

# SISTER PARISH

IGLESIAS HERMANAS

## Called to share everything we have

By Patricia Cespedes-Schueller

*Acts 4:32. "Now, all the believers were one in heart and soul. No one claimed that any of their possessions was their own, but they shared everything they had."*

The acts of the apostles tell us about the profound spirit of community within the early church. In the same way, I feel that our relationship with the community of TN II in Guatemala follows the same spirit. When our two communities encountered each other 30 years ago, this profound encounter moved us to open not only our hearts, but also our lives and share our struggles together and understand injustices and possibilities.

My daughter and I traveled to Guatemala to visit TN II in August of 2018. We had the honor to stay with a mom, a dad and two daughters. They explained their identity as a mixed family, Ladina (of mixed Indigenous and European descent) and Garifuna (of Afro-Caribbean descent), with pride in their heritage. The dad was not in town when we were staying with his family due to the lack of jobs in the area. The mom had a small room where she sold bread that she picked up from the bakery at 4:30am and she also made empanadas. Both daughters were very dedicated students. A year later, I learned that the dad's health had worsened, and he could not work any longer, and the older daughter stopped studying to support her family.

This family shared their lives with us. We talked for hours telling each other funny and sad family stories. We sang together. We danced. I helped the mom to cook empanadas at 4am in the morning one day. My daughter dressed up in some of the daughters' dresses just for fun.

This is what Sister Parish offered to my daughter and I, a real encounter with real people, the gift to struggle for justice together with our brothers and sisters in TN II. The understanding that our families had many similarities, but also the awareness that our geographic locations either limited or offered more opportunities to us, and the realization that the injustices were keeping us from fully answering our call to be a community who shared everything together, to fully be a family. Sister Parish offered us the opportunity to share our lives, to be One with our brothers and sisters in TN II and that is a gift that we accepted. There is always space for more to join us in this journey.



Photo: Patricia's delegation spends time with the youth group and scholarship students from TN2 in Guatemala.

# Changing the way I look at the world

Jan Heikes, a member of the Sister Parish Board of Directors, gave the following talk during a Sister Parish-themed service at Wallingford United Methodist Church in Seattle, Washington.

Our affiliation with Sister Parish began in about 1996 after my husband, Lee Zook, took a three-week summer course in Guatemala in preparation for course that he was leading for Luther College students. One of the activities was a visit to UPAVIM where he met Dick Fenske, one of Sister Parish's founders. He came back very excited, and a core group including our pastor, Jim Dale at FUMC of Decorah, started exploring the idea.

After some time of education and discernment, our first delegation traveled to Nebaj, Guatemala in June of 1999. Over the next three years, we had two additional delegations south, and one north. Although none of us considered ourselves financially well off, the living situations of our hosts showed us the reality of how many people lived... and also the incredible hospitality in sharing all that they had with us, and with those even less fortunate than they were. And we struggled in how to be in solidarity with these folks given our wealth. We financed scholarships and a chicken raising project. Due to a series of conflicts in the community, staff recommended to end the relationship eventually.



Photos on this page: Jan and her husband Lee visit old friends in Potrerillos during the Open Delegation with Sister Parish in 2023.

I tell you this because we don't tend to talk about the things that can go wrong. The experience shook us, and it took a couple of years to regroup. But in 2003, we had our first delegation to Potrerillos, El Salvador with delegations going north or south every year until 2017. Maria Van Der Maaten & I have been back as part of open delegations, but COVID, Sister Parish active members growing older, and busy schedules interrupted several "almost" delegations. About 2 years ago, the group expanded to include the Congregational UCC across the street to expand our circle.



I continue to be struck by the importance of relationships built through Sister Parish, relationships that have long-lasting impacts even if the contact is not frequent. We know their stories. We can tell their stories. And this is powerful in our community in Iowa that continues to have an increasing immigrant population that fill jobs in meat packing plants and on farms that would otherwise go unfilled. One of our delegates was a Decorah police officer who wanted to see what life was like for the people that he was meeting on the streets. Now, Warren is a big man who towered over most of our friends in El Salvador. And when the host family found out that he was a policeman from the US, they were terrified. This was not the reaction that this teddy bear of a man had expected and we learned from this experience.

Personally I've had to confront and become aware of prejudices that I didn't think I had...things like poor people aren't in touch with the political situation. Boy, was I wrong there!!

But, I think that a piece that my younger son, Sam, wrote on return from his first visit as a 14 year old might say it best...."Since I have come back from El Salvador, I have changed the way that I look at the world, the U.S., and everyday items that are supposedly necessities in America. Potrerillos, where we stayed as a delegation, was the poorest place I have been in all of my life...but the joyfulness that surrounded me affected the way I acted, and what I did. So when I came back home, I felt almost sad—that I wasn't in that environment and that I had so many things around to distract me unlike my time in El Salvador."

## Delegation Highlights



Photos: Learning about s'mores (top left, bottom left), making tamales (top right) and meeting UPAVIM scholarship students (bottom right).

I am thankful to God...  
It was a beautiful time, we ate,  
we played, we cried,  
we prayed, we laughed.

-Angela, host in Guatemala  
Downers Grove FUMC - UPAVIM delegation 2024

I've become more aware of the suffering that American consumerism creates. But there's also a larger, deeper growth in my understanding of being human, what my values are and why they are that way, is there another way I want to live my life; all these things are developing.

-Delegate to Guatemala  
Saint Joan of Arc - Tierra Nueva 2 delegation 2024



Photos: Our wonderful guide in Santiago Atitlán (left), welcome at the airport (top right) and children's choir in TN2 (bottom right).

# Together in the struggle

Sister Parish is not just an organization that arranges visits between communities. We are a faith-based organization focused on social justice, sharing cultures, and accompanying communities in their struggles, through good times and hard times, always seeking the common good.

Through this work, we have learned about the main projects and concerns of these communities. Three communities in Guatemala are currently renovating or building new churches. Brother Juan Tut Bac, from Chichipate (Izabal, Guatemala) shares: "The Christian community has grown, and the old church can no longer hold everyone, so we decided to build a new one." With the support of their sister church St. Thomas and the community's efforts, they raised enough funds to carry out this huge project. Like in Chichipate, many communities organize themselves and count on the support of their partner relationships.

One of the big challenges facing Central American communities today is migration, with young people and families leaving their communities due to a lack of economic opportunities and violence. Brother Juan Tut comments:



Photos: High school scholarship student from Las Margaritas 2, Guatemala (top left). TN1 committee prepares for children's day (top right). Virginia gathers for a meeting with Sister Parish staff (bottom).

"The main issue in my community is the lack of employment and land to farm, as landowners have taken control of 90% of the fertile land." Large plots of land in this area that land owners used to rent to farmers are now dedicated to oil palm trees. Sugar and banana plantations, as well as mining, have also occupied large areas of land in the region for a long time.

Climate change is another key concern affecting vulnerable communities. Severiano Pérez, from Virginia (Ixcán, Guatemala), summarizes it as: "It's very hot, and when it rains, it's too much rain." These extreme conditions make agriculture, which most people depend on, difficult, and can bring plant diseases for which they are not prepared.

Although we are a small organization, we do everything we can to support and accompany the communities in their joys and struggles and we really appreciate your support.

# The importance of commemorations

For families in Central America, commemorating tragic events from local history is crucial for emotional, cultural, and social reasons. These gatherings allow families to honor loved ones who were victims of acts of extreme violence and to keep their memories alive. For many, justice was never served, nor were official apologies made, so these commemorations serve as expressions of collective pain, a way of mourning, and an act of remembrance.

One of the darkest tragedies in Salvadoran history occurred on May 14, 1980, along the banks of the Sumpul River, where government forces committed one of the most horrific attacks on civilians, resulting in hundreds of deaths. Each year, families of those who died gather in Las Aradas, Chalatenango, to commemorate the victims of this massacre, which marked one of the most brutal episodes of El Salvador's civil war. Men, women, elders, and children seeking refuge from military repression were slaughtered, leaving a painful legacy. Today, this annual gathering is both a symbolic act of resistance against forgetting and an urgent call for justice.

For these families, the event is essential, not only to honor their loved ones but also to preserve historical memory for future generations. Without



formal justice, the ceremony offers a space for collective mourning and healing, where remembrance and demands for accountability come together as powerful tools of resilience and hope. The Historical Memory Committee that organizes the event explains that the goal is to seek justice and accountability, and also to demand reparations to help mend the lives shattered by the armed conflict. This collective memory, the Committee emphasizes, serves to educate and foster awareness to prevent such violence from ever happening again.

Standing in solidarity, Sister Parish supports the survivors, grieving families, and communities who participate in this pilgrimage of remembrance and justice every year, ensuring these tragic events are neither forgotten nor repeated.



Photos: Events organized in 2024 to commemorate the Sumpul River massacre. Sister Parish attended to accompany the Sister Parish community members from Chalatenango that participated in the event.

# Witness, covenant and hope...

*Kathy Hawks, a former Lutheran Pastor, recently joined the Sister Parish family and had the chance to travel with the Open Delegation in November 2023. She shares a beautiful reflection about her first experience with Sister Parish.*

I love to travel. As a tourist - for sure. But also to learn and grow. I lived in Singapore for a year, visited the USSR (when it was the USSR), mainland China before it "opened up", met with perpetrators and victims of the genocide in Rwanda, with people who lived through "the troubles" in Northern Ireland.

So I came aboard the Sister Parish Open Delegation last November expecting an interesting, meaningful trip -- and the chance to meet people in Guarjilla, El Salvador, whom my fiancé, Tom Pouliot, has known for nearly 25 years.

And I did learn a lot! --Central American history, which is also U.S. history; Guatemalan and Salvadoran cultures and foods; the beauty of the landscapes. I heard accounts of the horrific civil wars and armed conflicts from people who suffered, fought in, rebuilt after, and are still recovering from them.

But something else, harder to put into words, set the Sister Parish trip apart from all my other travels. I keep mulling it over, and right now, three biblical words seem to get me closest to the deeper experience I had: Witness. Covenant. And Hope....

Read the complete article on our blog at:  
<https://bit.ly/KathyHawksLetter>

Read more stories at:  
[sisterparish.org/blog](http://sisterparish.org/blog)



Photos: Kathy visits Guarjilla (above) and UPAVIM (below) during the Open Delegation 2023.



Scan the QR code to read more on your device:



# Time for transition

As most of you know, our beloved Executive Director, Carrie Stengel has stepped down from her role and transitioned to become the Regional Coordinator in the United States through the end of the year.

Ruth Garrido has been hired as the new Executive Director of Sister Parish. Ruth's passion for the work of the organization, her extensive experience, and her focus on relationships makes her an excellent choice to lead Sister Parish into the next chapter of its life.

Along with César Tox and Jorge Gómez, our dedicated team looks forward working with all of you for many years to come as we build community and connect our struggles for justice across borders.



Photos: Butterfly (top), Board members participate in a Mayan ceremony during an Open Delegation (bottom).

## Join us on the Sister Parish Board

The Board of Directors of Sister Parish, Inc. is reaching out to our wider community to request suggestions for new board members. We'd love to have a board member from most or all of our U.S. churches, and people not currently linked to a Sister Parish church are also welcome to join.

Here's a bit of information:

- The bylaws call for 6 to 10 members.
- Terms are staggered 3-year terms, with a 2-term limit.
- The board meets in person twice per year (spring and fall), and twice over Zoom (summer and winter). There may be additional Zoom meetings if needed. Meeting dates and times are dependent on board members' schedules.
- Each board member serves on at least one Committee of their choice.

Being a Board member is also a wonderful way to connect with other Sister Parish members across the country and learn more about the broader Sister Parish community.

If you are interested or would like to suggest a candidate, please contact:

Jan Heikes, Sister Parish Inc. Board member,  
Decorah, IA, [janheikes@gmail.com](mailto:janheikes@gmail.com)

In Solidarity, Linda Main, Board President



# Stay connected with Sister Parish

Stay connected with Sister Parish, as we plan delegations 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 faith, justice and community across borders!



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INC  
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Iglesias Hermanas

