

## Evolving Ministry

Ministry--openness to ministry--can take one in some unexpected directions, without one even trying or searching. For several years now, I have been lamenting the closing of prison gates to ministry with prison inmates throughout the prison system of El Salvador, due especially to increasingly punitive and repressive government policies (if you can imagine). I am able to link with some inmate friends outside prison walls, through varying cultural and sports and artisan events, or with some who are at some level of parole, and thus free to leave their prison spaces briefly. Some of these have been friends for decades within the prison system, collaborating with our programs and engaging in regular conversation.

In the meantime, El Salvador never ceases to offer Plan A, Plan B, Plan C, Plan D, etc., for any given day . . . for any given hour, so often at a moment's notice.

At the end of 2018, I was asked by a very competent Salvadoran Lutheran pastor whom I respect highly to join her and another Salvadoran colleague in their relatively newly-formed Lutheran Pastoral Ministry to Migrants program. Intrigued, I consented readily. Within weeks of joining them, a national initiative was launched by the Ministry of Justice and Public Security, a delayed response to a binding order by the Supreme Court of El Salvador to recognize the crisis of violently displaced persons within El Salvador. The government had resisted recognizing this phenomenon, so as to avoid the responsibilities associated with such recognition. Now, finally, the Minister of Justice was convening a commission to draft legislation to propose and present to Parliament for its approval and implementation. Of the 20+ organizations represented, including a few government entities, global organizations (UNHCR, Red Cross, Amnesty International), and several Salvadoran non-profit organizations, a couple of which are Roman Catholic/Jesuit or Anglican-related, the Lutheran Church is the only church body represented officially on this commission. This role fell to me. Every other member of the commission is, if not a human rights lawyer, at least heavily involved in the human rights work of their organization. The average age is about half my age. They are intense, supremely competent, and highly dedicated to their mission of drafting appropriate legislation to respond to the critical and diverse needs of violently displaced persons inside the country. While I live 24/7 surrounded by displaced persons in my home and ministry, I have less experience with the jargon, the legalese, the political procedures, than these legal professionals. I do bring perhaps a more global perspective, a more historical perspective, and perhaps a more down-to-earth perspective, which I express on occasion, tentatively, as I deem appropriate. Evidence of having been heard and understood often comes after a significant delay.

After 20 years of conducting 3-hour seminars in sweltering prison spaces, I may have to invest in a suit jacket and tie, or at least remember to bring a sweater, not just to fit more comfortably into the professional aura, but to withstand the blasts of air-conditioning in these government, UN, Red Cross, and hotel conference rooms. I'm also getting used to a considerably more elegant, complimentary diet than that to which I am accustomed.

I'm not sure if visiting delegations would be as welcome in these spaces as in our prison spaces, whether in terms of permission and passes, or socially. Inmates are considerably more sociable than lawyers, I find (though inmate lawyers become more sociable).

There are many stories to be told about this ministry and all who are involved. Much analysis and reflection is called for. Some day.

I don't need to say how critical such ministry is at this time in history, given the increasingly anti-immigrant policies and practices of the administration to the south, and the need for Canada to be increasingly open, responsive and supportive. We are grateful for many allies, including: the Synod of Alberta and the Territories, for financial support; numerous Lutherans and ecumenical partners in solidarity across Canada; the United Church of Canada (UCC); the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA). We are blessed to receive many visitors and maintain faithful communication with so many. As prison inmates so faithfully affirm: "God does not abandon us." Thanks be to God.

Paz,

Brian Rude

Rev. Dr. Brian Rude,

"En Mision con El Salvador" / "In Mission with With El Salvador"

Synod of Alberta and the Territories