



## **Connecting Our Dots with El Salvador**

By: Sister Phyllis Tierney

In November of 2015 Sister Elaine Hollis joined a delegation sponsored by the Leadership Conference of Women Religious (LCWR) to attend the 35<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the four churchwomen who were martyred during El Salvador's painful civil war (1979-1992). Sister Elaine was not the first person to become involved with SHARE. Elaine responded to SHARE's request to participate in their fundraising tour by inviting them to Rochester. The visit revealed surprising past connections.

### **Sister Kathy Weider's Story**

I first visited El Salvador November 29 to December 6, 1986 as part of a delegation organized by the LCWR and the SHARE organization on the sixth anniversary of the murders of Sisters Maura Clarke, Ita Ford, Dorothy Kazel and lay missionary Jean Donovan by Salvadoran soldiers. Our group attended Mass in the cathedral at San Salvador and visited the chapel in which Archbishop Oscar Romero had been shot by a soldier while saying Mass on March 24, 1980. The group heard about the continuing violence and atrocities committed by members of the Salvador military (with U.S. support of \$1 million per day) from various Church members and others.

After the visit I was asked by José Escobar, program director, to be on the board for The Interfaith Office on Accompaniment to assist with the *Going Home* Campaign which had just begun to try to repatriate Salvadoran refugees from Mesa Grande and to assist them to return to their home communities in Chalatenango and Cabañas. In 1987 I traveled with José and a few others to Mesa Grande, a huge armed refugee camp holding 12,000 Salvadorans who had fled across the border into Honduras to escape death in their own country. There we spoke to large gatherings of Salvadorans to help them understand their *Going Home* opportunity, explaining that refugees would be accompanied to El Salvador by groups of U.S. citizens to help ensure their safety.

Between 1987 and 1990 I made four additional trips to El Salvador and/or Honduras. I was part of groups that negotiated with the United Nations High Commission on Refugees (UNHCR), military leaders, and Church groups to advocate for the refugees. I also organized delegations from Rochester to bring humanitarian aid and support to the Salvadorans.

On each of the visits we met with many refugees and listened to their harrowing stories. We were inspired by the courage of the people and their generosity to their U.S. guests despite their own extreme poverty. I still treasure those stories in my heart as well as images of the absolutely horrific living conditions they endured,

especially while being forced to stay in the refugee camp for over seven years. I believe that my trips to El Salvador changed my life forever.

### **Sister Donna Del Santo's Story**

In 1989, I was a member of Corpus Christi Church, which was a "Sanctuary Church" for people fleeing the civil war in El Salvador. Sister Kathy Weider had already been to El Salvador and helped our parish to become a partner with SHARE.

In early fall of 1989, Sister Kathy had put out a call for parishioners to be part of a Peace Keeping Delegation to go to Mesa Grande Refugee Camp in Honduras to accompany Salvadoran refugees who had been living in the camps for nearly nine years. There were about 600 refugees, of the nearly 2,000, who were now being allowed back in to their homeland to a new re-settlement called *Santa Marta*. At the time I was unable to go on this delegation because of other commitments. The group of four parishioners joined other delegates from around the U.S. and went to Mesa Grande Refugee Camp only to get "stuck" there because of political red tape. They were on the border so long that their Visas to enter El Salvador had expired and they were unable to renew them.

Kathy began calling others to create a new delegation of *Peace Keepers*. When she called me, all of my commitments had been completed and I was now free to go. I reluctantly said yes because the Civil War was at a fever pitch and it had become very unsafe to travel there. There was a small voice within me that said, "Just say yes and I will do the rest." I thought that this meant that in the end, I wouldn't have to go!

After a lot of adventures to get my visas for Honduras and El Salvador, I ended up going! When I arrived in Mesa Grande it became clear that my fellow parishioners who had faithfully waited on the border to accompany these 600 refugees back in to El Salvador would not be allowed to cross the border and that I would need to go on without them.

As soon as we crossed into El Salvador with the long line of school buses carrying these 600 refugees, one of the woman gave birth to a beautiful baby girl. She named her "Patria," translated it means *homeland*.

There is much more to this story that I will have to tell you at a later time. Suffice to say, that the small voice within me never left me and helped me to peacefully navigate many dangerous situations to finally return safely home. Two weeks after my return, the brutal massacre of the six Jesuits, their housekeeper and her daughter took place at UCA, the Jesuit School of Theology in San Salvador.

### **Sister Mary Jane Mitchell**

Sister Mary Jane Mitchell (d. 2009) was attracted to mission work, especially with Hispanics. Among her many ministries she worked as a tutor and advocate in the Brockport Migrant Ministry Education Program. After a sabbatical in Central America in 1989-90 she found CRISPAZ, a volunteer organization in El Salvador. From

2001 -2004 she worked in San Francisco and San Vicente, rural areas near San Salvador and lived with a Salvadoran family. She had hoped that other Sisters would join her in the ministry but illness forced her to return to Rochester. During her sabbatical she also spent some time at the refugee camp in Mesa Grande.

To learn more about SHARE El Salvador, visit: <http://www.share-elsalvador.org/>.