

CHRIS & LINDA'S UTILA NEWSLETTER MARCH 2024

“...for it is written, ‘You shall be holy, for I am holy.’ “ (1 Peter 1:16, NRSV)

Dear friends,

First of all, the now traditional apology for being so late in posting this newsletter about what happened in March, leading neatly up to Holy Week with all its activities, even though we've just departed from the end of April. I suspect we will need a double issue for April and May, though this is longer than I'd intended. March started with the World Day of Prayer, which this time consisted of a prayer meeting led by a UMC minister who lives in the US, supplemented by an informative and unbiased historical video Rev Hanners found, followed by the service, led by and with a sermon from Linda, and finally a delicious Palestinian meal in the annexe, provided by some of the Women's Group members.

I made another ministry trip to La Ceiba- I was rather confused by the opening hymn this time as the student organist plays a syncopated rhythm rather than the actual tune, and I didn't recognize it as what I'd chosen. Mizpah church had donated a pulpit NRSV (the preferred MCCA Bible version)- they didn't have one, nor do they have MCCA prayer books, nor songbooks, relying instead on American UMC resources from a donation some time ago. After the service I managed to meet with all the preachers to strategise what we could do in the time remaining. In the afternoon we were supposed to go to San Francisco, but their church leader was in the public hospital in La Ceiba with her 11-year-old son, William. We contributed some money- it is a public hospital so patients get a bed and basic antibiotics, but have to pay for food, specific meds, and even blood tests and transfusions (apparently they even have to locate a donor). William was suffering from a nasty infection of the digestive system, but is now slowly recovering. I also finally discovered that the maximum taxi fare to the ferry is supposed to be L100 (£3), though I have normally been charged L200, apparently you need to hail a taxi from the street rather than outside the hotel.

I fitted in my Home Communion visits near the start of the month- this is normal practice, Communion Sunday being the first Sunday, but it doesn't always happen. Another visit to two shut-ins with the youth group was unsuccessful- only one teen turned up, and she wouldn't go with just Linda and I and without Bella, so the two of us visited them on our own. We had rather more for Teen Tuesday at Tammy's beach, where we played volleyball and ate chicken wings. We also started an evangelism course in Sunday School with a lesson on the creation. Early weeks seem a little repetitive, though for the adult class I do my own thing with the set themes, and Linda devises her own materials too.

I continued leading Lent Bible studies on Peter, John, and Judas. I also led the Men's Fellowship about worship in heaven from Revelation 4 & 5, and developed this further for the Women's Group, adding more hints on how to lead services- both the men's & women's groups do this regularly, but the main man who leads the services was away in the US when I did theirs. Linda was involved in sale of pork sandwiches to make funds for buying ingredients for the main annual fundraiser. She found their set ways of doing everything,

even laying out lettuce leaves, rather frustrating. She was then involved in the sale of the sandwiches and also cakes from tables on the main street, the cakes were delicious as always. The Women's Group here are very active- apart from this they also did a litter pick behind the church, a social trip to a café so far off the beaten track it requires a boat to access it, and they regularly visit elderly shut-ins in the wider community. The Men's Fellowship mostly do home improvement (which I'm no help with other than for donations) and preach (usually when I'm elsewhere), other than attending our actual meetings when I can.

The Saturday before Holy Week was particularly challenging- our devotions at our early prayer meeting had clearly been influenced by Adventist rather than Methodist teaching. Later there was a very secular memorial service at which I assisted but hadn't planned. After a difficult church service, at the cemetery the casket containing the deceased's ashes was too large to fit in the breeze block container designated for the purpose, so the prayers were said with the casket on top, after which the casket was unscrewed and the bag containing the ashes was put into the container to the sound of his favourite song, Bob Marley's 'No woman no cry', to which the widow alternately cried and sang. There was a second memorial service in church later, for a suicide victim who had lain undiscovered for some time. Several family members had come over from the US, including his teenage daughter, who hadn't intended to speak, but did so with many tears and some swearing. The Methodist Church is the established church of this community, which brings its own challenges.

So we came to Holy Week. Palm Sunday was memorable- the starting procession was challenging. As our forthright Sunday School Superintendent was away visiting a new grandchild, a large group of older ladies gathered on the main road by the church entrance, to have less distance to process than from our usual starting place under the annexe. They utterly refused to move, so we had the shortest procession ever, about 3 metres, to church- I had to be at the front. Linda led a memorable children's talk with enthusiastic responses from the congregation (especially two members of the Men's Fellowship who don't usually come on Sundays) as I battled with the fan, which was cooling us but threatening to blow my unlaminated cue cards away. All five members of the school choir turned up, three for the first time on a Sunday, with their Spanish teacher to sing 'God is our Father', which I'd taught them for Fathers' Day. There was a really great atmosphere throughout- what a blessing! The Sunday School procession was much more obedient, 104 people processed the full distance with 100 freshly-picked palm leaves. Our theme that week was Holy Week, so I developed the plastic egg timeline I'd used at school for use with the adult class (plus one clingy son). I also recruited characters for our drama sketch at the Easter presentation. My class even got the best behaviour award for the first time! Linda's Jubilee class get it occasionally...

The Holy Week 6am prayer meetings began on Monday and continued through the week with increasing numbers again, with breakfast every day except Good Friday. For Teen Tuesday we did the Holy Week egg game with the teenagers, who were fascinated with the objects that we'd brought from England. On Wednesday after prayer we prepared the tables for the Utilian version of the Passover meal later, including a top table for twelve men, some of whom had been invited from the Church of God to make up the numbers, even after the

exclusion of Judas Iscariot from our version. We drew names from a jar to select a 'Jesus', who didn't have to do anything, not even sit in the middle! As it transpired, our Jesus had to leave early to return to the Church of God! We were also briefly joined by a member of Alcoholics Anonymous, who usually meet there then. He came in, sat at the top table, saw all the women looking at him, and promptly left. I had wondered whether he'd been asked to do that, to play Judas, but no, it just happened. We had a full meal, including lamb, which is rarely seen here, half of which only arrived after nearly everyone had been served (timekeeping is not this lady's forte)! One man tried lamb for the first time, but didn't like it. Linda's contribution was charoseth, which was the first time Rev Hanners had ever had that.

On Maundy Thursday evening Linda led the foot washing service, including songs, prayers and her short appropriate message, as well as a monologue from Peter, from one of the two men present. It was a good and meaningful service, with a challenging message. The Good Friday prayer meeting was very different this year- the church matriarch was too ill to lead it as in previous years, so a teacher led it instead. She began with a mini service focused on the cross, then left lots of time for prayer, rather more than last year- a great start to the day. At 7am the Roman Catholics were doing the Stations of the Cross in Spanish in the streets- no 7 was conveniently outside the Mission House. I took the main Good Friday service this year, including our church choir singing two songs we'd taught them from Songs of Fellowship and a Spanish Bible reading. Hopefully it was thought-provoking. Linda helped pack Easter baskets for all the Sunday school children, and then went round after the Easter Saturday prayer meeting to help our neighbour make pork sandwiches to sell that morning.

Easter Sunday started very early with the Sunrise service. There were fewer benches this year, not enough for the 40-50 people, so some sat on the floor and some stood. Rev Hanners led the worship, then the new pastor from the Church of God preached on the rich man and Lazarus, a curious choice though it was very evangelistic. When the sun rose it was hidden behind a cloud, but came out later. I preached at the Cays this year, but the tourists visiting Water Cay (a major tourist attraction) on my boat were late, so I was late starting the service. It seemed to go well, and I got back in reasonable time after negotiating with the captain earlier (the original time I was given would have made me late for Sunday school).

Though I'd arranged a drama practice at an agreed date and time for my adult Sunday school class, only half of them turned up (Linda's class didn't turn up either), so we needed to practise before Sunday School, which is why I needed to be early. One cast member missed that too, another lady was replaced by her teenage daughter after an unfortunate accident, but it went OK despite our being the last item (the children were fidgety). Linda's Jubilee class did well with their recitation of the Easter story, which was not easy for self-conscious pre-teens. It was her first time with her new class, and she was very proud of them. They did very well, are gaining in confidence and she is getting to know them better. We were invited to a meal afterwards by a church steward, whose house we found from some rather vague directions. There were loads of people there, with good food and good fellowship.

At school, the work began on the entrance mural of Jesus and the children painted by three eleventh-grade students (age 15-17), it looks very good. Christian murals have also

been painted on an outer wall by a local artist. I now teach two Bible classes each week- Eighth Grade (age 12-13), where it is a struggle to get homework in, especially from the boys, and First Grade, who have settled down and seem nice, but most struggle to even copy a few words down from the board. Linda is not teaching any class this year, largely due to the increasing numbers of Spanish-dependent children in each class- even her class from last year have gained several new Spanish-dependent students since then. I have continued coordinating Bible classes- though I was asked by Global Relationships to hand over this role, or start working with someone to show them what needs doing. I was told that several other people were capable of doing this (though I strongly suspect they don't realise how much it involves), but when I asked for one to work with, I was met by deafening silence... I am currently also covering a variety of classes across the school, either at short notice or where we've had decent warning (eg trips away), when I've posted it on our WhatsApp group, but others have not volunteered. Our children and young people continue to find it hard to find Scripture references, in Sixth grade one of Linda's Jubilee girls was helping her classmates.

Some good things have been happening at school, alongside facing various challenges. I did a 7am assembly about the anointing of Jesus using a variety of aromatic substances, including mosquito repellent, otherwise known as 'Linda's perfume'. I arrived early for a 6th grade class I was covering, and ended up helping 5th grade, who were studying a story about zoos and conservation, so I was able to share from personal experiences. Our girls' volleyball team got to the Utilian final but lost to the Cays' team. We had a Parents' evening in the annexe, so we had to cancel Teen Tuesday, and elected a new PTA, all of whom are Spanish-speaking. Though most of the meeting was in Spanish, Rev Hanners spoke in English with a translator about us being a Christian bilingual school. Profa Ledea, a new Spanish teacher, also started our first after-school club, a school choir, with 7th & 8th grade girls (age 11-13)- I attended some practices to teach them 'God is our Father' for Fathers' Day.

One of the mums in my adult Sunday school class has been in school daily, as her son has been having separation anxiety. Some teachers got stranded on the mainland after their University study weekend by a ferry breakdown, so some Board members helped out as substitute teachers. I was called in for meeting about a 16-year-old student who had left home and was believed to be living with her older boyfriend. We had to let one lower school teacher go, after repeated failures to produce lesson plans and other issues, without a permanent replacement so an ex-teacher has been drafted in to substitute for a month.

One week the Honduran Government announced a national sports day for later that week; we agreed to send two year groups. The day before it they declared that all children in the country must attend. Given the lack of planning, the supervision was inconsistent- children were wandering out of the football stadium and walking the streets, while others were balancing on top of a stand, totally ignorant of Health & Safety. It also meant I missed that week's lesson with all three Bible classes, leaving me two weeks' work to fit into one week. It wouldn't be so bad if we could plan in advance, but these things happen at very short notice- the next day in this case. A lack of supervision also affected our Dia de Padres event, it started at school at 6pm (peak mosquito time), with patchy outdoor lighting. As the small

children, who went first, finished, they played loudly- it was hard to hear the next classes over it. As the older students finished some found dark corners for canoodling, as most teachers were watching the programme instead of their students. The choir were on last, and did well considering it was their first performance. There are lessons to be learned for next time though. School closed for Holy Week, with the revision and exam weeks to follow.

Life at the Mission House is never dull. One Sunday evening the gas ran out while Linda was cooking, so I went out to buy some pollo chuco. It took an hour (usually 30/40 minutes) as they were so busy! The small gas tank should now last us out. The older lady next door (one of our 'shut-ins' who gets Home Communion) spent one evening on her balcony with loads of teenagers for a Duane Stephenson concert (a Jamaican roots reggae singer)- her comment was, "That Jamaican can sing." Certainly better than the drunkenshoutoke.

The expansion of the hire business on the other side of the mission house continued to frustrate us, with banging from 7am each morning, and Linda (whose dad was a carpenter) criticizing their hammer technique. Another new disco with more powerful equipment set up on the next jetty- Thursdays are now no longer the only night we get deafened from front and back. A local drug addict, the son of church members, often sits on our wall, sometimes swearing, sometimes demanding food, sometimes drinking beer. On one occasion we caught him jumping into our garden to urinate on our garden wall! Our golf cart broke down again on our way to prayer breakfast, the one week someone had chosen a distant café near the airport, but we managed to limp back home, and had breakfast opposite at Munchies café instead. Oh, and we had a bad ant infestation. Also I'm having a problem with my camera- the photos from our Honduran holiday, which wouldn't delete from the camera, were not visible on my hard drive. Though I couldn't find them, they are there, I just have to go out and in again to view them. I need to get this sorted out- I'm unable to use it until can delete about 4,000 previous photos. Otherwise it would store them all again, and there's not enough space as it is, so this month I'm relying on other people's photos.

On Easter Saturday we ran out of water (great timing huh?), so I had to go to the dive instructors next door for a hosepipe. We had some interesting conversations, though some of the Norwegians were rather inebriated. Semana Santa (Holy Week) is a massive party here, with an estimated 3-4,000 Honduran visitors extra. That means the discos pay for special licences to stay open beyond 2am every night, sometimes 4am, and on Easter Sunday they were still going on when we left. There was actually a traffic jam outside our gate which delayed our departure to Paradise Cove for the sunrise service at 4:40 am!

We also managed a few culinary and leisure activities. We made an Utila bucket list and tried the Argentinian restaurant first- their steak was delicious. I bought some home-made Utila hot sauce, which is tasty with white rice. For Good Friday lunch we had breaded conch with plantain and white rice, but no Jersey wonders sadly. At Munchies opposite I also tried a very strange 'English breakfast'. For one of our days off, we visited Neptune's across the lagoon to go snorkelling on their onshore reef and venturing to their blue wall (the edge of the deeper water), and finished the day with barracuda and coconut cake at a local restaurant. We had a Christian cinema night at our new cinema, to see 'God's not dead 4',

our first visit alongside several others, all from our church. We also went snorkelling at Coral View, where Linda's breathing tube leaked, so she soon got out, but I saw some excellent fish near the blue edge. An afternoon off saw us visit the chocolate factory, and drive along the coast road, where I saw our second wild swamper (the rare endemic iguana).

I've got so far behind with these newsletters that it's too late to send any prayer requests for April, so these requests are for May. I hope to send out a double April/May newsletter in (hopefully) early June... hopefully shorter than this one...

Our prayer requests for May:

For wisdom and patience in sorting out the bureaucracy involved with the immigration authorities enabling us to serve for the time agreed, giving thanks for the help we have been receiving with this

For further progress in arrangements for our freight, giving thanks for progress thus far

For the right person(s) to step up to coordinate Bible classes once we leave

For the Congregational meeting on Monday 6th May at Mizpah

For the preparations across the churches for the online Circuit meetings, and for the meetings themselves, from Tuesday 7th to Thursday 9th May (and the next day if necessary!)

For the health of my Circuit colleagues

For our own mental and physical health as we prepare to move on

For William and his mum, and Janette (the church matriarch) and Albert

For smooth progress through our Utila bucket list on our days off

For an interesting, restful and peaceful trip to Guatemala towards the end of May

For the logistics in covering church events and school lessons during this time

Thank you all for your continuing interest in our work, may God richly bless you all.

Chris & Linda



World Day of Prayer service



The Palestinian meal afterwards



Dishes in close up



Ms Santos and William



Refreshments after Women's Group



Making pork sandwiches



Selling cakes on Main Street



The litter picking ladies



The fruits of their labours



The distant south-west cafe



Women's Group visiting



Youth group visiting Janette



Youth group at Tammy's



Linda's Jubilee class



Decorating for Palm Sunday



The rebellious Palm Sunday ladies on Main Street



Reading the responsive psalm



Self-conscious teenagers at the back of the parade



'Passover' top table



Foot washing service



Washing the other man's feet



Washing the ladies' feet



Making up the Easter baskets



Easter Sunday sunrise service



During the service



Easter morning sunrise



Easter morning floral cross



Easter Sunday School



Jubilee class's recitation



Adult class perform 'The Other Mary'



11th Grade painting their mural



Outer wall murals



(our team are the ones in purple)

Girls' volleyball final



Parents' evening



Children at Sports Day



Dia de Padres at school