

Grateful for Hurricane Mitch

Chacho found God in disaster. How about you?

HONDURAS || *Larry Overholt*



PRIOR TO FIRST ARRIVING in Choluteca (population 120,000) in September of 2000, Angie and I had wondered how we would ever get started in ministry in a new area of the country. We had served for 18 years with the long-established ministry at *Escuela El Sembrador* (School of the Sower), a boarding school for underprivileged Honduran boys, and moving to a brand-new area with no established ministry was a bit scary to us. Besides starting a completely new ministry for World Gospel Mission and the Honduran Holiness Church, the other challenge we faced had to do with the fact that the southern region of Honduras was still suffering the after-effects of Hurricane Mitch. It was almost like everyone was going through post-traumatic stress disorder. Large numbers of youth were still not back in classes. The regional economy, supported largely by shrimp-farming and cantaloupe and watermelon production, had not recovered. Large numbers of the population were still unemployed. Along the river, the city was cluttered with the ruins of houses that had been destroyed by the flooding. We had no idea where to start working.

The first day we arrived in Choluteca with our belongings to unload, we were met by several people from the recently established congregation. One man stood out in particular. His name was Chacho. He was a 30-year-old ox cart operator with a sixth-grade education who made a living hauling sand and gravel from the river for construction projects. Chacho helped us unload our belongings from the truck and trailer and moved boxes into the house we were renting. The following day he did his own work with the ox cart early in the morning and showed up for breakfast at 7:30 a.m. He continued day after day, making himself useful in the following days by grabbing a machete and cleaning up around the yard. There was a lot to do since the property had never been fully remodeled from when it had had six feet of water during Mitch.

Chacho was so helpful that we hired him full time to work with me. Chacho naturally shared his testimony with me as we got to know him. At the time of Hurricane Mitch, Chacho had been living a rough life. As a husband, he exhibited a “machismo” attitude and would stay out drinking at night without telling his wife where he was. Looking back, Chacho feels that he was already an alcoholic. He and his wife, Patti, had one son at the time.

Chacho, Patti, and their small son had escaped the flooding river with only the clothes on their backs. Chacho went back for his oxen and swam out of the river holding onto the tail of one of them. Chacho told me how they moved from one shelter to another and finally found a church building where they could stay. They were wet and cold and



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had little to eat. When they did manage to get a piece of chicken, they even ate the bones. Chacho told me that the most difficult part was having to tell their young son that they had no way to buy him juice when he cried for it.

Chacho and his family left the church after a week, seeking another shelter. Chacho says that he felt guilty because the pastor had caught him smoking inside the church. He was also resisting the preaching.

Eventually, when he was able to get back to the community where he had lived, Chacho found that there was nothing left of his house except one post. He was able to gather a few pieces of lumber and enough materials to put up a small shelter. When relief items began to arrive a few days later, Chacho met pastor Alejandro, who was distributing food and clothing that had been donated through World Gospel Mission and the Honduran Holiness Church. His wife, Patti, was one of the first converts of the future church. Chacho resisted the gospel.

Soon after Hurricane Mitch, Patti became extremely ill and miscarried during her pregnancy. Chacho explained that when she was admitted to the hospital due to complications, the doctors gave him very little reason for

hope that she would recover. Patti went into a coma and Chacho cried out to God one evening as he left the hospital. He said, “God, if you are out there, will you save my wife? I will follow you.” That evening he went home to his shelter and his small son. As Chacho lay awake all night he kept thinking of the pistol that he had under his pillow. As he lay there contemplating suicide, he came to a very clear sense that his son very well could be an orphan in the morning. Chacho felt God’s presence and comfort as he decided that whatever happened, he would continue on.

That morning he got up and milked his father’s cows and headed to the hospital early. As he walked into the hospital ward, he was amazed to see his wife sitting up on the side of the bed. Chacho says that was the moment when he was saved. Patti’s first words were, “Chacho, as soon as I am able, we are going to church together.”

Chacho cannot tell his testimony without tears flowing down his cheeks. There was no church building at that time, only the pastor’s house. During his first-ever church service, Chacho responded publicly to God’s invitation to accept Him as his personal Savior.

I could not really relate to Chacho when he told me that he personally was grateful for Hurricane Mitch. Many people suffered from the hurricane, but Chacho wonders if he would have ever heard and responded to the gospel message if it had not been for Mitch.

Chacho has continually been faithful in all areas of his life. He has studied electricity and finished his junior high education. Though Patti cannot give birth to any more children, God has miraculously provided them with a beautiful adopted daughter. But that is another story. ■

GIVE



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LARRY OVERHOLT

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Overholts have three adult children.