

Refreshing the Vision for Guatemala

The Vision for Global Engagement

As part of our overall vision to be a community of hope and transformation dedicated to following Jesus, in 2008 the Global Engagement Team set out to prayerfully discern a way for Cedar Ridge to serve internationally, “reaching out beyond global, cultural and political barriers to offer friendship and practical support.” The team established the following values for our approach to global engagement efforts: our partnership should be **focused** on one commitment; **sustainable** for many years; **relational** rather than programmatic; **a genuine partnership** in which we are learners, listeners, and co-workers; **generous; discipleship-based**, where all in our community can participate; and **contextually consistent** with our story, values, and vision. In June 2009, Guatemala was identified as the country, and shortly thereafter, the municipality of Ipala, a town of 20,000 people in southeastern Guatemala, was identified as the location in which we would focus our efforts.

Progress to Date

After members of Cedar Ridge made a couple of trips to Ipala to begin forming relationships and explore potential partnerships, a committee of community leaders in Ipala was formed to serve as Cedar Ridge’s agents on the ground. The *Comite Ipalteco de Hermanamiento* (CIDHER), originally called ACI, has taken an increasingly active role in identifying and discerning needs, prioritizing projects, submitting proposals to the Cedar Ridge Guatemala Team for approval, distributing funds, managing projects, and monitoring and making improvements to the goods and services we provide. They have been an invaluable resource and have earned our trust as reliable partners in Ipala.

Along the way, we have picked up some funding from the municipal government of Ipala, often through the provision of 20% of our projects’ cost or provision of labor for those projects. These contributions have helped us do more in Ipala, but we have been cautious about aligning with any political party, and due to increased federal scrutiny and an incident of failing to come through with promised funds, we do not assume future financial support and are not in any way dependent on municipal funding. But we have enjoyed a positive relationship with 3 different administrations over the years.

As our relationship with CIDHER has developed, they have repeatedly asserted that the greatest needs in Ipala are in the areas of education and health, and we have subsequently prioritized these two areas for funding and project development. To date, Cedar Ridge has invested approximately \$135,000 in projects in Ipala. As an example, in 2015-2016, 44% of Cedar Ridge funds for Guatemala went towards “hygienic homes” projects (smokeless stoves, floors, roofs, and home construction), 32% funded 51 scholarships for low-income middle and high school students, 15% paid for school construction projects, and 9% went towards medication and nutrition for at-risk children and adults. In addition to financial support, we have sought to provide encouragement and prayer for the recipients of those resources, and have enjoyed ongoing relationships with several public and religious schools in Ipala. In 2016, we held a well-attended interdenominational worship service in the heart of town. And, true to

our desire, a genuine friendship has developed between members of our two communities, sustained through regular visits to Ipala and Maryland, and ongoing contact between CIDHER and the Guatemala Team.

In addition to our work in Ipala, we have sought to engage with Ipaltecos who currently live in our area.¹ Cedar Ridge partners with with the Ipaltecos Ausentes organization, which is made up of Ipala-born DC area residents who seek to provide assistance to their hometown. We have worked together to provide funding on a couple of projects in Ipala, and have joined together for fundraising and social events, soccer games, advent parties and galas at Cedar Ridge, as well as off-site food distribution and Christmas parties. One member of the Ipaltecos Ausentes serves on our Guatemala Team and has been an invaluable resource, friend, and catalyst for our partnership with the people of Ipala.

Since 2010, 78 members of Cedar Ridge have traveled to Ipala, 29 of whom have made more than one trip. This includes 3 exploratory trips and 6 intergenerational trips through 2016. The trips give travelers a first-hand look at our projects, provide one of our best intergenerational relationship-building experiences, and become a catalyst for further engagement for many of the participants. Upon their return, many participants have reported fresh perspectives on the importance of relationships over material possessions, leading a less frenzied pace of life, and the needs of immigrants and the poor. Several travelers have become involved with the Guatemala Team and some are engaged with local Latinos in teaching English or meeting practical needs. Our partnership in Guatemala has become a key component of Cedar Ridge's social justice work and it is incorporated into the children and youth curricula. Most people in our community are aware of, if not invested in, Cedar Ridge's relationship with Ipala.

Current Challenges

As mentioned, CIDHER has become a trusted partner in Ipala. Yet we also realize that members of CIDHER are volunteers who are not development professionals, and the hard work they do is understandably not focused primarily on researching other partners, resources, or development practices. Additionally, we acknowledge the lack of international development professionals (particularly in the fields of health and education) on the current Cedar Ridge Guatemala Team. While our original team was shaped by experts in international development, we would benefit from professional perspectives in helping CIDHER assess community needs and identify well-established best practices for meeting those needs in a transformative, sustainable, and empowering way. Locally, small delegations from Cedar Ridge and the Ipaltecos Ausentes have attended events hosted by the other, but language and cultural differences have made interaction and integration fairly limited and somewhat awkward. Partnering has been challenging due to work schedules, limited public transportation (to Cedar Ridge), and lack of a consistent point person from Cedar Ridge to foster that relationship. We have not yet been able to find more local ways to reach out in friendship to nearby Latinos or Guatemalans.

¹ According to the 2010 Census, the Washington-Arlington-Alexandria area has the 3rd highest population of Guatemalans living in the US (52,000). Riverdale Park remains a sister city of Ipala, and there is a large population in Langley Park (which ranks as the 14th highest community in the US with 5,000 Guatemalans, or about 27% of its population). In Montgomery County, Hispanics are now (2016) the ethnic group with the highest percentage of enrolled students in MCPS (30%).

Our community's involvement through travel to Ipala has been notable. While there is anecdotal evidence of "life change" resulting from a summer trip, we want to ensure that these trips are making a lasting impact on participants and are an effective tool for discipleship. We have not provided clear, specific options (other than serving on the Guatemala Team) for trip participants to take the next step in their engagement with the passions, concerns, or perspectives gained in Ipala. Our capacity to continue or multiply our annual trips to Ipala is limited by the number of trip coordinators and translators currently available. Church-wide, year-round awareness, ownership, and prayer support of our Guatemala partnership could be strengthened.

Priorities Moving Forward

In seeking ways to build on the success of the past 9 years and address our challenges, we have identified the following priorities for the upcoming years.

1. **Ensure the use of best development practices and partnerships in Ipala in our key areas of health and education.**

Now that we have several years of experience with a variety of projects, it is important to confirm the effectiveness of these programs in helping to reduce poverty in Ipala. Tapping into the knowledge of international development professionals at Cedar Ridge and those who work in other parts of Guatemala can help us ensure that our intended results are being accomplished and that they are sustainable for the long haul. In a spirit of friendship, humility, and cultural sensitivity, we will seek to empower CIDHER to connect with local experts in order to assess, research, and recommend strategies and solutions for the future. Specifically, we will focus on education and health, while remaining open to new challenges or opportunities that may emerge in the next 10 years. We note with interest a similar focus of the Economic Justice Team and look forward to creating ways we can work to strengthen these key areas both locally and abroad.

- **Education:** Now that 9 students have graduated from our scholarship program, we will help CIDHER determine if their incomes are indeed greater than what they would have been without the scholarships, and if their families and the community are benefitting from their employment. While we intend to continue to provide moral and relational support to multiple English academies in Ipala, we will investigate whether financial support is likely to contribute to the overall flourishing of the community and its families. We will also explore whether and how we might invest in improving the quality of education in the community (such as school expansion projects, access to teacher training, etc.), as well as encouraging and supporting the emphasis on preschool attendance. We will help CIDHER study whether the establishment of a self-funding technical school might meet the needs of the community and train students for employment in the local area. We will help CIDHER consider how the hundreds of students with whom we have connections might be inspired to serve the poor in Ipala in the immediate and long-term future.
- **Health:** As Ipala suffers the effects of its worst drought in over 35 years, we would love to be able to help health leaders achieve their goal of "Hunger Zero" in Ipala, especially amongst children. In connection with the local and regional health experts who piloted

the First 1000 Days Nutrition program in Ipala in 2016, we will determine if future investment can indeed eliminate malnutrition amongst the youngest and poorest in Ipala. We also want to explore the feasibility of helping fund home gardens, and nutritional and prenatal training for expectant, high-risk mothers. Over the past few years, Cedar Ridge has funded 4 new homes, 200+ stoves, over 20 new roofs and cement floors as “hygienic homes” projects that fall into the category of health. We want to determine which of these projects are making a real difference in the health and quality of life for families in Ipala and consider alternative ways in which local community groups can be empowered to self-fund these efforts. We will also explore options for other projects and partnerships that impact health, such as clean water, mosquito-borne illness protection, and proper sanitation.

- **CIDHER:** We want to empower CIDHER to grow as an organization in terms of capacity and knowledge of development best practices. We want to continue to have them take the lead in assessing needs and deciding what they want to do, but we will offer advice about what is working in other places, pitfalls to avoid, and other wisdom gleaned from professionals in the field. We want to encourage them to explore alternative practices that are addressing similar needs in other parts of Guatemala, tap into other sources of funding, connect with reputable partners, and increase their capacity by growing in number.

2. Encourage and connect Ipala’s faith leaders to work together in meeting local needs.

Building on trust we have built with some faith communities and reaching out to pursue new relationships, we envision bringing local church leaders together to find ways to love one another and work together for the common good of Ipala. We want to promote and encourage local churches rather than being seen as competing with them or swooping in heroically to solve problems with resources that they simply don’t have access to. We will work with CIDHER to invite greater connection with and input from other churches in town, and ask CIDHER to consider having leaders from other faith communities join the committee. Theological and denominational barriers may create resistance to cooperation, but we would like to inspire a united effort on behalf of the poor in the name of Jesus. This is consistent with our values of reaching out across barriers, and mirrors the inter-faith collaboration we are seeking in Maryland.

3. Strengthen our relationships with the local Guatemalan and Latino immigrant community.

At a time when immigrant communities are facing fear and uncertainty, we desire to be a source of “friendship and practical support.” Our priorities will be to strengthen our relationship with the Ipaltecos Ausentes and work alongside the Economic Justice Team to engage with Latino students and families at Greencastle Elementary School. Encouraging people in our community to learn Spanish can be an important way of facilitating personal relationships. We can also look for ways to address food insecurity and educational inequality, and to advocate for and assist with other social justice concerns, such as immigration and deportation policies. We will collaborate with the Racial Reconciliation Team to foster awareness and compassion for Latinos living in our area.

4. **Leverage our Guatemala partnership experience to foster openness to God for lifelong, church-wide discipleship.**

We view an essential part of following Jesus as “working as agents of love, peace and hope wherever we are; serving our neighbors, caring for the poor, helping the oppressed.” Our relationship with the people of Ipala provides a wonderful opportunity to learn and grow as we give of ourselves to engage in this partnership. While people in Guatemala have benefitted from this partnership, we too have been challenged in our faith and inspired by our interactions. Highlighting aspects of this relationship in our messages, workshops, discipleship materials, and prayer practices is a wonderful and practical way to grow in our relationship with God and become “gradually transformed to become better people.” In cooperation with the Holy Spirit, we also want to fully leverage the Guatemala trip experience to foster deep and lasting spiritual growth in all who participate.

Next Steps

- **Send a small, development-oriented team to Ipala.** In order to support CIDHER’s growth, and foster awareness of effective health, education, and development practices, we want to spend a focused time strategizing with CIDHER and other current and potential partners in Guatemala. The team will be small and include at least one of Cedar Ridge’s development professionals to share some humble and supportive expertise. Such a trip could be repeated periodically as needed. This trip would be in addition to our regular annual trip, for which we want to develop more leaders and translator/interpreters.
- **Meet with the Ipaltecos Ausentes to plan for future connection.** Members of our Guatemala team will re-connect with our local partners to consider a realistic way for Cedar Ridge and the Ipalteco community to stay socially connected and to continue to explore ways in which we can help meet the needs of this community in these uncertain times. We will seek to create greater opportunities for the Ipaltecos Ausentes to interact with a larger portion of our congregation, allowing us to hear their stories and develop ongoing relationships.
- **Learn Spanish.** In order for our people to feel more comfortable in reaching out to their Latino neighbors, the Ipalteco community in the region, and our friends in Ipala, we will encourage church members to learn Spanish. We will consider offering classes at our facility and potentially making those available to our local community as well; or promoting other local language learning opportunities. This language learning is especially important for members of the Guatemala Team and those traveling to Ipala.
- **Collaborate with the Economic Justice and Racial Reconciliation Teams.** Recognizing Cedar Ridge’s overall strategic theme of advancing social justice, we want to collaborate on ways to expand our church’s awareness of issues facing the immigrant community and offering practical support in our relationship with Greencastle Elementary School and other partner organizations. We will hold combined meetings with these teams as appropriate, and develop annual plans in coordination with them. In order to educate ourselves about some of the social justice issues in Guatemala, our teams will seek out opportunities to grow in our understanding of the underlying causes of poverty and hunger, including those related to the United States’ historical involvement in the country.

- **Create a “Guat’s Next?” menu of options for sustained engagement.** We will create a list of ongoing activities, events, and practices that will allow young people and adults to be aware of practical ways to be involved in growth, community and servanthood with an eye towards deepening our relationship with Ipala and transplanted Guatemalans. This will become part of the “curriculum” of our Guatemala trip experience as well as being promoted more broadly and regularly amongst church members.
- **Establish a clear communication plan to facilitate church-wide prayer and involvement.** We will work with the Pastoral Team, church staff and the Prayer and Healing team to develop a systematic way for us to keep our Guatemala partnership in the forefront of our collective mind. This will include creative, informative, inspiring, and practical ways for all ages to pray for our Guatemalan friends—and they for us, in a spirit of partnership. We will encourage involvement through churchwide Days of Service, and we will work closely with the Economic Justice and Racial Reconciliation Teams to provide an integrated means of communication on social justice issues. We want to tell the story of how our partnership in Ipala is creating sustainable change in the lives of people and families there. We will also seek to develop new, creative ways to increase our community’s personal connection with Ipala.