

Latin Link On Location

January 2018 – transcript

George: *Hi, I'm George Luke and welcome to Latin Link On Location, the podcast that takes you right into the heart of what Latin Link members are doing in Latin America and around the world. We hope you find these podcasts informative and inspiring.*

Latin America has had its fair share of natural disasters in the past year. In this podcast we will hear about Latin Link members who have been caught up in two of those disasters that happened in 2017 – the flooding in Peru, and the earthquakes in Mexico.

George: *In September, Mexico was hit by two massive earthquakes in 12 days. Here is a member of Latin Link's Mexico team to tell us what happened and how the country coped.*

Mayra: Hello everyone, from Puebla, Mexico. My name is Mayra Gomez; I am Joel Gonzalez's wife. We are the Gonzalez family from Latin Link here in Puebla, Mexico. We came three years ago, and we have a son, his name is Joel Fernando. Sometimes we also call him JF, he's nine-and-a-half years old and he's doing his fourth grade in primary school.

Now as you all know, in the news we have all been for more than two weeks now, because of the earthquakes. We had an earthquake first in Oaxaca and Chiapas that was felt here in Puebla. There is a big distance between these two states and Puebla. It was really scary. We were in bed, sleeping, and the whole house was moving around us. It lasted 90 seconds, which is a lot. It was like horizontal, or circular, if you like to call it that way. It caused huge damage in Oaxaca, Chiapas and in Tabasco as well. Mexico City suffered in a little dimension, but it was bad. that happened the seventh of September.

Then the 19th of September, which happens to be the anniversary of the big earthquake that Mexico City suffered 32 years ago, with a huge coincidence we had another earthquake that affected Mexico City, Puebla State and City, and also Morelos.

This last earthquake has had lots of casualties, but also the destruction of buildings from the Spanish colony age and new buildings. So some people have suffered the loss of their jobs, their job centres, the loss of their homes, and, of course, the saddest thing of all, the loss of relatives, friends, family. So the whole country has been mourning them and also working hard to find survivors.

I can say that when the earthquake happened we were doing different activities. Joel was just entering the house. As he was indoors he really felt how the house shook and he thought it would fall upon him. Joel Fernando was in school, he was in PE. Happily, he was outside, precisely in the place that is the safest place in school. And about myself, I was walking from school to home with Nina, the new Strider from Switzerland.

We were just walking next to a major road in the city and I thought I was just feeling dizzy. And then I realised it was not just me but the whole world around me was moving. Nina felt the same, so we just stopped, moved away from the road and tried to be in a place without trees or other things that were dangerous. We waited there till it stopped. And then, when we tried to cross the road we realised that the traffic was crazy because there was no electricity. At that moment we were not sure how big the damage was. We just felt it was a tremor, a strong tremor but not an earthquake. We found out later on that it was a big thing.

We were without Internet for more than two

hours, which is not bad, but is bad when you know that family and friends around the world are receiving news and thinking about you and you cannot tell them that you are doing well.

We didn't have electricity for nearly five hours, and the whole city was full of sirens, ambulances and everything. We were praying for people, we were just at home as it was recommended by the government to be indoors and only radio was working. That was the only way to know what was happening away from home.

It was a very sad time and difficult. But it is amazing how people were so helpful with one another, solidarity was seen everywhere. We are now in many ways back to normal, in other ways trying to help people who really lost their homes, and schools were destroyed so some children are still missing school for that reason.

George: *The solidarity of the Mexican people that Mayra speaks about is something that many people in the country have picked up on. Here is Antonio Navalon, a well-known journalist and social commentator in Mexico:*

Antonio Navalon: Just like it was true 32 years ago, in the face of adversity and tragedy the people of Mexico are at their best.

It had been 32 years and nobody could believe it, the ground was shaking and grumbling again ... exactly 32 years later.

We all rushed onto the streets to help, and stayed there, and immediately the world witnessed solidarity. Hundreds, thousands, millions of people not thinking about themselves, digging with their bare hands through the rubble to save any life that was still there.

In 1985, things happened without any government. This was the biggest difference this time: the Municipal government stepped up and the response from the President was swift. The people also worked tirelessly and gave a lesson in solidarity that astonished the world.

George: *Here's Mayra with some more reflections.*

Mayra: So for about two weeks our timetable and lives were totally messed up. We couldn't go to work because we were working in locations so the government needs to check the infrastructure to say, yes, you can use it, it is safe. The same thing with schools. So Joel Fernando couldn't go to school as there are around 900 schools in Puebla City, and they were all queueing to have this assessment from the government.

So at the end we were lucky to return quite suddenly to normal life, but others did it in three weeks, and as I said there are a few people still waiting to have a more normal routine and life.

Also, it has been an intense time because everybody wants to help, but you want to do it to the people who really need it. So how to get the resources to them and not through people in the middle who maybe could put them aside or take them for another purpose. That was in the news, and many of you will know.

But that was a difficult time, and more of our friends – Mexicans we deal with them – was to collect goods and food, and give them to people who will go directly to the small villages, towns or areas of the city, and will give them directly to the people affected. That is what a lot of people did, they just used their own cars to take everything to the people and not to the government or the Red Cross, as both had been sadly involved in some acts of corruption. So people preferred to make sure that they were giving to the people in need. It worked, but it was a bit tricky and very sad.

Thank you for your prayers, your support. Thank you for thinking about us. And please pray for more people to come and join us in Mexico, so we can do more and in a better way, to serve the Mexican people and especially to serve the kingdom of God. God bless you.

George: *Mayra has asked us to pray for Mexico following the earthquake, so here are some prayer points.*

Pray for those in need as a result of the earthquake and that the help would reach them. Pray that God would open doors to assistance to reach them directly, and that through this they will be given hope and shown the love that they need.

Pray that there would be a real sense of solidarity, not just among the people, but also among the authorities, the military and those who are providing for everyone who have lost their jobs, houses and loved ones.

As a side-effect of the earthquake, people have been thinking about their own mortality, and the realities of life. These are huge opportunities to talk about hope, God, Christianity, real life, and what it means to be a Christian? So the earthquake has got people seeking out answers about purpose and meaning in life, and how to contribute to society and communities in Mexico. Pray for pastors, church leaders, mission workers and Christians across the country to be sensitive to the opportunities and also in how to guide people towards the Truth that they are seeking. Pray that many people will find Jesus during this time of reflection and uncertainty.

Why not pause the podcast now and take some time out to pray about those issues?

George: *Earlier this year, areas of Peru suffered huge floods. We asked some of the Peru team to tell us about the floods and how they fit into the wider natural issues in the region.*

Hannah: Hi, I'm Hannah and I live in Arequipa in Peru. I am the Short Term Coordinator here. My role involves identifying suitable projects for Step teams and Stride placements, helping to orientate them when they arrive, supporting them when they are in-country, and debriefing them at the end of their time in Peru. I'm also involved in the sending of Peruvian mission workers with Latin Link, and helping local churches and organisations send and support Peruvians in mission.

The rainy season in Arequipa starts at the end of September and goes on into March. Every year there is torrential rain. Water supplies are often cut for a day or two due to burst pipes, but this year the rains were much greater than normal. Around ten times more rain fell than normal due to conditions caused by the El Niño effect.

This caused rivers to overflow and mudslides to occur, destroying what was in their path. Hundreds were isolated and thousands displaced. The most badly affected were the areas in the north of Peru and the area surrounding Lima, the capital city.

George: *Ruth Turner has been based in Lima for the past 13 years. She is responsible for member care throughout Latin Link.*

Ruth: It was in Piura, where our members Bernardo and Johanna Wenk live, that the flooding was so much worse than other parts. And that was due to the river Piura bursting its banks after weeks and weeks of rain.

There had been fears as early as February, but it was in March that the worst really happened when the river overflowed and caused severe flooding, not just in the city but also in the areas surrounding Piura. There were many people in little villages who were completely cut off, and there was no access to them because the roads were destroyed or completely filled with water. So they were left without water and food supplies for days, sometimes even for a few weeks.

Thankfully, a few days before this all happened there had been warnings that there was the possibility that there could be severe flooding. So Bernardo and Johanna went out and bought supplies of water and dried goods that would keep them going if anything was to happen.

When the river did burst its banks, the water in the area around Bernhard and Johanna's apartment block was up to the level of your neck. Thankfully, they live on the ninth floor, so they were safe and well within their apartment.

However, they were without any electricity, which of course includes Internet, and they didn't have any running water, no drinking water, and so that meant they were not able to use the toilets because the whole of the sewage, septic tanks, and so on, were completely filled up. It was a very interesting time for them!

Many of the people in their apartment block had family members and friends staying with them, as they had lost their homes.

It was a time of national crisis, and many parts of the country were declared to be in a state of emergency. The government did all that they could to get supplies of food and water to the people who needed it most, and helped people to find emergency accommodation. They repaired bridges and roads as quickly as they could.

However, a lot of damage has been done, and the reconstruction of villages and towns is going to take a lot longer.

During the time of the flooding it was amazing to see a real spirit of solidarity throughout Peru. There were many collection points organised by the councils and local churches throughout cities like Lima and Arequipa.

It was amazing to hear people who never go to church say that they would prefer to leave supplies at the churches, rather than with the council because they trusted that the churches would ensure that everything got to the places that needed it most without items being stolen along the way.

And it was just amazing to watch all of this happen because on many previous occasions, when there have been problems, it's been very easy for people to look to other countries to bring in supplies. Of course we received relief from countries like Ecuador, and so on, and even Venezuela. But it was really great to see Peruvian people dig into their pockets and help each other.

George: *Latin Link members were able to contribute to the relief efforts. Here's Hannah:*

Hannah: We had one Stride family in Trujillo at the time. Once the waters had subsided around where they lived they were able to help with their local church and other organisations to provide food, water and other essentials to communities that had lost their homes and pretty much everything.

George: *And here's Ruth:*

Ruth: Within our local Latin Link team, we had Bernardo and Johanna Wenk in Piura, which was the region most badly affected. They were able to work with local churches to bring relief and

hope to people in areas that had been cut off completely.

The International School in Arequipa organised a collection, and were able to send a whole lorry-load of food, water, clothes, and other useful things to Piura. They had a contact – I think it was a father of one of their students – who worked with the Peruvian Air Force. They made contact with him and he organised for this lorry-load of relief to be driven safely by the Peruvian Air Force from Arequipa up to Piura, which was amazing.

And of course, it did mean that they got through quite early. There in Piura they were met by Bernharado and his friends, and of course Johanna, and they were able to distribute the supplies.

It was lovely to hear the stories from Bernharado and Johanna about how carefully they went to visit different communities to find the people who were most badly affected, the opportunities they had to share materially but were also able to share about Jesus, and how the churches that went, the people who went from the churches, were really keen to keep up the contact with the people that they met, that it wouldn't be a one-off thing, but this was an opportunity for a much longer contact and possibly even to plant churches in these areas one day.

There was lots of hope and a real sense of we're in this together, and of people linking up across the country, which was really special to see during such a difficult time.

George: *Here's Hannah again to summarise the current situation for us.*

Hannah: There is still much to be done in the areas affected by the floods. People are still living outside under makeshift shetlers, roads are still covered in potholes, and dengue fever is still a concern. Crops have been destroyed, meaning livelihoods have also been lost, and the cost of food in Peru has risen. Relief work is still ongoing, reconstruction work will take years.

George: *And here's Ruth with a couple of things she would like people to pray about.*

Ruth: First is for the country of Peru, and for the government – especially as they work on the reconstruction after all the events that happened earlier this year. Pray also that they won't lose sight of the need for a much better infrastructure and for a lot of preventative work to take place that would be of great help in the time of an incident of crisis occurring.

The second point is for those people who have really suffered during the floods. Pray for families who have lost loved ones, for those who are struggling with injuries, and for those who

have still not got a stable housing situation. Pray for provision, and also that the Church would continue to look out for people and not forget about those who are still suffering in the aftermath of these events.

George: *So there we have some prayer points from Ruth Turner. Why not pause the podcast here and pray about some of those things now?*

George: *The floods in Peru are part of a much bigger picture. To explain more about that, here's another member of the Peru team.*

Juliana: My name is Juliana Morillo Horne. I'm from Colombia. We are supporting the Quechua churches in Cusco in the south of Peru, together with my husband Ian and our two boys.

A significant part of my work includes promoting Christian care for creation, which I do mostly through local training and activities with local churches, as well as through an international network called the Lausanne WEA Creation Care Network.

I can say that during these last decades there has certainly been a marked increase in the number of floods, of landslides, and other climate-related natural disasters. This is true for Peru, as well as for many other countries in the region. During our 13 years in Peru, we have been involved several times as missionaries ministering to churches and communities affected by extreme flooding events.

Most recently it was the coastal El Niño floods that drenched and caused so much damage in the north of Peru. Other extreme climatic events, such as hurricans, are also becoming more frequent and stronger, particularly in the Caribbean region in the last decades, and are predicted to increase in response to climate change.

In general, I would say that effects are felt more severely because of issues such as deforestation and building in cyclone- or flood-prone areas. And the effects of climate change are also strongly felt here in the highlands of Cusco. The galciers are receding, and some have even disappeared. In general, there's a lot less water available for agriculture. This is a cause of great concern.

George: *Juliana spoke to a local Quechua community leader. Here's what she had to say:*

Quechua leader: I am going to tell you about what we are experiencing these days. We are seeing that climate change is affecting us a lot. Our water sources are drying up. Water is no longer enough for watering our fields, for drinking, or for supplying our reservoirs. Everything is drying up. What will we do?

We need to recover our sources of water. The waters from distant mountains that used to supply us, are also drying up. We are thinking about what we could do to prepare for the future.

We need to plant native trees to recover our water: trees such as molle, aliso, labran, and sauco. These will help us to recover our water.

George: *And here's Juliana again:*

Juliana: Most of the believers we relate to in the rural areas are themselves farmers. We regularly hear from them about how unpredictable weather has become, how a sudden hailstorm or unexpected frost can ruin their crops. They say that things used to be a lot more predictable in terms of when the rains would start in order to sow. People often say the weather is going crazy.

What we are also seeing is that these extreme weather conditions are making agriculture unviable for the poor Quechua farmers in these remote highland areas. Many are abandoning their farms and joining the many others who are moving to the towns and cities.

George: *Juliana has given us plenty of food for thought and some very challenging prayer points. I suggest that we take some time now to pray through some of those things.*

George: *In the past few years, a number of corruption scandals have happened in Guatemala. Recently this all came to a head with many Guatemalans going on strike and protesting on the streets. Geoff Baines is one of our longer-term members in Guatemala. He send us this report on the situation.*

Geoff: The political situation in Guatemala is difficult, to say the least. None of us are in any danger, don't worry, but it has been tense.

Two years ago, a few months before I arrived in Guatemala, there were huge strikes in the capital, and in the regional capitals, against the President of the time, Otto Pérez Molina, as the nation saw him as corrupt and using his position to benefit himself financially. After months of strikes, the President and Vice-President resigned.

During the elections the Guatemalan people voted in Jimmy Morales, an ex-comedian who ran his campaign under the slogan '*Ni corrupto, ni ladrón*' – 'Not corrupt, nor a thief'.

Just after he was elected, the UN sent a delegation to investigate corruption in Guatemala. They quickly gathered evidence, and helped in the prosecution of the previous President on the grounds of fraud and several cases involving income tax.

This commission then went on to investigate high-profile cases involving human trafficking, misuses of public funds, drug trafficking and other things.

Then a couple of months ago they presented papers in the constitutional courts applying to strip the current President, Jimmy Morales, of his immunity, so that they could investigate him and his party.

Jimmy's reaction was immediate. He attempted to throw the head of the commission, Iván Velásquez, out of the country. The constitutional court acted quickly and blocked the President's actions.

Two weeks ago Congress passed a reform of the justice system which legalised illicit campaign funding, the area that many think Jimmy was about to be investigated in. However, because it was rushed through and not really well thought through, and as many human rights groups pointed out, it also lessened punishments for other crimes, such as sexual abuse of infants.

The constitutional courts stepped in again and blocked the reform.

On Wednesday 20 September a national strike that involved thousands of people was called, calling on the resignation of the President and all those who voted in favour of this reform. This reform won overwhelmingly.

Strikes are now happening every weekend. Social media is hugely divided. A lot of my Guatemalan friends are sharing images of the delegates who voted for this reform, calling for them to be publicly shamed. You hear cases such as in a university they literally threw this delegate out of a class because they didn't want to hear from him.

However, just as many people are showing their support for the President, saying that we have to pray for him and his innocence, and even more extreme some are saying that he is the chosen President for Guatemala.

The problem that faces the country right now is that if the President resigns there is no good replacement. All of the current politicians have got skeletons in their closets – some just hide them better than others. Even if it is proven that he is corrupt, again the jury is still out, we have to accept that he might be innocent. There is no non-corrupt candidate to take his place.

So it's a very difficult situation for Guatemala right now.

George: *Geoff has been speaking to some local people and asking them what their thoughts are about the strikes and the situation. Here's what one of them had to say:*

Geoff: Fredy Delión Martínez is a student in SETECA Bible Seminary in Guatemala City, He is also a pastor and radio presenter for one of the major Christian radio stations here in Guatemala City.

Fredy: I think that to be able to respond to the question one needs to understand the context that Jimmy Morales works in.

I think that the perspective he previously had about politics was formed with good intentions, but when he was voted in he realised that this perspective was far from reality in the context of corruption. Because of this he has been either tainted by, or involved in, corruption.

I've heard about various strikes in different regions at different times. We want to change presidents but we don't want to change ourselves. The people want to change the President, but they keep throwing rubbish on the streets, they keep polluting the environment, they keep stealing or having affairs, we could make a long list of all the things that the Guatemalan people are unwilling to change.

Personally, I think that when we change family leaders, church leaders and community leaders, then we will start a change in Guatemala without depending on politics for a good example of integrity.

George: Here's Geoff again with a few things he'd like you to pray about.

Geoff: Thank you for listening. Some prayer points that I'd like you to take into account for Guatemala and this situation would be, pray for the President, that he makes the right choices for the country. Even if we are not necessarily in agreement with the choice for the leadership of our country I think it is still right to pray for them, because at the end of the day they are the people in charge.

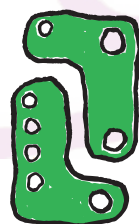
Pray for an end to corruption in the country, that the abuse of position of power stops, and that people can start to trust in their politicians.

And also pray for the future politicians that are coming up, for the people that are currently students, that are currently in secondary school even, that they see politics as an honest job and not one that you have to be corrupt in to survive.

But I think in general just pray that the corruption stops in all aspects of the society. The argument for a lot of Guatemalans is that if the leadership is corrupt then the normal, average person can be corrupt too – in their businesses, in their work, in the way they deal with people. But if integrity starts from the ground up then it can become a culture of integrity, rather than corruption.

Thank you very much for listening and I would really appreciate your prayers about all this.

And that's all for this addition of Latin Link On Location. Our thanks to Geoff, to Mayra and Hannah and everyone else who took the time to talk to us. If you'd like to know more about anything you've heard on this podcast there are several ways you can reach us. You can find us on Latin Link's Facebook page, or follow us on Twitter. If you are listening to this via the Latin Link App then you can contact us through that, or you can visit the Latin Link website at www.latinlink.org.uk. Once again, thanks for listening and do join us again next time.



Latin Link
COMMUNITY WITH A CALLING

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