

PALA, GUATEMALA UPDATE

August, 2018

Travelers: Virginia Anthony, Mike Anthony, Hal Jordan, Annette Homiller, Abby Bell, Tracy Weeks, Emyr Edwards (report compiler)

First Time Travelers: Catherine Devins, Tina Hammer, Sally Hammer, Tina Steed

In-Country Interpreters: Patty Ajanel, Wendy de Rodas, Anna Sanders, Martin Sop (also our bus driver), Mario Meijia.

One of our first-time travelers, Catherine, compared what she found in Pala with her experiences in Haiti. “These people (*of Pala*) have hope”, she observed. It seems to me that they have more than hope, they have a future as bright and colorful as the country they inhabit and the clothes they wear. Since my last visit, six years ago, the progress is tangible.

We celebrated three new university graduates, all of whom spoke eloquently and forcefully about the value of education, perseverance and giving back to the community. Two are women, one indication of how the women of Pala are beginning to assert themselves and speak up with authority, as we saw in the fish farming meetings and elsewhere. 78 students are now able to pursue education from middle school to five-year bachelor programs supported by becas (scholarships).

Micro-loans are proving to be very popular and the program is being successfully managed by the local committee. The scarf weaving program is thriving under the guidance of the Weaver’s Guild and Barney, who didn’t make the trip because he was trying to sell as many scarves as possible at the 2018 Churchwide Gathering of Presbyterian Women. The proceeds will go back to the village – sell, Barney, sell!

Virginia and Hal breathed new hope into the Tilapia farming program, which has been struggling. Pig rearing is growing in importance (see more under “Other Farming”) and diversification into crops other than coffee is gaining traction. There were signs of prosperity evident in one or two new buildings built with tiled floors, glass windows and actual doors.

Barring destructive natural or political intervention, the people of Pala are well on the road to self-sufficiency.

IT IS A MISSION TRIP ...

And, every evening we gathered before dinner for fellowship, devotion and reflection guided by Catherine’s “Be Attitude” of the day:

- Be Watchful: Where is God in this moment? Seek to see things God is seeing and wants to reveal to you.
- Be Prayerful: When something tests your patience, turn to God.
- Be Content: Find pleasure in the new, don't wish for any other moment.
- Be Vulnerable: Let the people I'm serving, serve me.
- Be Thankful: Be thankful for ANY circumstance that comes your way.
- Be A Witness: Show the love of Christ in all that you do and say.

In the end, we felt that Be Vulnerable most vividly captured our experience of the week. We were more fully served and blessed by the gifts that are the people of Pala than by our service to them. In and through them, God showed us the enduring nature of the human spirit and the faith that Jesus himself taught and practiced.

THE CHILDREN:

The best photo you'll find anywhere and the highlight of any visit to Pala. What a joy to see them ringing the color-coded bells, sitting on the sanctuary floor following (sometimes) Tina S' patient direction. There was a melody in there somewhere... I think! God heard it for sure.

Then, playing with Catherine's handmade jigsaw puzzles, infinite perturbations of random assemblages of pieces emerged looking nothing like the Guatemala or Central America we know. But, they had fun and, with Catherine, Abby, Tina H and Sally's patient attention learned a little about where they live and, perhaps, some fine motor skills.

Large plates of Rise Against Hunger meals packed at the Kirk and other local churches were seen every lunch time in little hands carrying it their favorite lunch spot from the "kitchen" (a shed next to the school house with an open wood fire inside) where it was prepared. I saw no undernourished children this time, in contrast to 2012.

EDUCATION:

Tracy Weeks met with the library staff to examine their filing system. They have created a set of files for students who are no longer in the beca program, one set for students who finished middle school but did not continue, and another set for those still active. For each student, there is a file with all their report cards, application, and letters. The files are organized alphabetically by first name and color coded by year in school.

Tracy also met with 24 beca students who are failing one or more classes. She emphasized the importance of going to class every day and completing all homework assignments, even for classes they do not like. If students do not maintain a passing average, they will no longer continue in the beca program.

Tracy met with all the current university students to check on how their studies are going. The students were very positive about school and excited about their futures. They did note that the level of Spanish required at the university level is much greater than what was required for middle and high school and can sometimes be a challenge. (Note: Spanish is their second language and is rarely spoken in the home. They speak a Mayan language called K'iche'.) We discussed ways to increase their Spanish skills through reading for pleasure and speaking at home to their siblings.

The university system in Guatemala is different from the U.S. Tracy asked all students to make a plan for graduation with a timeline - when courses would be completed, exams that are required, and when final diplomas will be awarded. Each year, we should review the plans to ensure there is no confusion on when students will graduate.

All beca students were required to attend a meeting to review the rules of the beca program. To support the leadership development of the library staff, Tracy asked Marta, the library staff assistant, to lead this portion of the program. Tracy then reiterated the need to go to all classes, complete all assignments, and practice their Spanish at home with siblings so that everyone can be successful.

We had a graduation celebration, with their families in attendance, for three university students, Domingo Joel Gomez Carac, Manuela Carac Guarchaj and Isabela Tzep Mas who graduated. Each was given a certificate, a laptop, and asked to make some remarks. All three students spoke with confidence, encouragement, and pride.

TILAPIA FARMING:

Despite some early success, the tilapia farming effort has struggled more recently with slow fish growth and a high mortality rate of fingerlings.

Hal and Virginia held two meetings with members of the fish association, several of whom, including two of the three women present, expressed anger at the lack of effort and constructive advice provided by the last consultant and apologies to the Kirk for wasting its resources. At the first meeting, it appeared that the association might be prepared to discontinue the program and disband. One member, Manuela, indicated that, with the coffee harvest approaching, she needed to focus on the traditional crop and had decided not to continue in the fish program.

Hal presented the option of sponsoring, in the form of beca scholarships, two people from the village to spend time at a working fish farm to learn first-hand how to raise fish to market size and bring the knowledge back to Pala. Several members, in particular Anibal mas Carac, were aware of such fish farms in the region with similar geographic and climate characteristics to Pala

and showed interest in the proposal. Whether those farms would be willing to offer such training was not known.

The members requested a second meeting the following day to allow them time to discuss the proposal among themselves in the meantime.

At the subsequent meeting, several members expressed their thanks and admiration for the way in which the Kirk mission team never gives up and is always looking for ways to open their minds to other options and new possibilities. Anibal indicated that he was ready to perform the research to find appropriate fish farms that would be willing to offer training and that he was interested in obtaining one of the becas. The details of the beca program would need to be worked out since it would differ from a traditional school beca and might need to include a travel and lodging component. September 1st was set as a tentative date for making a decision regarding the becas. Hal offered to pay the travel expenses for the research between now and then and the members indicated that they would review their finances and possibly contribute 50%.

It was also agreed that the association should decide what funds were due members such as Manuela who decided to leave the association, how to compensate them and also work out an agreement with one villager who has an association fish tank on his property.

Both Hal and Virginia expressed how gratified they were at the way the association members had assumed control and responsibility for the program, a significant step forward.

OTHER FARMING:

Our first agricultural engineer, Marta, has graduated and her brother, Manuel, has completed the three-year course study portion of his degree and will be starting work on his thesis.

The results are already evident in Manuel's pig raising techniques and business plan. He is building on the work done by Edwar, a trained and experienced agriculturalist previously retained by the Kirk, who introduced a different breed of pig that grows faster and provides better quality meat. All the pig pens now have concrete floors and Manuel is very conscientious about hygiene, proper feeding and timely inoculation of new-born piglets. They are grown to the age of two months and sold to others who will raise them for market. At two months, each piglet brings approximately Q300 (~\$39.00). During our stay, two of his pregnant sows yielded 13 newborns and a third sow was expected to produce up to six more.

Manuel's operation disproves what was a commonly held belief at one time that pigs could not thrive in Pala. At other households in the village, one sow and occasionally one or two piglets were evident, but nothing on the scale of Manuel's piggery.

In addition, the family is in the bee business, producing high-quality honey by allowing the bees to feed naturally and not feeding them sugar water. Honey is traditionally consumed in Guatemala during Holy Week, it seems.

Elsewhere in the village, large numbers of coffee seedlings and plants in various stages of growth were evident. Coffee continues to be the primary crop and is doing well.

ELDER MEETING:

Francisco has been re-affirmed as pastor of the church. The only piece of business was a request from the women of the church for a wood-burning stove for cooking. The cost is \$240 and Virginia initiated an informal campaign to raise the funds.

ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT:

The micro-loan program continues to grow with 78 loans now outstanding. Interest from the loans is split equally among the program, the church and the library and the goal of the micro-loan committee is to grow the program by four loans per year. They are also introducing a couples program to mitigate the risk if something should happen to the loan owner. They have had no defaults and have more applicants than available loans.

Interest charged is 1.5% per month and the loans have a term of ten months. (Commercially charged interest in Guatemala is 5% per month or more.) As an administrative convenience, Patti Ajanel will be added as a signatory on the bank account.

The loan committee has dwindled and a discussion of how to elect new members ensued. One member had recently died and several of us had an emotional visit with his widow.

HEALTH:

Dr. Mike Anthony held independent meetings with groups of men, women and weavers during the week. He also met with a former beca student who is now a practicing nurse. Mike handled all topics and questions factually and in readily understandable English, translated first to Spanish and then K'iche'. His complete report is provided in the Appendix and summarized here.

Men's Group:

25-30 men attended and topics brought to Mike's attention included diabetes, "gastritis", hypertension and back pain. As general principles he stressed good nutrition and regular testing, which is available free of charge for many factors, but requires travel to the testing sites.

Weavers – Vision Testing:

Barney had developed a procedure to determine if reading glasses could be helpful to some of the women of the weaver's guild. They were given the opportunity to try reading glasses of various strengths. The results were recorded and reading glasses will be provided to those who need them.

Women's Group:

Approximately 70 women were present and topics ranged from menstruation to pregnancy, childbirth, including C-section births which appear to be on the rise in Guatemala, contraception and risks associated with pregnancies and some contraceptive methods.

Meeting with Nurse Catarina Carac Mas:

Catarina and Mike had a long discussion of women's health problems. Contrary to the feedback from the women of Pala, Catarina indicated a need for menstrual products since the lack of these products sometimes keeps girls home from school. Bad information and advice, even from the medical community, as well as long-held myths continue to be a challenge in advancing women's health in Guatemala.

SELECTED COMMENTS FROM RETURN VISITORS:

Annette Homiller:

I found this trip to be one of the most full-filling ever. The image referring to Psalm 23 of my cup runneth over and the realization that visiting Pala fills my cup meant a lot to me.

I also feel like I see the fruit of the Spirit in Pala (Galatians 5:22-23).

Abby Bell:

I spoke during the sermon on Sunday because I wanted the people of Pala to understand that they had a big role in what I decided to pursue in college. I decided to continue studying Spanish because I wanted to be able to communicate better when I returned to Guatemala, so my first trip really influenced my education.

FIRST IMPRESSIONS:

Our new travelers have the distinct advantage of seeing Pala and its people for the first time and forming impressions that the "seasoned" travelers may overlook.

SALLY HAMMER

Pulling up to Pala for the first time was not at all what I expected. There was no square with mud houses lined up on each side, one of which hosted about a dozen or so women sitting together, weaving scarves. No single room school among the mud houses. Granted, having such a specific image in my mind, I was bound to be surprised. While life in the village was vastly different from anything I have ever personally witnessed, it was one of vivid color, diligence, and hope. This is not to say that the people of Pala are without poverty and extreme hardship in their day to day lives. Not at all. However, they are not destitute. Most notably, they are not destitute in spirit. Despite the complexity of communication, I was overwhelmed by the love and Christlikeness of these people. I was immediately welcomed with astounding hospitality and taught by example how to live in communion with Jesus. Interacting with the people there, I got a new taste of what it means to live in the moment, without concern for what the rest of the day holds. I was reminded of how hard work pays off, and that, with God's help, anyone can accomplish what he/she sets his/her mind to. The significance of the Kirk's work is clear in Pala, and pairing that with the nature and determination of the people there, I look with optimistic anticipation towards what is to come in this village.

CATHERINE DEVINS

I have been a Beca sponsor for years. In the beginning, I received a grainy Polaroid picture of skinny kid named Manuel de Jesus. He was in 6th grade and living in the poor indigenous village of Pala, Guatemala. Manuel is the 6th child of 10. Some of the older children in his family were receiving an education but resources were limited when it came to number 6. Manuel wanted an education and education is important to me, so I signed on. I sent money and a letter of encouragement a couple of times each year. I didn't think much more about him or the money....until I made the trip myself to Pala to meet Manuel de Jesus.

After a harrowing trek up the steep dirt rocky mountain roads, standing up in the back of a pickup truck and hanging on with a vise grip, the Kirk entourage arrived in Pala. Music was blaring and children gathered about. I spotted a young man I thought I recognized from Kirk mission pictures. Manuel? We locked eyes. You-Me? Yes!

Sometimes we write checks for a good cause or because we are Christian. But rarely do we get to see, first hand, the exponential return on our investment. Manuel de Jesus blew me away. He is in his 3rd year of university in pursuit of an advanced degree in Agricultural Engineering. Already he is applying his knowledge to the family business of pigs, bee hives and coffee. Manuel's dream is to share this knowledge with his community. While in Pala, two sows had 13 piglets! I am so proud, I consider myself a piggy grandmother!

I saw God's love and hope in Pala everywhere: playful children, enthusiastic students, trusting elders, weavers, pigs, coffee, bananas and beautiful hospitality. God is working toward God's

kingdom on earth as it is in heaven and God is using the Kirk and the community of Pala. I am joy-filled to be a witness. Thanks be to God.

TINA HAMMER

I went to Pala having no idea of what to expect, except I did expect some level of discomfort and homesickness. That is not what I found. What I found was a celebration of our arrival and lots of people, children and adults alike, who were ready to greet us with open arms, literally, and welcome us into their village and into their homes. It is hard for me to think of the people of Pala as "impoverished" because they didn't act that way. Yes, I noticed the tiny, open air, primitive houses with dirt floors and corrugated tin roofs that, in many cases, were so close together that it was hard to walk between them. But I feel like the partnership has done so much to improve the lives of these people that their demeanor is not one of a suffering people. They are on their way "up" and I think they really know that!

While in Pala, I got to be a part of numerous meetings of different types. Through this experience, I learned more about the different programs we have there and, also, a lot more about the people. They are hard-working, trusting of Virginia and the other people they have gotten to know, and want to be perceived as good partners. And I loved seeing how the people on our team never lost their sense of humor and were loving and supportive of their counterparts, with the goal of handing over programs for them to run independently.

I so appreciate being welcomed as a member of this team and being allowed to participate in meetings and to help where I could. Seeing Mike navigate the mine field of women's health issues masterfully was very inspiring, as was seeing how Virginia and Hal handled the tilapia farming situation. Tina Steed was amazing in the role of music teacher, getting children who didn't speak the same language to understand what she wanted them to do and, in the end, producing actual music. And Uncle Hal with all those kids! It was a great blessing to get to take this trip with my daughter Sally and to see her loving interactions with the kids throughout our visit. Helping get the vision care program off the ground and otherwise interacting with villagers were also great blessings. And last, but not least, I feel so blessed to have gotten to work with and get to know all our fabulous translators and to have been transported safely by our drivers. God was with us very conspicuously on our trip!

TINA STEED

As a first timer to Pala, I had many expectations and I must say - they were all shattered going on this trip. I had been wanting to go for a while and the timing seemed right with my scholarship student finishing her middle school - three years of sponsorship. I had heard that August is the rainy season and to prepare to have my heart broken because the Pala community is at such poverty levels.

I went to Pala very concerned about the travel back and forth from the hotel to Pala. It was going to be long drives – 2-3 hours each way, and half of it standing up in the back of a pickup truck in the rainy season. I get motion sickness easily so I rode in the front of the van and had the most amazing sights driving up and down mountain turns, through villages- seeing the kids going to school on the back of motorbikes, many dogs and chickens walking/sleeping in the road, and marketplaces and churches. God shone his goodness on us and not once did we get rained on while riding on the back of the truck. Instead we were treated to beautiful mountain patchworks of corn fields, banana trees, coffee plants, Guatemalans waving to us as we passed by, and the smell of wood burning from the wood burning stoves. Never did I ever wish that the drive could end, whether I was on the van or the truck. I could tell you more about the breathtaking scenery, but on to Pala.

I was expecting the usual fanfare of a welcome band that I had heard usually greets the team, but instead we were blessed with dances that the children put on for us to teach us about their culture. We had barely gotten there and they were sharing with us about their clothing, their daily life culture, their food, and their traditions. From there, we went to the church decorated with fresh flowers for a welcome ceremony. The walkway to the church was also lovingly decorated with flowers and braided palm tree leaves. The people of Pala really put in a lot of effort to make us feel welcomed right from the start. The welcome ceremony was kind but I was not expecting the way that they pray. While the preacher says his prayer, everyone else in the congregation prays aloud their own prayers at the same time. I was told that it was so God can hear their prayers as well. I thought it was marvelous how everyone could show their faith so outwardly and it sounded beautiful.

Throughout the week, I was expecting throngs of children, but due to the fact that it was testing week in school and on the weekend, many families were attending university graduations, the numbers of kids weren't the overwhelming numbers as they can be in January when school is out. I spent a lot of my time with the kids. We played soccer with them. I took jump ropes and taught the teenagers to do a number of jump rope tricks while the little ones jumped with the single jump ropes. I played follow the leader all over the village with them. We also had dance time when I taught them the electric slide and the chicken dance! We did the Hokey Pokey and Head, Shoulders, Knees, and Toes in English and Spanish. I held several handbell sessions with them with bells left from previous trips. Ask to see my video of them playing Ode to Joy! You can pick out the tune!

Another thing that I was expecting was that most of the people in Pala spoke Spanish and that even with my basic knowledge of Spanish, I'd be able to communicate with them. I hadn't done enough research to know that although middle school and above are Spanish immersive, it's mostly the teenagers and recent graduates that speak Spanish. And although they take "English" classes, it's very little that they know. In the scholarship student meeting, they were encouraged to speak Spanish to each other at school (instead of their native language K'iche' "key-chay") and to also speak it at home to teach it to their younger brothers and sisters to prepare them for school. I should have been surprised that the little kids were speaking

Spanish to us- but later I WAS surprised to learn that the librarians held Spanish classes for the younger kids (as young as 3 or 4!) to prepare for our visit! That really helped break some of the communication barriers. If I had one regret- it was that I didn't learn a little bit of K'iche' before we went so I could say a few phrases to the older community members. Mostly there was a lot of nodding, miming and smiling or help from the interpreters.

I expected that we would be doing most of the teaching and leading – especially with the kids, but they did quite a bit of teaching and leading as well! They taught me some songs in Spanish that they knew and they also were more than happy to show us around the village. With smaller numbers, I could ask them to show me where they lived and they were more than happy to lead me through the maze of one room houses to their home to meet their parents, cousins, aunts, uncles, chickens, etc... Along the way, there were women weaving outside their houses, peeking out windows or doors, washing dishes in their outside sinks, or tending to the meals or laundry. The paths were narrow and rocky, but all the villagers moved like mountain goats nimbly and quickly while I held the children's hands to steady myself or ducked to avoid the sharp corners of the corrugated tin roofs. I also saw a lot of the villagers leading and teaching each other. We held a graduation ceremony for the three students who were graduating from University and they all got up and were trying to impart their knowledge to the younger students telling them what a struggle it is but to persevere and study hard for great returns. They also celebrate the University graduates by hanging a picture of each of them on the library wall to inspire the next generation.

I had heard that the students were very excited to meet their sponsors who come to visit. While that may be - I didn't take into account the shyness of teenage girls. Especially middle school age! I also expected to be able to pick my student out of a crowd, but it was more difficult than I thought, and although many of them may look alike to us, we all look alike to them too! With the help of our interpreters, Tina Hammer and I visited my student's one room, dirt floor home twice on this trip to get to know her and her mother. We talked about how we all have trouble getting our kids to do homework, and other common issues with parenting. I shared with them my life story and how through good education and working hard, I am able and have been able to support myself and my children on my own for most of my life. The students are starting to see more female role models which is keeping them in school and delaying teenage marriages and pregnancies.

I was expecting that our team of eleven Kirk members would bond from the sheer time of being together all the time but we were all so busy! Hal, Virginia, Mike and Tracy were busy with many meetings to continue the amazing progress that they have been working hard on with the community for many years. The weaving program, the tilapia program, the scholarship program, the hog farming program, the health programs, the computer labs, meeting with the church elders and library staff show so many successes. Annette coordinated hygiene kits and took care of making sure that every student got a letter or care package from and to their sponsors. Abby and Sally helped scribe many of the meetings and provided solid Spanish translations when the rest of us were lacking. Tina H, Emyr, Catherine and I provided the glue

that keeps the relationships strong between our Cary church community and the Pala community. Every night the team got together with thoughtful devotions led by Catherine and focused on our daily relationship with God and each other and then shared communion on the final night.

Lastly, my heart wasn't broken. It was filled with the love and joy and hopefulness of the Pala community and of Guatemala. Children are learning and thriving. Families are going to church and sharing the spirit of God and community. Crops are growing and livestock is as well. The roads are getting better and the travel is getting easier. We were blessed that no one got sick under Virginia's cautionary warnings and preparation, the thunder quakes were all in the middle of the night and were gone by the next morning, the top notch Guatemalan team that travelled with us was very knowledgeable and friendly, and we were safe and sound throughout the trip. I'd definitely recommend it to any of our church family and can't wait to go back!

APPENDIX

PALA HEALTHCARE REPORT Dr. Mike Anthony, August 2018

Mike Anthony report from trip to Pala, Guatemala August 2018:

August 2, 2018 Afternoon

On the first day I had a meeting with men of the village and surrounding area. Mario did Spanish translation and Oscar Mas Carac performed translation to K'iche'. There were approximately 25 men present from the village and surrounding areas. I asked if there were any particular topics that they were interested in and they did not have any initial concerns. I mentioned that in the past I had heard there are concerns about Diabetes, "Gastritis", hypertension and back pain.

- 1) Diabetes: I described how this disease has no symptoms early and causes damage to many of the body's organs and functions. It is important to have a diet low in added sugars and to eat as much fresh food, vegetables and fruits, drink as much water (as compared to sodas) as possible. I also stated that when possible blood sugar should be tested. Several of the men responded that at local pharmacies they could have their blood sugar checked. Pascual (the local health promoter) also added that they should have blood sugar checked in a fasting state.
- 2) "Gastritis" appears to be the term that they use to describe heart burn or reflux symptoms, not necessarily symptoms of nausea/vomiting. We discussed how certain foods can make these symptoms worse, how antacids can help to reduce symptoms and need for medical care if symptoms are severe or persist.
- 3) Hypertension was also discussed as a chronic disease that has no symptoms and causes silent damage. Discussed importance of having blood pressure checked. Pascual (health promoter) noted that he does this on a regular basis in his Government health office.
- 4) Back pain was discussed in light of their physical jobs that require heavy lifting and bending. We discussed proper dynamics of standing, lifting and stretching.

After answering many questions on these topics and not finding further interest, I pointed out that the women of the village have always asked me for family planning advice; many men also ask me this. I pointed out that I only responded to questions and tried to dispel the many myths there are about dangers of artificial family planning. I stressed that it has never been my intention to suggest that people should not be able to have the number of children they desire to have BUT shared my opinion that the couple should be aware of all of their options, including the safety of these options, to plan the number of children that they want to have.

This discussion prompted a question from Lorenzo (brother of Pascual, the health promoter) about what a doctor is doing and why a doctor "cleans out the woman" after the baby is born

and it seems painful. As I explained what was going on with delivery and why it is painful this generated a lot of discussion in K'iche'. No one appeared to be upset by this discussion although Oscar did report that some of the K'iche' comments were along the lines of "why do we need to know THAT?"

August 3 Morning

Tina and Sally Hammer, Tina Steed and I initiated Barney's plan to have women of the scarf guild try various strength "cheater" reading glasses to see if this helped them see patterns better or made reading more clear. Barney had put together extensive instructions to assist in explaining this program, how we would provide better quality reading glasses for the women who benefit from them and three sets of readers to use. With these instructions he had an entire list of all the women in the guild. As women tried on the readers and determined what strength was best for them we recorded the strength by their name. As expected more than half of the women did not need these, they were the younger women. Barney also included instructions for Juanita (library staff) to use a range of glasses with various magnifications for other people in the village to determine if they could benefit. Since we had 2 sets that were designated to give to the women who benefited, we determined to give these limited numbers to the oldest women.

August 4 Afternoon

Women's seminar. I was assisted in translation by our translator Anna and Marta (library staff) translated to K'iche'. Abby Bell took notes. Approximately 70 women attended.

Since there is new emphasis on girls in the 3rd world who do not have resources for menstruation I started by asking the group if this is an issue for girls in the village. The consensus was that this is not a problem in the village (see notes of my discussion with Catarina Carac Mas later). This did break the ice though with many questions about menstruation. I used these questions to explain various aspects of menstruation, onset of puberty, painful periods, why periods are skipped sometimes. I discovered that there is a tea that is brewed and drunk to decrease cramps.

The above discussions led to questions and discussions about pregnancy and prenatal care. I have been hearing more anecdotal stories of women having more C-section deliveries. I asked for a show of hands of who had had C-sections. Only 4 raised their hands; more may have but didn't want to show themselves. (See comments from my discussion with Catarina Carac Mas).

I asked if they are aware of options for family planning from the health center and they seemed to be aware of these. I have known this from previous visits but also know that there is still a lot of suspicion and fear of possible complications which can occur from artificial family planning. I tried to dispel these myths. I explained that there is a very small chance of having complications from artificial family planning but the risk of equally serious complications is much higher with pregnancy. I also pointed out that the risk of them being hurt or killed is much higher when they ride up and down the mountain in the back of a truck. This was my attempt to compare risks of things they are NOT familiar with to things that they ARE familiar with.

I have found out from private discussions with educated villagers that the government clinics do have free contraceptives for any citizen; these consist of condoms, birth control pills and injectables. They also have subdermal hormonal implants, but these are less available, have to be requested and may take several months to obtain. I pointed out that pills could be used while waiting for these to arrive.

August 5 morning

Discussions with Catarina Carac Mas. Assisted in translation by Anna.

Catarina is one of our students who went on to “university” and trained to be a nurse. She is working at an APROFAM clinic and hospital in the city of Solola. She shares an apartment there with her sister but comes home on weekends. This is 3 hours away. Catarina sees patients in clinics and focuses on Women’s health. She also works in a hospital in preparing patients for surgery and caring for them after surgery, including OB and GYN surgery (C-sections, hysterectomies).

She had many questions for me about things that she has seen but not trained on. One topic was about uterine prolapse. She has only seen patients have hysterectomies for this. I discussed that we can also use pessaries for patients with mild symptoms and described what a pessary is, found the spelling in Spanish for her.

She presented questions related to family planning and potential complications. She tells me that doctors inform her and patients that they can only use birth control pills for 5 years; otherwise they will become sterile. Anna (who is a Guatemalan) confirmed that she has been told this also by doctors. I informed her that this is not true and pointed out many benefits of long term birth control pill use besides contraception (reduction in lifetime risk of uterine and ovarian cancer) which she did not know about. I did point out a small statistical risk of blood clot complications but, as in the women’s seminar, pointed out that pregnancy causes a significantly greater risk of the same blood clot complications.

She related to me a “story” that she was told by someone she works with as follows: A woman had used birth control pills for three years when she got married. She stopped pills to have a baby. When the baby was born the baby had a pill in its eye. She asked me if this was possible. Instead of answering yes or no I had her describe the GI tract and the uterus (which she knows about) then asked her if she thought this was possible? She then answered “no”. It is my opinion that, even though she is somewhat educated in this field she is bombarded by myths and fears from her world and may have a hard time reconciling these.

I then asked her about 2 topics

- 1) Availability of menstrual products for girls. She said that for the girls from poor families this is a real problem. Not having these resources keeps them from going to school. She agrees that a program that can privately provide this for the poorer people in the village can be of great help. She agreed to help in this endeavor.

- 2) I asked her about increasing C-sections. She described multiple reasons as follows:
 - a) With better ways for patients to get to the health clinics the local midwives and Pascual (local Health promoter) do sometimes refer patients too quickly, probably for fear of being responsible if something bad happens.
 - b) She describes that the midwives and Pascual do a good job in tracking patient's blood pressures and finding other problems that are real and appropriately transfer these patients. When indigenous patients are referred there seems to be a quicker decision for C-sections because these patients are sicker.
 - c) She also feels that sometimes doctors just do C-sections because they don't want to wait to let the baby be born.