

SYNOD EXECUTIVE CONTINUING EDUCATION MEETING JANUARY 2007

San Jose, Costa Rica

Report by Rob Brink

Each year the Synod Executives endeavor to have one of their three meetings focus on continuing education. So in January of 2007, we journeyed to San Jose, Costa Rica. Due to the low cost of our motels and food, we were able to meet in Costa Rica at approximately the same cost as meeting in the United States. I share that for the benefit of our accounting folk. We were being good stewards of our financial resources.

Costa Rica is a beautiful country with rolling hills, mountains, volcanoes, and rain forests with thick green vegetation. It is about the size of West Virginia and is bordered on the west by the Pacific Ocean, on the east by the Caribbean Sea, to the north lies Nicaragua, and to the South, Panama. There are approximately four and half million people living in Costa Rica, with nearly two million living in the San Jose area. The majority of Costa Ricans are descendants from Spanish settlers. Costa Ricans depend heavily on tourism so they are extremely friendly people. A couple of facts about Costa Rica: a) they were the first country in the world to abolish their military; b) their main foreign policy objective is to foster human rights; c) they are a democratic republic and a member of the United Nations; d) they produce only 2% of the world's coffee, but they are proud to say it is the best coffee in the world, and after tasting it, I agree; and e) something they are not proud of is the fact that they rank second, in the world behind Thailand, in child prostitution.

Ninety-two percent of the population is Christian with approximately 3 in 4 persons claiming to be Roman Catholic. However, other religions and denominations are beginning to flourish, including Presbyterians. Located high on a bluff over-looking San Jose is the Latin American Biblical University, or UBL as it is referred to. We had the pleasure of spending most of one day at the Seminary, touring the grounds, and hearing presentations from four professors. UBL has 10 study centers and 10 associated universities throughout Latin America.

UBL was founded in 1923 by a pastor and his wife from Scotland. From its beginning, the school focused on educating women, marginalized racial ethnic groups, and the poor. They informed us that Mexico and Brazil have a problem with UBL because women students are considered equal to male students. UBL is an ecumenically diverse university with almost all of its students coming from Latin America. They offer three academic levels: Bachelors, Licentiate, and Masters. The seminary has 15 professors—12 of whom have their doctorate and 3 who have master's degrees. Including all of their centers located throughout Latin America and their affiliated universities they have 900 students. The average age of a student is between 35 and 45 years old. The UBL Seminary in San Jose hosts 30 to 40 students at any one time. All students from all the centers must complete their final six months of education at the UBL seminary in San Jose. For some students, this means waiting for as long as two years in order to save enough money for the plane fare to San Jose in order to complete their final 6 months of study. Their philosophy of teaching is much different, I believe, than in the United States. UBL takes the approach that they are not so much going to teach the students, but rather the professors and students are going to learn together.

We spent part of one day visiting the Presbyterian Synod of Costa Rica. The entire Board of Directors of the Synod came to meet with us. Some had to travel long distances for this meeting. There are 20 Presbyterian Churches in Costa Rica. They have a tremendous need for mission work groups to come down and help with construction and renovation projects. Some of the churches are located in shanty towns, so the church receives no financial support from the congregation. Much of their financial support comes from the PCUSA. However, what they lack in financial resources they more than make up in their

enthusiasm and commitment. They are on fire with the Holy Spirit! Not succeeding in their efforts to bring the gospel to the people of Costa Rica is an option they refuse to even consider.

After we had gone around the room and introduced ourselves utilizing translators, since many of them did not speak English nor did we speak Spanish, they asked us a very poignant question, “Why did you come all the way down here from the United States to meet with us?” After a pause, one of our Synod colleagues said, “We came here to learn from you. People in the United States do not have all the answers. The work you are doing here with minimal resources is very inspiring. We can learn from that.”

After the translator completed translating what our Synod colleague had said, there was complete silence in the room. Many of them began to get tears in their eyes, as did we. Then the silence was broken by a call to have a meal. We all began to talk while we were eating and everyone was smiling, and laughing. They were so gracious and willing to give and share what they had. It was truly an inspiring experience. Although our two cultures and languages may have been miles apart, it was clear that God’s presence knew no bounds in bringing fellow believers together in Christ’s name.

Pura Vida!

(Good Life)