

**A Mission Trip to
Chiapas:
My Journal
By Rev. Rick Oberle**

Day One
Wednesday, September 25, 2013

We began our Mission Immersion experience at the St. Louis Airport Wednesday morning at 8:00am. I rode from Owensville to St. Louis with Ken and Cheryl Schlottach, members of St. James, Charlotte United Church of Christ. We checked in at the United terminal, and headed to the security checkpoint. That is where we met up with Brenda Lewis, Scott Lewis, Nathan Lewis (all from St. John's, Bem United Church of Christ) and the Kemps- Les and Judy- from St. John's, Casco United Church of Christ. (Cindy Mercer and Casey Heying from St. John's, Bem will join us Sunday)

Transportation to San Cristobal de las Casas was uneventful. We navigated the TSA screening at Lambert Field with no problems; our flight boarded and took off on time (10:05); and landed on time in Houston (12:00). Our airplane was a very small one; about 60 seats on the whole plane (15 rows, four seats in each row with an aisle in between.) I sat in the front row on the aisle and had enough leg room; but it was a tight squeeze getting into-and out of- the seat itself. I worried that we may need a shoehorn to make it work!

We had a six-hour layover in Houston, and we stayed in the airport the whole time. This ensured that we would indeed be there for our connecting flight; and this meant we did not have to go through security again.

The Houston airport was very nice. We had lunch at Chili's, and supper at Panda Express; just two of the many national chain restaurants that had outlets in the Houston terminal. We explored many shops in the terminal, and even tried the massage chairs! Scott and Nathan worked on homework, and I played on Facebook. Les and Judy took naps, and we all had a good bonding experience.

The flight from Houston took off right on time at 6:22pm; and it was a beautiful flight. As we flew south to Mexico, we were able to watch the sunset through the windows on the right side (west) of the plane. This plane was a tad larger, and the seats were much more comfortable. I sat in row 16 (there were 25 rows); but there was nobody past row 14 other than me! So, unlike our flight down, I had plenty of room to stretch out; and after the sun set, I took a nap.

I realized on that flight that I had never flown at night before. Every other plane trip I have taken has been during the day. It was very exciting to see the sun set, and to look down at different points on the journey and see "pools" of light from Mexican towns and villages that we flew over. The flight was a little turbulent, as there was some lightning on the left side of the plane, some fog at times and a little precipitation; but just a few bounces here and there, nothing to cause panic.

Landing in Tuxtla Gutierrez, Chiapas was a bit exciting! It was foggy at the time, so although I knew we were coming in for a landing, I did not realize we were that close until we actually touched down. We taxied to the terminal; but unlike the US, we did not embark directly into the terminal. We got off the plane on the tarmac (like in old movies) and walked a few feet or so to the terminal access steps.

Upon entering the terminal, there were armed security in military uniform standing at attention every few yards. They were not intimidating; but they were definitely present. We were the only flight arriving at that time of night (9:00pm) so all of the airport staff had their eyes on us; from restroom attendants to customs officials. They were very welcoming, smiling at us as we walked by, but we definitely had their attention. The people operating the customs desk were friendly, processing our paperwork with smiles and leading us through the necessary steps. Only a few of us had to have our bags inspected; standard operating procedure. As we passed through the checkpoint, the attendant genuinely offered us a "Welcome to Chiapas!"

It took a bit for everyone on the plane to get through security (maybe 30 minutes; really, not too bad...) and the whole time we could see Lindsey waiting for us on the other side of the concourse. When we finally made it to her we were greeted with hugs. She was there with a van and driver from INESIN to take us to what would be our home for the next 9 days.

What is Chiapas? A bit of explanation. There are 31 states in Mexico; Chiapas is the southernmost state, bordering Guatemala. Tuxtla Gutierrez is the capital city of Chiapas, with a population of about 300,000. San Cristobal de las Casas is the town where we stayed, with a population of about 25,000. So- Mexico is the country, Chiapas is the state, Tuxtla Gutierrez is the capital city, and San Cristobal de las Casas is the town where we stayed. Also the neighborhood (barrio) in San Cristobal where we stayed is called Cuxtitali.

Our journey from Tuxtla to San Cristobal was the most exciting leg of the entire journey! Our driver (Julio) navigated the roads very well, weaving in and out of traffic, travelling on the shoulder, and passing cars right and left. Julio did not confine us to only one side of the road, but rather spent plenty of time on both sides of the yellow line. We drove on the left side of the road quite a bit! But this is standard driving in Chiapas. Tailgating, quickly zipping around corners without stopping, routinely crossing the yellow line and driving on the shoulder is how everyone drives, and that is just fine. We enjoyed the diverse experience!

It took about 90 minutes to get to INESIN from Tuxtla. INESIN is right in the heart of San Cristobal. An amazing town! VERY narrow streets, and the houses are just a few feet from the street. The streets are just big enough- barely- for two cars to pass, and when a car is parked at the curb, a special challenge is encountered.

We pulled up at INESIN at 11:00pm. The entrance to INESIN is a very non-descript set of iron doors, set in a stucco wall just three feet or so from the curb. This is the typical agricultural style of buildings here. INESIN, like other buildings in San Cristobal, does not bear many markings. There exists no marquee proclaiming its presence or purpose; no signs advertising services, hours of operation or phone numbers; no slogan that informs passersby that "no matter who you are or where you are on life's journey you are welcome here" or anything of the like. Just a set of iron doors set in stucco on a wall about 8 feet high, and a small homemade wooden plaque that says, "INESIN".

What lies beyond those iron doors is much more fascinating. When Lindsey opened the iron doors and we walked through, we entered a beautifully manicured courtyard with stucco buildings all around. I was taken away by the simple beauty of my surroundings. The courtyard was more than just a front yard or an entryway to pass through to get inside; it was obvious that this courtyard was where life was lived. This open space is as meaningful as a living/family room to many of us in the States; and most of the buildings in the compound open up onto this courtyard.

We were greeted immediately by Natan, one of the Directors of INESIN, who was waiting for us with open arms. Like Ricardo Montalban welcoming folks to Fantasy Island his welcome was joyful, exuberant, and genuine. He was truly excited and happy to see us and embraced us with his hospitality immediately. After brief

introductions, we were shown our dorms, and then led to their small kitchen for a snack before turning in.

I speak no Spanish, other than the few words I learned from Sesame Street; so the language barrier was a bit of a worry. But with Natan, this was not a problem. Lindsey translated, but Natan expressed himself well without us sharing a common language. I would later figure out that this is common for the rest of his staff, too; diverse languages are no barrier to communication. His pride in this mission was very evident, as he gave us the brief evening tour of the facility and filled us with hospitality in the form of Mexican cookies and juice.

At one point, while we were standing in the kitchen, I saw some eggs in an egg tray sitting on a shelf, waiting to begin their new life as sustenance for us the next morning. My matriculation with Sesame Street immediately came to mind, and I exclaimed, "hey, I know that one! Huevos!" Natan got very excited and literally jumped up and down, clapping, proclaiming "Si! Si! Huevos!" He was so thrilled that there was a connection between us. Community building must be his whole nature, not just his job.

After a bit of table fellowship we went to bed; eager to see what the sunrise would bring us in our new home away from home.

Day Two

Thursday September 26, 2013

At 6:00am, the bells of the nearby Catholic Church began ringing out long and loud, calling people to morning mass. This was the first sound I heard, and perhaps their proclamation also served as a welcome to my travelling companions and myself. They were a welcoming sound, and I thought about their intent as I rolled over and went back to sleep. Waking again at 7:30, I rose to greet the Mexican morning.

Morning in San Cristobal is a magical time. I wrote much of this narrative in the mornings, sitting in the courtyard at a small table where important gatherings, the work of INESIN, often occur. San Cristobal is very high in the mountains, about 7000 feet; even higher than Denver. The air is crisp and refreshing, and a bit thinner than the air to which I am accustomed. Sitting there mornings I heard bells, car horns, birds, the occasional Mexican radio station coming from a passing car and many, many roosters calling the sun from its slumber. I saw the first hints of orange against an eastern sky, as the waking sun rose to greet me. The clouds were puffy and light, and mornings are beautiful. In the distance other peaks rise, covered with trees. Enchanting!

Most people assume that Mexico is very hot. Not San Cristobal! The altitude ensures a very cool climate. Most mornings exhaled breath is visible; by mid-day it is almost cool enough to wear shorts; but by evening, it is back to jeans and jackets. Sleeping is very nice, as I like cooler weather in which to sleep. Houses here have no AC and no heat; but none is needed. It is much cooler here than in Missouri!

Breakfast Thursday morning was prepared by Lucy and Betty, the cooks at INESIN. Again, language was no barrier, and I quickly learned "muy bueno!" and "perfecto" as adjectives applicable to their offerings. We had "huevos" cooked like an omelet with mushrooms, peppers, onions and other sautéed veggies on top. It was very good! We also had black beans, with feta cheese to sprinkle on top. I learned that many folks here put all their food in one bowl, combining the flavors. I followed suit. At the table, there were fresh tortillas, and homemade green salsa. We had pineapple juice and Chiappian coffee as well. It was a very welcoming meal.

We gathered shortly after breakfast to begin our day. This day was to consist of several gatherings with the INESIN staff for devotional, Bible Study, orientation, and a history

of the area. We began by introducing ourselves and meeting the rest of the staff. The staff here at INESIN includes some folks who are paid, and many more who are volunteer. Among these people are:

- **Loren-** a young woman whom we would learn works with the people of INESIN on many issues of domestic violence, family unity, and community building. She interacts with everyone she encounters as a great host and a nurturing presence. She exudes an aura of comfort and welcome, and it is very pleasing to be in her presence. Loren has two children; a son in high school, and daughter in college.
- **Aby-** a young man who is very wise; he led us in Bible study and our morning devotional. Aby is a pastoral theologian; and his insight in the sacred scriptures is both comforting and challenging. His theology is very welcome, and quite progressive; a challenge to the theology of the Presbyterian denomination in Chiapas of which he is clergy. He is a very dynamic person, and someone who welcomes all. It is comforting just being around him.
- **Hans-** a bit older than the others, Hans is on a yearlong mission immersion experience from Switzerland. He speaks some English, but it is clear that he is more comfortable in Spanish than English. Hans is a widower with two young daughters, ages 16 and 12, who are here with him.
- **Elena-** much wisdom packed into a small frame, Elena is young as well, but very knowledgeable and wise to the ways of life and the world. She travelled most recently with Lindsey to Italy to attend a theological conference on changing ways of worship and other intensive issues. She spoke very well of the social structure of this area, and the work of INESIN here. Elena has a Mayan background and is very spiritual in a way that combines Mayan spirituality with Christianity.
- **Jaime-** Just a bit older than Aby and Lorin, Jaime is very active in the community building activities of INESIN, along with the others. In Spanish, the "J" sounds like an "H" so his name sounds like "Heimey".
- **jPetul-** again the "j" is silent, so his name sounds like "Petool". He is about the same age as Jaime, and you can tell he is very dedicated to his work. He works in all of the programs of INESIN, serving the community well.
- **Rick-** a great new friend. He is our translator for the week, among his other duties at INESIN. Rick is on a three year mission immersion experience, from the Mennonite church in Canada. His wife and two preschool age children are here with him. He is a brilliant scholar, and systematic theologian. We have already had

great discussions about life and the church in just one day. He talked all day Thursday, translating quite aptly what everyone else was presenting; yet even at the end of the day, he was eager to continue conversing with us, sharing stories and listening to ours.

- **Martin-** He is a bit older than the others; very wise and very welcoming. He told us from the outset that even though we do not speak the same language, that will not be an issue. We will communicate well, and by the end of our time together we will not even realize we do not speak the same language. He presented much information to us Thursday, and it was all fascinating. He is passionate about his work, and presents to us in ways that keep us enthralled.
- **Natan-** the director of INESIN, of whom I have already spoken. He is a bit older than the others, with the exception of Martin. He is very passionate about his work; and he is the consummate institutional director. He knows his clientele well, he can articulate his mission aptly, and his passion for ministry exudes in all that he does. He is extravagantly welcoming, and eager to include all in the mission that drives him. He is a genuine, authentic, dedicated servant in God's mission field; and he makes me feel thrilled to be part of his mission, albeit for a brief 9 days.
- **Lindsey-** our friend from Bem. Lindsey has been on this mission immersion experience for 9 months, the start of a two year appointment. She works for Global Ministries, the common mission arm of the United Church of Christ and the Disciples of Christ. Lindsey is from St. John's, Bem United Church of Christ, and was the one who inspired our trip. Lindsey and I travelled a long journey of discernment together for her to get to this point as a Global Ministries Missions Intern; and it is very fulfilling to see her embodying the fulfillment of that dream.

We began our time together Thursday, after introductions, with a devotional led by Aby. This devotional centered on Acts 8, the story of Phillip and the Ethiopian Eunuch. This devotional was derived from material Aby used during the "week of Christian Unity" last May; one of the important projects supported by INESIN. We discussed this story, and asked "What does this story tell us about the challenges today in Chiapas?" This story centers on the Ethiopian Eunuch; someone who is unwelcome and unclean in proper Jewish society. Phillip is provoked by an angel to approach this unclean person, who is already desirous of a faith connection, as evidenced by the fact that he is reading from Isaiah as he sits in his chariot. He is unable to open God's Wisdom, without anyone to interpret the scripture for him. Phillip complies, and together they discern

God's Wisdom for that time and place. God's Wisdom unites both the unclean and the "proper" person; and the Eunuch is affirmed as a child of God.

Aby helped us understand this connection to Chiapas today, as some folks are ostracized as the Eunuch was in this culture. Their job is to work for unity, using Pastoral Readings of the Bible as a template. Aby lifted up the opening sentence of this pericope, "Now an angel of the LORD said to Phillip..." pointing out that through this Heavenly host, God provoked Phillip to action. Here in Chiapas, God is provoking the folks at INESIN to action.

After our devotional, we took a coffee break. A word about coffee in Chiapas. Coffee is part of the lifeblood of this area. There are many coffee plantations in Chiapas, and Chiapanecan coffee is exported all over the world. They grow Arabica beans in the mountains here, and harvesting those beans and selling them is an important part of the economy. At INESIN, we stop for several coffee breaks every day; and coffee is served at every meal. The coffee is high quality. Though strong, it is not acidic at all, and does not leave an aftertaste. This contributes to drinking many more cups of coffee than one probably should! Coffee breaks are accompanied by Mexican pastries, and fruit. We are not going hungry here!

When we reconvened, Martin led us in a discussion about the work of INESIN, using visual aids as accents. We were gathered in a circle in the small gathering area; and the space at the center of the circle was our "altar". This altar was where we offered information about ourselves during the introduction time, where they placed their visual aids during presentation, and where we offered our gifts to them that evening. (more later on that!) Martin told us that there are three major axis to their work here at INESIN; Theological and Spiritual connections; Community Building; and Institutional Development. We then investigated each aspect of their work.

Theological/Spiritual- There are several aspects to their spiritual/theological work. Christianity in Chiapas is a amalgam of Mayan Spirituality, Roman Catholicism, and Evangelical Christianity. The Mayan Spirituality is an important piece of all their work; and it has been incorporated into their Christian practice. Some might sneer and call this "Syncretism" with disdain; but to me it is a beautiful way to realize that God is Still Speaking in many diverse ways. They Mayan Spirituality centers on three foci: (Mother) Earth, Water, and Corn. Care for the environment is an important part of

Mayan Spirituality, and therefore an important part of Chiapanecan Christianity. INESIN encourages spiritual connections across the cultural divisions through spiritual strengthening programs, such as the degree offered in Pastoral Readings of the Bible.

Aby talked specifically about the degree offered in Pastoral Readings of the Bible. This degree is a two year program that INESIN offers, with six three day workshops over the course of those two years. Aby held up what looked like a wall hanging, and told us that this symbolizes the philosophy of this hermeneutic. The textile was diverse in color, distinct in contrasts, and unfinished. He likened this to our understandings of the Bible; diverse, distinct, and unfinished (or "Still Speaking"). This textile consisted of many threads all interwoven; so are the stories that make up the Bible, and so are we as we approach it. None of the interwoven threads are more important than others, and none of the threads tell the story by themselves. Only together can the wisdom be discerned. We as community are continually working on the threads we discover in life.

This is the sort of training INESIN offers as folks earn their degree in Pastoral Readings of the Bible. They then take those gifts and utilize them in their communities, hoping to use the Wisdom of the Bible to bring peace, where other have used the Bible as a weapon. In this way, they are training the trainers. Aby gave us the example of the Bible as God's Light. What do you do with light? You can shine it in other people's eyes, blinding them to what is really there; you can shine it in your own eyes, so you can really see nothing but the light; or, you can use the light to illumine your path, or to illumine the path for others. Aby told us that we should be illumining paths with God's light, not using it as a weapon. This is part of what they teach in their course. There are many divisions in Chiapas centering on Biblical interpretation. INESIN tries to heal these divisions, while recognizing the wounds that have been caused by prostylizing missionaries in the past.

Aby led us in a Bible study centering around the Creation stories in Genesis 1 & 2 using visual aids. He told us that this is important, because there is much illiteracy in Chiapas, and sometimes they have to share God's Wisdom using visual aids. In this Bible Study, he pointed out that it was when human beings stopped listening to God that the earth and the rest of Creation suffered. We must listen to God, and the earth and all of Creation will thrive.

Community Building- Rick talked about these efforts. Many of their community building efforts overlap with their theological/spiritual efforts; in fact, though there are three axis of work at INESIN, it would be counterproductive to try and delineate them as separate. They all work together and complement each other. Some of their community building efforts include promoting an ecumenical celebration for the "Week of Prayer for Christian Unity," held each May; leading agriculture classes in far reaching communities, teaching them new ways to get better crop yields; holding youth camps, where issues of peacemaking and diffusing conflict are the focus; youth animators training, teaching youth workers ways of peace; and family violence prevention.

This last one is an endemic problem in the Chiapanecan community. The indigenous culture is very Patriarchal, and alcoholism rates are high. This often leads to violent environments that cause families to suffer. INESIN hosts recovery workshops to teach gender equality. They also teach the teachers in issues relating to this problem, offering a diploma in "Pastoral Accompaniment in Issues of Family Violence". This is a two year program similar to the one in "Pastoral Readings of the Bible" that gives trainers the tools needed to make a difference in their community. In their programs, some participants have been victims, and some have been aggressors. The staff at INESIN is not judgmental in working with these participants; but they do encourage them to recognize their own wounds, so they can more authentically help others. They also have a program titled, "Healing the Heart" designed to do just that.

Institutional Building- Natan, the director if INESIN, led us in this discussion. Institutional building encompasses building up the core of INESIN, so they can continue their needed programs. Institutional building includes receiving groups such as ours, in order to build relationship; continually training their staff in new ways of conflict management and pastoral care; leadership training; working with local agencies; and working on their current project, constructing a multipurpose building. We then went outside and toured this new construction.

The foundation has already been poured for the multipurpose building; which is next to the house that Lindsey is renting from them. They were to build the walls this fall (we were to help with this project) but funding did not come through. They are working on raising \$10,000 for construction of this building. When finished, it will contain a larger

assembly hall, can host larger groups, and will allow their ministry to reach many more people. Our prayers will be with them as this project unfolds.

Natan told us that all of these three foci for INESIN contain the core values that drive their ministry: including gender equity in all things; equipping pastoral leaders with a tools for strong exegesis and a hermeneutic that is more reflective of peace; equipping leaders with tools to guide people through situations of family violence; helping men and women to live new lives based in harmony; and taking God's mission into the community, not confining it to the walls of this particular context.

At 1:00, we broke for lunch. Lunch was prepared by Betty and Lucy, and consisted of chicken pieces immersed in a creamy white sauce, with peppers, mushrooms, and other vegetables mixed in. This was served with pasta, and a salad. Homemade tortillas were on the table, along with Mexican pastries. The salad dressing appeared to be 1000 Island; but was spicy. A welcome surprise!

After lunch, we had a break until 4:00. While a nap would have been very welcome, Ken Schlottach, Nathan Lewis and I decided to take a walking tour of San Cristobal. After getting some directions from Rick, we set out; and we were enthralled. We walked for about 90 minutes, making a big circle around INESIN. What a town! All of the buildings open up right into the street, with barely a sidewalk in between. Stores and residences intermingled, and often people were selling tamales and sodas and chips, etc. right out of their houses, with a small counter set up at the door. There are doors everywhere. Most of the doors opened up onto courtyards; some were very nice, others were in extreme poverty. Restaurants, stores and other businesses did not have many identifying factors, maybe a small hand-lettered sign on the stucco. Often a store would just have the word "Vende" or "Tienda" painted on the stucco; this told passers-by that it was a store. Many houses had signs saying "NoEntrada/Salida" which translates as "no entry/exit". This kept out anyone who may think it a shop.

We walked to the Catholic Church, which rose high on a hill at the top of this street; then through a courtyard, and up and down several other streets. One sight we saw was a produce stand. Three young children dressed in rags were selling very nice looking produce at a table in front of their doorway. We could see into their courtyard and house beyond the sales table, and it was a ramshackle place that would have been

condemned in the US. However, these children seemed very happy, and were enjoying life. They did not seem to care that they did not have extravagance in life.

Another sight we saw was a young girl, about 10 years old, cooking her supper on a makeshift grill in front of her house. She was perhaps a foot away from a busy street, with cars zipping by. But she was not distracted, she seemed very happy. We kept waking, taking in the sights.

There are Volkswagen Beetles everywhere! Not the "new Beetle", either (yuck)! But old VW bugs, busses, "things" and pickup trucks. I am watching for a VW412, one of my favorites. I am a VW fan; my father had VW Bugs all his life, and my first car was a bug. For all the VWs we have seen, however, none of them are afflicted with what kills Beetles in the US- rust. In the US, most Beetles have rust accumulations in where the fenders meet the body, and at other key body joints. None here. This is due to the lack of salt treatments on the roads, and the mountain air, as opposed to salty sea air. It is not humid at all; and not a bit salty. Therefore, even older bugs just last forever!

After we returned from our excursion, it was time for our next session. Martin and Aby led us in this one, focusing on the Religious Environment of Chiapas, and the Current Social Situation of Chiapas.

Part I was on the Religious environment. Spiritual life in Chiapas is a mixture of 3 different worlds; the spirituality of the indigenous Mayan civilization, Christianity as brought here by the Roman Catholic Spaniards in 1500s, and Christianity introduced by the Protestants in the 1800s. This has made for an often volatile mix.

When the Spaniards (Roman Catholic) came in the early 1500s, it was easy for them to exploit the wealth of the Mayan communities. They encountered a culture and a religion that they did not understand. They asked themselves, "Do these people even have souls?" The spirituality of the Mayan people was completely disregarded. The Spaniards demonized everything that had to do with Mayan Spirituality. These missionaries were not invited to share their faith with the indigenous Mayans; they imposed it. Spaniards typically tore down Mayan spiritual centers, and built Christian centers of worship on those spots; to "cleanse" the ground.

Spaniards redefined Mayan symbology, turning it into Christian representation. One such instance is with the number "13". This is a symbolic number meaning, "completion" in Mayan spirituality, like "7" or "12" is in Judaism. The Spaniards overwrote their symbology by telling them that their 13 was really a reference to Jesus and the 12 disciples. Mayan spirituality often lifts God up with feminine references, talking about "Mother God". The Spaniards overwrote this element of Mayan Spirituality by convincing them that "Mother God" is in fact, Mary. In like manner, they disassembled key elements of Mayan Spirituality to make it a syncretic Christian religion. They became a Mayan/Catholic amalgam.

In the 1800s, Protestants came to Chiapas and told the indigenous people that Roman Catholicism was idolatry. The Protestants threw away their statues of Mary and Saints, preaching temperance and convincing them to refrain from drinking wine. These were Catholic idols, according to the Protestants, so they must renounce them. The Protestants were not violent (as the Spaniards were) but they were insidious in their denigration of what was a sacred religion to the people of Chiapas.

This led to Syncretism; which is common for indigenous societies when religion is imposed upon them uninvited. Syncretism can often result as a form of resistance. Some communities are more Mayan, some more Roman Catholic, some more Protestant; but many are combinations of all.

This also led eventually to the destruction of community. Festivals had taken on a "Roman Catholic" feel to them, with alcohol involved in the festivities. With the Protestants preaching temperance, they could no longer participate in community festivals, and many withheld their funds from it as well. This caused many rifts between the Catholics and Protestants of Chiapas.

As Mexico gained independence from Spain, this rift deepened. The papacy took the side of the Spanish occupiers, and the Protestants took the side of the brewing rebellion. The rift between the two groups grew. Some people switched religion based on the political climate; which caused feelings of animosity between the groups to grow even more. With these factors at play, Faith has led to the destruction of community.

Part II was about Chiapas today. Aby and Martin performed a skit about the conquering Spaniards and then Protestants. This helped illustrate the complex climate

of Chiapas today. We then went back into our meeting room, where the entire INESIN staff performed another skit, this time acting out a community meeting. This skit also illustrated for us the problems in Chiapas today.

The structure of Chiapas is very communal. This is different from communism, where the state owns everything. In their communal structure, much of the available land is community owned. One parcel of land may belong to a community of 600 families. They all farm it together, sharing in the work and the profits. But when they are of diverse faiths, and the church has taught them to war against one another, the fabric of their society begins to unravel. Religion, politics and culture are all intertwined; and the current Protestant climate in Chiapas has taken on the extreme nature of Fundamentalism. As the mandate of Fundamentalism is to refuse to participate in common religious expression, this has led to entire families being exiled from the community.

They took us through a case study of a community with which they are working. In this community of 432 families, 32 are Catholic and the rest are Fundamentalist Protestants. In 1972 the community pulled together to build a Catholic Church. By 2010, the church was in disrepair; so the Catholics tore down the old one and started building a new one. Because of religious intolerance, the Fundamentalist Protestants would not allow them to build a new church. Tensions escalated, and the Catholic families were exiled from the community. It did not help matters that the mayor of the town was also the pastor of one of the Fundamentalist Protestant churches.

There are three beliefs unique to Fundamentalist Protestants that lead to disharmony:

1. Refusal to share land with minority Christians of diverse faiths
2. Refusal to allow minority landowners to use common land to their benefit
3. The practice of expelling minority groups from the community based on diverse religious expression

The Catholic Church is not without its fracturing as well; but their fracturing tends to be centered within, between "Charismatic" Catholics and "Traditionalists". In the midst of all this, the goal of INESIN is to meet the spiritual and communal needs of the people, and promote peace in Chiapas.

After this, we had supper; which consisted of taquitos; (but they do not call them taquitos here, they are just tacos) and salad.

Day Three

Friday, September 27

I woke at 6:00 Friday morning, and began journaling in the courtyard, watching the sun rise. It was a beautiful morning, betraying the wonder of the day that was to come.

Breakfast: Morning tacos with ham and cheese; refried beans; salsa and guacamole

After breakfast, we boarded Julio's van again and rode into the heart of San Cristobal to visit a coffee cooperative. This van is not owned by INESIN; rather, it is a van service that contracts with people and agencies to provide transportation. This is one area where San Cristobal is ahead of the US; development of public transportation. Despite the number of VW Bugs I have seen, most of the people in this area do not have their own car. Public Transportation has developed quite well out of sheer necessity. The main form of transportation are taxis, which zip around town all day long. If you see 10 cars, at least 5 of them are taxis. Standing on the street outside of INESIN, taxi after taxi zips by constantly. They are very inexpensive. Public transportation also includes vans like the one Julio drives. Some of these are privately contracted, others zip around all day like the taxis. There are also large numbers of people who get rides in the backs of pickup trucks, especially going from town to town. Many of the pickup trucks around here are outfitted with iron cages on the beds for hauling people or supplies. Pickup trucks are not status symbols here, like they are in the US; they are the workhorses of the Mexican community.

The coffee cooperative we visited was actually the retail outlet where the coffee is sold. We did not actually go to the coffee fields to see it growing, which I think many of us would have liked. Logistically, though I understand the situation; the cooperative is just too far away and transportation issues would have made it hard to do in just one morning.

At the cooperative, we met a young man named Lasario. Through our translators, he relayed to us an outline of his cooperative, and how they work together. He taught us about coffee growing, how the beans are harvested, shelled, and prepared for consumption; and he taught us about coffee roasting and the many options available.

We sampled many coffees, and ate raw beans of several different roasts. The coffee here is so different; we learned to appreciate this beverage.

As I have stated before, coffee is very important to the people of Chiapas. It is grown on the hillsides in Chiapas, harvested, and exported. Several thousand tons are exported to the US every year; also, Europe and other areas of the world. The cooperative that is part of Lasario's life is a great study in community. The cooperative is 600 acres of coffee fields, and just over 600 families farm it. They share in the work, they share in the harvesting, they share in the profits. It is a great example of working together; a vision of God's plan for us all living in community (Acts 2:37-47).

After the coffee cooperative, we toured the downtown area of San Cristobal. We visited several markets, changed our dollars into Pesos, and soaked up the atmosphere of this town. We visited an old Catholic church in the center of town. It was gothic in style, very old, with original pews and doors, etc. There were several altars in this church that lifted up different aspects of faith; it was very moving.

There were many people worshipping in the church while we were there; some of them in traditional indigenous attire. They were saying prayers at the various altars, some of them prostrating themselves before the altars. Alongside these vignettes of faith there were tourists like myself, walking around and gawking at the beauty of the church. The tourists were respectful of the worshipping community; and the worshippers appeared to be used to the tourists.

There was one worshipper that particularly appealed to me. This man was prostrated in front of the main altar, saying prayers out loud, expressing his faith. He was not speaking Spanish, he was speaking Tzotzil, one of the indigenous languages of the Mayan people. Tzotzil is very distinct; it is guttural and blunt, like Hebrew. This is very different than Spanish, which is mostly spoken from the front of the mouth. Tzotzil is the language that was spoken by the indigenous people before the Spaniards arrived on this continent in the 1500s; it is still spoken by many communities today. Hearing his Tzotzil was very different than the Spanish we have been hearing all week. Hearing him worshipping lifted up for me the conflated spirituality we have been hearing about the past couple of days.

We walked back to INESIN for lunch. The walk was fascinating as always, walking through the town and immersing ourselves in the culture of this community. There were many vendors along the street trying to sell us anything from tortillas to handmade crafts and clothing. There was an obvious contrast between those living in poverty, and those who have enough. In the courtyard outside the church, there were people sitting under tents; this was their home. They had nothing else, the whole family lived in one tent. We saw people living on the street; however, none of these whom we saw looked miserable. They seemed like they truly loved their lives, as barren as they were. It was quite an experience.

Les Kemp and I found one woman who really touched our hearts. It was an older woman, sitting on a street, leaning against a shop. She was dressed in traditional indigenous garb. She was tiny, she was wrinkled, she was very old; and she was very smiley. She smiled at us as we walked by, and our hearts went out to her. We each gave her 5 pesos (about a dollar) and that just made her day. She thanked us (gracias, gracias!) and we went on our way. We both wanted to adopt her, to bring her back home with us and make her our grandma!

Upon our return at INESIN, lunch was ready. Lunch consisted of 2 kinds of Enchiladas and salad. After lunch, some of us took siestas!

Our late afternoon program was presented by a woman named Jet Nauta, from Switzerland. She is working with a program called SIPAZ, which is part of an International Service for Peace. They have been in Chiapas since 1995, working to bring peace after the Zapatista uprising. Jet has been here since 2000. They are an international agency, but they are not affiliated with the United Nations; too much baggage there. They are more of a grassroots organization, working with the people on a direct and intimate level to bring peace at the local level.

Bishop Samuel Ruiz of Chiapas called for their charter. Bishop Ruiz was the Bishop of Chiapas from the 1970s though 2011, when he died. He did much in his lifetime to bring peace and justice to this corner of the world; he was the "Mother Teresa" of Chiapas. This community is what it is today in large part because of his efforts.

Jet told us that the Zapatistas are a grassroots organization trying to bring justice to the people, speaking against some of the more oppressive programs of the Mexican

government. The conflict between the Zapatistas and the Federal State escalated in 1994, when Mexico entered NAFTA. This treaty has not been good for the Mexican people. (Some in our group maintain that it has not been good for US, either!) As a result of NAFTA, small farmers feared what impact this would have on their community and their economy. At this point, the Zapatista movement was headed by farmers, who rose up and took over 6 county seats in Chiapas. This was when the movement became violent. Prior to that it had been a more peaceful protest.

The beginnings of the Zapatista movement actually go back to 1983, when University students first organized to speak out against injustices in the Mexican Government. Though technically a bicameral democracy, Mexico is very much controlled by one political party, and their laws are directed towards making the rich richer and the poor poorer. This is what was being protested by the University students in 1983. The term Zapatista is derived from the name of Emilio Zapata, a leader in the Mexican Revolution of 1810. By calling themselves Zapatistas, they are capitalizing on the collateral of this national hero's name.

In 1992 the Zapatistas organized a march on Mexico City, similar to our march on Washington in the US back in 1963. This march on Mexico City was to demand rights for all Mexicans, and an end to the oppressive practices of the government. The protesters were ignored by the Mexican government. This was when the Zapatista movement shifted from peaceful demonstration to armed conflict.

The armed conflict came to a boiling point in 1994, when war erupted between the grassroots Zapatistas and the federal government. The government had trained a paramilitary force to do their 'dirty work' and they massacred 45 people in one armed conflict. This ended in a cease-fire agreement; but there has never been a resolution to the conflict. Technically, the Zapatistas and the Mexican Government are still only under a 'cease-fire.'

Since 1995, the Mexican government has implemented divergent platforms and courses of action. Their public statements and programs contain initiatives to build peace, and encourage peaceful resolution towards conflict; their more private initiatives contain programs of low-intensity warfare against the common people. This low-intensity warfare has included further development of the paramilitary "fifth column" that goes

into towns and does the government's 'dirty work,' while the government issues official proclamations decrying this acts and looks the other way.

This warfare also includes seizing land from farmers with no recompense and constructing military bases on their land in order to "keep an eye on them". Of course, this is "for their own good". The disparity between the excesses of the military and the poverty of the common people of Chiapas became very evident the next day on our journey to the Mayan Pyramid of Tonina in Ocosingo. On our way to the pyramid, we were passing an excessive military compound with state of the art services. I was looking across the street, at a family playing basketball. The court was dirt, the backboards were delaminating plywood, and the ball was ragged. It was a scene of poverty, but the family was enjoying themselves. Then I looked across the street at the military compound. Just on the other side of the razor-wire fence, not 100 yards away, there was a beautiful basketball court with an engineered surface, and expensive Plexiglas adjustable backboards. Of course, the military would not let these dirt poor farmers use their expensive basketball court. The disparity was shocking.

The Zapatistas had issued 15 demands in 1994, which were all ignored. In the Mexican elections of 2000 Vincente Fox was elected President. He was more moderate than those who had been in power for 70 years; and he began to respond to the demands of the Zapatistas. The conflict between the Zapatistas and the government eased a bit.

In 2003, the Zapatistas emerged with a new initiative, calling for a formation of a bottom-up government. This bottom-up plan included formations of barrios, then towns, then counties, then state. This bottom-up initiative was formed parallel to the government; so in essence, many parts of Mexico have two governments existing side by side; one that is imposed (Federal) and one that is by choice (Zapatista). This parallel "voluntary" government has set up systems of production and distribution, healthcare, education and justice. For example; the federal judicial system is very biased towards those who have the most money. Folks can choose instead to have their disputes mandated by the grassroots Zapatista judiciary. This is quicker, cheaper, and more equitable. The Zapatistas offer hope, in the form of an autonomous government.

In 2006, the Zapatistas tried unsuccessfully to influence the national election, and gain physical seats of power. This was met with some discomfort by Zapatistas, who feared losing their identity as a grassroots movement.

What exactly is the Zapatista movement? It is hard to define, because oppressed people tend to see what they want to see in this movement. Therefore, it has become many radical things, sometimes contradictory. There are violent acts committed in the Zapatista name, as well as peaceful development. It is a many-faceted movement, and not every facet is honorable and has integrity.

So, in the midst of all this, what is SIPAZ doing? They initiate programs and dialogue across lines of division that address three problem areas: direct violence; cultural violence; and structural violence.

- Direct violence: they initiate dialogue with paramilitary and official government groups to encourage ways of building community with the people of Chiapas, in the aftermath of their historical conflict.
- Cultural violence: they address cultural issues that cause the people of Chiapas to be violent with each other; such as deeply rooted systems of machismo, sexism and racism. They address these issues through peace education, workshops, literature, support groups, etc. They disseminate information and educate the people of Chiapas about alternatives as they are able.
- Structural violence: They address issues of systemic failure; such as instances where individuals are wrongly accused or oppressed. One instance is the case of a teacher who was accused of a crime he did not commit. He has been jailed for 13 years. SIPAZ is working to get him due process and a fair trial. They are also addressing legislation in the Mexican government that will benefit the rich at the expense of the majority of the Mexican people.

The presentation was very interesting, and troubling as well. We were thankful to receive the information, and agreed that our prayers would be with SIPAZ and the Mexican people as they worked for peace together.

Supper consisted of 3 kinds of tamales which were very good; salsa, lettuce and pastries. This was perhaps my favorite meal here; the tamales were incredible. This food is a staple in the Mexican community, and we certainly enjoyed it. One of the varieties of tamale was cooked in mole sauce (pronounced Mo-Lay; it is not made from "moles!") which sort of tastes like spicy chocolate! It was very good.

Day Four
Saturday, September 28, 2013

Today we climbed a pyramid! This was perhaps the most incredible part of our trip. We boarded a van (Julio's van, again!) at 7:30 Saturday morning and drove 3 hours to Ocosingo, a nearby city.

This was an incredible drive. Julio's driving had not grown any more timid from early in the week, and he continued to creatively express his skills using the yellow line and other traffic as his medium. We drove up and down numerous hills, around sharp curves, and over rough patches of pavement. At times, the street seemed to become nothing more than a rural road through a residential area. This, however, was one of the main highways in Chiapas. I was told that the other roads in Chiapas are really primitive.

We saw many people on our drive, most of them living in conditions we would label poverty. There were families of 10 and 12 people living in a one-room shack; people sleeping on the street, and many, many people walking from place to place. People were walking with firewood on their backs, bringing wood home for cooking purposes; with food on their backs that they had purchased or harvested; or with children in slings on their back as they walked from community to community. Some walked barefoot, others had shoes; but all dressed in clothing that identified their indigenous community.

There were many storefronts that we passed along the way, selling everything from potato chips and soda to five-gallon jugs of gasoline. There were many stores, but not many people shopping in these stores. I am told that they do not do much business; but are thankful for whatever they get. There were also several produce stands, with some fruit that was unfamiliar to me. There was one that looked like a watermelon, but turned out to be a large variety of squash; and another that looked like a spiny strawberry. We had some of these Monday for lunch; they were very good, but had to be peeled and the stone clung to the fruit.

I got a bit carsick on the way there with all of the ups and downs and twists and turns. I think part of the reason was because I was looking out my side window the whole time, looking at the people and the countryside. Along the way we passed a waterfall, a

coffee plantation, and lots of corn. At this point, we were in Tzotzil country, where the indigenous people spoke a Mayan language as their primary communication. Many also knew Spanish. I was fortunate enough to be sitting next to Rick, who pointed out things along the way, and taught me about many cultural issues facing the communities of Chiapas. The conversation with Rick was almost as interesting as our destination!

Upon our arrival in Ocosingo, we stopped at a public park for brunch. This was about 10:30. We had wonderful sandwiches that Lucy had packed for us. They were chicken and cheese, with avocado and lettuce. Muy Bueno!

While we were eating, there were three dogs meandering about the park, often coming close to us and begging for food. So a word about dogs in Chiapas, and some may find this a sad report. There is no 'Humane Society', Animal Control, or Bob Barker in Chiapas; and as a result, dogs often roam freely about the streets all day long. Many of them are slightly malnourished, and appear to not have a home. There is not a huge abundance of them; but enough to notice and take pity on their plight. However, of all the dogs we saw up and down the streets of town, none were in the least bit threatening to us; none even barked at us. They were just part of the community life. Several of us wound up giving large portions of our sandwiches to these three dogs.

After brunch, we got back in the van and continued our journey to the ruins of the Mayan city of Tonina. We were told we were going to tour the Mayan ruins; and I am not quite sure what I expected, but whatever I expected, this was not it. Our first sight of the ruins was a distant stone structure rising out of the ground, almost a part of the landscape itself. It appeared that the earth was rising to consume this grand structure, this Mayan pyramid; I later learned that this was not far from the truth.

We got out of the van at the ruins and contracted a tour guide, Elisimo, to lead the way. Rick was invaluable at negotiating a fee, and we began our journey. We walked about a half mile past a souvenir stand and restrooms, and arrived at a miniature replica of the ruins. This was in essence a 'map' for us, and Elisimo pointed out the different structures, and told us what we would be seeing. There are seven levels to the pyramid in all; each one with a courtyard and structures in it. There are 13 Temples scattered on the various levels, each one dedicated to a different aspect of Mayan Spirituality. He explained to us what we would encounter on each level, Then we resumed our journey to the ruins.

After another hike of about a half-mile or so, we arrived in a large field, with stone "stands" all around us. There was a small pyramid structure in the field, and a 'court' with six stone figures, three on each side. Elisimo told us that this was where they played a baseball-like game, where the stakes were very high. Often the competitors would be prisoners of war, sometimes they would be peasants from the surrounding town. The losers of the game were beheaded, and often the winners were as well. This was considered an honor, to die this way.

The pyramid we were about to climb was the center of the Mayan city of Tonina; but the city itself stretched out on the plain. The pyramid is in the center of a valley, surrounded by a mountain range on all sides. It is believed that this entire valley was the Tonina community. The closer to the pyramid a Tzotzil lived, the more prosperous they were; and the very wealthy leaders of the community actually lived on levels 3-5 of the pyramid. The peasants, whose farms stretched out beyond the pyramid, paid tribute, which benefitted the wealthy living on or near the pyramid itself.

This structure is repeated in Mexican communities today. The very rich live in the cities, while the poor live in the surrounding countryside. This is the opposite of our US culture, where the wealthy have migrated to the suburbs, while generally the inner city contains our least prosperous citizens.

We began our ascent, stopping on the first level. On this level, there were a few structures, one of which was the altar where the competitors in the field below were decapitated. There was also an interesting set of three archways. To the Tzotzil living in Tonina and worshipping on this pyramid, these three archways represented doorways to the sun, to the center of the earth, and to Venus. We queried our guide about the importance of Venus; and he reminded us that the Mayans were astute astronomers. They had mapped the constellations, and spent much of their time studying them. To them, Venus was a celestial body that accompanied the beginning of the day, and the end of the day; so for them, Venus embodied life and death. This circle of life idea was a repeating theme as we learned more about Mayan Spirituality.

We ascended to another level, again touring some temples and other structures erected there. It was very fascinating to see, and we were starting to get an amazing view of the countryside. We learned a bit about our guide, Elisimo. He is more than a tour guide, he is one of the archaeologists working on the ruins. He has been working on them for

21 years, since he was 17 years old. This is his job, his calling, his passion; and it showed as he talked about their excavation work and his connection to the ruins.

This site was just discovered in 1980. Prior to that, this was a mountain! At the top of the mountain they began discovering stones; and as they unearthed the stones, it was clearly a structure. More and more excavating revealed the top of the pyramid; and the work began in earnest. They have literally moved a mountain to uncover this pyramid, which had been reclaimed by the earth hundreds of years prior. The dig still continues; they have much more ruins to uncover, much more history to discover. What we are seeing today will be very different 20 years from now, as they uncover more and more. Elisimo continues to be part of this dig, and has dedicated his life to the restoration of this structure. It is humbling to be present in the midst of such grandeur. At one point, when we reached the top of the pyramid, I pointed to a mountain in the distance. I asked Elisimo if prior to 1980 these ruins looked like that; he affirmed that they did.

We ascended levels 3 thru 5, which were the levels where people lived. These were the elite of Mayan society, living on the pyramid while those below worked for them. These would have been priests and politicians, the wealthy who held all the power. The walls of their homes still stood, although the roofs, made of wood, were gone. They were like condos, joined together sharing common walls. Each house was 2-3 small rooms; and these were for the elite.

On these levels, there were a few tombs. These took the form of holes in the plaza, which the archaeologists had covered with protective fencing. We were able to see into the tombs, however. These were the tombs of the elite; and while we were able to view a few of them, Elisimo said his archaeological team speculates that that entire plaza is riddled with them.

The Mayan people used these ruins for 1300 years, from 400BC to 900AD. During this time there were many changes. We saw one structure built on top of the ruins of another, and other structures built in front of what had previously been important. When dynasties changes, or eras ended, remodeling was done and their spirituality refocused. The layers of life were evident in the many strata of the pyramid.

We were walking on bones. That is, the structure we walked on, the bricks and mortar that made up the pyramid today were the bones of the structure the Mayan people

lived on. The stones we walked on, in the time of the Maya, were covered with stucco, making it smooth and livable. This stucco exterior would have been painted with murals and décor, telling of their life and faith. It is a shame our culture will never see this. The stucco crumbled over the years, so only the stone skeleton remained. This is what we see and climb on today.

The pyramid is a work in progress. We were walking on a plaza that is theoretically full of Mayan tombs, but the team has only uncovered a handful of them. Structures are being discovered as each new layer of earth is removed. Temples are unearthed and new things found all the time. There was one structure that we were not able to tour yet, because it was just uncovered a year or so ago, and they have not had time to fully catalog and research the discovery yet. All of their discoveries are carbon dated, graphed and mapped, and recorded for posterity. One of the tombs we saw yielded information from this process; Elisimo knew how old the tomb was, and that the leader that was buried there was a woman. This site is a work in progress.

One structure we say was a Mayan bathroom. The stool was essentially just a hole in a rock seat; the waste dropped away somewhere deep below. Then, there was a stone bathtub; a square about 4 x 4 x 4 feet. This bathroom was only for the most elite; others had to relieve themselves elsewhere.

We noted that many of the Mayan homes of the elite had sunken patios. However, these patios were not for BBQs on Saturday afternoons. Via an impressive aqueduct system, the Mayans would flood these painted patios with water, then use them as a reflective surface to study the stars more closely. Using this method, they could even watch an eclipse without damage to the retina. It was due to ingenious astrological precision such as this that the Maya were able to calculate such precise measurements of time, such as the much-acclaimed Mayan calendar.

Climbing to levels 5-6, we encountered some 'holier' and more important places. The most important temples were here, as well as meeting rooms for the governing bodies. The main meeting chamber was a room about 8 X 10 feet. It had square 'windows' in it that perfectly lined up with the four directions- North, South, East and West. On the days of Solstice and Equinox, the sun shines directly through these windows in a dazzling display; one more testament to the Mayan astrological ingenuity.

On these levels, we saw some structures that remain close to as they did in the days of antiquity. We entered the 'temple of the monster of the earth,' with a sculpture of an earth creature with a sphere in his mouth; symbolizing the earth swallowing up the sun each evening, as it did as the sun set on the horizon. We also saw the thrones of royalty, which were still intact; and a stucco mosaic of what were past Mayan eras at that time, represented by upside down suns and severed heads. We also saw the dance floor in front of the thrones, where dancers entertained the royalty.

The Mayan dancers were a tribe, not unlike the tribes of Israel. They all came from the same family and, like Levites destined to become priests, they were all fated to be dancers. At only a few weeks old, the babies in the dance family tribe would be outfitted with a wooden plate, that was strapped to their forehead. As they grew and developed, this plate would deform the skull, showing all that they were an elite class; the family of dancers to the royalty. If they displeased the royalty, they were beheaded.

At this point, the only place to go was up. We were on the 6th level, and the last level was the top of the pyramid. The climb thus far was steep; but that was mild compared to what awaited us. The climb from the 6th level to the 7th level was almost vertical; 50 narrow steps with no landing, handrail, or escalator in sight. It would have been easy to chicken out at this point- especially if one is not fond of heights- but we all made the ascent. Within a few minutes, we were all on top of the pyramid.

Ironically, the hardest part of this final ascent were the hot stones. The best way to climb was on all fours, hands and feet aiding the climb; and the stones were very hot to the touch. By the time I got to the top I was winded, wobbly, and my hands hurt. It was worth it. The view from the top was incredible. I had climbed a pyramid in a foreign country- this has been a week of firsts.

We spent some time at the top of the pyramid, just hanging out and enjoying the fact that we had accomplished this task. We met another couple up there who were visiting from Israel. We had a nice conversation with them, before they climbed down again. On top of the pyramid, Elisimo pointed out various structures and told us aspects of Mayan culture that were new to us. Rick also filled us in on what he knew of the area. We all felt as if we were on top of the world.

Eventually, we had to come down; and down we went. Going down was much easier than up, of course; but not by much. As we descended, we stopped on each level again and explored for ourselves. By my estimation, they are missing out on a great opportunity by not installing a 'zip line' from the top all the way down!

At the bottom, we entered the museum, that told us a bit more about the pyramid and Mayan culture in general. By this time, many of us were feeling the effects of the climb. Lindsey had gotten quite dizzy from the heat, and my legs were aching from so much climbing. We rested a while before heading back to the van.

As we left Tonina in the van and headed for Ocosingo, we saw the ruins again from a distance; this time, we were able to say that we were on top of that pyramid. Looking back at it as we drove by, it seemed as if it would be impossible to ascend. But we knew otherwise.

We headed into Ocosingo, a town much like San Cristobal, where we ate supper at a restaurant there. I ordered Liver and Onions, expecting it to be done in a Mexican way; but it was just like Liver and Onions in the US. It was good. Others in our party were not as pleased with their food, though. We learned that in Mexican restaurants, the servers do not wait until all the food is prepared to bring it out; they bring it as it is finished. This often results in some of the party receiving their food early, and others receiving their food later. Sometimes, part of the party is done eating before the last of the party receives their food!

So the question may be asked, why climb a pyramid? We are on a mission trip; what part of mission is climbing a pyramid? The answer is in relationship. Mission trips are not about the work being accomplished; if that were the case, we would just send money and tell them to hire their own painters, gardeners, etc. Mission Trips are about building relationships; and by learning firsthand more about the Mayan community and culture, we are better able to build relationship with them. We climbed a pyramid in order to get closer to the community for which this pyramid is so important. By better understanding the Mayan people, we can better build our relationship with them.

As we drove back to San Cristobal, we had great fellowship together in the van. Upon arriving at INESIN, we were all very tired and sore. We went to bed for healing and rest, our hearts filled with joy; because we knew that today we climbed a pyramid.

Day Five
Sunday, September 29, 2013

Sunday morning we woke up very sore from climbing the pyramid the day before. We woke to the sound of fireworks at 5:00am. This is typical of a Sunday morning in San Cristobal; congregants and liturgists are celebrating "El Dia De Senior;" or "God's Day". Fireworks continued in the morning, and all throughout the day at various times. Our breakfast consisted of scrambled eggs with ham, peppers and onions in them; black beans; pastries and coffee. After a leisurely breakfast, we walked into town to worship.

We walk quite a bit here in San Cristobal. The churches, markets, restaurants, museums and other activities are all within a 30-minute walk of INESIN. It is a joy to walk up and down these streets. The people are friendly, and very unique. There are several varieties of dress among people belonging to a dozen or so indigenous communities. Their community is identified by the color and style of their attire. The most unique dress I have seen is from a community who wear furry black skirts (women/girls) or pants (men/boys). They wear white shirts with embroidered designs around the collar, and the women often wear shawls or, to keep the sun off, blankets folded on their heads. If they have small children, the woman carry them in slings. Often, these are some of the women and children who are selling things in the marketplace-street vendors, and other booths. One such attired woman I saw was selling handmade goods on the street, while at the same time nursing a baby in a sling! Quite the multi-tasker!

We worshipped in a historic Catholic Church in the marketplace square (Santo Domingo Church). It was an old Gothic church (not the same one we visited Friday-that one was the Cathedral of San Cristobal de las Casas) in the middle of town; very pretty, and very dated. The pews, icons, kneelers, and other accoutrements were very old and very care-worn. It was obvious that the congregation was more interested in preserving traditions than in keeping up with the latest new thing. In our country, the pews would have been replaced with cushioned seats and padded kneelers 50 years ago. These were not.

They did, however have a guitar leading the hymns and other music; which was very welcome. The homily given by the priest had elements of social justice woven throughout (what I could understand) and the deep faith of the congregants was very evident. The church was very large, and by the time the service started, about 400

people were in attendance. We were able to follow along pretty well in the bulletin, even though it was all in Spanish. I took some comfort in realizing that the scriptures we were reading in Spanish here in San Cristobal (*From the Revised Common Lectionary*) were the same scriptures that were being read back in Bem that Sunday by our church family, gathered for worship. The service lasted about an hour.

After worship, we headed outside into the marketplace. This is the courtyard area around the church. It is a maze full of vendors selling homemade tapestries, snacks, jewelry, and other items. There were probably 200 vendors in all, all over the square, each with their own canopy. We went to lunch after worship, but after lunch we returned and toured these booths for a bit, haggling prices with them and selecting souvenirs for family and friends back home. I purchased two stoles, a blouse for my daughter, and a tapestry to hang up in the sanctuary at church for World Communion Sunday. Previously this week I purchased two other blouses for my daughters, slippers for my sons, and two other paraments for the Sanctuary at church. These were all very inexpensive by our standards; each item (other than the tapestry) averaged about \$10.

We ate lunch at a restaurant in the downtown area. We all had various forms of tacos. In restaurants here, taco ingredients are served on a plate, depending on what ingredients are ordered, and a plate of tortillas is provided for each table. It is up to the individual to assemble their own tacos. The tortillas are small, so each person can easily eat 4-5 tacos. I ordered a plate with pork, pineapple, and various other ingredients. It was very good. There was also a condiment tray on each table filled with various salsas, onions, and other pickled vegetables. We do so much walking here that when meals arrive, they are very welcome. We ate lunch and then walked some more.

We went back to the marketplace, and this is when I made my purchases. It was fun haggling with the vendors! I have picked up, in the past few days, enough Spanish to get by in such situations. "Cuantos?" Is the query for price; then the haggling begins. I feel a little bad about haggling, because in comparison to their standard of living, I should probably be paying twice the asking price. But that is the way, so that is what I did. The tapestry I purchased was originally priced at \$1200 pesos (about \$100 US). I haggled down to \$900, simply because I was on the fence about even purchasing it. I told the woman that I would think about it and come back. After a minute, she chased after me and offered to sell it for \$800 pesos (about \$65 US). So I purchased it. To be

honest, the extra \$35 US would probably be better spent in her hands; but this is the way it works around here. In retrospect, I probably should have given her \$900 anyway; but she was very happy with what she received. Since I do not know how to differentiate denominations of currency in Spanish, all of the haggling was done by writing numbers on my hand; the vendor would then write another number on their hand, and we would go back and forth.

After shopping, we went to the Chocolate Museum. Chocolate, along with coffee, is another pillar of the economy in Chiapas. There are many cacao farmers in Chiapas, and they export their Cacao beans all over the world. At the museum we learned how chocolate is made, and purchased a bit of chocolate to take home.

One fascinating thing about the Cacao bean; it is not just for making chocolate. To the indigenous Mayan peoples, the Cacao bean was used for commerce. The bean was their common form of currency, and you traded so many beans to purchase commodities and foodstuff. There was even a display showing how many Cacao beans different items cost in the Mayan world. It was very interesting. We watched a movie about a disease that is currently threatening the Central American Cacao plantations; it has hit the Chiapas farming community very hard.

At the Chocolate Museum and at other places during the week, we were able to purchase Mexican Chocolate. It is very good. The taste is much purer than our chocolate, with no added sugars and wax, like our "milk chocolate" has in abundance. One thing I miss about Chiapas is the excellent chocolate!

Our translator for this afternoon was Jackie, whose husband Rick works at INESIN. Jackie is an administrator for a private school here in San Cristobal, and was able to provide us with insight into the area, and help with marketplace negotiations when needed. She directed us to the Chocolate Museum to help us understand a bit better the cultural issues of the region. Rick and Jackie are Mennonites from Canada, here on a three year mission. They are compensated through the Mennonite Central Committee, just as Lindsey is compensated through Global Ministries. They are a great couple to know. They are both filled with wisdom and knowledge; and they are both patient and kind. They were invaluable to our experience this week, sharing their passion for ministry as they explain and translate and help us learn about the culture and community. They have two children; Ezra, their son is 7 years old; Hillary is 4.

We returned to INESIN for a Siesta, and to meet back up with Lindsey. She had gone to the airport with Jaime to pick up the rest of our Mission Team: Cindy Mercer and Casey Heying. They had to wait until Sunday to arrive, as Casey was in a wedding Saturday night. Our mission team now numbers 10. We had about an hour back at INESIN before the Mercers arrived; a bit of welcome down time.

Upon their arrival, we walked back into town (I estimate that we walked a minimum of 5 miles Sunday) to get a late dinner. We ate at a Zapatista restaurant. I had tamales, others had Enchiladas, nachos, pizza and hamburgers. For the first time since arriving in Mexico, we had Margaritas as well. Muy Bueno! We all enjoyed our meal. We walked back to INESIN after supper, our first walk in the streets of San Cristobal after dark. Again, the people were friendly and wonderful.

At this point, I had many encounters with the people of San Cristobal. For five days, we have strolled the neighborhood, ate at restaurants, walked the plaza, and haggled in the marketplace. We have been to churches, museums, restaurants and stores. At no point, in this entire encounter, did I ever feel the least bit uneasy; at no time walking up and down the streets of this foreign city was I ever afraid; and at no point have I encountered any person who has been the least bit rude, intimidating, or threatening. I spoke with Rick Saturday about the US attitude towards Mexico, and the unjustified fear I encountered among people back home as we organized this trip. I was told that we would be kidnapped, mugged, and even held hostage by Mexican Drug Lords. As Americans, we have become so racist toward the Mexican people that when we hear "Mexico" we think of drugs and danger. Rick tells me that events such as this are very isolated to the northern states of Mexico, the ones bordering the US; and that violence is largely due the prominence of the US, and "customers" for the drug cartels there. These areas are as far from Chiapas and other southern states as New York is from California. While it is possible to cite anecdotal evidence of isolated negative encounters in the southern states of Mexico, this tactic could also be done anywhere, including my hometown of Owensville, MO. Chiapas is a very safe community, and any violence encountered here is much less than the violence we would find in most US states.

This inherent racism towards Mexico in our US culture has come about in large part due to our biased media, with their agenda of placing ratings over their mission to inform the public. All of our media outlets have an agenda of appealing to a certain

base; and they use sensationalism to make that appeal. There is a slogan in television news, "If it bleeds, it leads" meaning that the most sensational story is the one that will lead the newscast. This is our media attitude towards Mexico. If it involves violence or drugs, it makes it to the news; and if it bleeds, all the better. However, these isolated incidents are not an accurate picture of the entirety of the country; at least, it is definitely not an accurate picture of the state of Chiapas. People will continue to fear Chiapas because that fear appeals to the primal brain part of our human nature; our fight or flight instinct. It is much more basic and primitive to fear and hate. But for those who will allow themselves to move beyond this primal brain and develop an appreciation for the truth and the diverse reality of God's creation, a much more accurate understanding of our global community can develop. Part of our mission, when we return to the US, will be to try to move our communities beyond the racist view of Mexico that are harbored, and towards a more enlightened understanding.

Talking with Rick, this imposed media bias and inherent US racism against Mexico, coupled with the recent US recession, has resulted in severe economic and relationship losses for INESIN. Their mission and ministry with the community has suffered, as funding sources have disappeared. They have had to lay off some workers, and cut some of their programs. This is a shame, as we have learned firsthand how valuable their ministry is with this community.

Upon arrival back at home, we went to bed. We were exhausted after our busy day! Tomorrow we look forward to more physical work; we will be painting.

Day 6
Monday, September 30, 2013

Fireworks continued into the night Sunday night; but that did not deter our sleep. We woke up Monday morning a bit later than usual, but ready to paint. We began our day with a devotional/Bible Study based on 1 Timothy 6; it was a good way to start our day, and a focused way to greet the new week.

Breakfast consisted of mini omelets with ham and cheese, tortilla strips in red sauce, black beans, pastries, coffee, juice. Another refreshing meal.

After breakfast, we began painting. Jaime directed our work. Most of the buildings at INESIN are stucco, and that requires some maintenance. Jaime is charged with maintaining the physical plant here at INESIN. He previously had a crew scrape and patch the exteriors of the buildings, so they all had obvious patchwork on them. Our job today was to paint the exterior of every building in the place. A large task, but our group was eager to get to work; and after hours of painting, we had covered the entire compound.

Painting in Chiapas is a bit different than back home. I am used to opening the can and going at it; here, they water down the paint by about a 2:1 ratio of paint to water. It is almost like whitewashing (or like what I assume whitewashing would be). Trying to direct watercolors onto a wall with a roller and brush is much harder than the thick paint I am used to; but by the end of the day, I got the hang of it. I was told that because of the climate here, paint will peel if it is applied too thick. It is much more effective to paint two or three coats of watery paint, for it won't peel. We painted everything in the whole complex with two coats of paint.

Scott Lewis and I worked together, and we painted the building where the multipurpose room lies. Lindsey worked with Les Kemp, painting a similar size building across the courtyard. She and Les finished before Scott and I did, and Lindsey pointed that out to me, teasing a bit. I told her that when you do the job right, it just takes longer. It was a fun afternoon of painting. We teased each other like that, and laughed often while we worked. Natan and the rest of the staff painted alongside us, and we communicated well, despite the language barrier. Natan is not very tall, and he was painting a tall wall with a roller on an extension. I teased him that he needed to

jump up to get the high spots. By the end of the day, Natan and I had the most paint on ourselves. The courtyard, however, had undergone a brilliant transformation. It was even more beautiful than before. We made quite a difference, and for that I am very pleased. I am sitting here looking out at the courtyard, admiring our work while typing this Tuesday morning. It is another magical Chiapas morning!

Mexican music was playing on the 'boombox' the whole time we were painting, and that was interesting to hear. There was a variety, from the fast Latin beat which first comes to mind when we think of Mexican music, to slower ballads. At times, one of the staff members would sing along to a song while painting.

We even painted the exterior wall of INESIN; and as we did, we talked to passers-by on the street. They were all very happy and pleasant to us as they passed by.

Lunch on Monday was a bit different; Lucy prepared chop suey, which was very good; it was served with rice, along with fruit and pastries. Of course, every meal is served with great Chiappian coffee, which we drink all day long. I have become used to this coffee!

After lunch, I was in dire need of a shower to get the paint off! I showered while a few others napped. Lindsey, Casey, Cindy and Judy went to the store. After my shower, Les Kemp, Ken Schlottach, Cheryl Schlottach and I decided to go for a walk around the community. We walked all over the barrio, the streets surrounding INESIN. We took in the sights, talked with a few of the citizens, and immersed ourselves in this very different community. It was a great walk, as all of our walks have been, just soaking up the sights. At no time during this walk did any of us feel the least bit afraid. Everyone we encountered greeted us with a smile. Walks such as this have been a highlight of our trip. We try to take one every day, at least just around the neighborhood.

I often get my greetings mixed up. "Buenos Diaz" is the morning greeting, and "Buenos Tardes" is afternoon and evening. I often say the wrong greeting at the wrong time of day; but the people I encounter just smile; it does not bother them. They are very welcoming; extravagantly so! When I make a mistake and greet them with the wrong phrase, I think of how Mexicans are often perceived in the US. Many Americans will ignorantly complain when they have to "press 1 for English;" but here, they are very

welcoming to our foreign language and choppy Spanish. They are much more forgiving than we tend to be in the US when the tables are turned.

Supper consisted of Mollattas, which are sort of like a Mexican version of French bread pizza. They are halves of bread toasted, then covered with black beans and cheese. This was served with fresh salsa for us to spread on the top if we choose. As always, the meal was exceptional.

After supper, Lindsey hosted us in her apartment for a fiesta. All of the staff from INESIN was invited, and most of them came. Several of them brought their children; Loren brought her son, Fonzie; Hans brought his daughters, Carmella and Dorothy. We had chips, salsa, other chips and dips, wine that we brought from Hermann and Chiappian liquor. We tried a drink called Muscalte that is like Tequila, but stronger. It was very good, and very smooth. I had just a small glass of Muscalte, and enjoyed it. I then poured myself a tall glass of lemonade, and told Casey it was Muscalte. I asked her if she thought I would be able to chug the whole glass; she said I could not. So I did. She could not believe I chugged it- she still thought it was Muscalte!

After talking to my family on Facebook, it was time for bed; another Mexican day is done. It is a good feeling each day going to bed, thinking about the new experiences that day brought us. Each evening we are sore from all of the walking and working we are doing; so aches and pains are part of bedtime. But the feeling of accomplishment, expanded horizons, and developed relationships overshadow any complaints our bodies bemoan.

Day 7
Tuesday, October 1, 2013

I woke up to another beautiful Mexican morning. My routine is to get up around 6:30 each day and go out to the courtyard and begin journaling. I write, check emails, and post pictures on Facebook until breakfast, which is usually somewhere between 7:30 and 8:15, depending on the day and on how quickly everyone else get out of bed. We all tend to gather in the courtyard as we arise, so by the time breakfast is ready, we have quite a community. Coffee is always ready and waiting for us when we get up.

Breakfast Tuesday consisted of New potatoes, fried plantains, pastries, yogurt and coffee. We ate our breakfast, and prepared for another busy day of hard work. Today, we are to work in the garden at INESIN.

Before heading to the garden, we gathered in the multipurpose room again. Rick and Loren talked to us about their agriculture work with the indigenous people of Chiapas. Rick and Loren travel to communities and teach about agriculture, teaching folks new ways of planting and fertilizing naturally using compost, without the need for purchasing pesticides or fertilizer. In this area, chemicals and fertilizers are very expensive; so it is much more beneficial for farmers to use organic methods. Rick and Loren travel to communities that are sometimes two or three days away, often riding in the back of pickup trucks or wagons along dirt roads to get there. (Rick and Loren both have degrees in agriculture.)

Their goal is to help the farmers gain food independence. Farmers in this area are not like farmers in Owensville, always up on the latest trends, and very savvy to the most beneficial means of production. These farmers are often doing things the way they have been done for many, many generations; even when those things no longer work, or when more efficient ways are possible. Rick and Loren work to open them to more efficient ways of production. It is important to note that they offer these workshops upon invitation, not as an imposition. The farmers must invite them to come, and arrange (low cost) transportation and lodging (usually in someone's home) for them to participate. They do not impose new agricultural methods upon them; but if farmers are interested, they offer them.

Rick and Loren lead us in a few group-building exercises. They then told us that their goal is not just to help educate the farmers on nutrition and food security; their goal is also to build community, and help heal long-seated divisions within the community. Ideally, they work to set up community gardens that all can share and from which all can benefit. They work to promote peace through agriculture, teaching nutrition and providing sustenance along the way.

So, although they spend the majority of their time working on gardens and farming in communities, (Rick is in charge of three separate community gardens in San Cristobal, outside of INESIN) they have not had time to work in the garden at INESIN. It had grown out of control, overrun with weeds; so our work project for today was to restore it for educational use, and for food supplies at INESIN.

This was a task that was very labor intensive. Basically, the garden at INESIN had once been four raised beds, approximately 15 feet long. However, the whole garden area had become overrun with weeds and a nasty invasive grass. So we basically ripped out the whole area and redid the entire garden. The first bed was intact enough to keep, but the other three were pulled apart, dug up, and reset. At home, I would have used a rear-tine tiller to go over the entire area; here, we had picks and shovels and our bare hands. It was very hard labor!

We basically "tilled" the entire area, then dug channels for the raised bed borders. We set the borders, then backfilled. Some of us took turns cutting the grass outside the garden area, too- using a machete! After the raised beds were set, we filled in the paths between the beds with gravel. This was a task in itself. The gravel pile was up a very steep hill, some 25 feet from the garden. We formed a bucket brigade, and passed 5 gallon buckets from the pile to the garden, where Cheryl and Loren created the paths. This one task in itself was an example of community; and doing this together, illustrated exactly what Rick and Loren were teaching us earlier. As community, it all came together.

By the time we were done, most of us were very sore. Lunch was Chilles rellenios with rice and pastries, and of course, coffee. Chilles rellenios is one of my favorite meals; I often order this at Mexican restaurants. The ones we had today were the best I have ever eaten. Chilles rellenios is sort of like a Mexican stuffed pepper; but usually they

are just stuffed with cheese. These were stuffed with chicken, rice, and all kinds of other good food. It was delicious; and I had plenty.

After lunch, we had a bit of a closing time with Rick and Loren. They are leaving early in the morning for a three day trip to an outlying village for a workshop; so we will not see them again this trip. It was very sad to see them go, for we have gotten close this week. They led us in a leave-taking ritual that was very emotional; there were many tears in the room. We have learned much from these new friends, and with our trip home looming ever closer, goodbye will be hard to say.

Most of us needed showers at this point, since some of us were wearing much of the garden on our clothes, knees, and other body parts. We washed up and about 5:00 walked into town for some sightseeing and to purchase souvenirs. It is about a 2 mile walk into town, but we enjoy walking together and greeting the citizens of Chiapas on the way. Everyone smiles and greets us as we pass by.

We made our way back to the coffee cooperative, where Les and I wanted to buy more coffee. After working thorough the language barrier (which we are finding easier and easier to do) we made our purchases. We then started walking towards an open air market; but before we got there, we found some items that we just had to have, being sold by a street vendor. They were woven hooded ponchos, homemade by the women who were selling them. They were beautiful, and they were priced at only \$100 pesos each (about \$8). They are the perfect souvenir for my wife and kids so I bought several, as did the others in our group.

This opened the floodgates. Suddenly, we had vendors approaching us from every angle; they saw money waiting to be spent. In short order, 15-20 street vendors were on us, asking us if we would purchase their wares. While all of their items were very nice, we had to say, "Gracias, No." to them and then just ignore them. They were all young women and little girls; some of the women had babies in slings with them. It was hard to say no to them, but after several days, we have gotten used to it. One little girl was very persistent; she probably followed me for four blocks. She was very sweet, not arrogant or rude; but I ignored her and kept walking.

An incident happened at this point that I find revealing of the general nature of the people of Chiapas. When I was purchasing the woven ponchos for my family, I wanted

one in blue. I asked the woman selling them if she had any in "azul" (blue). She did not have any on her, but she had some blue back where her some base was. She immediately left everything that she had with us and went back to her base to get me an azul poncho. She did not speak English, and we did not speak Spanish; she had never before met any of us, we were just Americans on the street to her; yet she left all of her wares with us to go back and secure me a blue hoodie. There was easily \$2000 pesos worth of merchandise there, and we could have made off with it all. Yet she trusted us, and left it in our care. It never even occurred to her that I would steal her wares. She was gone perhaps 10 minutes. When she came back, she handed me the poncho, and started selling to someone else while I got my money together. She trusted that I would not run off.

This is very typical of the people of San Cristobal. I have found that they are very trusting. They leave items on the street to talk to a friend or customer, never fearing that another vendor or a tourist will take them. Doors and cars are left unlocked, and children run free without fear of strangers. Vendors and shopkeepers are honest in their transactions, and in my experience, are very accurate in giving change. This is a very honest, trusting community.

It is also a very clean community. The streets are clean, with no garbage strewn about. People wait for the trash truck to come around before bringing their trash out. There are no cigarette butts, wrappers, or other debris in the streets or curbs, as you would see in downtown St. Louis. People here take pride in their community. I also saw, on a few occasions, people cleaning their stoop, outside their house. It was not unusual to walk down the street and smell cleanser from where someone had cleaned the walk outside of their home.

We stopped in a supermarket, and marveled at the differences between their markets and US stores; and we stopped a bit at a bookstore. By the time we made it back to INESIN, it was 8:00. Dinner was ready (Lucy had left, but dinner was waiting) consisting of empanadas (like meat pies) and lettuce. After dinner and some hanging out together, it was time for bed; another day is done.

Day 8
Wednesday, October 2, 2013

We woke up on the last day of our Mission Trip, visitors to a country that would love to have its government voluntarily shut down, knowing that we would soon return to a country where that was the case. It makes one wonder about the ironies of life. This morning, breakfast was pancakes and fruit, with pastries and coffee. The pancakes were very light and fluffy; not heavy at all. I ate two of them.

After breakfast, we joined Elena in the multipurpose room. Elena taught us about Mayan Spirituality, and how it has evolved over the years in response to invasive forms of colonialism. Elena is Tzotzil, but her father is Tzeltal; so she has personal experience with both of these forms of indigenous society. She grew up Roman Catholic in a small Tzotzil village in Chiapas; but it was only after she learned to embrace the Mayan Spirituality of her heritage and combine it with her Roman Catholic upbringing that she was able to fully connect with God in a most intimate way.

When we entered the multipurpose room, she had constructed a Mayan altar for us on the floor in the center of the room. The altar was made of grasses and corn husks, with many colored flowers, candles, and other items representing harvest and spirituality. The altar was diverse, emphasizing the difficulties of life, and the beauty of God's Creation. Each item on the altar had symbolic value; but the most dominant ones were:

- Red flowers and candles at the east end of the altar: These represent the sunrise, life, love, hope, newness and re-creation. This is the color of the blood in our veins, and the candle of life. To a Mayan Christian, these also symbolize Christ's birth in our world.
- Purple flowers and candles at the west end of the altar: These represent sunsets, death, sickness; all of the hard things in life. To a Mayan Christian, these also symbolize Christ's crucifixion and death.
- Together these two candles represent the dynamic of life
- White flowers and candles at the north end of the altar: These represent heritage. The white color stands for the bones of our ancestors; so these represent all who have gone before us; the saints of the church long gone. To a Mayan Christian, these also symbolize Christ's resurrection.

- Yellow flowers and candles at the south end of the altar: These represent sustenance and nourishment; seeds giving life, agriculture, nurture. To a Mayan Christian, these also symbolize Christ's ministry with us, and the nurture of his Wisdom teachings.
- Green candle in the center of the altar: This represents the earth, and the blessings we receive from the soil.
- Blue candle in the center of the altar next to the green one: The heavens, the sky, and God. The blue and the green next to each other in the center of the altar stand for the heavens and the earth, and God's presence in all of creation.
- This altar then represents the four corners of Creation, the four pillars of life, with heaven and earth at the center.

This altar, we learned, has multiple symbolic imagery; from the symbols of the earth and Creation, to the symbols of Christ's life among us. It also symbolizes the human condition: Red, blood; Black, hair; Yellow, skin; White, teeth; Green and Blue, our dual nature of physicality and spirituality. So, we as (Hispanic-hued) humans are reflected in this altar as well.

Differently-colored corn and beans are often placed on the four corners as well. These are placed on the altar in the shape of crosses, to symbolize Christ's presence. Also on the altar is a lit brazier with incense. This fragrant smoke represents our words and prayers, ascending to God. The sweet smell is a reminder that our words should also be as sweet. The curling smoke also reminds them of winding rivers, part of God's gift of Creation. God is represented by both male and female imagery, not limiting God to one simplistic representation, as we often do in the North.

On the altar is a Nautilus, with its outward spirals reminding us that life spins outward from the moment of Creation. This shell is blown at the four corners to greet worshippers at the beginning of worship, much as our church bell calls us to worship on Sunday mornings.

Elena told us about the Mayan calendar. A month is 20 days on their calendar, and each day is represented by a particular aspect of life; an animal, an object or an element of our human condition (similar to the symbols of the Zodiac). Today, as we gather, is the day of the snake. In Mayan Spirituality, the snake represents Wisdom and Emotion. The shape of the snake is also seen in the smoke from the lit brazier of incense, curling

upward toward heaven. The snake invites us to connect our mind and our heart, and follow both in equitable ways. Today is the day to listen to your heart.

We were intrigued by the conceptualization of the Mayan calendar and asked Elena more about it. The 20 days of the calendar are repeated each month; these special days are referred to as "energies". The day that a Mayan was born identifies their particular energy. Each month, the day of their "energy" is a special day of spirituality marked with special prayer and observances. To Mayans, it is very important to know their "energy" and identify with it, and remember it on that day each month. It is not about "idol worship", or worshipping an "energy" other than God; it is about identity and spirituality, and making an internal connection more real, so one can more closely identify with God. Clarity of purpose and focused identity are very important aspects of Mayan Spirituality.

To Mayans, connection is very important; so is laughter. Elena told us that laughter has no barriers. In Mayan Spirituality, they are very focused on connecting to God; The Earth; animals; and each other. The Earth, animals and each other are all considered blessings, or gifts, from God. When they pray, they prostrate themselves on the floor, to make a more intimate physical connection to the earth. By doing this, they are embracing, or caressing, God's Creation. This is how they are most authentic in praising God.

We then participated in an abbreviated Mayan prayer ceremony, with Elena praising God in her native Tzotzil language, and us praying in English. It was a beautiful cacophony of diverse prayer and praise.

Elena told us that the Mayan prayer ceremony is practiced daily by priests, by people in community in times of planting and harvest, in times of sickness and restored health, and other special occasions. Often, Mayans cannot make it into town to the churches (Catholic, Protestant) on a regular basis, so they keep their faith vibrant and vital through this prayer ceremony. The Mayan prayer ceremony encompasses all of Creation with its symbolism and scope. Elena calls this "Mayan Cosmic-Vision." They are ultimately engrossed in the inter-connectedness of everything there is, and how everything is a blessed Creation of God.

Example of this: When Mayans plant, it is important for them to first offer praise to God, asking God (in the form of "Mother Earth") for permission to plant. After planting, they ask God to nurture the seeds, granting them rain, sun, etc. "Mayan Cosmic Vision" is inclusive of all, not exclusive. All are welcome to partake in Mayan celebration, and all are honored and affirmed as interconnected in God's Creation.

A bit of a recap on Mayan History: When Christianity arrived to the Mayan people, it was incorporated, or folded into, their already existing belief system. Spaniards told them their current systems of worship were erroneous; but by incorporating Christian practices and principles into their already existing forms of worship, they were able to "correct" them. (i.e.; telling them "Mother God" is, in fact, "Mother Mary".) While this may seem a bit odd, it has had the result of developing a much deeper spirituality among the Mayan people, and a closer connection with God. The existing Mayan ceremonies took on new meaning by incorporating Christianity into them, and their spiritual connection grew even richer.

We asked Elena about her clothing. Clothing is a part of indigenous identity; your style of dress is representative not only of your village, but the values that village stands for as well. The women of Elena's village wear clothes with many flowers on them, in specific patterns. These flowers represent life, creation and hope. There is a customary greeting in Elena's village that translates this way: "How is your heart?" "My heart is full of flowers." The flowers on Elena's blouse form a cross, to symbolize the four corners of the Mayan altar. The word, "Tzotzil" comes from indigenous words meaning "look for strength" to describe their constant quest for spiritual growth.

After a coffee break, Elena talked with us more about INESIN's work in these Tzotzil and Tzeltal (and other) villages. In these places, INESIN offers workshops (when invited) on self development and empowerment. Often these indigenous people feel oppressed by systemic abuse. INESIN works on healing these emotional and internal wounds caused by life experiences that have marginalized these people.

INESIN offers "Heart Strengthening Workshops" which help people identify and open up to their feelings, as well as helping them address their wounded natures. INESIN believes this contributes to peace. If you don't have peace in your heart first, you cannot contribute to peace in the world.

Healed people are happy, harmonious people. Some of these workshops are gender exclusive (only for men, only for women) some are gender inclusive, depending on the nature of the perceived need and the request from the villagers. Part of the "Mayan Cosmic Vision" is to truly know oneself. These workshops by INESIN help participants do just that.

For lunch we had Mexican chicken (chicken cooked in a creamy white mushroom sauce on the stovetop, not baked in the oven) with pasta and cabbage salad. At this point, our time in Mexico was nearing an end. Many of us wanted to go into town one last time, to mingle with the people of Chiapas and soak up the atmosphere. We left for town around 3:30, walking to the downtown area. We had to be back to INESIN by 7:00 for a surprise, but we did not know what the surprise may be.

We headed into town, and stopped at a museum. Les, Judy, Ken and Cheryl wanted to stop at the museum. I was torn. I wanted to go to the museum, but I also wanted to mingle with the people of Chiapas one last time. I chose the latter. We headed towards the main streets, and took our time looking in shops. Our destination was the open air marketplace in front of the church where we worshipped Sunday; and we took our time getting there.

This was a day of remembrance for the people of Chiapas. 45 years ago today, the Mexican government killed a group of protesting citizens, in an event similar to the one we refer to as the "Kent State Massacre." The current Mexican regime is imposing new regulations on education, energy, and other core systems that will be oppressive to the Mexican citizens. So today was a day to remember the past, and protest the oppression currently being felt. There was a large crowd in the town square, with protesters speaking out and leaders of the resistance community speaking from soapboxes. It was a sight to see; many people gathered en masse, longing for rights that we take for granted.

We made our way through the crowd, and to the marketplace. I purchased a few more souvenirs, and we just enjoyed soaking up the atmosphere of the Chiapas community. On our way back to INESIN, we stopped at a small shop that served churros. A few of us were getting a bit hungry, so we decided a treat was in order. While we were standing there trying to decide which flavor churro we wanted (they are filled with a variety of flavors, from chocolate to papaya, and many more) two street urchins

approached us; a boy and a girl maybe 6-8 years old. They were begging us to buy them churros, too. I was hesitant at first, remembering my experience with the street vendors the day before. I was afraid that if I bought them each a churro, 20 more children would come out of the woodwork wanting one, too. Not that I could not afford it. These churros cost less than \$1 apiece. I could have fed many of these children without making a dent in my privileged American lifestyle.

It did not take long for their hungry eyes to melt my hesitancy. These two children were dressed poorly, and looked like they had not eaten in a while. Their begging was not forceful or insistent; it was more like desperate pleading. I brought the menu down to them and asked them what flavors they wanted. Their eyes betrayed their disbelief; they could not fathom that I was actually going to buy them each a churro! The vendor handed me the papaya churro the young girl desired, and I handed it to her. Her eyes alit like Christmas morning. I enjoyed the same sight when the vendor handed me the boy's chocolate churro, and I gave it to him. They were both very grateful, and I was elated. When my churro arrived it was not nearly as sweet as the smiles on their faces, receiving that treat.

Brenda, Scott and Nathan all ordered churros as well; and after we ate them, I looked for our street urchins again. The thought struck me that treats are fine, but what they really needed was a meal. Just a few doors away was a Burger King (Mexican Burger Kings are very interesting, and have a few menu items that US Burger Kings do not) and I wanted to buy them a full meal. Had I the option right then and there, my wife would have been surprised on my arrival at home with two new adopted children. But neither adoption nor Burgers were to be the case, as they had disappeared from my life as swiftly as they entered it. They were lost in the crowd, and I was left wishing I had done more to help.

We continued walking back, and returned to the city square that we pass through on our way home. At this point, the crowd had become quite huge, protesting the current Mexican government and remembering the martyrs of 45 years ago today. While we were not at all afraid of violence from these gentle people, we also did not want to get separated in what had become a huge crowd; so we took a detour down a side street to get home.

We were supposed to be back at INESIN by 7:00, but we were running late. The children with the churros and the detour around the plaza delayed us, so we had to hustle. Brenda, Scott, Nathan and I were the only ones walking back to INESIN; Cindy, Casey and Lindsey had taken a cab from the open air market earlier. We were told that the program for the evening would be a surprise, and that we had to be back by 7:00 for it to begin. We did not know what to expect, but Scott suggested that perhaps it would be fireworks, set off to celebrate our week.

Fireworks are a big part of life in Chiapas; but not the showy spectacle ones to which we are accustomed. The people of Chiapas simply use the loud mortar shells. Fireworks are used to celebrate birthdays, graduations, special events in the life of the community, or any weekday ending in "Y". Fireworks are set off on Sunday morning to celebrate church or Monday evening to celebrate an exceptional dinner. We learned earlier in the week the reason fireworks are so important to the people of Chiapas; fireworks remind them of thunder, and thunder brings rain, and rain brings life. Therefore, fireworks are the sound of life. Setting off fireworks is a way of celebrating life. Fireworks are set off all the time, so it was a logical conclusion for Scott to make that this would be part of our evening.

This was not the case, however. As we approached INESIN, (we arrived at 7:10) we heard loud music, and assumed it was a radio in someone's car playing very loudly. When we arrived at INESIN the gate was standing open, and upon entering, we saw the source of the music: a mariachi band, assembled for our enjoyment, to celebrate the new relationships we had formed. All of the staff at INESIN was there (with the exception of Rick and Loren, who were on a 3-day trip to an indigenous community to lead an agriculture workshop) along with their families. They were there to celebrate with us our new bond of friendship. The band played on until 7:30, and several people danced.

After the band finished, we were treated to a fiesta! Lucy and Betty had prepared quite a feast. Tamales, Empenadas, taquitos, enchiladas, guacamole, salsa, tortilla chips, two different salads, and dessert. The tables were all joined together, and we assembled as one big family around them, enjoying table fellowship and conversing in broken English, broken Spanish, and lots of pantomime! Still, we did not speak the same language; but we had scintillating conversation anyway.

This has continued to amaze me all week. When we arrived, Martin told us that though we do not speak a common language, we will communicate just fine. He told us that language is not a barrier to relationship. This proved to be so very true; not just with Martin and the staff at INESIN, but with the people of San Cristobal as well. A common language is not the most important part of relationship; what is more important is a common heart.

Laughter is an ever present part of this community, and we often heard boisterous laughter coming from the offices and kitchen at INESIN. Wednesday evening, we enjoyed a bit of laughter ourselves. Casey has a reputation for gullibility, as seen Monday night when I convinced her that my lemonade was tequila and chugged the whole thing in one gulp. Wednesday at lunch, we convinced her that the chicken tasted rather feline. But the best part came Wednesday evening. I had purchased a treat in a bakery in town; a chocolate confection in the shape of a mouse. Of course, these treats are not really mice, but chocolate shaped in the form of a mouse; just as chocolate bunnies are not really rabbits and marshmallow peeps are not really chicks. However, we convinced Casey that it was really a chocolate covered mouse. We challenged her to eat it; and she did! She was surprised at how tasty mouse can be! I laughed so hard, tears were streaming down my face. To some this may seem cruel, but Casey enjoys this reputation and the fun and games that come with it. She has a repertoire of these sort of experiences, and I am glad I was able to add to it! We all laughed very hard, Casey right along with us.

The evening died down, and folks began to get ready for bed. Lindsey, Casey and Cindy said goodnight, and headed up to Lindsey's apartment. Some of our team began packing, as we had to get up early- 4:00am for our trip to the airport. Scott Lewis and I sat out on the patio, both journaling our experiences and enjoying our last night in this beautiful land. We both spoke of deep subjects, including how this experience has changed our lives and our outlook on the world; and how, despite our desires to get home to family and friends, we really hate to see this experience come to an end. We sat awhile, enjoying this last Mexican night; then it was time to turn in. Our last day had come to an end.

Day 9
Thursday, October 3, 2013

We woke up at 4:00am on the last day of our trip, to travel to the airport and catch our flight home. While we were eager to see family and friends, none of us were too eager to leave behind this place we had come to call home.

We packed, and by 5:00 Natan had come to say goodbye to us and Julio had loaded up our bags in his van. We dropped Natan off at his house on the way to the airport, and began our journey. It is a 90-minute drive from the mountainous region of San Cristobal back to the lower elevation of Tuxla Gutierrez, and our flight was scheduled to leave just after 8:00. The drive was uneventful. It was still dark, so we could not see much of the countryside, other than lights illuminating the towns below as we approached.

Upon arrival at the airport, we checked in and made our way through Mexican customs with no problem. They were very friendly and eager to make our experience a pleasant one. We made it to the terminal with an hour to spare, and spent that time talking with one another about our trip.

The airport in Tuxla is much smaller than the ones to which we are accustomed. Tuxla Gutierrez is the capital city of the state of Chiapas, yet the airport only has one terminal with six gates. It is obvious that air travel is not as much a part of their culture as ours. During our hour wait, no other flights took off; although another one was preparing to board across the terminal from us.

We flew back on a charter jet similar to the small one we arrived on. At this point, on a plane that seated 100+ people, there were only 17 on the plane. The flight attendant was a jolly man of Hispanic descent, although he grew up in the US and does not speak Spanish. He spent time socializing with us, hearing about our trip and talking about his life, and his career spent jetting around the country. We talked about religion a bit, and he was surprised to find out that there is a denomination out there (ours, the United Church of Christ) that does not condemn homosexuality, and will even affirm marriage equity among all people, regardless of sexual orientation. We had a great discussion about this, and he was pleasantly surprised to understand that God is bigger than the

tiny boxes with which we try to confine God's grace (such as claiming that 'gay marriage' somehow diminishes God's intentions for our world).

Upon landing in Houston, we were treated to the first bit of ugliness that we had seen on our entire trip. I have, on occasion in my time as Pastor at St. John's, Bem, had the opportunity to "work cattle" with members of the congregation. When we do so, we process the cattle through pens and chutes, capturing them in a "catch gate" so the Veterinarian can check them, worm them, and often castrate them. The people in customs and the airport agents in Houston were rude, callous, and arrogant. They treated us like cattle, and if we did not move fast enough for them, they barked. Though they lacked the electric cattle prods and castration tools of customary "cattle working," their words and demeanor served the same electrifying purpose. I was not sure if we were being processed through customs, or through the intake department of a penal colony. It struck me as ironic that our US view of Mexicans is so demeaning, when our own US customs and airport personnel were far more injurious than any Mexicans we encountered.

We had a 2-hour layover in Houston this time, and we all ate lunch at Panda Café. After eating, with 30 minutes to spare before our flight boarded, we made our way to the gate. Once again, we were barked at to hurry up and board, and some of our party were told there was no time to use the restroom. They did anyway. Once on the plane, we sat for a while before takeoff. The flight was very crowded; every seat was taken. After a brief flight, we landed in St. Louis; back home again.

I had never spent 9 days away from my family before; our reunion was fantastic. It is true that time spent apart makes the heart grow fonder. We were all overjoyed to be reunited, and spent much time catching up and hearing each other's stories of the previous 9 days. That Sunday in worship, we celebrated our return. It was "World Communion Sunday" and I had brought bread back from Mexico. We celebrated communion, and remembered our neighbors all over the world- including Chiapas.

Epilogue

Now that I have been home for a few weeks, I find myself eager to return, and to help further the mission work of INESIN. Their service is admirable, and the need is great. They are truly changing the world, by educating and empowering individuals who, in turn, go and do their part as well. They are creating ripples that will spread across the pond that is Chiapas, sweeping change in its wake. I hope to be part of that change.

The multi-purpose building they are attempting to build is one part of that work. I hope to be able to encourage ecclesial communities to fund this construction as able, so the work of INESIN can grow. Beyond that, ongoing annual support of INESIN and their work is needed as well. I have learned on this trip how the meager pocket change we waste every day on niceties and unnecessary luxuries can truly change lives in the Mexican economy. God's economy is one of communal abundance, not individual prosperity; through our prosperity, we can participate in God's economy in life-changing ways. INESIN is one very effective way to do this.

More important than economics, though are the relationship possibilities that can be fostered between our ecclesial communities and INESIN. This trip has opened my eyes to God's presence in diverse ways in our world, and the bond we all share as God's children. Language, culture and geography are barriers that we erect to keep others away; God challenges us to shatter those barriers; to tear down those walls of division. By developing a relationship with INESIN, we can help tear down those walls, and more fully be the people God intends us to be.

In 2014 and beyond, I hope to actively pursue a relationship with INESIN and the people of Chiapas inclusive of the congregation at St. John's, Bem, The Missouri Mid-South Conference, and other ecclesial entities as well. My hopes are that we can organize at least one more trip in 2014, and others in years to come. I would also like to organize a clergy trip, perhaps centered upon the INESIN course, "Pastoral Readings of the Bible." By partnering together and developing this relationship we can work towards enabling the mission work of INESIN, we can make God's world a little bit smaller, we can make our worldview a little bit larger, and we can make our communities a little bit more inclusive. I pray that God will be pleased with our efforts.