

Highlands United Church
Worship Service Oct. 17, 2010
Guatemala Partnerships
Led by Bill Dyer, Andria Parker,
Sharon Yetman, Jon & Simone Carrodus

Reading: What Efficiency Costs read by Bill

(Written by Habitat for Humanity volunteers, and adapted for this service)

One person with a cement truck would not have had the experience of
fellowship.

Would not have had the chance to dance in the streets or celebrate a
heavy stone removed from the earth.

Or felt the sweat Or the rain. Or heard the sounds of a rooster or a child's
laugh.

One person with a cement truck would not see, in each tossed stone, the
day a family will know the peace of a home they have helped to build.

Or imagine using the earth and its clay, its stones, to build the home itself.

Or feel blisters and soreness in the hands and still feel joy.

Or drink juice from the pods of a tree that shadows a home. Or feel heavy
earth on their shoes and be reminded that we are earth too.

One person with a cement truck would not have received the gifts of a hug,
or of linens, or of smiles.

Or the stories.

One person with a cement truck would have simply delivered cement, and
driven away.

Reflection: Partnerships

Why Guatemala? by Jon

In 1980 Simone and I knew almost nothing about Central America. One evening, when our children were very little, we got a babysitter and came to see a film being shown at Highlands -- a film about the civil wars raging in Guatemala and other Central American countries. We saw pictures of children the same age as ours, separated from their parents or orphaned

and being held in prison in horrendous conditions. It's even harder to see that when you have children of your own.

While our children were crayoning pictures of houses, the indigenous Mayan children of Guatemala -- if they had access to crayons -- were drawing houses burning, and helicopters shooting at them. How could these horrors be happening in a country no farther away than Halifax?

It was this experience that led us into involvement with the struggle of Guatemalans for justice. We, as well as other Highlands members and clergy, became part of the Christian Task Force on Central America, a coalition of concerned Christians in B.C. We met Guatemalan refugees and exiles, we gained a new perspective on our lives as part of a global community, and learned how our actions and lifestyle have repercussions elsewhere.

In 1987, Rigoberta Menchu, a Guatemalan Mayan opposition leader in exile, stayed with our family for several weeks while studying English. While she was with us I read her autobiography, and was moved to tears by her description of the suffering of her family -- one young brother died from being sprayed by DDT in the cotton fields where the family worked, her father and older brother brutally executed by the army. Rigoberta visited Highlands and shared her story with the congregation. In 1992, we all celebrated as Rigoberta was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize.

Members of Highlands went on delegations to Central America to learn first-hand of conditions in refugee camps and to meet with human rights organizations which were suffering extreme repression. These delegates included -- some of you will remember -- Rev. Don and Sandy Robertson, Ross and Jeannie White, Kathi Bentall, Rev. Jim and Geniene Elliott, Ariel Creighton, and Simone Carrodus; and later some of our young people -- our daughter Bronwyn, Gen Creighton, Kelly Graham, Christina Atkinson. They all brought back moving stories to a supportive congregation.

I will always remember Christina saying: "I've lived in North Van all my life, on the doorstep of indigenous people, but I had to go to Central America to become aware of their issues of discrimination and repression." And this life-changing awareness happened for all of us.

Well, the civil wars of the 1980s and 90s ended, but conditions in Guatemala remain very difficult for the majority of the population. And the connections we made in the 1980s continue.

And so, about 10 years ago, Highlands began a partnership with Nuestra Voz women's support group in Guatemala. In 2001, five women of the congregation travelled to Guatemala to hear the stories and build that partnership. A year or so later, we invited Vicki and Sylvia to visit us in return. They heard our stories, and our partnership became more established, but communication was difficult because of language barriers. So, during the last few years, we have begun a new partnership with the Women's Sector of Guatemala, with the help of Sandra Morán. And, earlier this year, we five members of Highlands visited Guatemala, to work in **partnership** with Guatemalans in several ways. So here's our stories.

Healing Touch by Sharon

In 2001 I was one of the 5 delegates from Highlands Church to travel to Guatemala to meet with our partners in the women's collective Nuestra Voz. Day after day I heard the stories--stories of courage, stories of commitment, stories of action, stories of support. My life has changed and the people of Guatemala are forever in my heart. Why is it that it took flying 3500 miles across the continent to understand what mission is about--to understand what partnership is about? At the end of that trip, our partner Sandra Morán said, "My vision is that you will return to Guatemala and teach healing touch." Surprisingly to me, out of my mouth came the reply "But I'm not an instructor YET! I had heard the stories and recognized the need. Who knew I was to become an instructor and spend two weeks each year teaching in Guatemala? It seems this is part of God's plan for my life.

For the past four years I have had the privilege of teaching healing touch workshops in Guatemala. Each time I receive more than I give and I am constantly learning from the participants. These workshops would not be possible without the coordinating efforts of Sandra Morán and Artesana. They make the contacts with groups, support them with the organization process and organize transportation for our team. Each group hosting a workshop makes arrangements for transportation for participants, accommodation if necessary, food catering, workshop space, tables and blankets. These are formidable challenges in a developing country. Last

year for example, all was in place for a workshop on a particular Monday. That day there was a bus strike in Guatemala City. The resulting traffic gridlock made it impossible for any of us to get the workshop. Two days later, 20 participants who had had to rearrange their incredibly busy schedules arrived at the newly relocated workshop space with a new food caterer and were ready to graciously receive us!! Partnership in action! We taught a successful workshop with fully present participants. During the lunch break, I had a moving ceremony with 2 midwives as I gave them receiving blankets that I had made. Heart to heart: Partner to Partner: Granddaughter of a midwife to midwives that work with the poorest of the poor in small isolated communities.

Karla is a leader of one Women' Sector group who have been with women who are victims of violence for the past 25 years. She arranged for 44 staff people from all parts of Guatemala have a self care day at a retreat centre and invited us to offer healing touch techniques as the program for that day. That is a huge commitment to the practice of self care and a wonderful model for all of us no matter where we live.

Last year 29 people from the Esmenta School of Alternative Medicine in Guatemala City attended a Phase one workshop. Ten days later 22 of those came to a Phase 2 workshop. Some of those people have offered Healing touch sessions at the school every Monday since. At Highlands we pray for their work each Monday when we light the candle at our Healing Hands session. We are grateful for this partnership. In 2010, 35 more people from the Esmenta School attended a phase one workshop. The partnership continues. The vision and passion of Elizabeth and her fellow teachers at the Esmenta School who want to make healing practices available to all is an inspiration for my continuing work and mission.

Women's Sector by Simone

Andria, Jon, and I went to Guatemala City for three days before the Habitat build started to connect with Highlands' partner organization, the Women's Sector.

We stayed at Casa Artesana, a place that functions as the office and workplace of the Artesana group, and offers hospitality. They serve great meals and offer a safe place for women to stay while in the city. People support each other.

Primitive, yes, in some ways; not even a one-star hotel; but it quickly became home because they shared it with us.

Jon and I and Andria were also privileged to have lunch with Rigoberta Menchú, whom we hadn't seen since 1987. It's good to be with her again. Rigoberta says "*que honor*", but we're the ones who feel honoured.

We talk about old times, our children, our lives of the last 23 years, memories of the time she spent with us. Just to report to you, she is now twice the age she was then; married; the mother of a 15-year-old son; and is a very able and confident woman who speaks English well.

She is very active politically; she heads a political party working to support the rights of the Mayan indigenous people. And she remembers us, and Highlands, with love!

Highlands' primary partner is an organization called the Women's Sector; Sandra Morán is a director of the Women's Sector and is our primary connection in Guatemala.

The Women's Sector began in 1994 to give input to the Guatemalan peace process through the UN.

Their goal is to influence public policy for women: in laws and in services. Women's Sector is an organization of some 33 organizations. These member organizations work in health, education, labour rights; they attempt to change society's ideas about women. We met with members of three of these organizations.

First we met with Olimpia and Rosa Delia of **Women against Violence**. Their mission has been to support women in the workplace for 3 years now. Some are women who are domestic workers or street peddlers. Many are the women who work in maquilas, or sweatshops as we would call them, which have very low wages and insufficient regulation. Olimpia told us of the "agromaquilas", where, for less than a dollar a day, women process flower bulbs for export, often being exposed to toxic chemicals. Something to think about, as you buy your bulbs!

Women against Violence helps women to know and obtain their rights around gender and age discrimination, especially in the workplace; and to prevent actual physical violence. Many women still have a problem with oppressive husbands and fathers, as well as employers.

Women against Violence hopes to begin working with supervisors and with the ministry of labour as well as with the women themselves.

We then had a presentation from Anastasia and MaryCruz of ***Women Planning for the Future***.

They work at building intercultural, social, gender and economic justice; at strengthening the participation of women. “Intercultural” implies cultures connecting and interacting, a relationship between cultures.

Their plan for this year: Building capacity for women to strengthen their citizenship, to participate in decision-making. The specific project goal for the year is to teach 60 women to read and write, and 40 to type. Yes, type, on typewriters: which don’t need electricity. And the idea is not to provide skills for employment but for empowerment: learning independence, learning new skills, learning to teach others, cooperation and community, teaching and working together.

The third Women’s Sector organization we met with is ***Artesana***: It’s a collective of seven women involved in theatre, art, dancing, music, and production. Sandra Morán is one of them; her partner Andréa is another.

Casa Artesana, where we stayed, is one of their projects: providing hospitality and a safe place for women to stay.

It seems that much of their work is social empowerment, done through the various art forms. For instance, they are doing a weekly call-in show on the public broadcasting system. One specific project is art workshops with women in prisons.

Artesana inform women of their rights, and help them maintain links with their families. And they are planning to begin a transition house project.

And, judging by the number of men we saw working with them in Casa Artesana, there are a lot of men involved in doing this work; it’s not just women!

Lastly, it’s Monday March 8; Jon and I return to Casa Artesana for International Women’s Day.

We walk near the head of a parade of thousands, apparently organized by the Women’s Sector with Sandra at the helm.

A real highlight of our time in Guatemala; because of the thousands of women participating,

because of the support from men which we hadn’t expected;

because of the general mood of optimism and making a difference;
because we saw about 100 people from a peasant organization, and about
15 of them were men;
because the police were supportive of that event at least;
because of the fun of youth participating;
because the women also took over the plaza in front of the National Palace
for the day;
because peasant women could sit on the steps of the National Palace;
and because of the joy of being able to walk alongside Guatemalan
women demonstrating for their rights and freedom.

Anyway, after our visit with the Women's Sector, Andria, Jon, and I went on
to the Habitat build with Bill and the rest of the team.

Habitat for Humanity by Andria

The word "mission" has always made me feel uncomfortable, partially
because I have associated it with the forceful definition of centuries past
and partially because I have never been quite sure what it means *to me*.

When I made the decision to go to Guatemala as part of a Habitat for
Humanity team this time last year I naively jumped to the conclusion that
escaping the rain and congestion of the 2010 winter Olympics would be
wonderful and that being a 'humanitarian' would be glamorous.

The night before I left for Guatemala I seemed to change my mind. For
some reason, back in September I had felt quite capable and yet on the
evening of February 8th I lay in bed asking myself peculiar questions. Who
was I, thinking I could be of the slightest help building a house when to this
day I can't even load the dishwasher to someone's satisfaction? What
happened if I fell into a Volcano and should I write a will incase I did? Did I
take the proper Malaria pills and did being allergic to mosquitoes make me
more susceptible to the bug? And lastly, would I have any excuse to pack
my favorite pair of high heels?

These questions spun me into a semi-dramatic panic attack and my
memory keeps recalling a weak moment in which I Googled "how to fake
appendicitis." However, in the end, my panic attack pushed me into survival
mode and I threw my ill-fitting carharts into my suitcase and promised
myself that I would be fine.

I said Adios that night to every misconception I ever had about the word “Mission” and opened myself up to an experience which is, safe to say, something that changed my life.

By the time the rest of the Habitat team arrived in Guatemala City, I had already been there four days with Jon and Simone. I had sent over thirty homesick emails to friends and family, including a request to fly me a cell phone that would work internationally and a block of cheddar cheese, and while I learned so much in those first four days, my heart was making so many adjustments that I don't feel it would be fair for me to attempt to remember the specifics. However, on February 13th I welcomed, along with Jon and Simon, the rest of the team and immediately went to work trying to find common ground with everyone.

When the team arrived in our build town, Champerico, we were greeted by 40 degrees and the most spectacular view of the Pacific Ocean I had ever seen. The people of the town were welcoming and curious and the first night there we sat down for a meal with the two families we would be building for. In broken English and broken Spanish we managed to all introduce ourselves and give our ages and relations to other people on the site. Both of the families had young children and the smiles around the table that night were some of the biggest I've ever seen.

The team was then split into two groups which would then be working on two separately located building sites and we all went our own ways to make sure we were well rested for our 6 am wake up call. Well-rested would soon become a foreign phrase, as sleep was nearly impossible with the lack of air conditioning. We struggled into our work pants and work boots and managed to get to our sites in time to receive building instructions from the Masons as to what we were to be doing that day. Which turned out to be a whole lot of digging. The heat, especially for the first few days, was so intense that working more than 15 minutes at a time was too much, and yet as the days wore on, the love and kinship that developed among the builders and the family we were there for seemed to build the house itself. The three young boys on the site all helped in the carrying of boulders and bricks and mixing the cement. The 3 year old daughter of the woman we were building for presented us with constant laughter and introduced us to her pet parrot on a stick, Lola and the women

on the site taught us Spanish, gossiped about the Masons and washed our hair for us when we looked about ready to faint.

The five days we spent building a home were not enough (in my teams case) to see a roof bridge four simple walls, but they were enough to bridge the walls between two worlds which never would have collided if 12 people had not set out to realize what 'Mission' meant to them, nor if two families had not had the strength to ask for help.

The experience was more physically and emotionally challenging than I ever would have assumed. On every single page of my Journal from that trip I have written; "I didn't know I had this strength, this is more than I knew I had to give." And as I reflect on it, even now, I know that I couldn't have given any more...I have used that phrase "I gave it my all" so many times, and yet looking back I can honestly say this has been the only time in my life I have *really* given it my all. And that, to me, is how I define "mission." The gift of everything you can see fit to give. I didn't write a cheque. I didn't bring Soccer Balls or Antibiotics...because I didn't have those to give. What I had, at that moment, was my hands and my heart.

On February 15th, the day we left Champerico, I wrote following in my Journal:

"I thought that I would find the meaning of love in Paris, or Rome, or in Holt Renfrew. To think I have found it here, on this one hot, stone rooftop in this hot, dusty Guatemalan nowhere town is beyond what I ever thought myself capable of... and all I had to do was give."

Commissioning by Simone

It is an honour to go to a place like Guatemala,
not to change the world,
but to learn from that part of the world
and its friendly and capable people.

So,
your homework is not for just this week, but for life.

Nobody is too old,
or too young, or too middle-aged

to have a life-changing experience.

Nobody is too busy,
or too world-weary, or too rich, or too poor
to benefit from a life-changing experience.

It takes strength to ask for help.

And it is in sharing one's gifts with others
that one receives gifts in return;
and in sharing, there are always returns.

So we challenge you, whoever you are,
to engage in life-changing experiences;

and we offer to you,
as a Global Connections Committee
and as a congregation,
support in seeking that experience.