



North American Association of Christians in Social Work (NACSW)
PO Box 121; Botsford, CT 06404 *** Phone/Fax (tollfree): 888.426.4712
Email: info@nacsww.org *** Website: <http://www.nacsww.org>

“A Vital Christian Presence in Social Work”

**ACCOMPANYING DEMOCRACY IN EL SALVADOR
THE LAND OF THE SAVIOR**

John G. Cosgrove

**Presented at:
NACSW Convention 2006
October, 2006
Philadelphia, PA**

This paper will look at this “everything old is new again” phenomenon of democratization. It will describe the roles Christians can and do play in promoting and nurturing nascent democracies. This will be illustrated by the evolution of the democracy in the Central American nation of El Salvador as witnessed by the author. Suggestions will be made for sensitive, effective and meaningful contributions by people of faith, including social workers, who would accompany our neighbors in the so-called developing world where the seeds of democracy too often fall on barren ground.

Democratization is arguably one the most important issues and opportunities of our time. At this point in history, a number of parallel, not always compatible, forces have combined to move democracy to the forefront of public consciousness. One of those forces, is the global economy, centuries in the making but suddenly overwhelmingly powerful. It is a force that reminds us of our interdependence but not necessarily in the sense that we are all brothers and sisters. It is also a force that prefers stable, but not necessarily democratic, governments.

An equally historic force that has gained momentum in recent years is the drive toward truly representative government. This drive can act as a counter to amoral, amorphous and largely unaccountable forces like the global economy and, in fact, draw energy from reaction to those forces. However, the main engines for “democracy building”, the *au courant* term for constructing working democracies, are more likely the moral and spiritual imperatives inherent in human nature.

Democratization and the Church

The full participation of all members of a society in the making decisions affecting their lives is a work-in-progress in the world and North America. It is a process that seems to be moving forward, although that progress has not been and will never be a linear one. Democratization in North America has made remarkable advances when viewed through the long lens of history. Nonetheless, there were and still at are times when the process has been thwarted, voices gone unheard and harm done. How difficult it must be to make democratic progress in lands which have less abundance and / or those in which the process had been obstructed.

As is often true in our poorest inner cities and rural areas, in developing nations religious institutions are often the most viable, mediating structures in communities. Over the last thirty years, especially in this hemisphere, churches have enabled the development of civil society and helped lay the ground work for effective enfranchisement.

In developing nations, popular movements have been and continue to this work. They successfully appeal to increasing numbers of their compatriots whose most fundamental well being has been compromised or is being threatened. While there are those who may be less than sanguine about some of these movements, they are, in reality, a step forward. Their existence means that just enough political space has opened up for people to see the *possibility* of achieving a more just future through democratic means, rather than violent revolution. These movements have made progress toward full and effective enfranchisement and a more evenhanded distribution of economic benefits in a spirit of community

Such equality is necessary for the development of both democracy and of stable governments. Increasing overall economic development is not enough. It has been known for some time that there is actually an inverse relationship between government stability and income inequality, i.e. governments become less stable when inequality increases. Furthermore, this relationship “holds independent of economic development, which is found to have no direct effect on democratic stability after controlling for income inequality” (Mullen, 1988).

The efforts of the churches and those of embryonic elements of civil society have led to the increasing emergence of political institutions and processes in the developing world that more closely approximate the ideal of fully representative government.

It may seem presumptuous at first, to reach beyond our own borders to promote democratization. This need not be. In fact, such involvement is wholly consistent and natural extension of our obligations as Christians and social workers. The national and international codes of ethics of our profession, as well as our faith call us to action, action which given the rapid reshaping of the world, is particularly timely.

El Salvador is a nation which has passed through a civil war and onto the path to democracy with considerable support from Christians within the country along with an impressive show of international solidarity.

Democracy in *El Salvador*, Land of the Savior

El Salvador has existed in various geo-political configurations, as a Spanish colony, subsumed in or members of regional governments and finally as an independent republic. During all of those permutations this tiny nation on the Pacific coast of Central America has been ruled by small elites, first agents of Spain and, eventually, by neocolonial surrogates for the US, other foreign and now, shifting global interests. These governments were historically aligned with the dominant, Roman Catholic Church and its hierarchy, Spaniards and fair skinned sons of the elite.

Violence was a frequently used method of exploiting and maintaining control over the population, mostly indigenous peoples with language and culture

very different from that of their rulers. In addition, their strong communal values were less than compatible with the ways of the government. This clash of cultures, so common in the region, may have contributed to the magical realism that was to later distinguish Latin American literature.

In 1932, a revolt of indigenous, peasants or *campesinos* led by Agustín Farabundo Martí failed and 20,000 - 30,000 indigenous were killed in a reprisal, which came to be known as *La Matanza*, the slaughter. The indigenous disappeared virtually overnight by divesting themselves of all the external signs of their identity in order to survive. Traditional clothing was no longer worn and only Spanish was spoken. Many indigenous spoke little of that language. They would avoid authorities or, in their presence, keep their heads bowed and mumble what Spanish they knew.

El Salvador remains one of the few Latin American nations where everyone's primary language is Spanish. Indeed, indigenous languages have, to all intents and purposes, vanished. *La Matanza* is still within living memory and fear of authorities, the military and police remains strong.

Christians in the Struggle for Democracy

The struggle against oppression continued and became a full blown Civil War in 1980, when several groups of rebels or *guerrillas* united under the name of the slain Martí, in the *Frente Farabundo Martí para la Liberación Nacional*, the Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front or FMLN. The struggle has had strong popular backing in addition to support from a seemingly unlikely source, the Catholic Church. This began with individual priests and male and, especially, female religious. Many were missionaries from abroad who were moved to action when they found the blatant injustice and open, incredibly cruel, repression that was so alien to their own experience and so beyond any acceptable standards. There were also those native clergy who had studied in Europe or been drawn to new theological thinking born in the wake of the horrors of World War II and the roles of Christians in that war. Among the missionaries were those from other Christian traditions whose presence was growing and who modeled greater participation of laity in the work of the church.

Comunidades ecesiales de base or basic Christian communities and similar Christian-inspired organizations, usually but not always under Catholic auspices, became some of the most effective catalysts of the “popular movements”, the first real intermediating social structures between the people and the ruling oligarchy. They eventually would enjoy varying degrees of support from their bishops and other church leaders and were able, and did do things that leadership could not or would not do.

They raised the consciousness of the people of their inherent God-given worth, their dignity and rights as human beings. The base communities brought people together to talk about pressing problems, their perhaps temporary resolution and to consider various more fundamental causes of those problems.

Unfortunately, the initially protective cloak for the base communities, that of the church, the only powerful, non-governmental institution in the land was soon wrent. There was the widening disaffection and disassociation of the privileged from prophetic Christians like, Archbishop Óscar Arnulfo Romero and voices from mainline and evangelical traditions. *Monseñor* Romero was to join the long list of Salvadorian and missionary martyrs who died in that country before and since his assassination in 1980. Moreover, the success of the popular movement and its spin offs, in the form of the organizational rudiments of civil society, also threatened the status quo.

In coming together people, especially but not only women, got there first experience of speaking in public and learned how to work in groups. Leadership qualities were developed which led participants to begin to develop other organizations, cooperatives, unions, women and youth groups as well as small enterprises in response to community needs. Some of the members of the base communities, frustrated by the pace of progress became active in the armed resistance

However, the operative theology of the base communities and of Christian supporters in and outside the country also included freeing the oppressors from the heavy burdens on their souls, from the distortions of their humanity, that came from oppressing others. This, of course, could not be done by duplicating the violent ways of the oppressors. In these popular movements, there has been

a sense of historical transcendence, of oneness with their ancestors and communal past and hope for future generations. This spirit seemed to resonate with the mass of Salvadorians. It is interesting that the parties calling for the most drastic, complete and sudden change were never to fare well at the polls.

On The Cusp of Democracy

I went to El Salvador in January 1992 as a member of an ecumenical group, one of many that had come to El Salvador for a number of years to express solidarity with and, by their collective, continuous presence, help protect vulnerable groups. I was to be privileged to be there at a pivotal time in the history of the nation and of Salvadorian democracy.

On arrival our awareness of the intense level and pervasiveness of fear was quickly apparent. Our conversations were anxiously shushed by our guide for reasons, later explained to us that at the time, we could not discern. Darkened windowed, SUVs without license plates occasionally raced through the capitol, San Salvador, in broad day light, ran red lights and generally ignored what traffic laws, or at least prevailing norms that other vehicles seemed to follow. They in-turn were ignored by the police and everyone else. These were the vehicles used by the government-supported death squads.

The office of the Mothers of the Disappeared was under not so subtle surveillance when we visited. A Lutheran clergyman came to our guest house to speak with us under the cover of darkness because he was under suspicion of seditious activities by authorities.

We were the most recent of a steady stream of visitors to the base community of *Diez de Octubre* situated on a hill of garbage in San Salvador. Since the visits began, the harassment by low flying military helicopters had stopped. The downwash from the choppers threatened the flimsy homes of the community. The harassment had been a warning. The community members had built a simple, concrete drain down the hill to a river to carry away human and animal waste. The degree of organization and resourcefulness necessary to carry out this task apparently made the government nervous since the guerillas

had recently demonstrated that they not only had sufficient military prowess but enough citizen cooperation to attack targets in the capitol at will.

We visited a scarred newspaper office that somehow managed to continue to publish despite numerous bombings resulting from the paper having crossed the moveable line that marked the changing limits of freedom of the press.

However, encouraging words began to come from Mexico City where we were told that negotiations to end the civil war were taking place between the Salvadorian government and the FMLN. On January 16 we joined those who gradually began to fill the main *plaza* or square in the capitol in anticipation of good news.

We were immediately struck by ubiquitous signs and symbols of the outlawed FMLN – flags, bandanas, a huge banner bearing the face of Farabundo Marti hung all the way down the side of the cathedral. It was from in front of this same house of God in 1979 that the world, on their evening news, saw a glimpse of the Salvadorian government's unselfconscious disregard for human life as, in full view of international media, the police mowed down unarmed protestors, killing twenty four and wounding many others.

Thirteen years later thousands squeezed into this same *plaza* where the blinding sun lent to the creation of surreal illusions as if to foreshadow the almost unreal events about to unfold. Dots of distant heads and shoulders appeared to shimmer and wave in the heat. The dots would suddenly form lines that, as people got where they were going, might merge, and just as quickly disappear like rain drops down a window pane. Red and white paper flowers were distributed that when held aloft together, made the plaza seem a colorful meadow

There was a platform in front of the crowd from which amplified speeches were made and on which musicians performed. The backdrop for the improvised stage was a government building where more people were precariously perched on window sills and still more, somehow, completely lining the top of the roof.

The crowd roared its approval when a band broke into a song I later learned was called "*Sombrero Azul*", literally the Blue Hat. This song had been

closely associated with the revolution and thus no one even dared whistle its tune in public before that day lest they face indeterminate prison sentences, torture or being “disappeared”

In an experience that I never expect to be surpassed, the word that the peace accords had been signed was announced and the crowd went wild, cheering, sobbing, while embracing, kissing everyone in sight. Not everyone had been supporters of the revolution. It made no difference in the plaza that day. Everyone shared their joy and pain with everyone else. They shouted, above the din and into the ears of the embraced, variants of – “Thank God, no more deaths”, “I am sorry”, “This is the single most important day in our history”. The importance of the day and “thank you for being here” were most often stage whispered to me as cheeks met and tears merged, before I was in the *ebrazo* of the next person, and the next.

That nothing ever changes overnight was apparent when on the way back to the guest house in a cab, I began to ask a question about the significance the words to *Sombreo Azul*. My expatriate US guide, glared at me and then to the back of the head of the driver and back at me. Although I had not heard the driver speak a word of English nor give evidence of any political allegiance, it was clear that a change of subject was in order.

In the heady atmosphere of the post peace accord period, I was to have experiences that were second only to that day in the *plaza*. However, that is for another time. The important, the monumental achievement was that that the *guerrillas* entered the political process as members of political parties reflecting the varying agendas of the FMLN and the groups of which it had been composed.

The Democratic Evolution

In the years following my initial visit, I followed news about El Salvador. I would support advocacy in efforts, such as the protection of worker’s or women’s rights, usually by sending emails to Salvadorian authorities or legislators here in the US. I also attended local celebrations of the lives of the US martyrs; one, Ita Ford, had relatives nearby.

A chance arose to do something hands-on to promote the continued development of the relatively new and still fragile democracy in El Salvador. The chance came in the form of an invitation by an NGO or non governmental organization, to be an election observer for the 2000 Salvadorian elections.

Back in El Salvador, as my taxi approached the Center where I was to be trained, I began to hear voices singing a familiar *cansion*. As we pulled up at the Center, I realized the voices were coming from its back yard and the song was none other than, *Sombrero Azul!* For me there could never have been as dramatic a sign of progress over the past eight years in El Salvador as it was to hear the words of that once forbidden song floating over the neighborhood.

I joined about one hundred other short-term volunteers who had just arrived. We were a very diverse assemblage. With the exception of a few college students, the rest were adults, with more than a few seniors. They represented every faith and humanitarian group. We were not required to speak Spanish since visual observation of election day procedures was all that was needed or possible. We did go through several days of training in those procedures and received our credentials as official election observers. We also were taken around to familiarize us with the country, its history and the towns and villages to which most of us would be deployed on election day.

My assignment was to El Paisnal the *municipio* or main town in an area within the Department of San Salvador but in the middle of nowhere. It, or rather the pastor of the local Aguilares parish, had played a significant role in the awakening of the people to throw off their centuries-old yoke of oppression. His name was Padre Rutilio Grande. He organized base communities run by lay persons. He also trained laity as Delegates of the Word who traveled the country side conducting the worship services which included a new found Catholic appreciation of the scriptures. In addition, Grande defended others who worked on behalf of the poor. In 1977 he was shot to death.

This began what led to the conversion of a fellow classmate and friend, a mild mannered, brown skinned man, at first comfortable with the traditional hierarchy (Chacon, 2000). . He had been considered a safe appointment as Archbishop of San Salvador. That man was Óscar Arnulfo Romero. It was a

conversion that took him back to his humble roots and to the people from whom he had been separated by his movement up the ranks of the church.

He shouldered Grande's cross and advanced it with demands for an end to the injustice visited upon his (His) people until he was brazenly shot while during mass by a gunman who did little to hide his identity or that of the vehicle in which he departed. In an oft quoted phrase from one of Romero's last prophetic sermons he anticipated his end and said that –"If they kill me, I will arise again in the Salvadorian people". Many believe that he did.

As we drove from the capitol on the appointed day, we passed scores of voters, many barefoot, some of whom had been walking a long time over dusty roads and trails from little villages throughout area to El Paisnal

We paid courtesy calls on all the candidates prior to the elections. My first official act as an observer on my early morning rounds on election day was to point out to the election officials that FMLN posters were closer to the polling stations than the rules allowed. They were taken down. The actual voting was rather uneventful except for one official from ARENA who kept trying to see how the voters were marking their ballots. Staring her down did little to deter her – we were not allowed to directly confront anyone committing an infraction and an official was not present at the moment – raising a camera and snapping her photo in action did the trick.

The elections in El Paisnal were "free and fair" but I was to learn that meant little unless careful attention was paid to the process leading up to and following the voting. I stayed long enough for our sponsoring NGO to hold a press conference to present a detailed summary of the work of our observers which would be reflected in official government reports.

The Evolution Continues

I decided to become an election observer again in El Salvador in 2006 to witness another significant step forward in democratization. There was to be, an experiment in "residential voting", that is, easier access to the vote through additional, dispersed polling stations in selected communities. Unfortunately, the experiment would be conducted in very few sites. Also, negotiations among the

parties made certain that the experimental communities were too small to have much influence on election outcomes or were located in known strongholds of the various parties. Still it was another opening to democracy. When I heard that one of the sites selected for the experiment was El Paisnal, I requested and was assigned there once more.

I lived with a Salvadorian family instead of the hotel where the short-time volunteers would stay. I met all but one of the extended family of my hosts. On a wall, frozen in time in a photo, was the fifteen year old son of my hostess. One day, in 1980, he had gone to play in a nearby park and never returned. There had been a sweep of the park by the military and all the boys there were taken away. Whether it was for forced military service or suspicion of rebel connections, his mother never knew nor did she ever hear from or about her boy again.

I had decided to stay longer this time because I wanted to join those who had already been doing the essential monitoring groundwork work by tracking preparations of the government and political parties. Closer to the big day, we began to visit El Paisnal and the countryside. The town had not have changed much, it was perhaps a bit cleaner and there were capital improvements in the school, in a larger more accessible town hall and there was a recreation program run by the parish in a government building.

I was pleased with yet another major electoral advance. Everyone received a free photo ID for voting purposes. All potential voters had to do to find their voting booth at a polling station was to match their cards with large pages printed with duplicates of those same ID cards that were posted near each booth

Prior to this, the process was difficult for the literacy-challenged and easier for the unscrupulous to manipulate. The ID cards did not deal with one issue. Under the law, women who did not have the same last name as their husbands often could not vote at the same location as the rest of her family. Even in the very few *municipios* participating in the residential voting experiment, this could mean a long trek, possibly alone, which was not conducive to full participation by women.

We were broken up into teams, each of which was led by a fluent Spanish speaker. We were four, one more than in 2000. The day before the election we went with a caravan of trucks and cars of election and party officials to one polling place after another in El Paisnal and the new, outlying sites. My first official action was a replay of my 2000 experience as I pointed out that, again the FMLN had their posters nearer to the school where the voting would take place than the rules allowed. Again they were taken down.

The roads were adventures in themselves with their ruts, holes, twists and turns bucking and banging us off the roof and frame of our rented, four-wheeled drive vehicle, magnifying the sense of time and distance we actually traveled. We monitored the delivery of all the equipment, records, ballots and other supplies according to a checklist. When everything was confirmed to have been received, as it was, with one minor and correctable exception at one site, everything was resealed and guarded by armed police until the next morning.

The fact that all of the sites were in school buildings surrounded by high fences helped to keep everything secure. That the police knew their job was evident the next day as they provided appropriate but unobtrusive security while keeping their distance from where the voting booths were set up.

Small signs of further opening up of the electoral process appeared in the form of a second, lower shelf in the sturdy cardboard voting booths that allowed the physically challenged to study and mark their vote by themselves. The booth had privacy protection panels on the sides, as they had in 2000, but a top cover had been added which would have frustrated the heck out of the party official I caught in 2000 peering at folks filling out their ballots.

On the morning of the vote, the police were there to let us in and we found everything as it had been left the day before. The officials arrived and began checking everything again and the setting up the voting booths. Then the party representatives and their backups wearing colorful vests clearly identifying their party affiliation approached the tables. They assumed their appropriate roles at the table at which the credentials of voters were to be checked and ballots distributed. The election procedures were very specific, including equitably distribution of the tasks and titles among the parties. For almost all, this was the

first time they had worked an election and it showed. We had been well trained in who should do what and we were able to confirm that officials pretty well sorted things out.

Then came the casting of votes by the party members, the officials were required to vote elsewhere. One of the would-be party observers announced who he voted for and held up his completed ballot for all to see. After vociferous protests against this clear violation of the rules, everyone, including his fellow party members, decided to make his vote null and void.

The day proceeded rather uneventfully at all locations. There was some problem with a few voters who attempted, against the regulations to enter the voting area carrying or wearing party names, symbols or slogans. They were all ARENA supporters. I remember one entire family arriving all on bikes. They were literally covered from head to toe with party regalia and carried banners and balloons. The police did not stop them at the gate but after some negotiations with election officials, the adults were allowed to vote while the children remained inside the fence but away from the voting area holding onto the non-clothing, party paraphernalia.

Also, one site was short one of the special large cardboard stands on which were posted the large sheets with copies of the photo IDs so voters could find the particular table where they were supposed start the voting process. So, the sheets were pasted on the wall of the school building near the appropriate table. The only problem was that these sheets were behind the dual-sided voting booth which meant that people were scanning the lists at the same time that someone was voting on the back side of the booth, compromising their privacy. We were able to get that changed as well.

The polls closed and counting began. It was occasionally contentious. Votes were to be counted only if those who cast them clearly put a mark through the symbol of the party of their choice. Occasionally the intention of voters was not clear from their marks. All parties were represented in the counting at each table and there were bound to be differences. When any shouting started at any table we headed there. Most often it was from the same group where one party representative was rather intimidating

We watched the votes being packed and sealed along with the results into boxes provided for that purpose, imprinted with identifying information. Unused ballots and an accounting for every ballot less than the number delivered also checked resealed and then go to the capitol under police escort. went into the boxes. We followed the boxes into town where they were to be

I left El Salvador before our sponsoring NGO's press conference at which the summary findings of almost one hundred observers were presented. The voting process itself had been essentially "free and fair", if you did not consider the continuing impediments to voting such as those for women and for rural voters distant from the polls.

There were frequent requests for the observers to return for the elections in 2009 which will include a presidential race that might lead to the first change in power since the revolution. This just concluded election had been become pretty much of a two party race with significant gains being made by the FMLN party, including an extremely close win in the contest for mayor in the capitol.

I left certain that the presence of outside observers during the preparation for and the run up to the elections and the actual voting had given voters a sense that they were not alone in their journey to democracy. I also am convinced that we prevented abuses of the process that may have occurred had we not been there. I will return in 2009, hoping that the residential voting will have been expanded and other kinks worked out. I will keep returning until the people in the land of the savior tell me that they don't need me anymore.

Discussion

My international experiences over the years and my specific participation in democratization efforts in El Salvador embolden me to share with you some thoughts about "foreign" involvements in like endeavors. Those thoughts essentially address: the approach to participation in the democratization of another country; its level of democratization; and, alternatives for "foreign" participation that correspond to the levels of democratization.

Approach

Humility and openness are critical to engaging with a society that is not only different from ours but which also springs from unique historical and cultural roots from which have evolved distinctive social and political institutions. In nations in transition to democracy it is particularly easy to fall, in good faith, into what approaches cultural and professional imperialism in which we see the things through a biased prism. It is very difficult not to we go with what we know best. What *is* possible is to “dialog” with the culture in the spirit of the title of a favorite book of mine on the tangentially related subject, “Conversation, Risk and Conversion”. That spirit may impact aspects of belief, but primarily applies to openness to new and differing world views.

Not to put too fine a point on this subject of approach, The United Nations Development Program’s Human Development Report of 2002, whose theme was democratization, put it this way. Democracy that empowers people must be built – it cannot be imported.” (HDR, 2002, p.4).

Levels of Democratization

The road from “where they are” to a functioning democracy seldom leads directly from the battle field to the ballot box. As I have said elsewhere, this holds true even in more peaceful but relatively sudden transitions such those of post-Soviet Central and Eastern Europe:

“Disappointment awaited anyone who anticipated that the dismantling of repressive regimes would somehow automatically or quickly result in the establishment of ...democracies. As if such a development was some kind of genetic, societal predisposition awaiting only exposure to the light of truth to spring forth, whole and mature. (Cosgrove, 1994)

Aware of the perils of the over simplification, I offer the following. The path to fully representative government might be said to pass through four of phases: pre-democratic; initiation of the process of democratization; its evolution; its maturity and continued refinement.

Participation Alternatives

The pre-democratic level is usually characterized by the weakened condition or virtual absence of a viable civil society. In some former Soviet nations there were recoverable, historical memories of democracy and a semblance of a social and political infrastructure that, while compromised, had redeemable elements. In this hemisphere, that is less the situation. In either case, the varying levels intensity and lengths of repression affect how readily civil society can be renewed or constructed. Haiti, though a centuries old republic, has virtually no infrastructure of any kind, never mind too few effective mediating institutions while some nations in South America go back and forth between tyranny and democracy.

At this point, joining in existing efforts to make way for democracy can be very helpful as in support for organizations like: Journalists without Borders who protect those monitoring in-country events; Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International which track human rights abuses and advocate for those affected; Lawyers without Borders and others who represent victims whose basic human rights have been violated. Some of these organizations may not be your cup of tea but they are just a very few of the secular and Christian organizations with similar missions. The same applies to humanitarian relief and development agencies, especially those that are active in the country of interest.

The initiation of democratization begins with the development of organs of civil society. If reflection and study lead to an individual or collective decision to become involved, it should bring with it a commitment to remain involved. The struggles of a people to empower themselves cannot afford even well meaning dabblers. However, continuity of effort is more important than the form or degree of involvement.

There are often native and international NGOs, including church groups that have been on the ground accompanying locals as they identify existing social capital, e.g. natural helping networks. They organize and support these resources as well as the development of the more formal social, political, educational, work-related, religious and other elements of a viable civil society. Rather than reinvent the wheel, consideration should be given to assisting in their work, to start, and then possible collaboration.

Partnerships or twining relationships between congregations here in the North and ones in the developing (usually politically and economically) world and, hopefully, their larger communities is a form of hands-on involvement that is flexible and not level-specific. It is an ideal place for people of faith to begin. The resulting direct individual and indirect congregational relationships can be enabling to the partner in the South and raise the awareness of the partner in the North to the realities of life in the developing world in a way that no printed word or documentary can.

Election monitoring and observing are a feasible forms of participation for many. However, more of that is being done by organizations for which promoting democratization is there reason for being. The Carter Center and the National Democratic¹ Institute for International Affairs (NDI) are two of better know. NDI actually spends more of its time developing native election monitoring and observation (J. Brothers, personal communication. September 19, 2006). This has been a direction recommended for some time (Carothers, 1997). Still there are places, like El Salvador, where foreign observers are necessary and welcome. I hope some of you will join me there in 2009.

As we have seen several examples in modern times, even apparently well established democracies in Latin America and elsewhere are vulnerable to subversion from within and without. That requires support for a free press and a dynamic civil society as well as practical assistance and promotion of local capacity and for equitable international policies. We and our neighbors to the South need to maintain mutual solidarity with watchful concern for each other. For our part, that means we must keep the South on our radar screens and perhaps do the unthinkable, be as open to their critique as we have expected them to be of ours.

Implications for Social Work

There were a number of other native and North American social workers whose paths I crossed in El Salvador. Proportionately, we were not significant but put our skills to good use. Our critical thinking and group skills assisted

¹ Not Affiliated with the Democratic Party

others in identifying and addressing understandable bias and sympathies that may otherwise have affected their role as neutral, objective observers.

Clinical skills helped in everything from relationships with native co-workers who had experienced severe personal and secondary trauma to dealing with certain character styles in sometimes tense situations. Community organizing experience makes it natural to have local people lead in showing us their world and they want to do about it, rather than imposing our view and solutions.

Our education and training in cultural diversity, planning, administration, working in task groups and evaluation would be invaluable to any organizational initiative such as a congregation contemplating a twinning relationship.

One long term BSW staffer from the US, nicely integrated a Freirean “popular education” approach to teaching Spanish. Most recently she was working in San Salvador, with an organization to help bring together adopted Salvadorian children in the US with their natural families. The parents of those children had been lost the civil war or been “disappeared”,

Conclusion

Truly representative government is an antidote to the forces that lead to a growing concentration of money and power that threatens to solidify the place of materialism and its accompaniments as the key metric of modern life. What better way, than by promoting democracy, is there to make more manifest our belief that all are children of God and to apply our professional skills and the dictates of our faith to “speak truth to power”, as our Quaker colleagues have taught us.

In a very short time we in the US will have the opportunity, in fact, the moral responsibility, not only to exercise our voting franchise but to do whatever we can to assure that that no one is denied the right neither to vote nor to have it counted. Beyond that, everyone should become invested and involved our civil society in all its diversity as well as in dialog on issues of importance to our nation and the world. Let the lessons of our brothers and sisters in the land of *The Savior* be a caution and a model.

References

Chacon, C., Carranza, S., Mancho, J., Alas, I., Hernandez C.E., Figueroa, M.I., et al. (2000, March-April). The reluctant conversion of Oscar Romero. *Sojourners Magazine*, 29 (2), p.28.

Carothers, T. (1997) The observers observed. *Journal of Democracy*, 8.3, 17-31.

Cosgrove, J. (1994). Western assistance in the development of services for families and children in the former Soviet Union, Central and Eastern Europe: Promises and pitfalls, *Journal of Global Awareness*, 2, 10-16.

Cowan, M. & Lee, B. (1997) Conversation, risk and conversion -The inner & public life of small Christian communities. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books.

Freire, P. (1972). *Pedagogy of the oppressed*, London: Penguin Press.

Human Development Report (2002). *Deepening democracy in a fragmented world*. New York: Oxford University Press

Muller, E. N. (1998) Democracy, Economic Development, and income inequality. *American Sociological Review*, 53 (1), 50-68.

Ocampo J.A, (2006, July). Statement to the High-Level Policy Dialogue of the Economic and Social Council by the Under-Secretary-General for Economic and Social Affairs. Geneva.

Office for Democratic institutions and human rights. (2005) *Election observation handbook: Fifth edition*. Warsaw, Poland: Author. Retrieved September 20, 2006 from <http://www.osce.org/odihr>