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Missioner came of age in Guatemala

Tom Roberts | Aug. 31, 2013
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At first, it all seemed rather simple and straightforward when he decided to head to Guatemala as a lay missioner. Dennis Smith, who had grown up in conservative church circles, already knew a lot about religion and mission work. He was familiar with the stories of visiting missionaries.

He'd had experience in mission work and other cultural settings at a camp in New Mexico that served Native American communities and during a summer at logging camps in California and Oregon. He spent one summer during college working at a radio station in Seoul, South Korea. The experiences forced him to deal early with differences in religion culture and class.

So he felt ready for Guatemala. But what he eventually found there turned out to be something he could not have known or imagined when he first showed up, a freshly graduated communications major out of Wheaton College whose only language other than English was German.

He found himself in Guatemala that first time, in 1974, sent by his church in Evanston, Ill., to spend a year as a consultant in communications. One of the projects was recording harmonium background music for churches that didn't have live accompaniment.

He returned on permanent assignment in 1977 with the Presbyterian Church (USA) with three months of Spanish language study in neighboring Mexico under his belt "and only a vague notion of the deadly and largely hidden underside to life in Guatemala at the that time, *la violencia* that was on the verge of erupting and infiltrating every level of society."

But in those first months and years, a Protestant lay missioner could go about life without directly encountering that other reality. Smith said that he felt no danger in 1974, for instance, visiting remote Mayan communities on foot or bouncing on the back of a truck as he prepared photo essays of new church developments or exploring volcanoes and ancient Mayan sites. On the contrary, the experience verged on the idyllic.

He and his first wife, a college sweetheart he married soon after graduation, were wrapped up in the normal work of altruistic young missionaries living in Quetzaltenango, Guatemala's second-largest city in the western portion of the country, and learning about the diverse Mayan communities in that region.

Little by little, however, the other reality began to emerge. Smith would take his 16 mm camera to small congregations of workers on coffee fincas, for instance, where he'd show religious-themed movies on a bed sheet hung between bamboo poles, and he began to hear things.

"You stay overnight," he recalled. "You talk to people; people begin to share their stories. You come to understand there is an armed opposition. You pick up info as to how the communities are organized. You begin to figure out who's the military commissioner, you figure out if you go up to this coffee finca, you've actually got to go up to the administrator to ask permission for a public religious gathering, something that is guaranteed

under the Guatemalan Constitution.

"You begin to talk and compare notes with mission workers you trust. And you begin to talk about, 'Did you hear what happened in this community?' "

On the mission side of things, the National Evangelical Presbyterian Church of Guatemala, a fairly conservative institution, was deciding what would be useful in terms of communication. "The church set up a committee, in good Presbyterian style," and decided to seek a different path from much of what was happening in the very competitive Protestant world, Smith said.

"In many churches, there was a lot of self-referential pulpit pounding. We started working in indigenous communities, being quiet and listening to the real problems in the community." The radio presentations produced by indigenous Presbyterians were mostly devotional reflections combined with tips on health and agriculture -- all offered in the Mayan language.

Listening to the real problems, however, turned out to be dangerous -- and divisive within the church.

A "wake-up moment," as he calls it, occurred when he learned in the spring of 1978, just months after arriving in the country the second time, of a now-infamous massacre in Panzós, a community in north-central Guatemala he had visited back in 1974. A photo appeared in the local paper of dump trucks full of human bodies carting them away from the site. Through the grapevine, he learned that those killed were peasants who had come to the community to try to settle land questions and had been ambushed.

His first instinct was to share the information with supporting churches in the United States. An older mission worker suggested he not do it. He began to understand that older mission workers were fearful of engaging political issues because they were concerned "that if the church was perceived as taking sides in the conflict that repression could rain down on the church." There was precedent. After the CIA-sponsored coup in 1954, the military dictatorship had targeted evangelicals who had supported land reform. In the 1970s, the government had begun to come down hard on some in the Catholic church for what was seen as taking sides, and evangelicals could also point to those cases and advise against becoming involved in political issues.

At a time when the population you are serving is viewed by the government as the water through which the fish of revolution swim, it is difficult not to become one or the other.

Smith realized that if he were to build relationships with Guatemalan colleagues who were also gathering information on human rights abuses, passing on that information to outside groups was "going to have to be done with great reserve." Further, he realized a division existed within the group of mission workers that would not be resolved. "The mission workers who were concerned about these issues were sort of on our own together with some of our Guatemalan colleagues."

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A friend at that time, Mario Higueros, was going through a similar evolution. A native Guatemalan and third-generation conservative evangelical, he was viewed in the 1960s as a rising young star on the preaching circuit. It was in the mid-1970s that a Guatemalan priest invited him, along with poet Julia Esquivel (**see accompanying story [1]**) and others, to join a group "open to a rereading of Christian Scripture in the Guatemalan context."

Higueros said he and some of the other conservative Protestants in the group "thought it was an opportunity for us to evangelize and convert these heathens -- the priest and all the people there in the parish. We ended up being converted," he said, as discussions connected love with "a passion for the pain of the people." It was, he

said, "my first introduction to the social teaching of the Catholic church."

It was in such discussions that Smith and Higueros became acquainted as the conflicts that pulled at each of them grew. How does one recognize and respond to such pain yet not get swept up in the politics and the violence?

"One of the things that came out of that whole experience with Mario and with others was, for the first time in my life, really having to deal with ambiguity," said Smith. "I had already seen some signs of this even during my conservative evangelical upbringing. God had been patient in putting me in situations where I had to begin to deal with ambiguity and that the black-and-white answers that my own evangelical tradition insisted upon -- insisted that there are black-and-white answers to everything, and it's all in the Bible -- were inadequate," he said. But the stakes were extreme in Guatemala. "Ambiguity in a place like Guatemala in the 1980s," he said, "means that people are dying around you."

The result, he said, was "you find yourself making the least worst choices and that the choices you make can even put other people in danger. Even if it is not your responsibility, people who have shared commitments with you are putting themselves in harm's way."

Higueros said the early exposure to reading the Gospel in the Guatemalan context led to wanting "to do something for these poor people" that brought badly laid plans with disastrous results, like opening a low-cost grocery that ended up putting poor shop owners out of business.

"The next stage for me was first of all to understand that I now had a number of ecumenical relationships, including nuns and priests and others, and to transition from wanting to do something ... to investigating structures. We came to understand we were in the midst of an economic system and culture where a few people had all of the resources of the country in their hands and they could manipulate law, they could manipulate governments, and we came to the conclusion that that had to change."

That also was a very dangerous conclusion to reach at the time, during the 1978-82 regime of Gen. Lucas García, a vicious dictator whose bloody reign of military and paramilitary torture and killing was surpassed in number and scope only by that of Gen. Efraín Ríos Montt, who took over in 1982 by coup. Earlier this year, Ríos Montt stood trial for genocide. In a legal process that many think is not yet over, he was first convicted of the charge, but weeks later a higher court overturned that decision.

Ultimately, Smith and Higueros had to figure out their own relationship with an armed resistance fighting for causes the two men agreed with, but using means they could not support. Such fine distinctions, however, were lost on the government and military at the time. Higueros found out he was on a death list and left the country for a period of years during the '80s and completed a doctorate in pastoral theology at Spain's University of Salamanca. And once again the clean lines become blurred. This son of the conservative evangelical tradition, who eventually joined the Anabaptist tradition, a traditional "peace church," and became an educator at the Mennonite seminary in Guatemala, concluded in his thesis that the only peace church in Guatemala during the civil war was the Catholic church. He reached that conclusion, he said, because of the pastoral letters of the bishops during the civil war. While there was hardly unanimity in the national conference of bishops, they produced the documents. No other tradition spoke out as a denomination against government repression, said Higueros, who also became deeply conversant with the papal documents of the Catholic social justice tradition.

In their conversation in June of this year in Guatemala City, Higueros and Smith recalled the delicate balance required to be in conversation with the armed resistance -- benefitting from, and sometimes questioning, its political analysis -- while rejecting the violence and refusing to take up arms and simultaneously working to get the story of repression and human rights violations out to the wider world.

If it was a period of evolution and theological insight, it was also a time of incredible fear, nightmares and loss. For Smith, several acquaintances were "disappeared" or killed in the violence. He also had reached the end of his contract in December 1982 with the National Evangelical Presbyterian Church, which by that point was split along ideological and political lines. He spent 18 months in the United States, traveling to Presbyterian congregations conducting workshops and other educational sessions on the situation in Central America.

In 1984, he received an assignment for about a year and a half to the Latin American Evangelical Center for Pastoral Studies in Costa Rica, allowing him to continue frequent contact with and travel back to Guatemala.

In 1986, as he puts it, "I escaped and came home to Guatemala."

The following year, 1987, his troubled first marriage, which had gone through several trial separations, ended in divorce.

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War has a way of exhausting itself and, history shows, that even in the worst of circumstances, life somehow goes on. That was the case in Guatemala as the civil war gradually wound its way to a "peace process."

In 1988, Smith met and fell in love with a Guatemalan woman, Aura Maribel Pérez, and in 1989 they were married in a church she had built. And that last is not much of an overstatement.

Pérez grew up in extremely poor and sometimes violent domestic circumstances. She was raised by a single mother who sold used clothing to support her children. Following the earthquake of 1976, which devastated the country, her mother was forced to move into hastily constructed housing in a neighborhood of the city now known as San Martín. In her teenage years, she was educated by nuns of the Holy Family order of Spoleto, Italy, with whom she also spent a period as a postulant. She was too headstrong for religious life and eventually realized there was no future for her in the order.

But despite some well-remembered tugs of war with mother superior, Pérez today says, "The nuns marked my life. Because of them I am who I am. They helped me discover myself, and sometimes you need that." They gave her confidence, she said, recognizing talents she was unaware of, and they pushed her to take up leadership roles and responsibilities that she otherwise would have never considered.

One of them was to be head of a committee, as a 19-year-old, to build a church in the poor neighborhood.

But that story begins with her friend from childhood, Margarita Yus, whose family had to move to the city in 1966 from an indigenous community in Tecpán, in the Western Highlands, because a crop had failed, causing economic hardship.

Yus, who has retained her Mayan language and dress, was raised as a Catholic. She and Pérez recall walking all night in 1983 to a large military assembly ground so they would be in place to see and hear Pope John Paul II. She recalls vividly that John Paul spoke of the Holy Year and used the phrase, "Open the door to the Redeemer."

Yus was struck by the phrase and went to a nearby parish and asked the priest what the pope meant by that phrase. The priest "introduced me to the nuns, and one of the nuns told me, 'I'd be happy to respond to your questions but it would be good for you to pull together some other people who would be interested in the same questions.' "

She did. About 15 people attended, and that was the beginning of a base community movement in San Martín barrio that eventually drew an average of 200-300 people to Sunday Masses held under a lean-to with a tin roof.

Other meetings were regularly held at houses throughout the neighborhood.

Talk of the need for a Catholic chapel in the neighborhood began to circulate, and the Italian nuns tapped Pérez to be president of the committee. The committee began to raise money with the equivalent in Guatemala of a U.S. bake sale. Pérez remembers that the sisters were able to procure a large donation from a group in Germany that allowed them to purchase land on which the church was built. It's at the top of an incline, at a high point in the neighborhood. The committee, a group of mostly young people, eventually hired an architect and an engineer.

They had done a census and determined that the neighborhood contained about 5,000 families. Many of them pitched in to do the construction of the church. Lots of others brought food for the workers. It was, Yus and Pérez recall, a total community undertaking. Yus, who had children at the time and wasn't available to do a lot of the work, remembers bringing food and helping to haul sand and cinder blocks.

The group had begun organizing in 1983. They opened the church, San Martín, in 1987.

On a recent Sunday, the mid-morning Mass was packed. A lively group of players and singers provided music ministry; a visiting priest presided at the Mass and preached. The servers and eucharistic ministers included women. And the small chapel -- it is not a formal parish -- conducts a range of social ministry throughout the neighborhood.

Pérez does workshops on trauma and post-traumatic stress. The couple has two children, Benjamin, 19, and Lucas, 21, and currently lives in Buenos Aires, where Smith works as regional liaison in Brazil and the Southern Cone for the Presbyterian Mission Agency of the Presbyterian Church (USA).

He is a far piece from the Baptist congregations of his youth and from the unambiguous certainties of his early adulthood. One of the biggest changes he's experienced, he said, is in his understanding of sin. "The tradition in which I grew up understood sin as a personal act, and I came to understand sin not only as a personal act, but also as a system that chews people up and spits them out. So to call to evangelize, to call to repentance, means to challenge the hegemony of that system in a particular time and place.

Another change would be "coming to understand more fully the fact that Jesus was a Jewish rabbi who grew up in a particular time and place and under a particular political system, and whose teaching was responding to that particular time and place. His concern for the excluded, including women, was something that had been largely invisible to me" before the experience in Guatemala.

n the heels of the horrors in Guatemala, he confronted some big, fundamental questions, as fundamental as "Is God good?" And his eventual answer emerged in the realization that "there's something about life that breaks us all. The way that we know that God is good is because we can see in our own lives and communities, in our own relationships, that in the midst of brokenness we can become whole."

See accompanying story: **In confronting a violent past, Guatemalans find miracles in present[1]**

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