

The Latest from Quito

May 2014

Hey family, friends and supporters!

I hope this letter finds you well. It's been a quick few first months of 2014 and it's hard to believe we are already in May. As I assume most of you already know, I am engaged to my girlfriend Eliana! We were engaged on Christmas Eve 2013 and have been looking ahead to wedding plans ever since. We are planning to have a civil ceremony to be legally married in late May or early June and we will have a wedding celebration with our local community in Quito on July 26th. Once we are legally married, we will begin the long process of filing for U.S. visas for Eliana and her six year-old son Kaleth. Eliana will also be starting English classes in June to get a head start on language learning before going to the states. If everything works out the way we are planning, we hope to be in the states by summer 2015.

Until we leave Quito in summer 2015, I will continue working through Mennonite Mission Network with the refugee project and other church activities. Virginia Mennonite Missions and Mennonite Central Committee have also generously committed to continue supporting me both in my work and financially, which is a huge blessing. MCC is currently in the process of looking for a person to replace me as coordinator of the refugee project, a transition that will likely happen in November. It will be nice to have adequate time to train my replacement and continue to help the refugee project in a supporting role. With less formal and administrative responsibilities after stepping down as coordinator of the refugee project, I hope to be able to spend more time supporting individual refugee families, helping out with church activities, hosting visiting groups, and generally planning for our return to the states.

Recently, there have been lots of activities happening at church and in the refugee project. On April 6th, we formally said good-bye to our long time pastors and mentors César Moya and Patricia Urueña. They returned to their home country Colombia after 14 years of service in Ecuador; however they will continue to work from a distance as national coordinators for the Ecuadorian Mennonite churches during all of 2014. They will be visiting Ecuador every two months and their first visit will be for our wedding! As we were sad to see them leave, we were also very thankful to welcome a new pastor to Quito Mennonite, Luis Tapia and his wife Jennifer Rey from Chile. It's been fun to get to know them and they've done a great job in their first few months here.

As usual, we've been very busy at the refugee project. We continue to have lots of interview each week, home visits, follow-up with families, inter-organizational meetings, small business start-ups and difficult situations that continually throw us curve-balls and challenges. Currently, there are two refugee families whose fathers are in jail, leaving the mothers alone with several children to fend for themselves. One of the families has been attending our church regularly for quite some time and is greatly struggling. Rocio, the mother, is unable to provide for her 4 children as an undocumented and unemployed refugee. I was able to visit her husband, Jair, in jail with our new pastor Luis. It was an impacting experience to be inside a noisy, dirty, over-crowded, chaotic Ecuadorian all-male jail. To my surprise, once inside the jail I ran into 2 other Colombian refugee men that I have worked with, whom I had no idea were imprisoned. They were happy to see a familiar face and receive a visit since no one visits them. It appears that 2 of the 3 men are currently struggling to wade through a racist, discriminatory and corrupt justice system that has kept them from having a fair and timely trial.

On a more positive note, I was invited to represent the refugee project in a diverse space with representatives from different NGO's, gov't officials and members of civil society in order to redact a city ordinance about social inclusion of refugees and other migrant groups. It was exciting to be a part of the first stage of brainstorming. In the coming months we will be meeting again in order to hopefully have a draft written by October. It's wonderful to see the provincial gov't interested in these kinds of legislative processes.

Those are just a few of the many things that have been happening recently in my life and in our community in Quito. Hope it gives you a glimpse of what's been happening! Check out the pictures below for a better visual effect.

Please pray for the following:

- Jair and Rocio's family. May Rocio be able to provide for her children and may Jair be granted a fair process in order to be reunited with his family as soon as possible.
- Eliana, Kaleth and myself in our wedding/life preparations, Eliana's English classes and preparing legal paperwork for U.S. visas.
- The process of finding my replacement as coordinator of the refugee project
- The ICAME (Mennonite Anabaptist Christian Churches of Ecuador) that is in the process of being legally recognized by the Ecuadorian state as a formal entity.

Much love,
David Shenk



Two of many families who were able to receive mattresses and blankets thanks to VMM's alternative x-mas gift initiative. Thanks to VMM and all who donated!



Working in a space with other organizations, lawyers, gov't officials and members of civil society in order to create a new provincial ordinance on social inclusion to include refugees and migrants.



With Jair, Rocio and the youngest of their 4 children, Matías at our church x-mas celebration before Jair was incarcerated.



The "scars" of visiting Jair in jail (at each security checkpoint there was a different stamp or number).



Eliana, Kaleth and me with Quito Menno's new pastor, Luis and his wife Jennifer.



One of our engagement pictures



Spending some quality time with other Goshen grads and students who were passing by/studying in Quito.



Some (very) fresh goat milk.