

HISTORY OF OUR COMPANION SYNOD RELATIONSHIP

In October 1987, Pastor Joe Ellwanger from Cross ELCA, Milwaukee went to visit the Salvadoran Lutheran Church Synod during a time when the country was in the midst of war. He subsequently brought a resolution to the Synod Assembly to create a sister synod relationship with the Salvadoran Lutheran Synod. That resolution was passed in June, 1988 and a committee was formed to develop the relationship. Cross also established a sister parish relationship with Resurrection Lutheran Church in San Salvador, El Salvador. Unlike other parts of the world, during wartime in El Salvador, Lutherans were considered subversive because of their work with poor people in rural communities and church workers were imprisoned and threatened. On the same day that the Jesuits were killed, Resurrection Church was bombed and several church workers including 2 Lutheran missionaries were arrested.

A committee was formed in our synod and the delegations to El Salvador began. These included our bishop, a staff member, several pastors and some lay people. Bishop Peter Rogness went to El Salvador in 1989 and 1990. The purpose was to visit repopulated communities and to provide international accompaniment for the Salvadoran Lutheran Synod. It appeared clear that government forces were more hesitant to bomb or otherwise harass the communities and the church when “outsiders” were present. The war continued until January 16, 1992 when the Peace Accords were signed.

In 1990, the committee decided to get directly involved with sponsoring a group of Salvadorans repopulating from Nicaragua. This group of people had not originally been from the area in which they were settling in El Salvador but had organized themselves as a community and had UN backing to return together. Our synod helped them to buy their land and we had a representative accompany them from Nicaragua to El Salvador. When their possessions were stopped at the border, we applied pressure to the Salvadoran government to allow them to receive their property. They were flown in from Nicaragua on March 15, 1991. The community is called Comunidad Rutilio Grande. There are about 55 families with 350 people total. We have greatly benefited from our partnership with them and have assisted in their development as a community, most recently in electrification and student scholarship projects.

In 1994, Mary Campbell went to El Salvador jointly sponsored by the Lutheran volunteer program of the Division for Global Mission and the Volunteer Missionary Movement. She worked in the Salvadoran Lutheran Synod’s human rights office for 5 years and developed a strong relationship with Comunidad Rutilio Grande. Delegations continued to visit and more Lutheran sister parish relationships were established. There are now 6 sister parishes. In addition to Cross, Milwaukee, St. John’s Brookfield, as well as Abiding Savior, Milwaukee, Atonement, Muskego, Grace, Thiensville, and St. Peter’s, Sheboygan also have sister parish relationships.

As of this writing, we have had about 100 people from our synod visit El Salvador, the most recent delegation was 25 strong, and there have been about 14 Salvadorans visiting Milwaukee. There will be another delegation of 10 coming in late May. It has been a

faith enhancing experience for all who have participated. The key has been and continues to be relationship, people getting to know each other and having a chance to learn from each other. The relationship is not all about money, certainly not in the sense of charity. Our Salvadoran brothers and sisters have helped us to become stronger advocates for justice. They have shown us a new model of church, showing us how to focus on the needs of the community, not on our own personal needs as a church. ‘

Our plan as a companion synod is to continue to walk with our Salvadoran brothers and sisters through regular visits back and forth, sharing the joys and struggles of what it means to be a Christian today. The 2001 earthquakes have shown us that much work needs to be done to bring about God’s justice in the world.