

Lawyers and Service

By Michael W. Brewer

I read and listened eagerly about the PROS FOR AFRICA, a recent mission trip to Northern Uganda. I knew of local lawyers, doctors, professional football players, missionaries, evangelists and a cast of others that were uniting to travel to Uganda.

I had dreamed and talked about going on a mission to a third-world country but had not yet done it. I know of many local lawyers and judges who go on missions all the time. I also have a friend whose full-time vocation is that of a missionary. His stories of trips to India, African countries and Central and South America are riveting. Finally, I caught a break or received some courage, I'm not sure which. A complicated Federal two-week trial scheduled for June was settled. It just so happened that my 19 year old daughter, Allison, who is currently a sophomore at the University of Arkansas in Fayetteville, was going on a mission trip with The Vine to Guatemala, Central America in June 2010. The Vine is an urban Church plant of Westminster Presbyterian Church in Oklahoma City. I must admit I did not know much about Guatemala or its people at the time but thought this might be a trip I could do.

The Vine was sending a team of eight who would connect up with another team of seven from Westminster Presbyterian Church of Lubbock, Texas. We were going to work with two orphanages and five local churches near a city in Guatemala named Quetzaltenango. Quetzaltenango is the second largest city in Guatemala and is estimated to have a population of over 300,000. It is situated at an altitude of over 7,500 feet above sea level, in a valley near two volcanoes. The locals call it Xela (pronounced Shay La). I called the trip leader and asked if it was too late to jump on board offering to sleep on floors or wherever they could put me. Luckily they had room at the hotel, and I was able to get on the same flight to and from Guatemala City. Guatemala City is the capital of Guatemala and has an estimated population of around three million people. Most Guatemalans live in rural areas.

As we were readying ourselves to leave for Guatemala things began to happen. First, Tropical Storm Agatha sat off the

Guatemalan coast for days leaving torrential downpours, flooding and landslides all over Guatemala. You may recall the news reporting a giant sink hole near the Guatemala City International Airport that swallowed a three-story building. We tried to get near it but security was tight and they didn't want to see any tourists (Silly Gringos). About that same time one of the volcanoes near Guatemala City decided to erupt spewing ash all over the city and closing the International Airport for several days. Within a week of our departure, the airport was still closed and so were many roads due to mudslides and flooding.

We had heard that one of the places we were to visit in Xela was hit hard by mud slides and we would be helping with humanitarian aid. That means us non-medical types could help dig them out of the mud. Just before we were to leave, we received reports that significantly impacted our trip. First, the International Airport was open and our flight was going to depart and arrive at the scheduled times. However, a decision had been made by someone (we still don't know who) that we would not be allowed to go to the orphanages. We refocused our trip on working with the local churches and people to do whatever it they needed help with considering the circumstances.

As you can imagine, families were nervous about their loved ones going to Guatemala during this time. However it seemed like the thing to do. Arriving in Guatemala City it seemed that it had not stopped raining since the tropical storm began. Signs of volcanic ash were everywhere. Piles and piles of ash and bags of ash lined the streets. The sink hole was still big news but we weren't going anywhere near it. For my friends of the Catholic faith, we were unable to visit Father Stan's church as that was nearer the volcano which had erupted and that area had suffered greatly from the ash, flooding and mudslides.

We were headed north to Xela in the mountains. The approximately 120 mile trip from Guatemala City to Xela is on Central American Highway 1, which prior to the mudslides and flooding was a modern four-lane highway. However, it was nothing like that for our trip. Considering the



Mike Brewer (second from right) with mission team and local young men, two of whom are studying law.

circumstances the five and one-half hours to cover the 120 miles was not bad. Photographs do not do justice to the striking natural beauty of the Xela Valley and Guatemalan people.

As an alien in their country, the first thing I could tell you about the Guatemalan people were that they are gracious, kind and friendly people. They are a beautiful people, who are small in stature. Xela Valley is a traditional Mayan area and many of the people, especially the women, dress in the traditional Mayan clothing. Something like 60 per cent of all Guatemalans trace their ancestry to the Mayan culture.

We even saw some of the older men wearing the traditional Mayan dress (colorful skirts). We visited five different zones (sort of like zip codes) in the Xela area in five days. We worked with many children and local farmers. The Guatemalan people appear to be extremely hard working. It seemed that every plot of land including hillsides on 45 to 60 degree angles were used for farming. It is difficult to believe these people were involved in a 35-year civil war between 1960 and 1995. Father Stan Rother, a Catholic Priest from Okarcho, was martyred in 1983. Literally, for 35 years, relatives and neighbors disappeared never to be heard from again. It is

unbelievable that these kind and gentle people would be subject to the things that occurred in an almost four decade civil war. Although, much of their lifestyle is strange and hard to post-modern Northern Americans, the Guatemalans seem to lead relatively happy lives.

Since we were in Xela during the World Cup, playing soccer with the young boys was an everyday occurrence. Whether it was in a field or on a street, which were anything but level, we were always playing soccer. Actually, I was photographing. You could tell Americans are used to football, as our brand of soccer looked more like a tackle football game. The Guatemalan kids thought it was hilarious. Signs in Guatemalan shops proudly pronounced the World Cup was on and it was the beginning of a thirty (30) day vacation. Guatemalans were impressed with the United States' tie with England. It seemed okay to us, but it was not a win.

We learned about simple things we could help them with. They were eager to learn and we quickly overcame the language barrier even when our interpreters were not present. I was able to visit with several young men who were studying to be

See SERVICE, PAGE 16

See SERVICE, PAGE 7

lawyers. They go directly from high school to law school. Rather than get their degrees and moving to the US, these young men were interested in becoming lawyers so they could stay in their city and work toward improving things. Their judicial system is very different than ours. One of the things I noted was that in Guatemala you must be a lawyer to be a notary. I'm not sure which is more important, but I was able to see some notarized documents in a lawyer's office and there are a lot of large seals, flourishing signatures and ceremonial trappings that go with signing and notarizing a document. Somehow, you get the feeling that being a notary may have been more significant.

One of our team member translators, a retired Spanish professor from Texas Tech University in Lubbock, was staying on to work with a dentist who is a fulltime missionary. Through this connection, we learned of the dental needs for these people. We had noticed certain things about the teeth and gums of the children. With such beautiful smiles it was hard to understand why they had discoloration at an early age. However we soon learned that many of these children because of their poverty level are given sugar water instead of milk as babies. Later it is a common practice for them to be given spoons of sugar and coffee grounds mixed together. I didn't understand this practice but we were told it was a common thing to do by Guatemalan mothers and these children would have dental problems not only in adulthood but also during their childhood. The lack of dental education and necessities are working against them. This truly seems like something we could help the Guatemalans to address and educate.

I will tell you that we did not help build any homes while we were in Guatemala. Most of the homes are built using cinderblock. It was common to see homes with an unfinished second or third story. Over time, the families would simply continue to build up to the rebar that was extended for two or three stories but was unused for now.

We also learned about their cooking issues. Evident everywhere were wood burning cooking pits. Only the most well off Guatemalans had stoves like you and I are used to. However, they don't run on natural gas or electricity, but rather

propane. Most of their ranges would qualify as an outdoor grill for those of us in Oklahoma City. Over the last ten years some ingenious person came up with a metal grill for indoor use by the Guatemalans. Essentially, it is like one of our outdoor grills in that it is a rectangular firebox with a chimney on the back. This allows for the Guatemalans to cook more efficiently than the wood fire pit. Here, they still use wood, but it is concentrated in the firebox and it does not take as much wood. They can interchange a grill for cooking meat with a stove top for cooking tortillas or tamalitas. Importantly, the chimney helps vent the smoke out of the house rather than what we saw, which was open fire pits, with smoke filled houses at cooking time. I still cannot get the sounds, smells and colors of Xela out of my mind. We learned to love their pollo (chicken) and their pan (sweet bread).

There was so much we could help them with in terms of education, humanitarian and medical assistance. However, in the short time that I was there, I also learned much from them in terms of kindness, openness to strangers and a willingness to listen to outsiders who are trying to help. We spent much of our time with people from the local churches talking about God, church and faith. The Guatemalans are extremely spiritual people living a very hard life. The contrast of natural beauty and severe poverty is hard to miss. I wondered if they even noticed the beautiful sunsets behind their local volcanoes, Santa Maria and Santiaguito.

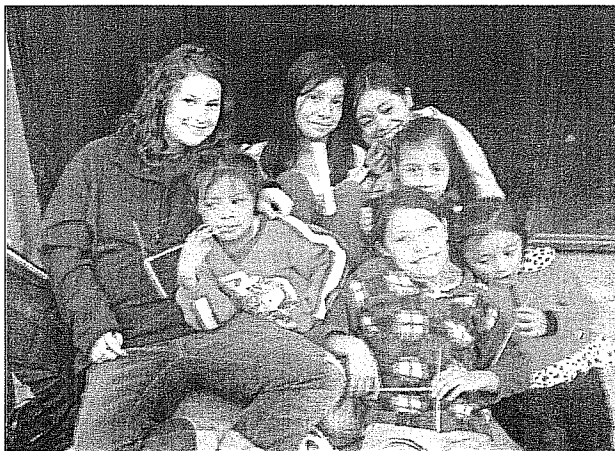
I encourage others to not sit on the sideline but take that chance at a mission trip, work trip or medical mission to a third-world country. This was also very special to be able to go with my oldest daughter, Allison, who is working toward an undergraduate degree in International Relations, with a minor in Spanish and hopes to attend law school in the future. We have so much to offer in assistance, but we also have so much to learn. As a side benefit to the trip, my family is now working toward sponsoring some Guatemalan children through Compassion International (www.compassion.com). Now, that I finally made it on a mission trip to a third-world country at age 50, I am ready for my next trip, before I turn 51, hopefully.



Guatemalan girl with a big smile.



A local farmer.



Allison Brewer with Guatemalan children.



The many colors of the marketplace.