

Jesus inside Guatemala's violent gangs

By Dr. Bob Ekljad

A couple of weeks ago, I returned from four intense days in Guatemala City working with "Estrategia de Transformación," an initiative that supports, encourages and trains a group of ex-gang members and committed pastors engaged in transformational work with active gang members. The trip was a home-coming of sorts as Guatemala was the place God called me to work with the poor and where I'd called Gracie asking her to marry me during some of the worst violence of a civil war in 1980.



I hadn't been to Guatemala in 20 years, but there I was, this time to go into two prisons housing some of the most violent gang members and to train chaplains and ministry workers who currently serve the poorest of the poor. What a privilege! But my memory of the terror from the violence was also rekindled. Torture, savage killings and beheading commonplace in 1980-81, fed by US policy, are still happening, now among rival gangs of young men and the police—and the fatherless young gang members are being scapegoated for nearly everything, including the violence they have inherited.

The guards opened the doors and left us off in the midst of 180 young men, many with tattoos covering their faces and upper bodies. Unlike our local jail, marijuana smoke, cell phone calls, a prostitute and dispute over a woman made it hard to get people's attention for the Bible study. But we were able to get away with what we do best in Skagit County Jail where I read the Bible with prisoners on a regular basis. Chris, from our ministry team, played and sang over the men after we asked permission to lay hands on each one and pray for God's Presence to heal, fill and bless them. I could sense that each hardened guy softened as we prayed, but the men had to be careful not to express outwardly that they were being positively affected.

Churches are often viewed as rival gangs, and often act that way—pulling people away from their most functional family of "homies" into something often marked by legalism and exclusivity. Yet a number of guys told me privately afterward that they appreciated the Bible study on receiving Jesus as their personal body guard—a particular reading I do of Psalm 23 and Luke 15. I was disturbed to learn from Joel Van Dyke, who just finished his doctoral thesis on the gangs, that as many as 80% of the gangsters are from evangelical homes. Legalism begets legalism unless it is directly confronted and healed by Jesus' grace and love.

A few days later we went to Central America's most infamous prison to visit the gang member inmates of perhaps the most notorious gang in the Western Hemisphere. Once again the guards let us in with 110 or so inmates. We hang out and talk with a number of men, some of whom had first

joined the gang while living in Los Angeles before they did prison time in the US and were deported. I later heard from Joel that many of the gang members had lost their fathers to the death squads or the war in the 1980s. Adrift and afraid, many migrated as young teens to the USA, often ending up selling drugs and joining a gang.

A few days before leaving for Guatemala I had a dream of a heavily-tattooed gangster with a hole in his right side. I saw someone fitting that description, and ended up needing to ask him where I could find a bathroom. I followed him into the dark recesses of the prison, and after using the toilet he humbly asked me if I'd like to see his cell. There in the cell this man who'd been shot in his lower abdomen, sentenced to over 120 years, one of the top chiefs of this gang invited me to sit down on a plastic chair and hear about his belief in God. I offered him a CD of contemplative flute music for worship and a copy of my book *Reading the Bible with the Damned*, which he warmly accepted. We prayed together for God's peace and presence in his life and he was very grateful.

From there we went straight into Chris singing over a group of 40 or so inmates, while we once again was granted permission to lay hands and pray over each one. I then led a reflection on the call of Matthew in what turned out to be a breakthrough Bible study. I described how Matthew was a tax-collector—a member of a notorious class of people that nearly everyone hated. "Who might fit the

description of tax-collectors today?" I asked. Gangs in Guatemala force businesses in their territories to pay "protection taxes" [from themselves] and taxi drivers to pay "circulation taxes"—and the men smiled and looked at each other, acknowledging that they fit the description.

"So what was Matthew doing when Jesus called him?" I ask. The men look surprised when they note that he wasn't following any rules, seeking God or doing anything religious, but practicing his despised trade when Jesus showed up on the street and chose him.

"So let's see if Jesus made Matthew leave his gang to be a Christian," I suggest, and people look closely at the next verse. There Jesus is eating at Matthew's house with other tax-collectors and sinners and the disciples. "So who followed whom?" I ask, excited to see people's reaction. The men could see the Jesus had apparently followed gangster Matthew into his barrio and joined his homies for a meal.

"So what do you think you guys, would you let Jesus join your gang?" I ask, looking directly to the two chiefs of the gang? They both had big smiles as we looked at Jesus' reaction to the Pharisees' disdain.

"Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick." I ask them if they are at all offended to think of themselves as sick—and they don't seem to be at all. I've got their attention and Jesus' final word to the religious insiders hits these guys like a spray of spiritual bullets from a drive by:

"Go and learn what this means, 'I desire mercy, not sacrifice.' For I have come to call not the righteous but sinners." I knew from experience that they were letting Jesus inside and hearing his call to follow. Last Thursday back in our local jail two groups of ten inmates all welcomed Jesus into their cells and into their lives after talking through this same Scripture with them.

But that day we still had to leave the prison. On our way out I wonder about the warden just as Joel suggests we thank him. We step into his office and shake hands. I acknowledge that he has a very complicated job needing lots of wisdom and ask if we can pray for him and bless him. "Bueno" he says, and I ask if we can lay hands on him. He accepts but just as we begin praying he suddenly pulls out his hand gun, takes out the clip and empties his pockets of other clips. "This is more proper!" he says, placing his gun and ammunition atop his file cabinet. He receives our blessing and we offer to pray for healing for an injury related to a machete fight that left his arm, shoulder and chest with

shooting pain. "All the pain is gone," he tells us with a grin after we pray. We leave amazed by the truly special unique Spirit who disarms and loves both gangsters and warden.

That night and the next day we ministered to the seven chaplains and some 50 ministry workers, teaching on forgiveness and praying for God's Spirit to refresh and renew people. The Holy Spirit came in beautiful ways, with lots of crying and people all wanting prayer.

I am sure there's a need for more and more of God's healing, transforming presence—brought right into the heart of the places of greatest wounding and pain. I'm also certain that honestly facing the truth of Guatemala's violent past and of America's participation is critical for forgiveness to lead to true reconciliation and peace.

