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May – June 2017

Dear companions in mission,

Greetings from Costa Rica, where the start of the rainy season has brought unusually heavy rains. The plants in my garden are happy, but in some places roads have washed out and people have been forced from their homes. The weather here is no longer as predictable as it once was thanks to climate change. Javier, my husband, is currently in his home country of Nicaragua just to the north of Costa Rica, where the rains have not been as abundant. We hope there will be enough rain this year to help the farmers, including us, recover from years of drought.

I apologize that nearly two months has passed since I last wrote. The beginning of May found me in Rosario, Argentina, attending a regional consultation for the Commission on World Mission and Evangelization of the World Council of Churches. About twenty women and men involved in churches and theological schools around Latin America met, together with a few folks from other continents as well as some ten representatives from churches in Argentina, for four days to reflect on the movement of God's Spirit in mission today and the way God's mission emerges today in the margins of societies. We were responding to the 2013 ecumenical affirmation of mission and evangelism, *Together Toward Life*. This regional consultation is one of several being held in preparation for next year's world conference on mission and evangelism. On our last day in Rosario, several of us participated in a march marking the fortieth anniversary of the struggle of the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo, the courageous women who challenged the dictatorship by demanding to know what happened to their disappeared children and grandchildren. The Mothers continue to search for the children of those who were disappeared and earlier this year they identified the 122<sup>nd</sup> grandchild. I also was able to spend a couple of days with friends and PCUSA colleagues in Buenos Aires before I flew back to Costa Rica on May 8<sup>th</sup>.

Since I returned to San Jose, the administrative work involved in the start of a new semester here at the Latin American Biblical University (UBL) has kept me busy. I spend a lot of my time

and energy reaching out to our students throughout Latin America to encourage them to continue their studies through distance courses. It is not easy for folks who are working and also involved in ministry to set aside time for academic work. Ismael Avalos, a student in Peru, is slowly working through a course in the history of Christianity with me. His pastoral work takes him to remote villages in the Andes. On a recent trip, he was bit by a poisonous spider as he conducted a graveside service in a cemetery. After more than two weeks in the hospital, I am glad to report that Ismael has been released and is sending me papers once again. He has taken his academic work very seriously, even redoing papers I haven't asked him to rewrite. His academic work has improved markedly over recent months. At the UBL, we are hoping and praying that he will be able to come to Costa Rica next year to finish his bachelor's degree in theology. Our scholarship program will cover his costs while he is in Costa Rica, but we cannot offer him any help with the cost of the flight. Ismael welcomes your prayers for his recovery process and for his studies.

On June 12, we will begin a cycle of courses for our licentiate degree, which in Costa Rica and much of Latin America is the degree that follows the bachelor's and has traditionally been the basic degree required for teaching at the university level. One student has already come from Peru for these courses and another will be coming from Cuba. We are encouraging as many as possible in other places to also take courses. I will be teaching one of the seminars, but not until closer to the end of the year.

A group of four youth and four adults from Second Presbyterian Church in Louisville, Kentucky will arrive here in Costa Rica on June 22<sup>nd</sup>. Here at the UBL, we will help the group learn about the Costa Rican context for a day before they are hosted for the weekend by a local Presbyterian congregation. They will spend another three days at the UBL learning about rainforest ecology and the situation of Salvadoran refugees here. The group will also be led in a Bible study by Nataly Romero, one of our Peruvian students who has just finished her bachelor's degree in Biblical studies. For us at the UBL, it is an honor to be part of nurturing the faith journey of the people who come to learn with us about God's mission in this part of the world.

The 2017 General Council of the World Communion of Reformed Churches (WCRC) will be meeting in Leipzig, Germany from June 29<sup>th</sup> to July 7<sup>th</sup>, with visits to Berlin and Wittenberg. The topic for this gathering that will bring together representatives of Reformed church from more than 200 member churches around the world is "Living God: Renew and Transform Us". I have been invited to be part of the language services team, working in English and Spanish. I will be leaving Costa Rica on June 24 to fly to Germany in time to help with the women's pre-conference on gender-based violence and climate change. Thank you for your prayers for me and the delegates to the General Council as they share their stories of faith and discern how God is calling to our family of churches to witness in the world.

## Reading corner

If you are looking for new ways to understand God's mission in the world today, I invite you to read *Together towards Life: Mission and Evangelism in Changing Landscapes*, the ecumenical affirmation adopted by the World Council of Churches in 2013. The document focuses on the work of God's life-giving Spirit in and beyond the churches. With the majority of Christ's followers living in the global south today, the dynamics of mission have changed as those far from the centers of power share the gospel and defend life. The document comes with a study guide and other study materials. This would be great material for a mission committee, an adult Sunday school class or even a confirmation class. The link below provides information on how to obtain copies of the document.

## UBL Profile

This month I want to introduce you to Vanessa Zuniga, our new academic registrar. Exactly three years ago, Vanessa started working part-time at the UBL as assistant to the registrar. She has lived close to where the UBL is located since she was ten-years-old. When word began to circulate in the neighborhood that the UBL was looking for someone to assist the registrar, Vanessa decided to apply, even though she had not had a job outside of her home for several years. Her technical degree in accounting as well as computer training has brought important skills to the registrar's office. When Ana Cecilia Rettes announced her retirement at the end of last year, Vanessa was selected to replace her. Vanessa is still adjusting to her new duties and responsibilities, but we are confident that she will be able to manage all the changes ahead as we expand our programs on-line. She tells me how much she enjoys the work atmosphere and team spirit at the UBL, a contrast to the business environments where she had worked in the past.

Vanessa and her husband, Marco Antonio Salas, have two children, Mariana y Anthony, both of whom are finishing their university studies soon. Their family has entered a new stage now that Mariana has a boyfriend. Vanessa and Marco Antonio are very active in the local Roman Catholic parish and serve as extraordinary communion ministers. Vanessa also helps with our weekly worship services at the UBL. She asks for prayers for her family and for the working environment at the UBL as we face the challenges of on-line education.

## Closing thoughts

As I finish this prayer letter, my heart is filled with sadness at the news of the death in Portland, Oregon on Friday, May 26<sup>th</sup>, of a young man, Taliesin Namkai-Meche, who had studied at Reed College with our daughter, Tamara Torrez-Koll. Taliesin was one of those who stepped in to protect two teenage women, one Muslim and one black, from a white man who was harassing them on a train. The attacker then stabbed Taliesin and two other men, one of

whom also died. The attack happened a short distance from the immigration law office where Tamara works as a legal assistant. I pray for all who are victims of acts of hate and for those whose hearts are full of hate. I especially give thanks for those who stand up to hate, even at the risk of their own lives. They help us to continue to dream of a world without hate. May we find the courage to stand against hate in all its forms.

Blessings,  
Karla