

“With the Stovebuilders of Guatemala-A book of Matches”

By David M. Weaver

I look up at what is now a full moon on a lovely last night working in Guatemala. We are in Santiago Atitlan, a town in the volcanic highlands of southwestern Guatemala, which is in a remote corner of Central America. To get here we traveled several hours by van from Guatemala City, then in a boat across Lake Atitlan, a beautiful blue lake.

I gaze at the stars and find it hard to believe our time in Guatemala is nearly over. Tomorrow we will again cross Lake Atitlan and go back home. I pause a moment and briefly recall some of the people, the places and the events shared these few days in Guatemala. Wearing our matching blue t-shirts as we made our way here, we all blended together yet we stood out from the local villagers who generally still wear their traditional and quite colorful clothes. “Amigos Por Siempre” is written on the backs of the blue t-shirts our group wears. Upon completion of a stove this logo will be stamped on each of the stoves. Yes, we are now “Friends Forever” with each other, the local stovebuilders, and the villagers with whom we have worked, all of us changed now by our work and our time together in the village.

We have spent a week building stoves here in Guatemala, a tradition and mission started by First United Methodist Church Wichita several years ago. A handout concerning the mission recites in part: “Many indigenous Guatemalan women continue to cook meals on the ground in windowless kitchens with no way to vent the smoke.” The brochure describes some of the problems in villages with no alternative but cooking on the ground or primitive fireplaces. These include lung and eye diseases, burns to the women and their young children from open fires, and depletion of the Guatemalan forests due to the large amount of wood used for cooking fires. The mission is to build concrete stoves to provide healthier and safer cooking conditions so that smoke is vented to the outside, cooking is done off the ground, and less wood is used. In the process young men from local villages are trained to build stoves, providing them with a new trade and a source of income.

Impatiently you ask, “What did you see, what did you do, what did you learn? Do they speak English?”

I think of Romelda, Elena, Deloris, their young children and families and others we met as we worked building stoves, and of little boys playing in the dirt with little toy trucks. I recall seeing a lady building a fire and then using her hands to make tortillas, something she does every day, 3 times a day, to feed her family every day if there is enough corn and meal. The beauty of the country is not mirrored in the harsh poverty that most here endure.

What did I see? In a very humble outdoor shed where we were building a stove, I saw a book of matches.

I grew up in northeast Arkansas where winters were cold, and homes were heated generally by wood stoves. I recall as a child seeing a big box of matches used by my grandmother and grandfather to start a fire to cook in grandmother's cast iron kitchen cook stove. Another fire was started in the cast iron cannonball heater used to heat the living room. These were their only sources for heat and for cooking in the cold winters of Northeast Arkansas. I would bring kindling wood into the house for Grandma to start a fire. Although my Grandmother used matches to light a fire in the enclosed cast iron stove inside her kitchen in her house, her home had four solid walls and a good roof overhead. Her home was not open to the wind, weather and elements as are the humble homes of the Mayan village here in Guatemala.

As I looked at the small book of matches, I could not help but think of my grandmother. The cover of the little Guatemalan match folder had a picture of a rooster on it. The rooster's picture reminded me of my Grandmother's chickens she kept around her house. Here too, in Guatemala, we see chickens running about. Some baby chicks are kept in what had been a clothes basket turned upside down. There are generally no fences or cages for the chickens. I thought that perhaps the stove might help the family in their daily struggle to build a fire.

In one of the houses the lady spoke only her native Tzutuhil¹ Mayan dialect, no English, and very little Spanish. She had very little, but she always had a smile, never a frown, as she, and others we met, helped shovel dirt, move blocks and bricks, and hauled water for us to use in building the stoves. The dirt is volcanic soil, beautiful dark and rich, and very fertile. The dirt along with the climate is the source of so many beautiful flowers, shrubs, and wonderful plants of all sorts. Bananas hang overhead in many places where we work. We hear the sound of villagers talking in their dialect, babies crying, chickens and a clucking turkey gobbling at various sites where we work.

What did I see, and what did I learn? I saw a book of matches, and it reminded me that we, and Romelda, and all of her family as well as the other families with whom we worked, are all God's children. Although we might be separated by culture, language, history, economic conditions, and very many miles apart, we are all so very much alike. Romelda will use her matches now to light a fire in the stove we have built for her to cook meals for her family just like Grandma used to do. Perhaps a grandchild will use a branch or two to start the fire just like I did so long ago.

On our last evening we went to a house to bless a stove just built by one of our teams. There an elderly woman who could have been my grandmother stood by her new stove yet still flanked by the fire on the ground on which she was cooking supper. She was so thankful and grateful for our efforts in building her a stove. She is one of the many here living in harsh

¹ The Tzutuhil are a Native American people, one of the 21 or so Maya ethnic groups that dwell in Guatemala. Many live in the area around Lake Atitlan. In pre-Columbian times, the Tzutuhil nation was a part of the ancient Maya civilization. See <http://www.santiagoatitlan.com/indexeng.html>

poverty. My father used to tell of an elderly poor man who said he had started life with nothing and after all his years of living he still had most of it left. This lady and so many other Tzutuhil villagers here fit my father's story. In this area, just outside her home, there are abandoned houses in front, and a volcano mountain to the rear. Here in 2005, several hundred Tzutuhil died in mudslides caused by Hurricane Stan.² Families in this area abandoned the houses, too scared to return there given the horrible experience and deaths in the mudslides.

In one of our nightly devotions the leaders asked, "What have I learned in Guatemala?" They answered by saying they had learned to try to find joy regardless of problems and conditions. In *Exodus* there is a story of how the women danced with tambourines after crossing the sea in front of the oncoming Egyptians. One might ask how did the Hebrew slaves have time to pack tambourines in their perilous journey out of bondage. A Rabbi in discussing this noted that one type of person always thinks of problems so they may bring Roloids. Other people find joy and know that God will do something special. So remember to pack your tambourines and always try to find happiness even in the harshest of conditions.

Yes, we found much joy in spite of the harsh poverty we saw. We saw and experienced the joy and smiling faces of the villagers in spite of their abject poverty. We are a now part of the "Stovebuilders of Guatemala" along with Pedro, Anhel, and Diego, the local stovebuilders who have been trained how to build stoves and who worked with us. Yes, we are now "Friends Forever," changed by our work and time together in the village. Hopefully we have made some slight improvement in the lives of the villagers for whom we have built stoves.

As another noted: "Guatemala may look like paradise, but it is not yet paradise."³ Guatemala is a beautiful country with striking landscapes and beautiful, extraordinary people, yet many live in abject poverty. There is much need for money and support to buy the materials to build stoves and continue this work.

The writer, David M. Weaver has participated in two work teams in Guatemala.

² See <http://www.santiagoatitlan.com/indexeng.html>

³ *Love in a Fearful Land*, Henri Nouwen, p.22.

