



Sister Parish

Iglesias Hermanas

Summer 2020

www.sisterparish.org

Consciousness-raising
Solidarity

Ecumenism
Reconciliation

We only get through this united in solidarity

By Miriam Vásquez

Miriam is a nurse and a Sister Parish member in Tierra Nueva.

The pandemic has changed life in Guatemala and the world, especially in places with a lot of poverty... The virus is here and it is spreading, but we have hope that we can get through this. We know that God does not abandon us. I was reading something the Pope wrote and he said that people may think that this is a time of judgment, but it isn't. God is not judging us, says the Pope, but rather God is accompanying us through this. We are the ones who need to judge, to really look at our lives, to look at how we can shorten the path that leads us to God and to other people, and to look at how we can change our relationship with our neighbor. We have to ask ourselves, as Christians, what are we doing? How can



A donation of no-touch thermometers is delivered to the clinics in Tierra Nueva 1 and 2.

I help in this situation? Because we have to get through this together. We only get through this if we are united in solidarity, if we understand that the well-being of all people is important. We each need to do our part. And we need to be strong and resilient... Of course there is a time for sadness too, but we also have to rise up and show that God is with us by showing love for our neighbors.



Guatemalan students persevere in a challenging year

A conversation with Brandon Ramirez

I am the Coordinator of the Scholarship Student Group here in Tierra Nueva 2 (Guatemala). I am in my last year of high school. It has been very hard during the pandemic. At the beginning, the teachers were preparing printed packets of our homework for us to complete at home. Now, the teachers are sending the homework online. I don't have a computer, my phone doesn't have enough memory

for Office programs, and I don't feel it is safe to go to the internet café because of the new coronavirus. The market here was recently closed because 7 vendors tested positive, so we know the virus is here... Friends and family help me get my homework, but sometimes I don't feel like I am really learning. Many students are thinking about repeating our grade next year if we can afford it, so that we actually learn the material before graduating.

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Moving toward virtual hugs in our work and in our lives



Greetings after mass with the delegation in Guarjila

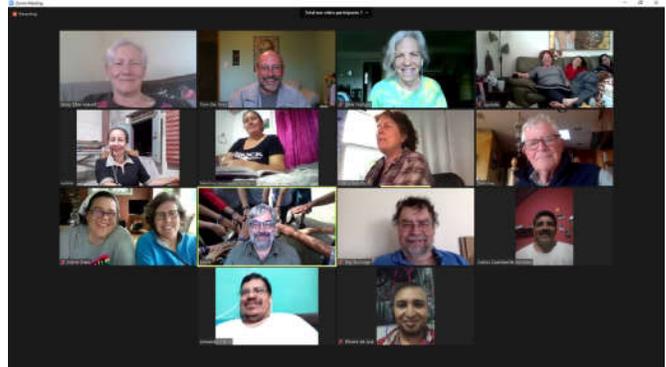
In the fall of 2019, Sister Parish was blessed by two delegations, one with Danville Congregational Church and San Antonio in Antigua, Guatemala, and the other with our Open Delegation that visited both El Salvador and Guatemala. In February 2020, a delegation to El Salvador marked the 20th anniversary of the relationship between Wallingford United Methodist Church and the community of Guarjila. On each delegation, we joined in celebrations, we worshiped and prayed together, we sang together, we learned about history and resistance, we deepened our commitment to social justice, and we saw the vital community work being carried out today.

We thank everyone who participated in making these delegations such wonderful

experiences. Our relationships and our faith were strengthened.

We didn't know then how much our work and our lives would change less than a month after the February delegation in Guarjila. As we face months of quarantine, social distancing, health challenges, limited travel, and grief, the moments we shared on recent delegations are that much sweeter, a comfort we can hold on to and part of a future we can, someday, look forward to.

In the meantime, we will continue to connect in our faith, in our love, and in our calls for justice in any way we can. We hope you will join us for Zoom calls, Messenger Bible studies, webinars, video exchanges and more. *Contact staff to set up an online activity for your relationship.*



Zoom reunion with WUMC and Guarjila.



The Sister Parish Open Delegation visited Saint Romero's house in El Salvador in 2019 (left). Danville Congregational Church and San Antonio gathered for an alternative delegation in Antigua, Guatemala in 2019 (right).

An example of true solidarity in times of crisis

In the absence of government aid, many Guatemalans are taking up the torch to support themselves, their families, and their communities during the coronavirus emergency. Doctors and nurses are buying their own equipment, churches and community members are distributing food supplies, and non-profits and private companies are donating much-needed financial and material support.

The Guatemalan government has borrowed billions of dollars from international financial institutions for various relief programs, including the Employment Protection Fund, the Capital Credit Fund, and the Family Bonus. Some features of the relief packages include providing families with Q1,000 a month, easing some credit payment charges, making loans more readily available, providing funding for pension plans, protecting certain jobs, and distributing fertilizer to subsistence farmers. Unfortunately, these programs have not been executed with transparency and many people have not seen the benefits despite meeting the requirements. The programs also leave certain vulnerable populations completely out of the picture. One way to access relief, for instance, is by showing low electricity usage on your bill—but those without electricity are arguably some of the most in need.

Leaders in Sister Parish communities are doing their part by providing baskets with basic food and hygiene supplies to impacted families. Tierra Nueva 2, Tierra Nueva 1, Chontalá, San Andrés Itzapa, Chichipate, UPAVIM, and Virginia have organized relief efforts using Sister Parish emergency funds. The aid efforts have prioritized elders, single mothers, differently-abled people, people with chronic illnesses, unemployed workers in the informal economy, families in quarantine, and farmers who lost their crops due to drought last year.

We are proud to work with Sister Parish communities in these efforts. Often taking risks and facing crises themselves, local leaders are demonstrating what it means to love your neighbor in times of crisis—a beautiful example of true solidarity.



Leaders in Chontalá distribute food aid to elders and families.

A doctor's perspective on the pandemic

by Carlos Orellana

Carlos is a doctor in a rural health clinic in El Salvador and a Sister Parish member in Potrerillos, Chalatenango, El Salvador.

The time in quarantine has been difficult. In the very beginning, as a doctor, I thought we would be able to control the pandemic. At the time, I thought that the rural communities wouldn't be too affected. At that moment I was thinking as the head doctor of a rural health clinic.

It was not until I was transferred to the regional hospital in Chalatenango that I understood the reality more clearly. Initially, I was working as a primary care doctor for COVID-19 patients. At this point, I had to face my fears, not just my fears for myself because of my daily exposure to the virus, but also the stress of not having much contact with my family and the fear that, with contact, I could pass the virus on to them.

Later, I was asked to go and help the team in the morgue, where I witnessed and felt pain, sorrow, suffering, empathy, and the fear of death. I also witnessed dehumanization. But in the middle of all of that, I felt what it really means to be human at the deepest level.

Guatemalan students persevere, continued...

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Even with all of the difficulties, we have seen a few positive things come out of the pandemic. As a family, we are spending more time together and we feel the love and closeness in our family. That love keeps us keeping on in spite of all the negative things. One might feel like the pandemic came and destroyed everything. But we also have time for our families, for reconciliation, for meditation, and for prayer. There are people here who forgot about God, but they are finding God again now, praying that all this passes.

Education in rural Guatemala

A conversation with Tomás Tol Perez

In Chontala, parents, students, and teachers are worried about the school year. Middle school and high school students are receiving homework and videos a few times a week from their teachers on WhatsApp, but access to the internet can be a huge barrier for those with scarce resources. Kids in elementary school are no longer receiving instruction.

Parents have a lot questions. Will there be midterms or final exams? If so, how can you test a



Brandon (second from right) with his sister and two delegates.

child who has not received instruction? Will students graduate automatically or repeat a grade? Will there be a shortage of teachers, especially given that some teachers are paid by the parents? Many of these questions concern an uncertain future, one which the government is ill-equipped to handle. For many families, life in Guatemala is a balancing act to survive. That is even more the case now.



Pandemic and tropical storms hit El Salvador hard

In March, El Salvador started a strict lockdown to slow the spread of the new coronavirus. The pandemic exacerbated all preexisting inequalities in the country. When the rainy season started in May, Tropical Storms Amanda and Cristobal hit El Salvador hard. While the three powers of the state of El Salvador dispute power, people all over the country are facing one of the worst crises in history.

The Salvadoran people know we can overcome these disasters, as we have overcome other crises in the past. People are not waiting for government aid. The communities organized to support those in need, once again providing an example of love and solidarity to the world. Our dear Sister Parish committees in Chalatenango and La Libertad have done just that. Community members and committees have gathered food, clothing, hygiene supplies, and medicine to distribute with their own vehicles. No storms, no pandemic, no broken government will stop us. Nothing will break the Salvadoran people's hearts. We will overcome this by helping each other and sharing what little we have with our brothers and sisters that need it now.

Working for racial justice

In the wake of the George Floyd’s murder in Minneapolis and the widespread calls for systemic change in the U.S., Sister Parish joins in calling out that Black Lives Matter and we express our support for the efforts led by Black people, Indigenous people and all People of Color to end systems of racism and inequality. We recognize that the calls are not new but started with the unjust systems deeply rooted in our country, systems now exacerbated by the pandemic. We call for justice for George Floyd and too many others killed by systemic and structural violence. We acknowledge the deep pain and grief that communities throughout the U.S. are feeling right now.

As the Sister Parish community, what can we do? We can listen, educate ourselves, and take action individually and collectively. We can build new long-lasting relationships to promote racial justice and transform systems that oppress people.

Our sistering relationships have always underlined the importance of listening, learning, and making commitments to change in ourselves and in our communities. Systems of racism and inequality are an integral part of U.S. history and the current reality, but they are also global systems. Calls for

justice in Guatemala, in El Salvador, in the U.S., and throughout the world are intertwined.

What does our vision for a better world look like? What do we need to do to move our world toward one of compassion, justice, and equality in the midst of such deep crises? In the words of Sister Parish member Miriam Vásquez, “This is hard, but we are called as Christians...to listen to the cries for help and take action. We want people alive and active in these times of violence and the pandemic.”

We believe that this work and each person’s journey exist on a continuum. We are works in progress - always - and there are no simple solutions to such deeply rooted, painful injustices. But we need to keep taking steps to uproot racism and anti-blackness in our communities and in our own hearts. We invite our Sister Parish communities to join us in conversations about our next steps, wherever people are on this journey.

All people deserve to live with dignity and basic human rights. May we challenge ourselves to take more and bigger steps to dismantle racism as part of our long walk in solidarity with each other. Thank you for being part of the Sister Parish community on this journey.



“Nothing will break the Salvadoran people’s hearts. We will overcome this by helping each other and sharing what little we have with our brothers and sisters that need it now.”

- Sister Parish staff Julieta Borja



Guarjila organizes aid after the storms.

2020 Fundraiser for Emergency Aid



All Sister Parish communities in El Salvador and Guatemala will all be affected by the pandemic. We are raising funds for small community-led relief efforts that could include food aid, medical supplies, agricultural products, or other needs as decided by each community.

As the virus spreads and the global economic impact sets in, the pandemic will affect everyone and expose all preexisting inequalities and other deadly “pandemics”, including racism, hunger, malnutrition, homelessness, lack of access to water, and lack of access to health care. This is, of course, also true in the U.S. In Sister Parish, we are one family despite borders and we will support each other through this.

Visit www.sisterparish.org.

Stay tuned for news about activities and ways to support Sister Parish, Inc. this fall, including our Solidarity Walk, our first ever Virtual Delegation, and Zoom conversations with community leaders from El Salvador and Guatemala. Visit our website, sign up for our e-news, or contact Carrie Stengel at carrie@sisterparish.org.



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