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Guatemala: More Than a News Story

Tragedies in distant countries often function for us like fiction. We read the news or see the footage on TV. We are drawn into serialized accounts which may make us sick or bring tears. But as a new hot spot seizes media attention, memory of the original tragedy fades. To us, it's only a story.

Rev. James Dekker's presence on Dordt's campus on November 22 and 23 made the fading news about Guatemala, cut back into the consciousness. Dekker is a missionary of the Christian Reformed Church who taught theology, until September of 1982, at Mariano Galvez University in Guatemala. He was forced to flee that country when government goons abducted and threatened another missionary under the mistaken impression that he was Dekker. The immediate reason for the abduction, said Dekker, appeared to be his sheltering of a Guatemalan pastor whom the government had falsely accused and tortured. On Dordt's campus, Dekker spoke in classes and in a public lecture. He also gave interviews to the campus media.

His concern was Guatemala and its crisis. In a communications class the topic was propaganda. In theology classes it was liberation theology and the Latin American church. In a combined political science and theology class, it was Christian discipleship in Guatemala. The public lecture described the political and religious crisis, as Dekker sees it, since the Evangelical convert Rios Montt came to power.

Rev. Dekker gave us intensely delivered lectures, succinct histories of aspects of the situation in Guatemala, and analysis of the current crisis. Interwoven in the lectures were the frustrating details of how people's rights and lives have been trampled, and of

how some Christians in the country have been apathetic or opportunistic. Particularly disturbing was Dekker's conclusion in his public lecture that, since the coming to power of Rios Montt, a Protestant Constantinianism is on the rise. Certain key evangelical church leaders have identified themselves closely with the government, which in spite of Montt's apparent sincerity, has a poor human rights record. Funds given by American evangelicals for food relief have been channeled through the army. Thus aid from the American church is linked to the government.

More heartening are the examples Dekker gave of courageous Christian discipleship. For instance, a committee of the Presbyterian Church in Guatemala worked patiently for over a year and a half to help some of its congregations of Indian peasants. Influential landowners were claiming land on which the Indians had lived for fifteen years. At peril to its own members, the committee gave the Indians legal advice, succeeding in securing their hold on their property.

Dekker made the news from Guatemala more than a story. He did this through his lectures and especially his accounts of the struggles of Guatemalan Christian communities. Just as important, however, was the vivid presence of Dekker himself, a man who with his family took actions for the Gospel's sake that he knew were dangerous. Dekker made us sense that, whether through the church or in spite of it, in a place of seemingly mindless tragedy and political confusion, the kingdom of God is on its way.

David Campbell