

11/17/07

Dear friends:

I'm back home in Guatemala after a whirlwind tour of Texas and Oklahoma as part of Mission Challenge 07, a campaign of the Presbyterian Church (USA) that placed 48 Presbyterian missionaries in 144 presbyteries throughout the month of October.

After dozens of conversations with hundreds of people I can proudly affirm that we Presbyterians are an articulate, opinionated and passionate lot! What a joy to spend a whole month helping many congregations get re-connected with PC(USA) missionaries and with the global mission of our church. For more information on how you can support Presbyterian missionaries, see www.pcusa.org/mission.

I returned home on Sunday, November 4th - Election Day in Guatemala. Many of you have been upholding the Guatemalan people in prayer at this critical time, so I wanted to bring you up-to-date on recent developments. In Sunday's election, center-left businessman Álvaro Colom defeated retired army General Otto Pérez Molina, 53% to 47%. Colóm based his campaign on combating poverty, Pérez on restoring law and order.

Public security is a big problem in Guatemala. Gang violence, petty crime, drug traffickers, and the daily grind of survival add an undercurrent of tension to daily life.

With a culture of impunity and a culture of violence, some paramilitary groups decide to take the law into their own hands. That's why many mornings the tortured bodies of tattooed youth are found on the edge of troubled neighborhoods. This we call "social cleansing" in Guatemala.

A couple of months ago I was leading a seminar on communicating the Gospel in Guatemala. One woman at the seminar, a Pentecostal, shared a powerful story. She told how her nephew had been gunned down on his doorstep by gang members, just a couple of houses down from where she lived. Everyone saw the shooting. Everyone in the neighborhood knew who was responsible.

The woman had relatives in the Attorney General's office; they approached her and asked her whether they shouldn't just take care of these thugs by their own means. Why wait for a court system that might put them in jail and might not?

The woman thought, and responded: "I cannot have this young man's blood on my hands. As a disciple of Jesus Christ, I must promote life, not death. I will work with you in your investigation, but I will not support a death squad."

I was deeply moved by the testimony of this woman who demonstrated the depth of her faith by rejecting vigilantism and supporting the rule of law.

In recent decades, most Guatemalans have perceived politicians as being part of the problem instead of the solution. According to credible published reports, both of the parties that competed in Sunday's elections have been unable to root out ties to corruption and drug money. Furthermore, the current administration has permitted death squads to operate with impunity from within the security forces.

Alvaro Colóm, who will be inaugurated on Jan. 14, comes from a courageous family. His uncle, Manuel Colóm Argueta, was a visionary and reform-minded mayor of Guatemala City who was gunned down by a death squad in the early 1970s.

Last Sunday, Colóm pulled off a decisive victory in 20 of Guatemala's 22 departments. Pérez campaigned hard on law and order issues and played up his military ties. Colom's ample victory is being interpreted as a rejection of rogue violence and militarism by Guatemalan voters.

In addition, the current government has paved the way for confronting endemic impunity by approving the UN-sponsored *International Commission to Combat Impunity in Guatemala* (CICIG). This commission will support Guatemala's justice system as they try to shepherd some high-profile cases of government corruption through the court system.

Perhaps we can indulge in a glimmer of hope that Guatemala's decades of violence, corruption and impunity are coming to an end.

Pray for this new government. Pray also for Guatemala's churches, as Christians here try to discern their role in the building of a just society, strengthened by the rule of law.

Under the Mercy,

Dennis A. Smith