

A Report on the CDC SEMILLA Learning Tour January 16-26, 2020

Eight people participated in the first CDC SEMILLA Learning Tour on January 16-26; Anna Yoder Schlabach (pastor at Assembly, Goshen), Rachel Stolpe (CDC Board Member and member of Milwaukee), Ardean Friesen (Ministerial Committee chairperson and member of Silverwood, Goshen), David Moser (pastor at Southside Fellowship, Elkhart), Gretchen Geyer (member of Columbus Mennonite), Julia Gingerich (pastor at Eight Street Mennonite, Goshen), Cate Desjardins (CDC licensed chaplain from Cincinnati) and Doug Luginbill, conference minister. Here are some reflections:

- We were shown **incredible hospitality** and experienced a very full and well-coordinated schedule that included: meetings with SEMILLA staff and students including Rachel and Loren Johns; pastors of both conferences of Mennonites in Guatemala as well as El Salvador; MCC and MMN staff including Deb Byler who is ordained in CDC (Hively Avenue Mennonite Church); two congregations (one in Guatemala City and the other among the K'ekchi community); visits to partner agencies of MCC, MMN and congregations; visits to historical sights and cooperatives; seven zip-lines, free coffee samples, three movies, two boat rides, a sauna and a kayak excursion.
- The **stories of faithfulness in the midst of adversity** were moving, humbling and inspiring. Most of the Mennonite pastors aren't paid, yet are able to provide tremendous leadership in their congregations and communities.
- We were impressed by the way the pastors and students were able to articulate **Anabaptist core values** with passion and conviction. They are able to see the unique gifts they have to offer to their communities even though non-violence, justice and active peace-making stand in stark contrast to the Guatemala City culture. **Our faith was strengthened** through their witness!
- SEMILLA, MCC and MMN are each committed to **empowering, supporting and nurturing women in ministry**. Many were moved to tears when, at a Tuesday evening worship service, six K'ekchi women were commissioned to serve the broader church. It was a movement of the Spirit that Anna Yoder Schlabach preached a beautiful sermon that affirmed God's generous gifts to all God's people. Many women came up to Anna afterwards and expressed appreciation.
- Privilege, racism, sexism, patriarchy, USA power, climate change, roots of migration and other evils were seen and experienced from a different vantage point. **This was indeed a "learning tour."**
- Strong and positive relationships emerged between the eight participants representing eight different CDC congregations.

During several times of reflection, there were strong affirmations of SEMILLA and the experiences we had. There was also strong affirmation for continuing to build the relationship between SEMILLA and CDC. Opportunities for continuing to nurture the relationship include:

- Inviting a Guatemalan Mennonite pastor to an Annual Meeting and having them preach and participate in a seminar
- Continue offering CDC Learning Tours.
- Recruiting volunteers to fill the positions Rachel and Loren are holding. (This would best be coordinated through MMN or MCC.)
- Providing links to videos and resources about SEMILLA and Guatemalan Mennonite Churches and

agencies on our CDC web page.

- Promoting Spanish language study for CDC pastors and others in CDC. (Both online and at SEMILLA.)
- Providing scholarships for SEMILLA students for room, board, books, travel expenses, etc. (SEMILLA doesn't charge for tuition.) Receive an offering at Annual Meetings to help support this.
- Encouraging sister-church relationships between CDC congregations and the congregations SEMILLA serves.

In late March we learned that travel restrictions put in place because of COVID-19 has created considerable financial hardship for SEMILLA. In a March newsletter, it was reported, *"Seminary classes have had to be cancelled as borders in Latin America have closed, and North American groups have cancelled their plans to participate in CASAS programs as well as stays at the Casa Emaús guesthouse through July. Both CASAS and Casa Emaús provide important revenue for SEMILLA, so these cancellations create significant losses for all of its programs. In the meantime, SEMILLA is doing everything possible to reduce expenses, but help is still needed to sustain minimal operations during this time."*

In response, CDC provided a \$1,000 gift to SEMILLA from our Jubilee Fund.

Doug Luginbill, Conference Minister