



**Evangelical Lutheran  
Church in America**  
God's work. Our hands.

**North/West Lower Michigan Synod**

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March 31, 2011

Dear Friends in Christ,

Sometimes God just calls you to go.

For the “Iglesia Cristiana Luterana en Honduras” (ICLH), our companion church in Honduras and a church of the poor, this is a time of crisis.

Prior to the coup on June 28, 2009, violence and insecurity had already reached alarming levels. Following the coup, the situation worsened and subsequent events have exposed injustice and corruption in the current socioeconomic system. Everything has been deteriorating for the church, except their faith in God and their love for one another.

Violence is a real and present danger for the pastors, national staff, local pastoral teams and members of every ICLH congregation or mission point, without exception. This grim reality is especially true for our brothers and sisters of “El Buen Pastor” congregation in San Pedro Sula where they or their family members have been threatened, raped and murdered, bringing overwhelming grief to families and the disintegration of an entire community.

But the same tragic acts of violence that have terrorized the La Union neighborhood in San Pedro Sula occur on a daily basis in other communities where the ICLH is present. Throughout Honduras, strife is fueled by confrontations between armed groups vying for territorial control, organized drug trafficking, and police and judicial corruption.

Honduras is wracked with systemic poverty, high unemployment and rising prices for food and transportation. Rising social discontent is being suppressed through new laws that perpetuate an unjust economic system and criminalize peaceful protest, combined with repressive police actions. Every key sector of life in Honduras is threatened by these endemic problems

The ability of the ICLH and other churches to continue their diaconal ministry is at risk. In a late-night vote in November 2010, the National Legislative Assembly passed a new law (Decree 185-2010) that obligates the ICLH, and all churches other than the Roman Catholic Church, to join and pay dues to a government-



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sanctioned confederation of churches. The law is seen as a way of controlling churches that work for social justice and could preclude these churches from advocating for human rights.

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From March 20-24, 2011, a delegation from the North/West Lower Michigan Synod of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA) visited Honduras. God's call, we felt, compelled us to be with the ICLH and to listen to their anguish in the face of this deepening crisis. Each day we encountered faith and a dogged determination, a conviction to remain steadfast in their witness.

During our visit, public school teachers from around the country came to the capital city of Tegucigalpa to protest. In part, they were protesting the unauthorized withdrawal of millions of dollars from their pension fund in the days following the June 2009 coup. To date, the current government has shown little political will or interest in following up on these accusations. Furthermore, the government is working to pass a new law that would fundamentally undermine an already beleaguered public education system. The tension was heightened by the March 18 death of a protesting teacher who was knocked unconscious by a tear gas canister and run over by a car.

Public education is one of the few remaining institutions not completely controlled by a handful of powerful men and women, many related to each other, who exert extraordinary influence over the country's economic and political life including industry, banking, commerce, the media, the distribution of essential goods and services, and the government itself.

For all of us, it was hard to hear about what is and about what seems to be coming.

On more than one occasion, we heard people express concerns about the re-militarization of Honduran society and the possibility of civil war. We heard concern that Honduras is on the verge of becoming a "failed state," because of the government's inability to honor and protect the human rights of its citizens. We heard that no one is safe, and that society in general no longer trusts the police to guarantee public safety.

Yet hope is stronger than all these expressions of evil. The laity of the ICLH live out the "priesthood of all believers." They articulate and practice the theology of the cross as they accompany people in their daily life struggles. In the midst of these struggles, we witnessed how they resist evil with their God-given kindness, laughter and camaraderie. In the words of the apostle Paul:

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*Marked with the cross of Christ forever, we are claimed, gathered and sent for the sake of the world.*



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***“We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed; always carrying in the body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be made visible in our bodies.” (2 Corinthians 4:8-10)***

We traveled to Honduras because we were worried about our ICLH sisters and brothers. We left no less fearful for their physical well-being but inspired by their conviction, by the hope within them that will not die.

Having witnessed these events and heard their testimonies, we issue an urgent call to all who read this message, especially Lutherans in our own country and members of Lutheran churches elsewhere in the world, to join with us in the following actions:

- that we, in the spirit of Isaiah 58, join with our brothers and sisters of the ICLH in a day of prayer and fasting on Sunday, May 29
- that we pray with thanksgiving for the courageous witness of the ICLH, other Honduran churches and human rights organizations who proclaim, at significant personal risk, God's regard for the poor
- that we also pray, in the spirit of I Timothy 2, for those in power who are called to protect the rights of the most vulnerable members of society
- that we educate ourselves about the crisis in Honduras and its root causes, guided by the information that we receive from the ICLH and its ecumenical partners
- that we express our concerns about the deteriorating human rights situation to our respective governmental leaders, in meetings and in writing, so that they better understand the true magnitude of the social conflict in the country
- that we continue to accompany the ICLH in our prayers and with our presence in a spirit of gentleness, humility and diligent follow-up

Sometimes God just calls you to go – and to act.

Yours in Christ,

Bishop John Schleicher  
North/West Lower Michigan Synod  
Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA)