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## The Future of Quakers in Central America

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## THE FUTURE OF QUAKERS IN CENTRAL AMERICA

ALVIN AND LUCY ANDERSON

The Friends movement in Central America is concentrated regionally, with over 20,000 Friends in Guatemala and 2,000 Friends in Honduras, but Friends' influence is also felt in other countries, as well. In 1871 Friends outreach to Mexico was conducted by Samuel Purdy of Indiana Yearly Meeting, and a Friends school was established in Ciudad Victoria in 1877. An unprogrammed Friends Meeting was established in Mexico City in 1947, serving later as a base for the FWCC-sponsored Comité de los Amigos Lationamericanos (COAL). Roscoe and Tina Knight opened another mission point in Mexico City in 1967, with continuing support from EFC-ER. The number of Friends in Mexico overall is around 800. Friends in El Salvador number around 500, and a Friends presence is also emerging in Nicaragua. In 1952 a group of Friends from Ohio and Iowa set a living community in Monteverde, Costa Rica, fostering alternatives to violence and centers for peace learning.

The history of Quakers in the Caribbean, though, is much older. As early as 1661 and 1662, Friends were active in visiting Barbados and Jamaica, and in addition to calling for the humane treatment of slaves (George Fox in 1671) and the abolition of slavery (William Edmondson in 1675 and Germantown Friends Meeting in 1688), Friends continued to be engaged with the Isles over the next few centuries. In 1898 Evi Sharpless from Iowa began a mission in Jamaica, and today there are as many as 400 Friends in Jamaica. In 1902 a Yearly Meeting was established in Cuba, supported also by Iowa Friends. Following the Revolution in 1959, the five Friends schools that Friends had founded were taken over by the Communist government, and following the emigrations resulted in the number of Friends in Cuba being reduced from over 1,000 to around 400.<sup>1</sup>

While most of the growth among Central American and Caribbean Friends is the direct result of evangelical missions among Friends, support from unprogrammed Friends in recent years has also led to cooperation with such Yearly Meetings as New England (with Cuba, especially with Alternatives to Violence Programs) and North

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Carolina (with Jamaica). In our own experience, we have directed the Teacher Education Semester in Guatemala on behalf of Malone University between 1992 and 2008, in which we have brought more than 110 student teachers from Malone and six other universities to do their field experience in Guatemala. We also offered assistance to volunteer work crews and other short-term visitors who helped with Friends meetinghouses or churches in Guatemala. It is rewarding to note the life-changing result of these participants in their semester in Guatemala.

### WHAT GOD HAS BEEN DOING AMONG CENTRAL AMERICAN FRIENDS

In thinking about the future of Friends in Central America, taking note of some of the things God has been doing points the way forward. Of course, Lucy and I feel a special affinity to Central America; after all, we met in San Jose, Costa Rica in 1950, while teaching at the Colegio Metodista. We were married the following year at First Friends Church (now Reedwood) in Portland Oregon, but our Latin American experience expanded. From 1961-1969 I was privileged to serve with US Information Agency as director of US binational centers in Colombia and Ecuador, and US AID in the Dominican Republic. Lucy taught English and music in the schools and universities where we lived, and into our retirement years, we taught college students in Guatemala City for eighteen years in a row, as they conducted student-teacher training in its three English-speaking schools.

In reflecting on what God is doing within the larger family of Friends, most people catch that vision from their local experience. From there, our perspective extends to other individuals and groups, and that's the way most people perceive how God is at work. Of course, an overview of the larger picture is also helpful, but Guatemalan Friends (as well as others) most likely see the Friends movement through the lens of their local church or meeting, moving to the yearly meeting, to the region, and then beyond.<sup>2</sup>

So, from our home church in Guatemala City, the San Cristobal Friends Church, we offer some impressions of what God is doing among Friends in Central America. And, those movements tend to cohere around several concerns: spiritual transformation, evangelism and outreach, education and leadership development, and peace work and social concerns.

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## SPIRITUAL TRANSFORMATION

- Despite the inevitable population shift from the hot coastal plains to the eternal springtime of the Capital zones, there remains among Friends in Guatemala a firm attachment to their roots in Chiquimula, where Guatemala Yearly Meeting is held every year in “The Tabernacle.” For many Guatemalans it is a sacred place because so many have sought the Holy Spirit there.
- As with the preaching of George Fox and early Friends, spiritual transformation continues to be a central message among Friends in Guatemala. In nearly every service seekers go forward to pray fervently for God’s forgiveness, healing and blessing, and for guidance in decisions they need to make. Societal transformation happens one life at a time.
- The celebration of Guatemala Friends’ Centennial at Chiquimula in 2002 brought a special blessing, bolstered by Virginia Miller’s history of Friends in Central America, “His-Story,” which was presented at Chiquimula. It was a time of rejoicing to note the growth of Friends in Guatemala, Honduras, and El Salvador; God is not finished with us yet!<sup>3</sup>

## EVANGELISM AND OUTREACH

- Central American Friends have joint mission efforts in two countries: Cambodia and Nicaragua. Southwest Yearly Meeting has led the way, providing contacts and instruction with the help of Cambodians living in California
- Radio outreach, as well as other state-of-the-art electronic communication devices, have extended the gospel to unreached peoples in amazing ways!
- Church planting continues from strength to strength, as outreach to El Salvador and Nicaragua continues to bear fruit.

## EDUCATION AND LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT

- A notable factor in the growth of the Friends movement in all sectors of Central America is that academics, Bible schools, and institutes for leadership development have been established in

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virtually every Quaker center. These educational ventures are central to the vitality of the Friends movement, and increasingly, the leadership has transferred from North American to national leadership.

- Interestingly, if one visits one of the Quaker Hispanic services in the United States or Canada, the pastor typically is a graduate of the Quaker Berean Seminary at Chiquimula. As one pastor observed, “you came from North America to bring us in the south the gospel, and now we are sending our people from the south to minister to you in the north. It has gone full circle, hasn’t it!”
- Unprogrammed Friends have also made appreciated contributions through a program of scholarships for agricultural technology sponsored by Dr. Hunt, retired Quaker professor from University of California at Davis. Additionally, a growing circle of unprogrammed Friends connected with Colegio Maya have also been a support for students and others.

## PEACE WORK AND SOCIAL CONCERNS

- The 1976 massive earthquake left thousands dead and even more homeless in Guatemala. Of the many people who volunteered to help in the reconstruction process, many were Friends who worked through their established meetings/churches in providing a helping hand. The result has been an accelerated growth among Friends.
- The Chorti Relocation Project at La Florida, developed by Ray and Virginia Canfield in the early 1960s, was one of the most successful of such plans to provide a means of making a living for people who otherwise would earn no more than \$.25 per day. Overcultivation and the dividing of family estates among all descendants after parents’ deaths had led to increasingly unsustainable farming. Assisting some forty families, who moved into the project, literally lifted many from want to abundance.
- Friends have especially been successful at facilitating engagement and fellowship across ethnic and racial lines, as our fellowship and unity are rooted in Christ. Friends have also witnessed to governments and other groups to the power of peacemaking, seeking alternatives to violence in conflict resolution. As a result,

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Friends are esteemed highly in Central America, and this bodes well for a bright future emerging from an inspiring past.

### THE FUTURE FOR FRIENDS IN CENTRAL AMERICA

Friends in Central America benefit from a history of sacrifice and Godly example on the part of early missionaries and their successors. Friends have established an honorable tradition based on their insistence on service, honesty, and respect for all people. Indigenous groups appreciate the way Friends have warmly embraced people who might have been socially rejected by the people representing Hispanic culture. It is probably from the indigenous groups that Friends will have their greatest success as a result of schools and other benefits for people who might be overlooked by those who place a higher priority on status and social acceptability than on Kingdom worth.

The future of Friends in Central America may depend on their willingness and eagerness to work together as partners with other Ladinos of neighboring countries. Even though the countries of Central America are relatively small, the national animosities could be a roadblock for people eager for increased understanding and cooperation. The soccer game riot of forty years ago exposed the national hatred which sometimes can erupt into violence. The Quaker message of peace and understanding could be the basis for international cooperation. Friends have the advantage of a message that reaches across social, ethnic and cultural barriers.

Friends can accomplish more through the excellent teamwork that has often been evident in Friends' working together. Missiologist Peter Wagner relates the story of a man who wanted to determine how heavy a load horses could pull. The first horse could pull a load of 10,000 pounds. The second horse pulled 8,000 pounds. Then he tied the horses together to see how heavy a load the horses could pull when hitched together. To his surprise, the two horses could pull up to 33,000 pounds, which nearly double the amount the two horses could pull when hitched separately.

This experiment reveals the winning criterion for increasing the amount that can be accomplished: it is through cooperation. Let us pray that the Spirit may endow our Friends in Central America with both the beauty and the love that is so urgently needed as they form bonds of fellowship and cooperation in Kingdom relationships.

ENDNOTES

1. More can be learned about the particular histories of Friends in Central America from Francis B. Hall, ed., *Friends in the Americas* (Philadelphia: FWCC, 1976), and Ron Stansell, *Missions by the Spirit; Learning from Quaker Examples* (Newberg: Barclay Press, 2010).
2. The chart at the end of this essay (“La Familia Mundial de los Amigos”—the world Family of Friends) reflects the way Guatemala Friends likely envision the larger Quaker movement.
3. Virginia Miller, *His Story: 1902-2002, Friends Church in Central America* (Whittier, CA: Evangelical Friends Southwest, 2002).

LA FAMILIA MUNDIAL DE LOS AMIGOS

