

## Heartland & Maya Quiché: Partners

In the early eighties the civil wars going on in Central America were in the headlines constantly. We heard of incredible suffering in Nicaragua, Honduras, and El Salvador. We also began to hear that much of the struggle came from new awakenings among the poor that had arisen, amazingly, out of small Bible study groups. Some of these were outgrowths of Vatican II and the role of some priests and others were enlivened by what came to be known as liberation theology. The poor were discovering that they mattered, that God was the God who liberated slaves and cared for the poor.

We also heard that many of these poor sisters and brothers were suffering terribly as concerns for the poor were labeled "Communist inspired" and believers were being persecuted and "disappeared" without trace. In 1984 a number of members of Heartland Presbytery journeyed to Costa Rica hoping to receive a "gift of new eyes" to see and understand. That did happen and a Central American Task Force was organized and six more trips followed with Heartland people meeting a variety of church and community folk as well as government spokespersons in Nicaragua, El Salvador, and Honduras.

After such wide and varied exposure there was strong desire to begin a deeper, continuing relationship with Central American sisters and brothers, preferably Presbyterian, who were living out their faithfulness in circumstances and settings very different from our own. That desire took us to Guatemala to become acquainted with folk from the National Evangelical Presbyterian Church of Guatemala.

In April 1991, we made our first visit to meet members of the Maya Quiché Presbytery. The Quiché are one of 22 indigenous Mayan groups that, together, comprise something like two-thirds of the population of Guatemala. Right from the first, we felt God leading us toward a partnership with these Quiché sisters and brothers, who now have 21 congregations centered around the highland city of Quetzaltenango. We and they agreed that this would be a different kind of relationship. It would not be one of gringos traveling far to do something to or for them. Rather, it would be a partnership of sisters and brothers in Christ, sharing our faith, our worship, our lives.

Since 1992 a group from Heartland has gone every year to spend a week or so with Maya Quiché folk, and groups of youth, women, elders and pastors have returned those visits to be with us in Heartland. This year two elders, Mario Barrios and Miguel Angel Itzep, both members of the Maya Quiché Presbytery's Executive Committee, are visiting us, and we welcome the opportunity to hear from them and get to know them better.