

October 15, 2008

Dear friends in Christ,

Greetings! We have been back in Mexico for about two months now. Sorry it's taken so long for another newsletter! I had hoped to get it out last month. Summer was a very busy time with visits to ten of our sponsoring congregations. It was great seeing many of you! We also got to visit a number of colleges, since Monica is in her senior year in high school, and spend some time with my parents and family, among other things. Alicia stayed here in Mexico City, and fortunately was able to find another teaching job, which she's been enjoying. Monica and I also got to spend time with daughter Elizabeth and her husband Matt in Columbus, Ohio, and then in late August Elizabeth came to Mexico to spend two and a half weeks with us here.

Our semester at the Theological Community started just a few days after I got back this summer, so I didn't have much time to switch gears. But all has been going well there. Our Lutheran Seminary is celebrating the tenth anniversary of its reopening in 1998 (it had originally functioned from 1965-1981), and we'll be commemorating that next week with some special events.

For this newsletter, I thought I'd share something with you about one of the students at the Theological Community. As you know, I work in an ecumenical environment in which most of my students are not Lutheran. They are involved in many interesting things. A few weeks ago, one of my students from the Baptist Seminary, which forms part of the Theological Community, shared some of his experiences this past summer at one of our Community chapel services, and I thought I'd share that with you on this occasion. His name is Jeshaú (pronounced He-sa-OO) Ocampo. He is 21 years old and in his third year of seminary.

Jeshaú is from a small rural town in the State of Puebla. When he decided to study to be a pastor, he enrolled at the Baptist Seminary, even though he is from a Methodist background. The Baptist Seminary is active in working with indigenous groups both in the countryside and in Mexico City, especially since a couple of their professors are indigenous. They are very involved in an organization called the "Evangelical Indigenous Campesino Council of Mexico." The Baptist Seminary and this Council organized a program in Chiapas this summer in which Jeshaú participated. Jeshaú had never been to Chiapas, a state in Southern Mexico on the border with Guatemala. It is one of the poorest states in Mexico, with a very high indigenous population. In fact, one of the things that struck Jeshaú most were the difficult living conditions and especially the poor medical attention in the rural communities he visited. Many of the indigenous people speak no Spanish, but there is no one at the hospitals and clinics to translate for them. He got to know several people with serious health problems that are unable to get proper medical attention. One of them, Pastor Humberto, loves singing with his guitar and has a beautiful voice (see photo), but he is gradually losing his voice because he has a chronic throat infection for which he can't afford treatment. Jeshaú was also very moved by Isaí, a two-year old boy who has a very painful tumor on one of his testicles. The doctors who examined him said they can't do anything for him until he is older and simply sent him back home without any medication or further treatment. In addition, Jeshaú says he observed a lot of health problems due to poor nutrition. Even though Jeshaú is from a small rural town as well, he says that in comparison to the living conditions he saw in the villages he visited in Chiapas, he feels so fortunate in his own life because he has so much compared to the people he saw there.

Jeshaú was in Chiapas for seven weeks from the end of June to mid-August. During this time he visited 17 different churches in indigenous communities. Most of these churches were of a Pentecostal background. He gave workshops on self-esteem for the youth at each

community, as well as teaching a course on the Bible and occasionally preaching. His work with the youth had an especially strong impact on Jeshaú. Many young people told him how they wanted to continue studying past primary (grades 1-6) or secondary school (grades 7-9), but were unable to do so not only because of the costs involved but because they needed to work to help their family. Even though public schooling is free, once you get past primary school, all the schools are quite a distance away from the villages, which makes it necessary for the students either to move away from their village or commute long hours (which also costs money). It's also very hard for them to find work in their villages. This means that many have to leave for the city or even go to the U.S. to look for work. The fact that it is extremely difficult for them to continue their studies as well as to find work means that there are just are not many opportunities or options for young people, and this gets extremely frustrating and depressing for them.

In contexts like this, the course on self-esteem is very important and helpful. When young people have such a difficult time, they feel as if they are not worth anything and that their life is of no real value. This only makes things worse, leading to all kinds of problematic behavior on their part. That is why one of the first things they need to do is to change the image they have of themselves. Jeshaú noted that they appreciated very much the fact that a young man like he was willing to make the effort to come from far away and spend time with them; in that sense, just his presence there among them was a way of helping them to see themselves as people who are worth a great deal.

As is usually the case when one carries out activities like those that Jeshaú did, Jeshaú felt that he was the one who was transformed most by his experience in Chiapas, receiving much more than he gave. Although he had been preparing for a more traditional ministry as a pastor, he said that as a result of his trip to Chiapas he hopes to go back there when he finishes his studies at the Baptist Seminary in order to work with an international ministry there. Jeshaú also mentioned that he has felt very blessed to be studying in an ecumenical environment like the Theological Community here, since it has helped him appreciate the diversity and richness that exist among the various Christian denominations and groups such as those he visited in Chiapas. I am attaching a couple of other photos with the newsletter, including one of Jeshaú eating with other youth during his visit to Chiapas and one of Jeshaú (with white cap), Rubén Montelongo, the Dean of the Theological Community, and myself.

It's a joy for me to be working with students like Jeshaú who come from a wide variety of backgrounds and are preparing to do ministry in many different contexts, knowing that as a result of their training at the Theological Community they will have the vision, knowledge, and pastoral skills they need to serve others. While as Lutherans, we have much to share with those of other traditions, we also have much to receive from them; most importantly, however, as we join forces with other Christians, we can have a much greater impact in our world, reaching out through one another to accompany people even in such distant and remote places as the villages of Chiapas!

May God continue to bless you all!

Yours in Christ,



David A. Brondos
ELCA Missionary in Mexico





