

Report of a visit to El Salvador, Holy Week 2006

by Margaret Fraser

I was addicted for 24 years; I began at 9 years old. I was eating garbage, sleeping anywhere. I was raped at home, that was the starting point. Alcohol and drugs are an escape vehicle from reality. I had four kids during that time...

I was dirty, a beggar from the streets. The first thing I received here was love. Then the discipline—I didn't like that. I liked that there was no discipline on the streets. Thank the Lord. I thought I would die on the streets. Most times women are only used for sex. Here they taught me to live without consuming. We have to know we are not alone any more.

I'm an addict. I've been on drugs for 15 years. I'm now 25. I was raped at 13. I lived with hard feelings. I looked for the easy way out. My friends gave me love and pot. Then different drugs. Then I couldn't stop. I lived on the streets without sleep or food day and night. I was beaten up. I decided to go to a recovery center. I received love and discipline—I didn't like that. But I was told if I wanted to get better... Now I have my family again—my 5 children. I'm a useful person in society, thanks to the center and my sponsors.

We all applauded as the plane arrived in San Salvador. Not that it was a bad landing—simply that almost everyone on board was visiting family for Easter. Passengers on the plane were chatty. The young man next to me was wearing an FCB (Futbol Club Barcelona) shirt and wristband. Why are Salvadorans such fans of FCB? I had asked him, remembering that Orlando, my host in San Ignacio, had FCB posters on the kitchen walls. Just because they're the best, my neighbor told me, adding that he had been in Barcelona the previous week to see them play, and would be back in Germany for the World Cup Finals.

I was one of six women from the US visiting during Holy Week: Lutherans, Catholic and Quaker. My friend Maria is a social worker with the Supreme Court of El Salvador. She had asked for visitors to see her volunteer work with women and children. Our focus was on violence: in general, and in particular as it affects women and children. We had opportunities to see what has happened since the civil war and it is a mixed picture—economic development beside persistent poverty; increased hope alongside fear.

First Baptist Church, San Salvador

April 9 was Palm Sunday—*Domingo de Ramos*—and we worshiped at First Baptist Church. It is a modern building in the center of the city. It was founded by the

American Baptist Church and has strong social programs. Preludes of *Jesu, Joy of Man's Desiring* and *In the Garden* were played on the grand piano. I felt the bench shake and thought that children were rattling it but no—"Terremoto?" asked one of our group, and Maria's daughter smiled and nodded. We were welcomed and I went up to introduce us all and say why we were there. Since I had not expected to do this, and was doing it all in Spanish without notes, I was pleasantly surprised at my new level of confidence. Just as in Bolivia last year, the congregation sang *Bienvenidos* to us and embraced us. The service ended with familiar music: *Tu Nombre Levantaré—Lord I Lift Your Name on High*.

The Cathedral, downtown, and the suburbs

We walked a few blocks to the Cathedral to see where Archbishop Romero had been assassinated. Romero's body was moved last year to where he used to live, but the crypt with his former tomb and another monument is still visited and many people stop to pray and light candles.

The downtown area is rundown and regarded as dangerous. Gangs of young men and women snatch bags and jewelry and run protection rackets. Maria made us take off watches and put anything that might be grabbed into the trunk of her car before we began the walk. Children of Salvadoran refugees in the US formed street gangs and served prison time there. They were deported to El Salvador after serving their sentences and continue to live the only life they know. Many of their recruits are children whose parents have left them behind as they seek work in the US. The parents have been unable to reunite the families quickly enough, so the abandoned children have joined another kind of family.

In complete contrast we visited a new shopping mall, one of several in the city, full of the same stores that we see in the US. One of the effects of the civil war seems to be a propensity among some to consume rather than invest—a kind of instant fix that I see as a spiritual problem—it does not satisfy for long. Some countries show, through new homes, clear evidence of money being sent home from family members working abroad being invested for the benefit of the extended family. By contrast I was told that there is tension in many families because Salvadorans are working long hours in the US to send money home, only to find that it has been spent in fast food restaurants and shopping malls. The money is thus going straight back into the US economy without any tangible long term benefit in El Salvador.

We spent the evening with families relaxing at Los Planos de Renderos, a hillside area overlooking the city, with walking paths, artisans' stalls and a roundabout and small Ferris wheel (or a *Chicago*, as it is known in Central America.) We ate *pupusas* at one of the many restaurants.

Breakfast with the Network against Violence

Next morning we had a working breakfast with members of the network of professionals who are concerned about the situation of women and children who are victims of sexual violence. The group included one of only two women Supreme Court judges, the doctor who carries out all the forensic examinations of rape victims in the city, psychologists and social workers. Police are also part of the network. They are working on strengthening the law, including training the police to regard the location of a sexual assault as a scene of a crime. They said that the overwhelming majority of sexual assaults are carried out in the home by acquaintances and family members. Most of the children are victims of incest. They are concerned that often a complainant experiences further violation after making her complaint. Until Maria involved her church in making care packages including fresh underwear, sanitary napkin, comb, soap, shampoo, toothbrush and toothpaste, the women had nothing fresh to wear after giving up their underwear for forensic evidence. They need more physical resources—more space for privacy, secondhand colposcopes. They told us about some excellent sensitivity training being done at the University of Central America by a visiting teacher from Fresno, and wished this could be more widely available.

The particular problems of El Salvador

Is the situation worse in El Salvador than, say, in Guatemala or Honduras? I asked. Yes, they said, because the civil war affected everyone—not just a section of the society, or a particular geographical area, as with the indigenous communities in the Guatemala highlands. It is a small country (the size of New Jersey) and everyone lost someone close, by death or disappearance. You could be “disappeared” for wearing something red. It is more relaxed now, singers of protest songs can perform publicly, the FMLN is a legal political party, but a generalized trauma remains. It was not just those on the side of social justice and redistribution of wealth and land who were fearful. I read of the anxiety of those who feared the loss of their farms and businesses, and the total collapse of the economy if the FMLN had succeeded. The streetscape reminded me of parts of Northern Ireland: the curbstones painted red, white and blue, the colors of ARENA, the Conservative party, and the lower parts of lampposts painted red, the colors of the FMLN.

The women identified four specific problems in El Salvador leading to the violence:

- Widespread, and largely untreated, Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder following the war;
- Economic stress—a large proportion of the population is unemployed, and many more are scarcely making enough to live on;
- Drugs and alcohol;
- Gangs.

El Camino Recovery Center

From my work as a volunteer chaplain in a county jail, I know that there is an intimate relationship between drugs and alcohol and domestic violence. As I listened to their stories, I discovered that the reason why the impoverished women in Indiana's Wayne County Jail were there—public intoxication, theft, credit card fraud, prostitution, physical violence—were the by-products of family abuse. As children—7 or 9 years old—they were often introduced to alcohol by a family member. At 11 or 12 they had their first sexual experience, usually again with a family member. They had their first babies as young teenagers. They deadened the pain through their drugs of choice, usually alcohol or crack cocaine back then. Their mothers' lives had been similar, and the jail had a revolving door through which they passed many times. How to break the cycle?

The El Camino Recovery Center¹ for abused women gave me some hope. Officially called *Asociación El Camino, Centro de Recuperación para la Mujer de maltrato familiar y adicta al Alcohol y Drogas*, it addresses precisely this issue. Ten women live in bunk beds in two small rooms. There is a large room at the front of the house with 12 step posters on the walls, a small living/dining room and a kitchen. Several women—graduates of the program and current participants—told us their stories and what the center had done for them.

One of them was shaking violently—she had stopped taking crack only two days before. A recurring theme was discipline. They are not used to it, they don't like it, and they now know that it is vital to their recovery. They talked of taking the easy way out, of dulling their pain with their drug of choice, of operating out of an emotional knee-jerk, rather than by making conscious decisions.

In the center, there are rules—TV only during certain hours, helping with chores, family visitors just two hours on a Saturday, no male visitors, no talking during meals to develop consciousness. There is also compassion. It is a place where a woman needing help can knock on the door at any hour of the night and be taken in. We ate lunch with the women and stayed several hours, helping make piñatas which is part of their occupational therapy. They hope to get sewing machines and to find a plot of land for gardening, to develop vocational skills and be able to sell products for the center.

The director, Camilo, an Evangelical Christian and only male member of the network, told us that many women had been in other centers but did not recover. This place succeeds where others fail, though of course not everyone stays the course. It receives no government aid, only the money that Maria raises for them. It has been in existence for just a year. He believes that the main reason for the program's effectiveness is Lorena, who is in charge of reception, who feeds them, sits with them as they go through withdrawal, takes them to the hospital, and enforces the rules with tough love. In other centers the administration is more remote, but Lorena is a graduate of the program. She told us that she had to give up her five children because she could not care for them.

Her partner raped and battered her. Helping others gain life and hope, it was a resurrection story I needed to hear.

If you need a home, you have to put up with a lot. I have scars on the outside and the inside. Children have to see their mother being beaten...Many women have recovered, but many women have died. We're all used to having an easy life—we don't know how to cook, clean, iron. I have no guilt for the past. The past is behind us. We have responsibility for the present. We will continue to help women.

Flor de Piedra

We went straight from El Camino to the area near the cathedral where Flor de Piedra, a resource center for sex workers is situated. Sylvia, the director and Cristi, a social work graduate, told us that it had been established by the Lutheran Church and University in 1990. The intention of providing alternative training (making piñatas, hairdressing and sewing) had not proved realistic because of low wages and unemployment. Sylvia said that she had retrained as a cosmetologist but could not afford the drop in pay. So the emphasis had shifted to being an advocacy center seeking legitimization of sex work, a better image in the media, and an end to police harassment. The financial support had been withdrawn unexpectedly in 1996 and since then Flor de Piedra has operated independently with funding from various sources including the Lutheran World Federation and foundations in Austria and the Netherlands. They have built close relationships with sex workers' organizations in other countries. They still did some retraining and we met two older women, one of whom was learning to read and write, and another to bake. They have a vigorous health education program including HIV/AIDS awareness and encouraging use of condoms (with little effect, apparently—the customers are resistant.)

After the faith-based hopefulness of the recovery center's staff and residents, I found the matter-of-fact materialism of Flor de Piedra's leadership and talk of protecting the human rights of women depressing. I asked about pimps controlling the women's lives, but was told that this was not an issue in El Salvador. The only problem that they had was having to pay protection money to gangs. I was not in a position to argue about pimps, but the picture painted of women doing business in parks for in fear of violence and disease left me feeling heavy inside.

Suchitoto

Thank goodness for Maria's careful planning. After a heavy day of violence in its many forms, we spent Tuesday in Suchitoto, an hour north of San Salvador. Overlooking a lake, Suchitoto is probably like Antigua Guatemala was 30 years ago—a small colonial town, and something of an artists' colony. We watched parishioners in the church preparing for the Good Friday processions. We sipped

mango juice, nibbled ice cream and rested in hammocks at El Tejado, the old farmhouse² that is now a small hotel. We had lunch by the lake, went on a boat ride past islands where we saw cormorants and egrets nesting, and rode back up the hill in an old school bus where we stood, swayed and laughed like sardines on the tips of our tails as the driver packed in more passengers at every stop. We looked into another hotel, a real luxury one,³ but decided that El Tejado was the place to be for recuperation.

Duane and Lois Davis

I spent Wednesday at the home of Duane and Lois Davis. Lois was born in Oregon, and her parents later became missionaries on a Native American reservation in Arizona. She was a missionary and administrator at the seminary in Chiquimula for three years. She and Duane were missionaries in Honduras for 30 years on behalf of Friends Church Southwest. Their three sons grew up there. Three years ago they moved to San Salvador, but they still teach as needed in Honduras. Lois participated in our recent publications consultation and is developing religious education curricula. They have rented a house near the artisans' market. Lois, their youngest son Jonathan, Duane and I ate brunch, then Duane set off for two days' work in Honduras. Jonathan is searching for a college in the US where he can study international business and play soccer. Lois and I had much to talk about, including possible locations for FWCC's next annual meeting in Latin America.⁴ It was good for me to be able to relax in a house and have time to read and reflect. Their hospitality was just what I needed.

The forensic clinic

On my final morning in the country we went first to the forensic clinic where the doctor examines 200 rape victims a month. We saw for ourselves the cramped offices, the single shower, the lack of privacy. After the physical examinations women have to wait four weeks for an interview with a psychologist. Worst of all was the waiting area—a row of white plastic chairs outside the clinic where everyone passing knows the reason for the women's presence, and gang members sometimes stop by to stare and sometimes threaten to rape them again. The doctor led us through the complex of buildings, ending with the autopsy room. The bodies of three young men were there. It was 9.15 in the morning and there had already been 9 deaths that day.

The University of Central America

I ended my stay on the campus of *Universidad Centroamericano*, UCA, the Jesuit University. Prestigious, expensive, with beautifully landscaped grounds, it was hard to imagine that this place of flowers, breezes and songbirds was the scene of a bloody massacre. The Jesuits were a bridge between the *campesinos* and the intellectuals, making public statements about social justice during the civil war, so a decision was made to silence them. The head of the university and five colleagues, together with their housekeeper and her daughter, were taken at night, forced to lie on the lawn, and shot. Their former house is now the Centro

Monseñor Romero, a meeting space and chapel, and the Jesuits are buried under the chapel floor, under a portrait of Archbishop Romero.

I passed a car with its bumper sticker *Romero vive. La lucha sigue.* (Romero lives. The struggle continues.) Maria's children are too young to remember the civil war. But what effect has it had on them? We sat on the ground, listening to her.

Fifteen years ago we weren't allowed to speak about things...People cut up, children missing, helicopters bombing. I couldn't go to a concert with music critical of injustice, but now we're free to do it. Now I feel free to smile and say this is a new situation. I feel free to express my ideas. But many people are still dying from gunshots.

...and from domestic violence.

On reflection:

It is Easter Sunday and I am still processing all that I saw, heard and felt. I once worked in a factory and when visitors came round I felt like a zoo animal being observed. But that was because they walked round a balcony far removed from the workers. Because we spent time in discussion, and sat down with the people we were visiting, I think we avoided that danger. In the recovery center we were there long enough to have good informal conversations and I was reminded of my times just hanging out with the women in Wayne County Jail. Twelve years later I remember many of them and wonder how they are doing. The ministry of hanging out is a gift that I can share.

Partly because of my increasing understanding of Spanish, and partly because of excellent interpretation, I was never aware of the fact that we were communicating across languages and cultures. In fact, I was more aware of that back in Indiana when I was fresh off the boat and the women from an Appalachian enclave of Richmond, for whom Europe was as remote as the moon, couldn't for the life of them imagine why I would choose to spend time locked up in a cell for the afternoon, and also had great trouble understanding the way I talked.

In El Salvador we received the gifts of hospitality and of doors opening wherever we went. Despite working for the same organization, Maria had never been in the autopsy room before. We, strangers, were taken straight in. The judge, the doctor and other busy people set out from home early to meet with us. We were welcomed into centers and people shared details of their lives with us. Some of the visits reached a level of intimacy that I could not have imagined. I hope that those who we met experienced us as respectful.

I am stunned by the raw accounts of domestic violence and the effects of addiction. The testimonies of the women have moved me beyond an intellectual

awareness to something I feel with my whole body. I hope it makes me more compassionate to the panhandlers I see each day on my way from work. I hope it makes me want to work towards solutions.

The term ministry of presence has been on my mind, but the problem with that is that it implies that I am the minister and the others are being ministered to. It was actually much more reciprocal than that. I prefer to think that all of us, Salvadorans and Gringas, were engaged in a ministry of hanging out together.

¹ Centro **El Camino**, Colonia Nicaragua, Calle Los Viveros 138, San Salvador. 270-3336. Camilo Díaz, Lorena Lopez.

² **El Tejado** 3a Av. Norte #58.
<http://www.infocentros.org.sv/notas.php?sid=3993&cat=10&scat=220&PHPSESSID=919a2ca98bc483d3e9b95b35c0a5b58d>

³ **Los Almendras de San Lorenzo**, 4a Calle Poniente 2b. www.hotelssalvador.com

Our guest house in San Salvador was **Oasis**, near the Universidad Nacional: Colonia Libertad, Av. Morazán, Pje Morelos & Pje Sta Marta 111. www.oasis.com.sv

⁴ Top recommendation:

Aparthotel Villa Nuria in San Pedro Sula, Honduras. Similar to our hotel in Guatemala, it has 204 rooms and is very reasonably priced.

A more expensive alternative is **Grand Hotel Sula**, 116 rooms, a Best Western hotel. It gives discounts to Christian groups.

Others worth looking at, in ascending order of cost, are the **Holiday Inn**, the **Princess** (now a Hilton) and the **Copantl**. The most expensive and most experienced in hosting conventions is the **Real Continental**.

The advantage of San Pedro Sula is the proximity of four different Friends churches that could be asked to form a local arrangements committee. An alternative location in Honduras would be the Copán ruins, but most hotels are not large enough to hold us all. The **Posada Real de Copán** has 80 rooms www.posadarealdecopan.com. The **Best Western** advertises a convention center. Both are near the ruins. An alternative would be to use several smaller downtown hotels within walking distance of each other. www.hondurastips.honduras.com

If we wished to consider El Salvador the hotels with the greatest capacity are in San Salvador, some distance away from the Friends churches, or at beach resorts where there are no Friends churches. San Salvador has the advantages (facilities, relative proximity to the international airport) and disadvantages (cost, commercialization) of a capital city.