

DIRECTOR'S PERSPECTIVE

A Post Pandemic Report about Churches in Panama by Larry Brady

Mission work has been challenged these last two years since the pandemic hit the world. Missionaries like me have not been able to travel, leaving a void in our lives and also in the work that we support. But praise God, the churches we support in Panama have survived and some have even made forward progress. Plus, our supporters have not deserted us.

The preachers we support did their best to keep their congregations going and to identify members who had the greatest needs. Although many were "food insufficient" during that time, our brethren here were generous, and we were able to provide for a large number.

The church in **Santiago** continues to grow and is in need of a larger place to meet. The preacher, **Julian Miranda**, along with his wife and two children, live in the back of their current building. They are very hard working and never complain about their situation.

The church in **Sanson**, adjacent to the Clinic of Hope, is having extremely good attendance and has had a number of people obey the gospel in the past few months. The hard working minister is **Luis Tojin**. Two people were baptized into Christ during our last campaign. The Sanson church continues to oversee care of the Clinic of Hope and uses some of the rooms as classrooms.

The church in **Santa Fe** has added restrooms and a kitchen with the help of brethren from Colorado. The work there has struggled, but they have a faithful preacher, **Aquilla Pinto**, who travels some distance each Sunday to preach and to encourage the brethren, despite receiving a very small salary. Starting in July, the **Cornerstone Church of Christ** near **Florence, Ala.**, will begin helping in that effort. They will host a campaign and VBS in Santa Fe and also in a neighboring Embera Pura community where there are a number of Christians.

Water Filters Provided Where Needed

Larry Brady reports that water filters are still being purchased, sent to Panama and distributed where opportunities arise, by both Panama Missions teams and the Senafrent Police, "although we have supplied most of the places we visit regularly," he explains.

"The water filter program has been one of the greatest programs we have instituted - providing pure drinking water where the water supplies are badly contaminated," he continues.

"Generous donations from caring Christians have made this program possible! Thank you!"

The churches in **El Tiroa** and **Platinilla** continue worshipping despite difficulties. However, we are extremely blessed that brother **John Henry** from Florence, Ala., has traveled there twice in the last few months to encourage these brethren.

We ask that you pray for the churches in Panama and for all of those who travel to encourage our brethren.

IN THE SPOTLIGHT

The first time that I visited the community of Torti in 1997, among the first people I met was the local preacher, **Ernesto Bonaga**. He and his wife, Juana, had two boys and two girls.

Johnny Bonaga, the oldest, was sponsored by **Diane Edrington** to attend school on our scholarship program.

When I arrived this March at the hospital in Torti where our eye surgery and general medical teams were working, there was Johnny, now 37, in charge!

Johnny works in the Minsa Public Health system and is manager of the Torti Minsa Hospital which hosted our cataract surgical team and a general medical clinic.

Johnny also maintains a nonprofit organization, **Emergency East Zone Panama**, dedicated to coordinating civilian emergency response throughout the eastern region of Torti.

"I am grateful to God for the opportunity to collaborate with the medical people of Panama Missions who were the ones who inspired me to make a career of service to my community," comments Johnny.

Johnny is a wonderful success story of Panama Missions' efforts over the years to provide educational opportunities and spiritual encouragement for the youth in rural Panama. He has a daughter, Sthephany.



Johnny Bonaga with Larry Brady during the recent medical mission in Torti.

Panama Missions

Spring 2022 News Update

Denver Eye Surgery Team Returns to Panama This Year

After a long pandemic year's absence, Panama Missions' eye surgery team returned this March to screen 2,300 hopeful patients "from all over Panama," resulting in 174 sight-restoring cataract surgeries and an additional 32 pterygium surgeries.

This year marks the 22nd time in 23 years that **Dr. Russ Burcham**, Denver ophthalmologist, has assembled a volunteer eye surgery team to perform cataract surgery for blind individuals in Panama who would otherwise never be able to afford the cost.

The team comes their own expense, providing all of the required equipment, medications and supplies.

This year's clinic was held in a state-of-the art facility, Torti Minsa Hospital, located in Torti, Panama, where an alumnus of Panama Missions' scholarship program, **Johnny Bonaga**, serves as manager. See "In the Spotlight," p. 4.

A general medical team led by Panama Missions medical director, **Diane Edrington, CFNP**, saw some 1,100 patients and dispensed 5,000 prescriptions.

Kimberly Howard of Prospera (a non-profit soap recycling manufacturer in Panama) helped with the organization of the clinics and also distributed 1,800 free bars of soap. www.prospera.panama.org for info.

Panama's First Lady Drops in to Visit

Yazmín Colón de Cortizo, wife of Panama President **Laurentino Cortizo**, responded to a written invitation from Diane Edrington to visit the medical mission in Torti by arriving the final day via helicopter and spending almost 2 hours with the team. She even "scrubbed up" to observe the cataract surgeries, apparently very impressed by what she saw.

"The First Lady explained that 'health in Panama' is one of her major concerns. She remarked that our eye surgery clinic was 'the best thing that has ever happened,' proposing that the team should come twice a year," relates Diane, who was pleased to accept the First Lady's invitation to visit and tour the presidential palace at the end of the mission. Kimberly, Johnny, and Alan Foster (of Solea Water) were also invited. While there, a meeting was held with the First Lady and her Social Works staff, where potential support for future medical events was discussed, such as less paperwork for approval for supplies to enter the country.



First Lady Yazmín Cortizo (left) poses with Larry Brady, Diane Edrington and Kimberly Howard while visiting the medical mission in Torti in March.



Medical team members and local interpreters.

Operation Christmas Joy Success Reflects Team Effort



Even though Panama Missions Director **Larry Brady** was not able to travel to Panama for Operation Christmas Joy again in 2021, the program proceeded as usual. Why? Because so many dedicated Christians, in the U.S. and in Panama, make sure the project is accomplished.

Larry praises the Panama **Senafront Police** for their assistance: unloading the container and providing transportation, assistance and security, plus delivering gifts to difficult to reach areas.

"I cannot adequately express my appreciation for the hundreds of people throughout the U.S. who make Christmas gifts, fill school backpacks and stockings, collect stuffed animals, sew and purchase clothing, and much more.

"A highlight of my year is traveling from community to community, church to church, picking up gifts, and meeting those who have worked so hard," Larry recalls.

Shipping Container Carries Needed Supplies to Panama

In addition to the 7,000 Operation Christmas Joy gifts, the shipping container that Panama Missions sends to Panama every November also includes other important items such as medical supplies, water filters, equipment for the Clinic of Hope, furniture, church supplies and more.

The pictured communion table was built by **Charles Sipper**, elder of the Salem Church of Christ where Larry Brady preaches, and the podium was donated by the Rock Hill Church of Christ. A new communion set was purchased with a private donation. All are now being enjoyed by the Sanson Church of Christ, adjacent to the Clinic of Hope.



Mark Dillman preaches in Sanson.

"Silent Workers" - People Who Make A Difference

Bessie Smith, 78, of the Davenport Church of Christ, Hope Hull, Ala., has been sewing for the children of Panama for more than twenty years.

It all started after Larry Brady's mother, Thelma, made a trip to Panama with Larry in 2001 at the age of 84. She returned resolved to sew much needed dresses, baby blankets and pre-folded diapers for the children of Panama.



Thelma motivated and organized other ladies of the Davenport church, including **Betsy Brady** and **Peggy Morgan**, to help gather funds and supplies and to meet at the church building on a regular basis to sew.

Eventually the sewing group moved to Bessie's home where she continues to sew even to this day! Many family and friends have also gotten involved.

In 2012 Bessie, along with her granddaughter, Hannah, traveled to Panama on a summer VBS mission team. Bessie helped with cooking and children's activities. When Bessie saw a young girl wearing one of the dresses she had made, she exclaimed: "This really helps to put things into perspectives for me."

After losing her husband, Billy, Bessie says that continuing to sew "gives me something useful to do." I've been sewing for Panama for so long, it just feels natural."

Bessie is one of the many "silent workers" who make a huge difference for Operation Christmas Joy.

Becky Holton, 75, of the Prattville (Ala.) Church of Christ, is another amazing "silent worker." Since 2017 she has personally sewn "one dress a day," and for the past three years, she has annually assembled as many as 400 small sewing kits, "a way to use small scraps," she explains. The kits include a Dollar Tree travel size sewing kit plus fabric and a variety of notions. Panama Missions includes the kits in shoeboxes and stockings for the older girls and in the "Mom Bags."



Other ladies of the congregation are also involved. Becky and a friend cut and assemble sewing kits for girls' dresses and for boys' and girls' shorts. About 10 ladies are helping this year, accepting 10 to 20 kits to complete between February and September. Each pair of shorts will be matched with a coordinating t-shirt and every set of clothing will include underwear, a task that **Kim Kasarjian**, the congregation's OCJ leader coordinates.

Fabric and notions have come from yard sales, auctions, and donations. The church also helps cover expenses. "This is what God has led me to do. We pray for each child as we sew," adds Becky.



Condolences for Chasity Watkins

Chasity Watkins, dedicated Operation Christmas Joy leader for the New Hope Church of Christ, Middleton, Tenn., passed away August 31, 2020, after being diagnosed May 25 with a brain tumor.

"Chasity was so passionate about Operation Christmas Joy, and such a wonderful Christian. Her family, our church family, and Panama Missions have suffered a huge loss," comments **Kimberly Borden**, her close friend who stepped up to take over as OCJ leader. Kimberly adds, "I wanted to see this work continue in her memory. I miss her terribly!"

2022 CALENDAR

June 3-16 Medical Mission to Sambu
Diane Edrington, Leader

July 8-16. Mission Team to Sanson
Reopen Clinic, Hold Gospel Meeting & VBS
Larry Brady, Leader

July 8-16 Mission Team to Santa Fe
Cornerstone Church of Christ & Jerry Irvin Leading

October 13 OCJ Gifts Due in Montgomery
Except for churches on OCJ Truck Route

October 13-14 OCJ Truck Pickup

October 29 Load OCJ Container

December 5-16 OCJ Team in Panama

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