

## **“Flowers Only Once”**

### **A Training Event for Men in Guatemala**

Rev. Dr. Kevin E. Frederick  
Associate Pastor, Black Mountain Presbyterian Church, Black Mountain, NC  
Presbyterians Against Domestic Violence Network (PADVN) Leadership Team

There is a saying in Guatemala, “A married woman will be hit 150 times in her lifetime but will receive flowers only once . . . at her funeral.” Members of the Presbytery of Western NC and two gentlemen from Guatemala were coordinating details of our workshop presentations when Pastor Humberto Baten from the Presbytery of Sur Occidente shared this comment with us. Our timing in providing Domestic Violence workshops to Guatemalan ministers was critical in light of the 2005 report of Amnesty International that the nation of Guatemala had one of the worst women’s rights violation records in the world.

From June 8 through June 16, Presbyterian Elder Chris Just and I traveled through the nation of Guatemala addressing the issue of Domestic Violence, an issue that has reached epidemic proportions in a nation with five hundred abuse related deaths of women in the first five months of 2006. (Guatemala has a population of 12.7 million people.) The Presbytery of Western North Carolina, of which I am a member, has had a covenant partnership with two presbyteries in Guatemala for the past 12 years. In addition, the denominationally based organization, Presbyterians Against Domestic Violence Network, has been growing in partnership with the CEDEPCA organization based in Guatemala City. CEDEPCA is an ecumenical Protestant institute providing biblical, theological, pastoral and practical training for Protestant churches throughout Central America. For several years now CEDEPCA has presented educational programs on themes related to the self-development of women.

Over six days we provided two seven-hour workshops and two more four-hour workshops, each on the theme, “Domestic Violence and the Response of the Guatemalan Protestant Churches.” We addressed a total of 93 people, mostly men and mostly pastors, but in our sister Presbyteries of Suchitepequez and Sur Occidente there was also a strong representation of women elders and deacons along with the pastors. The vast majority of these 93 folks were Presbyterian but in two workshops in Guatemala City there were also some Pentecostals, a few neo-Pentecostals, and one Episcopalian priest present. Everywhere we went, those in attendance acknowledged that Domestic Violence as a serious social malady deeply affects their women, their families and their nation. All who attended the workshops were open and hungry for the Bible studies and the practical suggestions and resources for congregational intervention.

In order to get from Guatemala City to our sister presbyteries in southwest Guatemala, we took a half-day bus ride into the country (the *campesina*). Throughout our week’s stay, we realized that sentiments against the United States Government have grown considerably throughout Central America since our first visit in 2003. On this trip, virtually everywhere we went, we heard comments from pastors and townspeople who were very critical of our nation’s foreign policies. One man, early in our third workshop, asked if I had come to export the US policies on human rights when we as a nation don’t follow them ourselves. He was skeptical as to our motives, and was unable to perceive me as a fellow Presbyterian. I thought for a moment and responded to his statement. *I am not here in any official capacity to serve as an advocate for US policy. I am not here to address this issue at all. My only authority is that of a Presbyterian minister. I, like you,*

*look to be guided by the Word of God in understanding God's will for our most intimate of human relationships, those we live every day in our families. That is the only issue and the only authority I claim to represent.* I saw heads nodding in affirmation all around the group of forty-four people. At that point the audience of Presbyterians was truly able to see us as brothers in Christ.

Throughout our presentations, both Chris and I recognized that pastors and lay leaders were fully embracing and understanding the depth of our message. Early on in our last workshop, one of the pastors pointed out a subtle but most powerful distinction in one Spanish version of a biblical translation of the first creation story in Genesis. In Genesis 1:26 the New Revised Standard Version says, "God created human beings in God's own image. In the image of God, he created them, male and female God created them." The pastor present pointed out that one Spanish translation of this text reads, instead of male and female, which would be translated, "*hombre y mujere*," it reads "*macho y hembra*." The term *macho* communicates the dominance and authority of males and the term *hembra* is translated as the female gender of animals and plants.

This translation discounts the equality of men and women who are both created in the image of God. The pastor recognized that the translation used by some fundamentalist churches in his country distorted the biblical truth in an effort to prop up the system of machismo that permeates the culture. The prevailing mindset of male dominance presents a serious challenge to the biblical witness of Presbyterians in Guatemala. Because of that popular translation and the common and unchallenged perception of male superiority, many Guatemalans cannot see God's will for mutual relationships between men and women.

When I led the last workshop in our sister church in San Antonio, Suchitepequez, based on a study of Ephesians 5:21-33, I heard an illustration shared by an older woman who had very little formal education but expressed the deep wisdom of scripture in sharing it. We were discussing the problem of taking part of this message out of the larger context and the distortion it creates, which then impacts human relationships. Verse 22 says, "Wives submit to your husbands for the husband is the head of the wife as Christ is head of the church." Taken by itself this passage has been freely used to distort the relationship Paul lifts up as God's will for husbands and wives. This woman shared with us a story that dramatically illustrates the full impact of a distorted interpretation of this text.

She told us that her neighbor, a young woman pregnant with her first child, was admitted to the hospital with a problem delivery. Several hours into the labor, the attending doctor informed the woman that she would be unable to deliver without surgery, but she refused to sign the permission form without her husband's approval. (He was away working in another town and could not be reached.) Sometime later it became clear to the doctor that the baby's life was at great risk and he communicated the degree of threat to both the baby and the mother, but she refused to give her consent to surgery. The doctor not wanting a lawsuit from an angry husband, required her to sign a form indicating that he had explained the degree of risk involved and that she still refused surgery. She signed the form. Hours later the baby died and the woman's reproductive organs were so damaged in the birthing process that she will never be able to conceive another child. After hearing this story I asked all present, "Is this the will of God for human life?" Each person responded in a unified and unequivocal, "NO!"

Time and again the comments of the women present in our sister presbyteries communicated God's wisdom from the depths of their hearts and the knowledge of their experience. They spoke with wisdom borne out of the struggle of their lives in a very violent society. I believe it will be

the rural women, the beautifully strong *compesinas*, who will work hardest to spread this message of God's will for human relationships throughout the nation by going from door to door, and victim to victim, comforting and speaking words of hope and truth. And now these women have strong allies in the pastors and male elders of the churches who themselves understand the theology of the truth of God's will for human relationships. Both the pastors and the lay leaders are very aware that an accurate understanding of the biblical witness for marriage is very counter-cultural in Guatemala and they understand that they have an uphill battle in educating the nation and its people. The Presbyterian Church of Guatemala is looking to the PCUSA and to PADVN to provide training and culturally appropriate Spanish resources that will help them in being faithful to this calling of Christ. Let us also keep our Presbyterian brothers and sisters in Guatemala in our prayers.