

## **Solidarity and Share Lent**

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Many of us have attended numerous graduations throughout our careers. It might have been for our own children: kindergarten, elementary, high school, college or university or other courses that they have taken. As a school leader you have also been an important attendee at graduations. They are such an important marker in our school careers. Do you recall how you felt at your own graduation? There was pride, a sense of accomplishment, celebration, and recognition. I look back and recall all of those times with very fond memories.

In the summer of 2008, I attended three graduations that will always remain in my memory. On an exposure tour with the Canadian Catholic Organization for Development and Peace, our group (6 women and 1 man) was invited to be part of three graduations in the south coast of Guatemala. We were invited because Development and Peace (P&D) partners with SERCATA, an education group dedicated to educating indigenous women.

The Mayan people of Guatemala are struggling with many issues. We were there primarily to witness the effects that Canadian mining companies are having on the environment of the Indigenous people in the Highlands. We also took opportunities to meet some of our partners who are doing great work there and in Honduras. We spent four days with Caritas in Honduras first and then traveled to Guatemala where we saw the social justice work of more D&P partners.

There are 22 distinctive language groups in Guatemala but they all descend from the Mayan people. The first graduation was held on a covered porch of an adobe. The porch and adobe had dirt floors but were immaculate. The heat was stifling and the air was still. The participants were happy, smiling, laughing and enjoying each other's company. There were approximately 12 graduates, ranging in age from 20 years to grandmothers; some were dressed in their traditional woven clothing. Their children were with them. Babies snuggled in the blankets that the women wore and young ones sat quietly near moms and grandmothers. There were many supporters and/or family members in attendance, mostly women. The two directors of the school program were there as was their teacher. Each woman was called forward to receive her diploma. Applause followed each presentation. Before the end of the ceremony we spoke briefly to the graduates and asked what it meant to be a graduate. They spoke in their Mayan dialect, which was translated into Spanish and then into English for their Canadian guests.

These women had worked hard for two years and were graduating from grade three. They spoke of the difficulty of going to school when their husbands did not approve. The children and all household duties were their responsibilities. One lady joked that her husband did not know she was graduating as he was a migrant worker in Florida. He will be surprised when he finds out, she said. This caused lots of laughter. The women spoke of going to market and feeling that they would not be short-changed as they now understood money. They were looking forward to the upcoming election and said that

they would vote. They could read the election information and newspapers. Most importantly, they said that their children would get an education too. It was very humbling to be there and to share in this important event knowing how hard it was to attain. They shared some of their school work which included learning Spanish, math, family studies, science, geography and history. If they continue for another two years, these women will graduate from grade six. That will be the end of their formal education as they would have to go to the city to continue further.

Following the ceremonies the women provided us with a meal. They prepared all the food themselves on their rock stoves, a very labour intensive process. After the meal, they spoke about how much they appreciated our visit and how important it was to continue this program for the indigenous women. They were very articulate about their hopes for their children.

For me the meaning of 'solidarity' was crystallized. We felt like sisters to women who lived so far away from us. We shared in motherhood, celebrations, goals for our families, and food. We learned about struggles and victories, and came away with such awe for their courage and effort.

The other two graduations varied somewhat in format but the overall feelings on both sides did not. Two groups wore their traditional clothing woven on lap looms. The women are artists in their own right. They know about time management but do not have time-saving appliances and to say they cook from scratch is an understatement!

When you support Development and Peace financially through Share Lent, you are supporting partners such as these. Share Lent Sunday is usually the 5<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Lent which is March 29 this year. Please think of these women when you give and give generously. You will be in solidarity with educators in the global south. We have heard this famous quotation before but it is good to be reminded:

*Education is the most powerful weapon which you can use to change the world.*  
Nelson Mandela