

Panama Update

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Cienaguita

To those of you who have visited Cienaguita, the word alone brings back a flood of memories. Cienaguita is the small rural community in the eastern part of the province of Chiriqui where our Methodist Community Center is located. That center serves as the focal point for our ministries to the Ngobe People, the largest group of indigenous inhabitants of Panama whose extensive reservation lies just across the San Juan River from Cienaguita. I have often called the Ngobe “the poorest of the poor in Panama.” We have been in ministry to the Ngobe People since 1987 when our Methodist Church in David, Chiriqui heeded a “Macedonian call” from one of the Ngobe leaders who came to the church to share with Pastor Manuel Ku about the difficult situation of the Ngobe community of Potrero Palma.

Our first major project

with the Ngobe was the construction of a pedestrian bridge across the river that enabled the Ngobe children of Potrero Palma to safely cross the river in order to attend the local elementary school in Cienaguita. The bridge was built in 1989 under the leadership of Glenn Abernathy and his UMVIM team from Tennessee with the active assistance of the entire surrounding community, both Ngobe and campesino (non-indigenous country folk). That bridge was destroyed by a major flood in 2007. Since then, the children have had to swim across the river or cross on the precarious “tree bridge” which was improvised by one of the Ngobe fathers.



Over the years the ministry based in Cienaguita has included many medical teams that have come for a week or two at a time. In the mid 1990’s with the help of UMVIM teams led by Trinity and Canterbury UMC, we began construction of the community center. That center has become the base of our ministries that extend into the vast Ngobe-Bugle Reservation. In 2001, the church sent Deaconess Antipas Moreno to coordinate the ministries based in Cienaguita.

Following in Antipas’ footsteps, local resident Paula Rodriguez was named coordinator of the Ngobe ministries in 2006. She does an outstanding job coordinating a wide variety of ministries including monthly meetings with the



community health promoters from over a dozen Ngobe communities. These volunteers graduated from a 120 hour training program conducted by the North Central Jurisdiction UMVIM team led by R.N. Jane Dunn that has been coming to Panama for several years. Each of the health promoters reports on progress being made in the construction of latrines

or the improvement of rural aqueducts. They also share about the health problems they have dealt with and receive a resupply of basic meds they are authorized to distribute.

Paula also organizes workshops led by the government agricultural agent in which both Ngobes and campesinos learn about improved techniques for raising traditional and non-traditional crops as well as livestock. The goal is to improve the nutrition of the families and provide some cash income from the sale of a portion of the production. Paula has coordinated the provision of “seed” money for raising chickens, tilapia fish and corn.

With the help of several UMVIM teams, especially the two teams organized by the late Bob Suda and his wife Joan this past January and February, we have built a dental clinic as an annex to our community center. Teams from Auburn UMC and Canterbury UMC also participated in the construction. Chicago dentist Alan Kushner has spearheaded efforts to equip the clinic with reliable dental chairs and equipment. The clinic will be available for the use of UMVIM teams as well as some local dentists. In conjunction with the opening of the clinic, our volunteer health promoters will receive training in a program called “Cavity Free Communities” in which preventive dental care will be emphasized.

For the last 4 years we have accompanied the community lobbying the Public Works Department (MOP) to build a new bridge to replace the one washed away in mid 2007. With the help of Dr. Steve Stokes (Covenant UMC) and the Dothan Rotary Club (Alabama) funding was obtained to cover the cost of the steel and cement. The MOP is providing the engineering and part of the labor. Several workers from the local community are assisting. We are providing housing and food for the workers. The two towers have been completed as well as the corresponding anchors. We hope that soon the cables will be installed and the rest of the structure will be finished.



Earlier this year we had a well drilled to provide a reliable source of potable water. Previously often the only source of water was a small spring located at the bottom of a nearby hill. Running water meant running down to the spring and running back up with a couple of buckets of water. A team from St. Andrews By The Sea UMC (Hilton Head, SC) served as our guinea pigs in the testing of the new well water. A chemical, biological and physical analysis by the lab at the Technological University had already determined that the water was safe to drink, especially after the installation of an in-line chlorinator.



A team from Canterbury UMC led by Rachel Estes actually had the honor of being the first team to stay out at the community center rather than make the daily 45 minute trip David, the provincial capital. Many improvements to the community center have been made over the years, including the building of full bathrooms. A team from Dothan FUMC helped us break ground on the staff house several years ago and provided funding to complete most of the construction. Earlier this year teams from Trinity UMC (Homewood), Auburn UMC and Birmingham First (Alabama) also helped paint and build a roofed terrace area that serves as a patient waiting area and a gathering place for worship services and other activities. The team from St. Andrews helped us begin work on a large new recreational field for the use of the children and youth.



A number of our teams have been touched by the plight of several children in the community who suffer from Cerebral Palsy as well as other problems. Repairs and improvements have been made on their homes. Wheel chairs have been



provided as well as needed medications. Funds have also been provided to purchase food for some of the neediest families. Felix, one of the youth who suffers from Cerebral Palsy, has become the poster child of the Trinity youth. His ever present smile is even bigger as his roof no longer leaks. Soon he will also be able to enjoy electricity as well as an indoor bathroom.

The Auburn UMC has provided the seed money for a new project we are organizing to provide decent housing for the Ngobe families on the reservation. We hope to build the first model home soon using concrete, cinder blocks, steel, tin and bamboo for different elements of the construction.

Rev. Benita de Del Cid, our pastor in David conducts worship services in Cienagueta every other week. The growing congregation recently celebrated its first anniversary. Three members of the community, including Paula are attending lay preaching classes in David every Friday. We consider that spiritual health is an integral part of the community based health concept.

Our guiding vision is that expressed by the prophet Isaiah in chapter 65: 17-25.

For I am about to create new heavens and a new earth; the former things shall not be remembered or come to mind. But be glad and rejoice forever in what I am creating; for I am about to create Jerusalem as a joy, and its people as a delight. I will rejoice in Jerusalem, and delight in my people; no more shall the sound of weeping be heard in it, or the cry of distress. No more shall there be in it an infant that lives but a few days, or an old person who does not live out a lifetime; for one who dies at a hundred years will be considered a youth, and one who falls short of a hundred will be considered accursed. They shall build houses and inhabit them; they shall plant vineyards and eat their fruit. They shall not build and another inhabit; they shall not plant and another eat; for like the days of a tree shall the days of my people be, and my chosen shall long enjoy the work of their hands. They shall not labor in vain, or bear children for calamity; for they shall be offspring blessed by the Lord—and their descendants as well. Before they call I will answer, while they are yet speaking I will hear. The wolf and the lamb shall feed together, the lion shall eat straw like the ox; but the serpent—its food shall be dust! They shall not hurt or destroy on all my holy mountain.

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In addition to his pastoral duties, Rev. Thompson coordinates efforts of the church to strengthen its outreach into the surrounding low-income neighborhood.

Rhett also serves as the National Coordinator of Volunteers in Mission Program in Panama, helping mission teams with construction and medical services projects.

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