

Letters from Overseas

Lynn Macaulay Writes an Advent Letter from El Salvador

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Flooding and Renewal in El Salvador

On October 11 it started to rain. Unlike most rain in El Salvador it lasted all day. On October 12, it rained all day again. By noon, the Civil Protection Agency had raised the threat level to Orange (one level below full disaster) and most schools were ordered closed. Many paved roads in the cities were quickly becoming rivers with high water levels. Dirt roads were slippery as they were a sea of mud. Non-essential travel was minimized. A day and a half of rain caused major difficulties. At first I felt frustrated that this quantity of rain could cause such problems. As it continued to rain, frustration turned to sadness as the devastation of the rains continued to unfold. Sadness melted into anger. For the first time in my life, I was angry at the rain. It all seemed so unfair and unjust that people were suffering so much and the rain wouldn't stop.

Tropical Depression 12 E sat over El Salvador and most of Central America for almost two weeks. By the time it was over, President Funes had declared El Salvador under a National State of Emergency. Tropical Storm 12 E dumped more than 1.5 metres of rain on the country, resulted in over 600 landslides, covered 10 percent of the country in water, and damaged over 20,000 homes; over 50,000 people were evacuated and 585 emergency shelters were activated. It destroyed 75 percent of the annual bean crop and 35 percent of the annual corn crop. Beans and corn are the basic staples for the Salvadoran diet, and the subsistence diet for approximately 40 percent of the country. Many of that same 40 percent live hand to mouth, earning just enough to survive on informal employment. Many were not able to work for two weeks. In addition, the infrastructure took a big hit. Schools, medical centres, bridges, and roads were destroyed. The cost of this one weather event is pegged at over \$850 million!

While heavy rain is "normal" in El Salvador at this time of year, the intensity, duration, and quantity of rainfall surpassed normal levels. Everyone is pointing to climate change as the culprit. A UN agency rated this region as one of the most vulnerable in the world to natural disasters. Although El Salvador is seriously impacted by climate change, it produces a miniscule amount of the world's carbon emissions.

Given that the climate situation is likely only going to worsen, it makes sense to work to minimize the impacts of such natural disasters. It is possible to build better dams and stronger houses, and to plant more weather resistant crops such as rice. Unfortunately this is not always the goal. The impact of empire building and neo-liberal economic theory meant that in September President Funes made an announcement in the Lower Lempa Region. This is the area that is prone to flooding. He announced an \$18 million aid package for the region that will, in part, help farmers convert to "exotic crops" such as cashew nuts that they can sell in the U.S. Such crops are even more sensitive to climate change and would subject Salvadoran farmers to the ups and downs of U.S. markets. And if locals are not growing corn and beans, they won't be able to feed themselves and they will have to buy more expensive food imported from the U.S.

To me Advent is a time of celebrating life. In the hymn "O Holy Night," there is a line that always resonates with me: "A weary world rejoices." At this moment, the world is a tough place to live. There are enormous challenges. Most people I know are weary. Here in El Salvador, the big picture issues are serious, real, and quite frankly feel completely overwhelming. There is just not enough global will and strong enough internal structures and

systems to significantly improve the situation for many people in this country. Yet, amongst it all, if one looks carefully, there are many things about which one can rejoice!

- Since Hurricane Mitch in 1998, Emergency and Civil Protection agencies worked together to create better response systems. Although this storm brought more rain than during Mitch, the number of deaths was far lower—29 compared to 289.
- Personally, I had never thought that climate change and the environment were “my” issue. Thankfully, United Church Moderator Mardi Tindal and many people like her around the world felt that it was “their” issue. While there is so much more that needs to be done, there are smart and passionate people in every corner of the world working on finding solutions to this problem. In El Salvador, the Local Economy team at ADES is working to help communities develop adequate food production. They are slowly expanding the use of greenhouses so that crops can be grown year round and be more protected from the impacts of climate change.
- In rural El Salvador, a brave and determined group of citizens are working to protect their land from the devastating consequences of a Canadian company opening a gold mine. One of the main concerns about mining is the negative impact it will have on local water. Staff from ADES are working to both protect their water source and to educate local residents. They are also working on a variety of projects to bring an adequate and clean supply of water to many small rural communities.
- Last week I attended the graduation of 140 people from the Literacy Circles program at ADES. The graduates included senior citizens, people with disabilities, youth, men, and women who received certificates indicating they had completed a literacy and numeracy program. Many can, for the first time in their lives, sign their names and read basic information on a product package.

On a personal note, thank you to everyone who supports the Mission and Service Fund, which has enabled me to come to El Salvador. While I have had an amazing experience here, more importantly, I have been able to witness the impact that M&S dollars have on the lives of people here in El Salvador. I am thankful to be part of a church family that demonstrates its caring for brothers and sisters around the world. Your gifts and the support provided by national church office staff are vitally important tools in working to make the world more just. For all of this I am rejoicing during this holy season.

Lynn Macaulay

To learn more, visit Lynn's blog at <http://macaulaycalling.blogspot.com>, or our global partnership photo site (<http://unitedchurch.smugmug.com>) to see pictures from El Salvador.

Lynn Macaulay is a United Church of Canada global mission personnel associate serving with the Asociación de Desarrollo Económico Social (ADES) in El Salvador. The work of this ecumenical partner and the work of overseas personnel are made possible through your gifts to the Mission and Service Fund of The United Church of Canada.

