

TRIP TO GUATEMALA – 11/8 – 11/16/2010

By Charles D. Dixon

Our Presbytery again sponsored its annual Partnership Delegation trip to Guatemala, which was made from November 8 to November 16, 2010. Eighteen persons made this trip which involved a Pastor's Conference at the Presbyterian Seminary in San Felipe, Guatemala, and a visit to 7 of our 31 sister churches.

The delegation was led by Rev. Deborah McEachran of the First Presbyterian Church in Hickory. Those making the trip were: Randall Boggs, Grace Boyer, Charles Dixon, Ellen Dozier, Barbara and Bill Hosbein, Deborah McEachran, Doug Michael, Judy Nebrig, Luke Ponder, Cathy and James Rubel, Ken Unnasch, Angela Washburn, Hannah Washburn, Jacob Washburn, Joseph Washburn and Vernon Yount.

I was asked to write my thoughts and impressions about this trip.

We arrived in Guatemala City, the capital, after about six hours of flight time. Part of our group had a flight that stopped in Houston; the other part had a plane that stopped in Atlanta.

Guatemala City has a population of over 4 million; it is located at an elevation of about 4,000 feet and had very pleasant, cool weather.

From Guatemala City we were taken by a mini-bus for about 35 miles to Antigua, the old capital. Antigua is now a city of about 50,000 people and is designated as a UNESCO site. Antigua was founded in 1543; the capital was moved to Guatemala City in 1776 due to the extensive damage to Antigua from flooding that occurred when a nearby volcano collapsed.

Guatemala is a beautiful country but is subject to many natural disasters. In 2010 it had a very severe drought which resulted in a 95% crop loss and affected about 400,000 families. Later, very severe rainfall caused extensive mud slides which damaged and blocked many roads and did extensive property damage. The Guatemalans are still busy reopening and repairing their roads. Guatemala's mountains were formed by volcanoes and are easily eroded.

We had a good tour of Antigua, the local jade factory, an old convent which is being restored by private capital, and an interesting slideshow by Elizabeth Bell giving a lot of the history of Antigua. We also had lectures from Karla Koll, a mission worker, and from Marcia Towers, another mission worker whose agency deals with disaster relief.

We learned that the two main sources of current income to Guatemala are from remittances by Guatemalans working in the United States and revenues from tourism. Some of the main problems faced by Guatemalans are lack of education, high unemployment, poverty, problems with illegal drugs, and corruption in the police and the government. Those we talked to seemed pessimistic about their country's future.

After leaving Antigua we drove to the seminary; we passed over mountains which reach an elevation of over 12,000 feet and at places are above the tree line. We went through the City of Xela (also known as Quezaltenango), a very pretty and seemingly prosperous city. The distance from Antigua to San Felipe is about 150 miles.

The Pastor's Conference was led by Rev. Grace Boyer and Rev. Deborah McEachran. The dedication and convictions of the Guatemalan pastors were clear from their discussions. The Conference studied and discussed A Brief Statement of Faith adopted by our Church in 1990, The Theological Declaration of Barmen, and The Heidelberg Catechism. The Conference discussed the possibility of making next year's conference a time to write a confession of faith that attempts to state their beliefs and convictions as they apply to their current life in Guatemala. To me this would be a very positive thing; it would encourage them to make their faith more real and more relevant. Also, I hope it would make the Guatemalan Church more tolerant and less likely to split into factions. The Pastor's Conference was held in a building given to the Seminary by Sam Walton.

After the conference we scattered to visit our individual sister churches. The churches visited in Suchitepequez Presbytery were Jesus El Buen Pastor (Long Creek), Monte Hebron (Hickory FPC), and Monte Horeb (Mills River). The churches visited in Sur Occidente Presbytery were Genezereth (Fairview), Horeb (Brevard-Davidson River), El Arca de Noe (Banner Elk), and El Redentor (Newton FPC).

Being from First Presbyterian Church in Hickory, I was part of a group of four that visited our sister church Monte Hebron, located in Santo Domingo, Guatemala, and its "congregation" Arca de Salvacion, located in La Selva. Our Church gives about 27 scholarships to children from the churches in Santo Domingo and in La Selva.

By luck, we arrived in Santo Domingo just in time to attend the local High School graduation. Two of our scholarship students graduated this year. They were Domingo Socop Tagual and Ruth Aracely Calderon Regil. It was fun to share the excitement and pride of the graduates and their families. After the ceremonies we had lunch with the extended family of Domingo. He was the first person from his family who has finished High School. We were welcomed to the lunch as though we were members of his family. It is satisfying to feel the appreciation that they have for our presence in Guatemala and our small financial help. A relatively small amount of money can make a great difference to people in a poor country like Guatemala.

The next day we visited the La Selva Church and two families that live nearby but in a very remote area. We had to walk a long distance through fields and pastures to find the persons we visited. One of the persons we visited had had polio and was the mother of two of our scholarship students. The other person had many children, one of whom is in a wheelchair due to cerebral palsy.

We asked several Guatemalans if they are more optimistic about the future of their country after their civil war ended in 1996. Generally they said there is such corruption in their police and government and such influence of drug trafficking that they are not optimistic.

Our relationship with our two churches seems strong and worthwhile. Guatemala has a lot of problems. However, they have a rich and interesting heritage. In my opinion their progress is largely dependent on themselves. Our partnership with Guatemala was wisely structured as an equal partnership in which each partner has an equal voice. Our partnership is designed to encourage independence.

I am thankful for having been able to be a member of the delegation. The trip was very refreshing to me and strengthened my commitment to the Mission Work of our Church.

Charles D. Dixon