

UTILA NEWS DECEMBER 2023

“Lift up your eyes and look about you; all assemble and come to you.” (Isaiah 60:4a)

December started off for Linda and I at Pico Bonito, where we'd booked a complementary guide for a bird walk, which was disappointing- the 'guide' started late, wanted to climb the mountain instead, spoke little English, and gave poor ornithological advice. I failed to see the lovely cotinga (its actual name), but saw other birds, including a toucan and an oropendola, and his captive snakes. I then photographed some hummingbirds, a trogon and a wild snake, while Linda enjoyed the hammock and a massage. The food was good and it was so peaceful after the constant noise pollution at home. The next morning, our last, I got up at 5:30am for a solo bird walk, on which I saw parrots, frogs, toucanets, an oriole probably not on the check list, and capuchin monkeys, before Linda saw them too. That afternoon we went back to La Ceiba, went shopping, and had a pizza. Linda went back the next morning, I stayed to preach, and was very unwell on the ferry home.

Other leisure activities included our neighbour Kim and her granddaughter coming round to put lights in our street-facing lounge window, inspiring us to put our Christmas tree up on the 13th, which rested on a cardboard box so looked increasingly wonky. At the Bando Beach Christmas markets, we bought each other presents, lionfish jewellery for Linda and tea and mango hot sauce for me. Linda had a baking morning in 'the bush' (countryside) with the Women's group, who made delicious cookies (biscuits) for their families and the wider community. Our Christmas dinner was at our usual restaurant with the family who'd invited us last year, which was good, but as we walked home primary school children were letting off firecrackers in the main street (no Health & Safety here). My peaflower tea is violet, or blue with milk- sadly we could only get UHT milk, which tainted the delicate floral flavour. We were also invited for chicken wings for Bella's 20th birthday with the Women's group and teenagers, enjoying a stunning sunset. We booked a holiday, and swam once on the public beach, whose road is much improved but now lacks off-road parking.

We had further issues with our golf cart, which was out of action for half the month, due to needing a new starter/generator- the starter worked, the generator didn't, so it had to be replaced again. The rain and associated frequent power cuts have continued, at least I can get my word processing done when there is no internet, but I struggled to finish the November newsletter before Christmas. I was also stung by a tropical bee on the sofa when I moved my leg, which was painful and swelled up a bit, but wasn't too bad- Linda continues to be violently attacked but tiny but voracious sandflies, which make her legs swell up.

We received a positive result from the stationing process mentioned last month- we were matched with the New River Circuit in Tottenham, in London, had Zoom meetings with the Superintendent minister, the Circuit Invitation Committee (CIC), the current presbyter

and his wife, a deacon, to see the manse, and finally members from both churches, who asked us lots of questions. The next morning the CIC met, unanimously offered us the appointment, and we rang back next the next morning to accept. We will finish here in July, do a short furlough and move to Tottenham in August.

Church here continues to be busy. On our visit to the North Coast I preached at La Ceiba, where I implemented a scheme to try to assess the preachers' worship leading skills, with limited success. We met after the service to discuss things- they still want to take an exam in April but asked for extra support, so I agreed to arrange extra online refresher and support sessions to help them catch up with their missing assignments. Their youth leader was very upset that all three of their teenagers had dropped out of the youth camp that morning, so there were none attending from any North Coast church. I took the whole service at El Pino in Spanish for the first time, normally a local lady has led worship, and we were treated to the sight of the glowworms again as it was getting dark. The first online Local Preacher tuition revision session could have gone better- we held it on WhatsApp, and a Spanish-speaking lady whose church has ceased to meet turned up by accident, so I set up a new group just for tuition, which I asked them to keep free of the devotions which tend to swamp messages on other groups. I would far rather do it on Zoom but they can't access that on their phones apparently. The first attempt on the new group was of limited success too.

We returned to Utila just in time to help host the Youth camp. We collected the camp leader and took him to the school, where we finally had our planning meeting, and met the Roatan group at the dock. The first night supper was cooked by our ladies in the church annexe, where the groups were assigned, so we both ate with ours. I was also asked to assign the Utilian youths to groups of Roatan teenagers, with an age range of 10-25 (though we were told the minimum was 12). We had Singspiration (extempore singing), I led devotions, and my colleague Rev Hanners welcomed everyone. The next morning I supervised my group cleaning up, while Linda prepared hers to do the devotions. That evening Linda and I were asked to lead a session on Methodist heritage, so Linda did a session on the Wesleys, and I did one on MCCA history and organization. I've never been asked to lead such a session at a youth camp in Britain, but they do respect their heritage here.

The rest of the camp continued despite heavy rain which prevented campers from going down to the church for their activities on some days, and also led to two cancellations of community visits to shut-ins, which we managed to do on the third full day. The second night activities took place in a room at the school, in which Linda and I led a Methodist quiz between the five groups. On the third morning the camp leader and his daughter had to go to the mainland for family funeral, so I led the main Bible study as I'd attended his first two, continuing the camp theme of 'Igniting the passion for life'. We also had a campfire, with open-air devotions, marshmallows and hot dogs roasted on palm leaf stalk skewers, and a welcome lack of the scary stories the camp leader allegedly normally tries to terrify them

with. I also asked for volunteers for the trip with me to the Cays for the Sunday service, for which I had six or seven straight away, with others asking later. We were also supporting the camp with our golf cart being the official transport for people and goods, including the picnic lunch to the beach, on the way to do which she broke down...

On Sunday morning I experienced some issues regarding who was coming to the Cays with me. The boat arrived late at the dock but we set off, only for the boat, captained by an inexperienced teenager, to break down and limp back to another jetty for another boat. Our musician missed the boat, so a teenage boy stepped in. Our service lasted 1.5 hours, the liturgical service at Mizpah written by the camp leader lasted for 2.5 hours- not at all what our young people are used to (though the Roatan ones may be). That afternoon we had fortyish extra teenagers at Sunday School, so we abandoned normal lessons and did some singing, presented the material for everyone, and finished early to allow our classes to practice their Christmas presentations (though without those on the camp, which was frustrating for Linda who lost key people). That evening we were back in church for the climactic 'revival service', which had difficulties from the start, as the Roatan girls started fainting, requiring medical care from Rev Hanners, a former nurse, until the health centre opposite opened, while I watched for new casualties and I helped carry girls into the health centre. They were all suffering from low blood sugars, but by the end of the service they were all sitting up, and in the morning, when I went to see them off in torrential rain, they were much better, though several youths were seasick on the way home... Youth Camp had had a very positive impact on the faith of some of our young people, and they made lots of new friends, though there are definitely lessons to be learned before next year in Roatan...

The following week Linda had a good practice with her Jubilee (pre-teens and young teens), the older teens practiced their liturgical dance several times (it showed, they were brilliant), and the adults... well, I'd been very busy at camp, so I wrote their drama sketch, which they'd all been eager to do (having never done much in previous years) and sent it to them during the week and we ran through it before the start of the programme. It all went really well, Linda and I were delighted with our classes' performances, and only one class suffered from stage fright. Later that week we went out for our annual teachers' meal, where we presented the Superintendent with a bunch of tropical flowers. Linda and I prepared the Sunday School Christmas Eve session for everyone, though it had to be cut slightly short for a memorial service for an American lady in church at 4pm. The centrepiece was a 'story quiz' based on the Biblical account- all the age groups got them all right except one question (Who ordered the census?)- one adult did get it right but was outvoted by the others! We decided not to do the puppets or screen technology due to the need to take them down quickly afterwards, and the handing out of (imported) apples at the end, but it still went well. The final week's Sunday School clashed with another funeral, arranged earlier that day to my irritation for 3pm, in the middle of the Sunday School hour. We couldn't contact all the

parents to cancel Sunday School, so we decided to run it without several teachers, with Linda in joint charge again. The body had only arrived that morning and burial usually happens the next day, but the release of the body had been delayed and the pile of earth that had to be shifted was so enormous that I could see it was going to be a very long burial... I was exhausted by the end, and just made it home before sunset, with Watchnight still to come....

But I'm jumping ahead... Throughout Advent, we hadn't been lighting the second Advent candle, in solidarity with Palestinian Christians. It did strike me that lighting what some think of as the peace candle was supposed to indicate that we were praying for peace, and also what about the conflicts in Ukraine, Sudan, DR Congo, Myanmar, Nigeria or Yemen, which were all going on last year too? However... I led the Christmas Eve morning service, to round off Advent and prepare us for the other services, in which my colleague took the lead in the collaborative planning and Linda and I contributed sermonettes and some carols. There were some real highlights- a seven-year-old sang all three verses of 'Joy to the world' on Christmas Eve, and on Christmas Day morning sang Little Drummer Boy in Spanish, off by heart, and beautifully. I was also touched by the tale of one of our teenagers, whose American gran had asked what she wanted for Christmas. She had said, "Christmas is for family," so she'd flown over to be with them. Not the best theology, but a lovely thought...

The 'Candlelit' carol service on Christmas Eve (this year we turned tea lights on at the end rather than actual candles) was nevertheless a good service, though we were exhausted. Christmas morning was peppered with people singing 'specials', with some excellent contributions from the children and young people. New Year's Eve was very busy too. Linda led the 9am service at Mizpah on the Magi (the Covenant service was on Epiphany Sunday). Then we had Sunday School and the funeral, as described earlier, before a break until the Watchnight service. I preached on the set gospel, the sheep and goats from Matthew, Linda spoke on using our time wisely, appropriate as the whole two-hour service was run to set times per item (only two people overran, but not us). Rev Hanners and a visiting minister also preached, but we finished roughly on time. The service was packed, with loads of children having late nights and young people there, even some who don't normally attend.

Lots of other things happened last month- Linda accompanied me on my Communion visits, and we visited a young lady in the bush with Teen Tuesday whose All-Terrain Vehicle had fallen to bits as she was driving it and broke her foot. Nobody wanted a lift back to town in our golf cart, possibly worried we'd break down again, so they went three on a motorbike instead. The Ladies' Group had their dinner and games night in the church annexe, for which Linda baked an enormous chocolate cake, and brought half of it back- it was delicious- I'd had pollo chuco (see photo- 'dirty chicken', the local version of KFC), as I was left on my own. The last prayer meeting of the year was cancelled due to heavy rain, which I can't remember happening before (everything else, but not the prayer meeting). I finally received our electronic copy of the Methodist Prayer Handbook, to start in January; I was sorry to see that

the European Methodist Churches who moved en bloc from the United Methodist Church to the Global Methodist Church are no longer included. We also started preparing for our Belize & Honduras District Conference in January. I had a Zoom meeting with two ministers from Belize to plan our ministers' retreat, which still had no venue yet at that stage! Linda booked our flights to Belize (she will be coming this time as it's our last District meeting), via Roatan as San Pedro Sula was very expensive, though it means flying out two days early.

Apart from hosting the youth camp (accommodation, meals and some sessions), the school did not stand idle during the school holidays either. A Board member and some volunteers from among current and recent past students provided extra tuition in English, Spanish and Maths for primary-age children whose parents can't afford regular tutoring. Some of our volunteers are considering teaching as a career, and we have already employed one to teach English in Kinder (English Reception, age 4-5). We have interviewed a number of teachers, both recruiting potential new teachers and reviewing the year with existing teachers, either in person or by Zoom. Some are changing responsibilities, and one reported an issue we had previously been unaware of, and need to investigate. The Board continue to be very busy behind the scenes, preparing for school to restart in February.

I failed to get this newsletter out on time due to the pre-Conference build-up, so the prayers below have been amended to make them relevant post-Conference:

Prayer requests relating to January:

For matters arising from the District Conference in Belize, that wise decisions may continue to be made, and for MCCA stationing, that they may find someone suitable for this Circuit
Giving thanks for our Circuit representatives, for travelling mercies, wisdom and blessings

For the local preachers in our Circuit, for ongoing training and wisdom going forward

For the life of the churches, especially Mizpah, with people away, especially the youth and children's work

For the continuing recruitment and wise deployment of teachers at our Methodist school

For the Bible classes at school, that we may be able to find teachers for all grades, and for wise timetabling that enables the best use of the resources available

For time and wisdom in developing and refining the Belize-based curriculum across all grades

For our plans to take time off, a February holiday on the mainland

The answer to the Sunday School question above is Emperor Augustus.

May God bless you all richly in the coming year,

Chris & Linda



Lovely cotinga (postcard)



Linda on the Toucan Tower



Our cabin



Keel-billed toucan



Linda in the hammock



Violet sabrewing



Black-throated trogon



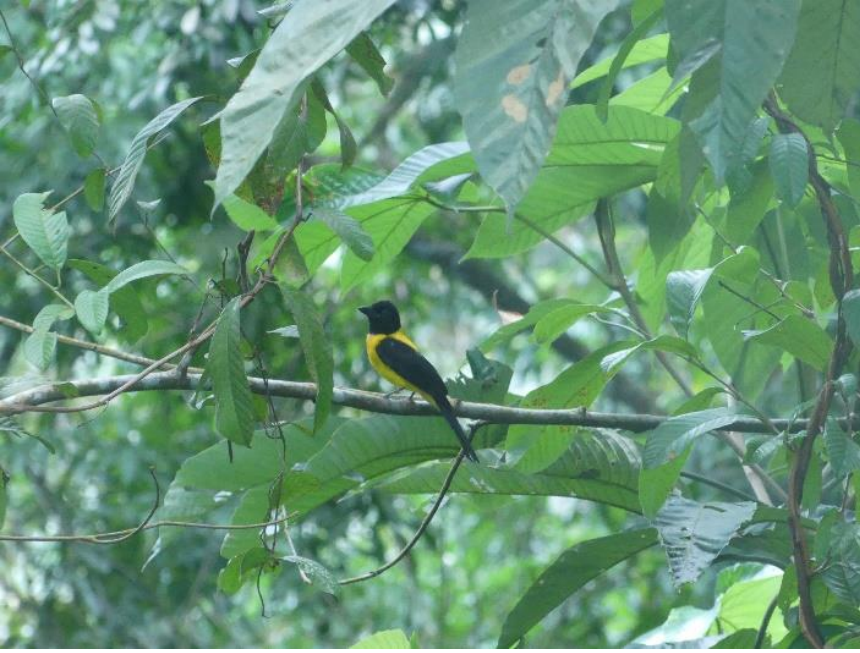
Wild snake, unsure of species



Cloud forest



Yellow-eared toucanet



Audubon's (?) oriole



White-fronted capuchin



Youthquake at the dock



Mizpah at dusk



Leading devotions



Methodist Heritage session



Queueing for breakfast



Bible quiz



Linda's group's devotions



Stoking the campfire



Changing boats for the Cays



After the service



Festive Decoration Party



Visiting the accident victim



Teenage liturgical dancers



Singing "Happy birthday Jesus"



Appreciative audience



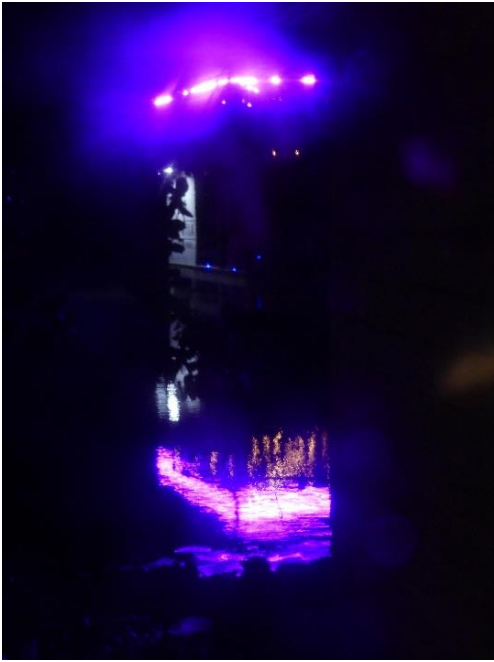
Linda's Jubilee class



Baking biscuits & cookies



Winner of the Great Utila Bake-Off



Thursday is back garden disco night



On romantic sunset jetty



Bella's birthday bash



Ladies' night



Bando Beach Christmas market



Lionfish jewellery stall



On Bando Beach



Bando Beach sunset



Paddleboarders in the garden



Record low Utila temperature



Pollo chuco aka 'dirty chicken'



Christmas dinner Utila style



Slightly wonky Christmas tree



Linda's pre-Christmas coffee



Post-Christmas peaflower tea