

Trinity United Methodist Church of Arlington, TX has added Stovebuilders of Guatemala to its list of missions for 2016, adding six of their members to the nine member March work team from First United Methodist Church in Wichita, KS. The Texans first met up with their Kansas teammates in the Houston airport where both groups had a layover before catching their plane on to Guatemala. It was our first chance to greet one another and begin learning names and getting acquainted.

After a late-night arrival in Guatemala City, we retired to a private B&B for a short night's rest before enjoying our first breakfast together, complete with rich Guatemalan coffee. Then a short orientation and a chance to enjoy the pleasant early morning air before loading up for our three hour drive to Chichicastenango and our first real look at the countryside of Guatemala.

The Spanish-colonial *Hotél Santo Tomás* quartered and fed us for the duration of our work week, and we saw several other missionary groups there during our stay, along with a few spring break travelers. Callie Piland, missionary with the General Board of Global Missions of the United Methodist Church joined us there and welcomed us to Guatemala. Three of our four stove builders for the week joined up with us that first evening, as well. After breakfast the next morning, we met Pedro, our bus driver for the week, and loaded ourselves and our gear into his ornately decorated "chicken bus" for our soon-to-be routine travel to and from our work site in Paxot II (Pa-SHOAT se-GOON-doe), a Mayan village in the Paxot Valley. For some reason that never became fully clear, the main road was closed not too far after we rolled out of Chichi, and we were forced to take a detour onto the old single lane dirt road that runs the length of the Paxot Valley. Our anticipated thirty-minute commute turned into a tooth-rattling hour and forty-five minutes before we bounced into the village of Paxot II, meeting our fourth stove builder waiting for us on the roadside. Welcome to Latin America. The country's compensation is that with every unanticipated glitch or delay seems to come some unexpected joy or treasure. Our long commute (which continued throughout the week) gave us an amazing look at the natural beauty of the Paxot Valley and the daily lives of its indigenous people.

Paxot II has a Methodist church, and upon our arrival, we were warmly greeted by the pastor and invited to walk over to the church to enjoy its celebration of its eighth anniversary (and in case you don't already know this, such celebrations are not casual affairs in Latin America). *Pastór Tomás*, it turned out, is the *Presidente* (i.e. Bishop) of the Methodist Church in Guatemala, and was responsible for arranging to have twenty-five stoves constructed to help improve the lives of the people of his village. In addition to benches, tables, and a shady place to eat our lunches, *Pastór Tomás* gave us all a warm welcome and an earnest prayer of thanksgiving and blessing for the work we were to be involved in. Continuing the theme of our

first day and emphasizing the advice to "be flexible", we soon learned that the chimney tubes and bricks for our stoves had not been delivered. We had some time to cool our heels and enjoy the sights and sounds of the celebration while Bonnie took off with Pedro and the bus to secure a refund for the un-delivered brick and negotiate with another *ferreteria* (a local lumberyard or building supply) for the requisite brick to be delivered. With a new supplier secured and a solemn promise to deliver bricks that evening, we were able to leave Paxot Segundo, confident that an early start the next morning would get us back on schedule. Our early return to Chichi gave us the opportunity to tidy up and explore our nearby surroundings, taking the pulse of the vibrant old colonial city.

Upon our somewhat earlier arrival in Paxot Segundo the next morning, we were greeted by our newest stovebuilder (who lives in the village of Paxot Segundo) and by the news that there were . . . no bricks. What now? Three or four women in our group decided they would just step out into the road and pray about it all. In less than a minute, we heard a truck groaning up the last little rise, into sight, and rolling to a stop just about . . . where we were. On the back were chimney tubes and bricks, all of which were carefully counted out and moved fire-bucket style hand to hand up the hill. We split into our four work teams, each with an experienced stovebuilder to guide us, and moved off to our chosen huts to begin learning the craft of stovebuilding. At our sites, we were welcomed into the modest homes of the Mayan families we would be building stoves for. Cooking fires still smoldered on the floor of some homes and we experienced firsthand the smoke that burns the eyes, throat, and lungs, and the soot and creosote that builds up on the walls and inside the roof. It is humbling to realize the vast difference in quality of life that a simple, well-constructed wood burning stove can make for an entire family. The average life expectancy for a Mayan woman in the highland region is forty-five years, and eye and lung problems from exposure to the smoke of open fire cooking are endemic.

Mostly, we saw women and children; lots of children. The men were mostly working somewhere else by the time we arrived each morning. We stovebuilders were definitely the biggest thing around, and neighbors, sisters, cousins, and all the nieces and nephews had to check us out and keep tabs on our progress. Along with the work, there were always children to play with, and blowing soap bubbles is a sure-fire ice-breaker. There's no language barrier when it comes to playing with children! Bigger children invariably wanted to help, carrying a brick or two, sifting sand, picking up pebbles, fetching water, and keeping us entertained. Most of the houses have hard-packed dirt floors, and the first order of business after arranging the proper place to situate the stove is to lay out the outline and scrape the floor more or less level. The first course of cement blocks goes down on a heavy mortar bed so that it can be leveled up perfectly. In addition to the stove builders small toolkit of sifter, level, trowels, tin snips, hammer, and bucket, every home there had a machete and a heavy grubbing hoe, the multi-

tools of Latin America, and we all got plenty of opportunity to work with them. Concrete blocks were wet down, bricks soaked, sand sifted, mortar mixed, and we all took a turn with these basic preparations for stove building before we began finding our own personal skill limitations and hidden talents in stove construction. Meanwhile, we were building relationships, friendships, and memories among ourselves and with the families of Paxot Segundo.

In spite of our beginning glitches and late start, we finished nineteen stoves by the end of our work week, with materials stored at the Methodist church to complete the full twenty-five. The local stovebuilder, the least experienced of the four we worked with, is now a skillful, seasoned builder who will continue to help the people of Paxot Segundo to improve their quality of life. He has completed the remainder of the twenty-five stoves in his village by now and will build more in the future, as long as materials can be made available through Stovebuilders of Guatemala.

At the end of our week, we reluctantly bid farewell to the Paxot Valley and the city of Chichicastenango and drove to the resort city of Panajachel on the shore of Lake Atitlán for our final night, followed by a day to sight-see, shop, visit, and take in the breathtaking views of Lake Atitlán. For that evening meal, we were entertained, regaled, and instructed by our host, Miguél, who gave us a better understanding of Mayan history, artistry, culture, music, food, and traditional dress. We dined on *pepián*, the national dish of Guatemala, and learned more about the work that the Stovebuilders of Guatemala have been doing and the impact it has on the daily lives of Mayan people in Guatemala. Over 900 stoves have now been completed by Stovebuilders of Guatemala, improving the lives of Mayan families literally for generations to come. The experience has changed our lives as well, and I am sure that all of our team feels that we really are "*Amigos por Siempre*" (friends forever) with our teammates and all of the stovebuilders and Mayan families we met, served, and shared our week with.