

SPRING 2021

Latinfile

THE MAGAZINE OF CONTEMPORARY LATIN MISSION



Community
with a calling



Latin Link
COMMUNITY WITH A CALLING

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WHAT IS LATIN LINK?

Latin Link works in partnership with churches to send and receive individuals, families and teams, to or from Latin America, to share God's love and hope. We do this through three programmes: Step, Stride, and Stay. You can read all about these programmes and how to get involved at latinlink.org.uk/go-with-us.

Cover Photo: Children praying at the second church service back after lockdown in Oruro, Bolivia. More on page 18.

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CONTACT US

Latin Link
t 0118 957 7100
e info@latinlink.org.uk
w latinlink.org.uk

Latin Link Ireland
t 07736 033253
e ireland@latinlink.org

Latin Link Scotland
t 0131 554 7744
e scotland@latinlink.org.uk

SOCIAL MEDIA

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IT'S ALL OF US!



'Community with a Calling' – the keen-eyed among us may know this phrase as Latin Link's strapline. It expresses what we strive to be and how we work. We believe that God calls all of us to play our part in his mission – to share his love

across the world and make his name known – and that this is best achieved through community.

"Each of you should use whatever gift you have received to serve others, as faithful stewards of God's grace in its various forms." 1 Peter 4:10

For Latin Link, the community is made up of people from different countries and backgrounds. And it's not limited to those serving on mission placements; it includes the many churches sending mission workers, the families encouraging loved ones to follow God's call, the supporters offering up time to fundraise or pray, and the readers of *Latinfile* taking time to learn about Latin America's needs and opportunities – it's all of us!

As you read through the pages ahead, we hope you'll get to see just how wide this community is, and just how important each person's role is – including yours.

This edition comes off the back of a hugely challenging year, as you'll read on pages 4-5. In this magazine, Latin Link team members reflect on their experiences of the pandemic, and share the ways they've seen God at work in difficult times - like Jaap, who's felt God's hope this year while treating Covid-19 patients in a rainforest community (p. 12-13).

Elsewhere, we'll explore what we mean by 'calling'. For those readers who may feel a nudge towards cross-cultural mission – perhaps soon, perhaps down the line – there's space to take stock and examine what a call to mission might look like (p. 16-17). And we'll hear from the experience of one Colombian woman who followed God's call to serve alongside Venezuelan migrants (p. 8-9).

In the concluding pages, we're excited to share some new ways that we can all step into God's mission – outlining some resources available to you and opportunities to get involved from home.

Whatever brings you to *Latinfile* today, we'd like to extend our warmest welcome. Thank you for playing your part in this community with a calling.

Will Pitchfork
Communications Coordinator, Latin Link

One Year On: COVID-19 AND THE LATIN LINK COMMUNITY

The challenge, the response, and the future

In March 2020, it seemed that we could only watch and pray as the coronavirus spread across the Atlantic and took hold in Latin America. We knew of so many communities that were very vulnerable to a situation like this.

A year later, despite many countries' attempts to enforce strict lockdowns, over a third of the world's Covid-19 deaths have happened in Latin America and the Caribbean. Brazil and Mexico have the second and third highest death tolls in the world, and Peru has suffered a particularly high rate of deaths per capita*.

Outside of the shocking death toll, the pandemic has had huge impacts on people living in poverty.

Hunger is massively on the rise – the World Food

Programme estimates that the number of people living with severe food insecurity in Latin American and the Caribbean rose from 3.4 million to a huge 13.7 million during 2020.

Education for this generation of children has been a big casualty too, with an estimated 100,000-300,000 children expected to leave school and start working instead**. As families teeter on the breadline, the costs of schooling become too high and every pair of hands is needed to help earn a living.

A COMMUNITY LIVING OUT ITS CALLING

Of course, we felt the effects of travel bans as an international community in the business of sending and receiving people. Early on, we had no choice but to evacuate our 2020 Spring Step team from their placement with a church in Colombia. In the weeks that followed, nearly half of those on Stride placements made the difficult decision to come back prematurely. With some longer-term mission workers stuck in the wrong countries, and the inability to send new members out for the foreseeable future, we had our moments of sadness and disappointment (read Joanna's reflections on page 14).

But – we have been so encouraged by the way the whole Latin Link community has stepped up to help. Our supporters across Britain and Ireland (that's you!) have pulled out all the stops. Your

...we have been so encouraged by the way the whole Latin Link community has stepped up to help.

fundraising and giving has skyrocketed over the past year, enabling our members on the ground to organise emergency aid and respond to crises caused by the pandemic. There will be urgent needs for the rest of 2021, so we invite your continued support in this way.

Others of you have responded with a huge prayer effort. Hundreds of Latin Link supporters have joined in online gatherings – like *Inspire!* and Spanish Worship Nights – and prayed for the sick, the unemployed, the refugees and governments of Latin America.

SPRINGING INTO ACTION

For our Latin Link members still in situ, emergency needs and lockdown restrictions challenged them to completely rethink, reprioritise and restructure what they were doing. We shared some of their responses in the last edition of *Latinfile*; a couple more are below.



WHAT COMES NEXT?

For Latin America, the pandemic is far from over. Many countries are still experiencing a second wave of the virus and will live with the health, economic and social consequences for years to come. Hope is rising in the vaccination rollout, but it's a slow process and governments face a huge challenge to get vaccines to every community – urban, rural, rich and poor.

Here in Britain and Ireland, our main office remains closed and our events are online for now, but there are probably more opportunities than ever for you

to step into God's mission through prayer and practical action (see pages 18-19). Although we're not sending Step teams this year, we're still able to send Striders where it's appropriate – like Anna-Claire and Stewart Cusick, who arrived in Ecuador in January to support a local hospital (read more on page 13).

It's been an unimaginable year. But we've never been more inspired by our big, international 'community with a calling'.

* Figures from Statista, March 2021
** Figures from the International Labour Organisation and the Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean, February 2021

Louis Woodley, Bolivia



Bolivia entered a strict lockdown in 2020 that completely disrupted Louis' usual work. The church he taught at closed its doors, and his international teaching role with the Timothy Institute was largely put on hold – except for the occasional course via Zoom.

Louis was immediately concerned that many people in his community would suffer from a lack of regular discipleship and Bible teaching. He decided to take action. In March 2020, as lockdown began, he uploaded his first video to YouTube – a short devotional called 'Tiempo en casa' (Time at home).

"I intended it as a tool to encourage our local church in lockdown," says Louis, "but then decided to share it on WhatsApp and Facebook to other friends and groups, and soon, due to the positive feedback, the distribution became wider!"

Responding to the demand, Louis wrote and uploaded more. Louis now has over 300 Bible reflections on a YouTube channel, encouraging many people in Bolivia and beyond each day. And now, even a local Christian TV station in Potosí has begun broadcasting the daily messages!

Brenda Darke, Costa Rica



In Costa Rica, Brenda Darke would usually meet and provide support for children with disabilities and their families through the *Uno en Cristo* ministry. With a lockdown in place, they could no longer meet up – especially since many of the children were deemed vulnerable to Covid-19 and advised to shield.

"Some of the mothers have lost work because of the pandemic," says Brenda. "Others are always on the breadline, but their needs have increased now they have to shield their vulnerable child."

Some of Brenda's families were left high and dry without government support, so Brenda and the project team decided to start delivering food and hygiene packs to those most in need. Everybody who took part in last year's Indoor Expeditions fundraiser helped to fund this work. In fact, your donations are still paying for this essential support now, with *Uno en Cristo* delivering family food packs as recently as Easter 2021.



A Generous Welcome

CASCADAS, SPAIN: THE SMALL COMMUNITY WITH A BIG CALLING TO HELP ANYBODY ENCOUNTER GOD

The Cascadas ('Waterfalls') Retreat Centre sits high up in a picturesque mountain region an hour from Madrid. It's a welcome stop for visitors and volunteers from around the world, offering a space to marvel at God's creation and spend time with a unique community of believers.

Everyone is welcome here - from gap-year students to refugees. Jill Spink, a Latin Link member, was one of the pioneers who planted Cascadas over 20 years ago, and she's been there to watch it grow ever since.

Jill explains: "The original vision was to offer a place for reflection, somewhere that displayed the beauty of nature. Being only an hour outside of the capital, we're accessible, but when you come up here into the valley, it's like you're in another world.

"We believe God cares about all areas of our lives"

"But as well as providing a physical place for people to retreat, we wanted to allow space for study and reflection together, particularly on issues that the church doesn't always talk about. If we believe in the God of the Bible, we must believe he cares about all areas of our lives; education, social issues, the environment - everything."

Two decades later, the centre is seeing this vision come to life in new ways.

STUDYING TOGETHER

Cascadas has been focusing on 'creation care' in recent years in response to the climate crisis. "In many of our teaching workshops, we look at what the Christian perspective is on creation," says Jill. "As Cascadas sits on the edge of a national park, there are lots of opportunities to enjoy God's handiwork. After a group has spent time talking, creating artwork or learning from the Bible, we take them out into

nature to reflect or do something practical. That might be helping in our organic garden, with planting or composting - we had even planned an activity week over the summer that included a river clean-up!" (This was cancelled by Covid-19 restrictions.) "As Christians, we know how important this topic is," Jill continues. "Creation care isn't just about having a more beautiful planet, it's a social (and theological) issue. As our environment suffers, it's the poorest populations who suffer first as climate refugees, and disproportionately so."

BRINGING OUTSIDERS IN

Cascadas has always placed an emphasis on serving its neighbours. In recent years, God's thrown a few surprises their way...

When the hotel next door was rented by a Christian project, it became a home for around 20 refugees, most of whom are Latin American.

"Because we're right next door, we've been able to get involved with them a little, and even offer living space for some of their workers," says Jill. "Last year, we hosted Bible studies and talks, and it was fantastic to welcome some of the refugees and staff (most of whom aren't Christians) to take part and be included. We're gradually building bridges with them."

Another unexpected chance to welcome people in, came through a Cascadas team member. She works at a rehabilitation centre in the city for people with psychiatric disorders.

"To start with, people from the centre would come for the day and we were creating a space for them to be out of the city and interacting with people," Jill explains. "This developed into occasional weekends and some longer holiday weeks.

"They heard about our different activities and workshops and wanted to join in. It's been really good to have them with us.

"Many of these individuals only really have contact with social workers and mental health professionals. When they come here, they get to mix with all kinds of people from the Cascadas

community, as well as more people in the village - it's great for their social interaction and rehabilitation."

God's generous welcome can bring anybody into community.

COMMUNITY IS KEY

Cascadas' emphasis on community is transformative for many people. Paola* is a good example. "Paola had a difficult personal situation," says Jill. "She wasn't getting much support from church, she was having a crisis of faith and was emotionally wrecked. A Christian friend connected her to us, so she came along. And she has stuck around as a volunteer.

"It was the community that kept bringing her back"

"It was the community that kept bringing her back. She found a space where she could discuss anything without feeling judged. She encountered people here who would talk and present the faith through a different lens - she found it encouraging to meet

Christians from different cultures, with a reasoned approach to faith. She brought her own friends out here, and she gradually grew in her faith again."

One local couple - professing agnostics - who originally came for an English language week, keep on finding themselves drawn back into this community too, without always knowing why.

"They've come along to workshops on social justice, which they love," says Jill. "They've even helped us support those from the rehabilitation centres. It's been very encouraging to see them receive God's welcome and, in turn, share it with others."

On their little plot in the Spanish countryside, Jill and the Cascadas team are reflecting Latin Link's big mission: to be a community with a calling to love and serve God and our neighbours.

* Paola's name has been changed



Be part of our community

If you'd love to be part of a community with a calling, we could find a place for you in Spain or Latin America through our Stride programme. Find out more on page 14 or see www.latinlink.org.uk/stride

THE GOD of all Comfort

ONE WOMAN'S REMARKABLE STORY OF SHARING THE COMFORT SHE RECEIVED

In Bogotá, the capital of Colombia, a local church is transforming the lives of families who have fled there from Venezuela. When Latin Link's Ian Horne helped establish this initiative, there was one volunteer in particular who drew his attention – Sandra Sanchez. She had a real gift for counselling and came alongside each migrant with such compassion, and a hunger for them to be treated fairly. The acceptance she showed them often seemed to have a transformative power.

Sandra was clearly somebody with a calling to this work. When Ian asked her about her motivation, Sandra replied: "It is important that we accept people as God accepts them and learn to see them through his eyes, understanding the things of their past."

*"It is important that we accept people
as God accepts them"*

Ian sat down and listened as she shared the story of what led her to Bogotá, the church and these refugees.

THE THINGS OF THE PAST

Sandra did not grow up in the capital city, but in Córdoba, to the north. It's not a place that holds happy memories for her. As a child, she lived with a violent and abusive father – the first of many people to mistreat her. The young Sandra was exposed to more trauma when a guerrilla group kidnapped her half-brother and held him captive for four years. In her early twenties, Sandra managed to leave that place and move over 700km away to try and start a new life in Bogotá.



For the first few years, she moved around the city, trying her hand at a range of jobs. But she found herself back in a horribly familiar situation – being mistreated by another man. Even then, Sandra had a keen sense of justice and knew this wasn't right. Courageously, she fled the abusive relationship to go it alone as a single mother with a newborn baby son.

It was tough. Struggling to make ends meet and not knowing where the next meal would come from, she felt herself sinking into a deep depression.

*"Praise be to... the God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our troubles, so that we can comfort those in any trouble with the comfort we ourselves receive from God."
(2 Corinthians 1:3-4).*

A TRANSFORMATION

It was in her moments of despair that Sandra picked up her Bible. As she read, she was overtaken by a feeling of great comfort. Looking back, it seems that God was ready to intervene in her life, because the next thing that happened was a Christian showing up. Sandra described her as a 'special lady of faith' who took Sandra under her wing, invited her to the local church and started to help her along a journey of faith.

Sandra grew close to Jesus. One day something powerful happened that gave her the new start she'd always longed for. God enabled her to forgive the men who had harmed her, and she found immense inner freedom.

God had much more in mind for Sandra. Now she was ready to respond to his call.

A CALL TO PASS IT ON

This is the context through which Sandra Sanchez came to be working with Venezuelan refugees. Like her, they had fled their old homes in search of something better, but had found new problems, like discrimination, mistreatment, and an endless battle to earn a living.

Sandra felt drawn to this community. When the church began its initiative to support them, she was quick to volunteer. She was soon appointed as promoter, helping the team provide practical help with food, rent, health care and income generation, but what motivated her most was providing pastoral care.

A lifetime of overcoming adversity had given Sandra a gift for counselling others, and a genuine empathy that made each refugee feel their value. She described her favourite part of the role as, "listening to the migrants, giving words of encouragement, and helping them to see things from God's perspective.

"We encourage the migrants not to despair"



"We give practical orientation and we encourage the migrants not to despair, to seek God and his peace." She was passing on the comfort and freedom that she discovered in her own moments of despair.

SANDRA'S IMPACT

This year has been tougher than most for the migrants. Despite the impacts of the pandemic, the church has seen a core group of Venezuelan families responding creatively to the challenges around them and growing their trust in God. Some have even had the chance to study the Bible for the first time in their lives. The church also saw a number of individuals come to faith during 2020.

"God is at work," Sandra concluded, simply. "We have seen how he takes care of the vulnerable migrants here in so many different ways."

Ian could see that Sandra was a hope-sharer. God met and called her in terribly difficult times, and made her a powerful sharer of his comfort and hope to a whole community in need.



Venezuelan migrants arriving in Bogotá

Sandra's past didn't define her future, but prepared her for it. Have your experiences – good and bad – given you insight or hope to share with others? For practical tips on exploring a call to mission, head to page 16-17.

GETTING TO KNOW OUR COMMUNITY WITH A CALLING

Latin Link is a community in its thousands, made up of individuals and families across Latin America, Europe and beyond. Here's a snapshot of how a few of our members live out their calling.

Called to Latin America

BOLIVIA: ANDREW ROBERTSON

We're passionate about helping people explore their calling to mission. Our Stride programme is the perfect entry point for individuals, couples or families looking for a taste of cross-cultural mission. Andrew Robertson is a year into his Stride placement.



Andrew: "I have loved making Bolivia my home. Stride has been a wonderful and challenging experience, full of surprises and unexpected changes. It has helped me grow in my relationship with Jesus and it is a privilege to learn from people with a different cultural background."

COSTA RICA: KAYLA CHANDLER

It's important that our short-term members on Step or Stride are well supported, not left to fend for themselves! That's why we have dedicated Short Term Coordinators (STCs) in each country team, ready to welcome and guide them. Our STCs are already on mission with Latin Link, so they know what to expect when starting out - like Kayla, based in Costa Rica.

Kayla: "It is such a privilege to facilitate and support short-term volunteers; to help them discover and develop their passions, expand their worldview and grow in their relationship with God. It's very rewarding to watch how their obedience to God's calling and their stories encourage and inspire those they meet."



PERU: RUTH TURNER

Who's caring for our longer-term members? Introducing: Ruth! She oversees our Member Care - that means it's her job to make sure that Latin Link is providing ample support for all its members.

Ruth: "I love the one-to-one conversations, and I love working with my team to develop structures and strategies that support, challenge and help our members - so they can live healthy lives, enjoy good relationships with others, and be fruitful in their work and ministry."

-  Guatemala
-  Cuba
-  Bolivia
-  Peru
-  Costa Rica

CUBA: MIRIAM HERNANDEZ

Cross-cultural mission isn't just about linking Europe and Latin America - we're increasingly seeing Latin Americans with a desire to share God across cultures within the continent. Last year, Miriam Hernandez began a Stride placement from Guatemala to Cuba.

Miriam: "My Latin Link mentor has been a huge support - spiritually and morally. The regular evaluations with my Latin Link Coordinator have helped me to see my strengths, and helped my sending church see the value of the ministry I'm developing here. I enjoy watching God use this ministry to expand his kingdom."



GUATEMALA: CHURCH PARTNER

We always partner with churches and Christian projects in Latin America, rather than starting our own initiatives. Latin Link members bring their skills, but local churches are far more aware of their neighbourhood's true needs. These partnerships are a valued part of our community.

In 2019, 1er Iglesia Baptista (1st Baptist Church) in San Juan la Laguna, Guatemala welcomed a Step team. For 12 weeks, the church and Step team worked side-by-side to serve the community, particularly through children's work and outreach.

Pastor: "The work the Step team did in the church was a blessing. They taught me how to show mercy in practice, which is a command of God. I hope our church has another opportunity like this - a Step team will always be welcome."



Called to Europe

ENGLAND: JOANNA McCREE

Step teams and Striders don't just turn up in Latin America unprepared (thankfully!). Our Programmes team is busy all year round organising placements, processing applications, running training days, and everything else that's needed to send people on short-term mission. It's quite a job but always worth it!

Joanna: "My favourite part of this job is the moment when somebody does something they thought they couldn't do - converse comfortably in Portuguese, lead a Bible study in Spanish, or even board a plane alone. I absolutely love watching people grow into the person God created them to be!"



SCOTLAND: SADOC AND VIVI CHONGO

Mission is no one-way street. Europe needs people with a heart for mission, just as much as Latin America. Latin Link's Incoming Mission Ministry has been providing a pathway for Latin Americans to come and work with churches in Britain and Ireland for 20 years. Sadoc and Vivi Chongo are one couple who have been serving for many years in Scotland.

Sadoc & Vivi: "When we first heard about Scotland and how challenging the church's reality is, we felt overwhelmed but at the same time we knew that God was already there, and we decided to join him with the conviction that he is the God of the Church and we his servants."



NORTHERN IRELAND: ELMA McCracken

At the heart of the Latin Link community are our amazing supporters. In the past year we've particularly loved hearing from dedicated fundraisers, prayer warriors, financial supporters and encouraging letter-writers all living out their calling. Elma is just one example - she took on a fundraising challenge last year, walking 60km in aid of Latin Link's pandemic response:

Elma: "I thought of those who couldn't even leave their house every day during their lockdown in Latin America, and as I thought of the hunger people were facing, raising white flags because they couldn't feed their family, I really felt challenged to get involved in this way."



As somebody with a passion for mission and Latin America, you're already an important part of the Latin Link community. If you'd like to get more involved, we'd love to help you to find your own way to serve. Discover more ways to step into God's big story through Latin mission - visit latinlink.org.uk/step-into-the-story

Hope in the Hospitals

ON THE FRONTLINE IN LATIN AMERICA'S COVID CRISIS

The past year has crippled already fragile healthcare systems across Latin America. We're privileged to have several qualified medical professionals serving with Latin Link. We spoke to two of them - Jaap and Nicola - to find out what this past year has looked like, and how they've held on to hope.

COVID-19 IN ECUADOR'S RAINFOREST



Jaap Bezemer is a specialist in tropical medicine and international health. He's a Latin Link member sent from the Netherlands, living with his family in Shell, Ecuador on the outskirts of a rainforest community. Jaap serves at an outpatient clinic there.

Jaap: "Each day during the peak from April-June 2020, we would have 40 Covid-19 patients coming in, and be visiting about three severely ill patients in their homes too. A few every day needed to be sent to the hospital to be put on oxygen, but there is serious mistrust in the public hospitals here and some did not want to go. We had to treat those with oxygen at home instead.



"One patient died under my hand. He came in with advanced respiratory failure and died before we could stabilise him; resuscitation was useless.

"One patient died under my hand. He came in with advanced respiratory failure and died before we could stabilise him; resuscitation was useless.

"In jungle communities, nobody applies PPE - there is no distancing and everybody drinks from the same cups. Inevitably, the jungle was infected massively at the beginning of the pandemic, but it showed signs of reaching herd immunity by July.

"I had Covid-19 myself early on in the pandemic. As we live in an indigenous community, it was hard to avoid. An upside for me was that catching and recovering from the virus at that stage gave me the confidence to travel around providing medical care across the region.

"Although Covid-19 cases are now declining here, the knock-on effects of the pandemic are really noticeable. Hospitals seem to get fewer and fewer supplies; my cancer patients aren't receiving their chemotherapy. Even the medication to intubate patients in intensive care is not available. The health system has collapsed.

His heart was touched during her illness, and he decided to become a Christian...

"Of course my trust in God has kept me going through these really challenging times, and I've been able to share this with others. Several times I appeared on the local news and I explained why I was in Ecuador and that my faith in God helped me not to be afraid while treating Covid-19 patients.

"One time I visited an indigenous Shuar lady with Covid-19 who was feeling really scared. She was a Christian, so my team and I prayed with her. We went back several times to check on her during her recovery and we got talking about Jesus, along with her partner, who wasn't a believer yet.

"His heart was touched during her illness, and he decided to become a Christian too. I got to pray with and encourage him in his new faith. After her recovery, the couple decided to marry and invited me and my wife to be their godparents at the wedding! It's a wonderful story of hope to come from this difficult time."

REOPENING THE HOSPITAL



that people can get all the medical care they need locally. **Anna-Claire and Stewart Cusick** arrived in Ecuador in January for a two-year Stride placement. The plan is for Stewart to use his engineering background to help get all the hospital's facilities up and running, while Anna-Claire treats patients.

MIDWIFERY IN GUATEMALA'S PANDEMIC

Nicola Brown is a midwife from the UK who arrived in Guatemala for a year's Stride in January 2020. It didn't quite go as planned. The pandemic hit as she was completing her initial three months of Spanish language study in Guatemala City. Miraculously, she was still permitted to travel across the country in April to begin her hospital placement in rural Quiché.

...we had the privilege of being open about our faith.

Nicola: "It was a bigger challenge than I was initially expecting. It was really faith-deepening to move from living in a gorgeous city and enjoying Spanish classes, to everything being unknown - not even knowing whether I should stay or if it was wiser to go back home. "One verse kept coming up over and over again, from 2 Chronicles 20: 'We don't know what to do, but our eyes are on you.' I decided to stay in Guatemala and was thrown headfirst into the Covid crisis.

Shell used to have its own hospital, but it closed down seven years ago. We are excited to have sent a new couple to help Jaap's team open the doors again so

"We saw between 40-100 Covid patients from the indigenous community every single day. I, sometimes with a doctor and sometimes alone, looked after 15 to 40 pregnant patients every day. And we saw emergencies in the afternoon as well.

"One of the greatest differences and biggest joys I found working as a midwife in Guatemala, is that we had the privilege of being open about our faith. We were able to talk about God with the patients and offer to pray with them.



"As you can imagine, we had many emergencies and many difficult cases because of Covid and the lack of resources in the country. Sometimes there was very little we could do, so praying with a patient was a significant way to bring hope."



Please pray

Please thank God for the willingness of Jaap, Nicola, Anna-Claire and Stewart to go and put their skills to use in a very challenging context. Ask God to encourage them with stories of hope as they work, and empower them to bring healing and comfort where it's most needed.

SHORT-TERM CHALLENGES

long-term hope

IT'S BEEN AN EVENTFUL YEAR, TO SAY THE LEAST, FOR JOANNA MCCREE, LATIN LINK'S SHORT-TERM COORDINATOR IN READING. BUT AMID THE MANY CHANGED PLANS AND DISAPPOINTMENTS, SHE HAS SEEN A HOPEFUL STORY.



A few weeks ago on a particularly wet and muddy walk, I started thinking about the previous year (does anyone else find walking makes you think the most profound thoughts, only to instantly forget them the moment you step back inside?).

It's been an incredibly challenging year for the Programmes team, dealing with delays, border closures, constantly changing travel restrictions, early returns, postponed placements, and of course many cancellations. I've given myself the nickname "The Dream Crusher" for all the Step and Stride placements I have had to cancel or postpone! There were days where it just felt bleak and I feared for the future

I gave myself the nickname "The Dream Crusher"

of Step and Stride (I do have a tendency to be a bit over-dramatic sometimes...).

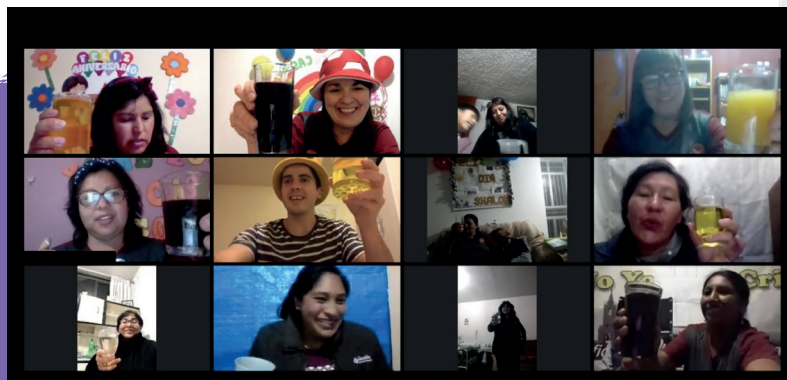
But, back to my walk - and a story of hope, I promise! There I was, knee deep in mud, when I began to ponder some of the highlights of the year - and there were a surprising number. It seemed that mixed in with all the chaos, confusion, sadness and let-downs, there was hope buried in the most amazing examples of God at work. I've watched God answer prayers in completely unexpected ways and heard how people have learnt to rely on God, seen his provision, experienced his joy, and heard his voice in the uncertainty.

Striders have adapted what they're doing to meet the needs of those around them. Food parcels, online prayer sessions, door-to-door prayer, online English

lessons, virtual church... and it works! I don't know why I am surprised - as if Covid could stop God's plans - but it's just amazing to see and hear stories of God breaking through and reaching people, in spite of the masks, the curfews, the lockdowns...

Josh is a great example of this. Peru went into lockdown just a few weeks after he arrived for his Stride placement, meaning that he had to carry out one of his two projects entirely online - and he did not disappoint! By launching himself into it, learning new skills, being creative and prepared to look a bit silly at times, he was able to immerse himself in the project and encourage and bless those he was working with.

"Watching Striders embrace changes of plan has been hugely motivating"



Josh taking his Stride placement online

A SHARED EXPERIENCE

There have been new and unexpected friendships - our flight agency staff now recognise my voice and the first ten minutes of our calls are spent chatting and laughing. I have commiserated and brainstormed with staff at other mission agencies, prayed with Steppers' and Striders' family members, and got on first name terms with people in embassies and consulates.

I had a personal moment of clarity where God spoke so clearly to me through a call with a Strider. She had no idea that by sharing her journey through this uncertainty, she was speaking directly into my life, and God was challenging and encouraging me. I love how God is unrestricted, how he mixes things up to challenge one person and yet encourage another.

Even at the lowest points, God has brought hope. When I was rushing to get the Step team home in the early days of the pandemic, I was on a 3am call to the flight agency and, embarrassingly, found myself in sleep-deprived-what-do-we-do-now tears to one of the agents. Within moments we went from being colleagues to friends. She shared some of her own fears, some of the abuse she had received from angry customers, and offered words of comfort. By the end of the call we had arranged to meet in person post-Covid - I could almost see God rubbing his hands together in glee!

EMBRACING CHALLENGE

Watching Striders embrace significant changes to their plans has been hugely motivating. During their interviews we always ask questions about their flexibility - never before has that been so well put to the test!

Andrew (on Stride in Bolivia) was unable to go to his original project in Oruro, and has instead spent many months on an



Andrew joins the volunteer prison ministry team

entirely different project. In spite of the challenges and perhaps disappointments this change has brought, he has thrown himself into it and touched many lives.

And now, over a year into his Stride placement, he's finally been able to move across Bolivia to his intended project, serving with prison ministries in Oruro.

GOD IS STILL SPEAKING

As a team we have also had to test our flexibility and willingness to adapt our plans and hopes for the programmes, and even to press 'pause' on some things. For me this is the saddest part; I miss the interview days, the orientation weekends, the interaction with applicants and staff. But even in this, God has brought hope and joy as we've had time to dream up new ideas, re-assess our programmes, and reflect on the highs and lows of the past year. Just as with Andrew's change of plans, God has not let anything go to waste - he is using the chaos.

"While we're on hold, God is speaking"

And people want to join in! Even as I write this I have had an email from an ex-Stepper. The team want to respond to any needs in

the community where they worked several years ago. Striders are extending their placements. Ex-Steppers want to return. We have had a steady flow of enquiries and applications from people hearing from God during these quiet months. And each enquiry serves as a reminder for me that while we're on hold - maybe even because we're on hold - God is still speaking, still preparing. He has a plan through all this, and nothing it seems, will get in his way.

We're constantly being told that the impact of this pandemic will be felt long after it's over, and I fully believe the same will be said for all that God has been teaching us.



Find out more

Short-term mission has many more challenges to overcome in the years ahead. But as long as God keeps calling people to serve, we'll be ready to send, support and equip.

To find out about opportunities for short-term mission, head to latinlink.org.uk/go-with-us

Is God calling me TO MISSION?



Ever questioned whether God is asking you to leave behind life as you know it and move across the world to share the gospel? Maybe you've heard stories about mission and felt inspired but intimidated. Perhaps you suddenly have some spare months ahead of you – is that a sign? It's confusing, right? What if God isn't calling you? What if it's just a 'fun idea' or a bit of escapism?

ARE YOU CALLED TO MISSION?

Let's try and clear a few things up here. Firstly, calling isn't just yes or no – it isn't a 'you're called' or 'you're not.' Don't expect God to necessarily call you to do one thing forever. Being called to go on mission in a short-term context – like a Latin Link Step team – is very different from being called to live in the Amazon jungle for the next 20 years!

Again Jesus said, "Peace be with you! As the Father has sent me, I am sending you." John 20:21

And secondly, if you're wondering whether you're called to mission at all, the answer is yes.

As Christians, we are all witnesses; we all seek to follow Jesus, and he's sending us all out to continue his ministry on earth. The question is more about how and where. Am I called to mission in a local context at home, or a cross-cultural context elsewhere in the world?

In our many years of helping to send people on mission to and from Latin America, we can say with confidence that everyone's situation is unique; one person's experience of being called is different from the next. So let's reframe the question: "Am I ready for mission?"

ARE YOU READY FOR MISSION?

Here are seven really practical questions to help you think about mission. Ask yourself honestly whether or not you think the following things apply to your situation:



Service: Are you involved in serving your local church or Christian Union, or part of a ministry that serves your community, like a food bank or street pastors? Mission is about service and it's good to have experience of that in your own culture before looking to serve in a different country.



Accountability: Have you talked to your church leaders? It's important to chat things through with trusted individuals. Often they'll be able to point you to ways to test your sense of calling or get involved in some form of service. At Latin Link, we don't just send people, we partner with churches to help them send people – your church's support is vital.



Spiritual Growth: Are you growing in your faith? Mission is about sharing what God has done in our lives and encouraging others to follow Jesus. We aren't looking for spiritual superstars but we do want people who are growing close to God through prayer, spending time getting into the Bible, and who are committed to Christian community.



Humility: Are you willing to be vulnerable? Learning to live in a different culture, grappling with a new language, and living with people who do things differently can be both exciting and terrifying – and even a bit embarrassing at times! Entering a different culture requires us to be willing to learn and be sensitive to other people's ideas and traditions. Usually you'll be working in a team led by someone from a different country, so you'll need to be a team player.



Resilience: Are you resilient? Mission can be hard, taking a toll on you physically, emotionally and spiritually. While we all rely on God for strength during difficult times, we still have a responsibility to take care of our mental and physical health. Many people living with health concerns have been effective mission workers, so don't write yourself off! Talk to us about your particular needs, but recognise that support and care is not always as easy to access as in the UK.



Talents: Is God providing an opening for you to use the gifts he's given you? Sometimes you know you are called when you hear about a project or need that's crying out for your particular expertise. In our Stride programme, we try to pair someone's passions and skills with a project or community where they are just what's needed.



Listening: What's your sense of where God is taking your life? For many people, a call to cross-cultural mission happens gradually. God sometimes speaks through seemingly unrelated events or people over many years. So if God's beginning to stir something, it's okay to wait and listen. Sometimes that act of patience can give you space to align your motives with God's. If your desire is to go wherever and whenever he calls you, you'll know your heart is in the right place for mission!

WHAT'S NEXT FOR YOU?

These questions might have given you confidence that you are ready for mission after all. Or maybe you're scared that you'll never 'tick all the boxes'! Wherever you're at, if mission is something that excites or intrigues you, talk to us. We'd love to walk alongside you as you explore what your calling might look like – we have a lot of experience in this area and we're always up for a chat.

Mission opportunities with Latin Link

STEP is our short-term programme for teams. A hands-on experience of mission in another culture for 3–16 weeks, living and working alongside a local church, helping with a practical project and joining them in reaching out to their community.

[w. latinlink.org.uk/step](http://w.latinlink.org.uk/step) t. 0118 975 7112 e. step@latinlink.org.uk

STRIDE is an opportunity for individuals, couples or families to spend 6–24 months putting their faith into practice in a different culture. Striders use their gifts and skills working with a church or Christian-run project.

[w. latinlink.org.uk/stride](http://w.latinlink.org.uk/stride) t. 0118 975 7112 e. stride@latinlink.org.uk

Step into the Story

There are so many exciting ways to connect and engage with global mission – and lots can be done even from your sofa! Whether it's praying for Latin Link, mobilising your church community for mission, fundraising, giving, or attending online events. Whatever way you feel able to step into the story, we'd love to provide you with the opportunities to do so.

Here are some exciting resources to help you connect with Latin Link in the months ahead.

HOPE-SHARERS DEVOTIONAL

If you're looking for inspiring Biblical content, to help you learn about and reflect on God's global mission, we invite you to join our monthly Hope-sharers Devotional. More than just an email in your inbox, it's an opportunity to hear stories and experiences from frontline mission workers, and receive practical tips for stepping into God's big mission.

If you're interested in listening back to our first 7 devotionals, our Hope-sharers Podcast is up and running. Available for free, in English and Spanish, via anchor.fm/latin-link, or anchor.fm/latin-link-espanol

Sign up for the monthly email, or share it with others in your church, at latinlink.org.uk/step-into-the-story

GIVING AND FUNDRAISING

In this past year, your generous financial giving and fundraising have been a huge encouragement for the whole Latin Link community. Not only has it enabled the day-to-day functioning of Latin Link - by equipping mission workers to serve their community - but funds have also gone towards providing emergency relief in a number of missional settings.

You'll see one fantastic example of this on the front cover of *Latinfile*: children praying at the Sunday service of a church plant in Oruro, Bolivia. The new

church, which Latin Link's Andrew Robertson attends, hosts about 70 people each week and currently meets on a roof belonging to a couple in the congregation. With help from Latin Link fundraisers, a small team have been able to distribute several food parcels to families in the church - a crucial provision amid present challenges.

We're incredibly grateful that your support helped this and many other vulnerable communities receive care and support in the past 12 months.

YOUTH AND CHILDREN'S MINISTRY RESOURCES

'Stories of Hope' is a brand new resource, available in two unique formats for children (age 5-10) and young people (11-16). It's designed to take your group beyond the current restrictions, to reach the world as part of God's mission.

This resource has been developed by experienced writers who have worked in both the UK and Latin America, and both the children's and youth resource packs feature:

- Adaptable session plans for online and in-person use
- Interactive presentations with videos, activities and games
- Bible stories and testimonies from around the world

- Flexible options for use over one, two or more group sessions
- Extension activities for use at mission-themed church events

Our hope and prayer is that, through using this resource, children and young people in your church will gain an enthusiasm for, and understanding of, what it means to be part of a global family of believers and the unique role they can play in God's mission.

To download your free resource pack, or to share it with your church's youth or children's leader, visit www.latinlink.org.uk/youth-children-resource



Let's keep going

The needs of Latin America continue to grow, with health and economic difficulties expected to play havoc for years to come, so we ask for your continued support in this way.

To give to Latin Link's work, please visit www.latinlink.org.uk/Appeal/stories-of-hope-donate or use the accompanying form that arrived with this copy of *Latinfile*.

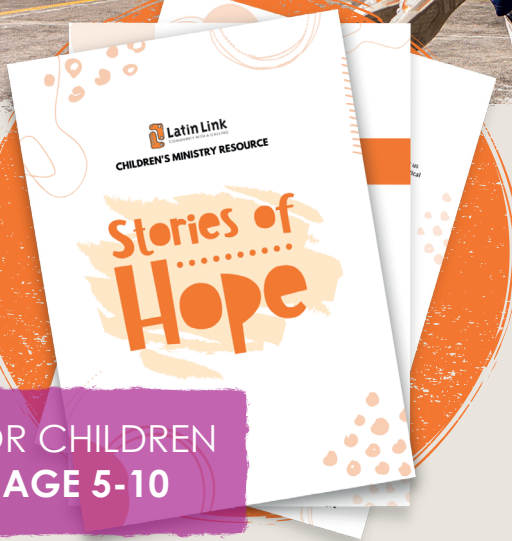
For fundraising ideas, and to set up your own fundraising page, go to www.latinlink.org.uk/fundraise

For more ideas and resources to help you connect, pray and step into God's mission, please visit www.latinlink.org.uk/step-into-the-story.



ARE YOU A YOUTH AND CHILDREN'S WORKER?

We've got a brand new resource for you!



FOR CHILDREN
AGE 5-10



FOR YOUTH
AGE 11-16



SCAN ME

Download your FREE resource pack at:
latinlink.org.uk/youth-children-resource,
or scan the QR code!

Our **Stories of Hope** resources are designed to take your children and young people beyond the current restrictions and help them step into God's global mission. They include games and activities, Bible stories, videos, and adaptable session plans for online and in-person groups. We're excited to share them with you!