



Hope and clouds

John Ellis finds troubles and success stories in El Salvador

Have you heard the one about the archbishop, the terrorist and the pineapple? No? Then read on... Commitment for Life is one of the United Reformed Church's success stories. By focusing attention on projects in four specific areas of the world, it brings to life our congregations' giving to Christian Aid. We feel we know the people whom we are helping.

Recently Central America became one of the focus areas. Christian Aid took four representatives of the URC to see the work there so we could begin to tell the story around the Church back in Britain. So Simon Walking from Wales, Alan McGougan from Scotland, Linda Mead, our Commitment for Life coordinator, and I found ourselves looking at the volcanic

mountains of El Salvador.

The landscape was lush, beautiful and hot. It is a good place to be a tree. It is a less easy place to be a human being. The civil war of the 1980s was devastating whether you think the winners were freedom fighters or terrorists. A fragile democracy has survived 20 years and there is a sense of a new country still learning how to be itself. But for most people there is no spare cash.

The projects we saw were all success stories for the Christian Aid model of partnership: Channelling our money through a highly professional El Salvadorian organisation that really can reach and understand the local communities and work alongside them to achieve some of their dreams. The visions emerge from the local groups; they do most of the hard work; our money provides a few key pieces needed to complete the jigsaw. ◉

'It is a good place to be a tree, a less easy place to be a human being'



Main image (previous page): El Salvador from the northern mountains
 Above left: Catching prawns
 Above right: Sliced fruit for the drying oven
 Left: Altar in the hospital chapel in San Salvador where Oscar Romero was assassinated while celebrating mass in 1980

So in a rural part of the country we sat under trees to hear about their water project. A “General Assembly” of the San Pedro community had decided to undertake the project and a water committee had made it happen. The digging was done by participating families but

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Christian Aid was able to help fund the pumping station. Now, for the first time, that community can turn on a supply of clean water.

The pumping station was built on land given by the local Baptist church. In another isolated community near the River Lempa, the Catholic Church had given land for an emergency shelter to be built to provide a refuge in time of floods or earthquakes, which devastate the area every few years.

Some projects were about building up economic capacity rather than simply survival. There is plenty of fruit growing in El Salvador but perishable fruit is difficult to transport to markets in less well endowed countries. So we saw a tiny but usefully profitable operation that takes thin slices of pineapple or mango and dries them in a wooden cabinet for four days to produce marketable sachets of non-perishable dried fruit. The drying cabinet was solar powered and Christian Aid’s contribution to this project was the solar energy equipment of the roof.

In a few – but too few – cases there were larger projects providing many jobs and a substantial income stream. Some large rectangular lakes near the sea turned out to be enormous fish tanks, each one growing prawns

of different ages. Once the prawns in a particular tank are mature, the tank is drained and a catch worth a large amount is sold to wholesalers. Our sample of freshly caught prawns, promptly fried in an antique frying pan over a wood fire, demonstrated they were very tasty too.

It would be possible to paint a picture of El Salvador full of hope. Certainly the money spent there by Christian Aid is achieving a great deal in poor communities. Sadly, that is only one layer of the story.

Hanging over El Salvador is a variety of dark clouds. The territory will always be prone to more natural disasters than any part of Britain, with volcanoes, earthquakes and floods to contend with. Any of them can wipe out a generation of hard work by a family on their land or in their home. Now, climate change adds a new threat. The predicted level of global warming before 2030 would completely wipe out the flourishing prawn industry, for example, because of water temperature changes.

El Salvador’s relationship with the US can also feel like a cloud. The countries of Central America all need the US; but even if the Americans’ intervention in their politics is not on a par with what was done in the 1980s during the Cold War, Washington still holds almost all the aces in negotiations on economic questions. El Salvador’s Free Trade Agreement with the US looks anything but free when viewed from the south.

A different sort of pervasive cloud is violence. We were told very firmly not to stroll outside our base hotel and realised why the concern was so acute when there was a murder on the pavement one block away on the Sunday we were there. Gangs control areas of the country and particularly areas of the overcrowded capital city of San Salvador. Drug running from South America through to the US adds a further violent dimension. Too many teenagers without any work are sucked into gang culture.

Amidst all these challenges, the Church plays a prominent role in supporting the people. One man in particular is “our saint”: Archbishop Oscar Romero. The then government had him assassinated in 1980 as a dangerously outspoken champion of the poor and the voiceless. Never has an assassination been less successful in crushing the influence of a good man. Romero is the people’s inspiration and in everything except the flesh seems resurrected amongst them. His memory encourages them to hold on to their hope even when the clouds are at their darkest.

Please pray for the people of El Salvador, that their fragile possibilities may prove more powerful than the threatening clouds. And keep giving to Commitment for Life, confident you will not receive better value for money anywhere. ●

i John Ellis is moderator of the United Reformed Church General Assembly. For more information about Commitment for Life, visit www.urc.org.uk/mission/commitment-for-life.html