

Case Study by PC(USA) missionary Dr. Karla Koll

In November of 2006, I was drafted to serve as a translator for a day for a group from a middle-sized church from a mid-western state who was installing a water system project in a community near the Pacific coast of Guatemala. While the men and a few of the women in the group worked around the well behind the church, the rest of the women, armed with the educational material provided by the ministry, proceeded to tell the women from the community who had gathered in the sanctuary all about the benefits of clean water. I was reminded of Freire's description of the banking model of education, in which the educators project ignorance on the students in order to transfer knowledge to them. The visiting women did not seem to think they needed to find out what the women from the community already knew about the use of water and the local health situation. But even if the visitors had wanted to learn what their hosts knew about water and its uses, they had no tools for doing so.

Popular education inspired by Freire starts with allowing people to name the reality they are living. In this instance, though I had been recruited only to serve as a translator for the day, I asked permission of the both groups of women to serve

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as facilitator for their interaction. We began again and asked each of the Guatemalan women to share where they obtained their water for use in their homes and whether or not they treated the water they used for drinking and cooking in some way. What emerged from the dialogue was a complex picture. Most of the Guatemalan women understood that they should be using purified water for drinking and food preparation, but some were

not doing so. They pointed to the lack of money to buy firewood or propane to boil water. Several of the women also expressed concern about the way in which newcomers, relocated to the area by the government after hurricane Stan, were taking the water piped from a nearby natural spring before it reached the area where these women lived. The women believed the well at the church was going to help, but the problem of transporting the water to their homes remained, as well as the problem of paying what the church would need to charge for the water in order to pay for the electricity to run the pump and the filter system. It became clear to the visitors that access to clean water is a complex social and economic problem, only some aspects of which would be addressed by the technical solution of a water filtration system installed at the church.

The visiting women also came prepared to teach a Bible study on Genesis 1, highlighting the importance of water in God's creation. Again, the women visitors, following the teaching material they had from the ministry, knew what they wanted to transmit to the Guatemalan women. Again, I asked if I could facilitate the Bible study. I used the process of Bible study inspired by Freire which was popularized in base ecclesial communities and circles of Bible study throughout Latin America. In this approach to Bible study, the people, not the leader, are the subjects of the interpretive process. The group constructs new knowledge of the text through dialogue. We read through the text, inviting members of the group to comment. We asked that a Guatemalan woman speak first, followed by a North American. At first, many of the Guatemalan women, especially those who didn't know how to read, were hesitant to speak. But the end, everyone had spoken. As we read through the passage, I was able to offer insights from Biblical studies, such as the ancient worldview that there was water both below the earth and above

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the sky. The most interesting part of the discussion came when we read verse 14, when God sets the lights in the sky “to be for signs and for seasons.” One of the Guatemalan women began to speak of how her Mayan ancestors watched the stars carefully in order to know what would happen and to know what to do, such as when to plant and when to harvest. One of the women from Missouri then talked about how her grandmother would watch the sky, predicting changes in the weather by observing the clouds. As the dialogue unfolded, the women present constructed new knowledge of the text together.

At the end of this mission trip, the community was left with a water project that they might have difficulty maintaining themselves without parts brought into the country from outside on a regular basis. But the women of the community were left with something more. They had been listened to. As Kurt Ver Beek points out, by listening to the poor, visitors can “affirm their value, their God-given dignity and their knowledge.” When short-term encounters are facilitated well, both those who travel and those who receive visitors find their understanding of faith transformed.

¹ Freire, 72.

² A description of this process can be found in Milton Schwantes, “Biblical Theology Together with the People,” in *Theology by the People: Reflections on Doing Theology in Community*, ed. Samuel Amirtham and John S. Pobee (Geneva: World Council of Churches, 1986), 43-54. Also see Carlos Mesters, *Defenseless Flower: A New Reading of the Bible*, trans. Francis McDonagh (Maryknoll: Orbis and London: CIIR, 1989).

³ Ver Beek, “International Service-Learning,” 68.

