

Bishop Mike and Marsha Visit Our Companion Diocese in Colombia

13 July 2010 – Tuesday: Going to our Companion Diocese

Marsha and I boarded the plane on Tuesday, 13 July, on our first leg of the journey to Bogotá. In making our arrangements, we obviously had many options, including one that took us to Houston and got us to Bogotá at about 3:30 a.m. on Wednesday. We opted not to take this flight. Rather, we spent a relatively short evening in the hotel in Houston.

However, that meant a long day of waiting at the Houston Airport, as our plane to Bogotá wasn't leaving until 3:45 p.m. on Wednesday.

While we waited in the airport, Marsha practiced her Spanish. She had promised Blanca Lucía, Bishop Duque's wife, that she would learn Spanish, and Blanca Lucía promised that she would learn English. I think it's now a race to see who can learn more, quicker.

Marsha was using a text book from my high school or college days. I was a Spanish major, and so I have MANY books of grammar and literature. (I much preferred Latin American literature.) Marsha's conjugation of verbs, and questions about meanings of sentences, has caused me to realize, once again, that while I spent many hours studying Spanish...it was MANY years ago. My experience is that this will come back upon immersion, but it could take a day or two...and then understanding returns more quickly than speaking...we shall see.

Our flight is now delayed...but it shouldn't cause any problems at the other end. I pray.

Bishop Duque was at the airport to meet us. It took us more than an hour and a half to clear Immigration and Customs...seems that all of the international flights arrive at about the same time, making the lines LONG! There had to be at least 500 people in our line, making it about 1000 people all together (or more).

Bishop was patiently waiting for us outside. He got his car, and took us to our hotel - Hotel Egina, just a block from his apartment, and about 2 blocks from the unicentro (a BIG shopping mall)

15 July – Thursday

The morning was on our own – to get acclimated to the altitude (more than 8000' in elevation)...the air is certainly thinner here.

At Noon, Blanca Lucia came to pick us up, and took us to the Diocesan Center. Once there, we went to Bishop Duque's office, met a couple of people in the office, and had a tour of the Cathedral. It seats about 250 and is quite modern...looks nice. At that time, he told me I would be preaching on Sunday – in Spanish.

We sat in the office, and had a lesson on the geographies of the Diocese/Country -- Coffee district, Silver District, beef/cattle, indigenous area (coastal), and the flower region. They have Departments, not counties, or provinces.

Had lunch with Bishop, Blanca Lucia and Elisabeth (their youngest daughter), at Crepes and Waffles. The Crepes were to die for.

Back to the office for more learning about the Diocese, and then at 4 p.m., we met Kate and Brittany, who have served with YASC (Young Adult Service Corp) in Colombia for the past year. They are going to return to the USA at the end of August.

While here, they created and ran numerous VBS's around the Diocese, and they have set up various programs to meet the extreme poverty and drug abuse that exists. They also worked with the Diocese of Connecticut for their recent mission trip. The age range of those present on the trip were from "16 to Bishop Currey." (Sorry Bishop Currey, that's a direct quote.) During the mission trip, they worked with vacation Bible Schools and some other projects.

Dinner last night with the family, at Carbón de Paulo...the steaks here are excellent (and that coming from a Chicago boy)...there was a 3 piece 'band' who sang typical Colombian songs and music. At one point, the entire wait-staff went up on the stage and sang, while doing a slight 'dance' or movement. It was absolutely wonderful!

16 July - Friday

We left for a meeting with various clergy and leaders for an interreligious meeting in Bogotá. In 1991, Colombia voted for a new Constitution. One of the important facts is that the Roman Catholic Church is no longer considered to be the official religion/Church of the Country. Rather, religious freedom is to be the norm, with no prosecution for people of any perspective. The wording, in translation, seems to be quite broad.

Unfortunately many of the Clergy and the leaders of religious organizations (Jews, Muslims, Christians and the rest) have not fully understood this aspect of the Constitution.

This meeting was to help inform the people, and to call upon the leaders of all faiths to work together for a common good of transforming Bogotá and the Country of Colombia. Presentations centered on some of the common issues (drugs, prostitution, poverty, displacement of indigenous persons) that could be solved if the religious community truly put its mind and heart behind these goals.

Nearly 30 different Churches were represented in some fashion...evangelical, Episcopal, Lutheran, Methodist, and a variety of protestant, along with rabbis and imams.

We had lunch there, and spoke with a few people, including an ex-pat who moved from Colorado and is now doing some community organizing for these purposes.

We left and traveled to the Museo del Oro (the Museum of Gold).

A wonderful history of the gold, silver, copper and cultural history of Colombia. It was a very good museum and a nice depiction of how people saw faith and religion.

At the museum, we were given a pair of headsets for an audio tour, with English translation. As we were walking through, there was a class field trip that watched us. After awhile, they asked what we were doing and what those audio phones were. We told them and they looked rather puzzled. I pushed in the buttons and let one listen. Suddenly we were surrounded by about 20 kids, all wanting to listen to the headsets. Then some of their teachers/chaperones came up and wanted to listen. One child asked where we were from. We said that we were from West Virginia and asked if they knew the song. Of course they were too young. So Marsha and I sang it. The kids were absolutely amazed and smiled...some laughed, and when we finished, they asked us to sing it again.

We finished our tour of the Museum of Gold, and returned to the Diocesan Offices where we were met by one of the YASC missionaries, there to be our interpreter for a meeting with the clergy from around the Bogotá area.

We met from about 5 until a little after 7. There were five clergy present, and about three others who could not be present. All but one of them were non-stipendiary. The Dean of the Cathedral was present, and it appeared to us that he was a bit unsure about the Episcopal Church, especially when I mentioned that we were in full communion with the ELCA Church, and that Lutheran Clergy served in various capacities in our Diocese.

It was a good meeting, and I heard many stories of how the Diocese, and especially these clergy, is working to build the Church and the Diocese. Ten years ago there were only three congregations in the city of Bogotá. Today there are eight. Each is struggling, but they all have the dream that one day soon they will be self sufficient.

On our way back to our hotel, where we were to meet Blanca Lucia, we got stuck in traffic – terrible traffic. So much so that Francisco called and said that we were going to stop nearby and have dinner in town. We had a wonderful pasta dinner.

It seems that Bogotá has too many cars. Traffic is abysmal. In order to try to alleviate the congestion the government has implemented restrictions on the use of cars. If your car's license plate ends in certain numbers, you cannot be on the road. This is designed to remove about 20% of the cars each day. They are restricted from about 6 a.m. until about 8 p.m.

From my vantage point – it's not working. If it is, I'd hate to see traffic with all of the cars on the road. I think what this has done is that it has forced people to buy multiple cars so that they can drive whenever they want without restriction. (Even Saturday morning and evening traffic was terrible!)

17 Julio (July) - Saturday

Marsha and I got up, and met Francisco, Blanca Lucia and Elizabeth for a trip to the Cathedral of Salt. About 30 km outside of Bogotá is an old salt mine. At some point the miners decided to turn this into a cathedral, with the Stations of the Cross, various altars, and indeed – a large cathedral. It is an absolutely amazing sight!

We toured the Cathedral, and took various pictures. The miners obviously were not only workers, but creative faithful Christians who displayed their faith in their work.

At the Salt Cathedral, we met a friend of Francisco's, who worked with him when he practiced law. They taught together at one of the universities (there are more than 100 universities in Bogotá). He joined us for the tour and then took us to lunch, where we ate Argentinian beef – supposedly the best beef in the world. Together the six of us, while ordering what was called '1/2 portions,' probably ate two complete cows. The portions were enormous! (and delicious!)

Running late, we took off to the City of Chia, where we met with the Community of Faith/Church of St. Martha of Bethany. Driving up to the Church and the parish hall made any driving in West Virginia look easy. Steep inclines and terrible ruts in the muddy roads made for difficult and treacherous driving. We got to the parish hall, just in time for it to begin raining again.

As we got out of the car, we were met by two soldiers and a police officer who welcomed us and escorted us into the house. We met with the people, and saw all ages – from babies to old ladies. Most of the congregation is women. There was one young girl cradling a duck, which she said she was going to raise as a pet.

The view from the parish hall is magnificent, and if it was not raining and overcast, we would have been able to see the City of Bogotá.

We stayed for a while, met with the priest, and said Evening Prayer together. We then went down the mountain a little bit to the Church building. There we took a tour of the small place. The soldiers and police officer followed us and made sure we were safe.

It is here that the two missionaries from YASC come weekly, to provide educational classes for the young children. During the week, the priest follows up with 'life lessons.' A most remarkable place, where the Church is touching and transforming the lives of the poorest of the poor.

We left the Church, and returned to Bogotá.

Marsha and I having consumed about ½ a cow between us, we said that we didn't need any dinner...so the Duques dropped us off at the hotel and we relaxed in our room for the evening.

A long and fruitful day!

18 July -- Sunday

Church at the Cathedral - WOW.

Not a tremendously large group – but certainly a faithful, strong, committed congregation with many young children!

On Thursday or Friday Francisco told me that I would be preaching on Sunday. Fortunately, he said it could be short. I worked on the sermon and translation during the past few days.

As we lined up for the Processional, Bishop Duque said that he would say the words of Consecration for the Pan, and I would say the words for el Vino. I balked but he insisted. I practiced once and got it right.

The Liturgy was wonderful, and I got an ovation upon completion of the sermon. The Distribution of Communion was uneventful, with many kids receiving a blessing...but after the Eucharist, and before the Post-communion prayer, the kids came back up for a blessing and to receive some candies the Bishop had in a small basket. (Guess which they really wanted...)

After the Sermon, one man came up and read a resolution from their Convention in February, stating that they, too, vote to be in a companion relationship. Bishop Duque signed it and gave it to Marsha and me. People applauded!

Coffee Hour followed, with many good people, including some founding families, who said how proud they were with the Church and the ministries they were doing!

Following Church, we went with the Americans through a small street shopping area. Had a lunch at a Tapas place and then walked some more. A small snack at Crepes and Waffles was a nice completion for the afternoon.

That evening, we went to the Bishop's apartment for dinner. They said it was a traditional meal: Salmon, mashed potatoes, rice, and veggies, with a wonderful postre for dessert.

19 July - Monday

A later breakfast, as we could sleep in for a little bit, and then off to the Cathedral Offices for a meeting with the Companion Diocese Committee.

Blanca Lucia spent the initial time talking about the realities of Colombia as a country – poverty, drugs, para-military groups, corruption, etc. Fully 80% of the national budget goes to fighting the war on drugs, leaving very little for social programs and assistance.

In addition, when Bishop Duque arrived 9 years ago the Diocese was approximately \$100,000 in debt, having spent restricted funds on undesignated projects. The Diocese is now debt free but is still struggling.

However, it was clear that there is a faith and a passion to bring the Gospel to all people, and all congregations have some form of a social gospel ministry that is truly changing the lives of the people around them!

Then, off to el Devino Salvador, to meet the priest, and to see one of the projects the missionaries have been working with. Many old people have been displaced and abandoned by their families (usually for lack of funds to assist their parents). Many of these people come to this Church for a place to live and for assistance.

In addition, young kids come who have no place to go after school. Poor kids, certainly. And Kate and Brittany have spent much time there, teaching the kids to speak English, to learn their colors, and other basic skills. The kids were like sponges – soaking up everything that happened!
Back to the hotel for a quick nap, and then off to dinner.