A Zapatista church: Presbyterians in Chiapas: Displaced and abandoned

by Mark Lewis Taylor in the October 27, 1999 issue

Amid poverty, war and, occasionally, massacre, the Presbyterians in the town of Polhó in Mexico's southernmost state of Chiapas are singing for their lives. The language of the Tzotzil Maya has a special lyrical quality. Sentences float like melodies in dialogue, rising and falling so that one speaker's tones spill over into the responses of the next. When this church of 700 to 1,000 members worships, their spoken "joys and concerns" become a singing into one another's hearts and minds.

But the lyrical phrasing and song cannot conceal the fact that something is wrong. The weariness that comes from poverty grinds away at nearly all the church's members, most of whom are displaced persons—part of the 8,000 internal refugees that make up this community of 11,000. More than half of all the internal refugees in Chiapas live in Polhó.

You can also sense the fear haunting these refugees' lives. Has their flight taken them far enough, to a place safe enough?

Flight did not take many far enough when they settled in the small hamlet of Acteal, just two miles down the road from Pohló. There, on December 22, 1997, paramilitary forces massacred 45 unarmed Tzotzil refugees. Among these were seven men, 22 women (four of them pregnant) and 18 boys and girls (one an infant).

Paramilitaries called "the Red Mask" took the latter part of a morning and most of the afternoon to hunt through shrubbery for terrified women and children hiding from bullets and machete blades. Despite warnings about the massacre, given before and during the incident, the area's state police and federal army took no action.

Mass was said the next day by Catholic Bishop Samuel Ruiz García. His text for this Advent horror was Matthew 2:18: "Rachel weeping for her children; she refused to be comforted, because they are no more." The refugees in Polhó do not want to

meet Rachel's fate. They guard the entry to their town, the women sitting shoulder to shoulder along a rope as one part of a makeshift security system.

With so much need and so much fear, you would think the Presbyterians of Polhó would have the support of other churches throughout Mexico and the world. After all, Presbyterians champion their "connectional life," joining local, national and world Reformed bodies in one ecumenical church. But Polhó's Presbyterians are not grafted in.

"We have been abandoned," says the lay leader, voicing a frequent lament. "We do not have a pastor."

"Polhó's lack of a pastor is just an oversight," muses a Presbyterian minister in the Chiapas colonial city of San Cristóbal de Las Casas. "The national Presbyterian leadership in Mexico just doesn't always know what the needs are at the local level."

This does not explain, however, why this lively Presbyterian congregation has such a sense of abandonment, a sense dramatized by the fact that not a single Mexican Presbyterian minister has yet visited—to preach, teach, sing or pray. The Polhó church is a vibrant Presbyterian community. It sings the missionary hymns, translated into Tzotil, to the beat and sway of a band at the front of the sanctuary. But it lives in exile from official structures of the National Presbyterian Church of Mexico (NPCM), which is supported, in different ways, by Reformed denominations in the U.S.: the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), the Presbyterian Church in America and the Reformed Church in America.

This exile status of the Polhó Presbyterians is one result of the storm raging in Chiapas. It is not primarily a religious storm. Though there is religious conflict, the underlying issues are political. The various religious groups are being blown about—and often are divided—by social, economic and political forces.

Socially, many in Chiapas are struggling to forge new bonds between the indigenous peoples and cultures on the one hand, and the dominant Ladino cultures on the other. With nine different Mayan language groups, this is no easy task. Ladinos, people of mixed Spanish and Indian traditions, tend to champion the values of a modernizing Mexico. Their power comes from their connection to foreign investment and the global market. The indigenous are expected to assimilate to market forces or move.

Economically, Chiapas abounds in oil, natural gas, precious woods, hydroelectric energy, and farms producing coffee, corn, bananas, sugar and cocoa. The struggle for a fair distribution of the wealth from these resources has not been successful.

The centuries-old pattern, from the time of the conquest of the Maya, is still in place: use of the wealth of the land by an elite few, while the working poor are left in ever-changing forms of servitude. The wealth is sent elsewhere in the country and abroad. Periodicals such as Oil and Gas Journal tantalize developers with reports of large oil deposits in areas now inhabited by the Tzotzil, Tzeltal, Chol and others.

Today more than half of Chiapas's population is living in poverty, many in extreme poverty. What makes the statistics so troubling is the plight of the largely indigenous peoples, both in the central highlands and in the low-lying Lacandón jungle. Of the 650,000 people living in those areas, 40 percent have had no schooling, 56 percent cannot read or write, and two-thirds of the homes have no electricity, drinking water or drainage. Nearly three-quarters of the working people make less than the minimum wage.

Most tumultuous have been the political winds of change. The poor of Chiapas, and especially its indigenous Maya groups (67 percent of whom suffer from hunger), have said a resounding No to being left behind. They have organized politically against the social failure—i.e., the refusal by dominant Ladino power-holders to embrace the culture and needs of indigenous peoples.

The indigenous poor have also organized against the economic failure: the development and control of land and wealth that benefits only the Chiapas elite who are tied in with the political party—the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI)—that has dominated Mexico for more than 70 years. Resisting the threat of the global market (often called "neoliberalism" in Latin America), the indigenous have organized like a team of Davids to take on the hyra-headed Goliath of corporate development. One of Goliath's heads speaks with soothing and promising words, and so some Maya communities try to stay afloat by cooperating with the emergent corporate powers. Many, however, have opted to challenge the neoliberal agenda.

The Polhó community, with its Presbyterian church of refugees, has cast its lot with the team of Davids, and as a result finds itself arrayed against international corporate developers, who have the support of the PRI-dominated Mexican government and PRIista officials.

Constituting the team of Davids are the Zapatistas, who, in 1994, with their army of 3,000 indigenous troops (the Zapatista Army of National Liberation, or EZLN) surged onto Mexico's political scene the very day of Mexico's entry into the new North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA). On New Year's Day they took over San Cristóbal and at least six other towns. After holding these towns for just two days the Zapatistas lost 70 of their rebel band in encounters with the Mexican military. "Here we are," they said in a communiqué through their eloquent Ladino spokesman, Subcomandante Marcos, "the forever dead, dying once again, but now in order to live."

The Zapatistas described their resistance as "the wind from below." It is the "fruit of the earth," as Marcos put it, and "matures not in books filled with regrets but rather in the breasts of those who have nothing more than dignity and their will to rebel."

This "wind from below" confronts and mixes with the oppressors' "winds from above," and from their turbulent mix arises the storm that Presbyterians and others now must weather. The shadows cast by the new storm clouds deepen the mountain shade that has always hidden and sheltered the resisting Maya. They link their rebellion today to these spreading and deepening shadows. EZLN soldiers, thus, are not just army troops; they are the "shadows of a tender fury."

Ten days after the Zapatista uprising, the Mexican government called a cease-fire, in part because citizens all over Mexico gave at least verbal support to the new kind of revolutionary speech and action. This was no typical guerrilla force. Without Marxist rhetoric, the cry of the Zapatista poor called many in Mexico back to their indigenous roots.

Civil society throughout Mexico has rallied in defense of the Zapatistas, more than once with gatherings exceeding 100,00. On December 22, 1998, 13,000 faithful from every state of Mexico made a pilgrimage to Polhó and then to Acteal to mark the passing of one year since the massacre. An uneasy truce has been observed ever since—one violated most often by the government army, which still maintains over 60,000 troops in Chiapas.

At present the conflict in Chiapas is not only between the Mexican army and the EZLN but also between the army's paramilitaries (eight to 14 of these now operate in Chiapas) and the Zapatista support communities. The use of paramilitaries marks a turn to a war of "low-intensity conflict." In this kind of war, militaries and

governments fight against rebelling communities by equipping paramilitary forces, allowing them to exacerbate family and intercommunity divisions, and to generate psychological pressure against targeted leaders and groups. It is a particularly sinister form of fighting. It originated with U.S. army strategists in the Vietnam war and is still taught in U.S. military schools for Latin American military personnel.

The *Washington Post* of February 26, 1998, reported that Mexicans constitute "the largest group of foreign soldiers receiving U.S. military instruction." Polhó—one of 32 pro-Zapatista "autonomous municipalities" in Chiapas—constantly lives under this military and paramilitary pressure. The community declared itself autonomous in April 1996, taking some 14,000 people from Chenalhó, a municipality of some 30,000. Even though it is pro-Zapatista, Polhó is also giving shelter to refugees who belong to the PRI and who have fallen out of favor with PRI leaders in their communities.

In general, an autonomous municipality exists parallel to the constitutionally sanctioned structures. Once a community with Zapatista allegiances declares itself autonomous, it receives little if anything from the Mexican government.

The government has made a special target of communities like Polhó, forcibly dismantling some of them, intimidating them with the posting of military checkpoints, and unloosing regional paramilitary forces against them. Polhó has several military checkpoints near its entrance. The Catholic human rights center reports that the army has contaminated the sources of water for Polhó inhabitants.

Polhó is run by a council of elders, all of whom are Presbyterians. In other words, there is not only a large and vigorous Presbyterian church in the town, but the whole multifaith community has largely Presbyterian leadership. This situation marks an unusual mode of Presbyterianism in Chiapas and is in contrast to the larger municipality in which Polhó is located, Chenalhó.

The chief branch of Presbyterians in the Chenalhó highlands has long supported a team of bilingual teachers who come from the government's National Indigenous Institute. The teachers dominated Chenalhó politics for 25 years, often becoming the corrupt *caciques* ("bosses") of Indian communities. They were also adept at fulfilling the wishes of the ruling PRIistas. In many communities, the *caciques* were elected municipal president—a mix of mayor, sheriff and county commissioner.

Presbyterian Jacinto Arias Cruz became president of Chenalhó in 1995, only to have to face the autonomous Polhó community. It would be hard to conceive of a political split within a religious community more dramatic than the one represented by the leaders of these two groups.

On the one side has been the president of the Polhó community, Presbyterian Domingo Pérez Paciencia, who has led Polhó in vigorous support of the Zapatista movement. His community continues to absorb large numbers of refugees displaced from communities where PRI power-holders harass non-PRI citizens. It also seeks to motivate national and international groups to help the Zapatista supporters survive the military and paramilitary pressure aimed at them.

On the other side has been Arias, PRI president of Chenalhó municipality. With his access to PRI power-holders (his uncle was secretary for Indian affairs for a time), he has lobbied officials in the state capital for arms to help with the "security problem" posed by Polhó. He has also made death threats against a priest who had worked in the town for 30 years and had come to embrace liberation theology and indigenous peoples' struggle for human rights. Arias was arrested, convicted and now is in prison for furnishing weapons to aggressors carrying out the Acteal massacre. His Presbyterian supporters still claim he was only gathering weapons of self-defense as protection against threatening Zapatista forces. NPCM officials say Arias is "no longer Presbyterian."

Certainly not all Presbyterians would advocate the kind of power play and deadly use of force for which Arias was convicted. Indeed, Presbyterians occupy many different political spaces between hardline PRIistas and rebelling Zapatistas. While the national church in Mexico has much of this diversity within it, it shares in the PRIista antipathy to liberation theology. In its last General Assembly, for example, the NPCM passed a resolution stating that liberation theology is not consonant with the Reformed tradition.

Moreover, most members of the NPCM are uneasy at best about any Christians who organize against standing government powers. The Presbyterians who still back Arias claim that the Presbyterians in Polhó are preaching liberation theology themes (such as the Exodus from Egypt) and are not preaching the word of God ("la palabra de Dios").

With this antipathy to liberation theology, and without church visitation and a practice of care in Polhó, it is understandable that refugee Presbyterians there believe that the National Presbyterian Church of Mexico has abandoned them.

The storm in Chiapas that rages among Presbyterians poses challenges for the entire ecumenical church. First, it is challenged to see through the religious conflict into the political struggle in Chiapas. World church bodies need to bear witness in relation to the state's complex politics. This involves speaking out directly on the efforts of the Zapatistas and communities like Polhó.

Churches should cast their lot with the Zapatista effort, imperfect as it has been (and as every movement will always be). It is not the only group warranting support, but it has the virtue of having prompted a nationwide debate about indigenous peoples' rights, and about whether the global market's development schemes are in the best interests of Mexico and its long-exploited poor. In fact, Chiapas has become a regular meeting site and hands-on study center for activists of every continent, who are organizing with diverse indigenous peoples against exploitative neoliberal market policies. For churches to give little or no formal support to the Zapatista struggle in effect isolates them from playing a key role in what is perhaps the most vigorous indigenous movement of resistance and dignity in the Americas—and one much affected by U.S. military and economic policy.

Second, the world's churches should recognize that witness to the gospel is already being made in Chiapas. The Zapatista movement is in part a result of the work of Christian clergy as well as catechists and other laypeople (Catholic and Protestant) who have given organized expression to the poor's own desire to cease being crushed by exploitive power. Outside churches need not adopt any strategy of missionary intervention. This is particularly important in Mexico, a country burdened by a long history of interventionist strategies (especially by the U.S.). The church must position its witness as an invited response to Mexican Christians and churches in Chiapas.

Third, a concerted effort should be made to respond to the needs of refugee churches and communities in Chiapas. In fact, an invitation to do so has come from Polhó's refugees—an appeal to world churches (and especially Presbyterian ones) for assistance and solidarity.

The seven *campamentos* in Polhó have been called "death camps" by some Mexican observers, not only because their inhabitants live in constant fear of attack by military and paramilitary forces, but because they are slowly dying from the traumas of refugee life. There is little clothing, only rough-hewn shelter, overcrowding and lost life from preventable disease. Mothers report having lost count of the number of children who have died simply from exposure to the climate, which is temperate by day but cold and damp by night. At least one child dies every week from complications of untreated eye infections.

"Our displaced peoples need much help: corn, beans, rice, oil, medicines," says Pérez Paciencia. As the Presbyterian head of the largest community of internal refugees in Chiapas, he has issued this invitation from Mexico to all. Will the churches of the world find a way to respond?

Finally, the world's churches need to clarify their witness to international corporate powers. The organizing poor of Chiapas witness daily the damage done by corporations in their search for oil and gas and in other development projects. U.S. churches may need to consider forms of opposition to their own government, which hopes to benefit from oil research in Chiapas and which also provides economic and military support for developing the region.

Today new roads are being cut through indigenous lands and villages in Chiapas. Military personnel are moving in to guard these roads and monitor the people. The U.S. School of the Americas in Fort Benning, Georgia, is graduating more Mexican officers assigned to the states of Guerrero, Oaxaca—and Chiapas. Villages are being militarized, bringing higher levels of prostitution and alcoholism. More paramilitary groups are being formed. What do the churches of the world say while all this takes place?

The struggle in Chiapas presents churches with a chance to make a stand for the dignity of indigenous peoples. That witness can start by sharing in the struggle of a Zapatista refugee church.