

June 13, 2008

Dear friends in Christ,

Greetings! Before leaving for the U.S. for this summer's missionary home assignment (from June 14 to August 15), I wanted to get out one more newsletter. While I look forward to visiting many of you at our sponsoring congregations this summer, unfortunately there are a number of congregations that we will not be able to visit. Hopefully we will be able to see you during our next home assignment, however.

This summer during the congregational visits I plan on sharing the stories of some of the people with whom I work, especially some of my students. In this newsletter, I want to share with you a little bit more the story of Rosa Hamdan, based on a short biography she wrote for me for class. I am attaching a couple of pictures of Rosa as well. Although I mentioned some things about Rosa a year ago in our newsletter, there is so much more to tell. Rosa grew up in a small town in a rural area of the Mexican state of Michoacan. Her father was Muslim (from Lebanon) and her mother was Christian. She says that her first experience of God took place when she was 8 and nearly died from an illness. Since they didn't have the medical facilities to care for her in Michoacan, she was taken to Mexico City where she had to spend a year away from her parents. However, she felt that God was with her at every moment, and from that point on realized that her life was not her own but belonged to God.

When she turned 18, she went to study medicine at the National Autonomous University of Mexico (the largest university in Mexico, and I believe in Latin America as well). Once again she became seriously ill and thought she was going to die, but God healed her. During her first year at the Faculty of Medicine at the University in 1974, she became acquainted with the International Fellowship of Evangelical Students, and was active in that organization for her last two years at the university. According to Rosa, this played an important role in both her personal and professional development. When she finished her medical degree, she began to work in some of the marginalized areas around Mexico City in conjunction with the University and the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO). This involved working with abused children who had problems of malnutrition as well as physical and emotional underdevelopment.

In 1981, while she continued to work in this program, Rosa married a pastor, in large part because she wanted to be doing what he was doing, namely, pastoral work in a congregation. Shortly afterwards, when she had not been able to become pregnant, she was told by a doctor that she was infertile. Surprisingly, however, she became pregnant, only then to have an ectopic pregnancy (in which the fetus develops outside of the uterus). Her fallopian tube ruptured, and she went into a coma for over a week, close to death for the third time in her life. She asked God to let her live, and God answered her prayer; she says this confirmed to her once more that her life was not her own. While the doctors were surprised that she had been able to get pregnant, after she recovered they told her there was now absolutely no chance of her becoming pregnant again. To the amazement of the doctors, however, she did become pregnant again in 1985, and this time was able to give birth to a daughter, whom she named "Hazel," which means, "one who sees God." Three years later, she then had a son, whom she named "Samuel," meaning "God heard my prayer."

Following this came the most difficult time in Rosa's life. In the same year Samuel was born, her husband told her he was leaving her. She had to leave the church

where they had been and look for a job to support herself and her two children, since she had quit working when her children were born. She worked as a doctor at a candy factory, attending the workers there, and even studied a Master's Degree in medical attention in the workplace at the Metropolitan Autonomous University. During this time she became acquainted with the Lutheran Church of the Good Shepherd and found the support she needed there. She also helped form an organization of female workers who wanted to address problems related to the various types of abuse and mistreatment they suffered; she led talks and workshops on things such as self-esteem, violence in the home and the workplace, and legal and psychological assistance for several years until the factory relocated outside of Mexico City in 2005.

In 1997, she took on a second job as a school doctor at a secondary school in Xochimilco, a marginalized area in southern Mexico City. There she began to deal with adolescents who were victims of abuse, family violence, and chemical addictions. In order to be able to deal better with these problems she studied a specialized degree in adolescent education at the National Pedagogical University and also earned diploma degrees in the areas of Addictions and Gestalt Therapy. She developed and ran a special program for adolescents and young women until the government cut funding for the program, leading to its termination in 2006. Nevertheless, she has continued to give workshops in all of these different areas on her own at the invitation of churches, non-profit organizations, and various youth and women groups.

All this time, however, Rosa says that she still felt she had a debt with God that she needed to address. One Sunday at church, listening to a sermon about Jeremiah's call (Jer. 1:4-9), she decided to do what she had wanted to do for over 20 years: study at the Seminary to become a pastor. In January 2007, she enrolled at the Lutheran Seminary in Mexico City (where I teach). It has been difficult for Rosa to make ends meet and to continue to support her two children, both of whom are now university students, but with God's help she has been able to accomplish this.

Rosa writes: "I believe I have come to know God both through my own personal pain as well as that of those around me. I have felt God's presence in everything I have been through. If I myself had not gone through the things I suffered, I would not be aware of the needs of others; if I had not come to know God, I would have had no way forward in life. When I try to make sense of everything that has happened to me, the only thing I can figure out is that I have to constantly look, not to myself, but to God, because God has experienced what I have. Even God chose to become one of us to go through what we go through in order to come to know us fully."

Rosa's story is a fascinating and inspiring one. You cannot imagine what a joy it has been for me and others to work with Rosa at the Seminary. Please keep Rosa and all of the other students and professors in your prayers.

Yours in Christ,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'D. A. Brondos', with a stylized flourish at the end.

David A. Brondos
ELCA Missionary in Mexico



