



Photo: Carla Molina

Karla Ann Koll (center) with her students Elizabeth Jaramillo and Silvia Montufo de Garcia

Christ's Call in Guatemala

by Russell Carstens

What do you do when you firmly believe that mission is “the working out of what we pray every Sunday when we ask for God’s reign to come”? What steps do you take when you understand mission as “inviting people to be part of God’s reign,” and “helping equip church leaders to participate in God’s mission and to lead communities of faith”?

Well, there’s a chance you could end up in Central America.

Such is the case with Karla Koll, a 2003 Ph.D. graduate of Princeton Seminary. She is a professor of history, missions, and religions in Guatemala for the Latin American Biblical University (UBL), an interdenominational institution whose main campus is in San José, Costa Rica. After earning her B.A. from St. Olaf College in Minnesota, Koll attended Union Theological Seminary in New York for both her M.Div. and Masters of Sacred Theology, focusing on Christian ethics. She taught for eight years in Nicaragua before she came to Princeton Seminary. Her dissertation in mission, ecumenics, and the history of religions focused on the Presbyterian Church USA’s mission relationships in Central America in the 1980s.

As a Presbyterian Church USA (PCUSA) mission coworker, the church’s designated term for long-term mission personnel, Koll served as adjunct professor at PTS for the 2007–2008 academic year. Almost all of the PCUSA mission coworkers serve outside of the United States, spending about two months in the United States for every year they spend working abroad. While on mission interpretation assignment in the States, Koll explains, mission coworkers like her “interpret the work of mission to the church” by visiting churches, preaching, teaching adult Sunday school classes, and similar activities.

Koll has spent the last seven years in Guatemala, teaching at the Evangelical Center for Pastoral Studies in Central America (CEDEPCA), an institution associated with UBL. At the university level, she teaches courses on the mission of the church,

an introduction to the history of Christianity, and several theology courses.

Koll’s affinity for Central America grew out of a number of experiences. Not only did she go on a trip to Ecuador in college, she also worked for a peace and justice organization in Colorado at the beginning of the “sanctuary movement,” a religious and political movement of approximately 500 congregations in the U.S. that sheltered Central Americans fleeing the wars in the region. After that experience, she says, “I wanted to learn from Central Americans how they were understanding what was happening theologically, and how they perceived God to be present in their struggles for peace and justice.” Koll chose to do part of her M.Div. studies in Costa Rica.

Koll believes that now is a crucial time to be involved in mission in Central America, especially Guatemala. After a long history of civil war, the 1996 Peace Accords have allowed Mayan rituals to be practiced openly. One of the major discussions today involves the relationship between traditional Mayan spirituality and Christian faith and practice. Since Mayan spirituality affirms a supreme being of the cosmos and emphasizes achieving a life of harmony, there is much room for compatibility with Christianity. However, tensions between the practices often lie in such matters as Christology, for it is a harder concept to bridge than the role of the Holy Spirit or the

doctrine of creation. It is an ongoing discussion in which Koll and her students participate actively, inside and outside the classroom.

As Guatemalans struggle to define their religious identity, for many the most significant current question is how to be Mayan and Christian at the same time. Koll said, “People are pretty much all over the map. Some believe that in order

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to be Christian you have to repudiate any Mayan beliefs. In some cases that takes the form of the extreme that says, 'If you're going to be a Christian you should no longer be speaking a Mayan language.' Folks at the other end of that spectrum are claiming that it's somehow possible today to practice a Mayan spirituality that's uncontaminated by Christianity, which seems dubious to me after 500 years of enforced contact."

The overwhelming majority of Central Americans identify themselves as Christian, and how they live out their faith within the many cultural contexts there is fascinating to Koll. She feels privileged to guide Latin American students in finding theological models suitable and appropriate for them. Together, they look at how Christians in other contexts have dealt with the struggle of intertwining gospel and culture.

At UBL, Koll equips present and future ministers with intellectual and practical knowledge they can apply to church life. She defines the goals of her teaching ministry in two ways: to answer "an increasing need for 'bridge people' to facilitate encounters between Latin America and the United States," and to provide important theological education, since "Protestant churches have a desperate need to train new leadership."

The PCUSA acknowledges this need to bolster mission in Latin America and elsewhere. Held last October, Mission Challenge 2007 was the denomination's month-long "tour" of missionaries (almost all of whom serve outside the U.S. in twenty-seven countries) across the U.S. to "interpret the international mission work of the PCUSA," Koll said. Coworkers preached and spoke to 144 presbyteries in order to establish relationships between themselves and the congregations. The goal was to build prayerful and financial support, and encourage churches to become involved in international mission.

Koll teaches at both the university and Bible institute level, and most of her students are active in leadership roles for their churches. They are looking for what she calls a "more solid theological formation." She brings together groups of people from different denominations in her classes, and aims to train her students to theologize within their own contexts.

There is a sad difference between Koll's seminary in Guatemala and Princeton Seminary: There is little hope that her Guatemalan students will go on to make theology their living, due to problems that have plagued Guatemala for a long time. There is a gap between the rich and poor that is only growing, and the bigger it



Karla Ann Koll (left) with Monica Herrera of CEDEPCA.

Photo: Carla Molina

gets, the more difficult it will be for some churches to pay their pastoral staffs.

"That has real, serious consequences for the churches, too," said Koll. "We lose some of our most promising students precisely because they don't see a future for themselves in the church in Guatemala." One of her goals is "to help people catch a vision of what it means to be in mission, which is Christ's call to every Christian, to be part of God's desire to transform our communities," which she hopes will keep her students practicing theology in Guatemala.

Koll hopes to return home to Guatemala this July to continue her ministry with the UBL and CEDEPCA, and help make the change to a more peaceful Central American society. She's excited about CEDEPCA's efforts to train people in alternatives to violence with concrete strategies that can affect their daily lives, which they can teach their children, since cultural transformation is a "really slow business." She also simply wants to help people "to understand themselves as participants in God's mission wherever they are. That's our calling—to work for the transformation of the world." ■

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The staff of CEDEPCA in Antigua, Guatemala

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