

On January 16, 2008, I joined a group of nine persons for a 17-day delegation to Guatemala and El Salvador. George Bunz, the president of Rainbow of Hope for Children, an Alberta-based NGO, had invited us to join him to visit some of the organization's projects. I had accompanied George to Brazil in 2006 and to El Salvador and Guatemala in 2004. This time I was especially thrilled to visit Cunén, Guatemala, for the opening of a high school focusing on Mayan cultural education and training of Mayan teachers.

Father Gerry Le Strat, our driver and guide for the next four days, met us at the Guatemala City airport at 5 AM on January 17. Around 7, we stopped for breakfast and started our trip to the highlands. Guatemala City is at 5000 feet. By 11 am, we had reached Tecpan, department of Chimaltenango, at 7000 feet, where we stretched our legs at the Mayan site of Iximché (Maize Tree), the ancient capital of the Cakchiquel. Dating from shortly before the Spanish conquest, Iximché, bears little resemblance to majestic ruins of the Classic period, 200 CE to 800 CE. Iximché's pyramids are only thirty feet high compared to Tikal's 230 feet and the population was about ten thousand people, a tenth the size of Tikal.

In 1524 Conquistador Pedro de Alvarado selected Iximché for Guatemala's first capital and renamed it Santiago de los Caballeros de Guatemala – St. James of the Knights of Guatemala (Guatemala, a Spanish corruption of Guautlemallan or Land of Many Trees). When the Cakchiquels rebelled two years later, Alvarado burned Iximché. By 1530, the Cakchiquel lords had all surrendered and slavery replaced the horrors of war.

Guatemala's indigenous people have not forgotten these things. In February 1980, just two weeks after the Spanish embassy massacre in Guatemala City, the Peasant Unity Committee (CUC), a predominantly Indian organization, convened a meeting here at these ruins and issued an extraordinary document called the Declaration of Iximché:

We the indigenous peoples of Guatemala declare and denounce before the world more than four centuries of discrimination, denial, repression, exploitation, and massacres, committed by the foreign invaders and continued by their most savage and criminal descendants to the present day. . . . The massacre at the Spanish embassy is not an isolated case but part of a chain of killings. The suffering of our people has come down through the centuries, since 1524, when there arrived in these lands the assassin and criminal Pedro de Alvarado. . . .

We arrived in Chichicastenango on market day but stayed less than hour, just enough time for lunch at Santo Tomás, the town's oldest and most luxurious hotel. The restaurant and rooms – and bathrooms for which we were given a ticket for a free bathroom stop - are arranged around patios full of flowers and stone fountains. A large red macaw heckles passersby. Could it be the same one from over 20 years ago?

We climb twelve miles to Santa Cruz del Quiché, the departmental capital of Quiché. Its infamous army camp, complete with walls and turrets, has been converted into a college. We climb and climb a narrow road of hairpin curves before descending towards the Río

Negro River and Sacapulas. The bridge is still a narrow, one way Bailey bridge. In 1998, Dawn and I arrived here very early one morning on our way to Nebaj. On the wall in front of the bridge we sat and waited a good part of the day for a bus that “was coming any time now” to take us the 18 km to Nebaj. When it did come it was full, even by Guatemalan standards; the overflow of passengers perched on the roof among the market baskets. I never did see the precipice plunging straight down to the sinewy ribbon of the river as we climbed and climbed back to the crossroads where we’d come from in the wee hours of the morning. In Nebaj, we arrived too late for the colourful market but did see the side altar of the church with its hundreds of little crosses and faded photos of victims of the violence that reigned over this town of the Ixil Triangle and from an escarpment we looked down on neat rows of identical houses surrounded by a high fence, a *Polo de Desarrollo* –Development Pole, the euphemistic term for a fortified village created by the Guatemalan army as a counterinsurgency tactic.

Now, the road cut into the side of the steep precipice is paved but its blind curves still leave climbing traffic at the mercy of overcrowded chicken buses hogging the road in their downward race to Sacapulas. At the top we see Cunén nestled way down in the next valley. Father Gerry points out the largest and whitest building, the new school. Cautiously, we threaded our way down to Cunén.

Our hotel is brand new but not quite finished – no toilets, no showers and no guardrails on the narrow stairs. The rooms upstairs are the smallest I have ever seen – a twin bed against the wall leaves barely enough floor room to turn around. No furniture. No hook to hang clothes. By the time we returned that evening the workmen had managed to connect one toilet and one shower (cold water only), but no doors or curtains! Cold water you’ll say! Most of us froze that night and asked for an extra blanket next morning – there was no one there to ask until morning! Only the courageous showered. The rest of us used those little towels airlines used to hand out in the good old days. The hotel was clean, comfortable and adequate. Who can complain at \$6 a night?

At sunset we were at the school for a Mayan ceremony – a moving outdoor prayer centered on fire. Each one contributed to the flames, which did not die in the ashes but returned to us to continue burning within. I will long remember the attentive and respectful participation of the students, the quiet measured pace of the ceremony, the dancing flames, and the aromatic perfume of the cedar resin. From there we went to a beautiful, spacious restaurant for a special celebration with the 24 teachers of the school, the members of the council, the architect and contractor. It was truly a celebration of a project that grew from an idea ten years ago. The dreamers had turned their dream into reality.

In 2002, four members of ASEMAQ – *Asociación Educativa Maya Quiché* – traveled to Canada to seek funding for the construction of a school. Hopes faded when CIDA cut off all funding to NGOs nevertheless ROHFC accepted to fund the \$215,000 project. Among the many generous donors was the late Al Gerwing, a strong voice for education. Our group was pleased to have with us Ron Fengstad who provided sweat equity on the

project. Since only one person speaks English in Cunén, Ron used the language of the heart to communicate.

Early the next morning, in their finest clothes, students, parents, teachers and most of the community headed to the school. A new invention in Guatemala is the motorcycle taxi, which offers for a few cents a covered ride for two or three passengers. Each has a name and is brightly painted, often bearing the logos of the main rival cell phone companies. How many schools could be built with the money these companies and the politicians spend on paint! Urban transport is a welcome innovation for the infirm and elderly but it's sad to see gas wasted and a future source of obesity.

I was glad to sit in the shade of a plastic tarp hung over the stage carpeted with pine needles. While the nights are cool, the sun is very hot. The two-hour opening ceremonies began at 10 am with four students performing, to flute music, a sacred dance directed to the four cardinal points, followed by the Guatemalan National Anthem – yes, it is still 5 minutes long – and the Canadian anthem which we sang proudly – 30 seconds! The speeches were actually interesting – all remarkably translated by the English teacher. This was followed by lunch for all participants. The school is stunning – a lofty entrance whose lines reflect Mayan architecture, open corridors, large bright classrooms.

From there we went to a meeting with some of the teachers to discuss future funding and needs. It was hard to concentrate as we sat in one of the classrooms presently used by over 40 students – the noise of passing traffic, the dust and heat make teaching challenging but our translator kept on translating!

Most of my questions were answered. In 2002, the school – without its own locale – began with *Básico*, grades 7,8,9 or junior high. Students pay fees for classes but the public school, which enjoys government subsidies, charges Q15 per month, whereas students of the Mayan school pay Q30 - \$4 instead of \$2. To put these amounts into perspective, the minimum daily wage is Q35 for an 8-hour day, but few workers earn even that much. Why aren't both schools funded equally? Essentially it goes back to the eternal problem of the central government with funding for indigenous education. Cunén is 95% indigenous. All the department of Quiché fared extremely badly at the hands of the military in the 36-year war, which ended with the peace accords of December 2006. As long as these accords are not implemented, the wounds of war cannot heal. For decades, the army forced all men, 15 and over, to serve in the Civil Patrols. They were forced to commit atrocities to show they had “gonads.” On December 22, 1982, 350 men from the municipality of Cunén were marched under military command to a village of the neighboring municipality of Sacapulas and ordered to kill the youth and men, to rape the women and kill them and the children – as many as 350 were killed. How do you live with that, brother killing brother? Between 1980 and 1984, 40,000 died and 40,000 or more were disappeared – mainly in the Highlands, mainly among the Mayan population.

On April 26, 1998, two days after Bishop Juan Gerardi released in Guatemala City the report *Nunca Más* – Never Again, which found the Guatemalan Army responsible for most of the war-time deaths and disappearances of 200,000 civilians and which set the

stage for future charges against the military for crimes against humanity, Gerardi was murdered. Another lesson taught by the military: Do not meddle with history! Democracy or no democracy, they are still in charge in Guatemala.

Today, many feel that Guatemala's Indigenous people are a sleeping giant, ready to awaken. That awakening is based on education, on re-valuation of their culture, on taking back – not by force but by moral right – their rightful place in their country. Those who hold the power in Guatemala would keep the giant asleep.

Many of the first graduates of the Básico program based on Mayan culture, went on to become students in Magisterio – a three year normal school program to prepare grade 10-12 students to teach in rural Mayan schools. The school year, which began in January, enrolled 312 students of whom 44 are in Magisterio. The fees for Magisterio are Q100. The training of teachers to receive in grade 1 students who speak only Kiché is very important for students to keep their language and culture, to succeed in school, to learn to function well in Spanish and to become community leaders. Only by preparing teachers who are comfortable in their mother tongue and proud of their culture will the region's predominant indigenous community be able to take the leadership roles that rightfully belong to them. In the large department of Quiché, there is only one other place where the option of Magisterio in Mayan education is offered. This is in Santa Cruz, the departmental capital. Public classes end with Básico in Cunén.

Mayan teachers want to have their own school instead of sending their children to the regular public schools because they want an education that values Mayan culture. Having taught Magisterio for three years in the Q'eqchi culture in Alta Verapaz, I know that the official government textbooks at all levels of education are very biased towards the ladino and urban side of culture. Indigenous people are represented as backward, dirty, primitive, and uneducated. While the national government prizes "colourful Mayan culture" for tourist appeal, the "real" Mayans are ignored and despised. It is very difficult to change these ways of thinking even among the Mayans themselves.

On the other hand, Mayan groups with the help of research funded by donor countries and organizations have produced excellent teaching guides and texts for the primary grades in bilingual education. I used several texts that invited the students to analyze textbooks and teaching methods commonly used – methods that are limited to copying and memorization without adaptation of the material. My students could name the 23 departments of Guatemala and their capitals but they could not tell me which department was the biggest in size, the least populated. They had copied hundreds of maps but could not identify the cardinal points, or even point out on the map the two oceans that border Guatemala. A student presented a lesson on Guatemala's mountains to his classmates without any idea of what is a mountain. He taught it was "monte," i.e. fields and uncultivated areas.

I was pleased to see the student-made posters on the walls of the classroom where we met. The topic was the Independence, a day celebrated with all the fanfare of July 4<sup>th</sup> in the U.S.A. Here are the messages of two of the posters:

## Independence

1. We need to understand what really happened then, to be able to interpret all that has happened since.
2. It's presented as an important date in which only some people were liberated when the Independence was signed.
3. We need to teach the real history, as it was when they signed the Independence so that children today may become aware of this.
4. The Maya, the Xinka, and the Garifuna as well as the poor ladinos had nothing to gain from Independence.

Second Poster: During the rule of the Spaniards not everyone was treated the same. The indigenous peoples were not treated equally nor were they well treated. The Criollos (Spaniards born in America) signed Independence on September 15, 1827 because they wanted absolute economic power for themselves.

These posters indicate that the teachers and students are able to recognize the one-sided view of history imposed by the department of education.

As we walked back to the hotel, we saw students of the public Básico marching around in a marching band. Here this is called *Banda de Guerra* – a War Band. All schools were obliged to have a band since the time of one of the Liberal Dictators who had decided students needed discipline – of course, even then education was only for the well-to-do in urban areas, certainly not for the indigenous hordes in the countryside.

One of the areas of study that featured predominantly at the school was environmental and ecological education. Guatemala possessed a rich biological diversity with 19 ecosystems. The school would like to offer is agriculture to create jobs and to learn more environmentally friendly methods. The sacredness of life was evident in the parish church where a poster entitled “They Destroy Our Life” showed photos of the environmental devastation caused by the Canadian Glamis Gold mine at Sicapaka, San Marcos.

Miguel and his family joined us for dinner our last evening in Cunén. His five children – four girls and one boy - are all good students. The older ones have graduated but are still studying. The boy and youngest girl are at the new school. Now Cunén's Mayan educators would like to have a branch of the University in Cunén so that students do not have as far to travel on weekends and to encourage the youth to stay and work in Cunén.

The school faces great challenges to ensure the number and quality of teachers needed for such an extensive program, methods of education which reflect the best in pedagogical science as well as in bilingual and bicultural education. This requires more funds than can be collected from students and the community. Scholarships must also be available so that no student with motivation and potential is left behind. There is a need for ongoing training of teachers in the form of conferences and workshops and for computers, books and teaching materials. ASEMAQ needs to join with other Mayan groups to lobby the

government for adequate funding as well as the full implementation of the Peace Accords, including the 1995 Accord on the Identity and Rights of Indigenous People.

We left early the next morning and stopped for breakfast in Sacapulas at a restaurant facing the Río Negro. A young boy, Eddy age 13, was carefully polishing one by one the glass plates of the louvered windows, using old newspapers. Eddy is the oldest in his family. His mother cannot send him to school She's a single mother with four children. So he works here, all day, every day for Q500 a month (\$67 a month or \$2 a day).

By mid-day we were at Casa Ramos ready to enjoy the beauty of Lake Atitlan. After a great lunch on a balcony overlooking the lake with its volcanoes we each went our way to explore the shops and to change money. We had another great dinner with a view of the sun setting on the lake. On Sunday we went to Mass and went for brunch to a natural food restaurant run by a German couple. There, Juan Skinner joined us to speak of his hydrological studies of Lake Atitlan. I have for several years now lobbied for strict controls over Canadian mines in Canada and especially in Third World countries. Skinner's work began in 2003 when the mayor of a Lake Atitlan community heard indirectly that mining exploration rights has been granted for an area around the lake without any consultation with anyone in and around the area. That was why the people around Lake Atitlan were very concerned when a large piece of equipment for the Glamis Gold mine in San Marcos was stopped at Cuatro Caminos and the dismantling of the pedestrian overpass had to be done to permit the extra large structure to pass. The people intended to impede its passage. The government sent 3000 heavily armed military, who shot in the air into the fields, anywhere. They hit and killed two persons.

The mine received a lot of backing from the government. The mining companies offer benefits to the people but these are minimal, a small public relation gesture. It's inefficient help: an empty school, no teachers, no materials; a health centre, again empty. The contractors get most of the money.

There are no environmental concerns. At the Glamis Gold mine not even the Guatemalan Minister of the Environment could obtain access to the mine. It is private property. In the lake Atitlan area, 15 mayors and a large number of stakeholders joined together. U.S. AID wants an environmental project but they want it their way. The mayors protested that they had the right to decide but U.S. AID wants to deal with only one person – a government person in the Capital - not the people actually affected. They have no voice. What U.S. AID wants is to do an inventory – nothing else. The lake is a protected area and yet nothing is done to protect it. Foreign help confuses things. The projects are linked to their interests, not those of the inhabitants or of Guatemala. Why are they here? We don't know. In a protected forest – are they planning a mine or use of resources, some economic benefits for themselves or for foreign companies? Are profits for shareholders the only thing that is important? What is more important? Local governments have no say. It's discouraging, frustrating, but it makes me more determining to continue lobbying the Canadian government!

After a long walk on Sunday afternoon, I join a few companions for a short boat ride Sta Catarina. From the lake, I see all the mansions perched on the cliffs overlooking the lake. The rich owners helicopter in for the weekend. On the way back we enjoyed setting behind the lakes three large volcanoes and the moon rising over the coastal cliffs. After a brief meeting over a bit of rum we headed out for our last dinner in Guatemala. Early next morning we checked out of Casa Ramos (\$12/night – with hot shower and private bathroom – also a TV but I never turned it on!).

We had breakfast in a beautiful country restaurant and reached Antigua by 10 AM. After a stop at the handicraft section of the market we drove to the centre where I met Richard. It had been ages since we'd seen each other. Richard and Susan were supposed to attend the last VMM Assembly in Milwaukee in June 2007 but ran into car problems and never made it. It always makes me feel good to think of Richard and Susan and the work they do in Guatemala six months of the year. Meanwhile our suitcases were moved from Father's van to the CIS van and we headed out. Once past the Capital, we stopped at an innovative fast food restaurant where I left my last Quetzals. Soon we were at the border. We were sent to the Guatemala Tourist Bureau for a bathroom stop. Their literature is much more inviting than their bathrooms! We crossed the river into El Salvador. Those last hours driving in the dark, in relentless traffic were hard but soon we were at the Florida. I got a nice room but without windows. It took me a day to figure out that what I thought was the TV remote was the AC remote. The AC also chases the mosquitoes. I am comfortable in the room I will sleep in for 11 nights. Very little daytime is spent in the room, as I'll soon discover!

### **Questions to ask Miguel – it's hard to be certain that you have the right answers**

How many students are there in all in the school?

How many are in básico?

How many are in magisterio?

How many of the graduates in magisterio can hope to find jobs in schools of the area?

¿Cuántos alumnos hay en total en la escuela?

¿Cuántos hay en básico?

¿Cuántos en magisterio?

¿Hay posibilidades para todos los en magisterio de obtener plazas en escuelas de la region?

In El Salvador there used to be many Indians until 70 years ago; now there are virtually none. In 1932, a year after Maximiliano Hernández Martínez was installed as dictator by the military, there was a peasant uprising in which Indians were prominent. They tried to recover lands stolen from them in the past and to set up communal local governments.

Hernández ordered his troops to destroy every Indian village and shoot every man in Indian dress they could find. An estimated thirty thousand died in what is now known simply as The Massacre. Those Indians who survived became Ladinos for obvious reasons. Their children and grandchildren may remember that once they were *indigena*, but their language, dress, and customs have become extinct.