Dear Congregations and Members of the Sierra Pacific Synod,

I am writing to you from the halfway point of my YAGM year, here in Budapest, Hungary. It’s amazing to think that six months ago, I was in Fairfield CA at my father’s house, packing my belongings into one suitcase and one carry-on, saying goodbye to friends and family, and heading into this year of service with no idea of what to expect.

So many of the YAGM alumni told us at orientation that this year will create some of the sweetest memories and some of the most difficult challenges that we will ever face. Throughout all of that, we will be humbled by the generosity and love of our community, we will feel deeper connected to our faith and our convictions, and we will learn to leave room for the unexpected in all things. With half a year left to go, I can say that I am beginning to understand what our beloved alumni meant.

In my community here, I work at the Lutheran school three days a week, assisting with English lessons, and an international Roma youth organization, Phiren Amenca, twice a week. I live at the house of my mentor, Katalin Fabiny, in a cozy and beautiful little room in the attic. I’m grateful for Sunday lunches with her family, invitations to worship (all in Hungarian!) and many opportunities in my greater community to participate in cultural events, or just visit a friend’s house for lunch.

Perhaps the most touching thing is that in the same way all of you hold and support the YAGMS in your prayers and thoughts, my community here prays and cares for you in return. From their love and relationship with me, they always ask how things are in California – when the wildfires were affecting so many places I love while I was so far from home, they would check in on me in the school hallways or at church services. When I share stories about home and the places that formed me, they listen with love and attention. I feel that I have become a bridge for all of you and all of my newly found beloveds, and for that I am so grateful.

These experiences simply wouldn’t have been possible for me without your support, your prayers, and your dedication to the YAGM community. I leave you with this prayer, originally shared by Rev. Andrea Walker –

God of life,
God of all our becoming
winding
changing
hopeful
fearful years---
we praise you
for your faithfulness.
When we look back
through all our
deciding
planning
wishing
through doors closed
through windows opened
through best-laid plans
and worst kept secrets,
how can we deny your grace
at work in the fabric of our lives?
Even allowing for our great gifts
of rationalization
and special pleading,
how can we look back
and not see
haunting traces of your grace?
Why can we not see that your hand
is present and is moving over things to come?
We ask no road map
no guarantees
no inoculation against human life.
But when we are hurting
and pain floods our vision,
grant us faith to cry our tears.
When we are strong,
grant us faith willing to be surprised.
God of all our becoming, we praise you.
(by Sharlanda Sledge)

Sincerely,
Pearl Penumaka

Prayers around the Cross service at YAGM Orientation, Chicago IL August 2017
Some of my students at Fasor school took me out for Hungarian dessert! Pictured here are Gyöngvölgyi Fellow Central Europe YAGMS Kayla Taylor and Michelle Moyer on a walk during our Advent Retreat in Szalka, Hungary – December 2017.
The Second Day of Christmas Feast at the village of Sárszentlőrinc, where one of my teacher friends from Fasor Lutheran School is from, and her mother is the pastor there.

The view of Budapest-Fasori Evangelius Gimnazium – Fasor Lutheran High School (grades 4th – 12th) where I work three days a week.