



# Building and Crossing

*Marilyn McClure*





It was late in the evening when Marilyn and I sat down in a Des Moines, Iowa, hotel to talk about her love for the Lord, family, missions, education, and the bridges that can connect all of God's people. Dark storm clouds filled the sky, lightning flashed, and raindrops pelted the window. The bridges over the Des Moines River were sturdy as the river was rising to flood levels.

All of this was a reminder that while so many things are not ours to control, bridges can make a difference especially as we reach out to new sisters.

"That picture in Revelation of all the tribes and all the peoples? Christ connects us all. Sometimes we just think of people in our own congregation or school setting. But we have sisters in Christ all over the world. We are going to be together with them one day," Marilyn shared. She's a petite woman, soft-spoken, with a delicate cross necklace, but I soon learned that she is anything but timid when it comes to life — she's bold in her faith, strong, and courageous. She's also an avid Arizona basketball fan who wears her team's jersey and cheers along with her family.

For years, Marilyn has been bridge building, on a mission to connect women and men from different cultures with different languages. But for this German-Lutheran, born and raised in Middle America, Fort Wayne, Indiana, this wasn't her plan. "I wasn't one of those people who always wanted to be a missionary," she admitted. As she reflects, she can see how God prepared her for the work, the people, and the culture she would ultimately embrace.

Marilyn is deeply rooted in Lutheran worship and education — grade school, confirmation, high school, and college. She graduated from Concordia, River Forest, with a degree in education, eager to use her love for teaching in an elementary classroom.

Sights and sounds of a different culture flooded Marilyn's world when her husband Garry was placed in Southern California for his vicarage, close to the Mexican border. Marilyn remembers her first trip to Tijuana with a group of women to take clothing and supplies. "It was like crossing a bridge into another world. I was just overwhelmed at the poverty, the tar-paper shacks on the hillsides," she said. "I talked my husband into going the next time," and she believed it was God's way of telling them He had plans for them in the mission field. "It started us thinking." Not surprisingly, the Jeremiah 29:11 verse has long been one of Marilyn's favorites. *For I know the plans I have for you, declares the LORD, plans for welfare and not for evil, to give you a future and a hope* (ESV).

As they discussed plans and where the Lord was leading them, they agreed on the mission path. It wasn't long before the young couple, Marilyn pregnant with their first child, moved more than 3,000 miles south of her Indiana homeland to Central America. Neither one of them spoke Spanish. "Synod sent us first to intensive language school in Cuernavaca, Mexico, for five months, and that helped," she remembered. "But we really only had 'Tarzan' Spanish when we finished our language training!"

They made their way to Guatemala, a land of abundant fruits, hurricanes, Mayan ruins, and beautiful white sand beaches. And Marilyn would add that it is also a land filled with God's people.

# Bridges:

By Beth Foreman, Associate Editor



The young couple arrived in Puerto Barrios, the site of their new church home, Cristo El Salvador, a little white wooden church building that had had missionary pastors but no permanent pastor for five years. Marilyn recalled the first worship service with 16 mostly elderly members. “My husband thought that maybe he had been sent there to bury what was left of the congregation. But God had a different plan!”

### **New Culture, New People**

Being a young wife in this new setting, preparing for her first baby, adjusting to new food, new people, new climate, Marilyn began building bridges. She gave birth to their first child, Amy, in Puerto Barrios in a private clinic. The birth went well, but they found out later that the clinic didn’t even have oxygen. They were advised to go to Guatemala City, with its modern hospitals, for her next two deliveries.

Putting food on the table was another learning experience for Marilyn. “Seafood was very accessible, and we ate it often. We always had fresh fruits and vegetables, but we needed to wash them well, sometimes in chlorine, as there were parasites,” she remembered. Their kitchen table was soon filled with foods like plantains, black beans, tortillas, and new Guatemalan dishes. “However, I did still fix pizza as a treat once in a while!”

They rapidly learned how to stay safe and healthy. “We had open sewers, so lots of mosquitoes. Our son had malaria and hepatitis, which were very serious, but God always saw us through. Our water sources were not safe for drinking, so there was always a large pot of water boiling on our stove.”

Outside, they were careful not to walk barefoot in the grass where poisonous snakes sometimes slithered. “We had a gardener who would cut the grass low around the house and the church property with a machete. We had snakes in our yard many times. They were just part of the surroundings!”

Venturing beyond their small town, the McClures had to be watchful because of the political climate in the late ’70s and early ’80s. “As foreigners, we needed to be cautious and never comment on political issues. Kidnappings were common, so we were particularly careful with our children especially when we visited Guatemala City.”

The family settled into new routines, embracing the land where God had planted them to do His work. They learned that there were many effective ways to do things, some unfamiliar. “The people there knew what would work. We just had to be willing to be open and learn from them.”

She gave birth to their second daughter, Kimberly, and juggled motherhood with teaching and filling in for her husband who often had to travel for work. “If someone was sick or in the hospital or needed help, it was usually my task to fill in. I was so grateful that I had attended Lutheran grade school and high school! All that memory work? It was amazing that those verses came back to me. I just had to translate them into Spanish.”

The number of children and families at their church grew steadily as they reached out into the community, building bridges. “I remember when the kids from the youth group asked me to teach them how to pray. I’d help them write prayers, and now those same youth are leaders of the congregation! It’s amazing to see how God has worked through them.”

### **Bridges Destroyed and Rebuilt**

Early February 1976, while her Fort Wayne family and friends were scraping ice off their car windshields and Marilyn was five months pregnant with their son, Mark, a major earthquake hit the country, leaving 23,000 dead and more than 75,000 injured. “We were in our home sleeping in the wee hours of the morning. It was one of the most frightening experiences. We ran and got our girls who were running to us in the dark. The noise was deafening. People were screaming,” she recalled.

“The water source for the city was located in front of our house in two very large tanks. The force of the water moving lifted the top off the tanks, and water was sloshing out in waves. In our area, most houses were made of wood with zinc roofing, so we did not experience the damage and death tolls that they did in the highlands where the houses were adobe with tile roofs. We did have water rationing, and electricity was very spotty for quite some time after the quake.”

The aftermath and the cleanup were challenging. “For days we experienced aftershocks. We slept on mattresses in our living room so that we could get out of the house quickly at night. In the daytime, our girls, six and three at the time, would not leave our sides because each time there was an aftershock, it seemed another quake was hitting.”

“Our multipurpose building (chapel, school, clinic) on the coast in El Quetzalito suddenly was out in the middle of the water. About 100 feet of beach was washed away. However, the cistern that we had built was intact and provided fresh water for the people,” she added.

The people worked together to rebuild their broken homes, communities, and lives. “Members of our church picked ripe grapefruit, and we hauled the citrus and barrels of fresh water to Gualan, about an hour from us, where we had another Lutheran Church and many homes were destroyed.”

Marilyn experienced so much in her years in Guatemala, but this was one time she will never forget. “It was a very stressful time. We comforted neighbors and members who received news that relatives had perished. There was so much loss.”

Routines changed dramatically in the next few months. Their brick and concrete home was structurally damaged, so the McClures moved out for several months during the repairs. Their once 5-hour trek to Guatemala City became a more arduous 12-hour journey as several bridges were damaged following more than 1,200 landslides. “We actually had to travel through El Salvador to get to the capital city until the landslides were cleared by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers.” Bailey bridges — portable pre-fabricated truss bridges — eventually replaced the bridges.

Their mission work continued as they all used their gifts to spread the Gospel. “I worked a lot with Sunday School classes and youth, as well as helping to plan religious curriculum for the school. I trained youth to teach religion in the school. My husband was good at drawing and draftsmanship, which came in handy with many construction projects. Our three children were a strong part of our mission efforts. They attended our school in Puerto Barrios. They formed friendships and participated in many activities, and they shared their love with many of our people.”

There are no detailed instructions for life or for raising a family in a foreign land. “You are never prepared. Not really. But God prepared our hearts to receive the people and love them as brothers and sisters in Christ. We still have a strong relationship with many of them and keep in touch through Facebook and occasional phone conversations. And He prepared the hearts of the people to receive us, a young Anglo couple that was not familiar with their culture and did not speak much Spanish. God provided people who were respectful toward us and showed us so much love.”

After sixteen years, the church was thriving, and the school, Colegio Particular Mixto Maya, was filled with more than 850 children. Marilyn and her family said their goodbyes to the people and the home they had grown to love in Guatemala, returning to the States to continue God’s work there.

When they moved to Tucson in 1985, it was a big transition for all but especially the kids, since it was their first experience of living in the States. “Their language skills were excellent, and they were all good students, so school was an easy transition. It was the social part that was so different. They were not used to put-downs and sarcasms, which were very common among their peers. They also had not really wanted to leave Guatemala and their friendships there, so we had challenges, but we faced them together, and we are a very close-knit family, as a result. The kids are all grateful, as are we, for having the experiences that we did, living in a third-world country. I think it has given us all a very special perspective on life.”

Marilyn focused on helping her family adjust to yet another change when she returned to the classroom a year later, first at Faith Lutheran, their new home church to this day, and then in the Tucson Unified School District where she was a bilingual teacher — building more bridges — for 20 years.

## Heart to Heart Bridges

Through her mission experiences, Marilyn understands how challenging it is to adjust. “You feel kind of foolish when you go into a new culture and a new country and you don’t speak the language. A lot of people treat you like a child. They treat you as less.”

Marilyn was serving on the Gospel Outreach Committee, along with Janis McDaniels, chairman; Melissa Salomón and Peggy Wunschel, under Past LWML President Virginia Von Seggern’s leadership in 2001, when they were challenged to come up with ideas to get women of more diverse ethnicities involved in LWML. The team planned a pre-convention gathering at the Oklahoma City Convention in 2003 for 22 leaders. Marilyn went on to serve as chairman of the Heart to Heart Sisters Task Force from 2003–2005 and the Gospel Outreach Committee from 2005–2007, where she continued building bridges and encouraging others to do the same.



*“God not only prepared the hearts of the people in Puerto Barrios to receive us, He also prepared the LWML to receive the idea of H2H Sisters.”*



*Pictured with Marilyn are some of the H2H Sisters who served on national LWML committees. Pictured from front to back are Susan Wang, Angelina Gomez, Abeba Tzeggai, Melissa Salomón, and Mary Smith.*

“The Heart to Heart Sisters program has evolved. The first time we had only black and Hispanic women because that was our committee’s expertise,” she shared. The program now includes women from Hispanic, African American, Hmong, African Immigrant, Native American, and Muslim origins and leaders on zone, district, and national levels. “The women become those bridge people to go back to their home churches and get things going,” Marilyn said.

An important step to building any bridge is the preparation. “God not only prepared the hearts of the people in Puerto Barrios to receive us, He also prepared the LWML to receive the idea of H2H Sisters,” she reflected.

“As a bilingual-bicultural person, I see myself as one of those bridge people who can maybe help somebody coming from the outside. A lot of our Heart to Heart Sisters are refugees, and they have tremendous stories! What they have been through sometimes is just incredible. They tell us their stories, such as the Hmong family fleeing Laos in the middle of the night on a boat.” Marilyn shared what a blessing it is to hear these stories. “You are right there with people who have had to depend on the Lord and who know that He is going to see them through. It’s humbling to hear them because I never had to go through anything like that!”

Marilyn commends the H2H Sisters program as it recognizes women leaders in ethnic congregations, inviting them to participate in LWML. “I was so grateful for the people who welcomed me into their culture in Guatemala. This was a good way for me and LWML to provide that welcoming for our ethnic sisters. I have been inspired by their ministries and their enthusiasm. They are wonderful, loving women.”

She shared one concern she has for the future. “So often people think of missions or H2H Sisters as programs where the dominant culture does things for people. The H2H Sisters have a lot to offer to each other and to LWML. I hope the H2H Sisters Committee continues to be a place where ethnic women can serve within the LWML and the church at large.”

She encourages others to be bridge people or to seek them. “It takes time, but there are things you can do. If you can find bridge people — they don’t necessarily have to be bicultural and bilingual! If they are interested, if they have a compassionate heart and they want to befriend people who come — they can serve as bridge people. Even though they might not have the gift of language to converse together. Their actions and the things that they do will communicate that they care. Their heart, heart-to-heart sisters.”

Currently, Marilyn edits the Spanish translations, written by Melissa Salomón, of Bible studies, devotions, and features in the *Lutheran Woman’s Quarterly*. “Since Spanish is Melissa’s first language, it comes naturally to her, and she does a beautiful job translating.” Marilyn double-checks the grammar details. “It’s a way for me to stay connected with LWML and to do something I know is getting used in different places,” she said. She also works closely with the H2H Sisters as an advisor for their ongoing work. “I’ve worked a lot with past chairman Margo Dupre to

edit and contribute to her work. Melissa and I thought we were diligent keeping the history. We have it archived — partly here!” she said as she pointed to her own head and laughed. “Most of it is written down now” and available online at [lwml.org](http://lwml.org).

“The Heart to Heart Sisters do a lot of sharing. They get to know each other and pray for each other. We’ve been at prayer sessions that have been so powerful. The LWML website and Facebook page helps the sisters stay connected.”

Bridge traffic goes both ways. “The bridge not only connects the people coming in, but it also connects our Anglo women,” dominant in our LWML culture, to help them understand the new cultures around them. “The bridge goes that way too. When those H2H Sisters come down the aisle in the convention procession, just look at the joy in the faces of the women watching! They realize this is a special part of the organization.”

### Always More Bridges to Build

Marilyn’s days are filled with working in a Hispanic mission in Tucson, supporting her husband in his ministry by teaching Sunday School, Vacation Bible School, and more. “As long as God gives us health and life, that’s what He has prepared us for.” Her prayer is that God would raise up more Hispanic workers to carry on the mission work in so many places.

She is also serving on the education committee for the Women’s Leadership Institute, an organization dedicated to educating, encouraging, and equipping women for Christian leadership. “LWML does a lot in this area, and WLI extends the opportunities for growth even further.”

Her greatest joy — next to spending time with her husband, three children, and six grandchildren — is just being able “to touch people who have never heard the Gospel message. We take it for granted. So many don’t have a clue about what God has done for them in Jesus Christ!”



Marilyn mentioned that after the earthquake in Guatemala, Bailey bridges were brought in to replace ones that had been washed away. Unfamiliar with this term, I Googled it and learned how

beautifully these bridges symbolize the mission work Marilyn and her family were doing in this foreign land. The bridges were built with three primary parts. The bridges — like the McClures and many other missionaries — required no special tools or heavy equipment to be effective. Yet the bridges, just like the missionaries, were strong enough to carry tanks and whatever else needed to cross the sometimes-raging waters below.

Marilyn and so many others are bridge-builders, women and men who require only the work of God, the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit to cross borders, to love sisters and brothers, and to spread the Gospel. **Q**