

Growing ecumenism in Guatemala

Maureen Fiedler | Jan. 15, 2014 NCR Today

I am in Guatemala for a week to investigate religion and politics for "Interfaith Voices," the radio show I host. I hope to report on some of what I see and hear to *NCR* readers as my schedule permits.

On Monday, I traveled to the small city of Nebaj, high in the mountains of Guatemala. Nebaj is about 99 percent indigenous; its citizens are descendants of the ancient Mayan people who inhabited that land for at least 1,500 years.

Among other interviews, I met with a group that calls itself the indigenous council of the city. It includes two Catholics, an evangelical pastor and two Mayan "spiritual guides." They seek to spread understanding and appreciation of each other's faith traditions.

This is a special challenge in Guatemala, where the Mayan religion was dominant until the Spanish conquest in the 1500s. Catholicism then became the official and dominant religion for centuries, but Mayan practices and traditions never died. At times, they were suppressed violently, but they lived on quietly, often intermingled with Christian practices. In the 1960s and '70s, evangelicals came to Guatemala to make converts, and their numbers grew. A scholar of Guatemala told me that Guatemala today is about 33 percent evangelical.

I asked the indigenous council of Nebaj what they thought of the intermingling of Christian and Mayan practices, and they all thought it was enriching and important in their community. One person in the group described it as a wonderful expression of "Guatemalan ecumenism."

This may be new for Guatemala, which has had violent conflicts over religion for decades. But these leaders offer hope that that is changing and can change.

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