

Ecuador Fellowship and Learning Tour 2013

By Shirley Kempf

Members of the Central Plains Mennonite Conference delegation for the Fellowship and Learning tour to Ecuador met together at the international airport in Houston, Texas in the afternoon of January 24. We had some time to visit and get acquainted with each other before boarding the plane for our 5 ½ hour flight in to Quito. We are: Margie Mejia-Caraballo from Moline IL, Don, Shirley and Jonathan Kempf from Shickley NE, Shawn Nolt from Shickley NE, and Lois Janzen Preheim from Freeman SD. Everyone's flights went well and all of our luggage arrived with us in the late evening there. We arrived at the Rumipamba Hotel near the church and bedded down for the night about midnight.

We all ate breakfast together there at the hotel in the morning where we were joined by Maria Elena Arango from Colombia. We walked together the three blocks to the Quito Mennonite Church. Patricia met us there and explained to us the Ecuadorian context. Ecuador has a population of 14 million. There are 20 different indigenous nationalities in the country. Their economy is based largely upon oil, fishing, agriculture and tourism.

This happens to be the time for election of the next president and also congressional representatives. The present president leans toward socialism, but he has done quite a lot to improve conditions in the infrastructure. He has made a lot of progress in social programs which benefit society, even though he does control a lot of the assets. During our time in Ecuador, we saw quite a few different parades and rallies for various candidates.

Our second visit of the morning was to the Hazel MacCallion Elementary School. The school is named after a Canadian female politician who worked hard for gender equality. They strive to give a quality education, at a low price, to 130 students. They range in age from 4 years up to 11 years. They have classes from 7:30 in the morning until 1:00 PM. They have some concerns about whether or not they will be able to continue, as legal stipulations require them to have three times the space in order to serve that many students adequately.

After lunch at the hotel and a short rest, we met back at the church to catch our ride to the Inca Sector of the city. This is the area of town where Alba, a Quito church worker, her children, her parents, and many of her extended family make their home. And this is where the church would like to begin a program for girls to help combat teenage pregnancy. We visited in Alba's home, and also the home of her parents.

After supper at the hotel, we went to a large Episcopal church for an ecumenical worship service in celebration of a week of prayer for unity. There was a lot of music. And we walked forward, by twos, to share a small roll as a symbol of communion. That was a full day, and we were all happy to retire early at the hotel.

On Saturday, January 26, we had a "tourist" day. After a leisurely breakfast at the hotel, and devotional time, we walked to the church. There we were introduced to the students in Cesar's PROPAZ class. We drove north out of Quito to visit the Pyramids of Cochasqui which were constructed in the pre-Inca era. We ate our noon meal in a restaurant that served the typical food called "Fritada". It is fried pork, potatoes, hominy, roasted corn, fried plantains, and salad.

The afternoon was spent exploring the indigenous market at Otavalo. We temporarily lost Margie, when we gathered at a certain street corner before getting into our van for the return trip to Quito. After a long wait, some of the men fanned out to walk through the market and around the streets, where they found her waiting on a different corner. We returned to the hotel for one more night, paid our bills, and retired for the evening.

On Sunday morning, January 27, we packed up our bags, stored them in a room at the hotel and walked to church for worship. The worship space was filled with church members, Colombian refugees, and our visiting delegation. We sang songs together in Spanish and English. Our North American group sang two numbers in English, "Joyful, joyful we adore Thee"(acappella) and the other one, "My soul is filled with joy"(with guitar). Margie presented the meditation. During the Sunday School hour, we shared about our various churches with photos (Maria Elena, Margie, Lois, and Shawn). We all spent the rest of the day with our hosts. Some traveled to the center of the city, some visited other friends, some went to a park, some went to a scenic overlook, and all were well taken care of.

After our night's rest, we met at the church and drove to the church's refugee house. The Quito Mennonite church was first introduced to the plight of the Colombian refugees in 2002 with the arrival of the first family who took refuge in their church building. Following this, more refugees began to arrive, hearing by word of mouth, that they could get some help from the Mennonites. Some families stayed at the church itself. And then a house was rented by the church to be used by some families. 12 families have lived in the "refugee house". In 2006, the Episcopalian church offered a person for 3 ½ years to help coordinate the response to the refugees' needs. But other evangelical churches are not interested in getting involved. Since that time, David Shenk has assumed leadership of the refugee project. The Refugee Project provides \$50 worth of groceries to 40 -50 families every month for six months. They also try to address such needs as medical or psychological issues, housing and clothing needs, business subsidies, and have monthly workshops on such things as budgeting, nutrition, or opening a bank account.

Alba works part time as a church secretary. Her other responsibilities are with the refugee project. She does the initial interviews and also home visits. There is a committee that helps plan the church's response to this overwhelming need.

Each family then told us their story. Xxxx (names withheld for their protection) and Xxxx and their son, Xxxx, lived in a small town in Colombia and had a good life. They received threats from FARC because her brother was helping to keep young people from taking up arms and turning to drugs. A guerilla group was also involved, so they went to the city of Calle for 5 months. They talked to a lawyer there, who recommended that they apply for refugee status in a secondary country like Venezuela or Ecuador.

They came to Ecuador on October 1st. They were in a homeless shelter and in a refugee house run by the Catholic Church. There, they heard about the Mennonite church. They have been denied housing because of their Colombian accent. He worked a night shift as a security guard for 2 months, but never received his pay. They have been denied refugee status, and therefore have no hope of getting legal help to recover that pay.

Yyyy and her 2 children arrived in Quito three months ago. They attended the Mennonite church in Bogota. Her husband was in the Colombian military for 13 years. He was murdered by paramilitaries a month after retiring in 2000. Some of his

colleagues were involved in his murder. His extended family also began to receive threats. This was all reported to authorities, and was investigated for 9 months. In 2007, Yyyy went to Bogota to demand an investigation into her husband's death. In 2010, she was summoned to the prosecutor's office where she gave the names of those complicit in her husband's death, in exchange for protection. One month later, they suffered an attack. She demanded protection and was given 4 months of protection. After that, they relocated to a small farm for 4 months, with the help of the Mennonite church. Because she had denounced present officials in power and knew a lot about military activities, she continued to receive threats, so they moved and found another Mennonite church. However, the threats continued, so they decided to come to Ecuador.

Here in Ecuador, the church has given them much help. However, her children experience discrimination and verbal abuse in the school. They are accused of being thieves and have trouble being bullied. Her children cried as they related the experiences they have to endure in an Ecuadorian school system.

Another young man, named Zzzz, lived in a town near the border of Colombia and Ecuador. He worked as a taxi driver. In that occupation, you transport people you don't know for business that you don't know about. One day, he picked up a 15 year old guy and took him on 3 trips. After this, a military group came to his house and threatened his sister, since he was gone working. He decided he needed to leave home and seek refuge elsewhere. He went to a city to stay with a friend, and felt relatively safe for awhile. But, as time passed, his fear increased, and he began to receive threats again. He went to the prosecutor's office to complain, but continued to receive threats on his life. So he came to Ecuador with no possessions. He is a relative of Yyyy, so the church is helping him survive right now, too, while he lives in the refugee house.

We were all very much affected by the tragic stories we heard, and the helplessness of the refugee people in a foreign land and culture. They made us our noon meal, and we all ate together there.

After leaving the refugee house, we drove to "El Mitad del Mundo" which marks the equator. We visited the museum there which houses a fantastic display of the various indigenous groups throughout Ecuador. We took pictures of ourselves with feet on either side of the equator, did a bit of shopping, and treated ourselves to an afternoon snack. We spent the evening at a very nice restaurant where we treated our host families. It had a lovely view of the city at night.

On Tuesday, January 29, we met at the church to learn about the indigenous mission work in Ecuador. In 1991, the indigenous people invited MMN to come support the theological training of the indigenous evangelical pastors. There were 2500 evangelical indigenous congregations in Ecuador. And 50% of their pastors didn't have any training. They knew that the Mennonite church had a good reputation for supporting existing churches, instead of planting new ones. So in 1992, Mauricio and Sara Chenlo came from Argentina to begin this work.

Sometime after their arrival in Ecuador, Cesar and Patricia began to relate to FEINE (the Ecuadorian organization of Indigenous Evangelical Churches). They developed a program for the entire country, in partnership with CLAI (the Latin American Council of Churches). The ideas and purpose were planned by many, but Cesar and Patricia helped to write the studies. There were 20 topics that were proposed by this partnership, including social, political, sacred, natural, individual, and community topics. These 20

were reduced to 12 which were completed. In 2010, the partnership between FEINE and CLAI and MMN ended when CLAI couldn't get any more money to continue funding this endeavor.

We walked to the headquarters of FEINE, where we listened as 3 people related their present goals. They focus on the integral development of the communities, as well as the educational development of their pastors. They are presently addressing women's issues and try to plan some youth events each year. They are hoping to sign a new agreement in 2014, since the previous one ended because of lack of funds.

After lunch in a restaurant, we visited CLAI, which is the Latin American Council of Churches. In the past, CLAI has helped by providing funds to produce the material for the indigenous pastors. They have also helped to obtain missionary visas. Their goal is to facilitate cooperation between different churches. They conduct seminars on environmental, economic, and agrarian issues. They try to address such social problems as family violence, drug use, climate change, immigration, sexual issues, youth pregnancies, and HIV. They are also concerned about the religious downfalls of "Prosperity gospel" and other minority religions. All of their projects have to have social implications, as well as religious themes.

In the evening, we had supper at the church with their church council members. Patricia led in devotions, reading from Ecclesiastes 4:9-12. Her lesson was from the example of geese. They support each other by flying in formation. They trade off leaders so that they don't become overly tired. They encourage each other. And they carry the hurt and suffering ones.

The council then presented the various ministries of the church. Alba is $\frac{3}{4}$ time between her service to the church and her service to the refugee project. They have two levels of theological training. The first is the congregational level which is 12 studies for one year. The second is a more advanced two-year program at the university level. The church has a vision of planting a new church in the Calderon section in the northern part of Quito. They want to begin an adolescent project to prevent teenage pregnancies in the El Inca sector. They are hoping to start a bakery to help the Ecuadorian families that are struggling economically. They want to start small groups in various parts of the city. And they have a desire to own their own building instead of renting each month. After supper and sharing, we all went home with our host families.

On Wednesday, January 30, we had a day of tourism. We moved our suitcases back to the hotel and then saw some of the sights in Quito. We visited the national Basilica. And some of us climbed to the top of the towers to enjoy the experience and the view. We drove to the top of Panecillo, (a small mountain overlooking the old part of the city), walked by the presidential palace in Old Quito, and went to an artisan market.

In the evening, we walked to the church where there was a presentation in their series "Moment for Peace". This one was a discussion by a knowledgeable government official on the many candidates for the presidential race that is in progress in Ecuador now. We shared a rice supper before heading back to the hotel to sleep.

On Thursday, January 31, we left the hotel at 6:30 in the morning with Xavier (our driver). We stopped to buy some things for breakfast at a bakery and ate on the way to Riobamba. We actually drove on past Riobamba, to Guamote, where there is a very large indigenous farmers' market. It was very interesting to walk around and see all of the many diverse products for sale there in the streets. We returned to Riobamba for our

lunch and arrived at the home of William and Luz Marina in time for afternoon tea/coffee. We went to the homes of our hosts for supper and the evening.

Raul and Ivette, members of Riobamba Mennonite church, and our hosts, have a weekly Bible study and marriage seminar in their home and it took place that evening. There are about 30 couples involved in this group. Those in attendance studied until after 11 PM. And one new couple, wishing for more help, stayed until after midnight.

On Friday morning, we gathered at William's house, after breakfast, and then all drove to the train station down town. We, along with some of the members of the church, took the scenic train from Riobamba to the city of Colta. There, we had lunch, rode on a boat around the lake, and visited the oldest Catholic church in Ecuador. We were also treated to an indigenous dance demonstration before our return trip. We relaxed the rest of the afternoon and had supper with our hosts.

In the evening, we met with the church council. They shared about the various ministries of their church. They have a couples' ministry for troubled marriages both in and outside of their church that meets every week. They have a very active youth group and some of their youth are involved in leading worship, singing in a praise band, preparing dramas, and preaching.

The church members in Riobamba are mostly from Catholic background. The concept of a spiritual community here on earth is a new one for many of the members. But, some are beginning to realize what this means and are becoming more active participants as they learn to use their gifts.

Some goals they have are to have youth meetings every month and earn money for community services. They would like to have a raised pulpit area and some storage space in order to have more of a church sanctuary atmosphere. Eventually, they would also like to have their own building, instead of renting space.

Saturday was another tourist day for us. We, in company with some of our hosts, spent most of the day in Guano where we shopped, visited tourist attractions, and enjoyed the beautiful central park with its manicured and shaped trees and bushes. In the evening, we took our hosts out for a supper in a nice restaurant and enjoyed the meal together.

We met for Sunday morning's worship at the church. About four of the newer families are missing today because of hospitalizations, sicknesses or other conflicts. Two youth were worship leaders and also led the music. We introduced ourselves, sang a couple songs in English, and shared our power point presentation about our home churches. Margie brought the message.

After changing clothes and packing a lunch, we all drove up to Cachi through Yaruquies, where one of the first work teams built a church. It was a long drive up into the mountains. At the top, there was an indigenous Catholic church where a priest was conducting mass. It was different than other Ecuadorian Catholic services and churches that I have seen. The priest was leading an interactive service with many responses from his parishioners (more like a Sunday school class). The front of the church was decorated with natural elements and things important in the everyday lives of those who attended there, instead of expensive windows, art work or altar decorations. We had our picnic lunch up in the area, and some of our group offered sandwiches to a couple women in the church there and were rewarded with very interesting conversations and exchanges of wishes for God's blessings. We visited a museum of the history, products and people of that village and visited a small store of products which had been made in that village.

After our return to Riobamba, some of us visited Lucia (one of the hospitalized members who had surgery the previous day) and prayed with her. Others took a walk around town. We gathered at William and Luz Marina's for some tea and an evening of playing games together. At our hosts that evening, we packed our bags in order to be ready for our return trip to Quito the next morning.

On Monday, February 4, we once again bid farewell to our host families and gathered at William and Luz Marina's for our departure. After pictures, tears, and farewells, we were again on the road toward Quito and home. We traveled to Ambato where we made a detour up the mountain to the village of Quizapincha where we visited the leather store of a business partner of Xavier. On our way back down to Ambato, it started to rain, but we still took the opportunity to walk the streets and see the restaurants that were preparing guinea pigs (cui) and rabbits for their patrons. We did not eat any guinea pig during this tour. It rained steadily during the rest of our trip, and we were so thankful for the many sunny and clear days that we had during all the rest of our visit.

Upon entering Quito, we made one more stop at the store owned and operated by Xavier and Yessenia. They shared with us their goals for the store, as they plan not only for the future of their own family, but also, for what they may be able to do to help with the refugee project of the Quito Mennonite church. Xavier dropped us off at the hotel where we said our goodbyes to him. After resting and preparing our luggage for our flights home the next day, we gathered in the dining room, along with Cesar and Patricia, for a final devotional together and a chance to exchange our reflections on the time spent together as a fellowship and learning team in Ecuador.

On Tuesday, February 5, we ordered two taxis to take us and our luggage the short distance to the airport. No one had serious problems getting home this time. Margie lost a souvenir mortar and pestle as she came through security. (It could have been used as an assault weapon). Lois lost a full bottle of water, which she just bought after passing through security, and planned to take along on the plane for the flight to Houston. Immigration through Houston's airport went well for all of us. And Margie and Lois arrived at their next gate just as boarding was in progress. Don, Shawn, Jonathan and I had a couple hours to find some food and take a nap before time for our flight to Omaha.