



February to March 2022

Guatemala Report

By Sandra Lopez, Partnership Coordinator for the Americas

Guatemala is a land of great beauty, a land of mountains and volcanos. It is a land steeped in indigenous traditions and a growing number of believers in Christ. It is also a land with high levels of violence, poverty, inequality and frequent natural disasters. The National Evangelical Primitive Methodist Church in Guatemala (*IENMPG*) is one of a growing number of evangelical churches in the country, offering holistic support to its communities.

This is my second time in Guatemala. During my visit in 2019, I was given the chance to visit the community affected by the volcanic explosion in Esquintla. At that time, a solidarity grant from the World Mission Fund had given the church the opportunity to support affected families. Now, in 2022, I was able to visit communities affected by hurricanes Iota and Eta in the Quiché department, who had also received help from international partners through the *IENMPG*.

World Mission Fund supports hurricane affected families in the Quiché department



The Balcazar family and Pastor Antonio Cordoba (second right)

When hurricanes Iota and Eta struck Guatemala in November 2020, several partners, including the Methodist Church in Britain, rallied to support communities affected by flooding, landslides and huge boulders hurtling down the mountains that destroyed many homes. As British Methodists, your kind donations were spent on immediate humanitarian relief for those who had lost everything in the hurricanes. UMCOR, The Methodist Committee on Relief, sent donations for building materials. Our guide, Methodist Pastor Antonio Cordoba,

introduced us to a number of affected families such as the Balcazar family. Their home had been completely washed away by the landslides caused by the hurricanes, but with

the help of funds from our World Mission Fund and UMCOR, they were able to get humanitarian relief and obtain material to rebuild their home. They are a large extended family, with 12 people living together. They asked me to thank the donors whose generosity had helped to buy food and materials that were distributed with the help of the National Primitive Evangelical Methodist Church in Guatemala.

In the town of Cunén, a three hour car journey from San Cotzal, I met Revd Alejandro Perez and his son Victor Perez, who serve the local Methodist Church. Together, they mobilised support given by UMCOR and the Methodist Church in Britain to help the hurricane-affected communities further up the mountain. The photo will show you just how much debris there still is and where huge boulders that were dislodged by the hurricanes came hurtling down the mountains, crashing into homes and vehicles. The communities are very grateful to the Methodist Church in

Guatemala for delivering immediate humanitarian aid and relief thanks to the solidarity grant from the World Mission Fund, and were equally grateful to UMCOR for providing materials to rebuild their homes. Victor Perez made trips to visit these remote communities with a tuk tuk!



Rocks and debris that hurtled down the mountain during the hurricanes



Victor Perez and his tuk tuk

Marks of 36 years of civil war

The Guatemalan Civil War ended in 1996 and lasted for 36 years. Revd Alejandro Perez lived through the war as an adult, his son, Victor Perez, as a child. They shared harrowing stories of atrocities committed by both sides of the civil war, but also testimonies of the goodness of God and how of protected and preserved them through this terrifying ordeal. To read about their experience please access this blog post I wrote during my visit:

[The Guatemalan Civil War | Global Relationships \(wordpress.com\)](https://www.globalrelationships.wordpress.com/2020/07/01/the-guatemalan-civil-war/)

Guatemalans still feel the effects of the civil war. The fact that many Guatemalans in rural areas do not speak Spanish or speak little Spanish is a testimony of the quiet resistance of the people against the power of the Spanish landowners and elites who attempted to wipe out indigenous culture and language.

But Pastor Alejandro and Victor testified that God's healing power had been glorified in that many people had been reconciled to God through Christ after their experience of the civil war and also in their relationships with their neighbours.

Meeting with the Executive Committee

It was a joy to meet with the Executive Committee of the Church during my visit. There are 12 members on the Committee, living in different parts of the country. Unfortunately, only a handful were able to travel to meet with me in the head office in Quetzaltenango. Several members, including the interim President, Revd Tomas Riquiac, had COVID at the time.

We spoke about several issues, including lamenting together the death of President Adán René de León who sadly passed away last year from COVID. We remembered him fondly and thanked God for all the work he had done for the church, not least in pushing the church towards greater financial controls and accountability.

Other issues we spoke about include:

- The ongoing need for theological education for Guatemalan Pastors. This includes the need to offer basic literacy to several Pastors who have not yet completed their primary school education and therefore are not yet able to formally study theology. Some Pastors have joined local seminaries but there is no teaching of Methodist doctrines and foundations at these. The United Methodist Church's General Board of Global Ministries and General Board of Higher Education continues to sponsor some Guatemalan students on a Course of Study, delivered by lecturers from Duke University.
- The need of the church to tighten its financial controls and strengthen accountability in light of recommendations from a recent audit on the last four financial years.
- The upcoming invitation in September 2022 to invite the church to apply for a one-off capacity-building grant to support the church's journey to self-sustainability. We explored the various forms this application could potentially take, including income generation, training for key staff in financial and administrative roles and theological education.

Methodist Women in Guatemala

One of the joys of visiting partners is meeting women from the churches and organisations we work with. When I met with the Federation of Methodist Guatemalan women (*COFENAM*), the scripture of the virtuous women in Proverbs 31 came to mind several times as I heard them talk about some of the difficulties they face as Guatemalan, Christian Methodist women.

Proverbs 31 is a personal reminder of the great potential that God has placed in each and every women to be and do many things in life for God's glory. I saw much of this potential reflected in the Methodist women I met with as they shared some of their testimonies of life and of overcoming great difficulties. Women in Guatemala are expected to and feel compelled to marry when they are young, even as young as teenagers. By society's standards in Guatemala, being a married woman gives them a certain status that they would not otherwise be able to obtain on their own merits. This became apparent to me one day when I spoke to a Guatemalan father who had two sons and two daughters. He told me that the sons wanted to study and earn a good living. His two daughters were mainly focusing on getting married. A very stark contrast between the expectations and aspirations of young men and young women in the country.

The Methodist women also shared that the pandemic had hit families and incomes very hard. The women were not able to go out and sell their goods and services because of the lockdown and life in some families became untenable because of domestic abuse. Some women increasingly turned to alcohol as a comfort. Connecting with one another during the lockdown was challenging-many women did not have sufficient data on their smartphones to connect to Zoom meetings. The annual Conference could also not take place in 2020 or 2021 because of COVID.

But there were also testimonies of how the women had rallied together and got themselves organised, supporting one another during the pandemic, enabling one another to connect to frequent Zoom meetings, helping each other financially and materially during times of need.

The women were very much looking forward to their annual conference this year in December, where over 100 women from all over the country would journey to the area of Chichcastenango and stay at the Methodist Guest House located there. Many of the women would be travelling with their children, which would be the only way in which to obtain permission from their husbands in order to attend this important event. *COFENAM* representatives told me that not only do they minister to the participants during the Conference, but also to their children, thereby reaching a new generation with the Good News of Jesus Christ.



Local Church Communities



Members of the Quiegel community



Members of the Chontala community

At various points during my visit I had the opportunity to visit a number of church communities. These church communities were in several different locations, they were all indigenous churches and at times did not have a church building to call their own. On one memorable occasion, I was driven to the Quiegel community in the province of Chichicastenango. There, the church had outgrown its existing building, growing from 45 people to 130! We met on the land they had bought where they hoped to build a new church building with the support from Volunteer in Mission Teams from the United Methodist Church. Another church, the Chontala community, was a church with 100 members. Here, as in several other churches, Quiché is spoken and some cultural practices within indigenous culture are

promoted. I got a sense of great pride and care being taken by our Guatemalan brothers and sisters in preserving their indigenous languages and customs but also a concern that many of the younger people were losing their knowledge of their native languages and were allowing Spanish to become the dominant language and American influences the dominant culture.

Conclusion

The *IENMPG* is a church that is growing in membership and provides a holistic ministry of pastoral care and social support to its communities. While it may not be able to heavily lean on its own funding for responding to local needs, it is a church that is experienced in mobilising support during times of disaster and has the logistical knowledge and experience it requires to distribute the donations of overseas partners effectively and efficiently. It is a church that is affirming of the culture and language of its indigenous communities and it is seeking to become a financially sustainable church, with the support of partners such as the Methodist Church in Britain.

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