

REVIEW
VIM GUATEMALA 3-08

Whew! What a project-packed run-the-whole-time trip! What a superlative-packed time!

I'm referring to the Oregon City UMC March 24-April 7, 2008, VIM trip to Guatemala. Here are the highlights:

Monday March 24: The group of 11 people flew from Portland, OR to Guatemala City, via Continental Airlines and the Houston airport. We were met at the Guatemala City Aurora airport by Adolfo Santizo, our chauffeur and friend for the next two weeks. Arrived at SETECA (Theological Seminary of the Central American Church) where we stayed for two nights.

Tuesday, March 25: Visited Los Romeritos at 9 a.m., talked with director Jaime Marcia before lunch, reviewing the history and ministries of that Project. Met with Herman Paz Alvarado after lunch, talking about land ownership and the process of resolving ownership conflicts and liberation theology. Visited the Relief Map of Guatemala, and returned to SETECA for dinner and the evening.

Wednesday, March 26: Traveled to Chichicastenango, stopping at the Iximche' ruins en route. Beth Werber's presentation on Mayan History and Spirituality. Began our 5-day stay at the Hotel Sto. Tomas in Chichi.

Thursday, March 27: Visited the Ruth & Nohemi Tailor Shop and Store in the morning, ate lunch at Ruth & Nohemi; explored the Chichi market in the afternoon.

Friday, March 28: Traveled to Chontola' to begin work on the cement block house we would build there. Had lunch in the new dining room of the National Methodist church, across the street from the church.

Saturday, March 29: Visited with the widows of the Ruth & Nohemi Cooperative just after lunch, and continued work on the house.

Sunday, March 30: Continued working on the house in Chontola'; visited with Juan Toj after dinner. Attended Worship with the National Methodist Church: during the first hour we sang, Larry preached; the offering was received; and Pastor Jeronimo gave a prayer of dedication and dismissal for the VIM group. We left after one hour of the two-hour service.

Monday, March 31: We got sack lunches from the kitchen, drove to the Campamento Bob Buescher in San Sebastian de Lemoa and dropped Larry off for the Consultation on Lake Lemoa, drove to the Institute Juan Wesley in Sta. Cruz del Quiche' where we met with the Director, Amilcor Solontano, and visited a class at each grade level; then returned to the Lemoa camp for lunch and a visit with VIM Coordinator Carla Gonzalez; visited the Hogar de Niños nearby; and after dinner returned to the Ruth & Nohemi store to pick up items which were not ready on Thursday.

Tuesday, April 1: After breakfast we packed up, paid our bill at the Hotel Sto. Tomas, drove to the National Methodist Church in Patulup. After lunch there we drove to Camanchaj and the Salud y Paz clinic. Larry stopped for a blood test as we drove through Solola. Then we drove to Panajachel, where we met with Mike and Adele Roberts and picked up the coffee we had ordered. After checking into the Monte Rosa Hotel we had dinner at the Sunset Restaurant, and then enjoyed a presentation by Juan Skinner Alvarado on the geological history and ecology of Lake Atitlan.

Wednesday April 2: After breakfast at Los Pumpos, cross Lake Atitlan to the Posada at Santiago Atitlan. Several had massages or backstrap weaving classes. The day was free to relax or explore the community, until we met at the Posada to go to the Peace Park and visit the avalanche site from Hurricane Stan. Overnight at the Posada Santiago.

Thursday April 3: Return across Lake Atitlan, meet at the bus in the parking lot at the Hotel

Cacique, and visit Tecnologia para La Salud in El Tejar, on the outskirts of Chimaltinango. Return to SETECA for dinner and overnight.

Friday April 4: We bid Adolfo goodbye and he drove us to the TAG terminal at the National Airport. At 6:30 we flew to Tikal, where we had breakfast at the Tikal Inn while we waited for our rooms to be ready. We discovered that procedures regarding admission to the Tikal National Park have changed: no admission is charged at the Park boundary. Admission prices have trippled to Q.150 per person per admission. During the afternoon 4 people decided to hike into the main Plaza at Tikal.

Saturday April 5. The group met our tour guide, Pablo, at the Tikal Inn office at 9 a.m. Larry stayed at the Hotel to rest. Several of the group were severely exhausted by the end of the tour, and were brought back to the Hotel by Park vehicle.

Sunday April 6: We found that the format and arrangements for the Bird Walk have changed. There are now two walks available. The Bird Walk costs \$100, divided among however many people sign up. There is also an Archaeology and Natural History tour, very similar to the regular 9 a.m. tour, at \$15 per person. After lunch we paid our bill, took the 2 p.m. shuttle to the Flores airport, then the 4 p.m. flight to Guatemala City. Hector Perez and two other taxi drivers met us at the TAG terminal, and took us to SETECA. There we walked to Pollo Campero for dinner, and returned for a performance by Jaime and his troop of clowns

Monday April 7: We ate breakfast at 8:00, then finished packing for our return home. At 11:30 Hector Perez and three other taxi drivers met us and took us to the International Airport, where we flew Continental to Houston, and then to Portland, arriving at 11:15 p.m.

(1) LOS ROMERITOS:

Los Romeritos is now in its 12th year of service to the street kids in Zone 1. Begun by current Director Jaime Mancía and Meggan Parkinson of the Oregon City UMC, this Day Care Project provides meals, health care, tutoring, musical and cultural activities, and a secure environment to the children of sexual workers and other ultra-low-income families in inner Guatemala City. It helps children attend public schools by maintaining a stable structured environment from which they leave for morning or afternoon school sessions, and to which they return. It offers a continually evolving mix of informal teaching/learning experiences (right now including cooking skills, music, traditional dances, and computer literacy). Los Romeritos is now an official Mission Project of the Oregon City UMC; its support comes almost entirely from Los Amigos de Los Romeritos, which purchases fabric goods tailored by the Ruth & Nohemi project in Chichicastenango and beaded jewelry, necklaces, and scarves from several cottage industry sources and resells them in the US, sending the profits to Los Romeritos each month at \$1600 per month.

This spring a new competitor appeared across the street from Los Romeritos, and then another one a block away. They are two branches of a Day Care effort by the present Mayor of Guatemala City to get his wife elected Mayor, either as an altruistic socially conscious candidate or else as a ploy to continue channeling income from dubiously ethical sources into the family finances. Or both. And director Jaime Marcía expects that they will disappear as soon as the city mayoral elections are over, on April 24.

In any case, the competition has access to public funds to charter buses to pick up kids, and also to take them on field trips to everywhere. So this has drained off Los Romeritos' normal enrollment, and forced them to rethink their curriculum and program.

And Jaime and his wife Elisa are responding with great creativity and enthusiasm. Neither the Mayoral competition nor the public schools include Computer literacy and applications. So Jaime is securing several computers and will soon offer Computer classes. One father of a child in Los Romeritos' programs will also take these classes, and will probably draw other adults to join the Computer classes as well.

Another strength of Jaime's complements the Public School and Mayoral Competition's lack: Cultural education including music and dance and drama and art. Here Jaime is a natural. When we were there Jaime was building drums, and had just returned from a trip to El Salvador with several good quality but inexpensive guitars and mandolins and similar instruments. The same father is teaching the students to play the instruments, and to do traditional Guatemalan dances. Our last evening they presented a portion of the Dance of the Death of the Deer, complete with wonderful costumes and masks. The afternoon we attended, they accompanied themselves on guitar while they sang several popular songs.

On Tuesday afternoon after Holy Week vacations, the program was not back on its feet, but I counted 18 kids present, just hanging out where it was safe, or eagerly helping out with any project at hand.

(2) BUILDING A HOUSE IN CHONTOLA'

As Carla Gonzalez and I put this trip together in mid-2007, we looked for a unique situation: a project building something where it was badly needed, and in a time-frame that fit at the end of our survey of National Methodist Church ministries. We could build for three days, after seeing the projects at the Hogar de Niños, the Ruth & Nohemi women and tailor shop, the Instituto Juan Wesley, the Patulup Clinic, the Campamento Bob Buescher at San Sebastian de Lemoa, and of course Los Romeritos Day Care Center and the Iximche' Ruins and the Relief Map. So it needed to be close to Chichicastenango, and it needed to be something we could accomplish in three days.

So we settled on the community of Chontola', ravaged by a massacre in 1982 with the National Methodist church destroyed and the thriving congregation obliterated. The women of the congregation could prepare us lunch in the new Kitchen, located 20 meters beyond the National Methodist church and across the street; we could eat in the Dining Room, adjacent, and contemplate the two unfinished Sunday School rooms on the same property.

There are pre-requisites for families receiving houses through the National Methodist Church. They must be poor and without a house of their own. They must have enough income to repay a loan (of \$3,000 with no interest charged); the property must be in their name and not that of a parent or other relative. The National Methodist Church congregation had no one who would qualify, and so they found a member of the Church of the Nazarene (which is building a new sanctuary 100 meters down the road on the same side) who happens to be the son of the pastor of that congregation.

This fellow was totally thrilled with the news that he would receive a house: now he and his wife and five children wouldn't have to live with his parents, and would have a brand-new home of his own! He immediately set to work leveling the building site, 25 feet down the side of the hill below the Church of the Nazarene's new building. And he carried down to the building site each cement block we were to use: about 1340 blocks weighing 22 pounds each, 8 at a time!

The Chontola' National Methodist Church invited us to join them in their Sunday afternoon 4 p.m.

Worship. Two of our group asked if we could possibly arrange to leave after only 1 hour: their backs wouldn't stand 2 hours of a Worship Service on those wooden benches! So I conferred with Pastor Jeronimo, and we planned the first hour to contain singing, the scripture lesson, the sermon, the offering, and a prayer of Commissioning and Dismissal. So that was the first hour: the family who received the new house was presented, I preached, Jeronimo led a prayer of Commissioning and Dismissal, the offering was received (larger than any other in their history, I am sure!), and we went out to the bus and drove off.

(3) CONSULTATION RE: LA LAGUNA DE LEMOA

The group's role in this enterprise consisted in leaving me at the National Methodist Church's Campamento in San Sebastian de Lemoa, and driving on to Sta. Cruz de Quiche', there to visit the INSTITUTO JUAN WESLEY, with the capable translating abilities of Beth Werber at the ready.

I arrived at the Chapel at the Campamento Bob Buescher just before 9:30, and set up chairs while I wondered who would arrive.

A carload of Methodists from Xela arrived, followed by people from MARN, the Ministerio del Ambiente y Recursos Naturales, from the Mayor's office in Sta. Cruz, the University of San Carlos, and Juan Skinner Alvarado, the ecologist and Lake specialist.

We began by asking Carla Gonzalez to take notes, and by reviewing the history of our activity. A year ago, in January of 2007, Drew University suggested that it would help the National Methodist Church in offering to the Lemoa community assistance in restoring the lake to its potential. Drew secured the participation of lake specialist Jean Blackie, who took water samples and had them analyzed. No formal action was taken at that meeting, although there was general agreement that livestock needed to be excluded from the lake and from its drainage area; lake-side areas needed to be planted in native plants; and the practice of washing clothes in the lake needed to be terminated.

The group then reviewed what had happened in the year since that first consultation. The University of San Carlos had swept the lake and removed tons of algae; Jean Blackie's water samples had shown elevated levels of phosphates and detergents in the lake, and especially in the water coming from pilas in the park shelter; Juan Skinner Alvarado had examined the lake and suggested a dry well to keep the pila outflow out of the lake; the popularity of the lake had meant removing tons of garbage and plastic bags from around the lake; and contacts with residents around the lake showed that they felt no responsibility for cleaning up the lake or its environs.

Larry then asked the group to vote on constituting itself as an official body, and compared the situation to that of an orphan child going to person to person asking "Do you want to be my father/mother?" The group proposed the name GRUPO VOLUNTARIO PRO LA LAGUNA DE LEMOA, and voted to assume this identity. Juan Skinner Alvarado volunteered to serve as Coordinator. The group then listed who would be official representatives from various agencies to the GVPLL, and agreed to meet again in April. Carla Gonzalez offered space on the new web site of the national Methodist Church, www.guatemalavim.org. The group agreed to post there the reports of activity in the past year, the list of participants and representatives, and minutes of the meetings.

(4) EL HOGAR DE Niños

Two weeks before our visit, the former Director and her assistant were dismissed, and a new Director hired. So everything was different. And everything was the same.

Two US short-term Volunteers were helping care for the kids, and living in the new apartment. The kids were all in the dining room, eating lunch or a snack or learning something – I wasn't paying attention to what they were doing. I was working with the VIM person deciding what our group should do while we waited for the new director to get there. He phoned her, and it would be half an hour.

So I asked for a tour. He pointed to the dining room and said, This is the dining room. Then we went up to the kitchen, examined the new-style charcoal stove, talked about the smoke going up the chimney rather than polluting the kitchen; learned that the right charcoal burner had water pipes for the boys' bathroom and the left charcoal burner had water pipes for the girls' showers; and looked at the propane stove which they seldom use because propane is more expensive.

In the boys' bedroom we found one of the infants, about 6 months old, looking content and well fed. In the girls bedroom we found all kinds of girl things. And then the new director arrived.

Lidia Garcia has been one of the VIM translators for years. A year ago she got married, and now has a plump and very wonderful child. She and her husband live in Chichi near the Ruth & Nohemi tailor shop, and are reading everything they can find about the Hogar and its history.

A great many of the children now at the Hogar are placed there by the family court, and have been declared abandoned. They will be there until age 18, or until they are adopted.

(5) PATULUP CLINIC

As I struggled with the itinerary for our last long day in the highlands, I came up with a novel solution to a tight time frame. This day we were to pack up at the Hotel Sto. Tomas in Chichi, pay the bill with a personal check, drive uphill nearly an hour to Patulup, tour the Methodist Church and Clinic there, go back through Chichicastenanto and stop at the Camanchaj Clinic of Salud y Paz, then drop over the side of the crater to Panajachel, get our coffee from Mike Roberts at the Crossroads Café, move into our rooms at the hotel Monte Rosa, meet JoAn Dwyer for dinner at the Sunset Restaurant, and return to our hotel for a presentation by Juan Skinner Alvarado on the geology and ecology of Lake Atitlan. Where to have lunch that would not waste an hour?

Then it hit me: Juan Ixtan always has some refreshment for us at the end of our visit to his clinic in Patulup. How about asking him to expand this into a lunch? He readily agreed, and surprised me by appearing before breakfast one morning at the Sto. Tomas, whereupon I gave him the Q.360 for lunch for the group.

The day did not begin well. The cobblestone pavement in the intersection next to the Hotel had been repaired, so traffic moved normally. However as we threaded our way toward the cemetery at the NW corner of town, we found our passage blocked by a car parked where we had to make our sweeping turn-reverse-forward-reverse-forward to get around the corner and on down the hill. The car's owner did not answer our horn blasts, nor did questioning the proprietor of the nearby store

produce a driver. So we backed up a block back to the previous intersection, dropped a wheel into a drainage gully and fortunately got it out again, backed around that corner and threaded our way down hill and eventually out of town. Then on to Patulup, though not on schedule.

At Patulup we unloaded the medicines and vitamins for the Clinic, and were met by Juan Ixtan's wonderfully gracious welcome. He had heard that this might be my last VIM trip, and that there were rumors that something would be dedicated to me, so he joked about my sainthood. The Church was decorated with colored plastic streamers that church members had cut out. The Clinic had two dental chairs and a new sterilizer installed and ready in one of the Dental Work stations, where Juan Toj is Dentist two Saturdays a month. After Juan Ixtan showed us around and described the Clinic's role in maintaining the health of the community, he and his congregation served us a delicious lunch on the roof.

The greatest surprise was the addition of two medical workers to his staff. They approached Carla Gonzalez for a volunteer position for a year, and Carla offered them work on Juan's Clinic in Patulup. One is a 48-year-old woman M.D., and the other a younger woman who is a Nurse Practitioner. The community has embraced them with open arms, and they and the congregation and community are all delighted.

And at 11:30 we left, wondrously impressed by the stupendous work that Juan Ixtan has done, and wound our way downhill and through Chichicastenango to Camanchaj and the Salud y Paz Clinic.

(6) SALUD Y PAZ CAMANHAJ CLINIC

Inge, Salud y Paz' receptionist and coordinator, met us and showed us where to put the medicines that we had brought from King Benevolent. Then she showed us through the building and gave us an introduction to the history and mission of Salud y Paz. We had a chance to visit with Dr. Freddie on some personnel matters, which he views as an opportunity to institute training for everyone on the staff. Salud y Paz now operates clinics at Camanchaj, which serves the 30,000-plus residents of the Los Encuentros to Chichicastenango rural area; La Urbina, a suburb of Quetzaltenango (Xela) which serves an equal population outside the city limits of Xela and other nearby cities; and cooperates with Rev. Juan Ixtan Calgua who provides medical services and medicines to the rural Patulup community and its neighbors southwest of Chichicastenango. A new clinic is under construction in Cunen, a community two hours' travel NE of Sta. Cruz del Quiche', which will serve communities which now have no close access to medical care.

Trip participants:

Larry Monk, Oregon City, Leader
Gary Ross, Oregon City, Assistant Leader
Judy Fox, Oregon City
Marvin and Donna Fourier, Oregon City
Marvin and Marsha McElroy, Oregon City
Ernestine Ross, Oregon City
Leif Terdal, Portland
Bob and Beth Werber, Oregon City

– by Larry Monk, 30 April 2008