

## EXPERIENCE IN SAN ANDRES ITZAPA, CHIMALTENANGO GUATEMALA

We would like to take a moment to reflect on our trip in March to San Andrés Itzapa, Chimaltenango, to be with the delegation of Sion students from Kansas City. We feel truly grateful for the opportunity to have this experience. We feel that it has been a blessing to respond to the Spirit by bringing our enthusiasm and spirituality to the beautiful country of Guatemala.



In our previous assemblies in the Central American region we have discussed the possibility of starting some kind of work in Guatemala, without knowing that SION has already been working on projects like this for some time.

Melinda and Phil Smith (Melinda is a Sion Associate) are a couple who have been working for many years in Guatemala carrying out various developmental projects in this community. This connection was first made 30 years ago by a priest from St. Thomas More parish in Kansas City. Working in solidarity and continuity with the people of Guatemala, they have been able to coordinate various projects. They eventually met the Carmelite Sisters of the Holy Family and began working with the sisters alongside the members of the local community.

Melinda and Phil are both very aware of our Guatemalan history during which entire indigenous villages were assassinated during a 36-year civil war. Therefore every delegation from Kansas City arrives having learned about the very real experience of the Guatemalan people during these difficult years of violence. This knowledge profoundly awakens students' desire to work in greater solidarity with the local community.

We are so grateful to Melinda and Phil for making this experience possible.



Since the Sion students from Kansas have been coming to San Andrés Itzapa for 6 years, our week-long experience showed us how well the students were received by the community and how loved they truly are. However, they were well known as students



coming from a school. Now, given our presence with them, the Guatemalan community came to understand that Sion is a Religious Congregation as well. That is why Yeimy (a woman who directs a group of women known as “Programa Compartiendo el Cambio”) expressed her desire to help us with promoting vocations.

This project is well organized. In fact, every delegation’s efforts benefit many families. During this week alone we constructed stoves, pigpens, poured cement floors, visited persons in critical health conditions, visited a school for children with specific needs and an orphanage, among others...

There were 38 of us in total. We divided into 5 groups, and each group was accompanied by an *albañil* or construction worker to coordinate each worksite more efficiently.



The rhythm of every day was wonderful: a morning walk to get to know different projects that had been accomplished over the years, such as the construction of a school, reforestation efforts, planting of fruit trees, bee harvesting, among others .... This was followed by breakfast at 8:00 am, then we departed to begin the workday at 8:30, with lunch at 1:00. The workday continued at 2:00 pm, prayer and reflection at 6:00, and supper at 7:00. We closed the day with thanksgiving prayer at 8:00 pm.

Our hearts were filled with much hope as we listened to the deep reflections of the entire group, hearing how each individual became more aware of and sensitized by their lived experience. Each member of the group treated us with genuine love, and was interested to know more about our life as religious and how we came to join the Congregation of Sion. We passionately shared our individual stories, and felt the girls truly connected with us.

We are certain that each person has left a mark on this beautiful community simply with their presence. They have particularly left a mark in our own lives.

We are deeply grateful to Sister Audrey Doetzel who not only thought of us but who invited us to form part of this Sion delegation.

Thank you to everyone for keeping us in your prayers. May Our Lady of Sion accompany you always.

With deep love and affection,

Alejandra Vásquez Mejía y María Clara Luz Gutiérrez Menchú

