Summer, 2011

Dear Student:

Thank you for your interest in our upcoming Honduras Development program. The purpose of this letter is to give you an overview of our program in Honduras, as well as share with you some of the unique challenges that you will need to personally assume if you decide to go to Honduras this fall. Some of you may decide that Honduras is not for you; others will intentionally choose to pursue this opportunity. Regardless of your choice, you will need to make the choice with full disclosure of information about the program.

Our semester programs in Honduras began in 1996, and since this time we have seen the power of these programs to provide students with life-changing experiences. As one student (who has done both the development and Spanish semester in Honduras) noted: *I think both experiences really put the theme of justice on my heart and made me aware of a lot, so it's still affecting my life today . . . It's made me have a broader perspective on teaching Spanish that's not just about learning the language, but it's also about learning more about the cultures that speak Spanish and issues like immigration and social justice -- trying to broaden my students' horizons within the boundaries of a typical Spanish class.*

In part, the success of our development program is related to Kurt and Jo Ann Ver Beek, the directors of the Honduras Development Semester. The Ver Beeks have been the only directors of this program; they have lived and worked in Honduras for the better part of 25 years. Their expertise and local knowledge about development issues in Honduras is critical to the success of the program. In 2001, apart from their Calvin work, they started a nonprofit in Honduras, Asociacion para una Sociedad mas Justa (ASJ) and a partner organization in the United States called Association for a More Just Society (AJM). ASJ is an Honduran organization "that seeks to be a group of brave Christians standing up to injustices and working to make Honduras' laws and government work as they should, on behalf of the poor."

While our Honduran programs have been very impactful, they also come with specific challenges for Calvin and our students. Over the last ten years, our programs in Honduras have experienced the most crime (e.g. robbery and theft) of any of our off-campus programs. In some ways, this is to be expected, as Honduras is a developing nation with social disparities that encourage petty crime. Foreigners, regardless of whether they are wealthy tourists, backpackers or students, are widely considered to be wealthy compared to the locals, which puts them at a higher risk of being targets of petty crime. Specifically, over the last three years (2009 to 2011), 3 to 5 Calvin students a year have been robbed (sometimes at knife point). To this point, no student has ever been physically harmed, yet the OCP office is concerned about these occurrences. Most recently (in 2011), our Spanish Program Director, who is Honduran, was robbed and held for 45 minutes while his assailants withdrew money with his ATM card.

As a result of these recent statistics and our regular program review process regarding safety concerns, Calvin hired a security consultant in 2011 to complete a safety audit of our Honduran programs. I would like to share some of the findings of this study and how Calvin is responding in an effort to help you make good decisions related to your participation in one of the Calvin semester programs in Honduras.

Findings:

- There has been a steady increase in violent crime in Honduras over the last few years. This violence is a result of a number of factors including increased gang violence, drug trafficking, and organized crime. A 2010 UN report indicates that Honduras, along with its neighboring countries of El Salvador and Guatemala, are experiencing murder rates 5 to 6 times higher than Mexico. In 2010, Honduras had the highest murder rate in the world (77.5 murders per 100 thousand inhabitants).

- Calvin's Honduras program continues to operate in Honduras in a relatively safe way; while statistics may be disturbing, most of the violence has been targeted in marginal and poor areas.

- Americans or foreigners in general are not targeted any more than the rest of the local population, but rather we have seen scenarios where they have fallen victim many times for being careless or because they have been engaging in risky behavior. Nonetheless one can be victimized even if he or she is doing everything right.

- A primary safety risk for Calvin students is armed robberies while walking around Tegucigalpa.

In addition to the findings of the safety audit, Calvin's relationship to ASJ through the involvement of Kurt Ver Beek is complex. With ASJ and AJS we celebrate the amazing work that is being done; God is using these organizations to do great things in Honduras (and we would encourage you to check out their website). Yet, social justice work is not without danger, and some ASJ lawyers have received threats on their lives, with one being killed in 2006. At this point, Kurt and Jo Ann Ver Beek have not received any threats; but as a precaution, Kurt travels with a bodyguard in Tegucigalpa, provided for his AJS work by the Honduran government. In response to these developments, Kurt and Jo Ann have continued to keep the work of AJS separated from their work with Calvin students. For example, no Calvin students work directly on any aspect of ASJ work. However, as has already been said, the value of studying with the Ver Beeks and hearing about the work of AJS and ASJ is one of the factors that makes this program so life impacting.

Calvin's Response:

Based on the findings of the safety audit, Calvin has responded in a number of ways, including:

- Transparency: Calvin chooses to offer programs in Honduras because we feel they are impactful, providing opportunities for students to learn first-hand about our beautiful world but also about the brokenness that can be found. We want to provide an opportunity for students to experience this type of learning with thoughtful and experienced faculty. At the same time, we recognize that students must make this choice willingly and with as much information as possible, thus this letter.

- Commitment: Calvin is committed to do its utmost to provide a secure environment in which students can live and learn. To fulfill this commitment we need students to commit to following the safety practices of the program. When students make this

commitment they become our partners in assuring the safety of all students and the overall program. This entails asking students to commit to a specific set of guidelines that they will follow while in Honduras.

- Location: In the Fall of 2011, we are moving the location where students are housed. We are re-locating to Santa Lucia, a small semi rural community about 30 minutes outside of Tegucigalpa. We feel that this change will have a positive and immediate effect on student safety as well as enhance the cultural experiences of students as it will reflect a more traditional Honduran experience.

These special considerations for Honduras build on the multi-faceted approach that Calvin has in place already to deal with student safety. These considerations include: monitoring world events, sending experienced faculty leadership, training students on personal safety, providing additional travel insurance, registering all American students with the U.S Embassy, partnering with local organizations, assuring contingency plans are in place when needed, and providing students with a variety of support services.

Although no one can guarantee the safety of participants or eliminate all risks from a study abroad experience, our goal is to minimize risks and keep students and parents aware of special situations as they make decisions about studying off-campus. Recognizing these realities, Calvin's Off-Campus Programs Office takes its responsibility seriously to do its utmost to provide a secure environment for students to live and learn. Likewise, we work hard to prepare students for the additional risks that can be present during their time off-campus.

We hope you find this letter helpful. The decision to study abroad is an important one and we want to make sure you have complete information on which to make an informed decision. Our Honduras programs offer several unique opportunities for students to learn about God's work in His world. If you decide to partner with Calvin in this endeavor, you will be changed. If you have additional questions or want to talk further about this opportunity, feel free to contact me directly.

Sincerely,

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