

A LOOK AT ONE'S LATIN-AMERICAN VICARSHIP IN PUERTO RICO

by

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In January of 1963, our synod, in the personage of Pastor H.C. Nitz of Waterloo made a survey of Puerto Rico to see if a mission there would be possible. His survey report was positive and ~~in~~^{by} the Fall of 1964 our Synod had called and sent two missionaries there to begin work. In order to provide a pool of men with Spanish experience and drum up more world mission zeal, it was decided that one Seminary student would be sent to Puerto Rico annually and serve as a vicar.

In the Fall of 1971, Carl Leyrer went to the island to serve as the first. Since then, except for a couple~~e~~ years when the vicar went to Columbia, and another couple when there was no funding for the vicar, one vicar per year has been sent to the island to help the men and to learn. In May 1986, the thirteenth Latin-American vicar was assigned. The author of this paper was the eleventh vicar.

In this paper, the author is trying to give a look into the Latin American (LA) vicar year in Puerto Rico (PR). It is not meant to be an personalized autobiography, but some personal viewpoints will be obvious. The author has tried to be objective.

It must be explained that normally the LA vicar call to PR is a fifteen-month call, the first six of which are spent in Mexico learning Spanish. The vicar then proceeds to PR usually in the beginning of December to commence with his nine months of vicaring.

PREACHING

Most vicars would consider preaching to be the area that needs the most concern in the vicar year. The vicar ~~wants~~^{wants} to get comfortable with a system that allows him to do a text

study, write an outline and sermon, then memorize and preach it. And he wants to know if he'll be able to do it regularly, week after week, as a pastor.

The LA vicar in PR will have opportunity to preach. Upon arrival in Mexico he'll think that writing and memorizing a sermon in Spanish is a next-to-impossible task. But after a couple months, as the Spanish gets more functional, the vicar will find that producing a clear, coherent sermon is possible, and in fact, is one of the more enjoyable and easier aspects of his stay in Mexico. Since the person can prepare the sermon beforehand (with a lot of help from friends to get the 'bugs' out) preaching in Spanish actually becomes easy when compared to trying to converse with two or three people at a 'fiesta' where a person is being bombarded with sound and a quickly changing conversation.

Traditionally the vicar preaches for the festival of the Reformation in Guadalajara. Pastor Saucedo, the Mexican pastor in Guadalajara, with whom we are in fellowship, let me pick my own text and do it all on my own. He checked the final copy and made a few changes and modified a couple strong statements to the Mexican ear. We had the highest attendance in church during the summer and fall at the Reformation service, with 33 people attending. Don't infer that this means Guadalajara, a city of 4-5 million is going bonkers over the Lutheran church. The increase was due mainly to a couple of friends coming to hear the gringo preach.

If the vicar is ready for it earlier, Pastor Saucedo will ask him to preach a sermon earlier and help with the liturgy, but he will not pressure the vicar and will succumb to his wishes on the matter.

Probably the most outstanding memory of preaching in Mexico was that even at that point, with five and a half months of Spanish under the belt, I was still preaching a foreign language and I felt like someone else was preaching those words. That would eventually change with experience in Puerto Rico, so that I felt I was preaching God's Word to them in a language that I knew they understood.

In Puerto Rico the difference in preaching was that the vicar had a supervisor who was trained in good homiletical principles and who could offer advice that I'd understand and comprehend. We would pick out a text together in advance. The vicar also could use the Pastors' books and translation aids, whereas in Mexico one had to use only the UBS text with its concise dictionary. In Puerto Rico, the vicar is also preaching to a flock that is accustomed to hearing and who know how to listen to good sermons.

I did not preach a Spanish sermon in Puerto Rico till six weeks after I got there. The first month was spent getting used to the Puerto Rican brand of Spanish and following the pastors around, getting to know the people in our congregations. But starting in January, I would write one Spanish sermon a month and would do it from scratch^e in Spanish, including the text study. That way one was working with a vocabulary he knew and understood from the start. I would then preach the same basic sermon five times. Each time it was preached it was to a distinctively different group, which was tremendous experience.

In Humacao on Sunday morning, you could expect about twenty people, the majority children and with one illiterate mother with her rambunctious raft of ill-behaved kids, so one had to be clear and easy to follow. One mature gentleman would

also be there and he could handle more than milk, so I tried to give him a couple pieces of sermonic meat.

In San Juan on Sunday evening, the group was middle-class, educated, family-oriented and some were bi-lingual. This group could probably be designated as "youth" in the faith. They had a certain amount of strength and yet were not yet the adults who could handle "red meat" sermon material all the time. The San Juan experience was especially good, because in addition to preaching to such a small group of people (20-25) with the intimacy that one can feel with such a small group, we worshipped in the living rooms of the members. It's an experience to preach to a handful of people gathered around you and seated on cushy/sofas or dining room chairs on a hot Puerto Rican evening. It's also an experience to sit there on your chair, facing the people with nothing to hide behind--no robe and no lectern--feeling more than a little naked, with your Bible in your lap and your sermon in your head, just talking about God's grace to them. It's a scary experience but also a tremendous one, one that most vicars don't have.

The Saturday evening group in the Dorado neighborhood in Guayama/was again small (approximately ten) and the Sunday morning one in Guayama was larger (25-30). The group in Guayama was again middle class and was probably the most mature group of Lutherans we have on the island, so they needed more than milk.

And in Barrancas, also on Sunday morning, the group was different. There were a couple families, new to the faith, with a couple high school/college-age girls smiling and giggling toward the American vicar. There were a couple youngsters who loved to run to the bathroom by the sacristy at any time and a

couple men who were again capable of handling red meat from the Word.

In all the places, except San Juan, one preached from a lectern. But in all the places the group was small and that necessitated a somewhat intimate style. You have no robe to hide behind. You might have a couple visitors from the many Pentecostal churches who are used to chiming in now and then with a spirit-filled exclamation. But, by and large, you are preaching to people who are there to hear God's grace and guidance and who appreciate it. And one of the most amazing things about it is that you understand what you were preaching to them in Spanish. A mistake would bring a smile now and then, but the message of forgiveness would also bring a contented smile.

So the LA vicar in PR does not produce a huge file of sermons. I only did nine sermons in PR. But the LA vicar is not to be pitied for lack of experience. He preaches plenty and as I've already tried to get across, where he preaches and to whom is an experience all by itself.

TEACHING AND EDUCATION

A vicar should get a chance to teach and a chance to teach all the age groups. He has ample opportunity to teach both the old and the young.

In addition to the sermon (which can be an excellent teaching tool in the intimate settings described before) the adults are taught in Bible class. In our Puerto Rican mission the missionaries (Pastor and Mrs. Charles Flunker) have written their own course of study. It is written for three different levels: the kiddies who don't read, the children who read a little, and the rest who can read fairly well. After worship service (or before the service as the case may be) the con-

gregation splits up into these three groups and they study God's Word using the Bible and a study sheet, prepared by the missionaries. It's a tremendous study and in Humacao and San Juan there is 100% attendance in Bible study. Those who go to worship stay to study.

The point of all this is that the vicar has a chance to teach each age group. Most of the time, when I'd have Bible study, I'd have the adults. In San Juan we had the teenagers in a separate little group and I'd have that group.

One of the large families in San Juan desired to study God's Word more. So we studied Christian stewardship principles in a five-week course, followed by a study of Ephesians. We did this on Friday nights in their home and almost always every member of the family was there, which was remarkable because the teenagers had just as many things to do there as teenagers have to do here. And Friday night in San Juan for a teenager means the same thing ~~Friday~~ night means to a Mequon teenager. And yet they were there studying God's Word.

YOUTH

A normal vicarage normally involves ~~work~~^{work} with the youth. And the LA vicar in PR is no exception. The Sunday evening class in San Juan was mentioned already. In addition there was a catechism class. It involved only one student but was catechism nonetheless. Once a week I'd make the trip from Humacao to the southern suburb of San Juan (about a 35 minute trip) to have class with him. Teaching a bright student God's truths from the catechism was an experience in itself. But especially in situations like that one can learn the importance of establishing a good rapport with a student so he feels he

can talk about anything. Yet the vicar has to walk the fine line and not overstep the bounds into being a buddy.

The LA vicar traditionally helps out with Vacation Bible School. During my year there in Humacao we had a VBS run on eleven consecutive Saturdays, again with three different levels of students and the vicar had the oldest group, comprised of a half-dozen teen-age girls. It can be a tremendous challenge to keep the missionary's daughters interested while still teaching the girl who can barely read and has hardly even heard of Jesus' disciples.

We also tried to start a youth group among the kids of San Juan and Humacao. Whereas the Wisconsin youth groups might go to a lake, have a study, and enjoy fellowship, we went to the ocean and tried to do the same. Puerto Rican youth are no different than American youth in some respects so this area of work can be frustrating, yet rewarding when done with patience.

Before we mentioned that all types of people were involved in the ministry and the vicar should have exposure to all. While there are very few elderly Christians among our group, there are still a ^{couple}~~couple~~ contacts with what here might be called shut-ins. There are young married couples and well-established families. There are divorcees and single parents. There are well-adjusted kids and problem children. There are well-behaved youngsters and snotty misfits. And there are babies. And all these different kinds of people need to hear what God has to say to them and need to be taught "all things whatsoever I have commanded you." The teaching and education experience is a good one for the LA vicar in PR.

ADMINISTRATION

The vicar should see that the Lord's work involves more

than only Bible study, teaching and preaching. It involves a certain amount of record-keeping and administration. The LA vicar in PR is exposed to a good amount. He is involved on the grass-roots level, counting the offerings, and training what would be called an assistant treasurer to count the money and keep good records of the income. He sits in on training sessions with the treasurer in Humacao and watches as the treasurer ~~she~~^{she} learns to write checks and account for Synod money. He helps with attendance and communion records. He helps to balance the mission's books. He helps turn out an attractive, informative and interesting bulletin every week, including using the mimeograph to print it. The vicar also helps print the VBS books and materials, which is no small affair when one considers the fact that there are three levels, with two books for each level and two-color printing on many of the pages.

Being on a mission field he sits in on the monthly pastors' conferences, or mission council meetings, where the three missionaries meet to encourage each other, discuss mutual problems, and generally react to situations on the field.

It's great experience because the men on the field have to do the same things that the men in the states have to do. A difference might be that the Missioners have no secretary to carry out any piddly work, and the vicar gets involved also, so he can appreciate the work that goes on behind the scene all the more. Since he's involved in the meetings, it's a good time to see that what seemed like far-off policy and strategy before he arrived on the field, is really simply human beings under God's direction, attempting to carry out God's will. It's an awesome task--to perform all the necessary duties in the modern ministry and the PR vicar has a chance to see and experience

almost all the little parts as well as the preaching and teaching.

EVANGELISM

During the vicar year, the student ought to have the chance to evangelize, and certainly the LA vicar in PR has that opportunity. The thing the PR vicar will notice soon is that all ideas of an American Pied Piper simply mentioning the name of Jesus Christ and then converting the poor heathen souls are foolish. Human beings, by nature, don't want to hear that salvation is free and by grace alone.

Puerto Ricans are no exception. They'd rather get emotional and feel good about God and shout and speak in tongues with the Pentecostals. They'd rather be a part of the huge Catholic Church just because its huge. They'd rather look down their noses at those poor, ignorant Christians who believe in Jesus Christ as their Savior because they've got a new Toyota Corolla and it has some of the best Jensen triaxials that Eddie Van Halen could ever shake. For what does he need "justification by faith alone?" And the average Puerto Rican certainly doesn't need to be told about justification by faith alone by someone from "alla" (over there).

So the vicar will learn that the best evangelism is still to have the Puerto Rican share his faith with other Puerto Ricans, whether it be over a Pepsi, or over a rum, or over a Schaeffer beer, or during a cock-fight, or at a basketball game. So the best evangelism tool is still simply to teach the Word and to help people grow in the faith, so they grow and produce fruits and confessions before others.

The vicar will have a chance to do "follow-up" calls and

be free to canvas areas. Of course he does this in consultation with and under the direction of the missionary. One has to feel that the evangelism training under Pastor Valleskey at the Seminary can only help in these endeavors and will help especially in Puerto Rico where there are some similarities with the American lifestyle.

All in all, the evangelism experience in PR taught this vicar that no matter where you are, evangelism requires courage, common sense, patience, and above all, the Lord's blessing. People won't swallow your message hook, line, and sinker just because you are American. In fact, your whole pole just might get thrown back at you because you're American.

ET CETERA

The student entering his vicar year wants to learn everything that he can for use in his future vocation. What we've touched on so far have been distinctive areas of the ministry: preaching, teaching administration and evangelism. But probably the most important area of the vicar experience will fall under the "etc." heading. He learns from experience, he learns about relationships with people, and he learns about himself. The LA vicar in PR again is no exception.

He'll learn the most from his bishop, an experience-man, one in whom the Seminary has entrusted his education for a whole year. The supervising pastor will teach many practical points that the Seminary simply doesn't have time to do. The vicar will learn about priorities and where the family fits into the Lord's work, how important it is to keep a good reputation, especially among outsiders. The LA vicar will learn by doing, which is no small potatoes. Think for a moment: These missionaries have

worked long years to build up the body of Christ and then in comes a vicar for a year, full of hot ideas and big dreams. And the missionaries try to use the vicar for the good of the people in the mission. It's an awesome task and one that's easy for the vicar to lose sight of.

Probably the biggest thing the vicar will learn is to know himself. He'll see some areas where he's strong and others where he's weak. He sees that he needs to work with others to build up the body of Christ and above all, he'll see that he is a sinner who by God's grace is privileged to help spread the good news of Jesus Christ who died to save sinners, including those Puerto Ricans.

DIFFERENCES AND EXTRAS

There are a couple things that the Puerto Rican vicarage lacks, when comparing it to other "normal" vicarships. For instance, there are not many hospital calls or shut-in calls, although I had a couple chances to have private devotions with the Lord's Supper for a member who could not attend on Sundays because of his work schedule. The vicar does not get experience in partaking in a Synod program, such as a stewardship drive. He won't have to sit in on ^any meetings and won't get the experience of handling an irate parishioner who blows up at such a meeting, but there are ~~are~~ meetings and the vicar will get a chance to observe a properly run and organized meeting. He won't get a taste of congregational life in a six-hundred member church, nor will he have old ladies doting over him, sending cookies and pies home with him after church.

But the LA vicar in PR will have a wealth of opportunities to learn--extras, if you will.

→ He has a chance to immerse himself in a whole different culture than the one he's been used to. Of course a huge part of that immersion and directly related to the degree of his immersion is his new language, Spanish. What a blessing it is to have new segment of the world opened, at least partially, to him. The vicar will see that just because we Americans do something one way means it is the right way. He might learn that American punctuality is not so important so as to cut off a conversation with a person and say, "I have to go now. I have an appointment." He'll see that for many people on the earth that type of punctuality is rude, so he'll carry that conversation to its natural end, then show up a little "late" say he's sorry (maybe), and be accepted--no questions asked. He'll see that the American work ethic can be a fine thing, but that ~~maybe~~^{maybe} sometimes work in America is as much a perverted idol as an Asherah pole was. Maybe he'll gain a new appreciation for those "spics" who leave home and family behind and come to the States to find work, or who bring their whole family here. Maybe he won't condemn them for not speaking English when they're here, because he'll see that it can be an insurmountable task for some adults to learn a new language. Maybe the vicar will think about the incredible amount of blessings he enjoys as an American, when he never thought twice about being an American before. And maybe the vicar will wonder why we Americans are so blessed.

The LA vicar in PR will work with a small group, whereas his classmates work, on the whole, in big churches. Maybe he'll learn a couple ^{or} more grass-roots type practical applications and more appreciation for all the aspects of the church work that

the secretary does, or the janitor, or the treasurer, or the organist, or the altar committee.

He'll learn how to make pointed applications of God's Word to a small group of people rather than to a large mass. We've already mentioned the joy of preaching in such an intimate surrounding, such as a member's living room, something he may do some day as a New Mode missionary. He'll appreciate the backing he receives from the WELS and will take a new look at what the WELS really is--simply a big group of people who are serious enough about God's pure Word that they want to see it preached in places like San Juan and Humacao, Puerto Rico, even though there are only a few people worshipping with us there.

The PR vicar will get the bonus of getting a taste of military base life. He'll visit a few of our families there and share God's Word with them in their unique situation. He'll gain an insight and new appreciation for American servicemen who are stationed sometimes in less than friendly surroundings. He'll also be able to do this in English and he'll find that his English speaking Christians can be just as ignorant about the Bible's truths as his Spanish speaking people.

Since the vicar is not tied up with many meetings and does not have a long list of shut-ins, he'll see that he has quite a bit of time on his own. I had a bishop who did not force me to keep a certain schedule, so the vicar has a chance to try his own wings and set his own schedule to a certain extent. He'll learn some more self-discipline in a hurry or he'll find that he can spend hours piddling away the time in what seems to be a worthwhile cause.

Although he'll work mainly with one pastor, the LA vicar has the unique blessing of working to some extent with three pastors and their families. He gets to see three different philosophies and three different ways of attacking the same problem. He'll see that indeed there is room for a wide range of talents in today's ministry and that all the talents can be used for God's glory. He'll see different wives and families and see how they fit into the ministry in differing degrees.

The LA vicar in PR will get a chance to travel and rub elbows with a different type of person in his travels, even if only on ~~the~~ travels to and ~~from~~ from the field. He'll see that God's creation is incredibly beautiful everywhere he looks.

He'll get world mission exposure and he'll see that WELS World Missions is really just human beings sent out by other human beings under God to do God's will in the best way they know how at a certain point in time. He'll see that it might seem easy to throw stones at past mistakes, but that it might ^{not} be so easy ^(to avoid all mistakes) when he's in the same situation.

Probably the biggest and most important thing that the LA vicar from '84-'85 learned is that people need to hear the story of God's grace over and over again. He learned that maybe sometimes we give our people too much credit and think that they need to hear something new all the time, when in reality, they could stand to hear a sermon on John 3:16 probably once a month. Due to a number of reasons our group in Puerto Rico is small, and they hear the simple Gospel message. But they know where they are going when they die. Maybe the preaching series that is used will never appear in the Quarterly, but they hear the story of God's love in sermon and Bible study

every week in a way that they understand.

Maybe there's an application here for our stateside ministry. Maybe we shouldn't be afraid to bypass a difficult text if our people can't handle it. Maybe shortening the service to forty-five minutes and then having a forty-five minute Bible study immediately after so that 100% of our members stay for it is not a bad idea.

An experience that the LA vicar certainly won't forget is his time in Guadalajara, Jalisco, Mexico, studying Spanish. He'll be on his own, with no supervision, and with only one assignment: to learn to communicate. He'll learn what a tremendous gift of God communication really is and be reminded of how often we abuse that gift when we talk about the price of beans in China, rather than getting to know our friends and loved ones better and communicating God's love to them. The vicar will learn to laugh at himself daily, almost by the minute, if he's out there sticking his neck out to learn the language. He'll learn to put himself back into kindergarten and follow people around, making himself a nuisance like a baby does with its mother, asking what this or that is. Maybe he'll thank God for the tremendous gift of the Lord's Supper that can be taken for granted, because it's the first time he's been reminded of the forgiveness of sins in a way he understands, simply because he couldn't understand the pastor well enough when he preached his sermons.

The vicar/student in Guadalajara will learn a new appreciation for Mexicans and for some of the "wetbacks" who cross the border illegally to make money simply so their family can eat more than just fat-fried tortillas. He'll also learn that

American influence is deeply felt in the Third World when he sees President Reagan's speeches make bigger headlines in Guadalajara than Miguel de la Madrid, the Mexican president. He'll see that not all Mexicans are poor and there are many who want to be cosmopolitan and learn English, Italian, or Japanese. He'll learn to love the warmth and openness of the Mexican family that can be misunderstood by the American as pushiness. He'll see that the "Mi casa es su casa" (My house is your house) philosophy is true and that it also implies then that your house is my house--a scary proposition for most Americans.

He'll meet a lot of interesting, if misguided, Americans, who are also studying Spanish for a myriad of reasons. He'll meet other missionaries who probably won't understand WELS confession^{al}ism, and yet missionaries who want to spread the good news of Jesus Christ.

Above all, in Mexico and Puerto Rico the vicar will be reduced to a child, in order to learn the language, so he'll be forced to re-think many things that a person who does not experience it takes for granted. He'll be forced to question himself, "Is it worth it? Do I really have something for these people that they really need?"

The resounding answer is, "Yes, by the grace of God."

Yes, the Latin-American vicar^s in Puerto Rico is a different experience, a good one. Andⁱ one that prepares the vicar well for his lifetime of service for the preaching of God's Word, nothing more and nothing less, wherever he may be.