

Sojourners in Our Midst

By David Chandler

Marta, David, Sandra, and Oscar are refugees from El Salvador sponsored by the Claremont United Methodist Church. Anyone who has followed the progress of these two families since they came to Claremont could testify to the changes that have taken place in them. They came to us physically and emotionally traumatized and afraid to talk about their experiences in El Salvador. Over the months their health care needs were attended to and their English improved greatly. David enrolled for job training and now both Oscar and David have full time jobs. Both families are now living out on their own, healthy, self assured, and increasingly self sufficient.

As these two families participated in the meetings of the refugee committee their presence transformed our committee into a support group. Little by little, their fear of speaking diminished as bonds of trust developed. First David and then the others began to open up and reveal the emotional scars that were the product of violence and repression. More and more, they have sought opportunities to speak out about the conditions that caused them to leave their country and which continue there even today. Here are their stories.

Marta worked in a drug store in San Salvador, the capital of El Salvador. Going to work one day she was arrested at the bus stop. The police were arresting as many university students as they could find on the presumption that they were sympathizers with the guerrillas. Marta was caught in the sweep. She describes being taken by the hair, thrown against the wall, beaten, taken to the police station, tortured, sexually abused, and put into prison without any trial. She was pregnant at the time. She did not attempt to contact her husband, David, for fear he too would be arrested. Her son was born while she was in prison. She feared for his welfare since the prisoners were not provided with adequate food or medical care.

While she was in prison Marta became friends with Sandra. Sandra had been imprisoned on similarly arbitrary grounds. She had been out of work. While walking across town to apply for a job she walked alongside a thirteen year old boy, whom she had never met before. As they approached a certain intersection they saw a lot of people and a number of police milling around. Some kind of incident had apparently occurred shortly before. Sandra never found out exactly what had happened. The police started arresting people. They grabbed her and the boy and pushed them both into the trunk of a car. When they arrived at the police station she went through an ordeal similar to what Marta had endured. She also was put in prison without a trial.

Marta's husband, David, first encountered El Salvador's institutionalized violence when he was taking a record player to be repaired. He was accosted by some government soldiers who wanted the record player. There was a brief struggle and he wound up being shot in the side. He still occasionally suffers pain from the bullet wound.

David tells of a friend he used to play with on a soccer team. The friend joined the National Guard and was brutalized by the experience. David met his friend later and listened to him brag about how easy it was to kill people, saying that a man's heart was really no different from a pig's heart. The friend urged David to join the national guard, but David refused.

Some time later soldiers came to David's house. They searched it, and although they found no contraband, they took him prisoner. He was held for four days until he was released through the efforts of his brother. He immediately left El Salvador and came to Los Angeles. After arriving in this country he heard that soldiers had returned to his house looking for him. He had little hope of seeing Marta get out of prison alive.

The unexpected did happen. After two years in prison, Marta and Sandra were released along with many other prisoners in a general amnesty, thanks to the efforts of Amnesty International and other groups. They were anxious to get out of El Salvador because some of the newly released prisoners were being recaptured and others were being hunted down and killed by death squads. Marta went to a refugee camp in El Salvador run by the Catholic Solidarity movement. They helped her get papers to leave the country. She and Sandra both eventually found their way to Mexico where Sandra was reunited with her husband Oscar, the only one of the four who had not experienced direct violence at the hands of Salvadoran government forces. After some months Marta continued to Los Angeles where she was reunited with her husband David and presented him with his infant son born in a Salvadoran prison.

We have heard many more stories of torture, beatings, disappearances, imprisonment without trial, shootings of unarmed civilians by government troops, and bombing of villages. A refrain we heard many times when David was at loss for words was simply, "It's terrible, it's terrible". Having these families in our midst brought the terrible realities home to us. The stories we were hearing, told from the depths of personal experience, belied the glib pronouncements of our own State Department about "economic refugees", "budding democracy" in El Salvador, and "progress" in human rights. To send fleeing refugees back to a war zone violates our nation's highest principles, not to mention simple human decency.

As our Church has assisted these families in the difficult circumstances refugees face here, they have shared with us in return their warmth and simple humanity. They have brought a personal focus to otherwise distant news stories and anonymous statistics. The suffering in Central America can never be an abstraction to us again.