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FRIENDS IN CENTRAL AMERICA

D. GENE PICKARD

In 1901/1902 two students, Thomas J. Kelly and Clark J. Buckley, at the Training School for Christian Workers in Whittier, California, were the first Quakers to respond to the call to share the Gospel in Guatemala. They sailed to Guatemala as Bible colporteurs in December of 1901, arriving in January of 1902 in the capital. There they studied Spanish for several months before determining to focus their ministry on the department of Chiquimula. They went out as representatives of the Training School for Christian Workers, but within a few years the support of the mission was taken up by California Yearly Meeting (now EFCI-Southwest). Three other missions had preceded the Friends in Guatemala—the Presbyterians, the Central American Mission, and a Pentecostal Mission (later aligned with the Church of the Nazarene). Two other missions would follow in short order, and the Friends joined in a comity arrangement with them to avoid overlap.

Paul Enyart reports in his book, *Friends in Central America*, that “although they made Chiquimula their headquarters, they spent most of their time traveling to the surrounding towns and villages, distributing literature and selling Bibles.” By September, [1902] they reported having sold nearly half a ton of Bibles.¹

Seeing the vast whitened fields of Northeast Guatemala, Kelly and Buckley longed for more workers to help them. Consequently, Kelly returned to California in search of recruits. Meanwhile, Buckley began a lengthy tour of the country and then began a journey through Honduras, with the goal of going as far as Panama, evangelizing and selling Bibles. Unfortunately, Buckley died of malaria on the trail.

Once in the United States, Kelly was able to recruit Charles and Gertrude Bodwell with their two small children, Esther A. Bond and Alice C. Zimmer. The new recruits sailed for Guatemala, but Kelly, after marrying, died before he could return.

The early years were filled with difficulties. The Bodwells stayed only a few months and then returned to the US, leaving the two single women alone in Chiquimula. Had it not been for the help

and encouragement of the Nazarene missionaries, the Friends' work would have been short-lived.

However, it did survive, and great impetus was given to the field with the arrival of R. Esther Smith in 1907. For forty years she led the mission until her death on the field in 1947. During her tenure, many churches were planted, and a Friends academy (Colegio Amigos) was started in Chiquimula, beginning with a girls' school and later adding a boys' section. Then in 1920, seeing the need to further train and prepare ministers for the flourishing work, missionary Mae Burk founded the Berea Bible Institute in Chiquimula. A student from the first graduating class in 1923 was Juan Allyon from Bolivia. He married a fellow student and returned to Bolivia to begin the Friends work there. For a time it was administered by the Friends in Guatemala, but later was turned over to Oregon Yearly Meeting.

The Friends movement in Central America soon branched out into Honduras and El Salvador. Several missionaries were assigned to the work in Honduras, where an academy was also established in San Marcos. Later the academy would be closed, but the facilities became the campus of the Jorge Fox Bible Institute. No missionaries were assigned to El Salvador until the beginnings of the 2000s. That republic has also established an academy on the campus of its main church in Soyapango, as well as a Bible Institute.

For many years the three Republics were united under one yearly meeting with one superintendent. As this arrangement became unwieldy, the yearly meeting divided into three independent ones. Honduras was established as a yearly meeting in 1983. El Salvador was established as a yearly meeting in 1989. In addition, in 1986 a splinter group in Chiquimula led by Edgar Amilcar Madrid established a fourth: La Junta Annual Amigos de Santidad (Holiness Friends Yearly Meeting). He also established a Quaker seminary in Chiquimula. Consequently, Chiquimula is the headquarters for two Friends yearly meetings, as well as two Friends seminaries.

There are currently some 200 organized monthly meetings in Guatemala. Honduras has around 50 organized churches, and El Salvador has 14. Each of those yearly meetings also has many preaching points or unorganized congregations. In addition, the Holiness Friends Yearly Meeting has a dozen or so churches under its auspices, most of them in the area around Chiquimula, Guatemala.

Early on, the mission emphasized education as well as evangelism and church planting. As we have already noted, the three major yearly meetings at one time all had at least one academy. In the 1970s, however, the mission decided to lay down the academy in San Marcos, Honduras. At the same time, they decided to no longer provide funds for the Colegio Amigos in Chiquimula, but to deploy the funds from that enterprise to be used for further church growth. This decision caused some tension and dissension with the national church. The national church then decided to take on the administration of the school and has done so successfully. The school has grown and continues to have an impact in Guatemala. Meanwhile, in Honduras and El Salvador some of the local churches have established academies in their facilities.

At the end of the 1970s, the Yearly Meeting decided to start a Christian radio station in Chiquimula. They asked the mission to partner with them on the enterprise. When the mission declined, the Yearly Meeting went ahead with the project and now broadcasts on FM frequencies into northeast Guatemala and western Honduras. In addition, they are able to broadcast into the whole world via their internet signal. Edgar Madrid also broadcasts the Gospel from the Chiquimula area via a shortwave station.

In addition to evangelism and education, the Friends in Guatemala have undertaken several social programs. In the early days the mission ran a medical clinic in Chiquimula. It even sponsored the medical training in the United States for Dr. Castro, a Guatemalan, with the intention of establishing a hospital in Chiquimula. By the time Dr. Castro finished his medical training and returned to Guatemala, however, the city had established a public hospital. The Friends, then, saw no need to establish their own. Nevertheless, travelling clinics did continue for several years.

The most notable social project undertaken by the Friends Mission in Central America was a relocation project carried out by Homer and Evelyn Sharpless and Ray and Virginia Canfield. Forty Christian Chorti indigenous families were relocated from the barren, nonproductive mountainous region near Chiquimula to the fertile jungles of the coastal plain. Ray, with his expertise in agriculture, and Virginia, as a registered nurse, were able to help significantly improve the quality of life of these families. At the same time, the relocated families established a church and became evangelists to surrounding areas.²

Early in the 1970's the Yearly Meeting purchased a piece of property in the mountains some 30 miles from Chiquimula to be used as a Christian camp, Mt. of Olives Camp. Later, both Honduras and El Salvador would also add camping to their evangelism and educational resources.

A remarkable thing began to happen in the 1990s. The three major yearly meetings, once the object of Christian missions of the Friends, began to organize to send out their own missionaries. The yearly meetings of Guatemala, Honduras and El Salvador formed a missions committee to collaborate in a new missions enterprise. The first joint effort was a mission to Nicaragua. At least three missionary couples have served there. Currently, their greatest effort is focused on Cambodia. Following the lead of Friends Church Southwest, they sent a missionary couple to Cambodia early in the 21st century. There are now two families from Guatemala ministering in Cambodia, sponsored and fully supported by the joint missions committee.

In addition to the missions project, we now find several Spanish-speaking Friends churches scattered around the United States and Canada. Many of them are led by pastors from the Friends' work in Central America.

THE FUTURE OF FRIENDS IN CENTRAL AMERICA

Since leaving Guatemala in 2000, I have had limited contact with our churches and leaders in Central America, though I have travelled back several times to teach short, concentrated courses in their Bible institutes. For that reason, my knowledge of their goals and vision for the future is limited. Nevertheless, I was able to obtain a vision document from the Guatemalan Yearly Meeting (Iglesia Evangélica Nacional "Amigos" de Guatemala—IENAG). Their projections exhibit an aggressive program of discipleship and evangelism. In addition, they hope to expand in the areas of communication, missions, literature, and social works.

Guatemalan Church-Growth projections:

- By 2014 they expect all of their churches to be involved in the discipleship of new believers.
- By 2017 the expectation is to have organized 7 regions (up from the current 5)

- By 2018 they hope to have organized 10 new districts (what we used to call Quarterly Meetings)
- By 2018 the projection is to have Friends churches organized in 5 district capitals where there are now no organized Friends churches.

In the area of communication the goal is for Radio Cultural Amigos to also begin broadcasting some TV transmissions by 2015.

By 2014 the Yearly Meeting expects 100% of its churches to be committed to world evangelization. They plan to retire from Nicaragua as a mission field by 2015 and to have only one family in Cambodia by 2016. Meanwhile, the plan is to move missionaries from Nicaragua and Cambodia to two new unreached areas of the world, perhaps Belize or South Africa.

They have projected new social efforts with the expectation that 100% of the churches be involved, beginning in 2013. They are concerned for the care of orphans, widows, seniors and improved agricultural methods.

The goal for the camping program is for it to be totally self-supporting by 2018, with a full-time administrator.

In the area of Christian education, they have formed a team of 15 writers, 8 editors and 8 pastor-overseers to produce literature and oversee the curriculums for the schools, radio, and bookstore.

Our Friends churches in Central America are fitting into the pattern seen worldwide in Christendom—the real growth of the Church is seen in the East and South of our world. May God continue to spur them on and help them to realize their lofty vision.

ENDNOTES

1. Paul Enyart, *Friends in Central America* (Pasadena, CA.: William Carey Library, 1970) 48.
2. The Canfields have recently authored and published a memoir about their work with the Chorti Indians and the relocation project. It is titled, *I Heard Their Cry; God's Hope for the Chorti People of Guatemala* (Bloomington, IN: WestBowPress, 2014).