

[OVT-029] On Support of the People of Guatemala**Source:** Presbytery**Committee:** Unassigned**Event:** 226th General Assembly (2024)**Sponsor:** Western North Carolina Presbytery**Type:** General Assembly Full Consideration

Recommendation

The Presbytery of Western North Carolina overtures the 226th General Assembly (2024) to express its support and care for the people of Guatemala by doing the following:

1. Encourage PC(USA) agencies, mid-councils, congregations and individual Presbyterians to
 - a. pray and work for peace wherever they are engaged;
 - b. become more aware of the past history and present reality of life in Guatemala;
 - c. work for the people of Guatemala through partnerships where mutuality is fostered;
 - d. advocate with their legislators to support peace and justice for the marginalized, oppressed and voiceless majority of the Guatemalan people.
2. Direct PC(USA) media outlets to inform churches and individuals of the nature of the present crisis in Guatemala, and of the opportunities for walking with our brothers and sisters there.
3. Direct the Stated Clerk, with guidance from the Office of Public Witness, to urge the Biden administration to continue engaging President Arévalo and Vice President Herrera to demonstrate its support for their efforts to
 - a. give voice to the Guatemalan people following the free and fair 2023 elections and
 - b. reform the corrupt systems that impact every aspect of daily life in Guatemala.
4. Direct the Office of Public Witness
 - a. In coordination and collaboration with ecumenical partners, to urge the administration and Congress to energetically engage in diplomacy over the long term to more effectively implement US policy goals (elimination of corruption, support for the rule of law, reduction of violence, and addressing the root causes of poverty, lack of basic services, and inadequate opportunity) that would also benefit the people of Guatemala and stabilize the society;
 - b. In coordination with its partners, to urge the administration and Congress to more effectively utilize targeted sanctions, including the use of Magnitsky sanctions when appropriate, toward those individuals who persist in corrupt and anti-democratic activities in Guatemala.
 - c. To provide educational resources that encourage and facilitate Presbyterians to engage in advocacy with their lawmakers.
5. Direct the Presbyterian Office at the United Nations to engage with the United Nations, the Organization of American States (OAS) and other international groups which support and can influence democratic reforms and work for peace and justice in Guatemala.

Rationale

The Guatemalan Crisis in Brief

Presbyterians have had a presence in Guatemala for over 100 years (<https://www.presbyterianmission.org/ministries/global/guatemala/>). During that time, Guatemalans have suffered through many years of military rule, a brief window of democratically elected government, a 1954 coup orchestrated by the CIA (well documented here), decades of an internal armed conflict, the frustrated hopes of the 1996 Peace Accords (here), and a series of governments run by a self-dealing oligarchy.

Corruption in Guatemala is pervasive, as government officials both enrich themselves at the expense of the citizenry and exploit and manipulate the most fundamental and critical institutions. Transparency.org ranks Guatemala at 150 of 180 nations in its 2022 Corruption Perception Index ([link here](#)). Not coincidentally, profound income and wealth inequality is found in Guatemala. Widely accepted figures indicate that 2% of the population owns 98% of Guatemalan land, and 22 families own nearly all the assets within the country. Guatemala's Gini index (when last recorded by the World Bank in 2014, [link here](#)), a measure of economic inequality, is 0.48, revealing a high level of inequality.

As national resources are diverted, Guatemala exhibits very poor performance on economic, education and health measures. 55% of Guatemalans live in poverty as of 2023 ([link here](#)), one of the highest rates in the Latin America and Caribbean region. Educational funding is limited to a low percentage of GDP (<3%), the quality of education is poor, and fewer than half of all Guatemalan youth reach high school ([link here](#)). Approximately 35% of the population lacks access to basic health and nutrition services, and at nearly 50%, the country has the highest rate of childhood malnutrition in Latin America ([link here](#)). Gang violence and narco-trafficking are tolerated by the government and contribute heavily to out-migration ([link here](#)).

In 2006, the United Nations and Guatemala signed an agreement to form CICIG, the International Commission Against Impunity in Guatemala. This agreement was unilaterally terminated by President Jimmy Morales in 2019. CICIG's work to support and strengthen the Guatemalan judiciary and enable them to combat organized crime and illegal organizations ceased. Since that time, the effects of corruption on the free press ([link here](#)) and the independent judiciary ([link here](#)) have deepened. Journalists and jurists who have displayed independence have faced arrest and trial or have fled the country. As institutions have become more corrupted, the oligarchy has become ever more deeply entrenched.

2023 has seen the election of Bernardo Arévalo to the Presidency, after running on a reformist, anti-corruption platform. Although the final result was not close, the present government is going to remarkable lengths to overturn this free and fair election. President Arévalo's Semilla Party office has been raided by the government ([link here](#)), the party has been suspended and he has been threatened with legal action. Associates of Attorney General Maria Consuelo Porras conducted an armed

raid of the Supreme Electoral Tribunal (TSE), which by statute is independent of all other governmental authority ([link here](#)) and removed boxes of election materials. Many Guatemalans have protested peacefully ([link here](#)), but they continue to be threatened, and in some cases imprisoned by the governing authorities for doing so. While President Alejandro Giammattei has stated that the President-Elect will be inaugurated in January, much evidence points toward the strong possibility of a different outcome, a "slow motion coup."

The present situation causes great pain to our brothers and sisters in Guatemala, and results in societal dislocation that progressively destabilizes the country. In conversations with young people, one often hears, "there is nothing here for me." Because there is no hope, Guatemala loses its most precious asset - the capable and motivated young people who are needed if the country is to flourish and succeed. Present levels of emigration represent both an existential threat to the Guatemalan nation and a cause of regional instability.

In all these ways, the reality of Guatemala today is an affront to our God and to the ideals of love, justice and mercy in which we hope.

What is Needed

It is within this reality that Presbyterian Mission Co-Workers, partnering organizations, presbytery partnerships, churches and individual Presbyterians are called to walk with our brothers and sisters in mutuality and faith. As we walk, and seek solutions together, we solicit the assistance of the other communities in which we live.

Above all else, our Guatemalan partners appreciate nothing so much as the prayers of others on their behalf, and continued engagement and accompaniment in their struggles will be necessary. The media in the United States offer little information regarding the nature of the problems within Guatemala; greater awareness of these issues, which impact us as well, is essential. A robust diplomatic response from the US is essential. US State Department policy objectives ([link here](#)) align closely with the needs and with the unrealized human rights of the Guatemalan people, and recognize the need to address root causes of the various problems. More effective targeted sanctions toward those who persist in anti-democratic activity may well be warranted ([link here](#)). Cooperation and collaboration with the United Nations, the Organization of American States (OAS) and other international bodies which support democracy is likewise necessary. The will of the Guatemalan people as expressed in the recent legitimate and certified election must be honored. And in order to end the pervasive corruption that exists in Guatemala, these efforts will need to be ongoing and long-term, as those entrenched forces will not willingly yield.

During an October 2023 Presbytery of Western North Carolina visit to Guatemala, in the midst of the nationwide protests that followed the government's raid on the TSE, our Guatemalan partners were asked what they most needed at this time. They requested the prayers, awareness and support of the larger church in the US.