



Tortillas and taxis

Separated by geography, lifestyles and languages, Mexicans seek unity

By Rachel Beth Miller Photographs by Jack Leonard

Crowing roosters and barking dogs announce the morning in Maravillas, a village in the southern Mexican state of Chiapas. As the sun rises behind mist-wrapped mountains, wood smoke drifts from cooking fires. Children eat their first tortillas of the day—made by mothers who rise before dawn to grind corn—and chatter in the ancient Mayan language of Tzotzil.

Speaking in rapid-fire Spanish, Mexico City residents crowd into taxis and subways during the morning rush hour. They pass bustling cafes and centuries-old cathedrals. The air is brown with pollution from millions of cars and factories here in the world's most densely populated urban area.

Separated by geography, lifestyles and languages, Mexicans can hardly envision the lives of people in other parts of this vast country. But as national economic policies, television and migration affect even the most isolated villages, the fates of distant communities are increasingly interwoven. Personal connections—between communi-



Maravillas, a village in Chiapas state (top), and bustling Mexico City.

ties, religious groups, individuals—are the foundation for a better future.

Edgar Carreto, a worker supported by MCC and the Conference of Anabaptist Mennonite Churches of Mexico, left his urban home in Puebla, central Mexico, to work in Maravillas.

"When I told my family and friends I was going to Chiapas, they told me I was crazy in the head," Carreto grins.

Chiapa, Mexico's poorest state, has made international headlines because of violence between guerrilla and government forces. Indigenous people make up some 40 percent of the state's population, and it is their treatment by the federal government that is at the root of the conflict.

"The indigenous people are the forgotten ones," ►

Mexican Mennonite Edgar Carreto left his urban home to do health work in rural Chiapas.

Carreto says. "But their cultures are so rich—I knew I could learn a lot."

Combining his training in botany with local knowledge of medicinal plants, Carreto teaches people to make plant-based cough syrups and creams for skin rashes. This knowledge—which had been in danger of dying out among the younger generation—is combined with first aid and basic healthcare in courses for health promoters.

"Most of the time there's no doctor here, so what are sick people going to do?" questions Maravillas resident Pedro Jimenez. He speaks in quiet, halting Spanish, but his eyes light up when he describes what he's learned about health.

Jimenez and his wife, Rosalia Perez, attended courses on medicinal plants that Carreto helped teach at the Ecumenical Bible School, an MCC-supported initiative in the Chiapas highlands city of San Cristobal. This school, which offers various classes both in the city and in area villages, brings together students from various indigenous and Spanish-speaking groups.

Teachers and students at the school, which an MCC worker helped found in 1997, include both Catholics and Protestants—a nearly unheard-of combination in Chiapas, where tension between the groups has erupted in violence during the recent conflict.

"When students come to San Cristobal for classes, they realize what they have in common," says Lucia Jimenez (no relation to Pedro), an Ecumenical Bible School administrator. "They are eating, singing and praying together, and they realize that, yes, we can live together."

She and other Chiapas residents believe the federal government has exploited religious divisions to divert attention away from the state's real problems: poverty, low education levels and lack of control over natural resources. Chiapas' abundant water and oil make it a prime target for government utilities and multinational corporations. The



◀ Rebecca Gonzales, a Mexico City Mennonite church leader, was inspired to greater compassion by her visit to Chiapas.

Chiapas residents ▶ Pedro Jimenez (right) and his wife, Rosalia Perez (in orange), attended courses on medicinal plants at the MCC-supported Ecumenical Bible School.

state's rivers supply nearly half of Mexico's hydroelectric power, yet only 37 percent of Chiapas residents have electricity in their homes.

These injustices are often hard for residents of bustling urban centers to imagine—until they experience them firsthand. Rebecca Gonzales was among nine Mexico City Mennonite church leaders to visit the region during a 1999 trip organized by MCC.

"It made such an impact on me," Gonzales remembers. "I realize now that compassion for the suffering is God's mandate. Otherwise, we're just playing at religion."

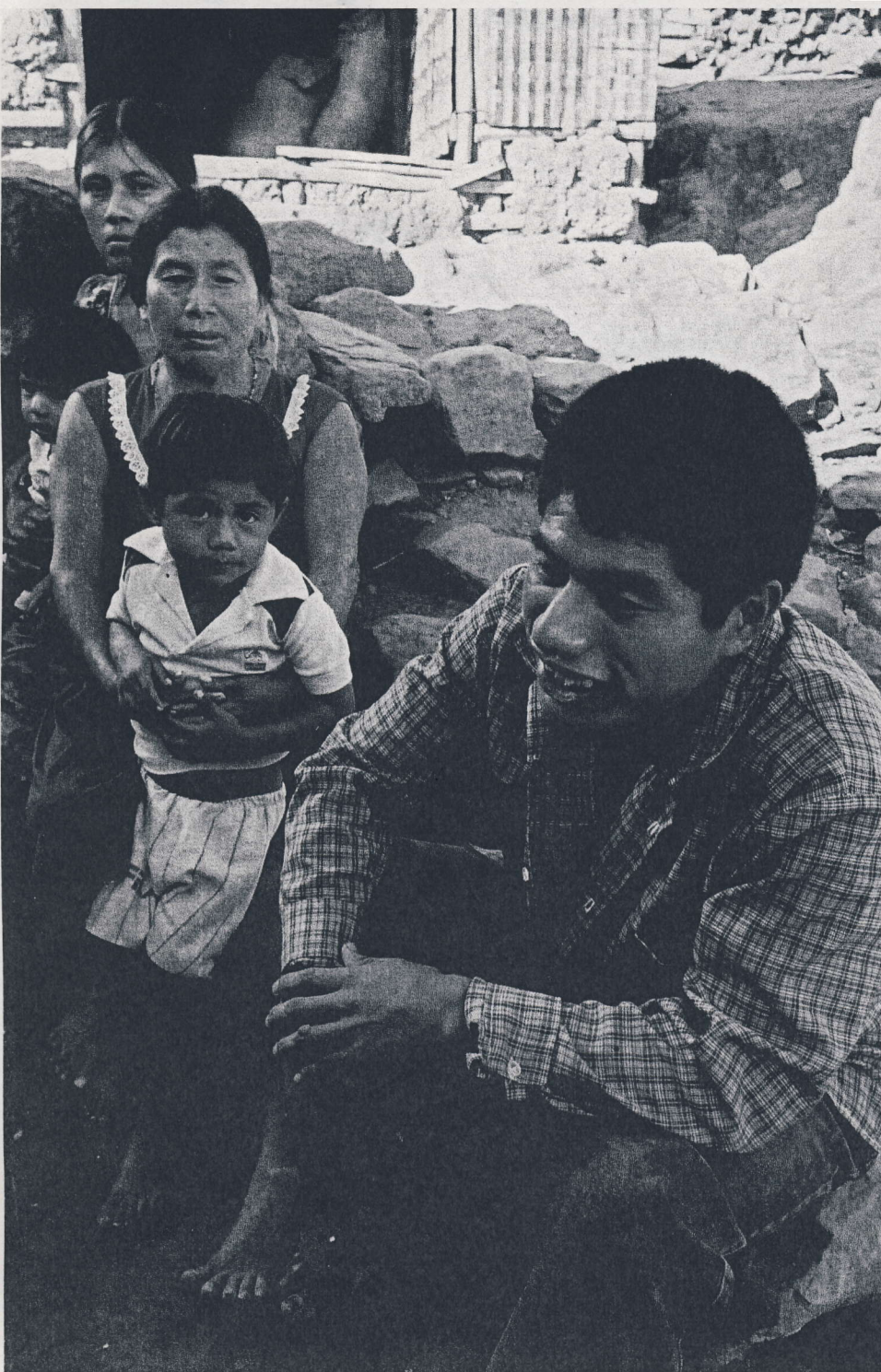
Today Gonzales directs the service ministry of a conference of Mexico City Mennonite churches. In addition to encouraging youth in various service opportunities and planning more visits to Chiapas, the ministry also focuses on local needs.

"We went to Chiapas and saw the needs there, and that encouraged us to have compassion for all people,"



▲ National cathedral, Mexico City.
Protestant church, Maravillas, Chiapas. ▶





Mural at the Acteal massacre site in Chiapas where 45 people were killed in 1997.

MCC IN MEXICO

MCC has worked with Old Colony Mennonites in Mexico since the 1950s (see pages 16 to 18). In 1985, following an earthquake, Mexico City Mennonites and Old Colony Mennonites invited MCC to assist with reconstruction efforts. After these projects were completed in 1987, MCC became involved in community development. In 1990 MCC decided to focus its development efforts on impoverished southern Mexico. MCC volunteers arrived in Guerrero in 1992 and in Chiapas in 1995. MCC also supports ministries of Mennonites in Mexico City and continues programs to improve conditions in the Mennonite colonies.



FIND YOUR PLACE

MCC is looking for a person to assist at the Ecumenical Bible School in Chiapas, Mexico. Contact your nearest MCC office for a job description. See page 23.

explains Mennonite pastor Serafin Liceago. "Drug addicts, the homeless—we have to see the needs of the whole community."

City residents are learning from their counterparts in Chiapas as well as assisting them. Las Abejas (The Bees) is an indigenous group committed to nonviolent activism, based on their understanding of Jesus' example. They made international headlines in 1997, when 45 Abejas were massacred by pro-government paramilitary fighters in the village of Acteal for refusing to take up arms.

Believing that the Abejas' vision of community and faith is important to share, MCC has sponsored visits of Abejas leaders to Mexico City and other urban centers.

Violence in the region has decreased, but the Abejas fear

current federal economic initiatives will continue the cycle of poverty and lack of autonomy in Chiapas. Their hope for the future, they say, lies not only in the strength of their community but also in their outside connections.

"We have to unite—with people from this country and people from other countries," says Mauricio Perez Vasquez, an Abejas leader. "It's a joy to know we are not alone." ■

Rachel Beth Miller is an MCC writer.