



# EXTENDING BEYOND

## Is service for you or for me?

By Marisa Smucker, executive director



**W**hen people prepare for a service or mission trip, especially for a short period of time, they often focus on the “me” part of that trip. What do I pack? What will the schedule look like? What do I want to accomplish while I’m there?

If it is a new experience, they may worry about culture and customs. Even when committing to a longer stay, the focus remains on the “me” part — “What will I do?” “How can I use my skills and talents to make a difference?”

But how often do we pause and consider the power of just being there? Of learning from others, letting them show us who they are, and allowing them to teach us and guide us?

In my experience learning to live in Costa Rica — my birth country — as an adult, local women proudly told me, “¡Tenemos que enseñarte a ser Tica!” (We need to teach you to be

Tica!\*) In that moment, my attitude shifted from figuring things out on my own to opening myself to their guidance and friendship.

This kind of mutual learning lies at the heart of Mennonite Mission Network’s approach to mission and service. We call it mutuality — a togetherness in which each one of us is giving and receiving. Each of us brings something unique to mission or service.

Our service programs — international mission, Just Peace Pilgrimages, Mennonite Voluntary Service, Service Adventure, SOOP and Youth Venture — create space to learn from and serve one another. ■

*Marisa Smucker*  
Marisa Smucker  
Executive Director

\*Tico and Tica (male and female) are colloquial terms that Costa Ricans use for themselves.

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The Faith Mennonite Church youth group went on a Civil Rights Just Peace Pilgrimage. It gave them opportunity to listen, ask questions and learn. Here, Leroy Clemmons, a long-time resident of Philadelphia, Mississippi, talks to Alicia McLoed, Julia Schmidt, Selah Potsander, Marta Bergstresser, Ezra Tice, and Kyan and Jordy Miller about the area’s history and impact. Photo by Arloa Bontrager.

“Listen to advice and accept instruction, that you may gain wisdom for the future.”

— Proverbs 19:20  
(NRSV)

# Receiving and giving the gift of language

By Stephany Rudeen

**A**s we continue our service with Mennonite Mission Network in Guatemala, one word comes to mind: gratitude.

I am grateful for everything my husband, Seth, and I have learned. I am grateful for the hospitality and friendship extended to us. I am grateful to serve in a place I already love. And right now, I am especially grateful for the gift of learning a new language.

After three months of intensive Spanish study in Guatemala City, Guatemala, Seth and I moved to San Pedro Carchá, Alta Verapaz, Guatemala, to serve at Q'eqchi' Bezaleel Mennonite Educational Center. We were initially surprised by how many people here are bilingual. In this rural Q'eqchi' Maya community, Q'eqchi' remains the first language for most families, yet Spanish is increasingly woven into daily life. School-age children learn Spanish for the purpose of broadening future work opportunities. As a result, all Bezaleel students are either bilingual or actively becoming so.

Seth and I share that same goal. Yet my role at the school introduced an unexpected twist: a third language for the students.

Just before the school year began, the English teacher resigned to pursue a new opportunity. When the replacement felt unprepared to teach English, I stepped in, drawing on my education degree.

The prospect felt intimidating at first. I had no formal experience teaching languages. However, I quickly found



Seth and Stephany Rudeen visit a park near Guatemala City, Guatemala, with their host family, Herbert and Mirna, and dog Kliford.

my rhythm, and the students have been remarkably patient, forgiving and a genuine joy to teach.

## An icebreaker in three languages

About a week into classes, just as the students were starting to warm up to us, an upperclassman asked if I speak any Q'eqchi'. I sheepishly admitted that I only knew a few words and would love to learn more. Her face lit up. She taught me several key phrases, patiently correcting my pronunciation and repeating the phrases until I remembered them. Other students watched, smiling or giggling, as I fumbled with the pronunciation, until I could eventually speak to their satisfaction.

The next day, I opened class by asking, “How are you?” first in English, then Spanish (“¿Cómo están?”), and finally in Q'eqchi’ (“Chan xaqwil?” — pronounced roughly “chan sha-KEEL”). Laughter rippled through the room — whether from surprise or my pronunciation, I’m not sure, but the energy shifted. The students sat taller, more engaged. Using their first language as a bridge became the perfect icebreaker.

Since then, language has woven itself into relationship building. Outside the classroom, students love to practice their English greetings with Seth and me — “Good morning!” “Good afternoon!” “How are you?” — sometimes shouting salutations in English across the valley, where the



Stephany Rudeen teaches English at the Q'eqchi' Bezaleel Mennonite Educational Center in San Pedro Carchá.

school is located, surrounded by the hills that their families farm. Those echoes warm my heart every time.

On the flip side, when I ask students to teach me a Q'eqchi' phrase, they often respond with shy pride, writing it carefully in my notebook. It signals that I, too, am a learner and that I value their world.

One student, who helped me early on, later opened up about her siblings who immigrated to the United States and now speak English. She is one of my strongest English students, and that conversation revealed her deeper motivation and family story.

Other teachers have joined in on this language exchange, happily jotting Q'eqchi' phrases for us, if we return the favor in English. We extend grace, laugh at our mistakes and celebrate small victories together.

These experiences have stirred deep reflection on language and the process of learning:

### Learning a language exposes vulnerability, especially when you are conversing with native speakers of that language

It requires courage to speak, accept corrections and stumble publicly. Even so, that very vulnerability draws people closer. It communicates respect for the culture, since language is a culture's heartbeat, even when the process feels awkward.

### It's healthy to laugh at yourself

At first, I worried the students were laughing at me when I mangled Q'eqchi'. Soon, however, I noticed them slipping English words into Spanish sentences, just to see my surprised reaction. The humor is mutual, and those bursts of shared laughter build unexpected joy.

### Approaching another culture with genuine openness unlocks doors

This has been a constant thread during our time in Guatemala. Asking questions, listening attentively and receiving the same graceful curiosity in return has forged meaningful connections.

I don't know if I will ever speak Q'eqchi' fluently, but I am deeply grateful for these energetic, gracious teachers, who embrace the journey with me. May the valley at Bezaleel continue echoing three languages as we continue growing in understanding and friendship. ■



Photo by Stephany Rudeen

Seth works on an agricultural project at the Q'eqchi' Bezaleel Mennonite Educational Center in San Pedro Carchá.



Photo by Seth Rudeen

The segundo basico students pause for a photo in the avocado grove on the Q'eqchi' Bezaleel Mennonite Educational Center campus.

Simple, yet profound.

**GOD**  
**OTHERS • SELF**

— Matthew 22:34-40



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