

## Book Review

by Emily Burton

Kathryn Anderson

*Weaving Relationships: Canada-Guatemala Solidarity*  
(Waterloo, Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2003), 322 p.

In 1987, Guatemalan refugees living in Mexico decided it was time to go home. The refugees, approximately 200,000 mostly indigenous Mayas displaced by the Guatemalan military government, had fled to Mexico in the early 1980s. The reasons for the repression that led to the exodus – and also to the displacement of hundreds of thousands and the disappearance of 38,000 within the country – are complex. The emergence of successful agricultural cooperatives and community organizations and the creation of an armed resistance group, coupled with the threat of a good example from the 1979 Sandinista Revolution in Nicaragua, are but three.

Fearful for their safety in the face of on-going repression, Guatemalans in Mexico published an open letter outlining several conditions that were essential to their return – including the right to be accompanied by international groups. When the conditions were agreed to by the Guatemalan government several years later, the refugees became "the first group in the world to negotiate its own return." (p. 33). Between 1993, when the first convoy of returnees crossed the Mexican-Guatemalan border, and 1999, 140 Canadians participated in the return process. They accompanied Guatemalans across the border, provided an international presence in the newly created communities in Guatemala, and sometimes accompanied delegations seeking to purchase land or demand the removal of a military base.

*A good deal of Weaving Relationships: Canada-Guatemala Solidarity* by Kathryn Anderson is devoted to telling the story of the return process and the Canada-Guatemala solidarity that emerged through Project Accompaniment ("Project A"), the body through which Canadian accompaniers were sent to Guatemala. There is also a strong emphasis in the book on the "spirituality of solidarity," and the journey from violence and despair to hope and resurrection is the arc along which the book's narrative unfolds. Published by the Canadian Corporation for Studies in Religion – as part of a Comparative Ethics Series which examines "moralities as cultural systems" – *Weaving Relationships* fulfills the mission of examining the interplay between society and religion. And the author, a United Church of Canada diaconal minister whose exposure to Guatemalan solidarity came through the church, is well suited to the task of reflecting upon this reality based on personal experience.

The voices of other Canadians as well as Guatemalans are heard in the book through journal entries, letters, songs, poems, project reports, newsletters and taped interviews. They provide testimony and analysis on both the situation in Guatemala and the role of Canadians in Guatemala. Bud Godderis, for instance, provides honest counsel on the patience and humility required to be an accompanier, especially for non-Spanish speakers: "You're going to find that you don't count for very much and you don't understand anything because you don't speak Spanish. Don't get uptight about it. You're not there for them to look after you." (p. 179). The words of exiled poet Julia Esquivel expresses the imperative towards hope that permeates the book: "... I live each day to kill death; / I die each day to give birth to life..." (p. 196).

Fifty-one research participants are listed at the back of the book, most of the names being Canadian. Guatemalans were interviewed in returned communities and in Guatemala City, but only well-known public figures in Guatemala are included in the list due to "ongoing security concerns in Guatemala". (p. 291). The need for anonymity is one that is not to be taken lightly. One of the stories included in the book is that of Myrna Mack, a social scientist researching the repatriated and internally displaced, who was assassinated as she was preparing to publish her findings. (p. 29). That having been said, it would have been helpful to document more fully the interviewees who did not require anonymity by

including dates and locations for the interviews. The citation "(TI)" – taped interview – in the body of the text is the only reference to oral interviews whereas other testimonies (videos, poems, prayers, songs, unpublished reports and diaries) have specific bibliographical references. (pp. 296-300). Audio cassettes of interviews with Canadians are available at the United Church of Canada Archives, University of Toronto.

In addition to international accompaniment, many other, often related, solidarity activities are carefully documented in the book: lobbying the Canadian government to change official policy towards Guatemala, creating a country-wide Urgent Action Network to respond immediately to people threatened with violence in Guatemala, organizing visits of Guatemalans to Canada to tell their stories and marketing fairly traded coffee and cooperative handicrafts are a few examples.

Numerous Canadian organizations involved in solidarity work during that time period are mentioned throughout the book, including church organizations, NGOs and labour unions. The Christian Task Force on Central America in British Columbia and the Maritimes-Guatemala Breaking the Silence Network are two organizations that receive particular attention, each having a chapter devoted to its formation, activities and transformation. The role of NGOs and unions could have been highlighted more. Still, the book does give credit where credit is due in terms of the important role of Christians and others who likewise experience solidarity as a "spiritual yearning" for justice. (p. 202).

Like Anderson, many Canadians became involved in Guatemalan solidarity through their churches, and many Guatemalans also see their struggle in religious terms. Returning groups, for instance, draw parallels between their return to a new community in Guatemala and biblical experiences. "On Palm Sunday, the returnees celebrated Jesus' entry into Jerusalem and their entry into El Quetzal," the author notes. (p. 96). The refugees also often relied on church support, both in Mexico and Guatemala. "When we left Guatemala and took refuge in Mexico we felt alone. But the Catholic Church gave us spiritual and pastoral accompaniment." (p. 38). The Christian Solidarity Committee in Mexico also provided emergency aid programs and job creation projects.

*Weaving Relationships* is in many ways a difficult book to read. Difficult because the book documents the history of repression in Guatemala in recent decades, including sad, sometimes graphic, stories of disappeared and displaced persons, village massacres, individual assassinations and other human rights violations. It is also an intensely rewarding book to read. It provides an excellent overview of 30 years of solidarity activity, and is a must-read for those involved in the issues who may not have been aware of the entire context within which they were operating. (Or may not be aware). As Anderson points out in the Epilogue, the context for solidarity unfortunately continues in Guatemala. It is well worth reading for those with little or no knowledge of Guatemala who wish to gain an understanding of the David and Goliath situation, or follow the journey from death to resurrection experienced by so many Guatemalans.