

Affirming Life and Justice

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Last week, on Maundy Thursday, we marked the one-year anniversary of the Guatemalan premier of *Gold Fever*. The documentary presents the stories of three women — Diodora, Crisanta and Gregoria, and their communities — who resist threats to their ancestral lands and way of living posed by international gold mining in a remote Guatemalan village of San Miguel Ixtahuacan.

As modern day Shiphrah and Puah — the Hebrew midwives that affirmed life and disobeyed the Pharaoh's command to kill the male newborns, including Moses (Exodus 1:15-20) — these three women risked their own lives for their families, communities, their land, air and water.

The injustice presented by *Gold Fever* is not restricted to the village of San Miguel. The Ecumenical Christian Council of Guatemala — an ecumenical organization that includes Catholics, Protestants and leaders of Mayan Spirituality, and a companion in mission with the United Church of Christ and Disciples of Christ — has faced mining issues affecting communities throughout Guatemala.

In an interview last year with Jim Hodgson, the Latin American and the Caribbean Program Coordinator of the United Church of Canada, Rev. Vitalino Similox, the General Secretary of Council in Guatemala, expressed a number of the counsels concerns including:

“(1) The weakness of the Guatemalan state in the face of strong foreign companies: government ministers show little capacity or will to defend the interests of the people, and laws are not adequate.

“(2) The mentality of mining companies: attitudes of arrogance, lack of respect for local decision-making, disregard for environmental and local concerns about rights to water, and discrimination.

“(3) The right to consultation has not been protected by the state. Communities have resisted, and often women in the communities have led the resistance. Men often need the work and are not in a position to criticize.”

In order to address these injustices the Counsel requested that legal norms be honored and that inhabitants be recognized as the historic owners of their lands and regarded as “first-place” partners in decision-making about the development of those lands. Finally they highlighted the need for technical assistance to help communities develop their resources for themselves and for their own benefit, noting that under the current system “wealth is being extracted, and the sense of loss is exacerbated by the government’s low royalty.”

As people living in the United States, and as Christians, we should work to understand the connection between the mining of natural resources in Guatemala, and in other parts of the world including the United States, and the greed of corporations and individuals. But also we hope that understanding those linkages will lead us to reflect on how we, as individuals and a society, may be benefiting from this system and the unjust treatment of people.

We pray that the testimony of Diodora, Crisanta and Gregoria, as well as the witness of their predecessors Shiphrah and Puah, inspire us to affirm all ways life and advocate for justice.

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