

**Come walk with us ... to God knows where**

## Guatemala churches inspire tour participants

A Central District Conference Reign of God Agrant helped Columbus (Ohio) Mennonite Church and Hively Avenue Mennonite Church (Elkhart, Ind.) cosponsor a learning tour of Central American Mennonite Churches in October.

The tour was centered at SEMILLA, the Latin American Mennonite Seminary in Guatemala City, Guatemala. In that setting, participants learned about the history of Guatemala and the current contexts for ministry. They toured within Guatemala and spent a weekend, including attending a worship service, in a community in El Salvador.

Among the participants in the learning tour were four members of the Hively congregation. The following top 10 experiences and reflections are adapted from their congregational newsletter, *Hively Happenings*.

**1** It was a privilege to learn the history of Guatemala and its people; to learn of the struggle and suffering of the people with such a strong desire to survive and thrive. We were especially touched by the plight of so many children and how hard the people work to survive and find meaning.

**2** Learning about the programs, outreach and influence of SEMILLA (the Anabaptist Seminary) throughout Central America (and into North America) and across a broad constituency (not just Mennonites). 700 people study or train through the seminary in some way in just one year.

**3** Listening to the stories of pastors who have received training through SEMILLA and the influence this training has had on their ministry and theology. Mennonite understanding of a holistic Gospel of peacebuilding takes on a whole new meaning in this context and adds urgency to



Learning tour participants, left to right:

Nina Fox, Abbie Miller, Amanda Rempel, Phyllis Lehman, Clarence Rempel, Winifred Saner, Leroy Saner, Joe Yoder, Ken Neuenschwander, a pastor at SEMILLA, Tim Stair, Jan Stair, Jan Yoder, Delores Nussbaum. CDC members of the group are Abbie Miller, Winifred and Leroy Saner, Tim and Jan Stair, and tour coordinator Charles Geiser (not pictured). Unfortunately, the pastor's name is not known; he ate breakfast at SEMILLA and joined in the photo following the meal.



*The group attended a worship service in Metapán, El Salvador, on the second Sunday of their tour. That Sunday, people who had a birthday in October were invited to the front of the sanctuary and everyone else in the congregation gave them hugs. Abbie Miller (at left), from Columbus Mennonite and Charles Geiser (second from right), tour coordinator and formerly from Hively Avenue Mennonite, were among those receiving birthday hugs.*

seeing its importance in our context.

**4** Seeing first-hand the ministry of Anabaptist churches in impoverished and sometimes violent areas. Often with few resources, these churches are providing education, empowerment (especially to women and children), life enrichment (like music and art opportunities), job training, and life skills training in their communities and neighborhoods.

**5** Seeing the K'ekci' Mennonite Church and hearing from women who are being empowered in leadership and ministry and using their gifts for the betterment of their families and the church, especially when their culture traditionally does not value them.

**6** Seeing the ministry of Deb Byler—member of Hively serving with Mennonite Mission Network (see January issue of CDC's *Reporter*)—in the context of the K'ekci' church.

**7** Visiting the Cloud Community Forest Conservation Center, started by two former Mennonite Central Committee workers, which

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combines creative ecological practices with development and education among indigenous people, especially children and girls.

**8** The hospitality of the people we met, especially from some families and individuals who took us in overnight for one night in their homes in El Salvador.

**9** The beauty of the land, mountains, villages and people.

**10** The group of people with whom we travelled. We had a very thoughtful and supportive group and wonderful leaders, including Charles Geiser (former member and pastor of Hively; former Mennonite Central Committee worker in Latin America), who was the North American coordinator of the tour.

A similar learning tour based at SEMILLA and exploring the history and current ministry of Central American churches is scheduled for October 18-29, 2019. For information about this opportunity, contact Charles Geiser, [geisersemilla@gmail.com](mailto:geisersemilla@gmail.com)

Learn more about SEMILLA in this documentary: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=g3h\\_ILD8jLU](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=g3h_ILD8jLU)