

# Report of Church Partner Delegation

March 2009

In March, a group of 10 delegates from 6 different churches in Western North Carolina traveled to Guatemala. All had met prior to the trip to learn the basics of the Presbytery's presence in Sur Occidente and Suchitepequez, as well as our responsibilities for this particular visit.

Because there were no specific projects to physically work on, this was essentially a time to meet with the elders of each church, fellowship with the congregations, and to deliver documents, money, and materials.

This simple, 8 day assignment was not really as simple as one might think! Travel to Guatemala and home again consumed two full days. Then each day in between involved the loading and unloading of baggage at each hotel. With 3 bags per person, most weighing close to 50 pounds, this took some time. Then there was the money exchanging, struggles with the Spanish language, and shopping for staples to deliver to each host family, along with a few uncertain moments of waiting to connect with our Guatemalan contacts. Logistics might have been considered taxing, except that our group was comprised of a rare breed of flexible, laid-back, unfrozen-chosen Presbyterians.

Each day had its highlights that we could all probably agree on.

**Monday:** Praying with Ginnie Stevens and Ellen Dozier before boarding our flight in Charlotte; then landing safely that same night, exhausted, but relieved to be greeted by our Presgov driver, Jose.

**Tuesday:** Visiting CEDEPCA to learn more about Guatemala's history and current political situation. Dennis Smith gave a clear and captivating summary that left us hopeful that our purpose was both important and effective. A female Pentecostal minister also spoke about women's issues that various denominations are trying to address. She referenced the parable in Luke 13 of the woman who had been crippled for 18 years. With a single word, "levantate" (get up!), Jesus healed her. The message is one that conveys Jesus' love and respect for women, a message that will hopefully pervade Guatemalan culture.

**Wednesday:** A morning in Antigua. Some of us enjoyed the informative city tour by Elizabeth Bell. Others shopped in the local markets to buy prayer dolls, wall hangings, and other keepsakes. We did our first round of grocery shopping before driving to Tiquisate. We dropped Sue in Palin on the way with her host family. Palin was a small city, but we could see the women washing their clothes in the ravine far below the house where Sue was staying. We all felt concerned for her, since her translator was not present and her accommodations seemed tight. As we would later learn though, she saw Christ at work in her church and community, even at the local mall!

## **Thursday**

We spent the morning at the hotel in Tiquisate, meeting with Edwin Gelista, the Suchitpequez Partnership Coordinator. We dropped Dorothy at her church, *Primitiva*; took Dennis and Nina to Santa Ana, where Nina's partner church *Betesda* is located, and Jim and Randy to San Felipe (*Nueva Esperanza*). The rest of us traveled on to Coatepeque for the evening.

The remainder of the trip was spent in our villages, with the final two days traveling back to Guatemala City and then onto the States. We each had unique experiences to share when we met up. Reports from a few team members are at the bottom of this report. You'll get a very personal viewpoint reading these.

Where did we see Jesus Christ in Guatemala? Well, he revealed Himself through many faces. His zeal shined through Jose's radiant smile each day that he drove us around. His grace protected us on highways as we swerved around trucks, loaded with bark from rubber trees. His peace rested in the smiles of our brothers and sisters in each village and town. His glory echoed from the walls of the concrete-block churches that we worshipped in. His sovereignty lingered in the clouds over the banana and papaya groves. His hope stirred deep in the eyes of children, toting everything from firewood to backpacks to other children. His truth resonated through the laughter, tears, reflections, and questions that we shared; none of which we can fully process, all of which He already has.

We trust that Christ will use our brief time in Guatemala to unveil Himself more clearly to each of the members who traveled there, to those whom we met, and to those here in America whom we share the experience with. May God richly bless this partnership between the churches in the PWNC and those in Guatemala!

## **REPORTS FROM INDIVIDUAL TEAM MEMBERS**

### **Marie Pender**

Now I get it! For years, I had heard Betty Yoder speak about this partnership with *Jesus la Luz del Mundo*; but, I never fully understood it or its significance. When she announced at our Global Missions committee meeting last year that "we" would be traveling to Guatemala in March of '08, I thanked God for answering my prayers to do mission work. He must have chuckled, for it was during this recent week that He showed us that our ministry was more about "submission" than "mission."

Submission of worry---leaving our families and responsibilities for 8 days. They survived, relatively unscathed! Our team, ten delegates from various Presbyterian churches in WNC traveled smoothly and never got too lost or sick.

Submission of purpose---it was not about *us* but them. We delivered Sunday school materials, Bibles, and fabric to the women of the church. For 4 days, the elders walked us from home to home in their village of Sintana, visiting members of the congregation, praying over each family, eating and worshipping with them.

Submission of schedule---going with the flow of Guatemalan time, culture, and language. All are "fluid" indeed. Occasionally Betty would casually announce, "I'm not exactly sure what we're doing or what they're talking about, but let's just go with the flow!" We might sit for two hours visiting, and then out of nowhere a feast of tamales wrapped in banana leaves would come parading out before the women's beaming faces.

Submission of judgment---it is NOT Christ's will for me to question their parenting styles or home maintenance. As a mother of two young children, I really struggled with this. It baffled me that children played by open fires, ate candy all day, and, through littered streets, ran barefoot and unsupervised alongside the chickens and pigs. Ironically, the mothers were astounded that I am not still breastfeeding my two year old and that he sleeps in a 'cage!'

Submission of self---accepting that it is not our talent and our idealistic views to improve their lives, but rather it is *Christ* through us to encourage them in their present circumstances. Our family at *Jesus la Luz del Mundo* appreciate our small financial contributions, which enable 50 children to attend school and provides a modest building to gather for worship. However, they are more grateful for the people from FPC who support them in prayer and come to visit them.

It was humbling to see how dependent on Christ many at our partner church truly are. This was evident in their generosity toward Betty in me, as they treated us like royalty. Many exuded a sincere character of hospitality, offering us more than they could afford in some cases. Also humbling was their open worship and bold praise. Hearing them sing *Unidos Unidos, en tu nombre unidos* (united, united, in Your name, united) still gives me chills.

I was most impressed by the strong sense of community among our brothers and sisters in Sintana. Church seemed to be a safe haven and base for fellowship where they could cast their burdens upon the Lord, rest in the hope of Christ, and sing praises to His holiness. We at First Presbyterian Church have that as well! Regardless of culture, language, or socio-economic status, we *all* can relate to the truth of Christ's unconditional love, once we submit our hearts to Him. He meets us wherever we are; He goes before us and behind; he bridges the gap between the willing souls of his children around the world. God has much to accomplish through these relationships if we are willing to give and receive His abundant love. I hope more members from FPC will be inspired to correspond with our families in Guatemala so as to encourage one another in faith.

### **Sue Grabau**

*The image that stands out in my mind was when I visited the area along the old railroad tracks in Palin. There, along the abandoned tracks, the people known as the "intruders" have built their shanties from scraps of discarded corrugated metal and other materials. The Pocomon Madian church has started a Sunday school there and I visited to meet the children and deliver school supplies. In the midst of this abject poverty was a small, intentional garden - where roses bloomed*

*prolifically! That, to me, symbolized the beauty the people find in life through Christ. They possess a core of happiness, despite their physical surroundings, that exemplifies their belief in God's grace and unconditional love.*

### **Jim Ludwig**

*I must commend Ginnie Stevens for preparing us so completely for our experience, but also teaching us to go with "open hands", allowing the Holy Spirit to work around and through us. Our sister church is called Nueva Esperanza, which means "New Hope", and it epitomizes every aspect of that phrase. This little church reaches out to and helps the community in every way it possibly can. My team partner and I spent 3 days with the elders and people of this church learning about their every day realities and concerns, and their hopes and dreams. They recently purchased property to build a church upon as they now meet in a rented one room space. This was a huge step of faith for this little church, but God is working to make this happen so that they can help their community in new and wonderful ways. At one Saturday meeting, 20 children stood up and told us how the scholarship program was helping them to get an education and change their future. I returned full of gratitude for being able to experience this partnership firsthand and eager to continue working with the program and with our "adopted" church, Nueva Esperanza of San Felipe, Guatemala.*

### **Dennis Stamper:**

On the last evening that Nina Green and I were in the community of Santa Ana Mixtan with the people of Iglesia Presbyteriana Betesda, we were taken to the church to participate in a program led by the women. Not long into the time together, Pastor Jose arrived at the church on his "motor" and spoke with one of the women. She came back into the church, spoke with several others and then announced that we would have the closing prayer.

The women seemed excited and ushered us quickly out and up the road toward the center of the community. They said that there was going to be a "meeting about the river" and that was all that we were told. We all piled into the back of a pick up truck with a number of others from the community and off we sped down the dirt road.

We had been told much about the problems with the river and of the wealthy farmer on the other side whose actions were the major cause of the floods that inundated the community every year or two. We had been told that, in spite of their efforts and appeals to the government, no one seemed to be listening and nothing was being done. We had also been told of the violence in the region (a family member of one of the ladies in the church had been killed in a community not far away the day we arrived) and that Pastor Jose had been threatened because of his work in the community regarding the situation with the river.

We thus were a little apprehensive about just what this "meeting" was about but the women seemed relaxed and in good spirits and had even brought along some children, so we tried to reassure ourselves that everything would be fine.

We arrived at the river where we joined a gathering crowd of equally excited people. We followed Pastor Jose up onto the river bank and walked first one direction and then the other trying to find where the meeting was going to take place. The crowd grew to perhaps 75 to 100 people, as best I can guess. Finally an obviously important man arrived with several other important looking men and they gathered with a few others and began to talk. We were told that the "important man" was the mayor of the district. One of his assistance had a video camera and was recording everything that was said.

When the discussion ended the mayor and his assistants began walking down the river past where Nina and I were standing. We, shall we say, stood out a little. Pastor Jose, who obviously knew the mayor well, invited him over and introduced him to us. He was very gracious and welcomed us.

Then to our surprise the man with the camera, with no warning, turned the camera toward me and asked (in Spanish of course) what had brought us to Guatemala and to the community to Santa Ana. I must admit, I felt a little panicked. I wanted to express concern and support for the people of the community but I certainly did not want to say anything to produce any ill effects for Pastor Jose or for the people of Iglesia Betesda.

**Nina Greene:**

Pastor Jose took us to the meeting he called it a Community Meeting with the Mayor about the river problems.

When we arrived at the bank of the river Jose could not determine where the meeting was being held. Finally the Mayor and his staff arrived. (I think it was his staff, they had the camera) Jose and some of the male community members met with him away from the crowd. It appeared to me that Jose was informing the Mayor of his concerns about the river flooding and about an individual who was cutting down cane that grows on the bank of the river. This cane serves as protection from erosion.

After Jose spoke to the Mayor, Jose then introduced the Mayor to Dennis and me. The man with the camera asked why I was here and asked me to introduce myself. I gave my name and said I was with FPC of Dallas NC and PWNC and that we are a Partner Church to Bethesda in Santa Ana and we are very concerned about the river flooding problems that Bethesda is faced with yearly. This camera man filmed us and thanked us. (Dennis asked them if I could get a picture with the Mayor, they said yes, which the camera man took with my camera). They were very nice to us. Jose and the Mayor as well as all of us then walked down the river bank in the opposite direction to the area where the cane is being cut down. The Mayor, his staff, the men of the community, Jose and the man that owns the property then walked down to where the cane had been cut. It appeared to us that they were having a heated conversation, hands were flying up in the air, hats would come off, heads were shaking. The women and some of the men stayed back, this is where Dennis and I stayed. Sometimes we could hear the conversation, and the group with us would agree and sometimes disagree with what was being said. Dennis

said that Jose informed him later that the Mayor told the property owner that he would stop cutting the cane and if he did not, authorities would step in to make him stop.

All I could tell was that the women and men were excited and seemed pleased with the meeting. After this we all walked back to our trucks, including the Mayor and we left.

The next morning Sunday, Jose informed Dennis that our being there was important, that it showed the Mayor and other officials that someone from the US is concerned about this community and the river problems. Jose thanked us for coming to the meeting.

I'm not sure if this meeting was already planned or if this was one of God's coincidences that I learned about in the studying of Ruth with The Women of the Church in Dallas. All I know is that I'm glad I was there and if my being there helped, praise God.

**Follow up on Dennis' Report:**

*About a week after our return, we received an email with a link to a news article from Guatemala regarding work at the river. The web page included a video of the mayor standing on the bank of the same river with bulldozers in the background dredging the river. The article stated that equipment was being borrowed from a nearby road project (one we traveled through on our way into the village) and that other equipment would soon be sent by the government. Plans were to dredge the river, raise the bank by two meters and reinforce it with stone and concrete.*

*I am joyful and hopeful that the work now being done will finally protect the little community of Santa Anna and the faithful people who have endured such hardships for so long. I do not know if our presence made some difference in making this happen. If so, it was another witness to how God works to use us for good if we will but follow and go when and where we are called and Nina and I are blessed to have been a part of God's plan. Even if our presence had nothing to do with the work now being done, we are still blessed to have been able, if just for that one evening, to stand in solidarity with our brothers and sisters in Christ and participate in some small way in their struggle.*

**Delegates**

FPC, Hendersonville: Betty Yoder, co-leader, and Marie Pender

Newland: Tommy and Cindy Williams

FPC, Dallas: Nina Greene

FPC, Gastonia: Dorothy McKenzie

FPC, Burnsville: Randy Hembree and Jim Ludwig

FPC, Mt. Holly: Sue Grabau

FPC, Hickory: Dennis Stamper, co-leader



# Please Remember in Prayer

Partner Church Delegation to Guatemala

March 24 – April 1, 2008

## The Team requests prayer that:

- ❖ Our sister churches welcome us just as we are, imperfect children of our Savior, and that we become mutual partners in change;
- ❖ Our team travels safely to Guatemala and back;
- ❖ The language barrier melts away and we can communicate with our hearts, making a special connection with our sister churches;
- ❖ Our churches support and pray for us collectively and individually, that they be open to hear what we have to say on our return, and that the Holy Spirit also works in their hearts;
- ❖ Our families support and pray for us and that they are taken care of while we are gone. On our return, pray that they listen to our experiences, be patient with us, and join us in promoting justice among all people;
- ❖ We can let go of our daily stresses and concerns we have about families and business;
- ❖ Finally, our spirits are open to the Holy Spirit's direction, our eyes to see the joy and the needs of our sister churches, our mouths to communicate our concern for their well being, and our hands to greet them and to work for justice for their people.



*Back Row:* Betty Yoder (Hendersonville, First); Tommy Williams (Newland);  
Randy Hembree (Burnsville, First); Jim Ludwig (Burnsville, First); Dennis Stamper (Hickory, First).  
*Middle Row:* Sue Grabau (Mt. Holly, First). *Front Row:* Nina Greene (Dallas, First);  
Cindy Williams (Newland); Dorothy McKenzie (Gastonia, First); Marie Pender (Hendersonville, First).

**The team will be eager to share their experiences in churches or clusters on their return. Contact Ginnie Stevens for more info ~ (vestevens2@aol.com; 828-438-4217).**

# *The Partnership ~*

Presbytery of  
Western  
North Carolina



Presbiterio de  
Suchitepéquez

Presbiterio de  
Sur Occidente

The Presbytery of Western North Carolina has been in partnership (covenant relationship) with Sur Occidente and Suchitepéquez Presbyteries in Southwest Guatemala since 1994. The goals of the partnership are to:

- Mutually encourage one another (Romans 1:12)
- Testify and demonstrate to all the reconciling love of Christ (Romans 12:9-21)
- Help our congregations and pastors gain a better understanding of God's shalom and experience God's abundant life in all aspects of our lives.
- Affirm our integral faith in Jesus Christ

Our intentions are to work as partners in support and mission in our respective countries, to learn from each other, to share our joys and pains, and to appreciate those gifts that each church offers for God's purpose.

As presbyteries we work together in the areas of health and Christian education. 32 congregations in PWNC are partners with 30 churches in Guatemala. This trip allows members of some of the partner churches to get to know each other face to face.