



THE IRENES IN PARAGUAY



JANUARY 2011

Our first year



It is an interesting experience for us to look back on the year 2010. In one way it feels as if it went by really fast and then on the other hand it has been one of the longest years in our lives. It has been a year full of surprises. We came to Paraguay thinking that I (Ronald) would be pastoring a church and that Nicky would look for a teaching job to help out. The first surprise was that I would be co-pastor for two congregations at the Anglican cathedral and also chaplain of the Anglican school here (St. Andrew's), Nicky and I pastors for EMA (Anglican Marriage Encounter) and Nicky helping out at the school as a secondary English teacher. The other surprise was finding out that we were expecting our 4th baby. Samuel James was born on the 28th of September and is our little Paraguayan.



This year hasn't been an easy one. We have had to deal with a number of difficulties and challenges. Fun-nily enough when I was asked the typical question, 'How are you all doing?' my honest answer has been 'Joyful and happy.'

As a family our first challenge was leaving a lifetime in Bolivia and arriving with just 9 suitcases (so heavy that they didn't arrive on the same flight as us) in Paraguay; a new country, culture, people, friends, school, etc. In our first year here we can see that the typical Paraguayan is very courteous and kind (on the surface passive as well) but has a tribal or clan mentality. I mean that being part of a group is extremely necessary and becoming part of that group is equally hard.

Take Natasha at school for example. She was 13 when we arrived and trying to fit into a group of 18 other girls and just 4 boys who had been together since they were three years old, was very difficult for her. In July, Nicky, Tamara and Natasha had to travel back to La Paz just for 4 days to renew their Bolivian documents and while they were there Natasha met up with her old school friends. This experience and also the Sunday sermon at our old church was just right for her and she returned to Paraguay with a completely different attitude towards herself and new friends. God helped her to accept her new school and classmates. She relaxed and became herself and funny enough at the end of the school year she was voted (by her classmates) as the best classmate!

For our other two children it was less of a dramatic problem. Tammy settled in straight away and has a 'best friend'. She also did ex-

tremely well in her school grades. Danny also. He plays with everyone. At the end of the year our kids are very happy with their new school and life in Paraguay. God is good!



The mentality in the school is interesting. It is divided into four groups. Administration, maintenance, canteen and teachers. There are then three teaching departments: Preprimary, primary and secondary. Then these are divided into two; Spanish and English. The Spanish teachers also mostly speak Guaraní, Paraguay's original language. It is their heart and soul idiom. Nicky (who was brought up in Paraguay) is kind of in the middle. She works as an English teacher in secondary but also gets on very well with the Spanish teachers. She had an English-Paraguayan upbringing and formation. Her dad, Bishop Greg Venables, was head of the school for 12 years when she was aged 2 to 14 and is still missed and highly respected. It was like going home for her. She is exceptionally happy helping at the school. Nicky teaches IGCSE English and ESL groups as well. She was able to work except for one month in

March when she had a placental rupture and had to be on bed rest for a month. Apart from that she was able to work up to two weeks before Sammy was born. She is returning now in February. Sammy will be 4 months and we have found a trustworthy person to take care of him while she is teaching. God's timing is wonderful.

As chaplain of the school, I have been in constant touch with the students and also with the teachers at a pastoral level. We have also helped organize two retreats during the year for teachers and another for the rest of the staff. Both retreats were focused on our strength in Christ and called 'A life worth living'. We were also coordinating bible studies for the secondary students and organizing assemblies. This job is challenging because I have an office in the school but at the same time there is so much to do and I am only able to give it a certain amount of hours. We believe that the work at the school is extremely important and since its creation by Anglican missionaries nearly 50 years ago has had the gospel at the heart of its ministry. St. Andrew's is an influential school and the contact Nicky and I have through the school with the students, parents and staff in general is not to be taken lightly as they are the present and future leadership of the country.



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For 2011 we want to strengthen the relationship with parents as well, so we will be organizing meetings and bible studies for them focusing on marriage. In 2010 as chaplain I have been more in touch with the secondary and in 2011 we want to extend this to primary and preprimary as well.

The rather closed mentality in the culture has also complicated the outworking of pastoral ministry especially in the evening services at the cathedral which involves younger people. For them the changes proved difficult and put us under their critical lens. This led to a spirit of rebellion towards authority in general. Like a child who stands on his chair and is told to sit down even when seated they continued to stand in their hearts. They seemed for a time beyond our reach.

The morning congregation has proved quite different and consists of more mature Christians with the desire to serve and collaborate with change.

My main role in the diocese of Paraguay and its two cathedral congregations is to strengthen and support its current team and build up future leadership. In the same way, Bishop Peter Bartlett is focusing his endeavors on the strengthening of existing congregations especially the cathedral in order to then develop new churches.

The purpose of EMA, Anglican Marriage Encounter, is in few words to save

marriages and hundreds of them have been strengthened and helped through this long weekend activity together with previous and post gatherings. In a 2010 meeting when they were given the opportunity to share experiences they all thanked God for this ministry. Our participation in May was minimal but we did more in September as a pastoral couple together with our testimony. We plan to be the leading pastoral couple in 2011 which will require planning, time and follow through.



Our financial situation has been another major challenge especially given that we were starting from scratch again. We had to furnish our house and pay for everything from our salaries so had to buy things in installments at times. We were given a few things as well from the school and a family kindly donated some second hand furniture as well. Little by little we are making it our home. We are not paid by the church here but neither are we employees of a foreign mission agency so we rather fall between stalls.

For the first few months it was very hard for us to get around as we didn't have a car and public transport is minimal in Paraguay. We would spend an awful lot of

money on getting to and from school every day. In April we were able to get a car and cover the down payment. We have bought it by credit as we say in Spanish and pay a significant amount every month.

Getting our documents sorted out was another large cost. After nearly a year and more than 3000 US dollars we can now say that we are completely legal in terms of residence in Paraguay. We have around four different documents each though! I still don't understand it!

Yet in all this which put us under terrible pressure God has showed us his fidelity and provision. God is faithful.

Another challenge in 2010 was our health. Like never before we have all been ill in some way. Nicky, Tamara and I were in hospital. Nicky with a threatened miscarriage and pneumonia, Tamara when they went to La Paz got edema in her lungs and I had to undergo treatment which was for sometime suspected as cancer. Thank God for his goodness.

Perhaps for some of you what we have written seems hard but we at no time have we doubted God's call nor his care. As I said at the beginning of



this letter 'We are happy'. There is no better place to be than where God wants you to be and we have no doubt that God wants us to serve him in Paraguay. The reason we are writing this report is for you to have a clearer idea of how things have been, what we are doing and to ask your ongoing prayers and support for the coming days.

One specific and important financial need for this year is the cost of our children's schooling which at present comes to at least \$400 US a month. Please ask God if He is



calling you to help in that area. Thank you!

This comes with our love and gratitude for your friendship and companionship in Christ and His wonderful gospel.

Ronald and Nicky Irene

