

El Salvador Report, 2016

"In Mission with El Salvador -- *En Misión con El Salvador*"

ABT Synod, ELCIC

Closed Doors – Opening Doors

2016 was a year of closed doors, as well as a year of opening doors in El Salvador.

Political authorities in El Salvador decided that "extraordinary measures" were needed to curb the extreme levels of violence, especially the alarming and persistent homicide rate. The targets were the seven prisons designated for El Salvador's gang inmates. Starting in March, visits were limited, first for two weeks, then for an entire month, then for the entire year. These measures were just extended for another year, until March 2018, though the Jesuit University is questioning their constitutionality. Such visits include those of bishops and pastors, *IPAZ*, our prison program of 20 years, family members, lawyers, and the Red Cross. These measures evidently affect non-gang prisons as well, as our--Jesús's and my--three applications to resume our psycho-social-spiritual seminars in non-gang prisons were denied as well. On one occasion, permission was granted us to resume our program, then rescinded one week later. When we asked for an explanation, some reason, they had none to give us.

IPAZ was able to make a couple visits to gang prisons early in the year. While I was not the official voice, I was the one most recognized, having worked with many of these inmates over the past two decades in different prisons throughout the national system. The reception was warm and eager, though also desperate, pleading for more contact with the real world especially in the maximum-security prison, two levels underground, where inmates survive with limited light, air, water and human contact. The internal limitation in February, prior to these measures being implemented, was that most *IPAZ* members did not submit their personal ID for the application list, a normal expectation when soliciting prison visits, though not required of *IPAZ* previously.

IPAZ continued with its weekly meetings throughout the year, which I attended. A diverse range of themes and concerns was addressed, depending largely on those in attendance. A range of other activities filled out the year, such as conferences, fora, press conferences, activities in "territories" or neighbourhoods and peace marches.

I had the opportunity of being the speaker (and "hanger-arounder") for the three-day national Salvadoran Lutheran Church youth and young adult gathering in January, invited by the young adults. The theme was hearing and following God's call. It was more participatory than youth and young adults here had ever experienced or imagined. All were fully and eagerly involved, with great enthusiasm and amazing contributions. It was a marvelous event, with tremendous folk. There were fewer than 100 participants--small and intimate.

Our *Fe y Esperanza* Historical Memory Association enjoyed a full and active year. The major events were the all-day May 5 anniversary of the initial settlement of displaced persons in 1982, held at Resurrection Lutheran Church, and the all-day annual gathering on 28 Dec., at the *Fe y Esperanza* site. A couple hundred people gathered for each event, many traveling considerable distances from their scattered rural communities. At least once a month, a half-dozen of us in the organizing committee visit a couple of these half-dozen communities, to rebuild the "family" connections of the 1980s and offer psycho-social-spiritual support, through meetings, social gatherings and worship services.

Since our prison program has been suspended, I was able to meet regularly with the two mutual support groups of persons living with HIV at Rosales Public Hospital, for their bi-weekly meetings and special events.

I was able to attend the bi-annual Global AIDS Conference last July, held in Durban, South Africa. Unfortunately, because of the distance and cost (I was able to cover my own costs), my usual Salvadoran companions from Rosales and CoCoSI (Committee against AIDS, Santa Marta, Cabañas) were not able to attend.

While there, I explored much of South Africa, as well as Botswana and Lesotho, learning much about apartheid, its after-effects of delinquency and violence, and the ongoing healing process. I made contact with Anglican Fr. Michael Lapsley's "Healing of Memories" ministry. He has since been in El Salvador, sharing his ministry and experiences, with the idea and hope of implementing something similar here. I was able to speak with him at some length, though not enough, in El Salvador. I also visited townships in South Africa, where I learned about the gang culture and problems with delinquency and youth violence. I worshipped at the former Norwegian Lutheran--now Anglican--congregation in Cape Town. My "unwelcome", both at the gate and inside the church, overcome through my persistence, provided me with an intriguing window into colonialism, apartheid and social fear.

Accompaniment of Lutheran pastors happened on Wednesdays, at our weekly meetings and continuing education sessions, as well as occasional visits to Salvadoran pastors' parishes, for Sunday worship or other events.

At least weekly there is some conference or forum on some significant theological, social or political theme. Attendance is important to keep up on the themes being discussed as well as to keep up with long-term, and meet new, colleagues in a broad range of fields, especially related to prisons, youth, migration, social violence, HIV-AIDS and the environment.

All-night vigils to commemorate martyrdoms and wakes to mourn deaths occur every two or three months, on average. These events are important for accompaniment ministry, to maintain and renew collegial friendships which have begun at some point over the past three decades.

There is also some all-day procession and artistic event about once per month, to promote some cause, church- or social- or justice-related. I believe that all this inspirational activity and

accompaniment, above all else, helps me to maintain my spirituality alive and healthy in this challenging, struggle-filled context.

I continued to serve on the CRISPAZ board, through regular "Zoom" meetings (including our annual meeting for 2016, for the first time not held on location in El Salvador), and meeting with staff and visiting delegations. Delegations are primarily Roman Catholic (Jesuit).

Due to a travel advisory from the US State Department, there were fewer delegations visiting in 2016, both for CRISPAZ and the ELCA, as well as most other organizations hosting such pilgrimages. For those who come regularly, there was no hesitation, and there were no regrets, in maintaining their regular schedule of visits. Newcomers were impressed and impacted, and felt any misgivings were misplaced. I met with groups from Lethbridge (ELCIC/Habitat); UCCanada, for the March Conference on Reconciliation, including current and former moderators; Fort Laramie, Ohio (RC); Boston School of Theology (Jesuit); 2 ELCA congregations from Minneapolis; SCIC youth from SK; two UCC youth groups from Toronto; individuals such as Joshua Hergesheimer (journalist) and Jim Hodgson (UCC); Tim and Sharon McIver (Minneapolis); CIS election observer colleagues who come back as English teacher volunteers. I was also invited to lead several classes via skype: Fordham University (Jesuit), New York City; Lutherans Connect, U of Toronto; U of C, Calgary; St. John's, Waterloo; Messiah, Camrose and LCBI, Outlook.

I don't have a pulpit to call my own--other than facebook, which I abuse and over-use at will--but I am invited to share others' on occasion: La *Resurrección*, San Salvador; El Paisnal and Ciudad Delgado in El Salvador; Messiah, Camrose, and Lakeland, Cold Lake, in the ABT Synod. Occasional e-newsletters, many of which are posted to the ABT website, also serve as a channel for communication of this "In Mission with El Salvador" ministry.

I have three regular housemates, all living here long-term due to some crisis or other, besides numerous drop-in visitors, for several hours, overnight or for several nights. Some can be high-maintenance, economically and emotionally. My home is a drop-in centre for dozens of my contacts over the decades, not to mention the friends and families of these three housemates and other visitors. Without leaving home, this could be 24/7 ministry, most of which I find satisfying, rewarding and enjoyable.

Former Fe y Esperanza youth, former prison inmate program participants, former street-ministry youth, former colleagues from some NGO, former and current colleagues from church . . . are often in contact, perhaps via Facebook, from any corner of the continent, or by phone, or face-to-face, hiking, going to the beach, or for coffee or lunch. Such contacts happen several times each day, keeping me from setting too strict an agenda for myself.

Respectfully submitted,

Brian Rude

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