

Short Mission Matters

People of God telling stories from their short-term mission experience

When I use the word *connectionalism* in my word processor, the spell-checker underlines it in red. That's because it's not really a word — at least not in our dictionaries — and yet every Presbyterian knows just what it means! We are “connected” to one another by our common faith tradition, Presbyterianism.

Within the context of Presbyterian short-term mission, the word “connectional” is vitally important for many reasons. First, it reminds us that a church need not be large to field a complete mission team. Within a presbytery, several smaller churches can each contribute funds and team members to create a multi-congregational team, each lending its own unique gifts to the whole. This “networking” (another newly minted word!) strengthens not only the individual churches, but also the entire presbytery.

Moreover, when mission teams partner with Presbyterians in the host country, they are taking advantage of our worldwide Presbyterian “connectionalism”.

Case in point: some years ago, when planning a short-term mission trip to the Yucatan peninsula, partnering with a small Presbyterian church in the state of Campeche, my church's Living Waters for the World mission team decided to advertise our plans in the presbytery newsletter, thinking that maybe someone would want to go along. To our surprise, we had responses from members of not one but five churches — churches that had eager and talented folks, but not enough financial and human resources to consider fielding a mission team. So, from six small churches (some less than 30 members) we formed one large team. Several years later, we are still a team, sometimes adding folks from another small church, combining and recombining, connecting and reconnecting churches within our presbytery.

And the “connectionalism” doesn't end with us — our mission focus also forms bonds among small churches in our host country when we work through the Presbyterians there. In the Yucatan peninsula, for example, small churches who are now operating clean water systems have joined together as a Network, supporting each other, learning from each other, and gathering annually for sharing of knowledge and experience. Healthy new interactions have sprung up among these small churches — new connections that flourish without our assistance — giving testimony to the durable value of the mission.

The moral of the story? In a connectional system, there is no such thing as a church too small for international mission, nor a community too small to be served. Thanks be to God (and maybe even to John Calvin!) ③

by **Joanie Lukins**,
volunteer for Living Waters for the
World

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Identify the ways in which your congregation can practice *connectionalism* as it is described in this story?

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We had come to Guatemala to meet our Mayan sisters and to see the project that our church was involved in. After brief greetings, the women invited us to sit with them in a circle. Catarina* arranged the worship space, spreading a hand-woven, square cloth on the floor and marking the four corners with candles. A vase of flowers was nearby. We began with Scripture, the reading of Psalm 133, followed by an opening prayer. The candles were lit. Then Catarina explained the meaning of the four corners and the colors in the cloth, the same colors that were represented in the flowers. Each woman chose one of the flowers, spoke of its significance for her, and placed it on the cloth. "I choose this yellow rose, the color of the dawn," I said, "and I pray for the dawn of a new day for all." Soon all the flowers and the greenery formed an interlocking circle on the cloth. We prayed in English and in Spanish, interlocking our hearts with those who welcomed us into their sacred space.

Sharing worship made it easier to share our personal stories, our struggles, our faith, and our desires for a better world. We also shared an exquisite lunch that the women had prepared. It was not until we finished eating that we finally set out to see the project. We struggled up a steep, narrow path, then trekked through dense woods, and finally over a ridge, before we descended into a clearing with a cluster of small homes, cornfields, and a handful of grazing cows. Our church had contributed to a revolving loan-fund to assist Mayan women with income-producing projects. The organization provided coordination, training and support, and when the loan was repaid, it would be passed on to another community. This particular community had chosen a cow project.

The women proudly showed us their cows and expressed much gratitude for our role in this cooperative venture. They were taking good care of the cows, but they had learned that the younger ones needed to be treated with an anti-parasitic. The commercial products were very costly. The agronomist working with the Mayan Presbyterian Women showed them how to make an organic version that would accomplish the same purpose. Since the anti-parasitic was natural, easily produced, and economical, the women were selling it to other communities and gaining additional income. And more than that, they were gaining new self-confidence and pride. An elderly grandmother stepped forward, her eyes shining as she held out a jar which contained the most unappealing concoction. "Look at this," she said. "This is what is sending my grandchildren to school."

It was a privilege to meet these women. We were humbled by their deep faith and hospitality. They took time to pray, to build relationships and enfold us into their lives before we ever saw the cows. Their gratitude was contagious. We rejoiced in their growing dignity and in the future they envisioned for their cows, their

by **Mary Jane Winter**,
PC(USA) mission participant who
served on the CEDEPCA mission
network of Guatemala and has led
many partnership trips there.

* Catarina was the leader of the
Mayan women Mary Jane met on
her trip.

community, and their children. We rejoiced that together we could glimpse the dawn of a new day and the transformation it was bringing to them — and to us. ④⑤⑥

④ Where do you see mutual accountability in this story – the Mayan Presbyterians and U.S. Presbyterians “asking, telling” and sharing?

⑤ Does the loan set the stage for the relationships, or do relationships set the stage for the sharing of resources?

⑥ How are the Mayan women accountable to their own community through the cow project?

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We arrived in Guatemala and learned that our assignment was building terraces in the small village of Toj Mech. We enthusiastically climbed half way up a mountain to spend hours in the sun using broken tools to dig stairs into the steep soil. We worked for two days, happy to provide these people with better farming techniques that yielded them crops they would be able to eat and sell. We only finished three terraces, and there was much work still to be done. We were told on the third day that we would no longer be digging the terraces. Confused and upset, we asked, “Why won’t you let us help these people?”

We were disappointed with Mike’s answer. “You guys are tired. You’ve worked hard and you deserve a break. It is important just to spend time with the people.” Spend time with them? Most of us knew little or no Spanish, and we were expected to just hang out with them? The next day, we were taken by bus to their church, grumbling as we passed the unfinished terraces on our way. Little did we know what awaited us at the church — children! At least a hundred children greeted us with smiles and hugs when we arrived, and we proceeded to play with them all afternoon. We met the families that we would be doing the *home-stay* with and left with them for the night.

To say that seeing the conditions these people lived in was humbling is an understatement! A family of six was crammed into a two-room shack, and they gave us the only bed to sleep in. They showed us off to all of their friends, and we played with their children, Francisco, Maria, and Pedro all night. Language barrier? What language barrier? Who needs words when the smiles on their faces told me everything I needed to know: they were happy we were there. They have so little, but our presence brought them delight and excitement.

Mission isn’t necessarily spending hours in the hot sun hacking away at the soil. Mission isn’t necessarily in any form of physical labor. Mission can be your time, your purpose, and your presence. We took time as a youth group to travel to Guatemala to help them, but they helped me more than they can ever know. We showed them we cared and they showed us the meaning of mission and hospitality. So whether it is large scale mission like feeding the 5,000 or small scale, like spending time with someone who needs to know that they matter, mission to me is a bond between you and someone else who both need each other. ③

by **Nora Bland**,
participated in a mission trip to
Guatemala in 2009 when she was a
teenager.

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Nora learns that “helping” doesn’t necessarily involve doing something or fixing a problem. Think about a time when you served God through a tangible, material witness. Now think about a time when you served God through a less tangible witness.

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The Latin American Task Force of the Giddings-Lovejoy Presbytery first visited the village of Plan Grande 2, Nicaragua, in 2000 to assist in post-Hurricane Mitch reconstruction. For many of us, this was our first face-to-face experience with abject poverty. We saw people living in dirt-floored homes, whose children couldn't attend school for lack of funds for the required uniforms. We fell in love with these "humble peasants" and left determined to "help them improve their lives."

A few months later I spoke before a group of Presbyterian Women. After viewing slides of those we'd met, together we hit upon what seemed a brilliant solution to their impoverishment: we'd equip them to sew! We'd purchase sewing machines, fabric, notions... And before we knew it, our friends would be sewing their way out of poverty!

Except—we hadn't included Plan Grande 2 in this conversation. In fact, it occurred to none of us that our friends might not be the least bit interested in our project. We had simply looked at them, perceived a need, and went about solving their problem not with them, but for them.

With a rather smug sense of pride in our ingenuity, I emailed a Presbyterian Mission Co-worker assigned to CEPAD in Nicaragua, the PC(USA) partner organization that facilitates our partnership. I was certain she'd share our enthusiasm. Imagine, then, my surprise when her response was closer to a rebuke. How could we make plans for women in Plan Grande 2 without input from them? Had we given consideration to any practical matters, including the fact that the community had no electricity? And where would items of such value be stored? What would happen when they inevitably required repair? Furthermore, did the women of Plan Grande 2 even want to sew? The wind abruptly escaped my sails. I felt completely deflated. However, this created an opportunity for the first of many teachable moments. The mission co-worker helped open a door for dialogue that paved the way for a partnership—not charity, but a meaningful way for us to share our lives and faith. We hadn't given our friends an opportunity to speak. We were ready to try to make their world more like ours, without even attempting to listen to what they had to say.

And when we did listen, what did we learn? That these "humble peasants" were very wise and resourceful people whose business acumen had been established long before we arrived. We learned that what they really wanted was for us to work alongside them to change structures that were making their lives difficult. We also learned that the women of Plan Grande 2 weren't the least bit interested in sewing—they were interested in some-thing that would benefit their community at large for generations to come. Their vision far exceeded that of our limited horizon.

by **Kathie Sherman**,
a mission initiator involved with a partnership between Giddings-Lovejoy Presbytery and Plan Grande 2, Nicaragua.

In 2010 we celebrate(d) ten years of partnership. With CEPAD helping us to interpret not only one another's language, but one another's cultures, we're hearing what our friends have to say about their lives—and likewise, they hear us. We tread carefully, knowing that because of our economic status, our partnership is inevitably lopsided—making it all the more important for us to hear with open hearts. We've learned a lot, and most of what we've learned has come through listening.

Study questions

What would an ideal, equitable partnership look like in terms of listening to and learning from mission partners? Identify concrete ways individuals and congregations can genuinely listen to mission partners.

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We have received quite a number of partners in the Women's Guild. We work with several of them. And one of the interesting experiences I remember is when our partners came to paint one of the dormitories of a children's home. Our women have a home, an orphanage for physically challenged children. And our partner wanted to come and do something — paint one of the dormitories of the children.

And we made all of the arrangements. They asked how much we would need. They even made arrangements so that we could buy paint. They even asked us to look for people who would help a little bit — hire some who would do some manual work in terms of assisting them.

And I just told our women in that project that we have one of our partners who were ready to come and paint one of the dormitories. And we didn't take time to go and visit the project, to sit with the women there and see their need. And so we assumed that they would definitely want one of the dormitories painted.

And so we did all the preparation and we put everything in the car. We had all of our paint, all of our brushes with our partners and all the gloves and off we went. And of course we started with introductions and the worship together which is very important. Praying together and so on. And we had arranged that they would spend a night with our partners, with the women who were working with this project.

But when we got to do the actual painting, and we asked, "Where is the dormitory that our partners want to paint?" We were really surprised because they told us that they didn't have a dormitory to paint, but that they would want us to paint the pastor's house.

And so I said, I was like, "No, we didn't come here to paint a pastor's house. The church can do the pastor's house. We are here to do some work for the project of the children." And so that was the time we really sat down with the women and they were able to explain to us that they are also the ones who take care of the pastor's house. And they were ashamed that the pastor's house was looking very, very bad. It needed painting, but they did not have the money to do the painting. And so when this opportunity came, they thought it was a good opportunity to paint the pastor's house.

And so we asked them, "What about the children's dormitory?" And they told us, "We just had partners and they have done the children's dormitory and it is just fine. But the pastor's house is here and since we were receiving partners, we couldn't say 'no.'"

And so we sat and we talked and we agreed that yes, this is what our women need. And they felt that painting the house of the pastor is also mission work. And it is also part of partnership. And so we agreed and the pastor's house was painted. ③

by **Veronica Muchiri**,
National Women's Guild Organizer for
the Presbyterian Church of East Africa, a
partner of the PC(USA)

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Veronica Muchiri's story highlights the assumptions about need that we sometimes make when engaging in cross-cultural ministry. The partners at the women's project didn't need a dorm painted; they felt they needed to paint the pastor's house. Yet these women — local partners for Veronica — did not feel they could say "no" in the face of their local and international partners' offer to come and help. Think about a time when you or your church may have made an assumption about a mission partner's needs, stemming from a failure to communicate well with that partner. Can you think of a time when it may have been that a mission partner felt compelled to agree or say "yes" to your church's agenda regarding perceived needs, rather than risk damaging the relationship with your church?