

Election Observers – March 2009

On March 15th, 2009, the El Salvadoran people went to the polls to elect a new president and vice-president. The result was the defeat of the ARENA party, which had ruled El Salvador since the end of the civil war in 1992, by the FMLN party. 2,700 international election observers were present in the country to ensure that the elections were held in a truly democratic manner.

Six Canadian observers from two local churches were requested to participate as election observers by Iglesia Bautista Emmanuel, of San Salvador. This request was made as a result of the long partnership that Emmanuel United Church has had with Iglesia Bautista Emmanuel. Five of these observers were from Emmanuel United Church and one from Orleans United Church.

The six observers were dispersed to three polling stations, located in Alegria, Nueva Grenada and Mercedes–Umaña. They joined observers from other churches across Canada, the United States, South America and Europe.

The “action” started at 5:15AM Sunday when we were loaded into a van which would take us to the polling stations to which we were assigned. Our first job was to get there prior to the polls being opened at 7:00 AM, to monitor the set up. All went smoothly with most of the polls opening on time, one being half an hour late due to difficulties with one official’s identification card. As the morning wore on, the increasing heat, heading for an eventual high temperature of 33C, started to take a toll on some of us. There was little shade to seek refuge in, and the breakfast arrangements had fallen through leaving some to manage on cookies, Gatorade and a mango.

It was obvious that the presence of the observers had a great dampening effect on any potential incidences. Anytime something looked like it might flare up, half a dozen observers would descend on the voting table in question, cameras out and at the ready. One look at six lenses pointed in their direction and the officials always managed to quickly work the situation out in a friendly manner. The day wore on and the polls closed at 5:00 PM, mostly without incident.

The overall impression of the observers present was that the election was conducted in a very professional manner, considering the fact that each voting table had at least four members of the two rival political parties either seated at, or in close proximity to it. The overall process was conducted fairly and we can only hope that the country’s transition to a full democracy will go as smoothly. All who participated have stated that they were changed by the experience and would likely visit the country again.

Emmanuel United Church and Iglesia Bautista Emmanuel have a long term partnership going back some 20 years. During that period, 12 individuals have participated as election observers in both the 2004 and 2009 elections, dozens of youth and adults have participated in Habitat for Humanity and other housing build trips and Emmanuel United has hosted 7 people from our partner church in San Salvador on exchange visits.



Left toRight

Reverend Peter Lougheed (Emmanuel United Church)

Iain Page

Jeannie Page

Pam Barron

Lynn Solvason

Pastor Miguel Tomas Castro (Iglesia Bautista Emmanuel)

Lydia Castro (Miguel's wife)

Russ Pastuch



Training Session



Dark and Too Early



Election Crowd



Election Crowd



Polling Station



Observers Observing The Observers



Downtown Nueva Grenada



Counting Ballots