

Presbyterians here reach out to those in no-man's land

Brentwood pastor joins in Guatamalan mission project

By CHARLES BOOTH

Staff Writer

BRENTWOOD — The pastors waved down a dump truck and climbed into the back. All poor men, the pastors were dressed in dirty jeans and button-down shirts.

Missionaries from the Presbytery of Middle Tennessee watched and waved as the dump truck disappeared down a dirt road in the Peten region of Guatemala. The driver of the truck was taking the pastors back to their homes — barren places that, technically, don't exist.

"One of the villages where we work, nobody owns any of the land, including the church," said Philip Beisswenger, pastor of Eastminster Presbyterian Church in Nashville. "It's not really clear who owns the land. For us, that's part of the challenge, because part of our work is building churches."

About five years ago, Presbyterians in Peten began looking for help. Life was tough. They struggled to live off the land they didn't own, and the one thing that offered hope — their faith — wasn't fully understood.

Their pleas reached Middle Tennessee. Now, 95 churches in the Presbytery of Middle Tennessee are working together to support the struggling members of the Presbytery of Peten.

Needs are many

In a place such as the Peten, there seems to be no limit to the needs of the people. They're hungry. They're sick. Their roofs leak. The church offers a respite from their suffering, but there isn't always an understanding of what the Presbyterian church does, even among the pastors in the region. So in June, missionaries from Middle Tennessee traveled to the region and taught them about their shared faith.

"We asked them what their greatest needs are, and they said they wanted some theological education," said Susan Brantley, with Nashville's Second Presbyterian Church. "Particularly on the sacraments; doing communion. Educate the pastors on how to administer communion."

Pastors from throughout the Peten region gathered in a small room in one of the villages. Communion sets were passed out, and pastors from Tennessee explained the practice.

"They had not been celebrating communion in these churches because they did not have the training," Beisswenger said.

Mike Magee, pastor of Brentwood First Presbyterian Church, was one of the pastors leading the seminar. He watched the Guatemalan pastors talking excitedly among themselves after learning about communion, and he learned about something else that was missing from their church services.

"I asked a couple of pastors if they said The Lord's Prayer in worship service. The ones I asked said 'no.' We had the opportunity to give a message on The Lord's Prayer."

Problems grow

The Peten isn't an easy place to live. Crops don't grow easily in its bad soil. Though people have avoided it for years, lately it has become a refuge for the country's poor and indigenous populations.

"A lot of people who have moved there have been pushed out of other areas in Guatemala," Beisswenger said. "They're virtually almost like refugees within Guatemala."

In many cases, resources aren't there to support the communities that have sprouted in this area. And what they did have has been taken away.

"There's so much deforestation in that part of the country," Brantley said. "Their thatched roofs are needing to be repaired, and trees aren't around in order to repair their roofs. And water is an issue in this area. They're trying to dig their hand-dug wells a little deeper."

The problems are real. The people are real, but on paper, their homes don't exist. That means government services don't always reach into this part of the country.

"The government won't provide them a school because, officially, the village doesn't exist," Beisswenger said. "The government doesn't recognize it, so they're not entitled to a school. We've arranged with the people there to pay for the salary of the teacher."

After the communion seminar, the pastors stopped a dump truck. They climbed in and rode back toward their home villages. The missionaries from different Middle Tennessee Presbyterian churches watched and waved.

"I think there is no doubt they are Christians and serve Jesus," Magee said. "But there's a lot of room for theological education."

Contact Charles Booth at 771-5432 or at cbooth@tennessean.com.