

# SISTER PARISH

IGLESIAS HERMANAS

## Rediscovering the joy of delegations

*This year, Sister Parish joyously received our first in-person delegations since the pandemic, starting with a visit from East Orrington Congregational Church (Maine) to Virginia, Guatemala, the relationship's first delegation ever. Delegate and former Sister Parish board member Doug Fogg writes about the experience:*

If there is one thing that was confirmed for me over and over on this trip is that, as Christians, we are called to great love and unity... Will this experience change our lives? I would say yes, without a doubt. Once you put yourself in someone else's reality, the trajectory of your life can't help but change, and the perspectives and paradigms you once held shift and broaden.

For the rest of our lives, Danielle and I will be practicing loving people... and we will use what we learn from people to change our views, broaden our perspectives, and do what we can to make the world a better place. That will happen in any place we happen to be in the whole world, including our own backyard.



The community of Virginia teaches EOCC how to make chocolate from tree to table.



# Persevering with love and faith

*From a speech by St Joan of Arc delegate Meghan Grossman during their August delegation to TN2, Guatemala*

The pandemic put our relationship to the test. In 2020 after months of preparation our delegation had to be canceled. We were so disappointed. As you all remember, it was a time of loss, isolation, and sadness, but... our hermanamiento persevered with love and faith.

For example, the Peregrinos Bible study groups met on Zoom, even adding new members. We were able to invite each other to graduation ceremonies, weddings, and funerals all on video calls. We did two delegations on video calls, too. During one of them, Cathy saw the living room in the house of Juan and Blanca. Now she has seen this same living room in person.

The action that taught us the most about solidarity, love and faith began in the women's group in TN2.. The women spent their funds, time, and effort to buy food for families in need when the pandemic started. The TN2 Sister Parish committee delivered food to the families' homes with the faith that God would protect them from COVID-19.

[Our time here on the delegation] confirmed that our relationship is as strong as before the pandemic. During a meeting with the committee, we were sharing about all we had lost during the pandemic, crying, hugging and very sad. Meanwhile the youth of both churches were playing a game right next door, a very loud game filled with a lot of laughter.

But the loud interruptions did not bother us because it was a perfect example of how we share our grief and our joy like family. As it says in Isaiah "them I will make joyful in my house of prayer." (56:1, 6-7)



***"It was a learning experience about how to serve others, about love, about patience.... This delegation helped me grow spiritually." - Pedro, TN2***



***"If you are in doubt about doing something outside of your comfort zone, most likely you should say yes and do it... We all took a small step and it led to something life-changing." - Mia, St Joan of Arc***

# Shared Blessings: A virtual delegation

**"We were all deeply moved by Maria's strength and willingness to share her life's story. We will be forever touched by her strength, faith, and courage.**

**- Suzanne, St Thomas.**

St Thomas Lutheran Church (Bloomington, Indiana) and the Catholic Church of Santo Domingo de Guzmán (Chichipate, Guatemala), organized a long-awaited Virtual Delegation with the theme of "Shared Blessings" in February 2023.

The virtual delegation opened with a livestream of St Thomas' mass and closed with a livestream of Chichipate's mass, marimba band and all.

Between the two masses, participants gathered on Zoom to share stories about migration from Chichipate, the work with refugees and migrants in Bloomington, and the reality of Indigenous women in Guatemala as Chichipate elder Maria shared her personal story.

**"It is very interesting, and also sad, to learn about the lives of our young migrants [in the U.S.]" -Amalia, Chichipate**



Gathering for the virtual delegation in Chichipate. (top). St Thomas members send a greeting to Chichipate in English, Spanish and Maya Q'eqchi' (bottom).



Delegates from Guarjila visit Wallingford UMC in October 2023 (left). Sister Parish members participate in San Andrés Itzapa's patron saint feast day (right).



# El Salvador: What changes have you seen?

In the past few years, El Salvador has made international headlines with the adoption of the cryptocurrency Bitcoin and an extended state of emergency during which the government has suspended constitutional rights and arrested over 71,000 people with the stated intent of addressing gang violence. There are, however, other far-reaching effects of the administration's policies.

Mirna Guardado, from San José la Montaña, El Salvador, is a working mother who receives support from sister church Trinity Episcopal Church (Newton, CT) to study Public Relations at a local university while she works with the municipal government. We spoke with Mirna and asked her to briefly share her point of view.

"There is no Economic and Social Development Fund (FODES) now," The current government has stopped disbursing these funds for local community development projects, alleging misappropriation of funds and corruption. Education, scholarships and programs for children and youth have all been affected by the lack of funding.

In the past, the municipality had also provided grains and supplies to the farmers so that they could produce without incurring huge expenses. Communities in the area depend heavily on agriculture to survive, specifically relying on their crops to feed their families.

Due to the lack of funding, in many municipalities, public employees continued to work for a year with no salary, only a promise of future payment.



"Human rights are also violated... The authorities do not share information," such as reporting on federal government expenses. Journalists who criticize or investigate are threatened.

Despite the challenges, Mirna remains hopeful. "We know that together, if we organize, we can improve our situation. Our greatest strength is the unity between people."



University students in Guarjila, El Salvador, supported by scholarships from WUMC, plant trees to combat the effects of climate change & deforestation.

# International Women's Day 2023

On March 8, International Women's Day, the women's groups from Tierra Nueva 1 and Tierra Nueva 2 joined the march in Guatemala City to commemorate the struggle for women's rights, and the intersection of those rights with environmental justice, labour rights, racial justice, Indigenous rights, and justice for the LGBTQIA+ community. The women's groups in TN1 and TN2 work every day to support women facing injustice, discrimination, and violence in their communities. We are inspired by their work to make this world a better place and it is an honor to work together for change.



Women from TN1 and TN2 in Central Plaza for the march in Guatemala City.

## Opportunities to share and build community

*Dina from UPAVIM visits Downers Grove FUMC*



***“Thank you everyone at UPAVIM and Downers Grove FUMC who helped give me this opportunity to share.”***

The experience visiting Downers Grove FUMC was very motivating and encouraging for me. I loved working with the kids during the Vacation Bible School. The kids loved the book about the worry dolls and the craft where I taught them how to make Guatemalan worry dolls. A number of parents told me how excited their child was that a woman from Guatemala was visiting. I am also grateful I got to meet the scholarship committee and spend time with my pen pal and homestays.

It was a beautiful experience. I met new people who are excited about building our friendship and relationship. This was so important for me. When new people asked me what the relationship was about, I told them, 'It is about sharing our friendship, our cultures and our faith.'

- Dina Velásquez, UPAVIM

# People's movement in Guatemala demands democracy

***"We are tired of so much inequality. We want a country where we are all respected, where there is democracy."***

***Indigenous Authorities***

Political turmoil has gripped Guatemala since the general elections in June, when anti-corruption candidate Bernardo Arévalo of the Semilla (Seed) party unexpectedly made it to the presidential run-off and later a historic landslide victory.

In 1944, Arévalo's father, Juan José Arévalo, won as Guatemala's first democratically elected president, ushering in a period known as the "ten years of spring" with widespread changes to address inequality and establish social welfare programs.

Although many are hopeful about Arévalo and the possibility of a "new spring" in Guatemala, powerful interest groups seeking to ensure impunity for corruption and other crimes are trying to prevent him from taking office in January.



March in Chichicastenango. Credit: Pastor Diego Chicoj, Ruth & Naomi Cooperative.

In response to what has been called a "slow motion coup", the country's Indigenous Authorities called for a national strike in October to demand the resignation of the Attorney General and other public officials actively trying to undermine the democratic process. Urban communities, university students, health workers, taxi drivers, app delivery drivers, and unions soon joined the call, leading to massive protests and roadblocks that essentially shut down the country for weeks.

Like many forms of civil disobedience, the roadblocks came at a high price, both in terms of the safety risks faced by the protesters and the impact on poor communities. At the height of the protests, with 140 roadblocks throughout the country, prices rose dramatically and some basic items like food and cooking gas were scarce. Schools and public transportation were canceled. Some neighborhoods had their water and electricity cut off.

Beautiful acts of solidarity also flourished in spite of the tension as people organized peaceful resistance in the face of threats. People donated food, held Mayan ceremonies, played soccer, created street performances, and danced Zumba in the blocked off streets, reclaiming public space and a sense of community with a shared goal,

President elect Arévalo will continue to face significant challenges, but this movement has clearly expressed the deep will of a widespread portion of the population to uphold democracy and address corruption and inequality.

# Pilgrimage to Mesa Grande refugee camp



Representatives of the Honduran government welcome the delegation.



Speakers share history, current reality.

On January 14, representatives of the repopulated communities of Chalatenango, Cabañas and Cuscatlán met in Mesa Grande, Honduras, where people had lived as refugees during the internal armed conflict in El Salvador.

More than 2,000 people, including Sister Parish members and staff, camped in the area to mark the anniversary of the refugee camp's establishment.

Representatives of the communities, organizations and local governments participated in the commemoration, sharing stories, testimonies, and a pilgrimage to the field to remember how the camp was set up in the 1980s. During the ceremony, people remembered all the organizations and people with a big heart who supported the refugees with food and other things they needed to survive in the refugee camp for 8 years.

## Commemorating Saint Romero

In March this year, Los Ranchos and sister church First Lutheran Church (Duluth, MN) held events in honor of Saint Romero, El Salvador's former Archbishop who was assassinated during the internal armed conflict for calling for an end to military repression and speaking out against injustice.

To honor Saint Romero, both communities screened movies about his life and then held a Zoom call to reflect on his teachings and how to put them into practice in our lives today.



Commemoration event in Los Ranchos on March 24, the anniversary of Saint Romero's assassination.

***"We know that every effort to improve society, above all when society is so full of injustice and sin, is an effort that God blesses; that God wants; that God demands of us." -Monsignor Oscar Romero, March 24, 1980.***

# Stay connected with Sister Parish

Stay connected with Sister Parish, as we plan both in-person and virtual events for this coming year. Contact us to start planning your next in-person delegation, U.S. tour stop, or Zoom call with community leaders in Guatemala and El Salvador.

We hope to hear from you soon about how we can work together to build justice and community across borders!

