

December 12, 2009

Dear Member of St. Mary's,

As many of you know I recently returned from a trip to El Salvador to visit our sister parish there, Santa Maria Virgen. The past few months have been exceptionally difficult for them - including the assassination by local gang members of Alex Canales, a parish member, on the church grounds. It had been over a year and a half since anyone from St. Mary's had last visited, and given that we are also in a transition year, I thought it was important that we show our support for their community in person.

Although most of you know that we have a sister parish in El Salvador, I thought it would be worthwhile to share with everyone both the long and recent past of St. Mary's historical involvement there, as well as provide an update on my trip.

St. Mary's Involvement in El Salvador

Our history in El Salvador goes back nearly twenty years to Larry Walton, the rector of St. Mary's prior to Peter Chase. Larry had been a missionary in Central America, and after retiring from St. Mary's in the early 1990s, moved to El Salvador. There, he was the rector of Santa Maria Virgen and the designated assistant to the Bishop of the Anglican (Episcopal) Church in El Salvador.

Santa Maria Virgen is an urban parish located in San Bartolo, a poor area outside of the capital city of San Salvador. Many of the roads are not paved and many people live in tin-roofed open houses. Although not a slum - there is electricity - living conditions for many of the people in this area are harsh.

In the "Peter Chase era" St. Mary's continued the relationship with El Salvador and Santa Maria Virgen, including several trips to visit during the 1990s and 2000s. Our parish members were very supportive of these efforts, especially the late Barbara Robinson, who bequeathed St. Mary's funding that we use today to support educational outreach initiatives. Our most recent parish trip was a ten-day trip in May of 2008 with six St. Mary's members (and five more from St. Paul's in Natick).

The Situation in El Salvador

History has not been kind to the majority of people in El Salvador. Well into the twentieth century, land ownership was very concentrated and there was little economic opportunity for the majority of the population except to work in harsh conditions on one of the large plantations. Waves of civil unrest were common throughout the twentieth century. A civil war in the 1980s and early 1990 between the government and many of its own citizens ultimately left one in six Salvadorians a refugee. After a large international outcry, in part due to the continued assassinations of clergy seen as sympathetic to the poor, the Salvadorian government signed a peace accord in 1992.

Although this marked the end of the civil war, and the beginning of economic reforms, the country was and continues to be daunted by gang violence and a lack of viable economic alternatives for many of its people. Per UN statistics, El Salvador is the most violent country in the Western hemisphere, and the second most deforested. It is also prone to natural disasters, including recent flooding in November - fourteen inches of rain in three hours - that left hundreds dead and thousands homeless.

The Episcopal Church in El Salvador

The Anglican Church in El Salvador is small, with only about twenty parishes, effectively having to rebuild itself after the civil war of the 1980s. It is active in its efforts to improve both the spiritual as well as economic lot of its members in both urban and rural poor settings. Examples of economic programs include providing seed financing for a program of microloans for farmers in the rural flatlands to buy fertilizer for their crops.

Our St. Mary's mission group in 2008 spent four days rebuilding portions of access roads to a parish in the western part of the country that the local authorities do not maintain, so that the Diocesan doctor can reach the church's clinic during the rainy season. Two years, a member of one rural mission parish died as his family was unable to get across a flooded road to get him to a hospital.

More Recent Developments at Santa Maria Virgen

On my first visit to El Salvador in 2007, I met their new rector, Father Julio Rivera, a dynamic former Roman Catholic priest who was doing amazing things in revitalizing Santa Maria Virgen. This culminated last year in the dedication of a new church building, constructed on a plot of land originally purchased for the church by Larry Walton. Our own Peter Chase attended the dedication of the new church building last December 6, and my own visit coincided with the one year anniversary of this dedication.

Father Julio has visited St. Mary's twice, in September of 2007 and 2008, so many of you already know him. His work at Santa Maria Virgen is all the more impressive when you consider that he is working in one of the most dangerous areas in El Salvador. On our last parish trip there in 2008, several of our parish members were exploring the area only a few blocks of the church and inadvertently became first hand witnesses to a fatal shooting. Fortunately, Alex Canales, the Santa Maria Virgen parish member who was with them, got everyone back to the church building safely.

However, Alex himself has not been as fortunate. This past September, Alex was assassinated in the church building itself by members of a local gang. Several weeks before Alex had been confronted by gang members who were attempting to take his mobile phone. Not only did Alex refuse, he also took their gun and then turned it in to local police. This made Alex a marked man. Father Julio tried to convince him to leave the country, but Alex refused, saying he had done nothing wrong and would not leave his home. In his final weeks, Father Julio had Alex stay at the parish building at night, but ultimately it didn't provide protection. The shooting itself happened during a medical clinic for the community that was being conducted by a mission group from Trinity Episcopal Church in Houston, Texas. The following quote is taken from an account written by one of the people who was there:

"The plan was to work until 12:30 and then take a lunch break. Just before 12:30, a masked man walked into the church and fatally shot Alex Canales, the church sexton and wounded a woman. The "pharmacy" table where DeAnna, Michael, Mark and I were working was located in the center and about two-thirds of the way inside the church doors. It all happened very fast, but what I remember is hearing what seemed to be a scuffle near the open church doors. I was in the process of dispensing some medication to a woman and her children and all of the sudden I noticed that a man, who was standing near the open doors, was trying to close the door nearest to him. Then the shooting started. Alex moved towards the shooter and was trying to stop him when he was shot. As we were trying to move away and take cover, the small metal table we were sitting at was knocked over and it actually ended up serving as a shield. We all hit the floor and and waited for it to be over. I think I heard five or six shots fired. Alex was shot at fairly close range at least twice in the heart. He died shortly thereafter."

Saturday, December 5: Morning

I arrived into the capital city of San Salvador late Friday evening, having been delayed by freak snowstorms in Houston Texas. I met briefly with Bishop Martin Barahona, Primate for Central America, and his daughter Eli, who would serve as my translator on this trip.

Saturday morning at 7am we departed from central San Salvador to make the forty minute drive to Santa Maria Virgen. By the time we arrived some of the youth had already started to arrive for Saturday morning church school. I was able to present them and their teachers with two

boxes of Spanish-language Christian Education materials, paid for by St. Mary's Outreach funds. The students then went to work finishing their "homework" - making Christmas cards for the people of St. Mary's in Massachusetts.

While the children continued their work, Father Julio and Eli took me on a walking tour of the local neighborhood so I could see what has changed since my last visit eighteen months ago. Heading up the road, a large area near the church had been razed both to continue building a larger road into the area as well as to have nearly one hundred new homes built for families whose homes were destroyed in Hurricane Ida last month.

Our next stop was the local elementary school, which had a few classes in session on Saturday morning, and a bare plot of land adjacent to the school. One of Father Julio's dreams is to build a secondary-level school in the area - there isn't one convenient for the area. He has been able to convince a local association to let the Anglican church have access to the land adjacent to the elementary school for this purpose. This is a big dream on the part of Father Julio - he envisions a school for as many as 300 youth. Such a school would require approximately \$250,000 to construct, and would need to be coordinated closely with the national government who would be responsible for much of the on-going operating cost. Clearly any such project is a far way off, but obtaining access to the land is a major milestone.

We then circled back to the old Santa Maria Virgen building, about 100 yards from the new building. The old building is still owned by the church. Father Julio was able to get donations of gym equipment and opened a gym so that local youth would have a place to go. He said that typically fifteen to twenty people would come each day. However, the gym was closed when the person running it was shot and killed after refusing to give money to a gang member.

We completed our circle by walking back up the street and path to the new Santa Maria Virgen building, walking by a mobile police station that had been set up in the area due to the sharp spike in violence.

Saturday, December 5: Afternoon and Evening

I spent the afternoon meeting with the Youth (Teen) Group, that numbered about fifteen. The president of the group told me that they had more members, but that some parents had decided to not let their children participate in the group because of fear about letting them out of their houses unless absolutely necessary. We spent about an hour discussing their view of the situation in El Salvador and how to work together as sister parishes. They also sang some songs, and we enjoyed an early dinner of Salvadorian papusas together.

Just before 5PM, Father Julio and I, along with a Vestry member and his two children, prepared for the Saturday evening Eucharist service with about twenty five attendees. After the service, many of the attendees were joined by other community members for an informal gathering at one members' house for discussion about the meaning of their faith, as well as for the youth to have

fun with a pinata. We finished about 8pm, after which I returned to San Salvador and an early night sleep.

Sunday, December 6

We departed this morning to make it for the 8AM service, the main service at Santa Maria Virgen. Much like at our Saint Mary's, the starting time is loosely observed by many members; however there were well over a hundred attendees by the time the service finished. Father Julio asked me to deliver the sermon, where I recounted the history of our sister parish relationship. He also asked if I could assist with the Eucharist, and had me present the bread as well as deliver the blessing.

Most members stayed after for coffee hour, which included coffee and sandwiches. This Sunday was also their Vestry meeting, which I was invited to attend. Some of the discussion sounded familiar - "How do we get and keep records of parish members up to date?" - "We really should do more with neighboring parishes and not just see them at Diocesan Convention." But the main topic of discussion was a sobering debate over whether Father Julio and Bishop Barahona should engage local gang leaders in an attempt to reduce some of the violence.

I would like to highlight a few items from the Vestry meeting:

- Donations from the Women of St. Mary's, the rector's discretionary fund, and a private donor will be used by Santa Maria Virgen to complete work on their new church building. In particular, they will finish an area designated for youth that will be named after Peter Chase.
- I was asked to send photos of both Peter Chase and Larry Walton that could be displayed prominently.
- Santa Maria Virgen is collecting clothing from its members and local community that can be given to the victims of recently flooding in El Salvador. The flooding had the greatest impact in the eastern part of the country where the Episcopal church has four relatively new parishes. Santa Maria Virgen has already made several trips to deliver supplies.
- When I asked what St. Mary's could do, I was asked if we could contribute \$400 for capital equipment that could be used to turn the old Santa Maria Virgen building into a vocational training center. I told them I would bring this to the attention of the Vestry. (This is a separate project from the secondary school I mentioned previously in this letter; the intent here is to turn the existing, unoccupied old church building into a school that can be used to teach vocational skills to youth in their late teens and early twenties.)

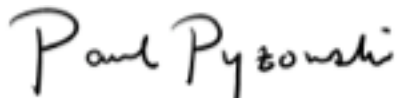
Lastly, one of the members commented that based on conversations he had with others in El Salvador is that the St. Mary's-Santa Maria Virgen sister parish relationship is one of the strongest there is.

The Vestry graciously provided me with lunch after the Vestry meeting, and several of the boys decided to cut me a fresh coconut for desert. Once we finished, I accompanied Father Julio and his wife for Sunday afternoon services at a neighboring parish (Trinidad) where Father Julio is assisting the newest priest in El Salvador with his new ministry.

Monday morning I had breakfast with Father Julio and Bishop Barahona, before my return flight to the United States. Among other things we agreed that Father Julio would be our guest at St. Mary's sometime in 2010 after our new rector had come on board.

Along with this letter are two items. The first is a one-page contact sheet of some of the photos I took while on this trip. Many more can be viewed on St. Mary's website at <http://st-marys-episcopal.org/News/News.html>. The second is a Christmas card made by the children of Santa Maria Virgen. As I write this letter I believe there are enough cards for each parish member to receive one; however there may not be enough cards for everyone on our parish mailing list, so I apologize in advance if not everyone receives a card with this letter.

Yours in Christ,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Paul Pyzowski". The letters are dark and fluid, with a prominent initial "P".

Paul Pyzowski