

HEARTLAND PRESBYTERY / MAYA QUICHÉ PARTNERSHIP HISTORY

The inspiration for seeking a partnership with a Central American community came out of the experiences formed when Heartland Presbytery participated in the Gift of New Eyes programs of the 1980s. Heartland's first trip to participate in this experience was in 1984 with a trip to Costa Rica. Other trips included Nicaragua, El Salvador, and Honduras. On these trips we witnessed the extreme poverty and oppressive governmental realities these people were living under and to whom our mission efforts were directed.

We worshiped with poor communities, base catholic communities, Baptist communities, and Pentecostal communities. We visited American embassies and talked with embassy staff, visited refugee camps in El Salvador, refugee farming communities in El Salvador, talked with refugees from the civil war in Guatemala, heard from Central American chamber of Commerce representatives, were given interviews by Sandinista congress persons, and department heads, visited cooperative farms in El Salvador and Nicaragua, and heard from leaders of various denominations in Central America. The economic and political reality for the majority of people in those country was very different from the official governmental views, including those views of U.S. representatives.

We found a very vital, spiritual, religious community whose faith was what kept them alive and filled with hope in the face of severe persecution. We coveted that spiritual maturity for our congregations. Many persons who went testified that their lives had been changed forever, just by visiting those countries and meeting those people.

Since Guatemala was the only Central American Country to have a national Presbyterian Church, we sought a trip to Guatemala to get to know the church and political and economic situation there, and to find out if there was some sort of permanent relationships that could be established. We discovered that the World Wide Ministries Division was promoting just such partnerships.

Our first trip to Guatemala to search out a possible Partnership was in 1991. CEDEPCA, one of the mission projects supported by the PCUSA regularly hosted and led groups. Rachel Lausch was our leader. We learned of the historic division between Ladino churches and indigenous churches, visited poor communities, and ladino churches in and around Guatemala City, and toured the central highlands Maya Quiché churches and some Presbytery pastors.

Our sentiment was unanimous: We felt a connection with the Maya Quiché churches. After returning home we decided to pursue a Partnership with the Maya Quiché Presbytery through the World Wide Ministries Division and wrote a proposed partnership agreement. Since the Maya Quiché Presbytery did not have a partnership we were encouraged to meet with their Presbytery Council. We did so in 1993 and 1994 and finally in 1995 had developed with them a Partnership proposal and signed it at their April Presbytery meeting. It had been approved by Heartland previous to our going.

One of the big concerns voiced by the Presbytery Council was to make sure that the U.S. churches would not come in, try to tell the Presbytery how to run things, or give special money for specific churches to hire persons and focus on mission programs designated by the U.S. Churches. This had happened previously and caused a big split in one of their churches and even involved the Maya Quiché Presbytery in a law suit.

Mutuality then became a hall mark of our agreement. Heartland Presbytery has sponsored at least one trip to Guatemala each year since then. We usually visit individual churches and their communities. We spend a day and join in worship with them. On several occasions we have made the trips when the Maya Quiché Presbytery is meeting.

We sponsored a special trip of Heartland Women so they could meet with the Maya Quiché Presbyterial and the Synodical. The Maya Quiché Presbyterial had never joined or attended the national Synodical. But since our group attended the Synodical the Presbyterial did so as well. That turned out to be a historical occasion and the Presbyterial returned and recommended that they join the Synodical.

Heartland Women then invited the Maya Quiché Presbyterial to send representatives to our Presbytery to attend fall regional meetings and to attend the Mid-America Women's synod meeting being held here in Kansas City.

One of our yearly travel groups attended a meeting of the Maya Quiché Youth and subsequently invited and paid for 4 of their young people to come to our Presbytery for a tour of our churches and mission projects. In 2000 we sponsored 2 young women to tour our Presbytery and to attend the Triennial convention in Indiana.

We have also sponsored three other trips for Maya Quiché Officers to come to our Presbytery. We often have their visits coincide with our Presbytery meeting. During the last trip we renewed the Partnership Agreement at the Heartland Presbytery meeting.

During the Year of Latin America, that is promoted through the Year book of Mission, we raised over \$5,000 and gave it to the Maya Quiché Presbytery for their use. One use was to add a classroom and a kitchen to one of the churches we had visited. Another special gift was in response to the devastation to communities and churches and individual within churches caused by a hurricane. We raised \$37,000. We received a full accounting of the use of those funds, down to the last centavo.

In addition we as a Presbytery have given from \$2,000 a year - occasionally up to \$5,000 a year -- to the Presbytery to help them with Presbytery expenses. Some of those expenses have been to help poor pastors travel to Presbytery meetings or committee meetings. At one meeting with the Presbytery Council, the elder President said with a quavering voice, "You are God's angels to us. Without your help we could not operate as a Presbytery."

The Heartland Presbyterian Women have also given special donations to the May Quiché Presbyterial. At the Presbytery meeting the President gave an emotional 5-minute thank you speech, again referring to our women as "God's angels to the Presbyterial."

Time and time again we have had trip participants return and say their lives had been changed forever. One of the youth who made the trip in 1994 and

who has become a lawyer, worked during her years in pre-law and law school with migrants in Florida and assisting with legal issues and has become fluent in Spanish.

--prepared by John Hart, July 2009