



Scattered Seeds

June
2020

“Therefore encourage one another and build up each other, as indeed you are doing.”

— 1 Thess. 5:11

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ECUADOR PARTNERSHIP

Seeing the world through Cofán eyes

by Jacob Yoder, West Union Mennonite Church, Parnell, Iowa

In the midst of lockdowns, social distancing, and closed borders, COVID-19 reminds us how interconnected our world is and how our lives are unavoidably intertwined. While there are challenges that come with living in such a world, this interconnection enriches our lives socially, economically and spiritually — a lesson I learned while spending a week with the Ross Richer family in the Amazonian community of Zábalo last month.

In early March, I had the privilege of traveling to Ecuador as part of a delegation to celebrate 30 years of partnership in Ecuador with Mennonites from North America and Colombia. Our delegation was invited to join Jane and Jerrell Ross Richer, who serve with Mennonite Mission Network, in a visit to the indigenous Cofán community of Zábalo where they live and work. Zábalo lies in Ecuador's far northeast. But one can't type Zábalo into Google Maps and get directions. Our journey took two full

days through a country boasting the greatest biodiversity on the planet.

As we descended nearly 7,500 feet from Quito, we watched the landscape transform dramatically. Towering snow-capped volcanos on Quito's horizon turned into valleys of abundant vegetable and flower farms. As we continued, waterfalls crashed into ravines below us, through lush cattle pasture stretching out for miles until finally plunging into the expansive Amazon rain forest. On our second day, we wove through endless African palm oil plantations before the dirt road finally ran straight into the Aguarico River, a tributary of the Amazon. From there we hopped on a long, narrow motorized canoe, winding through the tangled Amazon rain forest, ceiba trees towering above us and pink dolphins cresting at our side.

Deep in the rain forest, one could be forgiven for questioning how truly connected Cofán are

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to the outside world. Our lives today, however, are more interconnected than ever. A population numbering only about 1,600, Cofán are stewards of more than one million acres of rain forest. They help protect the lungs of the planet. As North Americans, we put huge pressure on this massive responsibility. Our culture's voracious appetite for fuel has driven oil companies deeper and deeper into the Amazon rain forest. Against incredible odds, the Cofán have been able to ward off further economic colonization of their ancestral land.

In our short time in Zábalo, we witnessed the Cofán people's deep connection to the natural world and intimate understanding of their environment. We were taught how to bathe by never lifting our feet more than a centimeter off the river floor. This protected us from stepping on poisonous sting rays. They showed us that the best fishing tributaries were the most dangerous for swimming due to the threat of 40-foot anacondas, 15-foot sting rays, and electric eels. When they invited us to wakeboard Amazon style — with a motorized canoe, wooden plank, rope, and a stick to grasp — they assured us the piranhas were nothing to fear so long as we didn't bleed too much.

When we returned to Zábalo for dinner, our hosts served us portions of a six-foot fish called paichi. After spending these few days with our Cofán friends, living so immersed in the natural world, so dependent on its abundance, it was easy to understand how Cofán cosmology might make little

distinction between the spirit world and the physical world. This is the world the Ross Richers live in six months out of the year as part of their two-way mission. They have totally immersed themselves in it. After nearly six years living in Zábalo, their kids speak the Cofán language. Their son joins the young men of the community on hunting expeditions, while their three daughters learn to master the preparation of a staple drink called chukula, a sort of roughly mashed warm plantain smoothie.

As they've poured themselves into Zábalo, Jane and Jerrell said they have been deeply impacted by the spirituality of their friends and neighbors. Our conversations with Hiter and Mimi, the two brothers leading the church in Zábalo, revealed a worldview of spirits, curses, dreams, and divine healing — far more like that of the Bible than our own culture. This cultural reference has become an incredible source of inspiration and learning for Jane and Jerrell, giving them new eyes with which to read the Bible.

This model of mission — to be of service, and to be hungry to experience, learn, and grow in the ways of the people you are with — is a way of living in an interconnected world I know will enrich my life and my understanding of God. I have my Cofán friends, and the Ross Richers who have brought us together, to thank for this.

This piece was first released by Mennonite Mission Network as part of The Hope Series.

Left to right: Amazon-style wakeboarding; José Manuel Guamán and Jerrell Ross Richer relax in Tena after a trip by road and river; home of church leader Hiter Yiyoguage, who hosted Partnership visitors in Zábalo; Jacob Yoder treks through rainforest wetlands. Photos by Jacob Yoder and Holly Blosser Yoder



ECUADOR PARTNERSHIP

Time to explore: Naomi Ross Richer's gap year

by Linda Shelly, Mennonite Mission Network director for mission relationships in Latin America, and Holly Blosser Yoder, West Union Mennonite Church, Parnell, Iowa, CPMC Representative for Mission Partnership in Ecuador and Venezuela

Naomi Ross Richer finished her homeschool high school program in 2019 but rather than going straight to college, she decided to stay with her family for one more year of two-way mission, spending part of the year in the eastern rainforest of Ecuador—this time as a young adult volunteer, not as a high school student.

In 2020, she was off to a great start in the Cofán indigenous community of Zábalo, spending time with friends her age, helping her siblings with their schooling, and attending to the tasks of everyday life in the rainforest, including the family's laundry.

In a recent interview with Mennonite Mission Network Director for Latin America, Linda Shelly, Naomi described the benefits of being in Zábalo as a young adult volunteer rather than as a high school student, including time to be with other people her age. She also planned to read the New Testament in Cofán with three of her friends in Zábalo.

Relating to youth in the village, Naomi and her siblings model a different path through teen years—one which offers alternatives. She said, "People have seen us not going straight from childhood into adulthood, but instead having some years in between to figure out who we are and to explore things, or studying and doing things other than just getting pregnant. People have seen that and have started to change their lives, too." One friend, Betty Criollo, is now studying at the Ninawachi Mission Institute, and a couple of other friends are enrolled in a program to finish their high school degrees.

When Naomi heard that her friend Betty and others in Zábalo wanted to be baptized, she began a special project to help younger youth understand baptism, a book in Cofán with watercolor illustrations. She said, "I want to tell the story of Jesus' baptism to help people here understand what baptism is and how it will change their lives". As she envisions it, the book will start with Mary's visit to Elizabeth before the birth of John the Baptist, lead into the story of John baptizing Jesus and show Jesus' ministry, death and resurrection.

Reflecting on the way in which her life among the Cofán has affected her own faith, Naomi said, "I am very grateful to my parents for having come here because it has shown me a lot of who God is. It's exciting to see other people getting excited about the Bible and very inspiring for me in my faith. People here are discovering the Bible and Jesus on a daily basis."

COVID-19 Update: During the half of each year that they are in Ecuador, the Ross Richer family normally spends part of their time in the village and part of their time in the city of Tena, a provincial capital, where they have additional ministry connections and access to internet and cell phone service. Beginning March 14, the family had to stay in Tena because of COVID-19. Naomi worked on the picture book for Cofán children while in Tena. After a month sheltering in place in Tena, the Ross Richer family returned to their home in Goshen April 18, where Naomi continues to work on illustrations for her book.



Top: After the January baptism service in Zábalo, Naomi Ross Richer decided to write and illustrate a book for younger youth to help them understand baptism and Jesus' call to discipleship. The book begins with Mary's visit to Elizabeth with a watercolor picture set at a typical Zábalo-style house. Most of the text will come straight from the Cofán Bible, but Naomi's friend Javier Aguinda will also help her with writing in the Cofán language. Bottom: Naomi Ross Richer and her friend Jessica Criollo Mendua share a hammock while entertaining children in the Ross Richer home. Photos by Linda Shelley

ECUADOR PARTNERSHIP

Ecuador partners celebrate anniversaries in Quito, travel to Zábalo

Less than two weeks before Ecuador would close its borders due to the coronavirus pandemic, mission partners from Ecuador, Colombia and North America gathered in Quito, March 5-8, to celebrate two anniversaries marking milestones in Mennonite ministry in Ecuador.

One anniversary marked 20 years of the partnership formed for ministry in Ecuador that includes Central Plains Mennonite Conference (CPMC), *Iglesia Cristiana Menonita de Colombia* (IMCOL), and Mennonite Mission Network. Another marked 30 years of Mission Network's presence in Ecuador.

A delegation of international visitors from Central Plains, the Colombia Mennonite Church and Mission Network joined Ecuadorian partners in the anniversary celebrations and partnership meetings. Holly Blosser Yoder and Jacob Yoder, both of West Union Mennonite Church, represented CPMC at the meetings and on a trip afterwards to Zábalo in the eastern rainforest region, where Cofán Christians hosted them in their homes. The partnership has supported two-way mission there since 2015.

Hosting the celebrations in Quito were two Ecuadorian conferences, *Iglesia Cristiana Anabautista Menonita de Ecuador* (ICAME), born directly through the partnership ministry; and *Iglesia Cristiana Menonita de Ecuador* (ICME). ICME is a primarily indigenous conference with Anabaptist theological roots that began to take shape in the 1950s, and has developed more fully through the theological education ministry of the partnership.

On March 16, Ecuador closed its borders to both foreign visitors and nationals returning to the country, resulting in airlines canceling flights. All visiting partners made it safely home to their respective countries, the CPMC delegation arriving home on March 24, after a delay of one week.





1 - German Velasquez, Peter Stucky, Linda Shelly, Stanley Green, Holly Blosser Yoder and Jacob Yoder, international visitors to Ecuador from the Colombian Mennonite Church, Mission Network and CPMC, respectively, all present for the partnership meetings and anniversary celebration at Quito Mennonite Church. 2 - "Welcome to Quito Mennonite Christian Church." 3 - A Cofán artist displays the jewelry she sells at the village's ecotourism project. 4 - The Quito Mennonite Church praise team leads music at the Sunday service March 8. 5 - Holly Blosser Yoder and Patricia Miranda of Quito Mennonite Church relax between meetings. 6 - Alexandra Meneses, right, speaks at March 5 worship service celebrating anniversaries in Mennonite missions in Ecuador. 7 - Preparing cacao harvested in Zábalo for processing. 8 - Partnership visitors enjoy a meal of fish and rice in the home of Hiter and Ireni Yiyoguage. 9 - Morning ride by motorized canoe to explore Amazon tributary. Cofán church leader, Carlos Yiyoguage, led the trip that gave visitors a glimpse of the specialized knowledge by which the Cofán live from and care for the rainforest.



Pastor's invitation opened door to mission partnerships in Ecuador

*by Holly Blosser Yoder, West Union Mennonite Church, Parnell, Iowa,
CPMC Representative for Mission Partnership in Ecuador and Venezuela*

Transitions

Karla Stoltzfus Detweiler resigned as pastor at First Mennonite Church, Iowa City, IA effective May 1. She will be the new Executive Director of Hungry World Farm in Tiskilwa, IL.

Pam Gerig-Unruh ended her time as interim at Washington Mennonite Church in Washington, IA on May 1.

Nick Detweiler-Stoddard resigned as pastor of Salem Mennonite Church, Freeman, SD effective May 15, and began as pastor at Washington Mennonite Church in Washington, IA on June 1.

Shawn Nolt resigned as pastor of Salem Mennonite Church, Shickley, NE effective May 31.

Ry Siggelkow resigned as pastor of Faith Mennonite Church in Minneapolis, MN. He will continue teaching at the University of St. Thomas in St. Paul, MN.

Bruno Penner, 91, former pastor at CPMC congregations White Chapel Mennonite Church in Glendive, MT and Bethel Mennonite Church in Mountain Lake, MN died on April 10, 2020. He is survived by his wife, Julia Penner, and five children.

To prepare for ministry or mission service, Bruno attended seminaries in New York City and Chicago for four years, and medical school in Philadelphia for three years. He was ordained into the ministry in 1959 at Bethel Mennonite Church in Mountain Lake, MN. During his 40 year pastoral career he pastored five Mennonite churches. The churches were located in Glendive, MT; Meadows, IL; Mountain Lake, MN; Fortuna, MO; and Newport, WA.

José Manuel Guamán, president of Igelsia Cristiana Menonita Evangelica (ICME), shared the story of his faith journey during Ecuador Partnership meetings March 5 in Quito. The Partnership was celebrating 30 years of Mennonite mission presence in Ecuador at the invitation of indigenous Christians. Guamán was president of FEINE, a nation-wide organization of indigenous religious leaders. In 1990, Mission Network predecessor, Mennonite Board of Missions, responded to that organization's invitation to work together at theological education for pastors.

Growing up in the indigenous Kichwa community of the Chimborazo region of Ecuador in the 1950's, José Manuel Guamán came to faith in the Catholic church and, at age 12, became a catechist, responsible for instructing others in the church's teachings. His own teacher was Bishop of Riobamba Leonides Proaño, a leading liberation theologian who advocated for indigenous people's rights to land and water. Jesus' teaching in Luke 4:18 proclaiming release for prisoners, recovery of sight for the blind and freedom for the oppressed formed the basis of Guamán's early understanding of the gospel.

In the 1970's, Guamán began to learn from a new teacher, Henry Klassen, an evangelical missionary from North America. Guamán became attuned to the first part of the Luke 4:18 passage—"The spirit of the Lord is upon me"—as he encountered anew the Holy Spirit's power. The revelation that the Spirit would enter into and act in one's own life was life-changing and propelled him into pastoral ministry. The Luke 4:18 passage spoke to this calling as well: "He has anointed me to bring good news to the poor."

Recalling his spiritual development at that time Guamán observed that, "When we accepted Christ, we understood that our lives had been poor not only materially, but spiritually." He viewed Henry Klassen's ministry, including working to increase literacy in the indigenous community and promoting health, as uniting word and deed. As he matured in faith, Guamán recognized that Henry Klassen brought a particular perspective to his teaching and discipleship. Klassen explained to him that while he had not come to Ecuador to start Mennonite churches, his own understanding of the gospel came from his Mennonite faith.

As president of FEINE, José Manuel reached out to Mennonites in 1990 to invite them to work together at theological training. When Mennonite missionary Mauricio Chenlo began to work with indigenous church leaders in Ecuador, his anabaptist perspective resonated with the indigenous Christians who had grown in faith through Henry Klassen's ministry. Guamán observed, "We understood that Henry (Klassen) had been giving us anabaptist theology." In 2018, ICME formed as a network of mostly indigenous churches. In relating this history, Guamán commented, "Before, we were like children without a last name. We were just evangelicals, and now we are Mennonite—Iglesia Cristiana Menonita de Ecuador."

In the 30 years since Guamán invited Mennonites to work with indigenous churches in Ecuador, a number of other ministries have blossomed. In 2000, the Ecuador Partnership formed to carry forward Mennonite missions in Ecuador. Out of this partnership grew Quito Mennonite Church, its refugee project, after-school program, and peace ministries. Beginning in 2015, the partnership expanded to include Jane and Jerrell Ross Richer's two-way mission initiative based in the Cofán indigenous community of the eastern rainforest region of Ecuador.

The relationship that began more than 30 years ago continues to open doors to partnership. As a mature fellowship of churches and a new Mennonite conference, ICME has a vision for its future and a plan to prepare for it. They dream of equipping young people with theological training for ministry, as well as commerce and agricultural production, and they have invited Mennonite partners to accompany them on this journey. Guamán explained, "Today we want to focus on the challenges for the new generation such as technology and climate change. We as Christians have responsibility to carry forward the work of Christ."

20th anniversary Ecuador Partnership reporting and discussion

If this issue of Scattered Seeds has piqued your interest about the Ecuador Partnership, you may want to mark June 20, 1:00 p.m. on your calendars. As part of our Virtual Annual Meeting this year, we'll hold a 20th Anniversary Ecuador Partnership Reporting and Discussion Zoom Meeting with CPMC Mission Partnership in Ecuador and Venezuela representative Holly Blosser Yoder, her son Jacob, and Ecuador Partnership personnel Jane and Jerrell Ross Richer and Peter Wigginton and Delicia Bravo in the afternoon following our Delegate Session.

If you are only coming to the Ecuador Partnership portion of Annual Meeting, you DO NOT NEED to register. Instead, there will be a link to the meeting on the CPMC website homepage closer to June 20. www.centralplainsmc.org



From left, Peter Stucky of Iglesia Cristiana Menonita de Colombia thanks José Manuel Guamán for a poncho that Guamán presented to him as part of a celebration marking anniversaries in the Ecuador Partnership, while Manuel Aguagallo, center, and Peter Wigginton look on. Photo by Linda Shelly.

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FINANCES

The Central Plains budget ends the year in the **BLACK!** We are extremely grateful for the generosity that exists within our Conference and we cannot thank you enough for your continued support. Income during April surpassed expenses, which were lower than budgeted due to the staff transitions we were experiencing. As a result, we added to the surplus coming into these two months to end the second fiscal year in a row with a surplus. We are appreciative of all your support – thank you again.

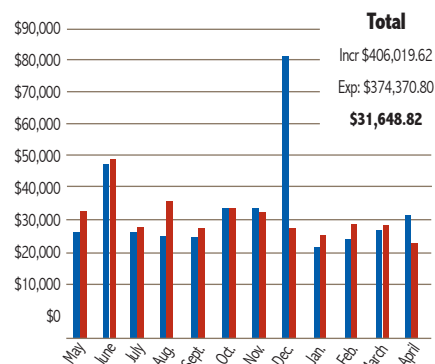
— Stewardship Task Group

UPCOMING EVENTS

Annual Meeting 2020 will be held virtually via Zoom on June 19 & 20 and in each local congregation on June 21. More details can be found on our website, www.centralplainsmc.org.

Central Plains Mennonite Conference

Income (blue) vs. Expenses (red)
Fiscal Year 2019-2020



*Growing in holistic witness to God's reconciling mission
in the world through fellowship, discipleship and leadership.*