



To: my friends at St. John's

Janice Lowell's Spring Message from Belize

Now that I have been here for one week, I am already feeling acclimated. I am living at a boarding house, where I have my own bedroom, with a ceiling fan, and a shared bathroom with a shower (cold water only, but that is just fine!). There is a common room with a TV, so I have been able to keep up with *Desperate Housewives*, *Brothers and Sisters*, *Grey's Anatomy* and *House*. It is quite modest, but absolutely adequate. My landlady, Sylvia, is a nurse and works at a nursing home, runs the boarding house and is a seamstress. Her mother lives with her, and she celebrated her 98th birthday this week. Sylvia's daughter, son-in-law and granddaughter also live here. There are three buildings on the property, all within a locked concrete block wall. Sylvia also makes breakfast and supper for me. She is a fabulous cook, but must think I have a great appetite. I often refrigerate part of my breakfast and have it for lunch. There are also two dogs, which are flea-ridden and suffering from mange. This is a middle-class area by Belize standards, and some of the homes are quite lovely, while others are wooden two-story buildings which look like they could collapse any minute. Everyone has a dog for protection, not so much for pets. The church I am assigned to and the hospital are within a 15 and 20 minute walk, so it is a convenient location. To get downtown and to the Diocesan office, I have to take a taxi.

All Saints seems to be a thriving parish. Usually 80 – 100 parishioners worship weekly. The primary service is at 8am, before it gets too hot. The 1st Sunday of the month, there is also Family Service at 10am. Many of the families of the school children attend this service. The 4th Sunday of the month is Youth Sunday, at which the youth group does the readings, chooses the hymns, and the sermon is youth directed. All Saints School, kindergarten to grade 8, is also on the property. It is vaguely affiliated with the church. There is a weekly church service, alternating among the different grades. My Field Supervisor is Fr. Wayne Kirton. He is from the Barbados and has been here since October. He finds the heat oppressive – that may give you



an idea of how hot it is.

My church duties are as follows:

I assist at all Sunday services

I preach once a month; Pentecost Sunday is my first Sunday and also Youth Sunday, so I am going to have them help me dramatize some of the readings

I teach a weekly Confirmation Class on Mondays, after school. This week I had ten children, but there are about 17 in the group.

I lead a Wednesday evening Bible Study. There were six women this week.

I will be addressing the students at the weekly School services

I will also be writing a reflection on the assigned readings for the Worship Bulletin every other week.

I assist with the Youth Program.

In addition to my duties at All Saints, the Bishop has asked me to work with the Pastoral Caregivers Team in developing a more formalized program of visitation to shut-ins and patients in the hospital. This team refers to one another as Sister and Brother, so I am Sister Janice. The Bishop had organized a turkey dinner last night for the eight pastoral caregivers. There is much work to be done. I would like to be able to formalize the program enough, so that when I leave, visitations will continue. A monthly worship service is held at 11am on the 3rd Sunday of the month at the Hospital. The chapel there is not much more than a closet, so patients who are able and willing are brought into a hallway, where the service is conducted. Apparently, someone brings a keyboard, so there is also hymn singing. I will also be conducting three workshops on dealing with trauma patients and families; what to do at a visit; the bereavement process and how they might set up a support group. I'm hoping some of the clergy will also attend. I will also be spending about 20 hours a week at the hospital in the chaplain's role. My photo ID badge says "Janice Lowell, Chaplin." The hospital is only 16 years old, but has been poorly maintained. There are 100 beds, and it is the major healthcare facility in Belize. There are also two private hospitals, but the cost of care is beyond what most Belizeans could afford. They are for the wealthy segment of the population. A 3 y.o. little girl was brought to the hospital from Punta Gorda, in the south of the country. She had burned herself with boiling water from a cauldron on an outdoor fire pit. She sustained severe burns, and the Social Worker arranged for her and her father to be flown to Shriners' Hospital in St. Louis, which is their burn hospital.

The Bishop had broken his leg several years ago and was in hospital for 45 days in traction. His family finally “kidnapped” him and flew him to Houston, where he stayed for five weeks for orthopaedic surgery, treatment of an embolism, and physiotherapy. If he had stayed here, he would have most likely died. This is all to say that the Belizeans do their best, but resources are scarce, some government officials are corrupt and line their pockets. It is frustrating to hear this when there is such need in education and healthcare. On a positive note, the country has a concerted campaign of awareness for HIV/AIDS. Their office is just down the street from me, so I plan to stop in some day to learn more of what they are doing.

The Bishop is an amazing man. He is quite young, perhaps forty. He was born here, so that is a real plus for the Anglicans of Belize. He has 17 priests in the Diocese, which is the entire country. So many churches do not have clergy, and he visits them monthly to provide services. He is on many boards in the country, and is always being called upon to “put out fires.” He is a kind, gentle, fun-loving, intelligent, holy, and personable young man. He is single, so I have heard that many of the women of the church have been introducing their daughters to him! Apparently, this is a common trait of mothers regardless of location.

There are four ethnic groups in Belize, and Belizeans can easily differentiate. Not so much for me, except the Mayans are easier to identify. Belize is the only country in Central America which is also considered to be part of the Caribbean, so it is truly unique. They have only had their independence from Britain since 1981. The Prime Minister is from the Middle East – go figure. But he is having a little difficulty right now. He came back from the capital on Monday and went into hiding. There may be an election soon. The people I have met are hospitable, warm, value education, and care deeply for their children. The Church here is still a dominant part of most people’s lives. Roman Catholics are the prevalent denomination, with the Evangelical churches also flourishing. The Anglican Cathedral is the oldest standing church in the Caribbean, being built in 1812. In a small section, the city looks very North American. I was also surprised to see many people driving SUV’s. What is considered Middle-class economically here would be on the lower end of the economic continuum in North America. But this section of the population is well-educated and many hold professional jobs. But the pay is low, and the cost of living is high as most commodities are imported. Fruits, beans, sugar cane and rice are indigenous. Mahogany is forested and exported. Tourism is the other source of income. Cruise ships port here three to four times a week. That

section of the city is upscale, with the best hotel and shops. I haven't walked around that area yet.

The children are amazing. My confirmation class had me in stitches. I took photos of all of them, to help me remember their names, and then we took some silly shots. They are not camera shy at all! They also like to sing, and two of the girls volunteered to close the class in prayer, which they created in a few minutes. They also know their Bible well.

This has already been an incredibly rich experience and more than I could have asked for or imagined. My primary discomfort is the heat. It is not unlike Florida, but only the commercial buildings have air conditioning. I have great spiritually energy, but sometimes the body does not. I am hoping to find someplace to swim or a nearby beach. I am longing to just immerse myself in cool water. I am told the rainy season will start next month, so perhaps that will cool things down. My next purchase will be a big umbrella – also good for providing shade in the sun!

As you can tell, it has been a very full week. I will probably write a monthly update, unless there is extraordinary news. Please keep this country and its people in your prayers.

Blessings, Janice (Lowell)

