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Sun Shines for First-Time Volunteer

By Deb Holland, Volunteer in Mission

The living room window of our home in Sturgis faces east, so most mornings we have to close the curtains because the sun shines in so brightly. But that daily dose of sunlight reminds me that people who are helped through the Solar Oven Partners ministry in the Dominican Republic are blessed by the sun daily. Sunlight translates to fuel for the solar ovens. Since my participation on a Volunteer in Mission (VIM) team to the Dominican Republic, I see the sun as a sign of hope.

I learned about Solar Oven Partners during an In Gathering at the Sturgis United Methodist Church from Zona Hairgrove, a young college student from Black Hills State University, who had accompanied the Volunteer in Mission trip earlier that year. I was so moved by her passion for this mission that I inquired that day how I could get involved. I'm so glad I did.

As the time approached for me to leave on the trip, I pondered what it would be like in the Dominican Republic. It was more than I could have ever imagined. The people were welcoming and our mission was much-needed.

Many Dominicans live in poverty, some survive on 3,000 to 6,000 pesos a month – or about \$60 to \$122 a month U.S. at the current exchange rate.

What struck me was that they appeared happy. I realized that happiness is a state of mind. You can choose to be a martyr, complaining about all that you don't have, or you can find happiness and blessings in what you do have.

I especially enjoyed the children and how they passed the time. On the first day, the

younger members of our group joined in a circle outside the church gates to play a game where you had to keep the ball in the air. The delight on the faces of both the Dominican children and our college-age participants was priceless. And throughout the trip, younger children found endless delight in the large

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Black Hills State University College students and VIMs from Spearfish UMC Kathryn Mah, Rachel Buxcel and Zona Hairgrove play a ball game with children and youth of La Victora church in Monte Cristi.



The Advance
Advancing hope in Christ's name

DONATE an OVEN for \$150

- Dakotas Advance #637...Checks to: Solar Ovens / PO Box 460 / Mitchell, SD 57301-0460
- UMCOR Advance #418812...Online Giving Link <https://www.umcor.org/UMCOR/Donate/Donation-Form?type=1002&project=418812>

*Check out web site: solarovenpartnersumc.org
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Solar Oven Partners UMC
Dakotas Conference Mission Newsletter for SOP UMC

boxes in which the solar ovens were packed.

Despite their circumstances, youth of the congregation at Monte Cristi shared with us their amazing dreams for their future. Some wanted to be doctors, others architects and still another, a preacher.

But the one who left an impression on all of us told us she wanted to help and give hope to others. Her message was simply this: "In life there's a lot of people who tell you that you can't do things. I want to be the person who tells you that you can do it. And I'll be there to help pick you up no matter how many times you fall," she said.

Most of our days were full either building ovens or doing workshops in the Dominican city of Monte Cristi or the surrounding areas. It was a wonderful, challenging 10 days.

As I rose in the mornings during the trip I found myself more and more praying for sunlight to show the people the incredible cooking capacity of these solar ovens.



Ovens line the street beside the church in Guatapanal, Monte Cristi, awaiting a break in the clouds

I remember one morning when the skies were overcast. We set up the ovens on both sides of a road leading to a local church. The solar oven workshop went on as planned that morning with little hope that the ovens would reach temperature to

cook the foods we had planned. But we were committed to staying at the location all day if that's what it took to show the people the ovens were legitimate. The clouds finally gave way to full sun.

Shortly after, I walked out of the courtyard of the church with Ardell Graner, who serves as a United Methodist missionary with her husband, Gordy, in the Dominican Republic, to check on the temperatures of the ovens. Most were at 250 degrees and some were approaching 300 degrees. I started to cry. "Praise the Lord!" I said. Seldom had I thought of sunlight as a gift from God, but it certainly was on that day.

We knew the foods in the pots would begin to cook and we could show those who had come to the workshop that abundant sunshine combined with the solar ovens could bring them hope for a better life.



Volunteer Deb Holland serves food fresh from the solar ovens.

March Trip at a Glance

- Record broken for the DR with 162 ovens distributed!
- Demand for more ovens from storage.
- Team built ovens for several hours on day off.
- Team returned to host church to build ovens into the evenings most days.

People-Reaching Power of Solar Ovens

By Marj Evans-de-Carpio, SOP Director

The three scriptural imperatives of The United Methodist Church and the Dakotas Annual Conference's vision statement are to: 1) Love God and Neighbor; 2) Reach New People; and 3) Heal a Broken World.

SOP wanted to explore how our ministry is doing when it comes to reaching new people, and so we asked! As a Volunteer in Mission project, we seek to strengthen the local church where we serve, which in March 2018, was the La Victoria Church in Monte Cristi, a city near the Dominican Republic's northern shore and along the Haitian border.

Since our team's return to the U.S., La Victoria's pastor, Deisy Polanco, reports that people who were not associated with the church, but came for the oven workshops, have been coming to worship! "I think that through the follow-up and helping people who obtained their oven," reflects Pastor Deisy, "we can take the opportunity to preach the Word, invite them to worship, and keep in touch with them. This is an opportunity to get close to the people of the town and the church can grow more."

She added that the cross-cultural experience of working with the U.S. mission team was easy when compared to the challenges of building relationships with their Haitian neighbors. "Our big problem is with Haitians, due to our history," she explains. "But, for us as a church, this problem has no place because we gladly work with them. Like us, they are poor, but their need for help is greater, so we don't leave them out... We are here to set people free, introducing them to Christ who loves them through us, which we have to do in practice."

La Victoria's membership includes a very high percentage of children and youth, many of whom had an opportunity to develop leadership skills as they helped with the solar oven workshops. "The youth—teens and children—are always preparing something," she says. "They are a great blessing to the church. There are times when



Pastor Daisy, left, husband Lorenzo, right and youth from the La Victoria Church.

we prepare a program just with them...It is beautiful to work with them.” How did the solar oven distribution impact La Victoria Church and reach new people? “We are so happy because we know that God is using you to make us known throughout Monte Cristi,” says Pastor Deisy. “We are full of **Love**; we want to increase our **Faith**

that God never abandons us; and to keep **Hope** alive, knowing that God is always with us.”

Mother's Day is Coming!

This Mother's Day, honor the nurturing women in your life with gifts that put love into action. Your gifts to our Mother's Day campaign will build a scholarship fund for those who can't afford the full expense of a mission trip. Help others have this faith-building encounter in honor or memory of a “mother” you love. To make your donation, mail to 910 7th St, Ste G, Brookings, SD 57006 or download materials to share at your church from our website at solarovenpartners.org, click on “Featuring Mothers' Day Toolkit” at top of homepage. Your gift changes lives. Thank you!

Figaro Embraces Solar Oven Program

By Deb Holland

The Rev. Erasme Figaro knew at an early age he had a servant's heart, especially for God's creation – the Earth. A pastor with Iglesia Evangélica Dominicana (IED), the Dominican denomination with roots in The United Methodist Church, Figaro's duties include working with the church's social action director on projects, including Solar Oven Partners.

Initially, Figaro worked on the project only when teams of volunteers would come to the country. But the effort has been so popular that he promotes solar oven cooking year-round. He estimates it takes about half his time as a pastor now.

“Since I was in primary school, I was involved with a group that wanted to take care of nature,” he said. “Somehow I have been involved in helping protect the environment since.”

Figaro grew up and received his basic education in Samana, in northeastern Dominican Republic on the shore of the Samana Peninsula. He went on to earn a degree at St. Louis Community College in Missouri, followed by theological education at the IED seminary in Santo Domingo. Figaro has served at several churches all in the capital, Santo Domingo. First, he was associate pastor at Ensanche Espaillat while he was in seminary. Later he served at Los Girasoles and V Centenario for one year as ordained pastor and then at Buenos Aires and Los Girasoles where he has been for the last two years.

The vision of the Dominican Evangelical Church is to take the love of Christ out of the church building to the people in need throughout the country, he said.

Figaro appreciates that SOP doesn't just hand out ovens to those in need, but rather shares information about why solar oven cooking is a better alternative than cooking with wood, charcoal or propane. “We certainly teach about the ovens but also about what we are doing to the environment,” he said. “And as Christians, we need to take care of nature because that is a responsibility God has given us.” Additionally, program participants learn about the cost-savings of cook-

ing with solar heat. According to climatemp.com, most locations in the Dominican Republic get sun about 70 percent of the year. As part of the curriculum at solar oven workshops, Figaro gathers examples of how much is spent on cooking fuels per month by participants. For some, it is about 800 pesos or one-quarter of their monthly income.

“We also talk about how cooking with the oven will help keep the family unit intact,” he said. Many families are having to separate just to keep the family fed. Some may live with their father and his extended family in one location and their mother at another location. Figaro concurs, saying money they don't have to spend on fuel can be spent on ingredients to feed the entire family.

Slowly, people are warming to the solar cooking. “Each time we go out and do a presentation, we get more people. We've gone from presentations with 10 or 20 people to some with 70 to 80 people. It has just snowballed,” Figaro said.

During the recent trip by the volunteer team, there were 162 ovens distributed – a new record. Those who sign up to get a solar oven must pay \$1,000 pesos, or about \$20 U.S. dollars.

Figaro says the program empowers the people of the Dominican Republic. “We are giving hope to these people,” he said. “We let them know that there are people out there that you can trust and are thinking about their wellbeing. That's the most important part of the program.”



SOLAR OVEN PARTNERS UMC

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Change Lives—Including Yours! Upcoming Mission Trips

One response we repeatedly hear from the Volunteers in Mission who join a Solar Oven Partners (SOP) mission team is that the experience deeply enriched their lives. Three upcoming SOP mission trips will provide that growth opportunity to those who desire to make a positive difference in the lives of people who struggle daily with poverty.

Mission team members experience God's love in action as they build ovens, cook and worship alongside the people we serve in real life settings rather than groomed tourist zones. Experiencing new peoples and their vibrant cultures, building meaningful relationships, and seeing the smiles of those carrying their ovens home make the long work days worthwhile. It's a "good kind of tired," explains SOP Director Marj Evans-de-Carpio.

Navajo Reservation, Flagstaff, Arizona

We are excited to announce that members of the Food Sovereignty Committee of the Tree of Life Ministry will make up this team traveling to the Navajo Reservation July 14-20. Tree of Life, located on South Dakota's Rosebud Reservation, is a sister ministry in the UMC Dakotas Conference.

Dominican Republic

Dates for this mission trip are July 24 to August 3. Volunteers will work with SOP's in-country partners spreading the positive message of solar cooking to an eager and responsive Spanish-speaking people on this Caribbean island shared with Haiti.

Sierra Leone, West Africa

November 25-December 7. This coastal country is home to a people excited about the possibilities of solar cooking in helping to reduce both sig-

nificant poverty and environmental degradation made worse by the dependence on charcoal as a cooking fuel source. SOP is partnering with the United Methodist Church in Sierra Leone following a very positive exploratory mission trip in 2017. English is the country's official language although Krio is commonly spoken.

Interested in changing your life?

For additional information on any of these mission trips, including estimated costs and vaccination requirements, contact SOP Director Marj Evans-de-Carpio at 605-692-3391 or sopdir@swiftel.net. SOP desires that these life-changing trips be accessible to people of all income levels. Financial assistance may be available through an SOP scholarship.