

Learning—and yearning—in Guatemala

"Spirit, bless our souls with yearning," the Central District Conference theme, became a motif of the January learning tour to Guatemala. Eight members of conference congregations spent 10 days learning about the history, culture, challenges, faith and ministries of Guatemala and the Anabaptist churches there. The learning tour was coordinated and led by SEMILLA, the Anabaptist seminary centered in Guatemala City. One goal was to explore a growing friendship between SEMILLA and CDC through this opportunity to see first-hand what God is doing in Guatemala.

Several participants share reflections, stories and photos in this issue.

Rachel Stolpe, CDC Board member, Milwaukee (Wisc.) Mennonite Church,

Share a life-changing, 10-day trip in a short summary? Ok, no small task. Guatemala is so beautiful, green and warm. But I'll save that for another time. I'll also skip specifics and share general impressions and the nuggets.

Besides the scenery and the weather, the people we met in Guatemala were also incredible. They were so warm, welcoming and generous with their time. They told us their stories, and some showed us their churches and neighborhoods. We heard story after story of how they are doing church. Each story was more amazing than the last. In the midst of extreme poverty and violence, their churches are still growing and thriving. Women are leading church in larger numbers, in a country



Sitting with translator Javier Mata (left) at a SEMILLA lunch are learning tour participants (L-R) Anna Yoder Schlabach, Gretchen Geyer, Rachel Stolpe, Julia Gingrich, Cate Desjardins, David Moser and Ardean Friesen. Not pictured: Doug Luginbill.

where machismo is strong. They are also shaping the youth to be leaders of tomorrow. What kept striking me in an odd way was that they kept asking us for our advice. I left feeling empowered by those women risking life and limb to preach and run programs in their churches and neighborhoods. We have so much to learn from them. It might be that these initiatives are life or death for them, quite literally. Here, we are safe and comfortable.

Which brings me to our theme: Spirit, bless our souls with yearning. We don't have the same level of yearning here. We are so comfortable. They see a need, they meet it, and they risk life and limb to do it. Their yearning is a matter of life and death. Ours is not. But maybe the Spirit could bless us with yearning for better lives for them.

Another way to think about yearning is desire. In Guatemala they desire and need change. Everyone we met has hope and plans for improving conditions in Guatemala. Access to safe migration, trauma healing for women, youth leadership, food for the kids and many other initiatives. One person made the analogy that they are a coiled spring ready to jump into action when that window of opportunity opens. That continual preparation keeps them going. They also trust God that the window will open at some point.

I feel that our role with SEMILLA, and Guatemala, could be to help them prepare for that window of opportunity. One pastor said, "God is the God of opportunity and we ask each day, what opportunity is God giving us?"

I am still processing all that I learned and saw in Guatemala. I have not made any major life changes yet. I hope I do. The trip opened my eyes to another world that is doing extraordinary things with nothing but their love of God and the help of the Holy Spirit. My prayer for us, my brothers and sisters, is that we too can feel the pull of the Spirit and be led to make a difference. That the Holy Spirit will bless us with yearning to help them with immediate needs and to help them prepare their coiled springs for when the window opens.

Cate Desjardins, Cincinnati (Ohio) Mennonite Fellowship

Visiting the Alta Verapaz region of Guatemala, where CDC-licensed missionary Deb Byler serves by resourcing and encouraging women's groups, was such a highlight. Before going, so many people at SEMILLA and Mennonite Central Committee looked joyful and envious when we told them we were going to the area to visit the Qeqchi' Mennonite Church. "It's the most beautiful area!" Beautiful it was. And, to be honest, very, very wet. Our hosts and guides called it "the cloudy forest," an accurate description! Mist and green leaves and mountains filled our vision for miles.

Of particular memory was a visit with Sister

Julia, a woman who works with Deb Byler to encourage Qeqchi' Mennonite women and serves as a Women's Coordinator for one of the regions. Sister Julia also helped organize and participate in a recent trauma healing workshop offered to women in the Qeqchi' Mennonite Church. Sister Julia spoke with an extraordinary passion for the

importance of women's groups and women's leadership in the church. She seems to do more work in the church than most American pastors I know, yet isn't paid and is raising a family and supporting her husband, a pastor, as well.

Would that the churches of CDC could embrace the necessity of empowering women for ministry, motherhood, and faithfulness to God's kingdom the way the Qeqchi' Mennonite Church is! The visit was particularly powerful for the five women representing CDC on the trip, each of us knowing innately how important affirmation and support are to raising up women leaders in the church.

Ardean Friesen, Ministerial Committee, Silverwood Mennonite, Goshen, Ind.

"Any message that is not related to the liberation of the poor in a society is not Christ's message. Any theology that is indifferent to the theme of liberation is not Christian theology." James Cone, American theologian (1938-2018)

"Spirit, bless our souls with yearning"
Miriam Webster defines yearning as "a

tender or urgent longing.” I was not really sure what my yearning was before leaving for Guatemala but I knew that I wanted to learn more about the Mennonite church there.

We had the opportunity to worship with several different churches and to meet many church leaders from Guatemala and El Salvador. We learned about the history of the church in Guatemala and specifically the Mennonite church and its history. We heard from Gilberto Flores about the confrontations he has had standing up to the leaders of the country putting his life and his family’s lives in danger. He said the Mennonites “were the wrong people at the right time.”

We also heard about work being done by the churches in the red zones. The red zones are those with the highest crime and poverty. Because of the violence, Yanette and her husband, Alberto, co-pastors of one church, opened up their church so families could use the facility for funerals of loved ones for free.

We were able to worship with Casa Horeb. One of the ministries they have is called Eduvida, a program to teach children and young adults how to read and write. Many children are not able to go to school because their families do not have any money. These children many times end up living on the street and join gangs. Two of the graduates worshiped with us that day.

Gustavo Olivares is 28 years old. He felt a calling and deep desire to help the young people in his community. As a result he quit his job so he could spend his time

teaching young people about God. He works odd jobs in construction to support himself.

As a result of this trip I realized my yearning was the experience of fellowship and worship with those seeking God’s kingdom here on earth. No matter what our context is, we work for peace and justice as required by God.

Anna Yoder Schlabach, CDC President, Assembly Mennonite Church, Goshen, Ind.

We visited the Alta Verapaz region to visit the Kekchi Mennonites, along with Deb Byler, a Mennonite Mission Network worker who has had relationships with the Kekchi Mennonites for many years. We were asked ahead of time if someone from our group would be willing to preach at a worship service at Iglesia Menonita Mounte Sinai in Chimaltenango. Somehow I drew the short



Kekchi women in the leadership development program knelt to be commissioned the Sunday the SEMILLA learning tour participants were present for worship; the CDC members joined in the blessing of these women. See more in the conclusion of Anna Yoder Schlabach’s reflections on page 4.

straw and prepared a sermon, although I was concerned about how my preaching style and content would translate.

We arrived at Iglesia Menonita Mounte Sinai after a day of cold rainy weather and huddled around the kitchen fire where the women were making tortillas and *caldo*, a traditional Guatemalan soup with rice, turkey and vegetables, made very mild for us. After dinner we joined Pastor Thomas and his congregation for worship. We were warmly welcomed and we brought greetings from the conference and sang a few hymns.

Then it was my turn. I shared the story of the wise men's journey to find the Christ child. I said that in addition to the traditional gifts they brought, they also brought gifts of curiosity, courage and intuition. Unfortunately, in the Kekchi language, there is no direct translation for the word curiosity. So, I'm not entirely sure what kind of a sermon they heard, though Deb Byler translated valiantly. And I do believe the Holy Spirit was present in translating the intent of my message, if not the literal words: each of you have gifts to share and we never know the ripple effects our journeys will have.

Afterwards, there was a special commissioning for women in the congregation who were serving in a women's ministry group, and our group was invited to come up and lay hands on them and pray with them. That moment was very meaningful as we saw the ways that women's leadership is being formally encouraged and supported.

Julia Gingrich, Eighth Street Mennonite Church, Goshen, Ind.

As I continue to synthesize the stories and experiences of our Learning Tour, I often return to these words from Psalm 85: "Steadfast love and faithfulness will meet; righteousness and peace will kiss each other. Faithfulness will spring up from the ground, and righteousness will look down from the sky."

These are the words that Olga Piedrasanta recited as we shared a conversation in the courtyard of SEMILLA. In the short time that we had together, Olga shared generously about her lifelong work as a therapist, theologian, professor and church leader. Her ministry has been one of accompaniment. Following three

decades of war, Olga accompanied families to the sites of mass graves, standing with them through the process of exhuming and identifying the remains of their loved ones. Olga also tended the wounds of war by helping to reunify family members who were separated from each other in the unfathomable chaos of it all.

Reflecting on her work, Olga acknowledged the deep pain and profound heartbreak of facing this collective trauma. But over the years, she has remained convicted that "the work of healing is always the work of God." Olga witnessed the healing power of God on the day when a child was reunited with her family following years of separation. She described the celebration that broke forth with the music of marimbas and the colorful bursts of fireworks! Olga remembers this as an unforgettable moment when "Righteousness looked down from sky."

I am so grateful for the opportunity to have met Olga and so many others who are courageously facing the hard realities of this world, but who are living according to the vision of a new world where "justice and peace will kiss each other." Knowing that we cannot work toward this vision on our own, I'm excited to see how an emerging partnership with SEMILLA will empower us all to undertake ministries of accompaniment and solidarity, in our own communities and across whatever borders God is calling us. ☪



Olga Piedrasanta and Julia Gingrich

Doug's Mug: A taste of home

by Doug Luginbill, Conference Minister

In the dawn of the new day, after eight of us representing eight different CDC congregations arrived at SEMILLA in January, I looked out from the balcony of Casa Emaus and took in the beauty of the gardens below. I breathed in the fresh, cool morning air, listened to the song birds and watched the hummingbirds flit among the hibiscus.

Suddenly I had a strange feeling of being "home." How could this be? I was in a foreign country, a different culture, among strangers. The garden, with its tropical plants, was very different than the view from my home-office window overlooking my dormant garden. The horizon, with its mountains and volcanic peaks, looks nothing like Bluffton. Seventy-five degrees in January is certainly not Ohio! The tortillas frying on the stove and the strange-looking fruit in the basket are not familiar in my home.

So, why a sense of "home" in the midst of this place I'd never been before?

In the spring of 1984, when a student at Bluffton (College) University, I participated in a two-month cross cultural trip to Nicaragua and Costa Rica. It was a transformative experience as I learned about the history of conquest, capitalistic exploitation, new ways of reading scripture and recognizing my own privilege. It was in this setting, as I wrestled with injustice and poverty, that I claimed non-violence as a personal faith commitment rather than a legal position of my faith tradition. As I heard pastors and professors connected with SEMILLA

tell their stories of faithfulness, this college experience came back to me.

Hearing pastors and professors clearly articulate an Anabaptist understanding of Christian faith was another reason I felt right at home. Most Anabaptists in Latin America have experiences in other faith traditions—

Catholic, Pentecostal, Evangelical. They have chosen the Anabaptist way of understanding faith and interpreting scripture because, as several of them stated, "it feels like a more holistic faith that takes the teachings of Jesus seriously and claims non-violent justice-making."

Of the people we met while in Guatemala, most were complete strangers. Yet their gracious hospitality, trust, openness and kindness were as if we had known each other for years. We were well cared for. A common faith tradition and gracious hospitality have a way of breaking down barriers and quickly building relationships.

The eight of us from CDC, from eight congregations, learned to know each other and our congregations in new and more meaningful ways. While each congregation represented has its own culture and missional experience, we found many common ministries and foundational beliefs. One of our priorities as a conference is "supporting missional partnerships that make God's reign visible and fostering ministries of evangelism, peace, healing and hope." The trip to SEMILLA seemed to fit this aspect of our mission very well.

I continue to savor the experiences, feelings and relationships of the CDC SEMILLA learning tour and yearn for this experience to continue to transform me and others among our CDC home. ☺



Doug Luginbill, wearing a SEMILLA stole, and Ingrid Elias, the SEMILLA guide for the learning tour.



View of the SEMILLA garden.

Financial report

February 29, 2020

Year-to-date contributed

support \$146,398

Year-to-date plan \$152,417

Difference between giving and plan -\$6,019

Year-to-date expenses \$141,364

Year-to-date plan \$156,617

Difference between expenses
and plan -\$15,253

The above report shows that we are slightly behind in contributed support compared to budgeted income, but this is typical for this time in the financial year. Our expenses are well under the spending plan figures for the year to date, and overall CDC year-to-date income is about \$5,000 above expenses. As always, we are grateful for continued faithful congregational and individual giving.

Report provided by Timothy Lind conference treasurer

Installation



Matt Pritchard (center) was installed as elder at Berea Mennonite Church, Atlanta, Ga., on February 9. Elizabeth, his wife, (to Matt's right) and Matt are surrounded by members of the congregation for a blessing.

Licensing



Jan Croyle was licensed for Specific Ministry as Interim Pastor at First Mennonite Church in Wadsworth, Ohio, on March 8. Jan is a student in Journey: A Missional Leadership Development Program.

News notes on mission workers

Eric and Kelly Frey Martin, members of Silverwood Mennonite Church, Goshen, Ind., reflect on their three years in Colombia with Mennonite Mission Network in a feature on the Network's website. Read the feature: www.mennonitemission.net/news/Transformed-by-Colombia

Deb Byler, Mennonite Mission Network worker in Guatemala and member of Hively Avenue Mennonite Church, Elkhart, Ind., offers spiritual direction to Kekchi women, a new concept for them. Read what she's learning: www.mennonitemission.net/news/Spiritual-direction-in-Kekchi-context-brings-mutual-growth

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Email: cdceditor@gmail.com

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Central District Office:

Doug Luginbill, conference minister

Emma Hartman, administrator

1015 Division St., Goshen, IN 46528

Toll-free: 800.662.2264

Phone: 574.534.1485

Email: office@mcusacdc.org

Web: www.mcusacdc.org