

Blissfield Presbyterian Church's "El Grupo de Guatemala"

In the fall of 2005 Blissfield Presbyterian Church formulated a new objective for international mission when Reverend Carlos Lara of Guatemala visited Blissfield, serving for six weeks as an associated pastor. Carlos lived in the homes of members of the congregation while he ministered, educated and gave the church a dream of mission that came to reality in June of this year.

On June 19th, Pastor Bob Bidwell, Cathie and Doug Case, Diana Maloney, Jana Martin, Peggy Nieman, Neil Sauter, Tracy Strouse, Denny and Linda Thompson flew to Guatemala. Their mission project was designed with the help of the Presbyterian Church USA's International Mission Program. The goals of the team included helping a new Presbytery become established, working on a new church building for Cristo Es El Camino Presbiteriana Iglesia (Christ is the Way Presbyterian Church). Goals also included conducting a one-day Bible School session for children, leading a seminary's theological workshop for pastors and elders, sharing women's issues with Guatemalan sisters, and all the while learning about Guatemalan customs and conditions. Most importantly, the team wanted to simply share their love and friendship with Guatemalan brothers and sisters, demonstrating we all are truly one in Christ.

The group was met at the Guatemalan airport and led across Guatemala by Reverend David Wiseman, a retired Presbyterian minister. David and his wife Jeannene had served a North Carolina church for 26 years before becoming Presbyterian Church USA missionaries in Guatemala less than a year ago.



David and Jeannene took the team to the highland city of Quetzaltenango (commonly called Xela) the second largest city in Guatemala. Only the capital, Guatemala City, is larger. In Xela, the group met members and learned more about the new Presbytery (a group of Presbyterian churches) they hope to join forces with in the future. Reverend Moises Colop of Emanuel Presbiteriana Iglesia of Xela and his wife Brumilda hosted the Blissfield group and explained the history of both the Presbyterian Church in Guatemala (the first protestant church in Guatemala) and the newly formed, five-church, Presbytery. The group was lucky to be part of the cooking and life-skills class taught by Brumilda. They also were

invited to stay for dinner and to share the delicious Pepian (a savory Guatemalan stew) they prepared that day. This church offers the class to *all* women... church and non-church members, indigenous women and even to their Catholic sisters across the street. Unfortunately, Emanuel's ecumenical approach is quite unique in Guatemala.

From there the Blissfield "Grupo de Guatemala," as their name soon became, spent two days working with the small congregation of Cristo Es El Camino Presbiteriana Iglesia. Each day their invigorating 45-minute ride to the village of Monte Margarita (Mount Margarita) in the back of a pickup on, to say the least,



an undeveloped road, was truly an exciting event. There they helped layout the foundation of a small new building, dug holes for footers, and assembled re-rod supports for the cement corners of the building. And each day the team enjoyed the open-fire cooked meals prepared by the ladies of the church. The Blissfield church is hoping to become a “sister church” of “Cristo Es El Camino” church and have already discussed and inquired about a return visit, perhaps as early as next year.



Back in Xela, there was no time to rest as the next day, Saturday, the scheduled Bible School, with “Fishers of Men” as a theme, took place. The kids were treated to a puppet show in the group’s fractured Spanish, banner making and games, all organized by Tracy Strouse, Christian Education Director of the church. Denny Thompson and Diana Maloney (the church’s music director) worked with Emanuel’s young adult contemporary music group who was preparing for Sundays’ worship service. That afternoon, Pastor Bob Bidwell, assisted by Doug Case, taught a three-hour long seminary class on “Organization of a Presbyterian Worship Service” to prospective pastors and elders of the church. Later, Cathie Case and Linda Thompson led an enlightening discussion about “Women in the Guatemala and Blissfield Presbyterian Church”, discovering that both Blissfield and Emanuel have had, or may soon have, female pastors. Again, this practice is quite unique in Guatemala.

Sunday found Pastor Bidwell preaching the sermon at Sunday worship. The Blissfield “Grupo” was very fortunate to have a wonderful translator. Lora Burge, from Washington state, is in Guatemala for a year serving the Presbyterian Church USA as a Young Adult Volunteer and is fluent in Spanish. Denny Thompson played with the contemporary youth musicians and the entire team treated their Presbyterian brothers and sisters to a hymn sung in Spanish. Because of a couple of the group was under the weather with one in the hospital, two more days were spent exploring Xela. Unfortunately, one of the team had developed a problem with a tooth infection brought from home, which spread though her body and became serious enough to require hospitalization. One more of the group made a brief stop at another hospital to get IV antibiotics for typical intestinal problems, which several of the team endured to lesser degrees!

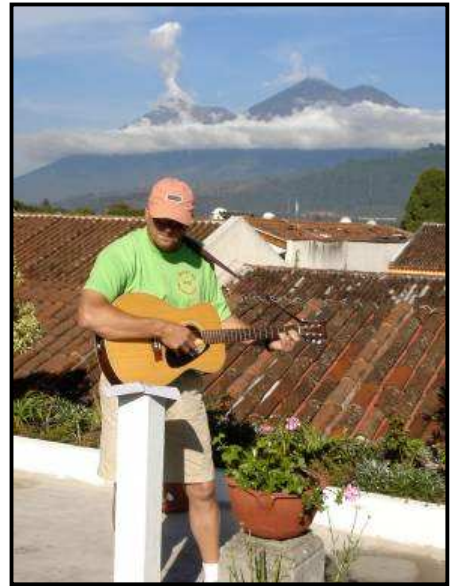
The team was also fortunate to learn more about Mayan Spirituality from Salome Lucas. Salome is a member of the Mayan Kiche Presbytery, an indigenous Presbytery. There are 25 other indigenous Mayan tribes in Guatemala. Salome spent two interesting evenings talking about his native Mayan culture. Salome uses his farm to demonstrate sustainable organic agriculture methods to people throughout Guatemala. His Mayan people practice many of these same methods. He is also an elder in the Presbyterian Church.

From Xela the group traveled to beautiful Lake Atitlan, called by many, one of the 10 most beautiful lakes in the world. And then they were on to Antigua, for 200 years the capital of Guatemala. Antigua lost its capital status after a series of earthquakes in 1773 that caused the capital to be moved to present-day Guatemala City. While in Antigua they visited coffee and macadamia fincas (plantations), saw wonderful Spanish colonial relics, and did a little shopping... all rounding off a truly inspiring international mission experience. This experience is best summed up by these verses of a song penned by Denny Thompson on a beautiful rooftop in Guatemala.

*“As we stand on the rooftop this morn, the sun is shining bright.
The splendor of the beauty here, is such an awesome sight.
The mountains and volcanoes here, help us see God’s love.
The beauty of this world He made, is a blessing from above.*

*We are all God’s people, created by his hand.
In some ways we’re so different, it’s hard to understand.
Guatemalans share His love, this much we know is true.
Our Father loves these people, our Father loves us, too.*

*We came here to serve the Lord; we came to spread His love.
We know we’ve been given, lots of blessings from above.
These people have so little here, but yet I must confess,
They’ve shown us how to worship God, with that we’ve all been
blessed.”*



If anyone would like to hear more about Blissfield Presbyterian’s “El Grupo de Guatemala” mission trip or would like to share their dream, please contact any of the group or email Doug Case, doug@blissfieldpresbyterian.com.