

Guatemala 2012

Welcoming, mountainous, green, amazing, friendly, contrasts, colour, smiling faces, poverty, beautiful, volcanoes, and did I say welcoming. These are words that echo some of the thoughts of the team as we arrived in Guatemala. The first visit of a team from the Methodist Church in Ireland to Guatemala was one of a little apprehension, anticipation and intrigue. This was a visit to a church that we had much to learn from as it was growing by three congregations a year and we were here to receive as much as give.

The visit was organised to involve two elements. Firstly a visit to a project supported by WDRF of MCI and Christian Aid called Bethania in Chiquimula and secondly to meet with, learn from and share with the youth leaders of the church in Guatemala (Joven Organizada en Sociedad Evangelica Metodista Nacional – JOSEMN).

Bethania is a clinic that provides various medical types of support including general practitioner services, dental care, pharmacy and a small clinic to help families who have malnourished children. The clinic can accommodate 16 children as well as a few adults and its busiest time is in April/May. This year we were told there was an anomaly of the clinic being full in January. When we visited one child was coming to the end of treatment and another had just arrived. Both looked much smaller than children of a similar age.

The clinic has developed a new programme of encouraging families to set aside a small space in their land to develop a kitchen garden growing different vegetables and fruit that will help with the nutritional needs of the children. As well the families receive training in nutrition and hygiene, which all helps. The wonderful thing was to hear that the places where the project is in place there were less children needing the help of the clinic because of malnourishment.

A highlight was a visit to the family of Alberto and Maria who told us about the help of the project, showed us their kitchen garden, and proudly showed us the new oven that Alberto had built a few weeks before. At the end of the visit Alberto asked if he could pray for us, which they did most exuberantly. And then, this family who told us they had just enough to survive offered us a plant to take home with us. Out of their lack they were prepared to give. I have never been so moved.

Our time with JOSEMN at Lemoa began with an initial welcome at some Mayan ruins followed by dinner and a welcome service. It was at this service that we realised how important this visit was to the church in Guatemala. Terms like 'historic' were used frequently and when the comment was made that 'our names would be forever written in the history of their church' we became more aware of our role.

Over the next 10 days we shared together and built strong friendships, most of which came from games we played together. We shared about the work among children and young people both in Ireland and Guatemala and realised how much was done by volunteers who gave so much of their time. We worked on a couple of small building projects with the help of a couple of foremen who instructed us well. We visited a number of families, churches, an orphanage and school. What always struck us was the welcome we received, the colour not only of the dress of the people but also of their faith and worship and the thankfulness of the people.

The JOSEMN committee do wonderful work among the children and young people without all the resources and finance that we often take for granted. Their enthusiasm and obvious love of God was a vital element in the singing, drama and fun that we had as we shared the story of God's love together.

Relationships have grown and continue. We have been challenged, encouraged and blessed by the experience of being with the people of Guatemala. We look to see how this new friendship can be grown and developed and hope to make this happen across the church.

A final word that was said on the last night was this: 'No longer are we orphans in the world as we now have brothers and sisters in Ireland.' We, in Ireland, will benefit more from this relationship, I believe than our brothers and sisters in Guatemala, learning particularly to be thankful in all circumstances.

I would like to express our grateful thanks to the President of the Church, Rev. Mario Chanchavac and the members of the Executive committee for showing such interest in our visit, spending so much time with us and looking after us so well.