

St. Mark's and San Marcos

A Story of Companion Parishes

by Kim Reed

In 2001, the Diocese of Chicago entered into a relationship with the Diocese of Renk in Sudan, Africa and the Diocese of Southeast Mexico. The reason for these companion dioceses is to provide mutual support and encouragement. The three dioceses have agreed to encourage one another, to share in their spiritual journeys, to visit one another in friendship, to share resources, and if possible, to share financial resources.

St. Mark's began its relationship with San Marcos in the Diocese of Southeast Mexico the summer of 2006. Father George, who first visited the diocese the previous summer with Christ Church Winnetka, led a group of St. Mark's parishioners, youths and adults, to San Marcos in Nigromante with the hope of establishing a companion parish. During this visit where we were so graciously hosted by the Diocese, the parish of San Marcos and the community of Nigromante, we had the opportunity to see firsthand how other parishes from the Chicago area have reached out to parishes in the Diocese of Southeast Mexico. We visited rural churches that had begun micro-businesses to help the neediest of those in their parish and community. One of these micro-businesses was a bakery made possible with the donation of a bread oven; another parish created a micro-business with the use of a corn grinder, again purchased with donations from a parish within the Chicago Diocese. We realized how we at St. Mark's might be able to help the parish of San Marcos by helping them purchase a bread oven so they could establish their own bakery project, and of equal or more importance, how we could enter into a mutually respectful, loving, and continuous friendship with this church and its members.

The following summer, 2007, we returned to San Marcos with a group of 15. During this visit we witnessed the progress of the new San Marcos bakery operating out of a new addition built on the side of the church. We helped make bread and went door to door selling the bread. Proceeds from the bakery go to help provide income for the women who work in it. The bakery also tithes to the church. Another project we envisioned, after discussions with Bishop Benito and

his consultations with Padre Isaias, was to build a playset for the community. San Marcos is ideally located in the heart of Nigromante, at its village plaza. It is there that we constructed the playset that we purchased at the Costco in Veracruz. We completed this project just in time to see the children of Nigromante playing on it before we scrambled for the van in order to return to Veracruz to catch our flight.

In 2008, we brought a group from St. Mark's all of whom, with the exception of two, had previously been to Nigromante. The parishioners were moved that we would return a third time, that we were truly interested in pursuing a continuous, mutual friendship. During this visit, we were delighted to see the progress of the bakery and to see the playset, newly painted, still enjoyed by los ninos in the community. This time we tackled a new project: sanding and repainting the church roof, a very physically demanding project; however, we were joined in this effort by the parish and the community. While the roof project was going on, down below, inside the church, we worked side by side with San Marcos

parishioners to provide Vacation Bible School classes for the children of San Marcos and the community.

During each visit, we had the opportunity to stay in the homes of parishioners. We were treated with the most gracious hospitality. We participated in some of their festivals and celebrations, grieved with them over the loss of some of their own, worshiped and broke bread with them on Sunday and during the week, played with their children, met their friends, helped out in their homes, learned some of their indigenous language, Zapoteco, and witnessed the tremendous pride they have in their community and culture. Each visit we have prepared a spaghetti dinner for the parish and broader community, and each time, the parishioners helped us make this possible. At our last visit, we were able to purchase bread from the bakery to serve along with the spaghetti. We have been blessed to give and to receive in this relationship with la iglesia de San Marcos and with the Diocese of Southeast Mexico.

Plans are currently underway for our June 2009 visit. We will be discussing possible projects, hoping that once again they will be joint projects, and we look forward to being with our dear friends from San Marcos.

**For more information about the Diocese of Southeast Mexico, visit:
<http://diosemexico.org/>**