



## The History of the Chiapas Mission

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The State of Chiapas is about half the size of Iowa. It is a remote and neglected green jewel snuggled up against Guatemala. Geographically and culturally it should be part of Guatemala. But in 1824, following the war of independence when both Mexico and Guatemala broke free from Spain, Chiapas chose to become part of Mexico.

Chiapas has been called the Sleeping Green Giant. It is a rugged, mountainous area, kept lush and green by heavy rainfall coming from three directions. On the southwestern coast, the fertile strip of land between the mountains and the ocean receives its rain from the Pacific. The eastern and central part of the state receives its moisture from the distant Caribbean. The rain arrives from the east in late May to relieve the dry season and refresh the fields of recently planted corn and beans. During the winter months, the northern and eastern parts of the state also receive rain from the north. The cold drizzle, called a *norte*, is the final advance of a cold wave that has crossed the Gulf of Mexico. All this rain produces a verdant, productive region.

The surplus water also provides a great deal of hydroelectric power, as it rushes down from the mountains through the valleys and back to the Gulf of Mexico and the Pacific Ocean.

### **The Gospel Arrives**

The gospel also came to Chiapas from three directions: from Mexico City, from Guatemala, and from Tabasco, the state to the north of Chiapas. Chiapas was a spiritually parched land. The Catholic Church had a spiritual monopoly, dating back to the Spanish conquest in the 1520s. The Catholicism that arrived was medieval, unchallenged by the Renaissance and the Reformation and unrefined by the Catholic Reform. In the centuries that followed, the remoteness and ruggedness of Chiapas, the scarcity of priests, and the illiteracy of the people produced a Catholicism that was more animistic than Christian. The good soil of Chiapas desperately needed the good seed of the gospel.

From 1902 to 1904, visits to Chiapas by English and American missionaries from Mexico City succeeded in planting seeds in Tuxtla Gutierrez, the capital city in central Chiapas. But the chaos of the Mexican Revolution that erupted in 1910 made further visits impossible.

At the same time, the gospel was brought from Guatemala to Southern Chiapas by Indian evangelists, who had been converted through Presbyterian mission work in Guatemala. They placed Bibles in the hands of the town officials in the village of Mazapa. The president and secretary were converted, and this humble highland village became a beacon of light for that area.

Guatemalan coffee pickers also brought the gospel to coffee ranches near the town of Tapachula, and a congregation formed in this commercial center at the end of the railroad.

The gospel also entered from the north, from the neighboring State of Tabasco. Tabasco had received the gospel as a result of the American Civil War. Five Confederate soldiers from Kentucky, who preferred exile to Yankee rule, had traveled south more than two thousand miles to the coastal plain of Tabasco. They carved ranches out of the tropical jungle and married Mexican women.

Their leader was Johnny Green, whose sons became influential political leaders. His son, Carlos Green, was elected governor of Tabasco in 1917. However, it was a turbulent and violent time in Mexican politics. Two years later he was forced out of office. When he attempted to regain the office in 1924, he and his brother were killed by their political opposition.

### **The Presbyterian Church in Tabasco**

Joseph Coffin was another of the men from Kentucky. He and his Mexican wife waited over ten years for the birth of their first son, whom they named José and dedicated to the Lord's service. José was sent to the Presbyterian Seminary in Mexico City, where he married an educated and dedicated young woman, Luz Otero. After his graduation, they returned in 1905 to serve in remote Tabasco. They set up a primary school in Paraiso, and José began his pastoral and evangelistic work.

He joined two veteran Mexican ministers who were serving several Presbyterian congregations in Tabasco. Along with three ministers from the Yucatan Peninsula, they had formed the Presbytery of the Gulf of Mexico.

A Presbyterian missionary by the name of Sutherland and the Tabascan ministers had already penetrated into the jungles of northern Chiapas, finding some response in some isolated ranches and villages. In 1920 José Coffin accompanied the Tabascan minister, the Reverend Eligio Granados, on a trip into Chiapas. Their preaching in the village of Tumbala was rewarded with a large number of converts, including both Mexican ranchers and Ch'ol Indian laborers. The ministers immediately baptized all the converts and promised to visit them again. It would be six years before that promise was fulfilled.

### **The Tapachula Invitation**

The number of believers in the southern tip of Chiapas multiplied quickly, including a group in Tapachula, the commercial and communication center of the area. Hearing that there were other Presbyterians in Mexico City, they sent word asking for pastoral help. Responding to the request, the Presbyterian leaders in Tabasco decided to send José Coffin and his wife to Tapachula. They began their work in 1920, and five years later the Presbyterian center in Tapachula included a chapel, parsonage, medical work, six primary schools, and a community Red Cross office. José Coffin had organized three additional congregations and was visiting families and groups of believers in eighty-one locations scattered throughout the interior of Chiapas.

The heavy work load prompted the Coffins to request missionary help from the Presbyterian Mission Board, but it responded that it was already overextended.

However, the Presbyterian Mission Board in turn invited the Reformed Church in America to provide a missionary for Chiapas. The Board of Foreign Missions of the Reformed Church responded that it was also already overextended. But when the Reformed Church Women's Board of Domestic Missions heard of the opportunity, it accepted the challenge. The women justified their beginning a ministry in this foreign land by saying that, since most of the Chiapas people were Indians, the board's participation would be an extension of its mission work among the American Indians.

The men's Board of Domestic Missions agreed to join the women in investigating this opportunity. A committee of four made the long trip from New York to Tapachula in 1925. The trip included a long cruise from New York to Veracruz and a slow train trip to the southern tip of Chiapas. The committee consisted of Edith A. Allen and Ada Quimby Knox of the Women's Board and the Reverend G. Watermulder and the Reverend Henry Sluyter of the Board of Domestic Missions.

José Coffin, an ardent Presbyterian, was not pleased when he heard that instead of missionaries from the Presbyterian Church, he was being offered aid from the Reformed Church, which he suspected of being much too liberal. But his concern was eased when he found that one of the women had the hallowed name of Knox. The Coffins were so impressed by her that they named the playground of their school Ada Park.

Edith Allen was also very impressive. The Chiapas Mission later gave her the title, "The Mother of the Chiapas Mission," based on "her quick understanding of the situation in Mexico, her grasp of details, her personal interest in us and in the Mexican workers."<sup>1</sup> Upon return to the US, she wrote a report of the trip and the group's visit with the Coffins. The report included the following question, which gives a blueprint for the future work in Chiapas:

Shall the Reformed Church in America come to the help of this noble servant of the Master and send preachers, medical workers and such native helpers as may be, to some well chosen and equipped Reformed Church Mission center in Chiapas, to be associated with the Presbyterian forces there in bringing Chiapas into that fellowship of Christ through which in His own time it will itself be able to achieve entirely, not only its own Christian ministry, but also send gospel messengers to Indians of other more remote sections of South America where millions wait the gospel of a Saviour's love and healing?

She answers her lengthy question with enthusiasm:

The Domestic Boards have said "Yes" to this call from Over the Border, and some in our churches by their gifts have also said "Yes." A noble young son of [our] church and recent graduate of Princeton, with his prospective bride, have answered, "Here I am, send me," and they are going and we are going, all of us – through prayer and love and gifts, for the Reformed Church in America does not put its hand to the plow and hesitate; it does not fail.

Yes, in Christ's name and in His power we are coming to help you, brother Indians of Chiapas! We are coming, honored brother José Coffin,

and all other lovers of the Master there whose names we know not yet. Blessed heavenly Father, lead thou us on that Thy will may have its way with us for Chiapas and all the great work to which Domestic Missions is called.<sup>2</sup>

### **John and Mabel Kempers**

The “recent graduate of Princeton [Seminary]” with a concurrent M.A. from Princeton University was, of course, John R. Kempers. Born in Sioux Center, Iowa in 1900, he had graduated from Hope College in 1921. He had served one summer at the Comanche Indian Mission in Lawton, Oklahoma, under the Reverend Richard Harper, who recommended him to the Domestic Board for this new venture in Chiapas. His “prospective bride” was Mabel Van Dyke of Holland, Michigan, who was also a graduate of Hope College. Following John’s graduation, they were married in August 1925.

On December 4, the Kemperses took the same cruise as the four board members had before them, arriving in Veracruz on December 12. Two weeks later the door closed behind them. The Mexican government began enforcing some of the antichurch laws of the liberal constitution, prohibiting the entrance of foreign ministers and priests into Mexico. Foreign priests and ministers living in Mexico could no longer celebrate the sacraments. Hundreds of priests and nuns were expelled from the country, beginning a long and sometimes violent chapter of conflict between the state and the church in Mexico.

After some orientation and language study in Jalapa and Mexico City, the Kempers took the long train ride to Tapachula, arriving May 1, 1926. Although Coffin had his doubts about this young Yankee missionary couple, he was comforted by the fact that John Kempers was a graduate of the prestigious Presbyterian seminary at Princeton. There would be no theological conflicts between them.

The Kempers’s assignment was to reach the Indians of Chiapas. There were six tribes scattered in the rugged north, central, and eastern parts of the state. José Coffin proposed that he and Kempers make an exploratory trip through the state, beginning at the northern border and traveling back south to Tapachula. Coffin intimated that it would be a two-week trip. Coffin was testing the Kempers’s commitment and endurance. Leaving their wives in torrid Tapachula, they took the train north and east to Tabasco, where Coffin spent two weeks visiting family and the congregations there. Kempers wrote to Mabel, warning her that the trip was going to take longer than two weeks and expressing his regret that he would not be there to celebrate their first wedding anniversary.

The two men purchased horses and mules and supplies and began the trail into Chiapas. It was the middle of rainy season, the worst time of the year to travel. The

trails were horrendous. The mosquitoes were ferocious. They visited some of the groups of believers on the way, in Tumbala and Yajalon and Chilon, and replaced their worn-out horses five times. Worst of all, sickness struck the pair. Kempers nearly died from food poisoning half way home in the town of Ocosingo. God provided help from an American doctor who happened to be in Ocosingo. A few days later, in Comitán, Coffin became seriously ill with dysentery. Two months after they had left home, the bedraggled pair rode slowly into Tapachula.

Both John and Mabel Kempers passed the first test. Instead of calling the assignment impossible, they took as their motto: *Chiapas para Cristo* ("Chiapas for Christ"). They now knew how challenging it would be. As John Kempers wrote: "If it takes two months to cross the state, how long will it take to cover it?"

The trip through the rugged, remote Indian area revealed how difficult it was going to be to reach these tribes. Kempers decided that their first priority should be to strengthen the Spanish-speaking believers, in hopes that these Mexican believers would later reach out to the Indian tribes around them. On the trip he had seen Ch'ol Indian converts in the congregations in Tumbala and Yajalon. He hoped this would happen in other places as well. So Kempers joined Coffin in the visitation of the scattered Mexican believers, with their saddle horses and mules as their partners in mission. Years later, as Kempers began his retirement in California, he wrote:

I wish all the Chiapas missionaries would get on their horses and visit the churches in their areas. I know from experience how important that is. There was a time when I knew every believer in Chiapas and everyone knew me. I often traveled two days up and two days back just to visit one family.<sup>3</sup>

### **The Conflict**

Although Coffin and Kempers had the same method of ministry, their different goals brought them into sharp conflict. Coffin was quite content to be the only ordained Presbyterian minister in Chiapas. He would appoint lay chaplains for the new groups and hold elections of elders for the larger congregations. But he was very reluctant to train others for ordination to the ministry. However, he did eventually approve of the ordination of one of his chaplains, Genaro de la Rosa, to assist him in Tapachula and the surrounding area.

Kemper, being a foreigner, was prohibited from administering the sacraments. But he was allowed to teach and preach. And he realized that an even greater priority was the training of leaders for the many congregations in Chiapas. Only a year after their arrival, the Kempers began giving training sessions for the chaplains, with the church building serving as a classroom and dormitory and their home serving as the dining hall. They also initiated youth work and women's societies. All of these new activities

were opposed by Coffin, but they went ahead nonetheless.

### *Bert and Harriet Kempers*

In 1929, when they returned to Chiapas from their first furlough, they were accompanied by John Kempers's brother, Dr. Bert Kempers, and his equally gifted wife, Harriet Heneveld Kempers. They had been called to begin a medical ministry in Chiapas, and they would have made an excellent contribution to the mission work.

During the following ten weeks, John took his brother on some long trips over the trails to show him how desperate the health needs were. As Bert Kempers reminisced years later: "We slept in the most awful places and climbed over mountains, crossing rivers, and one time we were caught in a downpour. The horses sunk into the mud up to their knees."<sup>4</sup>

On one trip they bought a "wild eyed belligerent mule" in Comitán to replace a worn out pack horse. As Bert remembered:

John thought we could tame him with a solid load and we did, though several times as the load shifted, he bucked until objects were scattered all over and twice he bolted and nearly caused us to lose our footing on the narrow ledge. We had other close calls and even now recall, usually at night, how fortunate we were to have escaped alive.<sup>5</sup>

Bert and Harriet were eager to serve in Chiapas. However, the Mexican Medical Society recently had successfully lobbied the government to prohibit foreign doctors from doing medical work in Mexico. The closing of this door and the forced return of Bert and Harriet Kempers to the U.S.A. was a huge disappointment for all of them.

### *The Move to Tuxtla*

To give themselves more freedom from Coffin's control, the Kempers moved to the capital city of Tuxtla Gutiérrez in central Chiapas in 1931. There they began working with groups of believers who had first been evangelized nearly thirty years before by the missionaries from Mexico City. The Tuxtla congregation developed quickly to the point where they called a Mexican minister, the Reverend Ezequiel Lango, from Mexico City to serve them. The work was strengthened by Lango's ministry, and eventually the Presbytery of the Gulf gave him the pastoral responsibility for all of the central area of the state, in spite of Coffin's objections.

### *The Final Battle*

Meanwhile Kempers continued to train leaders. At the invitation of Lango, who had returned to serve in Mexico City, two young men from Chiapas, Daniel Aguilar Ochoa and Nehemias Garcia, were sent to the Presbyterian Seminary. Two other candidates for the ministry were taught in the Kempers's home. At last in 1949, three Chiapas men

were ordained at the annual meeting of the Presbytery of the Gulf in Tuzantan, Chiapas. This provided the necessary five ministers to form the Presbytery of Chiapas.

But Coffin kept his foot on the brake as long as he could. In that hotly contested Presbytery meeting, an elder delegate from Tabasco, Carlos Lutzow, cast the deciding vote in favor of forming the Chiapas Presbytery. As Kempers wrote years later:

That Tuzantan meeting was a humdinger. Two hostile camps. The ordination there of Nehemias, Margarito, and Bartolome was the undoing of Estrella and Coffin that gave us the necessary five to form the Presbytery.<sup>6</sup>

Another letter reflects the strong mixture of admiration and antagonism Kempers had toward Coffin:

Coffin the lion. A man, a great man, who was destroyed by his own jealousy. He had a way of hypnotizing the unwary to think he and he alone was right. How De la Rosa, Lango, and I suffered under that man. And how the work progressed in spite of him in his spiteful years.<sup>7</sup>

When the leaders of the Presbytery of the Gulf continued to delay the formation of the Chiapas Presbytery, the synod ordered its immediate organization. The historic day was July 14, 1949.

Later that year, Coffin and his wife left Tapachula and returned to Tabasco, unwilling to transfer his membership from the Presbytery of the Gulf to the new Chiapas Presbytery. He was received with honor in his home area, and that same year was elected to be the first president of the General Assembly of the National Presbyterian Church of Mexico. He also was invited to speak at the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church USA in Seattle, and he received an honorary doctor's degree from Whitworth College.

### **Missionary Reinforcements**

In the early 1940's Mexico's political leaders relaxed their antichurch prohibitions and the door to missionaries opened slightly. Garold and Ruth Van Engen slipped into Mexico in 1943. They went to Yajalon to prepare to serve the Ch'ol Indian converts in that area.

The tropical climate quickly undermined Ruth's health, and the doctor urged them to return to the USA or at least find a cooler climate. In 1948 they moved to the city of San Cristobal de Las Casas, located at seven thousand feet elevation. There they teamed up with a dynamic, capable Mexican minister, the Reverend Daniel Aguilar Ochoa. Together they developed a Bible school and established a press for religious publications.

At that same time God raised up two mission organizations to share the gospel with the Indians of Chiapas. Mexico was the first challenge for the Wycliffe Bible Translators. They were given permission by the Mexican government to give the 130 Indian languages a written form, to produce literacy materials, and to translate the New Testament into these newly written languages.

Their missionaries entered the six tribes of Chiapas, living in remote villages in order to learn their languages. To provide them with transportation, supplies, and communication, a new organization of Christian pilots and mechanics called Mission Aviation Fellowship arrived in Chiapas. They established a base in central Chiapas at Ixtapa with two airplanes. For thirty-eight years they provided transportation and communication for the missionaries of Chiapas, without suffering a serious injury or fatal accident.

### *Ch'ol and Tzeltal Response*

Two of the tribes responded enthusiastically to this witness in their own languages, the Ch'ol and the Tzeltal tribes. Providentially, one of the Wycliffe couples to the Ch'ol tribe was John and Elaine Beekman, members of the Reformed Church in Midland Park, New Jersey. Under their translation and teaching, the Ch'ol believers multiplied rapidly.

In the Tzeltal tribe, the Wycliffe Translator was Marianna Slocum, a Presbyterian from Pennsylvania. Her partner was a nurse, Florence Gerdel. After enduring several years of hostility and suspicion, there was a gospel breakthrough in a small valley called Corralito in 1949. The missionaries moved to Corralito, and in five years the New Testament translation was completed. Florence Gerdel's medical work prospered also, and under Kempers's supervision a medical building was constructed at Corralito.

The background of these missionaries facilitated the placing of the Ch'ol and Tzeltal work under the Presbyterian Church of Mexico. Daniel Aguilar Ochoa of San Cristobal became the officiating pastor for the Tzeltals, and the Reverend Alejandro Barrios, pastor of the church in Las Margaritas, served in the Ch'ol field. They prompted the selection of elders and deacons and organized the Indian churches, which then joined the Presbytery of Chiapas. The welcome and respect that the Indians received in the Chiapas Presbytery was an uplifting and gratifying experience for the downtrodden Indians.

### **R.C.A. Missionaries in the Indian Fields**

The Wycliffe missionaries planned to move on to new fields of service as soon as the translation of the New Testaments was completed, so R.C.A. missionaries were called to continue the work in the Ch'ol and Tzeltal fields. Al and Nita De Voogd began their

service in the Ch'ol field in 1952, with the daunting task of establishing a Bible school in the jungle on the banks of the Tulija River. With tenacious drive and determination, Al beat back the jungle. With homemade bricks, their home was built on the hillside. Its lower level became the Bible school classroom. Nita's expanding medical work soon necessitated the building of a clinic between their home and the river. The heavy work load, the humid heat, and the jungle insects were a huge challenge.

Paul and Dorothy Meyerink were flown into Corralito in 1955 and began looking for a location for a Tzeltal Bible school. It would be six years before the Lord placed in their hands the beautiful Buenos Aires Ranch, a three-hour walk downriver from Corralito. It soon became evident that establishing a leadership program in a remote location demanded the presence of more than one couple. So in 1959 Sam and Helen Hofman joined the Meyerinks, and Henry and Charmaine Stegenga joined the De Voogds.

### **The Chiapas Mission**

The Reformed Church work in Chiapas for so long had been one solitary couple. Now a group of six couples formed the Chiapas Mission. For the Kempers it meant additional work in communication, orientation, and the complicated struggle to get immigration papers for the new couples. Their home in the capital city became the refuge for renewal and shopping for the four couples living in the remote tribal areas.

For Kempers it also meant that decisions that he had made quickly by himself in past decades now needed long discussions, motions, and votes in mission meetings. As director and treasurer, John Kempers still held the power and pocketbook of the mission. The Kempers had lived through the lean years of the 1930s and taught frugality by precept and example. Accountability was strict and R.C.A. money was not to be wasted in Chiapas. This occasionally produced frustration, as for example when Al De Voogd once objected, "I can't build a Bible school in the jungle on a shoe string!"

The Spanish language churches received a new couple when Gene and Arlene Meerdink arrived in 1966. They began developing a conference grounds in the hills above Tapachula for retreats and leadership training. But Gene had several severe bouts with typhoid, and they were forced to return to the U.S.A. five years later. Their place was taken by Charles and Jean Van Engen. Charles was the son of Garold and Ruth, and thus was fluent in Spanish. He teamed up with the Reverend Jorge Lopez Perez, a gifted young minister, and they developed a Bible school and seminary program that prepared a new wave of leaders for the Chiapas churches.

All four women in the Reformed Church couples serving in the Spanish language were gifted in music and teaching. Mabel Kempers, Ruth Van Engen, Arlene Meerdink, and Jean Van Engen all contributed greatly to the development of church music, and also strengthened the women's societies and the youth work of the churches.

### *The Kemperses Retire*

When the Kempers' retirement year arrived in 1966, the Van Engens and the Meerdinks continued the ministry to the Spanish-language churches. Not that Kempers left willingly, knowing that he still had the health and vitality for additional years of service. To ease the pain of their uprooting, the mission board arranged for them to spend the first three years of retirement in Mexico City, teaching at the Presbyterian Seminary.

In 1967 an additional couple was called to the Tzeltal field. Jim and Sharon Heneveld picked up where the Wycliffe missionaries had left off in the lowland dialect area of the tribe. Later they joined the Meyerinks and Hofmans at the Buenos Aires Ranch, which was transformed into the Tzeltal Bible School. It was a fruitful team, with Paul Meyerink majoring in Bible translation, Sam Hofman in administration of the Bible school and the medical work, and Jim Heneveld in literature production. They and their wives shared the teaching load, offering a wide range of learning opportunities to the Tzeltal believers.

### **Resistant Tribes**

Whereas the Ch'ol and Tzeltal believers multiplied very rapidly, the progress in the Tzotzil and Tojolabal tribes was much slower. This was due to severe persecution. Tribal and village authorities were determined not to permit any change from their animistic Catholicism. The initial persecution in the Ch'ol and Tzeltal tribes subsided quite quickly, but in the Tzotzil and Tojolabal tribes, the persecution was persistent and violent. Wycliffe missionaries and their converts were chased out of the villages. The Tzotzil Christian refugees began accumulating in San Cristobal and the Tojolabal refugees in Las Margaritas. The translations of the New Testaments continued, and eventually the Wycliffe missionaries and their Indian translation partners produced New Testaments in Tojolabal and in five dialects of the Tzotzil language.

However, all of the Wycliffe translators who served in these two tribes were from Baptist and independent churches. They were not comfortable with the idea of placing the Indian converts under the care of the Presbyterian Church of Mexico, preferring that the Indian converts remain independent and free to develop their own style of church government. But in the heat of the persecution, it was the Mexican Presbyterian Church leaders and believers who came to the aid of the persecuted Indians. As the Wycliffe missionaries completed their translations and moved on, the Tzotzil and Tojolabal believers asked the Presbyterian leaders to receive and organize them. This helped in their relationship to regional and state government officials, as the Presbyterian Church was recognized and respected.

This meant that additional missionaries were needed for these new fields. In 1969, Vernon and Carla Sterk arrived and moved into Navenchauc, a village known to be a

center of witchcraft and alcoholism in the Zinacanteco Tzotzil tribe. The Zinacantecos were still completely closed to the gospel, having resisted previous attempts by Wycliffe missionaries to begin work in their tribe. Through medical work and community projects, the Sterks cautiously began their language learning and witness.

### **Progress in the Ch'ol and Tzeltal Areas**

In 1966, the Stegengas welcomed John and Mildred Bode to the Ch'ol Bible School. John was an agronomist from central Iowa, and he introduced the Ch'ol and Tzeltal believers to some appropriate modern methods of agriculture. After three years of fruitful and helpful ministry, they returned to Iowa, where John began a valiant ten-year battle with cancer.

Paul and Dorothy Hostetter arrived in 1973 to provide the Stegengas a long-term partner at the Ch'ol Bible School. Paul's previous experience in the Sudan and Pakistan was valuable, and Dorothy was a gifted linguist, teacher, and musician. They assisted the Stegengas and the Ch'ol church in the transfer of the Bible school from the remote jungle location to the central town of Palenque, a location famous for its spectacular Mayan ruins.

The medical work in the Tzeltal field grew as the church expanded, with more than sixty village health workers serving their people's basic health needs. In 1975 Dr. Glenn and nurse Carolyn Folmsbee responded to the need for medical missionaries to continue the training of these "paramedics." The Folmsbees established a medical training center in their home in Yajalon, a location that also enabled them to develop a network of twenty health workers in the Ch'ol tribe.

### **Ups and Downs in Mission Work and Missionaries**

In June, 1977, Chris and Henny Platteel arrived from Canada to begin their work in the Tojolabal tribe, constructing a home in the remote village of Santa Lucia. This brought the Chiapas Mission to its peak membership of ten couples, serving in five languages: Spanish, Ch'ol, Tzeltal, Tzotzil, and Tojolabal. But 1978 was to be a year of serious losses. Hank Stegenga's slow recovery from hepatitis and typhoid forced them to make the difficult decision not to return to Chiapas. The Henevelds were forced to leave when Jim became seriously ill with regional enteritis. Chris and Henny Platteel's baby died shortly after birth in Tuxtla. His grave is the only Reformed Church missionary grave in Chiapas. Garold and Ruth Van Engen retired after thirty-five years of faithful and helpful ministry. And Paul Meyerink's surgery to remove a brain tumor in 1979 threatened to end their fruitful ministry.

There were more disappointments to come. In 1980 the Hostetters moved to California to serve in the Garden Grove Church, where Paul became minister of evangelism and missions. A year later the Platteels returned to Canada following the death of yet

another infant son.

As an increasing number of Chamula and Zinacanteco Tzotzils responded to the gospel, the persecution increased. Thousands were expelled from their villages, not only evangelical converts but also renewed Catholics. The Sterks moved to San Cristobal de Las Casas and for several years worked to care for these refugees, helping them resettle in San Cristobal, and, with funds from Reformed Church World Service, helping them purchase land and build new evangelical villages in the nearby hills.

One encouragement was the arrival of Al and Sue Schreuder in 1981 to join the Sterks in the large Tzotzil field. They began their orientation and ministry in the unevangelized village of Potovtic. There they survived and endured the eruption of the nearby Mt. Chichonal in 1982. When the town drunk was converted and left his alcoholism, the village leaders felt threatened and asked the Schreuders to leave. They moved to the Christian refugee village of Betania and later joined the Sterks in San Cristobal to participate in the leadership training program at the Tzotzil Bible School. Al has also given direction to the medical work, and Sue is inaugurating women's work in the Tzotzil tribe.

#### *More Reinforcements*

The year 1984 brought needed reinforcements to the Chiapas Mission. Bill and Peg De Boer, whose first visit had coincided with the volcano's eruption, began ten years of fruitful service at the Ch'ol Bible School, now located in Palenque. Steve and Sue Van Bronkhorst also arrived in 1984 to begin work in the Amatenango dialect of the Tzeltal tribe, a section of the tribe that had persistently resisted evangelization. The Van Bronkhorsts gained permission to live in the central village of Amatenango, until the conversion of several families. These families and the Van Bronkhorsts were then forced out of the village and moved to the nearby town of Teopisca. There they were joined by a Tzeltal missionary couple, Roberto Santis and his wife, Micaela. In 1989, the Van Bronkhorsts returned to the U.S.A. because of Steve's health problems. But Roberto and Micaela continued the outreach, and after years of struggle and persecution, a church was established in Amatenango.

Also returning to Chiapas in the fall of 1984 were the Meerdinks. They assisted in the development of the Girls' Bible School in Berriozabal, north of Tuxtla, the capital city. Also for five years they participated in the birth and development of the seminary at that same location. Gene also played a major role in the development of the Media Center in San Cristobal.

#### *Departures and Arrivals*

From 1985 to 1995 there was a confusing flow of missionaries from and to Chiapas. In 1985, Charles and Jean Van Engen moved on to Holland, Michigan, where Charles

would teach at Western Theological Seminary. This left an empty spot at the Tapachula Conference Grounds that has never been refilled.

In that same year, Dr. Moises Ocampo Torres of Toluca, Mexico, began his ministry in the Tzotzil tribe. He developed a paramedic training center in San Cristobal and now has a network of thirty Tzotzil paramedics, who are treating over twenty thousand people a year. He and Al Schreuder also oversee the medical work in the Ch'ol and Tzeltal areas.

In 1990, Brian and Donna Renes of Sioux Center, Iowa, arrived to serve in the Tojolabal tribe. They joined the Hofmans in Las Margaritas, who had transferred south from the Tzeltal tribe in 1988. The arrival of the Reneses permitted the Hofmans to return to the Tzeltals in 1994 for the revision of the highland Tzeltal Bible and the translation of the New Testament into the Amatenango Tzeltal dialect, and the preparation of their hymnals.

In 1992, the Folmsbees and the Meyerinks reached retirement age. In 1993 the DeBoers returned to the USA and began their ministry to the American Indians in Dulce, New Mexico.

Then came the happy return of the Henevelds to the Tzeltal tribe in 1994. Their arrival coincided with the Zapatista revolt and the occupation of the Tzeltal Bible School by rebel Indians. They moved to Ocosingo and have had a very fruitful ministry teaching in the Bible school established there by the lowland Tzeltals. Jim has also assisted in a new translation of the Bible in the lowland dialect, and Sharon has developed a prison ministry.

In 1995, the illness of one of the Renes daughters and the political uncertainties caused by the Zapatista revolt forced the Renes family to leave Chiapas. Brian became a translation consultant for the United Bible Societies and now gives valuable computer training to missionaries who are involved in Bible translation in Latin America.

### **Chiapas Reaching Out to Others**

In 1925, Edith Allen looked forward to the day when the church in Chiapas "will itself send gospel messengers to Indians of more remote sections of South America where millions wait the gospel of a Saviour's love and healing." From the beginning, the believers in Chiapas have not limited their witness to their own people. The Tzeltal believers shared the gospel with the Huisteco Tzotzil tribe to the west and with the Tojolabal tribe to the south. In the eastern jungle, a Tzeltal missionary learned the language of the Lacandon Indians to evangelize them.

Ministers from Chiapas have served in Texas, California, and Washington. A Tzeltal minister serves a large Mexican church in Morelia, Mexico. Another pastors a church near the capitol city of Tuxtla.

In 1920 the humble village of Mazapa became a lighthouse to its area in Chiapas. Today, two brothers from Mazapa, Jorge and Abner Lopez, are pastors of historic Presbyterian churches in Mexico City. They have both served as president of the General Assembly of the National Presbyterian Church of Mexico, and Abner Lopez also serves as director of the Mexican Bible Society.

To prepare Chiapas missionaries for service in foreign lands, Vern Sterk and Chuck Van Engen have developed a missiological study program and are helping build a mission organization called the Chiapas Missionary Association (AMICH). This fulfills Edith Allen's vision of Chiapas missionaries going out into the unreached parts of the world.

### **Support Personnel and R.C.A. Administrators**

We have made no mention of the many short-term and support personnel who contributed to the work in Chiapas, including about a dozen teachers who taught missionary children in their remote locations. Wayne Luben of Colorado carved an airstrip from a hill at the Ch'ol Bible School. Herb Tanis of Illinois drilled wells at the Ch'ol and Tzeltal Bible schools. Dr. Robert Kalee of Michigan taught and equipped thirty Tzeltal paramedics for dental work. Dr. David Barnes of Pella, Iowa, is doing likewise for the Tzotzil paramedics. Dr. Harrison Visscher of Grand Rapids, Michigan filmed and produced a professional quality movie on the Reformed Church's work in Chiapas. Bill and Marge Vander Pol from California helped in the development of the Tzeltal Bible School at the Buenos Aires Ranch. Their airplane and vehicles brought needed equipment for the printing and audiovisual ministries. There is a long list of couples and work crews who assisted in construction and maintenance projects.

Several couples served as caretakers of the Mission House in San Cristobal, a convenient location for rest, renewal, shopping, and storage for the couples living in remote tribal areas. When this need diminished, the Mission House became the hotel and conference center for the increasing number of visiting groups and work crews that wanted to see and serve in Chiapas. During the past four years, Jeff and Deb Feenstra have welcomed, oriented, and accompanied fifty-nine mission teams from the U.S.A. and nine groups from within Mexico. They have hosted a thousand people in all, including a variety of committee meetings and retreats.

The support and guidance of the Reformed Church's mission administrators, called "area secretaries," became increasingly significant as the decades passed. For the first four decades, Kempers appreciated the freedom from control that their isolation provided them. But the arrival of additional missionary couples increased the importance of the area secretary. The list of area secretaries is a distinguished group of

dedicated and capable leaders. Kempers spoke highly of Zimmerman and Vande Berg. Those of us who arrived in later decades treasure the memories of serving under Russell Redeker, Beth Marcus, John Hiemstra, Howard Schade, Harold Brown, Dick Vander Voet, and Roger De Young. We couldn't have done it without them.

### Summing It Up

Nearly eighty years have passed since the Kemperses arrived in Chiapas. The scattered groups of believers then totaled less than one thousand. Today the Presbyterian Church in Chiapas numbers over two hundred thousand, gathering in about thirteen hundred church buildings, and worshipping in six languages. It took John Kempers twenty years to achieve the organization of the Chiapas Presbytery; now in Chiapas there are fourteen presbyteries under three synods.

Chiapas was a unique experience for the Reformed Church in that a large number of missionaries were sent to one area over a long period of time. This provided the opportunity to develop a very solid and supportive mission organization. The Chiapas missionaries all became one family, which is still very united with bonds of love.

The missionaries majored in leadership training, establishing a seminary, five Bible schools, and a paramedic training center. Translation work includes three Bibles and one New Testament. There has also been the preparation and publication of hymnals, concordances, textbooks, pamphlets, and news bulletins in five languages.

Missionary service in Chiapas was also characterized by long-term service. The first six couples averaged more than thirty years of service. The next eight couples averaged more than seventeen years of service. And this was in spite of the serious health hazards that sent several couples home much too soon. This long-term commitment provided continuity and productivity for the work.

Reformed Church missionary couples have invested a total of 350 years of service in Chiapas. That represents a huge amount of financial and prayer support from the people of the R.C.A., living up to Edith Allen's expectations when she wrote eighty years ago: "The Reformed Church in America does not put its hand to the plow and hesitate." We can all rejoice together that as we have given ourselves fully to the work of the Lord, our labor in the Lord has not been in vain.

### ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> *Chiapas for Christ*, pamphlet published by the Reformed Church Board of Domestic Mission, July 1958, 4-5.

<sup>2</sup> *Christian Intelligencer and Mission Field*, June 3, 1925, 341.

<sup>3</sup> Letter to author dated September 23, 1971.

<sup>4</sup> Letter to author dated January 24, 1990.

<sup>5</sup> Letter to author dated March 12, 1989.

<sup>6</sup> Letter to author dated February 27, 1982.

<sup>7</sup> Letter to author dated September 4, 1971.