

A Traveler's Tale...

From the mountains of the Mexican southeast
(CI = Cloudforest Initiatives)

"If you're not living on the edge you're taking up too much space." This quotation, which caught our attention while we were traveling in rural Chiapas, characterized our emotions amidst the conflict and turmoil in this southernmost Mexican state.

In May, we spent two+ weeks in Chiapas with a twelve-member delegation from our church, building a pig sty with five campesino families in Las Margaritas and visiting refugee and autonomous communities. We learned just enough about what was happening in Chiapas to make us thirst for more understanding. As a result of that first trip to Chiapas, two challenges loomed. One was our lack of ability to communicate in Spanish with the wonderful people we had met. The second was our clearly inadequate knowledge of the political, economic, and social issues in this tiny conflicted state. We returned to the US with lots of questions and were asked numerous others. We planned to meet these challenges by returning to Chiapas.

We researched several opportunities for the summer of 1999 and eventually chose the Cloudforest Initiatives (CI) program - a perfect fit for us. We spent from June 13 through July 4 with three other Americans and our facilitator, Teresa Ortiz. The five-member group included a full-time care giver for her 98-year-old mother from Holland, Michigan, a nurse who treats Spanish-speaking patients in Tucson, Arizona; Michiganite who will start law school at the University of California, Berkeley this fall and intends to become a human rights attorney; and the two of us who are English and economics community college instructors and long time political activists in Madison, Wisconsin. The CI program is organized into several components. Language training, home stays, visits to non-governmental organizations, travel to Maya communities, and the dynamics of group interaction kept us challenged and invigorated for a full three weeks.

Language Training

Language training is a major part of the CI program. After all, we could hardly expect to immerse ourselves in issues of social and cultural change without acquiring at least a limited facility with the language. Instituto Jovel, a respected language school located in San Cristobal, assumes the task of getting CI participants up to speed as Spanish speakers. The instruction is quite individualized; students find themselves both intrigued and challenged by the process. The classes are small; ours varied from two to five students. Some are actually one-on-one. There are no textbooks although some instructors, usually when requested, did make copies from texts for handouts.

The classes can be intense. Two instructors divided the three-hour sessions in half so we were exposed to different personalities and teaching styles. The classes can also be exhausting. As a student in a small class setting, close concentration is a must and new material just kept coming. So, the 4:00 until 7:00pm class each weekday became part of

the CI routine. Study outside the scheduled class time is necessary and an expectation of the instructors. San Cristobal's many coffee shops provide the perfect setting.

This is really an incomparable opportunity for individuals with a combination of love for the challenge of a new language and determination to learn. Instituto Jovel is quite sensitive to the perceptions of individual students and, in our experience, ready to fit the learning situation to changing needs of the learner. This can mean changing instructors, methods, classes, or class meeting times. As is so often the case, rewards of the language class experience seem closely linked to the interest, effort, and attitude of the participant. This summer's CI group was highly motivated and often tireless in its effort to absorb every opportunity afforded by the time available for language study.

Home Stay

Part of the language program involves the chance to live and share meals with a family in San Cristobal. Betty, Texanna, and Shannon stayed in a lovely middle-class home and shared the midday "comida" with their family almost every day of our three-week program. They used Spanish consistently and interacted with all the family members, who patiently conversed with them about daily events. This interaction would probably not occur absent the home stay portion of the program.

We stayed in a guest house, operated by a Mexican family active in the Catholic diocese and sympathetic to the struggles of indigenous people in Chiapas. It was a challenge to speak with any proficiency with family members, particularly the young children, who came into our bedroom every morning and wanted to talk. We all became more comfortable with each other as the weeks progressed. Although we didn't share meals with our family, we did fix breakfast and some picnic lunches in the kitchen and so got to interact informally and talk politics, which we thoroughly enjoyed and appreciated. Visits to Non-Governmental Organizations (NGO's)

There is precious little down time in the CI program. Some of the most thought-provoking moments of the three weeks came during interactions with various NGO's in San Cristobal. Each week's schedule included visits, typically of two to three hours' duration. At different times our group met with representatives of CIAM (Center for Women's Research and Action), SIPAZ (International Service for Peace), the Fray Bartolome Human Rights Center, a Chiapas Highlands Coffee Collective, the ecumenical bible school, and the CPT (Christian Peacekeeper Team).

The standard routine was as follows: introductions, explanation of goals and objectives, accounts of current activities, and then a free flow of questions and discussion with NGO staff. This practice led to both intimate personal exchanges and advanced seminar level interaction on political economy and social/cultural change. In response to our many questions, two comments always emerged. "That's a very good question." And, what became almost a mantra, "the answer is complex and has many levels." Nothing can duplicate in-country face-to-face encounters of this type. Each meeting was followed by group reflection in what amounted to a debriefing session. The debriefing, usually

another hour or two, served as an opportunity to sort out personal understandings, to integrate the accumulating CI agenda, and to benefit from the various perceptions of other group members.

Travel to Maya Communities

Community visits took us away from urban San Cristobal to the more remote areas of the surrounding highlands. One such visit involved two hours each way in the back of a pick up truck over ever deteriorating roads and through absolutely spectacular landscapes. As in the case of the NGO meetings, the challenge and the joy of the experience is face-to-face contact with people.

For example, our group visited the village of Magdalenas Aldama, northeast of San Cristobal, to speak with leaders of the autonomous segment of that community about their efforts to build a more sustainable community in the face of very difficult political and economic circumstances. Other visits included trips to the internal refugee community of Acteal, Chamula, the Museum of Maya Medicine, an indigenous training school, and the Huitepec Cloudforest Reserve. One of the great frustrations and joys of these experiences, both the community visits and the meetings with ngo representatives, is the great volume of information which inevitably flows toward us and the sense that we catch and assimilate so little.

Group Dynamics

From our first meal together on June 13 at Taco Juan's Cenaduria, this group began to bond. Initially, Teresa made it clear that an essential component of the entire experience would be group reflection and processing. Our small contingency became very good at each of these tasks. Not only did we reflect after each NGO and community visit, but we also spent numerous lengthy periods in coffee shops studying Spanish, ate meals together after our 4-7 pm language classes, and on two occasions celebrated mass led by Bishop Don Samuel Garcia Ruiz.

For this three-week period, the five of us became quite close. We now consider each other friends who have a shared consuming interest in the future of Chiapas and its people, particularly those who have been victims of violence and oppression. In our culminating session we each took the role of a different sector of Chiapas society and challenged each other with questions and observations. This exciting, exhilarating activity helped bring all the components of the CI program together. Teresa Ortiz facilitated our reflections with probing questions, expertise in the history, politics and social situation in Chiapas, and genuine interest in our personal growth. It was a great experience.

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