



Cristosal

EL SALVADOR UPDATE

There's a black granite wall in San Salvador, the capital of El Salvador, engraved with the names of more than 30,000 people who were killed or "disappeared" during that country's civil war from 1980 to 1992.

We quietly walked the wall's length, pausing to ponder names and sometimes trace them with our fingertips.

"There must be walls like this all over the world," said Scott Ferguson, senior warden of the Episcopal Church of the Holy Communion in University City.

Eleven members of Holy Communion, along with the Rev. Beth Scriven and a friend from another church, spent a week in El Salvador this summer to learn about its past and present suffering as well as a human-rights group called Cristosal that's helping to pick up the pieces after the civil war. We came to understand that El Salvador's champions of human rights have much to teach us about working for justice in the United States.

Like our country, El Salvador has an intolerable gap between rich and poor, only wider, as evidenced by the mansions

and corrugated tin shacks we saw. Police sometimes summarily execute real and suspected gang members just as government death squads during the civil war gunned down "communists." People of color in the United States know a similar terror. While abortion rights are under attack here, abortion there is a crime that can land a woman in prison. LGBT rights in El Salvador lag far behind those gained to the north, an animus abetted by many church leaders.

"No matter where we live, our problems are universal," commented Karen Payne, a Holy Communion member making the trip.

Cristosal, founded by Episcopal clergy in 2000, aims to empower ordinary citizens in El Salvador and neighboring countries to be their own architects and agents of change. One guiding principle that Cristosal executive director Noah Bullock shared with us is that human rights are best seen through the eyes of the victims.

"We learn what human rights are when they're violated," said Bullock.



The Rev. Beth Scriven, and others from the pilgrimage at the Memorial Wall in San Salvador.



Our group in El Salvador in June. In 2018 Holy Communion plans host a conference with Cristosal focused on Human Rights in El Salvador and St. Louis. If you'd like to help, contact the rector at mangell@holycommunion.net

Some of Cristosal's labors are in the courts, seeking protection for citizens uprooted from their homes by gang violence, and prosecuting government perpetrators of a civil war-era massacre in which some 1,000 civilians perished (our country supported the El Salvador government during the conflict). Cristosal also has advised the United Nations on addressing the plight of refugees.

Its prime mission is helping others to secure their own rights. We visited a village where activists coached by Cristosal have organized soccer games for young people and persuaded gang members to paint over graffiti that once stigmatized their area to the point of losing government services. We learned how activists in one San Salvador neighborhood teach youth to play musical instruments, with bands becoming an alternative to gangs. In nearby Santa Lucia, graduates of Cristosal's Citizen Formation School are part of an effort to clean up a polluted river and win other environmental victories.

The Holy Communion delegation, together with El Salvadoran social workers, lawyers, and students, studied how to do community organizing in Cristosal workshops. We split up to create mock human-rights campaigns, for example. One group devised a gun buy-back program that would reward participants with scholarships and internships.

Much of our time was spent honoring Christians in El Salvador whose advocacy for human rights cost them their lives. We sat in the chapel where Archbishop Oscar Romero was assassinated in 1980 while performing mass, one day after he had urged government soldiers in a radio broadcast to disobey orders to murder their countrymen. At the José Simeón Cañas Central American University,

we walked through the dorm where the army killed six Jesuit priests, their housekeeper, and her daughter in 1989.

“WHEN THEY TALKED ABOUT THE MASSACRES, IT RANG BACK TO ME ABOUT MARTIN LUTHER KING, MALCOLM X, AND MEDGAR EVERS,” SAID HOLY COMMUNION MEMBER GRETCHEN WILKES. “IT WAS JUST LIKE THE CIVIL RIGHTS MOVEMENT.”

Our deeply felt experience in El Salvador convinced Holy Communion's vestry to form an official partnership with Cristosal, said our rector, the Rev. Mike Angell, another summer pilgrim. Rev. Angell said Holy Communion envisions holding an annual human rights conference with Cristosal, alternating between St. Louis and San Salvador. The first conference could take place here as early as fall 2018. Other Episcopal parishes are interested in joining us in future trips to El Salvador to learn from our brothers and sisters in Cristosal.

Said Rev. Angell: “It's about building a movement.”

-Robert Lowes

Member of the El Salvador Committee

article reprinted from the November 2018 "Seek" Magazine of the Diocesan of Missouri