

**A Visit to Our Sister Church
Members and Friends of The United Churches of Olympia Visit
Iglesia El Divino Salvador, Calle Blancos, Costa Rica
November 2005**

Summary

"God has been here," says don Miguel Vargas, the energetic new pastor of our Sister Church in Costa Rica.

And for the ten TUCO travelers who visited the San Jose church in November, that seemed to be true. The front of the church building has been painted a bright yellow and ochre, and the sanctuary too has a new coat of paint. Upstairs where two years before were only four bleak walls, partitions have been added. There was energy and optimism among the congregation as they prepared to celebrate their 50th anniversary. The four celebratory services during the week were well attended, the music lively, the sermons dramatic, and church leaders were involved in every part of the way.

The congregation seems excited about its new pastor and its new beginning following five years of part-time pastors and a dwindling congregation. With the funds provided by our church, they are able at last to hire someone full-time. And as an added bonus, the new pastor's wife is a key part of the action. We saw put together a very successful Saturday morning program for the community's children.

We were greeted warmly by church members and our host families. We were fed well and had a busy week planned for us learning more about Costa Rica, the church, and its many activities.

Preparation

The dates for our visit, November 5 through 14, were chosen following an invitation from our Sister Church to be part of their 50th anniversary celebration on November 13. The ten members and friends going were Janet Anderson, Mark Boyd, Shirley Sainsbury, Janet Tolman, Melissa Wise, our youth delegate Hannah Hunter (18), and the Qvigstad-Fishel family of Kari Qvigstad, Jeff Fishel, Gabriel (11) and AnnElise (9).

We held six Wednesday evening sessions at our church to prepare. We learned some basic Spanish (ably taught by Frances Tanaka who had been part of the 2003 trip), practiced a hymn in Spanish and discussed

some of the cultural mores of the country and the church we would visit.

We took with us two checks from our congregation in Olympia. One for \$3,000 from the budget of the Missions, Peace and Justice Ministry was a contribution to the church's mission work. The second for \$6,000 were funds raised by our church members as the first step in our commitment to help the sister church fund a full-time pastor. We have promised the church \$4,500 for 2006, \$3,000 for 2007 and \$1,500 for the following year. These pastor support funds were raised in addition to the funds from Missions, Peace and Justice.

Getting there

We left Seattle on Saturday, November 5 and returned on Monday, November 14. The cost of our round-trip tickets averaged about \$625. In addition, the church had rented a small bus to take us to and from the airport and to the coffee plantation. Although the sister church had said they would cover our costs while there, each adult in our group put \$200 in the offering plate at the last Sunday service to cover costs of meals and bus transportation. This was about the amount paid by the group that visited the church in 2003.

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Key church members

The key church members we met during our visit were as follows:

- Don Miguel and Iris Vargas, the new pastor and his wife
- Irene Foulkes, a North American professor at Universidad Biblica Latinoamericana, our official contact person with the church, and our able translator.
- Don Rodrigo Cascante, Fernando Cascante's father and pastor of the church in Pavas
- Ana Guevarra, an active member who coordinated much of our trip.
- Paulino, a church member who invited us to spend the day at his small farm outside the city.
- Gregorio with his wife Sadie and 3 year-old Neselle and 7 month old Gregorio, the church caretakers who live on church grounds and hosted the Qvigstad-Fishel family
- German Dias Vidaurre, wife Guiselle Machado, and teenaged daughters Maria Jesus and Daniella, the family who was host to

Janet and Hannah. German presided at Friday night service, Guiselle was one of three cooks for all our meals and Daniela took Hannah to school with her.

- Marvin, another active member of the congregation
- Chepita Contreras (who visited us in Olympia in 2003), Sadie, and Yvette were the cooks who provided us three meals a day from the church kitchen
- Victor, a banker and church treasurer who gave us a lecture on Costa Rican economy and helped us change money.
- Guillermo Cortes (who visited us in Olympia in 2003) and who is soon to be working at a bank in North Carolina. He preached at an evening service.

The new pastor—Don Miguel Vargas

Don Miguel was called to become the full-time church pastor in July 2005. His coming followed a five-year period of part-time pastors and times of no pastor at all. In our conversations with him, he expressed his desire to strengthen the church's presence in the community of Calle Blancos. "The church must be united and healthy," he said. "When something is healthy, it grows by itself." He seeks more children and young families and wants to hold retreats and courses for different age groups such as men, women, couples, and youth. He also is looking for a new program of mission and outreach that will provide services to families in Calle Blancos.

Don Miguel and Iris seem well liked by the congregation. (She is very active in work with church children.) He told us that he had been a nominal Roman Catholic for 21 years, then 22 years ago, Christ changed his life. His background was with the Pentecostal church, but after six years as a Pentecostal pastor, he found that church to be too legalistic. After a meeting with members of the Costa Rican Evangelical Presbyterian Church and with the urging of his family, he made the switch to a more liberal church. He is now taking courses at the seminary, Universidad Biblica Laninoamericana, to complete a master degree in church administration.

The status of the church

Although the church has been through a difficult time without a full time pastor, it appears to be quite strong. Over the past five years, according to Irene Foulkes, church committees have met and services have been held. The church leadership is strong and decisive. At

present there are 60 to 65 official members but attendance is often larger than that number.

There have been improvements in the church building. The front has been painted a bright yellow and ochre, and the sanctuary too. Partitions have been added on the second floor. There was energy and optimism among the congregation as they prepared to celebrate their 50th anniversary. The four celebratory services during the week were well attended, the music lively, the sermons dramatic, and church leaders were involved in every part of the way. The theme for this 50th anniversary week was "Dios Restaura Para Una Vida en Plenitud" (God restores to us a fulfilling life).

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Church services are lively. There is a band and five or six singers all with mikes. Words to praise songs are projected on the wall and the singing is heart-felt. The minister's sermons are dramatic. We saw liturgical dances by children and youth. A mime performed at one service.

One significant change has occurred. The Pavas Mission, headed by Fernando Cascante's father Rodrigo, has broken away from our sister church and has now become a church on its own—though not one related to the Presbyterian denomination. Fernando's sister Rebeca took her counseling program with her to the Pavas church. (Rebeca was not present during our stay, so we were unable to speak with her.) There were some ill feelings about the split although individuals still feel warmly toward don Rodrigo. Irene scheduled a visit for us at the mission where we painted the new concrete outer walls a bright blue. Don Rodrigo did not comment on the break, but welcomed us warmly. The church in Calle Blancos promises to begin a new mission program.

Names have also changed. The larger group our sister church is part of has changed its name to the Costa Rican Evangelical Presbyterian Church

Some of our activities

We all enjoyed getting to know our host families. The Ovigstad-Fishel family stayed on the church grounds with the caretaker's family giving

AnnElise and Gabriel the opportunity to meet many of the children there. Hannah Hunter and Janet Anderson stayed in a home where there were two daughters about Hannah's age. The remainder stayed singly with other church members. Though our Spanish was limited, there were lots of "conversations" about their lives and the church. As an icebreaker, we all brought pictures of our families along with us to share. These in turn began conversations about their own families.

We ate all our meals at the church. The food, prepared in the church kitchen by three wonderful cooks, was plentiful and good. Being at the church for our meals gave us the opportunity to meet other church members.

Here's an outline of some of our activities:

On Saturday, November 5 we were picked up at the airport by Ana Guevarra and taken to the church by bus to meet our host families.

Sunday morning we attended two back-to-back church services. At the first, Melissa Wise was baptized along with 12 or 14 other new members. In the afternoon, Ana took us to downtown San Jose

Monday, Hannah visited high school with her host family's daughter, and Shirley went along with AnnElise and Gabriel on a tour of an elementary school. The rest of us spent the day in an orientation put together by Irene. We heard a talk on the country's economic situation by Victor and another on the history and mission of the non-Catholic churches in the country. We visited the Universidad Biblica Latinoamericana where we learned about the courses that the seminary offers to pastors and layleaders of small churches. While there we heard a lecture on the ecology of Costa Rica.

Wednesday we went by bus to visit a coffee plantation in San Ramon to learn about the economics of growing organic, free trade, and bird sanctuary coffee. That evening at the Wednesday Bible Study, Mark Boyd was guest preacher. With Irene as translator, he spoke about the Good Samaritan.

Thursday, we took the bus to the Pavas Mission. The mission church is under construction. Concrete walls surround the older wooden structure. When the walls are finished and a new roof added, the wooden walls will be torn down giving the mission church a solid structure with more room for its activities. Don Rodrigo gave us a walking tour of the area and explained some of its history and its many

needs. We spent the morning painting the new walls bright blue, then helped feed lunch to the many children there. Later we enjoyed a lunch with the Pavas staff.

Friday we went in two cars to a beautiful spot about two hours out of town where Paulino owns some land. We ate well and enjoyed a relaxing day. We were back in time for a church service Friday evening.

Saturday morning the minister's wife Iris, along with the youth of the church, had put together an amazing children's program that included about 60 children from the community. Many of the toys and things we had brought with us were given as prizes. Some of the most popular items were the Spanish-English books on Christmas that had been signed by our own church's children. Many of us were asked to sign them too.

Saturday evening a big dinner was held to celebrate both Costa Rica and the anniversary of the church. Guillermo Cortes was the MC. Eight or ten church members dressed in traditional costumes and performed a number of Costa Rican dances. Our church was presented with a beautiful clock inscribed with thanks for our contributions.

Sunday morning we had breakfast with host families. At 5 pm the Anniversary Service was held. In addition to the sermon and songs, there were liturgical dances by church youth along with a mime. Our group sang *Somos pueblo que camina (We Are People on a Journey)* and *Amazing Grace*. Gabe accompanied us on his flute.

On our own

During some down time, we enjoyed being in downtown San Jose and visiting the Museum of Gold, the elegant old Opera House, the National Museum and the Jade Museum. We also took in a Saturday market. Several of us spent some time walking around the Calle Blancos neighborhood.

Our group of ten worked well together. All were flexible and appeared at ease in this new culture. No one became ill. The children were especially fun to have with us as they made friends so easily and opened doors for the rest of us.