

Alternatives to Violence Project workshops in El Salvador,
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It feels like just the beginning—as if we have touched the surface just enough to get a sense of the enormity. So much to be done. So much pain, oppression and trauma to be worked through and set free.



We stepped into well prepared, fertile soil. Mara Komoska (Brooklyn Meeting) has been volunteering since 2008 with CO-MADRES, the Committee of Mothers and Relatives of the Disappeared, Assassinated and Political Prisoners of El Salvador, organized by Archbishop Oscar Romero in 1977. This group of 400 women has maintained a consistent voice of nonviolent resistance in El Salvador for 36 years. Shirley has built relationship with an organization that facilitates sister community relationships—FUNDAHMER—first traveling with Poplar Ridge Friends to meet our sister community—San Pedro—in 2005 and returning twice more in the years since. And Val Liveoak (Friends Peace Teams) and Margaret Lechner (Purchase Meeting) have developed a strong team of Salvadoran AVP facilitators over the past several years.

We facilitated three workshops in two weeks—two were three days long, on our normal weekend schedule, and the third was over four afternoons—two one week and two the next—not an ideal schedule for building community and continuity but it worked nonetheless. Even though we only had two weeks to work, it was a rich, blessed and fruitful time.

We traveled twice to the province of Cabañas (borders Honduras) for two AVP workshops (a basic and an advanced) with a group of between 21-28 women and two men. More than half the group came from a village that is two hours on foot away from the village where we held the workshop. They walked it daily, often bringing children.

We were a facilitation team of three and Salomón Medina—coordinator of AVP in El Salvador—is a huge gift. As most in the workshop did not read or write, as a team we decided to illustrate the key concepts of AVP and Salomón, a gifted artist, drew evocative caricatures.

In the advanced workshop, two themes emerged as important: domestic violence and the on-going struggle for land rights. The families of this region fled to Honduras in 1980 when their villages came under constant air bombardment. Many died as they were shot at from helicopters crossing the river into Honduras. Those who survived spent seven years in a refugee camp. When the refugees returned to their land in 1987, a representative from the camp was entrusted with a large parcel of land that was to be shared communally by all returning families. But he did not stay true to the agreement. Since that time, three families have held title to the land and refuse to share it with the other families. This has been devastating, because in rural Central America, land is life. The families of Santa Marta and San Felipe are *campesinos*. They live directly off the land. So this more than 30 year old injustice means they still struggle to feed their families.

Lack of adequate housing, health care and education are also realities as is the structural violence that marginalizes. Machismo is so strong a force that women are sometimes prohibited to meet with other women (by their partners) and they are often not allowed to speak in communal gatherings (sometimes by other women). Domestic violence and alcoholism run deep. Alcoholics Anonymous is held as an option but many do not participate. Each of the four role-plays in the basic workshop depicted scenarios involving alcoholism and domestic violence.

We who ask people to open their lives—to name for themselves and others that which they carry most heavily—we carry a responsibility to come prepared. We must be grounded in God, Love, Peace, Humility, Self-Awareness and Self-Acceptance so completely that what comes, what we offer, comes from God and therefore points toward healing. We listened deeply with compassion and, at times, what came forth, came from Love and Truth. We offered tools—grounding techniques, transforming power, how to set personal boundaries—and all that AVP brings—opportunity to give and receive affirmation, to practice compassionate communication and cooperation, to build community based on honesty, respect and caring, to practice transforming conflict into win-win outcomes and to practice joy, levity and gratitude.

We on-team, and some participants as well, witnessed a dramatic transformation in nearly all of the women participants. When the team met together at the end of the first day, we each expressed the same concern, that the participants seemed very timid. Most were withdrawn and spoke few words. Many said they had never attended a workshop before in their lives. But by the second day, they started to talk more, and on the third day the majority of the women spoke with conviction about the freedom and lack of fear they felt speaking in the group, because of the level of acceptance and safety that they had experienced in the AVP workshop structure. In the second workshop, the women seemed much more confident and expressive. It was surprising to witness this result in such a short time, and on follow-up, Mara has learned that many of the women are speaking up more now in community meetings and sharing their voices. It seems AVP has had a real impact.

CO-MADRES are enthusiastic to have all 400 of their members participate in AVP workshops. At this time, we are considering the best path forward. There is a strong desire for trauma resilience workshops from the CO-MADRES, most of whom have suffered unspeakable atrocities. During this trip, we also recognized the need for more leadership development and ways of addressing domestic violence. We will certainly continue AVP with CO-MADRES. Training their leadership to be AVP facilitators feels like a next step.



The third workshop was a basic in a rare schedule of four afternoons over two weeks in Jardines de Colón in the province of La Libertad. Nineteen participated in at least one afternoon and fourteen completed all four. Five were from FUNDAHMER and the rest live in Jardines de Colón. This community has a sister community in North America and so the two young men who were at times able to be present, are students at a university. People

are well fed. There are flushable toilets and tiled floors. There is a clear and palpable confidence that comes with knowing that I matter—within this community and beyond.

That confidence allows a truth-telling that might otherwise not be accessible. Stories of physical and psychological torture, of loved ones being disappeared, of death threats and threats against family members, of rape and brutality were shared during the “What is Violence and What is Non-Violence” exercise.

We know that some trauma was released during this workshop. Some healing happened. Some wept. Some spoke of physical pain in various parts of their bodies. And there was a lot of laughter, love and joy present and palpable.

There is strong enthusiasm to continue with AVP—both on the part of FUNDAHMER staff and on the part of the people of Jardines de Colón. FUNDAHMER is active in twenty-three Salvadoran communities. With FUNDAHMER staff as trained AVP facilitators, their reach could be very broad. And so the work continues.

The two “Salvadoran” facilitators—Miguel Gonzalez and Larry Parr—originally from Chicago—brought skilled facilitation and insight that provided deeper understanding. Thank you.

With much gratitude, dear Friends, for support—financial and spiritual—and for walking with us.

Shirley Way and Mara Komoska