

Second Letter from the Church in Belize
From VST Student Janice Lowell, June 2007

I have now been in Belize for five weeks, and I feel very immersed into the life of the church here. While being in a foreign country always brings its stresses, the Church is the one constant that brings me purpose, joy, and peace.

I established a Learning Covenant with my Field Supervisor, Fr. Wayne Kirton, and so I will structure this as an update on the progression of meeting my learning goals.

It was important for me to further develop my role as a worship leader, and I have been assisting the priest during worship services. On every other Sunday, I lead the service up to the passing of the peace. The form of worship here is a higher Anglican format than I am accustomed to in Vancouver, and so it is good to broaden my experience. Genuflecting at the altar is still a bit of a challenge – when to do it and how to get up! I assist the priest at the altar, and again, the method of presiding at the Eucharist is varied from what I am accustomed to. The priest is very patient with me.

I preached on Pentecost Sunday and the Youth Group assisted me by providing some actions to illustrate the rush of the wind, the tongues of fire descending on the people, and the gifts of the Spirit. It was also Youth Sunday, so the young people read all of the lessons and chose the hymns.

Following the service, the church had “Family Day.” Probably 150 people attended. Tents were erected to provide shade, a steel band provided music, a delicious meal of turkey, beans and rice, and potato salad was served, and there were games for all ages. I participated in the “Lime and Spoon” race, which consists of trying to get to the finish line first while balancing a line on a spoon. It sounds easier than it is – needless to say, I did not win. The highlight for me was the Maypole. This was a brand new experience for me. Twelve women each took hold of the end of a coloured ribbon. Dancing to the beat of the steel drums, we accomplished this rather complicated and confusing ritual of weaving through one another, so that the result was a pole covered with the beautifully braided ribbons. It was amazing! Then, of course, we had to reverse the process.

Last Sunday, Fr. Kirton went to Punta Gorda, about 5 hours to the south, to conduct services at a parish, which is currently without a priest. In his absence, Bishop Philip Wright conducted services at All Saints. It was truly an honour to assist the Bishop. The first Sunday of the month an additional Family Service is held at 10am. This service is to encourage families of the children who attend All Saints School to come to worship. The students read the lessons, and the school choir provided some lovely and lively music. The Bishop and I were the only people at the altar, so I was acolyte, assistant and server. My first time being a server – for example, I washed the Bishop’s hands!

In addition to the Sunday services, the school has a weekly Wednesday morning service. The students rotate attendance by grades. I have provided “reflections” for the youngest group (ages 5 – 7) and had them sing “He’s got the Whole World in His Hands.” For the children aged 8-10, I talked about being mean and how it hurts feelings. All the children could relate to having someone being mean to them. Later that day, while walking from the hospital, a group of 5 girls from the morning service

ran up to me and threw their arms around me, giving me hugs, and saying, "Miss Janice, Miss Janice!" Is that grace, or what?

I have also been writing reflections for the worship bulleting every other Sunday. Without the advantage of the Vancouver School of Theology Library, I must depend on a few outdated commentaries at the local library and inspiration. It becomes increasingly easier to read the scriptures, identify a common thread, reflect upon it and apply it to our lives today. So far the assigned lessons have been good to me. I preached again this Sunday, and while I had written reflections on the readings, I took the risk to preach without notes. I really want to experience giving the time over to God and let the Spirit direct my words. It went very smoothly and several people commented to me afterwards how meaningful my words were to them. Go Holy Spirit!

My other role in worship leadership is with the Youth Group. They meet every Saturday afternoon from 2-4pm. I am more of a participant observer, consultant, as there are already two leaders in place. But it gives me an opportunity to increase my comfort in relating with youth. The teenagers are the greatest challenge for me. The Youth Group is a thriving one with usually 20 - 25 attending. The leaders really do a good job in providing stimulating activities. The youth are competitive and love to play games. They are killers at Bible Trivia - my Biblical professors at school would be impressed!

My second learning goal was to gain experience in leading Bible Studies. We have a small group of 6 - 8 people that meets every Wednesday evening in the church from 7-8p. We start with Evening Prayer and when the service comes to the readings, the Bible Study component begins. In discussing how the group wanted to structure the study, they decided that each week one person would choose a passage that was particularly meaningful to them or difficult for them to understand. On Sunday morning, that person gives me the passage and I prepare some background information and questions for reflection. It has worked out well, and every week we seem to add another member. The group has deep insight and our discussions are stimulating. We close with the remainder of Evening Prayer and a hymn.

The third learning goal was to gain experience in teaching Confirmation Classes. Confirmation is a very big deal here. No one is allowed to receive communion until they have been confirmed. A bit different from a paper I wrote for Liturgical Studies in which I advocated Communion without Baptism, on occasions. My class meets every Monday, from 3:45-5p. The children are 10-12 year olds and come straight from school. Needless to say, they are full of energy. After struggling with "crowd control" of these fourteen lively bodies, we agreed to a covenant of behaviour. It seems to help.

There is a curriculum which helps me structure the class, and I get a lot of energy from developing the lesson plans. I guess there is still an educator in me. There are not any craft or activity supplies which we in North America take for granted. As a result, they are enthralled when I give them 3 x 5 Index cards for exercises, construction paper, handouts, etc. This week, I had posted eight sheets of coloured paper on the wall with words which related to Communion. One of the girls asked if she could take them home. I had also taken the Passion Narrative from Mark and put it into a dramatic reading. They were very engaged in reading their parts. I was not able to have individual copies for everyone, as the church doesn't have a copy machine, so I printed off 6 copies for them to share. One of the girls asked me later if she could have a copy.

I'm not sure if it's because of the content or they just want something of their own. It will be a good reflection discussion with my Field Supervisor.

My final goal is to develop a sustainable pastoral ministry presence at the local hospital. I have been going to the hospital three to four days a week for several hours. I have discovered that continually meeting new people, struggling with a language barrier (Spanish and Creole), entering into people's struggles with illnesses or with their children and praying with them is exhausting. It quickly depletes my extroverted energy. I have had to limit myself in order to prevent being overwhelmed. With the language barrier, I have truly learned what it is to be a non-anxious presence. But in prayer, there is no language barrier.

While avoiding pediatrics as a nurse, I find myself drawn to the Pediatric Ward as a chaplain. A family member is required to stay with the child 24/7 and small sleeping lounges are provided. So the ministry is family directed. As in North America, some of the healthcare professionals are truly fulfilling a vocation, but most are working a job. With a few exceptions, I am mostly ignored by the staff. The patients are usually welcoming. I have learned to not be surprised by being asked for money to help with medical expenses. I will talk about the begging issue shortly. Some of the babies and children break my heart. Sunday I prayed with a mom and her only child – 6 month old girl with liver and renal failure. She is dying. I could not help but think that if this child was in North America, she might have had a better chance. I told the mama to continue to talk to her baby and sing her a favourite song. The child was unconscious, but without pain and looked peaceful. A tearful experience.

A Pastoral Caregivers Team of eight Anglicans and Methodists already exists. A month ago, this group hosted a wonderful turkey dinner to welcome me. The Bishop met with us and we discussed how the group wanted to develop. June 23, I am conducting a daylong workshop of Pastoral Caregiving, covering topics such as "The Role of a Pastoral Caregiver," "Ministering to People in Crisis," "Bereavement," and "What to do on Pastoral Visits." For this last session, the Bishop is providing some verbatims and we will do role play. Letters of invitation were sent to all seven of the Anglican and Methodist Churches in Belize City. I hope we have a good response.

This group also conducts a monthly worship service at the hospital. Last month, we were ready to begin and there were not any patients. So we went out two by two to the wards to recruit. The staff was not very helpful, but we managed to gather five patients to worship with us. I spoke with the Matron's (Director of Nursing) Secretary the next week about the lack of knowledge of the service. Apparently, the service had been cancelled twice during the previous year, so the perception was that "no one knew when the services were being held." I delivered a schedule of services to the Matron within a few days.

We had a meeting last week and decided to go to the hospital the day before the next service and pass out invitations to patients and family members. One of the Methodist churches is sending a choir for this service, so we particularly want patients to be able to enjoy this service. In our discussions, members of the team confessed their discomfort with making hospital visits and not knowing how to leave, when they visit shut-ins. "They just keep asking me to stay and talk some more; they are so lonely." I was thankful that the group had reached this level of trust. As a result, I am meeting four of the women at the hospital this week, on separate days, and we will do joint visits. I'm hoping that some of the workshop content will help them with boundary

issues when visiting. I was very pleased with the outcome of our meeting and enjoyed the "Johnny Cakes," (like a cheese biscuit) which Miss Bailey baked for us.

I am use to the homeless situation in Vancouver begging, but I was not prepared for the level of begging from all sorts of people here. I was waiting for a taxi in front of where I live, when a woman on a bicycle with two toddlers in tow stopped and asked for money to feed her children. She was out of work; her babies were hungry, etc. Indeed, they were all thin. I gave her BZ\$5, which is US\$2.50. She said she could buy bread and some eggs with that.

A few days later, another woman on a bicycle approached me, saying she had HIV/AIDS, had just been released from the hospital, everyone had abandoned her and would I please give her some money, as she was hungry. I told her I would go to the store and buy her some groceries. She started asking the shopkeeper for lots of items. I had to stop her and tell her I was willing to give her \$15. She said, "US \$15?" I told her I was not a tourist and that I meant \$BZ15. I didn't know if I was being approached because I was white, looked like a tourist, or had money. I dress quite modestly and wear only the simplest of jewellery. How do I tell if I am being scammed?

My Field Supervisor and I had a long discussion about this, as did my Bible Study group. Apparently, begging is a common practice. The priest said he just says no, and after a while people stop asking. I had noticed when I was with the Bishop, a man had approached him, and the Bishop said, "Not today, man." He told me later that he gives the man a few dollars a week. A few days later, one of the school children came up to the window of the church office and asked me for a shilling. I practiced saying no.

Following the Family Day church picnic, as I was walking home, a woman and her daughter asked me for money so they wouldn't be thrown out of their home. I told her I didn't have any money with me - a lie. Then she asked if I lived close-by and could go and get some money. I explained to her that I was a student without an income, and that I had already helped someone else earlier in the week (the woman I took to the grocery store). She was quite persistent, saying how I would be blessed, etc. I think she had done this before, and was quite insulted when I refused. At this point, they stopped walking with me.

It is a dilemma to know when and when not to help. I keep thinking about the scripture from Matthew 25. 35-45, "for I was hungry and you gave me food..." Sometimes the need is real, and I pray for the discernment to recognize it. But I also realize that begging can become a way of life and perhaps perpetuates lack of ambition. A woman in the Bible Study shared that a boy about 10 years old asked her for \$5. She told him she wouldn't give it to him, but if he wanted to do a bit of yard work for her, she would gladly pay him. He ran in the opposite direction. It is certainly a complicated issue.

Last week, my senses became overloaded with all that I have been experiencing, and I sat in the priest's office and just cried. The priest, church secretary, and one of the Lay Ministers all happened to be there. They were most supportive. They encouraged me to not let "it" get to me; that each of us does the small piece we can. Wise words.

On the lighter side, last Friday, I took a water taxi to Caye Caulker, which is about a 45 minute ride from Belize City. It is a small island with a sugar sand main street which can be walked in 20 minutes, and the only vehicles are bicycles and golf carts. In the 1970's, it was a bit of a hippie colony and has retained the laid back atmosphere. There is a small beach and I wallowed in that crystal clear cool water,

happy as a pig in mud. The water was so clear that I could stand and pick up shells from the bottom. I ate at a sports bar, owned by a Canadian, and enjoyed a hamburger, fries and margarita! It was quite ironical to be sitting there on an island in the Caribbean and looking at the sports memorabilia - a Tampa Bay Lightning Goalie's mask; a Tampa Bay Buccaneers blanket; a Toronto Maple Leafs jersey, etc. Unfortunately, I didn't have the opportunity to talk with the proprietor.

Two days later, I came down with a sore throat and subsequently bronchitis. My dear physician, Charissa, had written me prescriptions for antibiotics before I left, in the eventuality of exactly this. I spent two days in bed, and stayed out of the hospital this week. While I feel somewhat better, my energy is zapped and I realize I have to take life a little slower in the heat. And also keep my self-expectations realistic.

My next letter will be my last - so difficult to believe. This experience is so valuable, challenging, exciting, overwhelming, heart-warming/breaking, etc. I will be forever grateful to the Anglican Church of Canada for allowing me this opportunity. My love and passion for ministry is stronger than ever, and hopefully a little wiser.

Blessings to all of you,
"the babe in Belize,"
Janice