

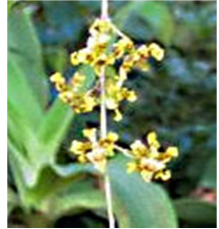
22 Years of Partnership
1987–2004

**The Congregational Church of Needham
and Santa María Tzejá, Guatemala**

By Kay Taylor

2009

Family life is very important in Santa María. Men work in the fields and take care of bigger animals. Women generally work at home, taking care of children, grinding the corn, and making meals. Men often help take care of children, and women also sometimes work in the fields. The Needham Congregational Church has had a partner relationship with the Mayan village of Santa María Tzejá for 22 years. The village is located in the jungle in northern Guatemala. There are beautiful flowers throughout the year, unusual trees, birds and animals. The area is very hilly, and people walk on narrow dirt paths within the community. There is a gravel, one-lane road to the nearest town. The community now owns a bus, and occasionally small trucks take passengers. Mostly, people have to walk.



In the early morning women and children line up at the corn grinder. They bring the corn home in a big pan, and then make tortillas on an open stove for all their meals that day. They can't save any of the ground corn because they don't have refrigerators. They also don't have lights or running water. Women wash their clothes in the river, and everyone takes baths in the river

In 1999, the Blossom Fund of Boston gave money for each family to build a pila, a cement container to collect rainwater. Most of the year, there is enough rain that women can now use the water collected at their homes. All the water must be boiled before being used for food preparation. In 2000 and 2001 the Blossom Fund gave money for every woman to buy a cow. Later they received funds to construct large pens for the animals.

Both women and men are teachers, health workers, and serve on town committees. Kids play soccer, basketball, help their parents, and go to school.

There are about 150 Needham families who are partnered with families in Santa María. They exchange

letters twice a year. The families in Santa María are happy to get letters from Needham, because there isn't any other mail delivery. They are especially happy to get photographs or pictures drawn by children.

We enjoy visiting with people in their homes. They like to watch us try to make tortillas, which we're not very good at. Sometimes delegation members stay all night with families in their homes. During the day we spend a lot of time talking with children and their parents. They tell us the stories of their lives which are very different from ours. They also like to ask questions about our lives. Sometimes members of the delegations help in the school.



a picture is worth a thousand words

Several years ago money from the Needham church helped to build a new school. So many children are going to school that they have outgrown that school and have built two more. We have given some of the money to build those schools too. Our church money is helping to pay the teachers' salaries and to buy books, crayons, scissors, typewriters, microscopes, and other supplies.



Santa María school children

In January 1995 Randall Shea, a North American and former Witness for Peace volunteer in Mexico, started a junior high in Santa María Tzejá. Before that, no one could go past 6th grade. There are now nearly one hundred students in the junior high, many coming from surrounding communities. Six classes have graduated, and more than 90 students are now in high school in other parts of Guatemala, being supported by scholarships. Our church is paying for several scholarships, and individuals in our church

are paying for other scholarships. There are no high schools in that part of Guatemala, and most families have very little money for education. There are also more than 30 students who are studying at the University of San Carlos in Guatemala City. There are very few college students from other Mayan communities in the northern part of Guatemala. Some of the college students are being supported by a scholarship fund set up in memory of Muriel Abbott, a longtime member of our church and a strong supporter of this work.

There are now about 350 children and young people in school in Santa Maria Tzejá. If the government were providing the teachers, there would likely be only two teachers. However, through the support of

our church, there are now 21 teachers, all having grown up in the community. These teachers are very committed to their students and help the children gain pride in their Mayan heritage. Class sizes in Santa María are similar to those in Needham, and the curriculum is very demanding.



The beginning of the partnership

Some history of Santa María Tzejá and our church's involvement there is helpful to our understanding of this partnership. In 1986 at its annual meeting, our church voted to explore the possibility of a partnership with this village. The following summer Clark and Kay Taylor traveled by plane, bus, truck and then on foot through the countryside of Guatemala, finally reaching the isolated rural village of Santa María Tzejá. In faltering Spanish, they talked with the

people about our church in Needham and the possible relationship we might have with them. A handshake between Clark and their elected president symbolized the hope and trust that would develop over the next 17 years. Since then, more than 35 delegations and 130 different travelers have gone from our church. Some have gone 5 or 6 times, and one is now living in Santa Maria. Many of the high school students who have gone have written their college admissions essays about their experience. In October 2000, five adults from Santa Maria visited our church for the first time.

The village of Santa María Tzejá is a Mayan indigenous community, carved out of the northern Guatemalan jungle in the early 1970s by young families. For about 10 years they built a thriving community where they could grow their traditional crops, develop their Christian faith, and educate their children. For the first time in their lives, they had land of their own and did not have to work for landowners on big plantations. Women did the daily work of the home. Children went to school and took care of younger children. Men worked together to build homes and community buildings, care for animals, and do the farm work.



Guatemalan army soldier

Their dream was shattered in February 1982 when the Guatemalan army destroyed their community in a sweep of small villages designed to rid the area of opposition forces. Families fled into the mountains, carrying their children and only a few belongings on their backs. They watched over a period of six days as the soldiers burned all their houses, slaughtered their animals, burned their crops, and killed any people they found.



troops on the move

Seventeen people were massacred by the army during that period of violence and immediately after.

Many families have shown us the charred remains of their houses and have told us about their family's terror during that time. Some families in Santa Maria have joined a suit, which includes people from other surrounding villages, charging the Guatemalan government with genocide. The suit is proceeding through the courts.

About half of the families, after hiding in the jungle for as much as a year and a half, made their way across the border to Mexico where they spent 12 years in refugee camps, protected by the Mexican government. The other families gradually returned to Santa María, their lives threatened by hunger and disease after months of hiding under the dense jungle cover. Some of the men were imprisoned and tortured by the army, and were finally allowed to return to their destroyed community under strict army control.

In 1994 through the intervention of the United Nations and the Mexican government, the refugee families returned from Mexico, and the village was once again united after 12 years of forced exile. With almost no services or infrastructure provided by the government, the families of Santa María Tzejá were unable to rebuild their community. They lived in constant fear of further violence from soldiers at the nearby army base. Without a road, telephone, or international protection, they were totally vulnerable.



charred posts and family



returning refugees

The partnership with our church has been one factor making it possible for them to recover their faith in people, to re-establish some of the infrastructure that was destroyed, and to become a center of education and health in that part of Guatemala. They have also received help from other groups in the United States and other countries. Padre Luis Gurriaran, who accompanied the young families who originally established Santa Maria in the early 1970s, now lives in Guatemala City

and is able to help with funds from various groups in Spain.



tooth brushing!

Funds from Needham, and the labor of the men in the community, built the first health center in 1988, trained young men from the village as health promoters, and supplied medicines. Gifts of dental training, dental supplies, and toothbrushes have provided the basis for a dental program that is unique in that area. Under the direction of two young people from our church, the children enjoyed learning how to brush their teeth in the local river. Doctors and nurses who are committed to this partnership continue to provide medicines and other supplies needed to help the health promoters.



Santa María health clinic workers

The women's group, numbering now more than 140 women in the village, has received funds from the Needham church to buy chickens, animal vaccines, weaving materials, midwife training and supplies, and build a fruit processing plant. Recent delegations have met with a large group of widows who have very little means of survival.

Other funds from our church have gone to build bridges, a basketball court, solar panels for the church and school, and emergency medical needs. Most of the construction is done without pay by people of the community.

The relationship we have with the people of Santa María Tzejá is a source of protection and connection for them. This is the only village in the area that has been able to fully reintegrate peacefully after the refugees returned from Mexico.

Our shared faith is a source of strength and growth for them and for us. Our church covenant states that "We seek to be faithful in a world torn by suffering, injustice, oppression and war." The families of Santa María Tzejá are our friends in faith. We are blessed and amply rewarded by them. They are profoundly grateful to the members of this church.

By Kay Taylor

Updated November, 2009

For more information, you can visit the Guatemala Partnership website or www.needhamcongregational.org or call Brenda Metzler 781-449-5696 or Kay and Clark Taylor 781-400-5076.

>>

