

My latest prayer letter from Costa Rica



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Dear friends in mission,

Grace and peace to you as we move into February. My history of Christianity students started our work together this term by exploring various calendars developed in ancient and medieval times. While most of the month names in our current calendar derive either from the name of a Roman god, a Roman emperor, or a Roman number, the name February comes from an ancient purification ritual. So, may February be a time of reflection for each of us.

I want to start this monthly letter with a health update. February 1st marks six years from my breast cancer diagnosis. I am glad to report that the cervical biopsy I had on January 19th showed only normal tissue. Thanks to many of you for your prayers and notes. It will be a few weeks until I will be able to resume all of my normal activities as the biopsy incision continues to heal.

The Presbyterian Church of Honduras suspended their presbytery meeting in January, so my colleague Nidia Fonseca and I did not travel to Honduras to offer a workshop to begin the second year of the theological formation program the Latin American Biblical University (UBL) is offering to the church there. Protests against electoral fraud in the November 26th elections continued around the country leading up to the inauguration of the second term for Juan Orlando Hernandez on January 27th. A delegation of US religious leaders went to Honduras to accompany the popular movements who are calling for democracy and respect for the people in Honduras. Former YAV Lora Burge was part of the delegation representing the Presbyterian Peace Fellowship.

We are waiting to see what the conditions in the country will be like after the inauguration. We have learned that the students there are eager to start their new classes. Blanca Aida Rivas and Betzabe Reyes, the UBL graduates who are facilitating the program, hope to be able to start visiting the groups of students in the different regions of the country in February, if conditions will allow them to travel. We are looking into how to send the materials to Honduras so the groups can begin the new courses. Nidia and I will be ready to go to Honduras for a national workshop with our students when the Presbyterian Church of Honduras indicates that it is possible for people to gather from different parts of the country. Please keep Blanca Aida and Betzabe, as well as our students there, in your prayers.

Here at the UBL, our classrooms are full this term. I have twelve students in the introductory history of Christianity course. Another eight students are taking the same course with me online. Another group of students, Hispanic pastors serving in the United Methodist Church in the United States, will start another version of this same course on February 5th. We are so happy to receive many people who have decided to come study theology and the Bible in a setting that encourages critical thinking and a theological vision that promotes well-being for all, including the earth.

The presence of women in the history of Christianity has often been ignored. The continuing education program of the UBL, called Travesias (Passages), is a space that allows us to explore different topic in online certificates. This term I am offering a certificate entitled, "Invisible Never Again: Toward a Feminist Vision of the History of Christianity". The course, which begins on February 5th and runs for 12 weeks, has generated a lot of interest.

At the UBL, we are always glad to receive groups who decide to travel to Costa Rica from the United States and elsewhere to learn about mission and theology in Latin America. On February 10th, a group of thirteen people from the Presbyterian church in Ocean View, Delaware are arriving to spend a week with us. I was able to visit this congregation in 2016 and welcome them into the circle of churches that support me with their prayers and gifts. I am looking forward to spending a week with them.

At the end of February, we will be holding a faculty workshop to thinking together how we understand theology today and what we believe to be the contributions that theology can make to the efforts to empower communities and improve lives in Latin America and the Caribbean today. Nicolas Panotto, a theologian from Argentina who currently works in

Chile, will be leading us through the three-day process.

UBL profile

Angel Roman and Simone Dollinger, along with their seven year-old daughter Alma, have just arrived in Costa Rica to join the UBL community. They are staying with Javier and me until they find a place to live. Angel is from Guatemala and I worked him years ago in the theological formation program of the Evangelical Center for Pastoral Studies in Central America (CEDEPCA). Angel began his theological studies in the Episcopal Church of Guatemala before he came to CEDEPCA to study. He then came to Costa Rica and finished three degrees (bachelor's, licenciante and master's degree) here at the UBL. Here in Costa Rica he met Simone, a theology student from Switzerland who spent 2001 at the UBL. In 2004, Angel went to Switzerland to do his doctoral work in pastoral theology, where he wrote his dissertation on the pastoral work some Pentecostal churches in Guatemala are doing with ex-gang members. He and Simone married in 2007. Alma was born in 2010.

Angel and Simone have been sent to Costa Rica by Mission 21 of the Swiss Reformed churches. Angel, in addition to teaching in the theology department, will be helping us organize research processes. Simone will work directly with the institutions around Latin America that Mission 21 supports in projects that focus on religion and development. Alma starts second grade at the Humboldt school on January 31st. She's looking forward to learning new things and making new friends.

Angel, Simone and Alma ask for your prayers as they begin their new adventure in Costa Rica. They are hoping to find a house or apartment to rent close to the UBL. They also ask for prayers for Angel's parents in Guatemala and Simone's family in Switzerland, especially for Simone's aunt who has recently started chemotherapy.

Closing thoughts

On February 4th, Costa Ricans will go to the polls in the first round of presidential elections. Unlike the other countries of the region, this country has held regular democratic elections since 1949. This campaign season has been marked by belligerent religious rhetoric, especially after the Interamerican Court for Human Rights issued a binding opinion in mid-January calling on the states to recognize the right of all of their citizens to marry. Of the thirteen candidates running, the frontrunner in the current polls is from an evangelical political party. He has taken a stance against gender equality and recognition of the rights

of LGBTQ persons. At the UBL, we are very concerned about the manipulation of religious language and sentiments. I ask your prayers for the election process here as the people of Costa Rica choose a path for their future.

As always, thank you for accompanying me and my colleagues with your prayers as we help women and men develop skills to serve their churches and communities. I am especially grateful for the gifts that make my service here in Costa Rica possible.

Blessings,

Karla

PS As I finished this letter, I received word that a member of the UBL community is hospitalized in very serious condition, though there is no clear diagnosis. Hernán López is a UBL graduate from Honduras. He is a Lutheran pastor who had to leave Honduras with his family almost five years ago because they were receiving death threats. Hernán and his family returned to live at UBL here in Costa Rica in August after a short time in the US working with two different Lutheran congregations. Since coming back to Costa Rica, Hernán, a cancer survivor, has been getting weaker and weaker. Please hold Hernán, his wife Mirna and their daughter Rachel in your prayers.