.

The Spaniards, with light skin, European features, Christian misunderstanding, and power through land usurpation, prevailed in Guatemala and the rest of Central America for 300 years. During this colonial period, Spanish custom and culture continually claimed supremacy over indigenous people as happened in North America. By the time Guatemala declared independence from Spain in 1821, the Mayan majority remained powerless under Ladino repression. Ladino originally meant people of mixed Spanish/Indian ancestry. Today it means people who follow Spanish-American culture and traditions, regardless of ancestral mixture. This population dichotomy still continues to determine who receives education, employment opportunities, medical care, decent and affordable housing, legal rights, and justice. The Baltimore Presbytery's partnership, with the group of Mayans known as the Kaqchiquel, is an attempt to empower a marginalized people with the resources to reclaim their human rights, their land, and their dignity.

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Mission to Guatemala – Part 3

The Baltimore Presbytery's Mission to the Kaqchiquel Maya

The second of our info-profiles, concerning last February's mission trip to Guatemala, ended with a sentence that could summarize the goal of the Baltimore Presbytery's partnership with Guatemala's Kaqchiquel Presbyterians. It is to empower a marginalized people with the resources to reclaim their human rights, their land and their dignity. The Gospels often tell of Jesus' interactions with folks who have been isolated from the "in-crowd" of the day (the Jews of power and position in Temple affairs) because of their gender (women), age (children), profession (tax-collectors, prostitutes), health status (the lepers or demon-possessed), ethnic background (Samaritans), etc. As outsiders, they cannot get viable employment or justice, they are avoided and disrespected, and they are not free to associate with the "in-crowd" and all that being part of a thriving society brings. Time and again, Jesus listens to them, calls them by name, grants their requests, heals their infirmities, or even shames the power-brokers into respecting their rights as creatures of a wildly loving God.

Our experience with our Guatemalan sisters and brothers was of this nature. We listened to their history of discrimination and visited the gravesites of their people who dared seek justice for Mayan people. During their Sunday worship service, we prayed together for a better future and made mutual introductions with all village representatives in their Presbytery. We accompanied them on village medical rounds, partaking of simple Mayan meals the women prepared for everyone and shared their joy in the latest breeder-hog cooperative venture. They brought us to their ancient Mayan ruins and trusted us with their Mayan faith vision of one God over all humanity. At the time, it was hard to understand how such relatively little action from us could have such a life-giving effect. But by listening thoughtfully and accompanying respectfully, we affirmed their human value, both collective and individual. This is not what they generally experience among their Ladino countrymen. It is a very sad thing to witness.

The physical harshness of life for these Mayan Guatemalans was especially evident during our village medical rounds. With the men working in the steep countryside, mostly women and children came to see Dr. Lucía of the newly established Kaqchiquel Presbytery Clinic. Our mission team member, Dr. Mike Weddel, helped Dr. Lucía diagnose a litany of women's and children's complaints. Given the heavy lifting women do of children and bundles, squatting to cook and wash, doing repeated motions involved in daily weaving, embroidering, and grinding corn, women suffer from spinal compression and joint pain. Many children, especially babies, eat little due to intestinal parasites and painful gum disease. Many Mayans have chronic coughs and lung disorders from years of breathing cooking-fire smoke. Girls and young women need reading glasses, not to read (80% of Mayan women are illiterate), but to be able to continue the intricate embroidery that adorns their woven fabric. The reading glasses we bring help them continue to make and sell quality piece goods in the market. Yet, in spite of their burdensome lives, our Mayan friends gratefully showed us the new village well whose clean water has reduced the high incidence of amoebic dysentery in the community. We saw the latest cement-constructed stove that enabled the women to cook in a standing position, relieving their chronically arthritic knees and backs. The vented stove was such a blessing to them because it allowed the family to live in a relatively smoke-free environment and provided the community with a clear, warm place to share a meal. These small improvements to their daily lives happened because of this intra-Presbytery partnership.

More significantly, visiting the Herb Valentine Medical and Psychological Clinic, developed and administered by our Mayan friends, but funded largely through the inter-Presbytery relationship, offers great hope for a better Guatemalan future. Dr. Patricia Jiménez Buckley sees medical patients 3 days a week at the Chimaltenango clinic, trains village health promoters and visits outlying villages six times a month. She is assisted by their recently graduated herbalist, Vilma Leticia Albúrez. Ronaldo Similox, the psychologist and manager of the clinic, sees patients 4 days a week and administers the entire project. His wife, Noemí, keeps track of all financial matters in her spare time, and his parents are pastors in the Presbyterian Church in Chimaltenango.

While only in operation since spring, 2000, the clinic is gaining recognition and trust in the community. Ronaldo presented a five year plan for the clinic to us, which is an encouraging accomplishment for a group of people who had not dared to make plans for the future during all those years of civil war and violence. They had been hoping to just make it through the day without some maliciousness occurring in their midst. Their 5-year vision for the clinic includes:

- *Train and send out 22 health promoters (2 to each of 11 outlying villages):
 - to teach basic hygiene
 - to troubleshoot treatable illnesses
 - to refer critical patients to the doctor or hospital

Expand clinic services with:

- **basic laboratory services
- minor surgery capabilities
- vehicular support to villages with x-ray, ultrasound, and lab services capabilities

Expand psychological services to include:

- teaching mothers how to mentally stimulate infants / toddlers
- *** Train a specialist in indigenous herbal remedies to supplement use of Western medicine.

*At the time of this update (1/03) a second batch of health promoters are being trained so that a total of 38 trained personnel can service 19 outlying villages in the Kaqchikel Presbytery.

** Laboratory equipment, to test blood and urine specimen, are now in place at the Clinic.

***Two licensed herbalists are working with the clinic now. They are making and distributing various hygiene products, natural vitamin/mineral supplements, salves and cough remedies, etc.

The success of this 5 year plan heavily depends on funding from all the churches in the Baltimore Presbytery. There are several churches which have already designated a portion of their mission budget to the *Herb D. Valentine Medical and Psychological Clinic* in Chimaltenango, Guatemala. We are hoping that you and your church will respond in kind to the need of the Kaqchiquel Presbytery for basic medical care for this disenfranchised group of native Guatemalans.

For more information, please contact:

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