

A BRIEF INTRODUCTION TO GUATEMALA

Guatemala is the third largest and the most populous of the 5 Central American countries, which include El Salvador, Honduras, Nicaragua, and Costa Rica. Guatemala covers 42,042 square miles stretching between the Pacific and Atlantic Oceans and is approximately the size of Ohio or Tennessee. Spanish is the national language, however 22 Mayan languages are also spoken, and those are divided into more than 100 dialects. The country is divided into 22 departments (states), each with its own capital, and into a total of 331 municipalities (counties).

Guatemala City, with an elevation of 4,800 feet, and a population of 4-5 million people, has been the national capital since 1776.

The name “Guatemala” is believed to come from a Nahuatl (Mexico) word “Coactl-moct-lán”, meaning “Land of the the Snake-Eating Bird”, i.e. the eagle. This later declined into “Coactemal-lán” (land of forests) and from there into “Guahtemal-lán”, the term used by the Mexican Tlaxcal Indians who accompanied Spanish invader, Pedro de Alvarado, upon his entry into Guatemala in 1523.

Guatemala was already home to the Mayan people when the Spanish conquerers arrived. The extensive Mayan civilization had developed a calendar so accurate that it only needed to be adjusted once every 52 years; also developed was the concept of the “zero”. The mythology, traditions, and history of one of the Mayan groups, the Maya Quiché, including the chronology of their kings down to 1550, are related in the *Popol Vuh* (The Sacred Book of the Ancient Maya Quiché). By 1610 approximately 90% of the Mayan population had died, due either to forced labor, assassination, or the diseases which the Europeans had brought with them.

Two Guatemalan have the distinction of being Nobel Laureates: Miguel Angel Asturias won the Literature award in 1967 for the book, *El Señor Presidente*, and Rigoberta Menchú was awarded the Peace Prize in 1992. Her life story is recorded in the book, *I, Rigoberta Menchú*.

Guatemala, with its volcanoes, mountain lakes, pine forests, steep cornfields, colorful markets, and ancient Mayan sites is one of the most beautiful countries in the world. Its beauty can mask the poverty and suffering of the majority of its people. More than half the population are Mayan Indian. Since the coming of the Europeans, Mayans have been gradually pushed off the best lands and marginalized in all areas of life – land, housing, health, education, and employment.

Since the mid-1950s, successive military governments resorted to brutal oppression of dissidents, climaxing in the “scorched earth” policy of the army in the early 1980’s. Hundreds of Mayan communities were wiped out. Tens of thousands of people were killed, disappeared, fled to Mexico, or were internally displaced. Numerous Presbyterians were killed, widowed, orphaned, or displaced during this time, though Catholics took the brunt of the repression.

Six years of negotiations between the government of Guatemala and the insurgents led to the signing of peace accords on December 29, 1996, opening the possibility of a new era for the Guatemala people. Though leaders are once again democratically elected, many challenges remain in this country that has been traumatized by so many years of war. These challenges include: government corruption, institutionalized injustice, poverty, street crime, and violence.

The National Evangelical Presbyterian Church of Guatemala (IENPG) had its beginnings in 1882 as the result of efforts by US Presbyterian missionaries. The Synod of Guatemala is divided into 23 presbyteries. In recent years the main growth of the church has been among the Mayan people, and some of their leaders have assumed strong leadership roles in working for the rights of their people.