**News from Craig and Amanda, 9th February 2023**



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| **A happy Gathering** |
| A body of water with trees around it  Description automatically generated with medium confidence |
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| Ever since our return here in July of last year, one pressing commitment has loomed larger than all others. Every four years, Latin Link hosts its week-long International Assembly for all members and associates. Bolivia was chosen some time ago for 2022: owing to the pandemic, a twelve-month postponement was necessary. And so, having taken care of the business side of things last year in a special virtual meeting, the 2022 International Assembly became the 2023 Gathering: live and in-person from Santa Cruz de la Sierra, Bolivia. |
| In the last month in particular, there have been a great deal of plates to spin: rooming arrangements, dietary preferences, airport taxi reservations, extra bookings for those arriving earlier and leaving later, tote-bag production, printing for T-shirts, banners, notebooks…you name it! The Bolivia team had been hard at work putting it all together, and naturally much of that work fell on the Santa Cruz members (ie, us!). |
| Nonetheless, with many of us having been greatly blessed by past assemblies, we have been determined to deliver as warm a welcome as we can, and I think we just about pulled it off. |
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| I have often reflected that a big sign should welcome people at our international hubs, along the lines of: “Welcome to Bolivia: It’s complicated.” Or, “Welcome to Bolivia: Be flexible.” The first day or two certainly bore that out! We arrived as a family the day before the conference was due to begin, along with the rest of the Bolivia team members. My own arrival took a wee bit longer than Amanda and Sam’s! There was a horrendous storm on the motorway and water managed to find itself into our car’s engine. The car broke down completely and it was only thanks to a borrowed Land Cruiser from some friends that Amanda was able to take Sam (my only passenger) to the hotel. |
| Meanwhile, a nearby mechanic who just happened to be in the area spotted an opportunity for a quick buck. It was tempting to think we might have found our Good Samaritan, but after a couple of hours’ effort, he was no closer to fixing it. To cut a long story short, I trailed said mechanic as he graciously towed our car, slowly but surely, back to our usual mechanic in the city. I finally made it to the hotel with my dinner waiting for me around 10:30pm! |
| That storm kept going into Thursday, the main day for arrivals, with the conference beginning formally on Thursday evening. It persisted into Friday, and was so intense that a hotel-wide power-cut resulted on the Friday morning, power reigniting just in time for the first main meeting. Meanwhile, as far as the hotel’s access was concerned — tricky at the best of times in such a remote location — what was once a road became a river! And the later the arrivals, the less inclined the taxi drivers were to come ‘all the way’. Let’s just say I spent a *lot* of time in that Land Cruiser those first couple of days! |
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| Back at the hotel, Amanda was in continual demand throughout the conference. Guests’ staying-on plans were in continual flux, while the hotel needed a fair bit of, let’s say, ‘reminding’, as to our requirements. We found, for example, that some conference rooms we’d booked months ago had magically gone to L’Oreal Bolivia (they’re worth it)! I told you it’s complicated here! Amanda, who has expressed a desire to go into events management if she could start all over again, did remarkably well throughout it all, and was unflappable until the end. The *very* end: she was being asked to sign some forms by a hotel receptionist as our car was leaving the property. |
| I must reiterate: as the Bolivia team it was an honour, and for us as a couple, likewise. I have recounted elsewhere what a pivotal, providential time we had in Guatemala in 2018, and so it was our privilege to be able to ‘give back’, in the knowledge that we’ll have to be here a *very* long time if we are to ever host this again! |
| In truth, like any host, we noticed the small details that were out of place, but our guests were delighted with everything. Not least the venue, which was spread over a massive tropical property, with people mostly sleeping in family-sized cabins. The main meeting room was huge and perfect for our needs. Most importantly, smack bang in the middle was the *pièce de résistance*: a very large swimming pool. |
| The conference theme was taken from Isaiah 43:19 (“See, I am doing a new thing! Now it springs up; do you not perceive it?”) and we were guided in the main morning Bible teaching by Iván Neira, a Chilean now based in the UK, where he serves with Friends International. Other visiting speakers covered topics such as member care, organizational trust, mobilisation and the global diaspora. The afternoons saw plenty of pool time, as well as training for national team members with roles (such as team leaders, short-term coordinators and member-care facilitators) and some more general workshops on topics such as time-management and communication with supporters. |
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| If more by accident than design, there seemed to be a fair bit more time for simply being together, given that the main required four-yearly business had already been taken care of in last year’s virtual meeting. The evenings in particular were very ‘open’. I imagine most people in Latin Link would agree that this aspect, of just being with ‘the tribe’ again, is the most important factor in any such gatherings, and so on that front we were greatly blessed. |
| Naturally with all the logistical considerations, our participation was a wee bit hokey-cokey (in-out-in-out), but Sam was fully plugged-in to the parallel children’s ministry. This was overseen by a lovely young lady called Rebecca, who like all of the children in attendance, is herself a TCK (third culture kid). There really was no-one better equipped to guide our younger participants. |
| Our hope was to take some time together as a couple today to take stock a bit, but Sam has come down with a fever, and there’s a very good chance that it could be dengue. So most immediately, please pray for him, and pray that we can find a little bit of rest amid all the inevitable ‘cleaning-up’ now required, not least with several attendees staying on for a few days or even weeks. As for us, we will take a proper week off later in February. |
| And above all, give thanks for the ‘new thing’ that our God, *the* God of the nations, did in this past week, among his humble servants. All praise, glory and honour to him! |
| A group of people in a room  Description automatically generated with low confidence |
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