

Ecuador Learning and Fellowship Tour

January 17-28, 2014

Gerald and Joetta Schlabach

Gerald and I were privileged to participate in the January 2014 Learning and Fellowship Tour in Ecuador. We traveled with three other couples from Central Plains Mennonite Conference (Don & Shirley Kempf, tour leaders, from Shickley, NE; Mark Epp and Cathy Wismer from Henderson, NE; and Dennis and Carolyn Peters from Lincoln, NE) and two young men from the Colombian Mennonite Church (Santiago Marin and Miguel Basabe). Elaine Kauffman from Mountain Lake, MN joined us in Ecuador.

Schedule

January 17: Arrival in Quito and overnight in Hotel Capital Inn

January 18-22: Travelled south 3.5 hours to **Riobamba**, where we stayed in homes of church families. The local Mennonite church gave us a welcome that included a history of the congregation and several testimonies of members. On Sunday we participated in worship in which I (Joetta) preached and Don Kempf brought greetings from Central Plains Conference and expressed appreciation for the service of William and Luz Maria Valencia, Colombians who had served the church the past 2 years. In the afternoon we participated in a farewell gathering for them. On **Monday** we visited a natural history museum and then traveled to the nearby town of **Guano**, where we visited another history museum and visited artisan shops. In the evening we gathered at the Mennonite Church for a discussion of the socioeconomic background of the region. On **Tuesday** we visited a museum of religious art and then traveled to **Baños** where we visited a zoo and a waterfall. In the evening we participated in a Bible study at the Mennonite Church. **Wednesday** morning we returned to Quito

January 22-28: Back in **Quito** we spent 2 nights in the hotel before moving to the homes of host families. On **Wednesday** evening Gerald gave a presentation at the monthly "Moment for Peace" gathering at the Quito Mennonite Church. He talked about Mennonite-Catholic dialogue and relationships. **Thursday** morning Patricia Urueña gave a presentation about the sociopolitical changes in the country that have occurred under the presidency of Rafael Correa, beginning in 2006, and César Moya presented a history of the Mennonite Church in Ecuador. In the afternoon we went to the park on the equator, La Mitad del Mundo. In the evening we participated in a Bible study at the **Calderón church**. On **Friday** morning we visited the office of **CLAI** (Latin American Council of Churches) for a presentation about the work of CLAI through Latin America. In the afternoon we spent time walking around **Old Quito**. In the evening we visited the church in **Jardines del Inca** and saw the **Vida Juvenil** center. **Saturday** we observed the opening gathering of a peace workshop for children at the Quito Mennonite Church and then traveled 2 hours to **Otovalo**, which has a large artisan market. In the evening our host family, Gladys, Estuardo & Zisa, prepared a meal for Luis Tapia (pastoral candidate) and his wife Jennifer, Carlos and Patricia, and Don and Shirley. **Sunday** morning was a time of joint worship of the three Quito churches. Luis Tapia preached. I was invited to lead the children's time and participate in communion. Following the service there was a time of dialogue with Luis and Jennifer, followed by a vote and invitation for Luis to become the new pastor of Quito Mennonite Church. We spent the afternoon with host families and Gerald and I attended mass with Estuardo at a nearby Catholic Church. That evening all of the host families joined us for dinner at the Cafe Mosiaca, which overlooks the city. **Monday** morning MMN worker David Shenk gave a presentation on the **refugee program**, followed by a visit at the home of a Colombian refugee family. Following lunch, prepared by Alba and another Colombian refugee woman, the woman shared her story with us. Later in the afternoon some of us took the trolley

back to old Quito, returning in time for a final dinner and evaluation at the hotel, which included César and Patricia.

Learnings

This was Gerald's and my first time in South America. Having spent 5 years with MCC in Central America (CA) in the 1980s with several trips back to the region in the succeeding years, we couldn't help but notice the similarities and distinctions between Central America and Ecuador. We realized that Ecuador is probably the country we knew least about, dwarfed by its larger neighbors Colombia, Brazil and Peru. We were very impressed by the changes brought about by the government of Rafael Correa who was first elected in 2006, following a time of instability in which seven presidents served in six years. Correa is a University of Illinois-trained economist with a socialist orientation, formed in part by Catholic social teaching. His first action as president was to call a constitutional congress which created a new constitution that removed resources from the control of political parties and gives priority to social investment.

Correa appointed two commissions: one to investigate the corruption and fraud in the banking system that channeled a significant portion of international loans to the oligarchy, and another to investigate the crimes of the oligarchy, especially during the presidency of León Febres Cordero (1984-88). As a result of the findings of the first commission, the country has stopped paying any more interest or principal on the portion of foreign loans that had been fraudulently used for personal gain and began to invest this amount in public health, education, and infrastructure. As a result, the poverty rate dropped from 37.6% in 2006 to 23.7% in 2013. The current government claims a dual identity: 21st-century socialism and *sumak kawsay* -- a Quichua phrase meaning the "common good" or "good life."

The most visible example of this social investment for us was the excellent quality of the roads, both highways and streets within the cities we visited. We also saw newly renovated parts of Quito, including La Ronda, and several new parks. In one park we saw a mobile after-school program. High school students and several adults from a Catholic high school were working with elementary-aged students. They had a mobile library with books and puzzle and a mobile black-board with various panels containing word and number exercises.

We did not visit the poorest of neighborhoods in Quito nor did we visit rural areas with majority indigenous populations that tend to have highest levels of poverty. We were told that there is a high incidence of teen pregnancy and lack of healthy relationships in marriages and families. Violence is on the increase in some of the urban centers. We were cautioned against using taxis that aren't officially registered and were told that theft is common on the trolleys. However when we were on a very packed trolley at rush hour I (Joetta) didn't notice a high level of alertness or precaution on the part of people around us, which appeared to include persons from various social classes.

We witnessed expressions of prejudice against the indigenous population. Colombian refugees also told stories of discrimination: of not being paid for work and of being turned away from rental opportunities. One of our guides suggested that the latter may be due to assumptions by Ecuadorians that anyone leaving Colombia has committed a crime or is involved in the drug trade, and that they are taking scarce jobs. (Similar assumptions prevail in the US regarding immigrants.)

David Shenk helped us understand the situation in Colombia that is producing 1000 refugees entering Ecuador each month. The refugee's personal stories put flesh on his information. One woman came with her children after paramilitaries came to her home at night and forced her husband and her to the floor with faces down. When her husband raised his head, the intruders shot and killed him. She took her family and fled the next morning. Another, Rosío, explained that her family (husband and 4 children ages 19, 17, 5 (?), and infant) fled after witnessing a murder and receiving death threats. Since arriving in Ecuador the daughter

has had a child and several weeks ago the father was put in prison when he was with some people accused of a crime. The family currently has no source of income and fears eviction from their apartment. They are depending on support from the Refugee Program and the Quito Mennonite Church which they attend. A third woman was from a wealthy family in Colombia. Her father was a Caterpillar mechanic with an automotive and airplane parts business. She followed in the family business and had a parts store in another city. The FARC murdered her father and several years later, when the family publicly denounced the killing, the FARC made death threats against her family as well. Overnight the family decided to leave everything they had and go to Colombia with only clothes in suitcases. Her teen-age daughters have had an especially difficult time going from privilege to poverty. This woman is now using her business knowledge to begin a food business, selling arepas (corn patties) and salchipapas (sausage and potatoes) on the street. Her husband has had multiple experiences of not being paid for work. According to David and César, the Mennonite Church (which now has a 3-year commitment of support from MCC) is the only protestant church involved in refugee work. The Mennonite refugee program is increasingly collaborating and finding support with other NGOs.

Fellowship

All of the information we received on the trip could no doubt be found in books and on-line resources. The greatest value of a trip such as this is meeting brothers and sisters in faith, receiving their hospitality and learning from their experiences. The hospitality we received came in various forms: church members taking time out of their schedules to accompany us at various times, welcoming us into their worship services, patiently listening to our less-than-fluent Spanish, taking the extra time needed for translation, individual families hosting us for 3-4 days/nights not only on the weekend but also during work days.

While we were in Riobamba we were fortunate to be housed together with Miguel and Santiago from Colombia. This made it possible for us to get better acquainted with both Ecuadoran and Colombian culture. Our hosts, Nancy Naranjo and Gerardo Rodriguez, were gracious and energetic. We had an interesting conversation on our first morning with the family, when Nancy's elderly parents who are deeply observant Catholics, joined us for breakfast. Her father asked, "What do Mennonites believe?" I gave the standard 3-point response about "discipleship, community, and peace." Miguel added, "we believe that our faith needs to leave the church and be in service to others."

We learned that the Riobamba church has had its ups and downs, with a frequent turn-over in leadership: Don & Jan Reinheimer (2008-2010), Daniel & Beatriz Escobar (2010-2012?), William and Luz Marina Valencia (2012-2014), and now Raul & Yvette Escobar are taking the role of pastoral coordinators. The church was begun by Catholic couples who had participated in a marriage encounter and were looking for ways to continue strengthening their marital relationships and deepen their faith. The church has developed with a specific mission of supporting and strengthening marriages. We heard several testimonies from young couples who were at the point of separation and divorce and how the church and their faith have sustained them.

Perhaps because the Riobamba church's mission is focused around personal issues such as marriage and because a number of the members are small business owners or professionals, I got the impression that there was less of an emphasis on social justice issues, which we witnessed strongly in the Quito church. Promoting healthy marriages and families is clearly a matter of social justice in a society where there is a lot of family violence and oppression of women. We pray for the health and growth in ministry of this congregation.

The emergence and growth of the Mennonite Church in Quito, now extending itself in two new congregations in Calderón and Jardines del Inca, was very impressive. It is clear that César Moya and Patricia Urueña have made an indelible mark on the formation and character of

these congregations with their passion for Anabaptist theology and peacemaking. The presence of workers such as Liliana Ocampo, David Shenk, Alyssa Rodriguez, Caleb Yoder, Luis Tapia, and new pastoral coordinators Tatiana, Alba, and Osvaldo, has also strengthened the church. I was impressed by the deep sense of shared ministry and respect regardless if one was Ecuadoran, Colombian, North American, or Chilean. Nevertheless, we did hear of cultural challenges, including for those from different South American countries.

We quickly fell in love with our Quito host family, Gladys Montaluisa, Estuardo, and Zisa. Gladys overcame a significant physical disability and the loss of two of six children--one of them murdered--to become a lawyer who wrote the disability and employment law for Ecuador. She now serves as a consultant for the UN, traveling to other Latin American countries that are working on disability legislation. She is one of two lawyers in the Quito MC who have helped write the articles of incorporation for gaining legal recognition by the government. Estuardo works for the Ecuadoran Special Olympics program and is the main cook for the family. He and 12-year-old Zisa have an endearing, playful relationship. (The three older sons are all doctors and live in other parts of the country.) Gladys expressed concerns for her early adolescent daughter similar to the concerns we hear from families in our churches--bullying, use of technology, sexual pressures. She was particularly interested in hearing from pastoral candidate Luis Tapia about his commitments and ideas for youth programming.

The family lives in a humble house, for which they do not have title, with a million-dollar view of the city. They built their home as part of a land take-over by some 250 poor families next to a municipal park. They were the only ones who built a permanent home of cement block; others built make-shift homes of cardboard and tin. When the city offered land in another area, farther from the city, all of the other families moved. Gladys and her family refused to leave, in part due to her disability which makes travel difficult.

Both of the homes and families we stayed with in Riobamba and Quito were important reminders that hospitality is about the quality of relationship and generosity of spirit, not the physical characteristics of the home. In North America we usually worry about whether our homes are adequate for hosting others. In Ecuador our host families were just pleased to share what they had.

The other CPMC participants with whom we traveled were an integral part of our experience. Don and Shirley Kempf were excellent leaders, providing information before and along the way that helped us anticipate and interpret what we experienced. They were never anxious and invited our input on a regular basis, modeling collaboration in the very best way. Mark Epp and Cathy Wismer had a quiet gravitas in their manner, raising wise questions and observations based on their previous experience in Bolivia. They were easy going and a pleasure to be with. Dennis and Carolyn Peters, while unable to speak in Spanish, more than made up for it with their simpática personalities and extroversion. They were the first to greet persons whenever we arrived and the last to be doling out despedida hugs as we departed. We hope that others in the group found our participation as beneficial as we found theirs to be.

Recommendations

While we have no regrets about our experience we can think of several things we would suggest for future trips, some of which were shared in our final evaluation meeting:

- 1) provide reminders throughout the trip of anticipated changes in altitude in order to dress appropriately each day
- 2) provide indigenous voices, including a visit to an indigenous worship service
- 3) provide a session that recounts the history of the country from conquest to independence
- 4) provide a session on the Catholic Church in Latin America, given by a Catholic

Again, we want to reiterate our deep appreciation for this experience and express our commitment to pray for the church in Ecuador and the Colombia/MMN/CPMC partnership.

February 1, 2014