

2023 GUATEMALA UPDATE  
January 4 - January 10, 2023

Trip Participants: Hal Jordan, Jonathan Allen, (Mike, Virginia, John and Emily Anthony), Carol Hamilton, Edward Leonard, (Ruth and Daniel Menechella), (Jackson and Elizabeth Riley), Cole Warren, Patty Snow, Barney Hale

We had not been back to Pala since January, 2020. We went into the trip knowing that there had been some regression of the programs and the number of people involved. This trip offered a chance to determine the current conditions of the village and our programs and to “re-set” programs that would continue.

Some aspects of the village were immediately apparent. The Peace of God Presbyterian church we have been working through has completed the construction of a larger facility which completely encompasses the former church building by going over it with a second floor and expanding beyond the former walls. This construction had been underway in 2020 and the new facility is now completed and in use.

Another interesting aspect was among the youth / young adults. Youth that we had last seen when they were 14 years old are now 17. A lot of physical changes can occur in both males and females in that age range. Changes that made it difficult to recognize the students that we remembered as their younger selves.

Overall, there seemed to be greater sense of prosperity – driven by a combination of improved education and job opportunities, remittances being received from family members in the US, and a relief that the village had come through covid. Although poverty still exists, the level of despair that was palatable when we first started going to Pala seems to have diminished greatly.

Our trip consisted of meeting with various “committees”, re-engaging students in the scholarship program, health workshops and interacting with children. Summaries of various activities are described below.

Next year’s trip is already planned for January 3 to January 9, 2024.

SCHOLARSHIP

When covid was introduced into Guatemala in the spring of 2020, the Guatemalan government responded by shutting schools and switching to on-line classes. Unfortunately for Pala, few students had reliable access to the internet and many stopped attending classes of any type. In addition, as schools reopened, many teachers became less committed to showing up and teaching classes. As a result, a significant number of middle school and high school students simply dropped out and have not returned. The becca program will continue, but with a reduced number of students. There were applications from 10 new middle school students, all of whom have been paired with sponsors. Some of the high school students that were previously in the program need new sponsors to replace sponsors that have discontinued. With the new applicants, there are currently 18 middle school students, 18 high school students and 5 university students in the scholarship program.

Administration of the program is being transitioned to the library staff in Pala. Their roles will be to identify and screen potential students, keep track of grades, monitor the progress of individual students, and be available for tutoring assistance or questions. The library staff has made a noticeable effort to support the students in the program.

We prepared and distributed paper and electronic survey forms to former becca students who have been out of the program at least five years. The intent of the survey is to obtain their current social data and solicit their opinions about the program.

Santa, a former becca student, worked for World Vision for a period of two years and was able to register current students in Pala for additional health and hygiene services offered by World Vision. Santa currently owns and operates a small shop in Pala.

### SCHOOL LUNCH PROGRAM

We continue to evaluate a school lunch program in Pala. In a nutshell, it's complicated. The information we gathered on this trip reflects a new reality in Pala which will impact how we proceed. Factors to consider, both here and in Pala are best listed as bullet points.

1. There seems to be a little more prosperity and the children are certainly looking healthier than when we first started our work in Pala.
2. The student population in elementary school has declined. We don't think this is the result of kids not being sent to school. Instead, it may be the result of a decreasing number of very young kids. Considering we have been working with Pala for about 15 years, the

reduction in young kids may reflect girls holding off on getting married / pregnant until they are older. It may also reflect an increase in birth control or a greater consciousness of family planning.

3. The construction of the new Peace of God church facility did not include a kitchen. While we do not see this development as a good choice on the part of the church, it still means there is no community kitchen for preparing the meals.
4. We currently do not have a meal grant from Rise Against Hunger. If we do get a renewed grant, it may be 12 to 18 months before we have a commitment from RAH.
5. Storage costs at the Guatemala ports have increased dramatically; to the tune of \$150 to \$200 per day. Once the meals arrive in a shipping container, it takes “paperwork” and authorizations to get the cargo released so it can be removed from the port facility. As humanitarian aid that does not pay tariffs, there is no hurry on the part of port officials to process the paperwork. This creates uncertainty in cost, and a potentially high cost as well.

There may be other options for food assistance to Guatemala. One option is preparation and delivery of food bags through the school to the families of the students. Another option is to re-direct food assistance to other areas where the need is even greater. We have done this in the past by delivering RAH meals to a day care center supporting the city “dump” residents in Xela and by delivering meals to an orphanage. A lot of details and logistics remain to be developed for the food assistance portion of our work.

### COMPUTER CENTER

The computer equipment remains functioning, primarily due to on-going maintenance and repairs by Manuel the computer instructor. There is a need for additional parts and items to help continue the maintenance program. Jackson Riley agreed to prepare a repair /maintenance schedule that would look ahead to the next three years.

Computer classes continue to be well attended and include at least one father who comes to the classes with his daughter. The computer center is becoming a regional resource that attracts students from villages other than Pala. Those from outside the village often accept a one to two-hour commute by riding in the back of a pick-up truck to get to the classes. There is a charge for the classes, which helps to provide a revenue stream for the library.

### LIBRARY STAFF

The library staff, Juanita, Marta and Manuel, has become proactive in supporting education at all levels. All of them provide tutoring or help with questions to any student that comes the library seeking help. Juanita and Marta also offer pre-school activities and additional reading and story time sessions. This was evident in a special dance performed by a group of 5-year- old pre-school girls upon our arrival the first day.

Carol Hamilton provided a variety of pre-school and elementary educational tools to the library staff and demonstrated how they could be used.

### HEALTH WORKSHOPS (Reported by Mike Anthony)

Four health workshops were conducted for males and females in two different age groups. Speaking to the adult population of Pala is challenging since many do not speak Spanish or have a low level of Spanish fluency. As a result, translation from English to Spanish, and then from Spanish to the Mayan language of K'iche' is required. And the reverse translation is also required for any questions or comments from the audience.

1) Women's Health Seminar: 30 women attended. We began by talking about breast cancer signs and symptoms. Due to the poverty and minimal government sponsored healthcare there does not seem to be awareness of or access to screening mammograms. Their questions led to a discussion of uterine and cervical cancer. Cervical cancer screening is generally available through pap smears. In all examples of these more common forms of cancer, I stressed that early detection greatly improved survival because they tend to have an idea that ALL cancers are fatal. We next discussed menstruation and related problems. I discussed the use of hormonal contraceptives for the purpose of cycle control as well as surgery for more severe cases. The use of hormonal contraceptives has been very minimal in the past, either for cycle control OR for contraceptives but over my years of visiting I have learned that a significant (and increasing) minority of women do practice some type of contraception for family planning. This topic always leads to many questions which unveil myths that they are told about hormonal contraceptives, all of which imply they are dangerous and/or lead to infertility. I next discussed Covid and how our lives were significantly disrupted just like theirs. I discussed the safety of the vaccine and acknowledged that the vaccination rates in the US are fairly low as in Guatemala. I encouraged them to all be fully vaccinated since Covid vaccines are available. There does seem to be a decent childhood vaccine program where their children are being vaccinated for childhood diseases. I used the Covid pandemic as a segue to discuss depression/anxiety as rates of these

psychiatric problems had increased in the US. We know of at least 2 villagers who committed suicide in the past several years. As usual, there were several women who had good questions and much interaction.

2) Girls Health seminar: 30 girls attended. In preparing for this seminar, I spoke to Katarina, one of our first becca students who has gone VERY far in her education and career as a nurse. She was formerly sponsored by Wendy and Tony Segretti. Katarina informed me that the middle school and high school kids "start dating too fast" and get so wrapped up in each other that they tend to drop out of school. Frequently this leads to teen pregnancy and marriage before either young adult is able to support themselves. I began the seminar with this topic. For clarity, I used anatomical terms to describe sex. Based on discussion with Katarina, I dispelled various myths such as "you can't get pregnant the first time" and "you only need to take one birth control pill" to prevent pregnancy. Due to my past visits there (and Katarina's advice) I leaned towards encouraging them waiting to have sex and trying to point out how early pregnancy can lead to more poverty. I focused on the topic of autonomy and them being in control of their bodies. I discussed "NO MEANS NO" and assured them that no one had the right to force them to have sex. Despite the conservative attitude with regards to using contraception there were many questions about contraception. As in the Women's seminar many questions came up related to myths they had been told about all the problems that contraceptives cause. Menstruation was also a big topic of discussion; I discussed normal sexual organ development and normal trends in menstrual variation, especially in the first few years. I discussed what was normal and abnormal and when to seek care. There were many questions about painful and irregular periods. A new myth for me was "I heard you can't take a pain pill while you are having your period". I discussed safe treatments for painful periods, including the legitimate use of hormonal contraceptives to relieve menstrual problems. We finished by discussing depression/anxiety. Several of the girls waited to talk to me after the meeting and outside the group. One informed me about her 14-year-old friend who died from a botched abortion.

3) Boy's Health seminar: 18 boys attended. I started this discussion by describing how they played an important role in keeping the village healthy by respecting their mothers, sisters and other females. Based on my many discussions with our Guatemalan translators and Katrina, I know about the Machismo Culture so prevalent in Guatemala. I described how this attitude leads to female inferiority and associated problems. I encouraged them to rethink this attitude, pointing out that they are no less of a man and, in fact, by fostering an attitude of respect and trying to build equal relationships with women, they can benefit themselves significantly. I was helped in this by two of our younger male travelers who spoke of their equal relationship with their wives

and how this made for a happy home. I discussed female autonomy and "NO MEANS NO" with regards to sex. I pointed out how a few minutes of admittedly very intense pleasure can change two people's lives, sometimes in very bad ways. I used the unnamed 14- year-old girl who died from the botched abortion to point out how this had probably seriously affected the boyfriend and hoped none of them would ever be in that situation. We discussed alcohol and drug use and I also discussed depression. There were not as many questions from the boys as the girls, which is the same in all cultures.

4) Men's Health seminar: 20 men attended. The usual topics of discussion at the meeting with the men are their fears related to diabetes, hypertension and other chronic diseases. Screening for these diseases is available but more difficult to get there. Treatment for these diseases is relatively more expensive so I tried to focus on prevention of these problems, especially diabetes, by pointing out all of the added sugar that has been introduced to their diets since they have opened to the outside world. I did point out that these diseases do cause a lot of problems before any symptoms appear. We also discussed Covid and vaccination.

### MINI-LOANS

The existing committee members asked to be replaced by new members. This is not uncommon as participating on a committee is viewed as unpaid work and there is not a strong culture of volunteering in Guatemala. They will generally agree to a one-year commitment but not much more. The problem with forming a new committee is that the new members have to be trained in maintaining a balance sheet, banking practices and writing checks. However, with the extended period of time the scholarship program has been in place, there is a higher base level of education from which to start. There is also a loss of continuity as former committee members view themselves as finished and do not necessarily complete final tasks. To extend the length of time members are willing to serve and improve continuity, we decided to provide an economic incentive. Committee members will not be required to pay interest on the loans they receive.

98 loans were issued in 2022 with re-payment expected between January 15 and February 9, 2023. Patty Ajanel, our in-country director, will be tracking the re-payment. The number of loans to be issued in 2023 is yet to be determined. We expect fewer loans will be issued as some of the former loan holders have left Pala and others feel they are on a more solid financial footing. Overall, funds for the program will remain intact if the repayment rate matches previous levels.

### WEAVING PROGRAM (Reported by Barney Hale)

I went to Pala on this trip uncertain of the status of the weaving program. Production had been maintained during 2020, 2021 and 2022. Scarves are commissioned by sending a list of assignments to Samantha Alvarez (Wendy's daughter) who translates the instructions into Spanish and then relays the information to Juanita at the library in Pala. Juanita translates the information into K'iche' and relays the information to the weaving committee. The weaving committee members then relay the information to the other weavers. The library houses a collection of fabric samples representing each design that has been created. The samples are numbered with an index card so that individual designs can be ordered by number. The weavers can then check out the samples and take them to the market to buy thread and use the samples for design reference. Upon completion, the scarves are turned in to the weaving committee where members do a quantity and quality check. Patty Ajanel arranges a courier to travel to the village to deliver checks prepared by Anna Sanders for the weavers and to exchange the checks for the scarves. The scarves are then returned to Patty's house where she contacts Arlindo, who prepares customs / shipping documents and arranges transport of the scarves from Guatemala City to the RDU airport. It is a Rube Goldberg system that actually works. Each round of assignments produces 360 to 384 scarves.

The concern was that 11 weavers had withdrawn from the program following completion of the 2021 assignments. There was no explanation provided for the withdrawals. Although the weavers that withdrew were replaced, I felt it was necessary to determine the causes of the withdrawals. In general, reasons were typically age or health related (weaving can be physically demanding and especially difficult if the weaver is recovering from surgery). Weavers also withdrew to focus more time on coffee production. There did not seem to be discontent with the program itself. When I asked the weavers if they wanted to continue, their collective response was "we are here in this meeting, doesn't that tell you something?" I see that response as a good sign.

Issues discussed separately with the weaving committee were that they could use their own judgment when considering quality issues. For example, a scarf that was one centimeter short did not have to be rejected, but one that was 5 to 6 centimeters short would need to be replaced. The concept of "firm but fair" was suggested. The committee members are in the position of having to represent the interests of both Pala Village Market as the buyer and the weavers as community members. I recognized the need to hold certain quality standards and that the committee members also had to remain on good terms with their neighbors. It is a little different standard than black and white rules, but I think they will have the ability to decide how to respond to any degradation in quality.

Another assignment will be prepared and submitted to Pala in February for the 2023 production run.

### CHILDREN'S ACTIVITIES (Reported by Elizabeth Riley)

A few of us took opportunity to spend time with the younger children during our trip. We had taken some art supplies and there were two separate times in the four-day schedule when we held organized activities for children. Their ages were mostly 1 to 10 years old and approximately 20 attended both days. During our time with the children, we read stories aloud and provided them with supplies to draw pictures, do coloring pages, and a few other simple art projects. We ended each day with games outside by the school, the most popular of which was soccer. For story time, I read the English words and had assistance from two interpreters to translate to Spanish and then to K'iche'. Most of the children speak and comprehend Spanish if they are attending school, but it was evident some of the younger children communicate better in K'iche'. Despite the language differences, the children were very focused and listened intently to the story the entire time. They were also eager to follow directions and show us their progress and understanding of each project. We reminded them that the library is a great place to go where they can read more stories and do other fun projects to reinforce what they learn. Their overall level of enthusiasm and engagement was impressive, and after the first day they were excited to know when we would meet next. It was evident that school is providing these children with the necessary structured environment that is allowing them to learn and thrive in life.

### FIRST IMPRESSIONS

We ask our new travelers to prepare a brief summary of their impressions and experiences. Their comments give us a "fresh look" at our programs and also give insight into how people who have not been to Pala before may react. Their comments are presented below.

Cole Warren

The village of Pala was exactly as I expected. What this tells me is that previous travelers have done a great job of describing the village and people of Pala. I like that there are ways to be involved with the program even if one is not able to travel to Guatemala. I love that so many people at The Kirk support the program in whatever way they can.



## 2023 Guatemala Update

I am amazed at the vision the leaders of the committee had in the beginning. I was very impressed by what is being accomplished in Pala. To see the library, computers, and staff to be managing so well when the committee was unable to travel during Covid speaks volumes about the program.

I am very thankful that I had the opportunity to visit Pala, and I plan to make it a habit.

### Jackson Riley

During our visit to Guatemala, I was incredibly touched by just how welcoming the people of Pala were to us. Our relationship is so much more than simple mission work - it's truly a special cultural partnership between the Kirk and the village. I was able to learn so much about what the Kirk has provided in the past; gaining an understanding of where Pala has been, and where it can go through our continued support for their educational and economic growth. I learned about the becca scholarship program, the computer center and library, as well as the mini-loan program that has spurred economic development within the community. What we, the Kirk, have supported in building affects more than just this village. People travel from other nearby villages to utilize the resources this education center provides.

My wife and I had the opportunity to spend time with the children of the village, who were so kind-hearted and excited to participate in the activities we had prepared. We played soccer with them as well, and saw their unbridled joy at the opportunity to just play a game. They are truly an inspiration, and left us feeling incredibly optimistic about the future of Pala.

I will treasure our time in Guatemala, and look forward to another future visit to see the continued growth being achieved by this very special community.

### Elizabeth Riley

What an incredible week we had in Guatemala! I'm caught up on sleep at this point, but it will take some more time for me to process the experience from a mental and spiritual standpoint. On the first day we visited Palá, my first concern was will I make it up the mountain in the back of this pickup truck? But once I realized we would be just fine (don't look down and hold on tight!), we arrived in the village and all I could feel was the sheer joy and excitement that exuded from everyone. During the parade and warm welcoming ceremony, I could instantly tell how special these people are and the significance of being reunited with our brothers and sisters after a long three years due to the pandemic. I learned that we shared many of the same

experiences during that time that seemed to put all our lives on hold including missing work, school, friends, church, and suffering the loss of loved ones. Truly no corner of the world was left untouched by covid. But throughout the week, I saw how the beautiful people of Palá are resourceful and resilient with many things to offer the rest of the world. At times I found myself marveling at how differently we live our lives, yet we still have so much in common. We don't have to speak the same language to connect with others through love, pain, and friendship. And all it takes is a soccer ball and an open space to share in the laughter that comes from playing a game with children. Too often we are caught up in the hustle and bustle and consumerism of our world, that we miss the larger lessons of what God is trying to teach us. If we take the time to slow down and absorb the present moments with one another, we will see that we are all His children and need to treat each other as such. We may be separated by cities, countries, and even continents that make our cultures seem hard to understand at times, but that doesn't change the lesson. I hope we can visit Palá again in the future because inevitably I will need a reminder someday!

Daniel Menechella

I've grown up in the Kirk hearing stories about members' trips and experiences to Pala and have always wanted to go myself. I was very excited to be able to go this year for the first time. I was blown away from the first day we visited the village with how welcoming and friendly they all were. I was amazed to see how much the village of Pala had changed as compared to all the stories I heard growing up. I loved being able to meet the friends my mom had made on her many visits and the students my family had sponsored over the years, but the best part of the trip was playing with the kids and forming my own relationships with many of the people in the village. This mission trip is so much different than many of the other trips I've been a part of and I am glad I got the chance to participate.

John and Emily Anthony

Emily and I had a bit of a different perspective as new travelers who have been around the trip for the last 17 or so years. The big things that we noticed included the awe inspiring landscape, the incredible welcome and enthusiasm that the group was back, and most importantly to us how much the library staff was doing for the community. Meeting the students, both our former Becca, and future Becca, as well as all of the kids I'd heard stories about from Virginia was a truly humbling experience. The seriousness in which they take their education was great to see

2023 Guatemala Update

first hand. Overall, we would both say that the trip is rewarding and a driver of a new perspective on life here at home.