

IT TAKES A VILLAGE

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Mission work has often been defined in a narrow sense by churches. Deliver the gospel and do good work. For many years that is how Gloria Dei Lutheran Church in Clear Lake Texas defined mission work. We traveled to Central America to work in Panama, Belize and Guatemala. The work involved doing Vacation Bible School and helping pastors and congregations to share the Good News with people. For a number of years we even helped build homes for people in dire need – widows, single mothers, or people with handicaps. The work was fulfilling to a degree but we soon discovered we were only dropping in and out of people's lives. We had no ongoing relationship with families we helped and we seemed to be somewhat nomadic in our approach, helping people in a variety of places.

In 2013 we began to do missions different. With the help of another agency in Central America we focused on a village. We were given a profile on three villages on a mountain in a coffee-growing region of Guatemala. A small team of leaders from Gloria Dei went to visit each of the three villages. Our goal was to establish a long-term relationship with a village, preferably five years. We spent a week meeting with key leaders from each village, touring the villages, usually with about six hundred residents, and visiting the public areas, like schools or clinics. We also visited with people we found at home in these very remote communities.

Each village had a unique list of problems that hampered the ability of the community to be wholesome and thriving. They also had many things in common, like abject poverty, poor education and disease. Two of the communities had sold most of their farm property to land barons. After several generations the villagers discovered the benefits of the sale of their property was short sighted and they became dependent upon the land barons for employment. They were land-locked and experiencing a population growth that forced families to share their homes and resources with others in need. Many were forced to abandon their village and move somewhere else to live. The morale in these villages was very poor due to their hopeless situation. Guatemala is a country with "haves" and "have-nots". Those who own land control those who do not. From 1966 to 1999, Guatemala was in civil war. At the conclusion of the war little had changed. Those who "have" continued to dominate those who had not.

One village had not sold out to the land barons and, although they were poor and uneducated they still had something very precious, a small piece of land they could call their own. This past year, following the second year of a coffee blight that has wiped out almost 60% of their crop, they were paid seventeen cents a pound for their coffee. Their status is not much improved over those who live nearby and work for the rich land barons, but they still have their land. In 2000 this village, called Chaguiton in the state of Zacapa, was chosen by UNESCO to be a case study of how Guatemalans are faring since the civil war. The report was quite thorough and the Cocode, the elected village leadership, presented us with copies of the report. Although it was fourteen years old, the report provided great insights into the life and culture of the village of Chaguiton. Not

only that, we discovered that this village had become a leader for the communities surrounding it, by helping with water resources and medical assistance. Gloria Dei decided that we could impact all the villages around them by helping with this one, due to their willingness to share resources with other villages.

We have now made three trips to the village and have discovered that we have chosen wisely. Each trip is designed to provide assistance to the whole community rather than to one family or individual. As a result, our work is proving to be a very good cooperative effort. There is a book we use to train our work teams from America. It is called, When Helping Hurts: How to Alleviate Poverty Without Hurting the Poor . . . and Yourself by Steve Corbett & Brian Fikkert. This book has been very instrumental in helping our teams act with unity of purpose and in a determined way to prevent dependency in the mission field.

Next Steps

1) We are working with the University of Michigan to help create a safe filtration system for water. Currently the Chaguiton is drinking water that contains ten known bacteria that are harmful to humans. Their water source is a spring up the mountain but it has pesticides and fertilizer residue in the drinking water. Blue Lab, the undergraduate program from U of M is going to send a team to build a water filtration system. The men of the village are anxiously awaiting the team to come, so they can help install and care for the system Blue Lab will provide. The Cocode plans to distribute water to other villages so there will be clean water for as many as possible. They are also discussing building a water bottling facility to be able to sell water at reduced prices to others on the mountain.

2) We have brought back samples of the coffee produced in the village and have sent it to Boston where we have a congregation member's son who will analyze the quality of the coffee and help us find options to improve the profits from their coffee, establishing a fair trade arrangement, something unheard of in this area of Guatemala.

3) The community is almost entirely Roman Catholic, but in a unique arrangement with the R.C. priest who manages 60 villages on the mountain, we have been welcomed as Christian brothers and sisters into Chaguiton. One of our goals is to expand the Roman Catholic Church in the village because they have standing room only every Sunday.

4) Since the children in the school (187 pupils) rarely eat breakfast before school and generally receive one meal a day in the afternoon, we will be providing Incaparina every morning for the children. In keeping with the lessons we have learned about not creating dependency, we will pay \$44 per year per pupil to purchase the Incaparina and to pay for a stipend for a director who will arrange for parents to be present every morning to cook the Incaparina and serve it to the children. Incaparina has proven to be a vital tool for education, since the children are nourished prior to beginning their studies for the day. The Guatemalan government has been promising this protein drink for the children for a number of years but they are long on promises and short on delivery.

5) The medical clinic has not had essential medications to handle the maladies of the residents. Blood pressure medication, diabetes drugs and gastric disorder medication are basic and important but rarely available. On our last trip we delivered \$500 worth of pills and prescription drugs to the clinic. They were overwhelmed with their supplies. The clinic nurses work in Chaguilton and three surrounding villages. Even the simplest things like blood pressure cuffs and thermometers were deeply appreciated. Our January trip will be a medical mission trip to deliver doctors, nurses and dentists to Chaguilton and surrounding areas.

6) We will be pursuing the opportunity for good students to continue on in school beyond Chaguilton by providing scholarships to those proving to have the desire and ability to continue on. School in the village ends at ninth grade.

Our relationship will continue for at least five years. We expect to be able to help the community in so many ways. They are still being revealed to us as we continue to work together. They have no central area for the Cocode to meet and discuss village business, so we may be building a civic center there. They have asked us to consider helping them with soccer uniforms. Considering the connection we are making with University of Michigan I'm convinced we can easily get them uniforms if the like maize and blue.

The flood gates have just begun to open a little right now. We have no way of knowing all the ways we can be involved yet, nor do we know what impact this will have on the whole mountain but we intend to find out. With God's guidance and the generous nature of the people of Clear Lake we are sure we will make a huge difference in one place in the world.