

Postcard from Guatemala: Lessons in Leadership

By Mary B. Wacker, MS

A small, barefooted girl bends over at the waist, carefully places a doll on her back and flings a *rebozo* (shawl) over the doll. Standing, she ties the shawl across her chest in the traditional manner. She is imitating her mother, her grandmother and countless other Guatemalan women who carry their babies on their backs. She has learned the way most of us learn - through observation and practice.

Joining a medical mission to Guatemala was a unique and satisfying experience and unexpectedly, a lesson in local leadership. Sponsored by Medical Ministries International (MMI), this Christian organization provides opportunities for volunteers to work in medical, dental and eye clinics throughout the world. While volunteers do not need to be Christian, they are asked to respect MMI's principles. Over 2500 volunteer each year.

In February, 29 *gringos* from the US and Canada trooped to Comitancillo (Co-mee-tan-see-o), a small town in the western Guatemalan Highlands, to provide a two week medical/surgical clinic. With physicians, nurses, surgeons, anesthesiologists, translators and techs, I fell into the General Helper category. As such, I worked in the pharmacy filling orders, did pharmacy pick-up and delivery to the patient teaching area nearby, organized surgery schedules, visited local classrooms "marketing" our clinic, colored, blew bubbles and played guitar with waiting patients. I expected to be flexible, helping wherever needed. I didn't expect to encounter leadership development, Guatemalan style.

Why have a medical clinic? To "provide spiritual and physical healthcare in this world of need", according to MMI. Yes, and...for another important reason – to develop leadership within local communities.

Village committees organize the clinics, establish fees for service, and develop methods to run the clinic – from registration through surgery. Local translators provided almost all our patient teaching. While our volunteer group included several English-Spanish translators, we were primarily serving the indigenous Mayan-descent Mam (mom) Indians living in the region. We could not provide any healthcare without our local Spanish-Mam translators. Running the clinic was dependent upon at least a dozen local volunteers showing up each day to assist with patient registration, cooking, patient transport and occasional emergency trips to the hospital 1½ hours away. The clinic gave many local residents the opportunity to develop new skills and participate in building their community.

Our mission coordinator, Gardner, an American living in Comitancillo, made it clear that even if there were no patients, the clinics have lasting impact on the community's leadership, faith and ability to create options in the face of almost insurmountable poverty and oppression. While the locals learned from us and developed their skills, I was inspired by them around some fundamental values:

Family: The strength of families in Comitancillo is powerful. No one arrived for health care alone. Each person came with a spouse, children, brother, uncle or grandmother. Groups of related families often came together.

Commitment and Patience: With most arriving on foot, some from several hours away, they came prepared to spend the entire day with us.

Relationships: Mam people carry their bundles atop their heads or on their backs supported from a headstrap. I learned this is the most efficient way to use calories (critical in areas where food is a daily concern) but more importantly, it is to

leave their hands free for the traditional handshake greeting, offered to all they encounter. Most patients, upon leaving the clinic, would be sure to touch my hand, my shoulder or take my arm. Connection was a way to say, “thank you, this made a difference.”

Participating in this mission provided a richness of experience I will never forget. For two weeks we lived and worked together, appreciating each other’s talents and sharing in the Guatemalan culture, from food and market day to worship where we *gringos* sang a song we had learned in Spanish: *Gracias de mi Corazon* (*Thank you from my Heart.*) It expresses my sentiments exactly.

Anyone interested in learning more about Medical Ministry International can call (972) 437-1995 or email: mmitx @ computek.net.

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Article published in the May, 1999 ASTD Southeastern Wisconsin Newsletter: *Discovery*

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