

Sister Parish: San Roque

Jim MacDonald

St. John's had a "sister parish" relationship with a parish in San Roque, El Salvador from 1987 to 1994. The delegations started while the civil war was raging and continued after the war ended.

The arrangement was facilitated by SHARE, an umbrella organization located in San Francisco that advocated for the Salvadoran people in the United States. It encouraged American churches to twin with churches in El Salvador. It also provided training for delegations preparing to travel to El Salvador, and arranged housing, transportation and agenda guidance for delegations while in El Salvador.

SHARE prepared a list of three possible Salvadorian parishes with which St John's could establish a sister relationship. The list, with descriptions of each Salvadorian parish, was presented to the St John's parish at all the weekend Masses.

Parishioners were asked to vote on which parish we would sister with. They chose the poorest parish, San Roque, in the capital city, San Salvador.

Towson Presbyterian and Maryland Presbyterian Churches also chose San Roque as their sister parish. We trained together and travelled to El Salvador together as a united delegation. In addition to providing financial support and medical supplies, we were to accompany the poor people as they went about their lives. Locals were safer from government interference when accompanied by Americans.

Unfortunately, Barbara Taylor is the only other person I can recall who was in that first delegation. San Roque's church had been heavily damaged by the 1986 earthquake. The entrance facade was still standing but the roof was completely gone. There was no thought of restoring the church while the parishioners were lacking essentials, so services were held in the church as it was. Food was scarce or too expensive for the poor. A cornmeal tortilla with beans was a typical meal but during the war most of the poor could not afford the beans.

We all had brought sleeping bags with us. At night, we slept under the stars in what had been the sanctuary. Tiny homes surrounded the church. Each home must have had a rooster which acted like a watch dog. Every time anyone passed by all the roosters started crowing making sleeping difficult!

St John's supported the ministry of Adrienne Plasse, a public health nurse, for four years. She established a health clinic that used health promoters who went out to the people. When the war ended in January of 1992, Father Adolpho and San Roque's other key leaders refocused their attention on the health clinic. Parish leaders asked St John's parish for financial assistance to help pay small stipends to the 24 health promoters who staff the clinic and to buy laboratory and clerical supplies. Each promoter received a stipend of \$52.00 per month.

Partly because of language differences, it was difficult to maintain the close relationship during the time between delegations. And so in 1994, another delegation including Fr. Dick Tillman, Irene MacDonald (a Spanish speaker), and Barbara Hope Hunter and her son, Jeremy went to San Roque. The main objective of this delegation was to determine how we could re-ignite the intensity of the relationship that existed just a few years before.

End of the San Roque Sister Parish Initiative

Barbara Hope Hunter

Soon after, the parish's relationship with San Roque was ended, due principally to two factors:

1. Adrienne, the midwife, left the parish and was not replaced. She was a nurse and community organizer and also trained local health educators. She was an excellent communicator.
2. The pastor was reassigned. His goal had been to empower the parishioners and he deemphasized institutional building. For example, he felt that the missing portion of the roof was not detrimental to the use of the facility, and he wanted all St. John's funds to benefit the parishioners directly. Adrienne and this priest, who had been pastor during the most difficult times of the civil insurgency, did much to hold that section of the city together, and together were a beacon for justice.

The new priest assigned to the parish felt that rebuilding the church was a top priority, and he wanted to use the St. John's donations to fund the completion of

the church structure. But our parish did not want its money to be used in a way that only indirectly benefitted the parishioners.

Instead, we looked at the growing Salvadorian/Latino population in our own city, and we decided to use our energy to advocate with the people right in our own community. From this decision to use our funding to aid those in need at home came several initiatives:

- The Latino Health Fair in coordination with Howard County General.
- Advocacy for Alianza de la Comunidad to meet every day needs of Latinos in Howard County.
- Opening up liaison with the Howard County Police Department. There were probably more activities over the years.

The Spirit guided our process. Soon after we were able to hire a Spanish-speaking priest on staff, and the Latino community is thriving.