



WOMEN ON THE MOVE WITH GOD

35th Annual Meeting of the International Committee for the Fellowship of the Least Coin, Guatemala, October 17th – 24th 2015

The ICFLC Annual Meeting dedicated its first day to an FLC workshop with women of CLAI (Latin American Council of Churches). We got the chance to know the ecumenical women who work in this region.

Nora Coloma, Women Ministries and Gender Justice executive secretary of the Ecumenical Council of Churches in Guatemala—our host, pointed out in her welcome speech that indigenous women in Guatemala and other Central and Southern American countries are discriminated against. She thanked our coming as our solidarity with our Mayan sisters.

In Guatemala the Mayan spirituality is important. We were welcomed by a Mayan ritual with flowers and candles, each of them having a special meaning connected to the elements of nature and to the ancestors. Mayan culture was explained, the very old Mayan calendar represents law and justice, it symbolises energy upon our planet. In Guatemala there are altars and pyramids dedicated to the Mayan classic period which show harmony with mother nature, with the animals, and the sun. There is a spirit of sexuality, bodiness and practical everyday life in the ceremonies in which Mayan people give thanks to their ancestors.



a Mayan Ceremony

After an introduction of what FLC is all about, the women and some men who attended got very enthusiastic and indicated that they want to carry further this prayer movement in their own Latin American countries.

A series of important projects were presented: in Guatemala, domestic violence is a major problem, mainly caused by poverty. Fellowship of the Least Coin supported several poor families to set up their own small business in making jellies to generate income. And this project changed their lives. 43 women benefitted from it. And their children go to school now, are well fed, and emotionally feel good.

Another project came from the South coast of Guatemala, a warm area. It was set up to prevent violence. Unfortunately the government does not do anything against criminality until someone is dead. People are given social and theological formation so that they can form their own critical opinion. There is a whole people's movement of resistance which gives a prophetic and practical testimony against corruption and against the privatisation of the public services. Women are educated to act and become independent while they had always been told in the church to live only for God and heaven. Now they go to school and see that their husbands are machos. They do read the bible and have circles of prayer, reflection and action. They share their experiences and discover how to change the situation in their families. They sing, have fun, pray, and get energy to go on. They organise practical actions

like prayer marches, cooperatives for arts and crafts, protest against the high costs of energy, protest against corruption and actions for the environment as well as awareness trainings in equality between men and women in order to change the existing patriarchal shape of family life.

Nicaragua presented a project which opens its doors for women in social need. They give trainings in pastoral counseling, sexual and reproductive health, gender violence. Sexuality and health education are a taboo in the churches. Women do not know their bodies. In a patriarchal society women do not negotiate with their husbands concerning family planning. Another task is to accompany women who have cancer during their chemotherapy in special shelters. These women come from very poor communities and remote areas. The project has a big impact on the quality of their lives.

Cuba presented the Evangelical Seminary tackling ecumenical and diaconal issues. In spite of the political situation this seminary managed to stay open since its foundation in 1946.

During the afternoon more exchanges took place between the FLC committee and women from the respective projects and countries who felt very much inspired by the story of Shanti Salomon and indicated to be willing to participate more in the FLC movement. Useful practical advice were given.

On Sunday morning we went in smaller groups to different churches of Guatemala City followed by the official opening ceremony of the 35th ICFLC annual conference in the afternoon. We also joined CLAI in a demonstration against corruption and gender violence at the corner of a big street on this Sunday, one week before the national elections for a new president.



Demonstration



After a very interesting visit – unfortunately on a rainy Monday – to a Mayan women’s cooperative in the mountains where we were introduced to the aims of this project supported by FLC, we could buy the beautiful and colourful textiles woven by those Mayan women weavers.

An excursion to Antigua, the beautiful former Guatemaltecan capital in colonial Spanish style, a visit to a Macadamia nut farm and the performance of traditional Mayan music and dances by school children of Chimaltenango gave us an impression of the cultural life in Guatemala.

The ICFLC working sessions took place from Tuesday to Thursday at Mariapolis, a centre of the Focolare movement, which was explained to us by Ms. Martita, an Argentinian member living in this centre. This movement is very big and started during World War II in Trent, Italy. After the terrible bombings, a young woman and teacher named Chiara Lubich gathered young people around her and told them about the Gospel, which as she believed, is stronger

than bombs. They went to the shelters to bring the Gospel and risked their life. They started to live in communities. In a short time many people from the little villages around joined them. Their ideals were: pray and work for unity, which is a gift of God; love the other, care for the other. When the war finished, people brought with them this new life and charism of unity. The movement spread out all over the world. They hold international big gatherings. Focolare was given a peace award in Luxemburg. The dialogue among religions is also fundamental. And they go into politics to strive for unity on the basis of the gospel, and into business for an economy of unity. The aim is to share and not to make profit. The word 'Focolare' means fire place.

Parallel to the ICFLC working sessions, CLAI held an expert meeting about gender mapping in Latin America.

As in previous years, many good projects for women, children and families from all regions of the world were presented during the ICFLC business meeting. About thirty projects were granted along with four scholarships for young women to support them in their studies. To give a short impression of some concerns which are tackled through these projects: a feminist theological consultation, support gatherings for female pastors, awareness raising for food education, hygiene and sanitary health, children's parks and playgrounds, trainings in self-esteem for women in prison, consultations about gender- based violence against women and girls, ecumenical learning and pilgrimages, Gods creation and ecological awareness raising, income generating activities and trainings e.g. dairy farming, peace and reconciliation work.

Next year FLC will celebrate her 60th anniversary in Louisville, Kentucky in the United States of America. This special event will be hosted by the Presbyterian Women and connected to the 75th anniversary of Church Women United.

Martina Heinrichs, November 2015

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