

*Students attending Lutheran Theological Seminary (Saskatoon, SK), take a Globalization Ethics course as part of their studies at LTS, which includes a mandatory Globalization/Cross Cultural Practicum. These hands on, in- depth learning experiences have been held in countries across the world including Madagascar and India. They are also open to lay and non-student participants who would like to join faculty and students in their travels. Please contact the Lutheran Theological Seminary for more information on how you can join one of these excursions.*

Beginning on March 17, 2014, five students and faculty from Lutheran Theological Seminary (Saskatoon, SK), completed an 18-day immersion pilgrimage in a variety of Salvadoran contexts while visiting with Pastor Brian Rude in El Salvador. Jon Eriksson is a student in his first year of classes at the seminary and the following are some of his impressions after his return to Canada from El Salvador.

El Salvador is a society that is living in its own self-imposed prison, everyone "under house arrest" so to speak; houses, gardens, shops, businesses, all surrounded by coils of barbed wire and razor wire, high voltage electrical fencing, armed guards at the entrances of shops and businesses.

The whole society is fenced in, living in its own self-inflicted prison, guarding its valuables, its personal treasures and possessions. Only the ones with no one to lose-- the very poor in a farming village such as Santa Marta--are free and safe. It was in this poor village of peasant farmers where we all felt the safest.

I would guess, however, that the ones "most in prison" are those 11 to 14 families of the super elite, the colonial oligarchy that controlled the country before land reform in the 1960s and 1970s, and who still control the levers of power now. These oligarchs would be perhaps the ones most under house arrest, the ones with the most barbed wire and electric fences, guarded gates, armed guards.

I have experienced other societies where there was a tangible atmosphere of fear. My wife and I felt this in Syria, which we visited perhaps a dozen times or more in our 4 years of living in Lebanon. For Syria it was felt in the atmosphere of anxiety created by the 4 layers of secret police and internal security forces. The center and source of Syria's fear-prison is the dictator and his family, supported by others who had interests connected to the preservation of the dictator's status.

Our group travelling to El Salvador caught other glimpses of a similar imprisoning fear as we passed through the indignities of American Homeland Security screenings at the airports--body pat-downs, X-ray screening devices, having to remove belts, shoes, all metal objects, and concern over gels and liquids. All this struck me as being fear-generated, or greed-generated, the imprisoning fear imposed by the guarding and defending of our North American "mammon."

In El Salvador we were cared for, tended and nursed back into health. Just about all of us fell sick at different points. I myself was taken into the village home of the local doctor's sister and their aunt and uncle, where I was fed mint tea, fresh garden ginger drinks, and chicken soup, and allowed to sleep and recover in a hammock and a dark cool bedroom, until I was feeling more myself. We were guests. We were protected, nurtured, and fragile foreigners. We were grateful for this care, and the effort and love behind it.

In El Salvador we finally (on the second last day) came to understand the significance of the Christian missionary work of Pastor Brian Rude. Brian is part of an effort that is saving lives from violence and tragedy. Around 5,500 human lives have been preserved (a reduction on average of about 8 murders

per day) only in the last two years (since 2012) as the fragile peace between rival gang members has been nurtured and sustained by the efforts of persons like Brian and his colleagues.

Brian Rude, Jesus Morales, Guillermo and others, support and maintain this peace or truce through their advocating for the legal and human rights of men, women and children within the prisons, and supporting the prisoners with psycho-social health workshops and just their visiting presence. When Brian and his colleagues visit the prisoners, (these ones who are most at risk, most despised, the "littlest ones"), their safety and human rights are upheld, simply by the scrutiny that is brought to bear upon the treatment of those in prison by this regular visits made by Brian and his colleagues.

An irony I glimpsed perhaps is that *it is from the prisoners themselves* that there is hope for a healing of the larger Salvadoran society, which is itself so imprisoned by its fear for the safety of self and its goods. The hope for a deep and lasting healing of this imprisoned society is coming from those who have the least to protect and preserve. It is not coming from the rich and powerful in Parliament or elsewhere. It seems to be coming from the goodwill and repentance of the gang leaders and gang members as they seek to step out of the cycle of violence created by lack of opportunities and lack of justice and equity.

We saw on our second-last day and second-last prison visit clear evidence of this peace that was being upheld and maintained in the prisons by the prisoners, the groups of men and women, both actual and ex-inmates. We clearly saw the human decency and kindness they show to each other, the compassion shown between former rival gang members, all this fostered and supported by the work of persons such as Brian, his co-worker Jesus Morales, and the director of the association of ex-inmates, Guillermo, (now a lawyer after being at one time an inmate himself.)

In El Salvador we obeyed the command of our compassionate Lord and God to visit the sick and those in prison, to care for the poor and the least, the littlest ones. We visited our host himself, Pastor Brian, in the hospital where he was forced to go for treatment of an infected leg. Along with Brian, Jesus and Brenda we made visits to prisoners on five occasions. We ourselves became sick and experienced the loving care and concern of our fellow group members and kind Salvadorans.

5,500 lives spared from violence—a reduction in the daily murder rate of 8, and all the associated family tragedy coming from these deaths—all this is very clear and tangible evidence of the value of Pastor Brian's missionary work, work done in obedience to the command of Jesus to care for the poor and needy, visit the sick and those in prison.

I think Brian's presence (as a Canadian) in the prisons and among patients and inmates with HIV has a clout, a weight, or influence upon the well-being of prisoners and the sick that is greater than that of the indigenous Salvadoran Lutheran clergy. Pastor Brian is being faithful and effective in this ministry or care and love to the least and the littlest. The many lives spared from violence is evidence of the significance of his work.

Do we as Canadian Church members and Church leaders do any of this work in obedience to our Lord's command, here in Canada?

I think we do some. Do we do enough? There must certainly be lives here in Canada that could be spared from violence and tragedy if we were more obedient to our compassionate and just God and Saviour, and followed Brian Rude's example.