Sustaining the Weary with a Word

Honduras Companion Synod Mission Trip, March 13-19, 2013

Isiah 50: 4a says, “The Lord God has given me the tongue of a teacher, that I may know how to sustain the weary with a word…” The purpose of the March 2013 trip to Honduras was to "minister to the ministers," to listen to the cries of God’s people who face assault, intimidation, extortion, and the prospect of a violent death on a nearly daily basis. In our role as accompanying companions Pastor Paul Busekist from Bethlehem, Traverse City, Janet Alcantara, a deaconess and former missionary to Honduras, Ann Kleman, from Iowa but originally from the Saginaw area, and Bishop John Schleicher went to do what good friends do: listen carefully, demonstrate that they hear what is said and speak honestly – “sustaining the weary with a Word”. The cries were cries of the heart - cries for a nation in which almost nothing works anymore; cries for church leaders under chronic stress; and cries for the health volunteers we have helped train. These are a weary people, hungering for someone who would listen, hungering for a word that would sustain them. Much of our time was spent just "being with" our sisters and brothers from Tegucigalpa and San Pedro Sula. As we heard how dangerous it can be living in Honduras, we saw how resilient, creative and church loving these people are. Our goal was accompaniment; the many times we heard (with hugs), “Thank you for coming!” and “We’re so glad you came!” indicated we were successful.

Each mission team member brought their own strengths to our time in Honduras. Ann led Centering Prayer where the promotoras (volunteer health providers) experienced silence and felt God’s presence with them. The people were hungry for the silence. They didn’t fidget and were thrilled and eager to share their experiences. Ann challenged each of them/us to set aside all of the voices and cares we have and focus on silence with God.

Janet led a discussion on Biblical responses to violence, listening to how God is speaking to us in the silence and walking with others in our lives. She allowed the promotoras to open up and *talk* in a safe environment about their experience with violence and their strategies for coping, so they could see they were not alone.

Pastor Paul talked about praying Psalm 1 and being environmentally aware, particularly with respect to water usage and pollution. Pastor Suyapa, from Honduras, began the session by inviting participants to write what they perceived as ecological problems in Honduras and to put their papers on a tree she had drawn. Pastor Paul then took those concerns to springboard into his talk (illustrated—to the delight of all) about trees and water in the message of the Biblical story.

Bishop John discussed praying the psalms. His gift for listening and then feeding back information with great gentleness and compassion helped individuals understand themselves and their situations with greater clarity. The Bishop also affirmed each participant's gifts and blessings. He led a devotional on "curing" vs. "healing". It seemed that this was an exact moment of spiritual accompaniment: all of us together - shared tears, shared pain, and yet, rising out of that, also shared hope, shared strength to somehow keep going, and shared faith that God was indeed present.

Janet had crisis intervention/spiritual direction conversations with individual members of the ICLH leadership and action plans were devised regarding self-care. These leaders were encouraged to value themselves and their ministry and see themselves in a refreshing new light.

The team spent time with other leaders in Honduras. Stories and ideas were shared with the Lutheran World Federation staff in Tegucigalpa. They heard from Hermillo Soto just how systemic and widespread were the poverty, violence and other societal problems afflicting the Honduran people. Meeting with the leaders of AJS (Association for a More Just Society), and learning of their upper-level contacts in the Honduran government and their highly political points of view, was quite different from what one usually hears in the church. There appears to be real potential in teaming up with this Christian Reformed group based in Grand Rapids, Michigan, as they have more resources "on the ground" in Honduras and we (as the ELCA) have more resources/members "back home" in the U.S.

We had words from the Word to sustain the weary. But equally, the Word came from the lips of those who cried out. When responding to the question, "Where do you see the hand of God in all this?" it was abundantly clear that these Honduran people were the teachers too. Sometimes in just a sentence or two, we heard powerful sermons. We sensed the promotoras and leaders thoroughly enjoyed their time together. In terms of spiritual accompaniment, bringing them all together was a huge gift for them. Their laughter and animated voices were such a pleasure to hear.

Through the years, "el grupo de Michigan" has generated an affectionate relationship and a sustainable health program in Honduras. Despite the difficult situation, we heard all of the promotoras declare firmly their intention to carry on finding energy in God's sustaining love and wholeheartedly believing in the value of this ministry to their community. In the years ahead we must remember how much the North/West Lower Michigan Synod means to the leaders and volunteers in the Lutheran Church in Honduras. We are rare teachers, catalysts of hope, for them. And not at all surprising because they and we are in Christ, they are our teachers and catalysts of hope for us too.

(Compiled by Connie Lenkowski from individual reports of the Team: Pastor Paul Busekist, Janet Alcantara, Ann Kleman and Bishop John Schleicher.)