

REMEMBERING ELÍAS

Losing a student to a premature death is always a difficult experience, especially when it is sudden and unexpected. On occasion, however, there are students who touch one's life in a very special way, and their loss is particularly heartbreaking. One such student was Elías Hernández.

I got to know Elías over the past couple of years when he enrolled in several of my classes at the Theological Community. Elías was an iron worker by trade who worked out of his house as his workshop, where he filled orders for clients who needed things such as doors, gates, windows, and other types of metal structures and frames for their houses or constructions. He and his wife Valentina lived in a fairly rough neighborhood outside of Mexico City, where they built their own home on a lot they had purchased.



Elías (second from left in photo) and Valentina joined a Pentecostal church in the area and became very active there. At first, things went well and they were happy at the church, but after a time Elías began to have conflicts with the pastor. As is common in many Pentecostal churches in Mexico, the pastor tended to be very authoritarian and to exert strong control over the lives of the members. Elías was not one to remain quiet in the face of what he perceived to be injustices and manipulation, and thus began to question some of the things going on at the church. Relations with the pastor got worse when Elías told him that he wanted to study theology at our school, since the pastor, who had little formal theological training himself, began to see Elías as a threat to his own authority.

Shortly after Elías began his studies, he and Valentina finally felt they had no choice but to leave the congregation. Unfortunately, they were not able to find another church nearby where they might feel at home.

Like many of our students at the Theological Community, Elías had to travel a long distance to attend classes. It took him well over two hours to get to school on public transportation and then the same amount of time to return home. For that reason, and also because he needed to continue working in order to make a living, he only came in to school a couple of days per week.

Elías repeatedly told us in class that he did not want to be a pastor, at least in the traditional sense of the word. He simply wanted to grow in his faith and knowledge in order to be able to share what he learned with others. In a sense, however, he became a pastor to many people in that he reached out to those around him with the gospel in order to serve and accompany them in their daily lives, joys, and struggles. He often told us of the conversations he had with others, especially Valentina, with whom he shared constantly the things he learned in class. Many of Elías's friends and acquaintances, as well as people he got to know from his work, came to look to him for guidance and spiritual support.



In July, Elías began to feel fatigued and also to have muscular pain. He went with Valentina to a doctor, who prescribed something for the pain, but when Elías continued to grow worse, the doctor ordered some blood tests. Shortly thereafter, Elías was diagnosed with leucemia, a disease from which a couple of his siblings had died. Because of the overload that medical services in Mexico are facing as a result of the COVID-19 crisis and the very limited financial resources that Elías and Valentina had, it was difficult for Elías to find treatment. When he was finally able to get chemotherapy, it was extremely painful and the leucemia was too advanced, so he suspended treatment. According to Valentina, his last days in the hospital were particularly difficult and he also became infected with the coronavirus. He died in the hospital with Valentina at his side on August 12. Fortunately, because the test results for the coronavirus had not yet come back, Valentina was able to have him buried. Had the hospital known that Elías had become infected with the virus, by law they would not have been allowed to release his body to Valentina.

One of the things that I always tell my students is that, whether they believe me or not, I always learn more from them than they do from me. Valentina told me that Elías had shared that comment with her. It is not always easy to put into words what I learn from my students, and such is the case with Elías. However, many of the things that Elías shared helped open my eyes and those of my other students to new realities and to gain new perspectives on life, ministry, and the gospel. Elías's experiences enabled us to reflect on questions such as power relations in the church and the ways that different concepts of God are often used to justify those relations. On several occasions, Elías discussed the pain and heartbreak that he and Valentina had of not being able to have children, thus leading us all to understand more clearly what many couples go through and how we can minister to them with greater compassion and solidarity. As we had opportunity to hear more about the contexts in which he lived and worked, we were able to gain many insights as to how the gospel needs to be contextualized today.



In one class, I remember Elías sharing what it was like for his mother to bring him and his siblings to Mexico City as children to raise them here. She had no family or acquaintances here or anyone else to help her, and she had never had the opportunity to go to school or learn to read. In spite of this, she found a way to earn the money necessary to make ends meet and provide for her children's needs and education. I remember responding to Elías that people like his mother are inevitably looked down on as ignorant and treated with contempt, when in reality one can only be astonished and amazed at the intelligence, resolve, and ingenuity she displayed in navigating such a complicated urban setting without being able to read and overcoming the huge obstacles she faced in order to raise her children successfully. It was evident to all of us that she had passed on to Elías all of those same qualities, together with the creativity he displayed both in his work and in his studies.

Both Alicia and I feel very privileged and blessed to have gotten to know Elías. In addition to the things he taught us, one can hardly be around students such as Elías without being inspired and motivated by them. The faith and passion for the gospel that Elías displayed both inside and outside the classroom were contagious and changed our lives and the lives of many others. We thank God for Elías's life and pray that God will grant strength, comfort, and peace to Valentina in these difficult times.

OUR NEW SEMESTER

This past week we began a new semester at the Theological Community and Lutheran Seminary. All classes will be online due to the COVID-19 crisis. I will be teaching a Christology course on Wednesdays and a class on the Thought of Dietrich Bonhoeffer on Thursdays, both by Zoom. I will also be teaching or co-teaching four other courses in our Seminary's online program, though these courses are not by Zoom.

In many ways, of course, it is not ideal to have to teach classes in this way. At the same time, however, we are realizing that this kind of online teaching offers certain advantages. Most importantly, it allows students from many different places to participate. For example, for my course on Bonhoeffer, we already have students enrolled not only from various places in Mexico but also from Chile, Cuba, and El Salvador. If any of you would like to take the course from the U.S., you are welcome to enroll as well—although, of course, the class is entirely in Spanish! In my Christology course, we began by analyzing together some of the many ways in which artists have portrayed Christ in different times and places, such as in the mural below from a center for migrants in northern Mexico.



I think it is now clear to all of us that, even when we go back to having classes in person, we will continue using virtual learning methods as well. Only in this way will we be able to fulfill the demand that we are now seeing. Of course, this will require a great deal of planning, especially as we look to implement an entire study program for those who are not able to attend seminary in person. We will also need to continue to explore new methods of teaching virtual classes in creative ways. These things will be a big challenge, but we look forward to discovering new ways in which to help prepare the leaders that God's church needs!

INSTALLATION BY ZOOM

Last fall, Pastor Karina García at Holy Trinity Lutheran Church here in Mexico City announced that she was engaged to be married and would be moving to San Luis Potosí (about four hours north of Mexico City). It just so happens that the Lutheran congregation in San Luis was vacant and needed a pastor. Then in January the Mexican Lutheran Church approved the ordination of Yuly Alonso (see photo) and her installation as pastor at Holy Trinity. Both Karina and Yuly work with the Lutheran Seminary in addition to their pastoral ministry. Yuly comes from a Pentecostal background, yet had never had the opportunity to be ordained as a pastor there before she began working with the Seminary and joined the Lutheran Church.



Because of the coronavirus, plans for both Karina and Yuly were delayed, but finally on Sunday, August 23 Yuly was installed as pastor at Holy Trinity. Due to the pandemic, it was necessary to do the installation by Zoom, which was a first for the Lutheran church here. The decision was made to hold off on her ordination and a more formal installation until a special service might be held at the congregation, which is still not gathering for live worship. Yuly will become the fifth woman to be ordained as pastor in the Mexican Lutheran Church when we are finally able to hold the service. We rejoice with Yuly and of course with Karina as well!

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