



REFLECTIONS *from* GUATEMALA

SUNDAY

NOVEMBER 13

9:00AM • 11:00AM

November 13, 2022 | Reflections from Guatemala |

23rd Sunday after Pentecost | Romans 12:2

Sarah Day, Nancy Gunder, Jennifer Morgan, Jane Pearson, Carrie Sanders

Melissa Hinz: CEPEPCA

Before I begin our time of reflection, I wanted to point out that one of the photos on the cover of the bulletin – and also on the screen – is a picture of Jorge. Covenant has had a long-standing relationship with Jorge since he came to the US for a kidney transplant as a boy. It was wonderful for Sally and Charlie to be able to connect with him in Santa Domingo and see that he is healthy and learn he is soon to finish with his schooling. One of the many blessings of this trip.

This was Covenant's first opportunity to travel to Guatemala with CEPEPCA, The Protestant Center for Pastoral Studies in Central America (CEPEPCA) It is an educational institution that contributes to the transformation of lives and contexts by providing training and accompaniment, and by offering spaces for reflection to women and men from diverse Christian traditions, communities, and contexts. PCUSA Pastor Betsey Moe and facilitator Esvin Sirin had worked before we arrived to connect with the communities at Coyolate and Santo Domingo to determine ways that we could walk alongside them, working, singing, praying, playing, eating, and sharing together. Our first day in Guatemala included several informational sessions with various speakers. We learned about Guatemalan history, immigration, the Church in Guatemala, and several educational programs focused on empowering women and men run by CEPEPCA. We were all inspired by the people we met and determined to make good use of our time together as we sought to better understand why God had called us, a group of everyday folks, to this time and place. We want to thank you, the Covenant family, for being a part of this ministry, for praying for us, for praying for the people of Guatemala that we were to meet and for allowing us to make this trip so that we might continue to grow in love and understanding of our brothers and sisters around the world. It

truly was a life-changing experience for us, and we want to share some of our experiences with you.

Our first day in Guatemala included a visit to the CEDEPCA offices in Guatemala City and several informational sessions with various speakers. We learned about Guatemalan history, immigration, the Church in Guatemala, and several educational programs focused on empowering women and men run by CEPEPCA. We were all inspired by the people we met and determined to make good use of our time together as we sought to better understand why God had called us, a group of everyday folk, to this time and place. We want to thank you, the Covenant family, for being a part of this ministry, for praying for us, for praying for the people of Guatemala that we were to meet and for allowing us to make this trip so that we might continue to grow in love and understanding of our brothers and sisters around the world. CEDEPCA shared with us a paraphrase of Romans 12:2 We recognize that living toward God's new creation requires a transformation of our minds. This trip truly was a life-changing and transforming experience for us, and we want to share some of our experiences with you.

Nancy Gunder: Guatemala Civil War History (read by Sally Lorenz)

I find myself asking how one can fully recover from the horrors of civil war that raged in Guatemala for 36 years from 1960 to 1996. Like many, I was mostly oblivious to the tragedy that was unfolding in Guatemala.

The civil war began in the 1960's because of economic, political, and social inequalities. In the 1980's, the war became focused on the indigenous Mayan people in the Highlands, who were thought to be harboring and supporting guerillas that took up the fight for human rights in Guatemala. The Guatemalan government and the American multi-national corporation, the United Fruit Company, which owned vast amounts of land in Guatemala, had a long history of oppression of indigenous people not unlike what happened in our own country with first nations peoples. Finding their voice and asking for rights was a long and complicated effort ultimately attracting guerillas who were willing to fight for these rights through violent means.

In response, the government via the military (and with the support of the CIA) intent on squashing communism pursued a scorched earth policy on the Mayan people. Their homes, crops, and animals were burned as they fled into the mountains around them with nothing but the clothes on their back.

We visited a women's weaving cooperative, "Corazon de Mujeres", during our travels, which has been a blessing to many Mayan women as a means of support emotionally, socially, and financially. While there, one woman, Bernarda, shared her personal story of how her village was burned to the ground and they had to flee into the mountains. She was very pregnant at the time and delivered a baby boy in the mountainous forests 6 weeks later only to be shunned by her community because the cries of a newborn could disclose their location. She was advised that the child had to be killed or she had to leave the group. She opted for the latter, leaving her husband and two other children behind only to ultimately survive and reunite with them. About a million indigenous persons were displaced by the war.

My take-away from this experience is that despite the horror and tragedy, hope abounds for a better life even in the most desperate of circumstances. (In fact, hope for a better life is a major driver in today's immigration crisis.) May we continue to support our Guatemalan neighbors as we live into Jesus's message of abundant life, peace, and love for all people through Him. (2:15)

Carrie Sanders: Digging/painting/service work

As I jumped off the bus and surveyed the site where we would be working alongside the wonderful people at Monte Horeb Presbyterian Church, I felt my throat tighten, my stomach start flipping, and my heart starting to race. Before me, I saw pickaxes, shovels, and the start of the trenches for a three-foot concrete foundation. To my right were piles of sand and concrete mix, cinder blocks, and a trailer truck full of large rocks. I sent a quick prayer up, "God, why am I here? What do you have for me to do here?" I also sent a quick text to a mentor of mine, Pastor Marcio Sierra at Lighthouse Church, with a plea for prayer, "Marcio, I am on mission in Guatemala, I am asking for prayers for the work and also to be the hands and feet of Jesus. I am not sure why God called me here."

And with that, I picked up a shovel, alongside my new friends in Coyolate and got to work doing some of the most difficult manual labor of my life. Of course, our hosts handled the work with agility and ease, and patience and kindness. It became clear that my being there was not helping in any real way to finish the construction of a new building that would house a Sunday school and a community kitchen. Again, I sent up a prayer, God....why am I here? Why did you send me?

Meanwhile, I received a response back from Pastor Marcio, "I believe you are

there, with the people that God sent you with, for a purpose. I pray that God's will be done in and through you. I feel like you are there for more than just helping with a building project. You are there to speak into the lives of others."

As I took a swig of water and picked up a shovel, I found myself paying attention to the opportunities to speak into lives of others (and others speaking into my life) that could happen while co-working with the church volunteers from the Coyolate community. The conversations that followed were -- God-breathed. There is no other way to describe it. I found myself so grateful that I had the opportunity to study Spanish earlier this year in immersion school, because it gave me the tools to connect with several people, hearing their stories -- listening, not speaking so much -- and finding myself curious about their lives, their cares, their concerns, their children. All of these conversations happened in the context of working together doing hard (for me) work in community, for a purpose that bonded us in a hard-to-explain way.

The service project in Coyolate was so meaningful for me because it set a beautiful canvas for incredible connections and community to be created, renewed, and strengthened. These conversations showed me how big, how expansive, how beautiful God's community is.

As I headed back to the hotel that night, exhausted, dirty, and so very happy and filled to the brim with God's love, I asked God again, "Why am I here?" And the lyrics from a favorite hymn came right into my heart:

Verse 2 of Here I am Lord, inspired by Isaiah 6:

I, who made the stars of night
I will make their darkness bright
Who will bear my light to them?
Whom shall I send?

[Chorus]

Here I am, Lord. Is it I, Lord?
I have heard you calling in the night
I will go, Lord, if you lead me
I will hold your people in my heart

Indeed, the Lord called me, used the context of service to lead me to these wonderful connections, and I will, forever, hold the people of Guatemala in my heart.

Jane Pearson: Lessons in Health and Healthcare

Dr. Marcy, a local Guatemalan family medicine physician met with us on our first night in Guatemala and gave us an overview about health and healthcare in Guatemala.

- *High infant mortality due to infection and malnutrition

- *Guatemala has state of the art healthcare in certain private hospitals that are only really available to the wealthy

- *18% of the population has access to timely and quality care by being employed by the government.

- *for the vast majority of the population healthcare is fragmented, inaccessible and prohibitively costly. People wait many months for specialty care that is often located a great distance from where they live, and finally when specialty care is provided, more travel and expense may be required to get the appropriate lab or radiologic evaluation and yet another place for medication which is often unaffordable. We met families with diagnosed conditions, but treatments including basic medications, could not be obtained.

Carolyn Lorenz-Greenberg, Sally's daughter, and pediatrician from Vermont, and I worked with several University students from the Monte Hebron church who were in training for various healthcare roles. We helped them learn proper BP monitoring technique and they helped us with figuring out how to deliver care with limited resources—like the finger abscess I was able to drain without a scalpel!

Our clinic was a small room off the courtyard of the church with a curtain and 2 tables and benches inside, on a toasty Saturday afternoon. Carolyn and I had prepared as best we could by hauling medical supplies and a small handful of medicines, we predicted would be helpful. Our CEDEPCA hosts asked us to provide vitamins for kids, adults and pregnant women, pain relievers (Tylenol and Ibuprofen) since these are very expensive in Guatemala and anti-parasitic medications since sanitation and water quality are severely lacking in Guatemala. Each family that we saw received a packet of these basic medicines to take home. But it was definitely a figure-it-out-as-we-go situation and an “all-hands-on-deck operation”. Each of us helped in some way as all the church families received health biometric screenings, like weight, height, head circumferences of

babies, blood pressures, blood sugars followed by a brief visit with either Carolyn or myself in a make-shift semi-private space. We listened to hearts and lungs, and perhaps more importantly, we listened to health concerns, and stories thru a Spanish interpreter—Betsy Moe, a Presbyterian pastor with CEDEPCA served as my interpreter, but was truly my partner in delivering care. Many people talked about situational stress, insomnia, headaches, lots of arthritis pain, migratory abdominal pain due to dietary deficiencies etc. Betsy was an amazing partner as she counseled these people and provided care in a way that I am not trained for. By the numbers here's what we saw:

56 patients seen in 1 afternoon—many waited over 2 hours for their turn

80-90% of babies and children with mild-moderate malnutrition

9 new cases of hypertension

1 new case of Type 2 Diabetes

Several courses of antibiotics given for various infections

1 case of “shock”---I was actually the one in shock when Betsy explained to me that the strapping young man of about 18 sitting before me and appeared extremely healthy had had a terrible shock. Turns out his machete had come into contact with a downed electrical wire while working in the sugarcane field 7 months prior and he was noticing some aftereffects of the electrocution!! Miraculously, he had no serious complications and even more miraculously I was able to somehow recall a couple of helpful things about post-electrocution care and reassured him that complete recovery was likely but may take 1-2 years..

But it was another very healthy appearing, muscular young man of about 17 years who was patiently but anxiously waiting for a word with me while his mother lingered nearby that I will never forget. Betsy translated that this young man had been told to see a cardiologist for a slow pulse and that he had only 3 months to live. I do not know details about where this information came from, or more likely it was what he hears, rather than what was said, but I do know that this young man had no symptoms of any sort, and a completely normal heart exam. We taught him how to monitor his own pulse and assured him of his normal heart exam. His relief was enormous, and his mother hugged us.

At the end of the day, we may not have really delivered much in the way of treatment, but we delivered lots of care.

Jennifer Morgan: Scholarships

Good morning! As you may or may not know, Covenant has provided scholarships for students in Santo Domingo for a number of years. It is not free to go to public schools, so for many children, these scholarships have been a lifeline to education. The Guatemala Auction, which starts soon, is a major part of the fundraising we do in order to provide these scholarships.

While in Santo Domingo, we had the opportunity to meet with some of these students and their parents. It was wonderful to hear where their education was taking them- future agronomists, lawyers, nurses, physical therapists, psychologists and more. They expressed their gratitude for our help in making these achievements possible. But it was moving, and I think very important, for us to hear how difficult it still is for these students. Their struggles to learn include lack of transportation, health problems and difficult family issues. Yet they persist, grateful for the chance, and continue their dream of a future with a job and the opportunity to improve their lives. For one young lady, this meant catching a ride in the back of a pickup truck each day. Later, she had to make sure she arrived at the proper spot in time to catch her return ride home.

One gentleman, pictured here playing guitar for the morning church service, was at our meeting with three of these students. Two were his wife's son and daughter from a previous marriage (the first husband and father had abandoned them). The third was his wife's sister's son, who he had taken in after the father had disappeared and the mother migrated to the US. He was supporting them in their educational pursuits as if they were his own children. The daughter had developed severe anxiety during the Covid shutdown, and he had managed to get her the help she needed, so that in time she could resume her studies.

These were just some of the stories I heard in my small group of students, and I know there are many others with very similar experiences. I am so grateful to have had the opportunity to talk with them, and I encourage you all to remember them in your prayers and continue to support them by bidding in the upcoming auction! Oh, and if you don't want more "stuff", that's ok- a donation will do just fine! Thank you!

Sarah Day: Storytelling

Archimedes said that the shortest distance between two points is a straight line. But, I'm convinced that the shortest distance between two people begins with a

smile and is sustained by the telling and receiving of a story.

Points can be made, and sometimes understood with facts and figures and statistics.

But lives, hearts and minds can be changed when we are given the chance to share our stories with others.

The lucky dozen of us who made the trip to Guatemala were given the incredible gift of hearing peoples' stories.

Of being witnesses.

It felt like the most important thing we did in Coyolate and Santo Domingo was to listen as people shared their stories with us.

It was wonderful to share the act of chopping vegetables with them, or moving some earth with them, or reading a story to them, or assisting with a medical clinic, or painting a room...

And of course being able to sing and pray with them, as they so extravagantly welcomed us to join them in worship...

But, ultimately the act of actually listening, and being witness to their life story felt like the most important thing that we could do...that we could give to them...our undivided attention.

Every story that was told to us was ultimately about love.

Love for family, love for community, love for education, love for God.

And the incredible lengths they went to in order to be able to make the lives of those they love better.

Their generosity of spirit, and their love were the sacred gifts they gave to us.

How blessed we are to have such wonderful brothers and sisters in Christ.