



Letter to Partner Families
Sept. 2008

Dear Partner families,

Life in the village is a story of adherence to indigenous traditions, and yet through a perceptive lens one does see an undercurrent of substantial change. Men in the village still follow the agrarian lifestyle which entails hardships of subsistence farming. For cash generating crops in this remote region, there is a relatively small economy. Women in the village are most often homemakers whose days start before dawn with a walk to the corn grinder to make flour needed for the day's tortillas.

Santa María Tzejá is a community organized around volunteer committees that act on behalf of the village. Of late, the community benefits from guiding wisdom of several college educated leaders. The mayor, Emiliano Panjo, is an entrepreneur who founded the Federation of Cooperative Farming two years ago. This is both a business and an institute of agrarian research. Another leader, Hugo Canil, is the administrator of the middle school, or Basico, and a man who lends his recognizable competence to a number of village committees.



Federation Cooperative (Emiliano at center)



Heart of Palm processing facility

Santa María Tzejá is extraordinarily progressive when compared to most villages throughout Guatemala. While Guatemala only provides for primary education in similar communities, SMT has education through middle school (to our equivalent of 9th grade) accessible to all students. Its schools are attended also by students from Santa Maria Delores, a community to south side of the Tzejá river.

Our young delegates help 7th graders
with English lesson



In the past two years, SMT has enjoyed an operating computer center offering 25 computers for use by students in SMT and SMD at very discounted cost. *These remarkable advances have been the direct result of the Needham Congregational Church's partnership.*

What's new in the village?

- There are discussions taking place to explore the possibility of SMT having its own High School. In Guatemala, most high schools provide direct training for specific professions. A key decision for SMT is to establish what profession to orient the curriculum towards. The leading prospects are agronomy and a special "academic track" which channels students toward college in 2 years.
- Currently 20 students are funded (by partner families) to attend high schools. They are usually at least 4 hours away and thus involve residential living expenses.
- A regional issue is being confronted regarding land grabbing by outside interests who would like to exploit the region's climate for growing African palm trees. Palm produces oil, a cooking product, and potentially a bio-fuel. This is a contentious issue that hopefully awakens a sense of the past 120 year history of Guatemala with its prior land-grabs for coffee and banana plantations. When a lopsided amount of land in the country is held by a very privileged few, the indigenous people are subject to indentured migratory labor. During our week in the village, a presentation was made to the village addressing the microeconomics involved. A sermon by a seminarian on Sunday (before handing out partner letters) ended with a simple plea: "Please don't sell your land to these people!"
- Twice during the week, 5am open meetings were held to discuss a cell tower that was being erected on the property of a villager. The community as a whole felt that it was unacceptable that an individual in the village had struck a deal with one of the Guatemala providers in return for rent, while placing a tower in the residential realm of SMT. Fear of health issues from the close by radiation was a primary issue. The unilateral dealing to the benefit on one family was also resented.
- Students who have studied in High school and college participate in a group AESMAC which enthusiastically seeks to find ways of applying their skills and education to the benefit of SMT and other villages in the Ixcán region.
- The increasingly wide use of cell phones- over 60% of SMT homes have one.
- Increasing number of homes that use a modest solar panel. Energy is stored for lighting at night, radios, and small appliances. The 9th grade physical science class participated in a workshop/lab on solar energy given by my daughter Natalie and myself.
- For increasing number of families, a member has reached the US. The benefits are sometimes materially visible in their homes (eg. solar panel, radio) or in the livestock they have acquired.
- Many residences have newly constructed living quarter with concrete floor, cinderblock walls. This stems from a government subsidized program.

- The new church is wonderful. Very open, well lit and welcoming.



- The village has a library, owing to donations and hard work by a group from Spain.
- The guest quarters for our delegations have improved. Owing to a suspended eco-tourist investment, we enjoy flush toilets, running water, several showers.

- The delegation trekked to the remnants of an old rope bridge that spanned the Tzeja River and was historically a gateway to the settling of SMT in the early 1970's.



- The new health center that dispenses medications is a welcome addition to the village. It is staffed by the village health promoter, a new assistant and the optometry specialist. Again, connections with our partnership have provided this.



What's not new?

- The hospitality and welcoming felt by delegations as they stay for a week in the village. It's amazing!



- The heat, humidity and slippery mud

- The feeling one achieves interacting with children in SMT. What seems like simple things to us can be extraordinarily meaningful to them.



In your next letter to your partner family, feel free to bring up any of these observations and draw them out. Behind their sometime reserved facades, villagers have so much to communicate. You won't always be able to grasp the difficulties that they endure in their daily lives, or their dependence on fatalism. But they have family issues not unlike our own. Seek to learn what gives them joy, what makes them laugh and what worries them as you build the bonds between your family and theirs.

Dave Johnson
Guatemala Parntership