

FaithBIT



AMEXTRA Transformation

Reflection by Kim Rathjen

I recently returned from my 10th trip to visit Immanuel's ministry partner in Mexico, AMEXTRA. My first trip was as a participant in a group led by our former Pastor, Susan Weaver. The subsequent trips have included nine visits to the community of Lomas de San Isidro on the margins of Mexico City and two to the Pej Pem Ecological Center near Palenque (plus 4-5 visits to the community of Tultitlan); I have led seven groups from Immanuel totaling about forty people, made one visit with my family and one visit by myself!

Immanuel's relationship with AMEXTRA is more than 35 years old. One of Immanuel's first Pastors, Gary Peterson, had a friendship with one of the men who started AMEXTRA. From the very beginning, Immanuel groups have made trips to visit and witness the work of AMEXTRA. I have seen the Immanuel community be transformed and individual lives changed because of this ministry partnership.

The tagline for AMEXTRA is "Transforming Communities, Changing Lives." The three men who started AMEXTRA (Eugenio, Pepe, and Omar) based their organization on the concept in Romans 12:1-2 in which the Apostle Paul talks about the transformation that God creates in us when we worship God through service. The model that AMEXTRA uses is one of servant leadership. When invited into a community AMEXTRA staff begin a listening process to help the community determine what their hopes are for their community, and then AMEXTRA staff help the community to draw on their own gifts and skills to work together towards the expressed goals. This is a constantly evolving and changing process.

Immanuel has had the longest relationship with the community of Lomas de San Isidro, formerly known as Cartonlandia because the original homes were made from cardboard boxes (cartons) and debris. From providing dental clinics, to helping with the financial needs and manual labor of constructing a community center, to installing a small kitchen, to providing computers, to hours of working in the garden and interacting with women and children – Immanuel has a deep connection to the community. Currently, benevolence funds help pay the cost of the salary for the AMEXTRA staff who accompany the community in Lomas.

During the pandemic, most of the programming in Lomas stopped. Because people from the community isolated at home or moved in with family members in other parts of the country, several of the former community leaders are not currently involved. The herbal products and garden are in hiatus. But AMEXTRA is committed to this community and has started the listening process again to help the community discern how to move forward. It has started programming again with children; helping with homework, giving access to laptops when children must learn remotely, and providing fun and safe activities. A staff person was recently added who works directly with the children's programs. Because Mariana, the AMEXTRA staff person who has worked in the community for 10 years, has developed relationships with the people, community members shared with her that domestic violence has risen during the pandemic. There are now two additional AMEXTRA staff working in the community to provide workshops, both in schools and at the AMEXTRA center, and one on one counseling for those experiencing domestic violence. During our visit this time we played games with the kids, did work in the garden, and listened and learned about the challenges faced in the community over the past two years.

This trip we also flew to southeastern Mexico to visit the AMEXTRA Pej Pem Ecological Center. Immanuel's last Capital Campaign, Building Up, included a benevolence gift of \$40,000 to AMEXTRA. They are using the gift for growing needs at Pej Pem, which is a training center for eco projects. The workshops help local farmers learn eco-friendly techniques for growing food and cooking it in new and exciting ways, for dealing with human waste, and for water retention in the rainforest jungle. AMEXTRA also works with a collaborative of beekeepers, training them how to work with bees and to extract the honey for income. AMEXTRA purchases the honey at fair trade prices so that keepers can make a living wage from this difficult profession. This time our group also participated in a candy making workshop which is shared with local people so that they can make special sweets with the honey and sell the treats for more income. Most of the financial gift from Immanuel will be used to bring electricity to the Eco Center. Currently there is only a small amount of solar power and one tiny generator that is used sparingly. Electricity will provide opportunities to increase the impact of the Eco Center and the training provided there.

The work of AMEXTRA is helping to transform communities and to change individual lives in Mexico. I am certain of that after ten visits. It has also been my privilege to walk alongside many Immanuel members who have been changed because of their AMEXTRA experiences. God has also transformed me through my visits to AMEXTRA over the years. My understanding of how to help and serve others by giving them dignity and agency has grown. My understanding of issues related to poverty, immigration, the history of exploitation in Mexico and in my own backyard, and what it means to "help" have been influenced by my experiences with AMEXTRA. My understanding of my place in the world as a servant of God has also changed. I believe all these changes in my life have been the work of God as I grow closer to the person God intends for me to be, living and serving in the world God created, and I am forever grateful for this gift as part of the Immanuel and AMEXTRA relationship.

Kim Rathjen

Learn more about [AMEXTRA](http://www.immanuel.us/serve/amextra) at www.immanuel.us/serve/amextra

