

Second Presbyterian Church – newsletter – July 2008

On June 19, 2008, Second Presbyterian members Susan Brantley, Fred Kirchner, Gregg Hileman, Melissa DuPuy, Bob Goodrich, and Chris Goodrich traveled with Philip Beiswinger (Minister, Southminster Presbyterian Church), Michael Magee (Minister, East Brentwood Presbyterian Church), Doris Rice, and Fran Peebles to Flores, Guatemala, where we met up with Roger and Gloria Marriott to begin the seventh year of Second Presbyterian mission trips to the Peten region of Guatemala. Bob, Chris and Fran were first timers to Guatemala, and the others were veterans. Roger and Gloria Marriott, members of Hillsboro Presbyterian Church, have lived in Coban, Guatemala on and off for the past seven years. Their main goal is to educate Guatemalans in basic accounting procedures; however, they also conduct a variety of other mission activities, including hosting groups like ours. Roger is a late 50s/early 60s gringo with an intelligent eye and a quick smile. Gloria, his softer counterpart, endures the hardships of Guatemala with devotion to her husband and their cause.

We carried Sunday school crafts, Bibles, Frisbees, soccer balls, toothbrushes and fluoride for the Guatemalan villages we were to visit and medical supplies for delivery to American doctors working for Concern America who run a clinic in Las Cruces. Most of Thursday, June 19, 2008, was a travel day, and after arrival in Flores, we met Roger and Gloria. That night and every night of the trip, the group met to share our reflections of the day behind and our hopes and concerns for the day ahead.

Friday was our tourist day. Bob, Chris, Fred, Melissa, Fran, and Doris went to Tikal, a fantastic Mayan ruin in a rainforest in the northern part of the Peten, and the others went to Yaxha, another Mayan ruin. At Tikal, our guide Sam, an “indigenous” (a word often used to describe a non-Spanish speaking person of Mayan descent who has not adopted an urban, Spanish speaking lifestyle), entertained us with fact and lore about the Mayan culture and shared with us the story of his family’s ten year flight to the jungle to escape death at the hands of government hit squads during the country’s long civil war, which began after the CIA-assisted overthrow of the democratically elected pro-land reform government in 1952 and ended in 1996. We were told prior to our trip that it was we who would be transformed by our mission, and hearing Sam’s story was part of our transformation.

Saturday morning we set out for Chinatal, our first village visit, and Zapotal 2, our second visit. Both villages have Presbyterian Churches, previously visited by Second Presbyterian, that are part of the Presbytery of the Peten, which is part of the national Guatemalan Presbyterian Church. To reach these villages, our workhorse van with its awesome driver Caesar left the pavement to challenge pothole ridden dirt roads. Each village came out to greet us with open arms. Beautiful children and skinny, mangy dogs were everywhere. The Chinatal Church was struggling, having lost its minister and having dwindled down to three families. Zapotal 2 was faring much better. The congregation rented plastic chairs for us and placed us in the front of the humble church. We ate together, worshipped together, and played together (with kids running and shouting “Chris, aqui! aqui!”, hoping to get a Frisbee toss or soccer ball kick). Saturday

night we returned to Flores, exhausted after a long day, and reflected on what we had experienced. One of those experiences was the sight, out of our van, of a murder victim lying on the sidewalk surrounded by a crowd in Flores with a sheet thrown over him, except for his tennis shoes, which stuck out of one end of the sheet.

Sunday morning we headed to Nuevo Canaan (on a paved road), where we were greeted with firecrackers, a marimba concert, and a delicious lunch. The Nuevo Canaan church seemed to be thriving, with a cinder block church building under construction, an active Sociedad Femenil (women's group), and talented musicians. After that visit we headed to Sayaxche, which would be our second home base. To get there we crossed the Passion River by ferry. The ferry crossing, which lands at the doorstep of the downtown area, operates non-stop day and night as cars, trucks, bicycles, and motorcycles (one of which carried a family of four) cross the river filled with every type of cargo imaginable. The river front is a noisy hubbub of activity: swimming, bathing, camping, hanging out. Our hotel had a resident parrot and a second story patio that overlooked the ferry crossing. Sayaxche, a center of commerce in a country plagued with violence, is not a place where one wanders around after dark. Although we did not feel threatened, our use of police escorts was a prudent move in a country with no real law enforcement.

Using Sayaxche as a home base, we spent the next three days visiting Valle Nuevo, a village about an hour's drive from Sayaxche. The end of the trip was the most challenging: an unshaded dirt road with standing water ranging from several inches to several feet deep. We sometimes drove (in a truck lurching wildly from side to side, close to tipping) and sometimes walked down this challenging stretch, with mud and water cresting the tops of our boots to slide down our legs and slosh about. The village was a microcosm of life in the Peten for the indigenous. On the front steps of the humble but welcoming church building, we looked out over ground that was pasture, barnyard, playground, and latrine, with dogs everywhere, a male turkey strutting his stuff, ducks, chickens, children playing, horses. A corn grinding machine was cranked up occasionally, with a loud thumping engine and smoke puffing out of the engine's exhaust pipe, which stuck out from the corn grinding hut. Water was available to the community out of a large tank into which poured rainwater from the gutters of an adjacent house.

In Valle Nuevo, we conducted Vacation Bible School, worshipped, played, and ate together. Philip Beiswinger, fluent in Spanish, conducted a three day training session for local ministers, focusing on the sacrament of baptism. The trips in and out were exhausting, and many of us (including your reporter), experiencing various degrees of nausea and fatigue, skipped at least one of the three days and stayed at the hotel to recover. On Wednesday, at the end of the third day, we closed with a joyous worship service. Hanging across the front of the church were over fifty blue spirals, symbolizing the water of baptism, adorned with divine symbols, the beautiful product of Guatemalan children during the Vacation Bible School.

Wednesday afternoon we headed back to Flores to spend the night and fly out the next morning. After Sayaxche, our hotel in Flores, which initially seemed a bit primitive, felt like a five-star hotel (hot water! pizza across the street! a steady stream of

electricity!). We again reflected, humbled but not dispirited by what we had seen and by the difficulty of effecting change in this war-torn country. As predicted, it was we who were transformed.

Bob Goodrich
Second Pres Member