

YAGM NEWSLETTER

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GREETINGS AND WELCOME

Hello friends, family, and mentors!

What a whirlwind it has been in my life these last few months. After five fruitful and engaging years, I graduated in May from Pacific Lutheran University (Go lutes!), and then had another amazing summer working at Rainbow Trail Lutheran Camp. Now, in this last month, I have stepped foot yet again into the complete unknown as I begin my year of service with YAGM. A quick note: this newsletter is a bit on the long side, so I invite you to grab a cup of coffee or tea whatever suits your fancy and settle in!

I know many of you are already familiar with YAGM as a program, but those of you who are not, let me take a moment to explain. Young Adults in Global Mission is a year long service program established by the ELCA that provides the opportunity to live in community and engage in service work around the globe. Currently, the program serves in Argentina/Uruguay, Cambodia, Central Europe/Hungary, Mexico, and the United Kingdom. Volunteers are placed in schools, churches, and social service ministries and are expected to live with and engage with their local community.

A quick note on this being a "mission": While this program is a mission in name, the ELCA is very intentional about how its volunteers interact and live within their host communities. This program is not about converting people to christianity. It is about living in and learning from the surrounding community, creating relationships, and learning to serve communities in small but impactful ways. If all goes well, I will be learning more from them than they will learn from me.

TOPICS OF DISCUSSION

WHAT IS YAGM?

MEXICO CITY ORIENTATION

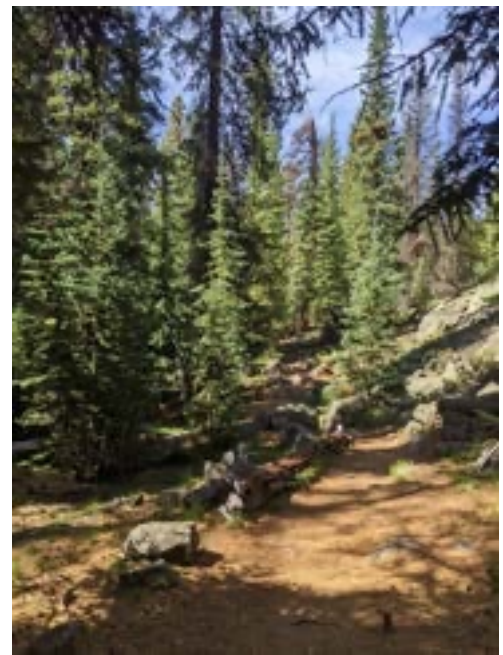
GUADALAJARA: HOST FAMILY
AND THE ILM

SITE PLACEMENT: EL REFUGIO
AND WORKING WITH
MIGRANTS

PICTURES!



ME WITH A COOL SNAKE!



Left: Mt Rainier from Tolmie Peak Lookout (WA) and Right: Mt. Yale trail (CO)



Top: Summit of Eagle Peak (Rainbow Trail, CO)
Bottom: Hurricane Ridge, Olympic National Park (WA)

Who am I and why did I decide to pursue YAGM?

For those of you who have known me a long time, a lot of this you may already be familiar with. Feel free to read along anyways!

I am a recent graduate from Pacific Lutheran University in Tacoma, WA, where I double majored in Biology and Health Humanities. During my time at PLU I studied abroad twice in Oaxaca, Mexico, where I had the great privilege of immersing myself in the Spanish language and all the wonderful artwork, culinary experiences, and history that the region offers.

I am originally from Denver, CO, so I have a deep love all things outdoors and in the mountains. I'm a total and complete nerd, and I love all things related to music, reading, and writing. While I grew up methodist, I have discovered a wonderful and welcoming community within the ELCA both through my time with Campus Ministry and Trinity Lutheran Church at PLU, as well as my two summers on staff at Rainbow Trail Lutheran Camp.

I want this year to be about growing in faith and expanding my perspective to encompass all that Mexico and its people have to teach me. As someone aspiring to become a physician one day, I believe service and compassion are as critical to what I want to do as the technical sciences. I also believe that it is crucial to experience and hold the world for what it really is; both the beautiful things that other countries and cultures have to offer, as well as the hard realities of suffering and poverty. This is why I have decided to pursue a year of service in this program, so I can practice service in a meaningful context, and in a way that I can carry through into my next steps.



Mexico City: Orientation

In a foggy, sluggish dreamstate I awake to the awful noise of my phone's alarm piercing through my silicone earplugs. I groan, let out a big, huffing sigh, and roll over to turn it off. It is 2:35 in the morning, and I have ten minutes to get up, throw on some clothes, and carry my life and luggage to the door. It is the witching hours on the last day of our full group orientation in Chicago, and it is time for the Mexico cohort to say our goodbyes and head to the airport.

Why on earth it was necessary to be up so early, I will never know, but after many hours of half-awake shuffling through security lines and a murder scene of coffee cups, granola bars, and chick fil a breakfast sandwich wrappers, we were on the plane.

The next three weeks were a wild and wonderful blend of tourism, lectures, and devotionals designed to give our cohort a glimpse of what the city has to offer, as well as to inform us on the social, economic, and cultural realities of the country. We visited the bright and colorful waterways of Xochimilco, scaled the imposing steps of the pyramids at Teotihuacan, and braved the pickpockets and tourist traps of the Zócalo (i.e. the city center). Our time outside of exploring the city was devoted to various lectures on themes of poverty and socioeconomic disparity, violence, migration, and the complex religious and cultural landscape that makes up the country. Each cohort member led a devotional on one of these topics, which was a nice way of providing space to process the mountains of information entering our brains.

While all of this information is critical and necessary, I found that the most rewarding part of orientation was how quickly and easily our cohort bonded. I kid you not, but it seemed like every night was characterized by joviality and humor; we played games, cracked jokes, held dance parties in the kitchen and even managed to put together a poor man's rodeo (by this, I mean we all pretended to be galloping horses at the command of Maya, our country coordinator's 4 year old daughter). We shared our outrage watching *The Summer I Turned Pretty* as much as we shared our vulnerabilities and anxieties in devotionals and long walks through the city's various urban parks.

The camaraderie I grew to feel towards my cohort mates is something I have only experienced in those rare and remarkable spaces of life. It is the camaraderie of summer club swim teams and summer camps, of late night drives around the city and backpacking expeditions through the mountains of my home. It is the camaraderie of belly aching laughter and belly aching tears, the joys and the griefs and the messy in-betweens all rolled into one. I'm inclined to call it beautiful, but maybe that is just the poet in me.

Top to Bottom:
Mexico Cohort arriving at the airport at 3am,
Country Coordinator Soliette and I being goofy,
A cross we painted for devotionals.



Some photos from the soccer game!

Cohort Members (left to right):
Micah, Andrew, Reagan, Mara, Daniel (aka me), Mak

A Story From Orientation:

I used to think I knew what a real rainstorm was like. I was wrong. It was the first Sunday of our in country orientation, and by this point our cohort had already bonded fairly well. We had shared meals on floating barges, carried reticulated pythons around our necks, and climbed the steep steps of the great Pyramid of the Moon in Teotihuacán. So after a small but lovely service at one of our companion Lutheran churches, we were excited to go to the local University stadium for a soccer game.

The game was very enjoyable, but having never graduated past peewee soccer, I had no idea what was going on. I simply shouted when other people shouted and jumped out of the chair when they screamed "Go!!!"

But as we all laughed and cheered and struck up conversations with various local fans, clouds began to loom overhead. It had rained every afternoon that we had been there, so I knew we were in for a downpour; the only problem was that we had all neglected to bring umbrellas or raincoats to the stadium.

So in the final minutes of the game, just as we were hoping to see the Universities team win, the clouds churning above began to unload. Thousands of people fled their seats and began pushing and shoving their way towards the tunnels that lead outside the stadium. Our group barely managed to stay together without being separated, but we found shelter inside of one of the tunnels leading up to the stands for some time, waiting to catch a break from the rain. Our nervous laughter was punctuated by eager (and mostly drunk) fans chanting "Goya! Goya!", riling up the crowd inside the tunnel.

At this point, we were all embroiled in laughter, leaning into the ridiculous nature of our situation as best we could. Since the rain didn't seem to be stopping any time soon, Soliette decided we should make a break for it and see if we could run home. All of us bolted out of the tunnel, and immediately got soaked by the pounding rain. Our feet splashing through the now rushing torrents of inch deep water, water so cold I could feel it sucking the breath out of me.

Just past the gates of the stadium, we spotted a bus stop where a group of fans had gathered to take shelter. We splashed our way through the flooding parking lot and gathered on the platform. It was then, as if some kind of divine retribution had been cast upon us, that the rain gave way to hail and the winds picked up; it was as if the storm had somehow been holding back, baiting us, waiting for us to break away from the nice, cozy shelter of the tunnel and expose ourselves to the full brunt of it's force.

The wind blew everything at an angle, so the meager roof above use was all but useless in keeping us dry. So there we were, eight pobrecitos marooned on this little concrete island in the swelling storm. No raincoats. No umbrellas. No clue as to when the hail that was ferociously attacking our backs and legs would let up.



Trapped underneath the bus stop! (Actually miserable)

Now, here is the interesting part of this experience. Even as we felt the cold seeping it's way from a skin into our bones, as the clouds grew thicker to the point that the skyscrapers that once lined the horizon vanished from view, I cannot recall a single moment where our cohort was not completely absorbed in that hysterical laughter. Maybe it was our defense mechanism, our distraction, but for the entirety of the onslaught that we endured, we were cracking jokes and making fun of each other. I distinctly remember at one point looking over, as we were all huddling together like penguins for warmth, to see Andrew taking the full brunt of the onslaught on the outside, screaming squealing in what I still can't decide was terror or not.

Finally deciding we weren't doing anything useful by making ourselves sitting ducks in the rain, we made a break for it, running back home through the flooding streets. We dodged traffic, and hopped from one meager shelter to another, finally making it home, where of course as soon as we crossed the threshold indoors, the hail stopped and the rain began to subside.

There is *so much* more to talk about from orientation, but not enough time. I will post lots of pictures for you all to enjoy at the end of the newsletter!



Soliette attempting to save our phone by wrapping them in a raincoat (she will drop them all on the ground of course)



Everyone cold and miserable after running through the rain and hail to get home. Pro tip: NEVER leave the house without an umbrella.

Shoutout to Mara for coming in clutch with the photos even when we all thought we were going to die. You know the priorities!

Guadalajara: First Impressions, Host Family and the ILM

On September 15th, after a very short flight from Mexico City, I arrived in my new home of Guadalajara. I was picked up by Roberto, the current president of the Iglesia Luterana Mexicana, and we began the long drive across the city to my host home. In this time, he explained a little of the wide variety of things he is responsible for, from pastoring the Guadalajara congregation with his brother Ari, as well as a some rural congregations in Ahualulco, Tepic, and Mazatlan. He explained that he also has a prison ministry, and that in his role as president he must travel regularly to make visits to the 11 congregations that make up the church around the country.

I felt we really warmed up to each other over the course of the drive, and this gave me some confidence as we arrived at my host home and he introduced me to my host family, Lupita and Job. They are both retired with several children and grandchildren, most of whom I was able to meet shortly after.

We kicked off my new stay on dramatic fashion, celebrating both Mexican Independence Day and Job's birthday that first night. The whole family came over (a mild panic zone moment for my poor introverted self), and the cooking and feasting began. I swear, I do not know what kind of witchcraft and wizardry Lupita was up to, but that night I ate some of the most incredible food I've ever had in my life; mountains on mountains of mouthwateringly crisp and juicy grilled meats, refried beans that would make Rosarita hang up her hat and retire, and an assortment of cakes and desserts that had me worrying I wouldn't be unable to walk up the stairs to my bedroom by the end of it all.

It was a casual but familiar atmosphere of food and conversation. There were many pockets of conversation occurring in different parts of the room, family members and guests greeting each other and catching up. I watched a bit of the football game, told people a bit about my background, and played a card game or two. It reminded me very much of the nature of my own family gatherings, and that brought me some joy and helped me settle into the new space.

I spent the majority of my time talking with Pastor Ari and his family, who had been invited. I met his wife Isa, and their two daughters Elizabeth and Elian, who emphatically reminded me of the critical cultural importance of Toothless and the How to Train Your Dragon series.

I asked Pastor Ari about his work and what he enjoys the most about it. He explained to me his intentionality for making his ministry not just about theology and biblical knowledge, but also about relationships and community, specifically working to improve the participation and commitment of the children.

I have had many other fruitful and engaging conversations since then, but I think it is important to reflect on the fact that I have been surprised at how confident my use of the language is, and how clear my understanding has become. This is monumental for me after many years of struggling through the growing pains of immersion; my Spanish is not perfect, but I am not longer afraid of making mistakes, and I look towards the rest of this year not fearing an inability to make connections, but relishing the possibilities that now lay before me.



Lupita and Job



Pastor Ari and wife Isa and their kids Elizabeth (older) and Elian (younger)



Pastor Ari (left) and Pastor Roberto (right) being goofy

Site Placements: Migration Shelter and the ILM

During my year here in Guadalajara, I will be serving in two main contexts. First and foremost, I will be volunteering at El Refugio: Casa del Migrante, a migrant shelter located in the economically disadvantaged neighborhood of Las Juntas on the outskirts of the Guadalajara metropolitan area. The shelter is run by the charismatic Padre Alberto, whose parish is situated right across the street, and provides refuge for individuals and families travelling along the migrant corridors in Mexico. Much of their work involves providing food and lodging, as employment opportunities for the residents during their stay. The center relies heavily on the volunteer work of members from the parish, nuns, and others like me.

Secondly, I will be involved with *La Iglesia Luterana Mexicana* (Mexican Lutheran Church) on weekends. On Saturdays, I will drive with Pastor Ari and his family to Aqualulco, a small town west of Guadalajara, where I will assist in running confirmation and programming for their youth. On Sundays, I will participate in service and community activities at the main ILM congregation here in GDL, Iglesia Luterana Fé. More on this in future newsletters; for the interest of time I would like to focus on my first week at the shelter.

I had my first week of service this last week, and I went in with a little bit of nerves and apprehension. I didn't know what I would be doing, what the residents of the shelter would be like, or what might happen. But it didn't take me long to get adjusted to the routine of being there: serving breakfast, lunch, and dinner, cleaning dishes, mopping floors, helping sort food and clothing donations.

I was welcomed by Marin, a man from the Parish who seems to be the one running the show, and other volunteers- Miguel, Margarita, Claudia, and the Nuns who all put me to good work.

Navigating my place in the shelter and trying to establish some rapport with the residents proved to be a little awkward; one of the biggest obstacles was simply my inability to understand certain accents, and anything at all when there is noise happening around me. I found myself in many conversations where I had to strain to pick out the individual words being used, and it was humbling having to accept that I didn't understand and admit to the people who are trying to talk to me.

There are two stories I would like to share from my first week: The first is about F, a native to Guadalajara, who after listening in on various conversations I came to learn was in the shelter not for migration, but for family conflict. F is a very dynamic and expressive character, with lots to say and many stories to tell. We were sitting on the couches in the lounge area, when suddenly our conversation turned to the topic of swimming. We sat and talked for at least an hour, sharing stories about our backgrounds (him being an open water swimmer, and I being a former competition swimmer), laughing and joking and bonding over our shared understanding of the sport. After a while, he began drawing a map of the Mexican coastline, creating a map for me of all of his favorite beaches and tourist towns for me to visit (if I ever have the time).



The Sanctuary inside *Iglesia Luterana Fé*, the main congregation in Guadalajara



The entrance to *El Refugio*, the migrant shelter I am volunteering at.

After having to leave the conversation to attend to some other tasks, he came back later in the evening and helped me dice strawberries for the dessert we were making for dinner. I felt a sense of comfort, and ease, and the beginning of what I hope might be a camaraderie and friendship of some kind. For the rest of the night, he would pass by me to say “buen provecho” as I ate, or give me an enthusiastic fist bump. It made me feel that I was welcomed, and reassured me that there would be further opportunity for connection ahead.

Second is E, one of the women residents of the shelter, traveling with part of her family from Honduras. She was initially one of the residents who I felt somewhat awkward around, but who began to invite me to sit next to her at meals. During dinner on my second day, she again invited me to sit next to her. We began by exchanging pleasantries, and I am trying my hardest to hear her words over the noise of dishes being gathered and other residents cleaning up for the night. She is teaching me about Honduran cuisine- of plátanos fritos, arroz, y caldo de res, amongst others, and asking me about my favorite “American” cuisine.

But as our conversation evolves, I notice a shift. No longer is she animated by the traditions of her country; she becomes solemn and quiet, her eyes falling to where her hands lay on the table. She is sharing something important and vulnerable, and I must lean in close to hear over the noise around us. She is telling me about her daughter, who lives in the United States, who was separated from her (and by what context clues I had, by force). But within all the noise and all my effort to understand, I hear one thing that cements the reality of what I am bearing witness to. She tells me “I think I have to cross the desert to find her.”

This sentence stops me. I have heard of migrants crossing the deserts in Arizona before, but that had been at a distance. It is an altogether more humbling experience to meet someone who must seriously consider such an act out for necessity, to find and return to their child. I was at a loss for words; what does one say to someone in that position? I felt profoundly out of my depth.

But I had to take a step back and remember the reason why I was there. Accompaniment is not a theology of solutions; it does not provide quick or easy answers, not does it ask of us to attempt to solve anything ourselves. Rather, accompaniment asks us to be still in those moments of uneasiness, of insecurity and loss, to bear witness to the lives of those around us both in celebration of their joy and witness to their suffering. It is profound because it does not deny the harsh realities of life on this earth (as we so often try to do through rationalization, or solution based mindsets), but rather invites us to exist in that tension so we may be moved towards greater love and compassion.

I have no idea what impact I might have made on E for having sat and listened; my hope, of course, is that I offered something beneficial, but that's not really the point. I could only tell her what I knew to be true: “I wish I had the words, but I do not know what to say.” And her response was gracious and simple, a candid smile with eyes that held the unspokenness of her experience in all their depth.

And so we returned to laughing, and sharing recipes, and eventually the last chores of the evening before saying goodnight.



Top to bottom:
The main courtyard as seen from the kitchen,
A mural in the courtyard which says "Welcome,"
Padre Albertos parish across the street.

Thank You!

Thank you all for taking the time to read my newsletter, I hope you enjoyed it. Of course, there is so much I wish I could have said, but there is not enough time to cover it all. I hope that over the course of this year I can provide more information on all the wonderful, insightful, and difficult things I am encountering.

To all of my friends, family, and mentors, as well as the congregations who have donated in support of me this year: a profound thank you. Your generosity has been astounding, and your support means more than you can know.

If you have enjoyed reading this newsletter and would like to support me, I invite you to donate at the following link: elca.org/yagm/give

All you have to do is click the "My Gift Will Support" tab and find my name. Any amount you're willing to contribute goes a long way in supporting me and the program as a whole.

Send me an email with your thoughts, questions, or comments. I would love to hear from you all. Until next time!

Best,
Daniel Bensen

"This command which I enjoin on you today is not too mysterious and remote for you. It is not up in the sky, nor is it across the sea. No, it is something very near to you, already in your mouths and in your hearts, you have only to carry it out." - Deuteronomy 30: 11-14



Young Adults in Global Mission



The Lutheran Center: This is where we stayed during orientation



Xochimilco: the historic waterways and remnants of the volcanic lakes Mexico City was built upon. Tourists pay to go on leisurely rides on these extravagantly colorful barges



Axolotl Refuge: one of our stops on the Xochimilco tour



Teotihuacan: Largest ancient city in America, with the Pyramid of the Sun being the third largest pyramid in the world



Teotihuacan



Miscellaneous:

Includes the following : Lucha Libre, Basilica de Guadalupe, Torre Latinoamerica, Castillo de Chapultepec, Zócalo/Catedral Metropolitana, and Soliette dying after a perfectly timed joke.



More miscellaneous pictures: City Palaces, Tepoztlan, Catedral Metropolitano, Chapultepec Murals, Flower Market