

A BLESSING FOR A PASTOR AND A CHURCH

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Rev. Yamilka Hernandez, ELCA scholar recipient.

Yamilka Hernández Guzmán always loved education and had a talent for teaching. A psychologist in an oncology hospital in Cuba, she looked for answers to the daily struggle for life she witnessed. A patient suggested to her that knowing Jesus might help, and a friend who attended a nearby Lutheran church invited Hernández Guzmán to join her at worship. Shortly thereafter, the congregation's pastor asked Hernández Guzmán to lend her teaching talents to a youth ministry.

The United Evangelical Church in Cuba Lutheran Synod (IEU-SL) joined the Lutheran World Federation in 2018, and because

talent," she said. "At least, I think it's a talent—to teach people that don't have a high level of education or training. However, with me, they learn the Bible and theology. I led people through studies at seminary, people that I think no institution would have considered. They learned and learned. And wherever I went, people always called me to teach."

Eventually Hernández Guzmán was called to serve as pastor of a congregation. In 2019 a scholarship from the ELCA's International Leadership Development Program allowed her to pursue doctoral studies at Faculdades EST, a Lutheran

their studies, students return to their home churches better equipped to serve and lead.

Hernández Guzmán is working to formalize theological education at the IEU-SL school. Thus far it has empowered church leaders to create a liturgy blending Lutheran and Cuban traditions. However, it needs someone with a doctorate to establish a program of studies that will train leaders at a higher level.

"It's not possible to be a leader in the church without a minimum of biblical and theological preparation," Hernández Guzmán said, "precisely because the essence of our faith is an



Assistant Bishop Martha Romero makes her way to the faith community of Cristo Redentor. The roads are difficult to travel. Romero is accompanied by her daughter-in-law, Claudia Ramos, a lay leader of the church.

Cuba lacks an immigrant Lutheran tradition, the church relies on bivocational leaders, lay and rostered, to maintain an education system that can teach the church's 1,500 members the hows and whys of a Lutheran life.

Though teaching children seemed like a big task for a new member, Hernández Guzmán tackled it and then started teaching adults at the church's informal seminary. "I have a

seminary in Brazil. *Because of your Mission Support dollars, the ELCA can support the education of leaders such as Hernández Guzmán.*

The International Women Leaders program was founded to enhance the missional capacity of our global church. Our companion churches raise up talented people to pursue advanced degrees that the ELCA finances. Once they complete

evangelical faith lived in freedom. That freedom is based on a personal relationship with God. But that has to come from an understanding of what God is, where God comes from, how God has a relationship with us, and the things God wants from us. ...

The first contact with a believer—is with us. We are the bridge [between God and the believers]."