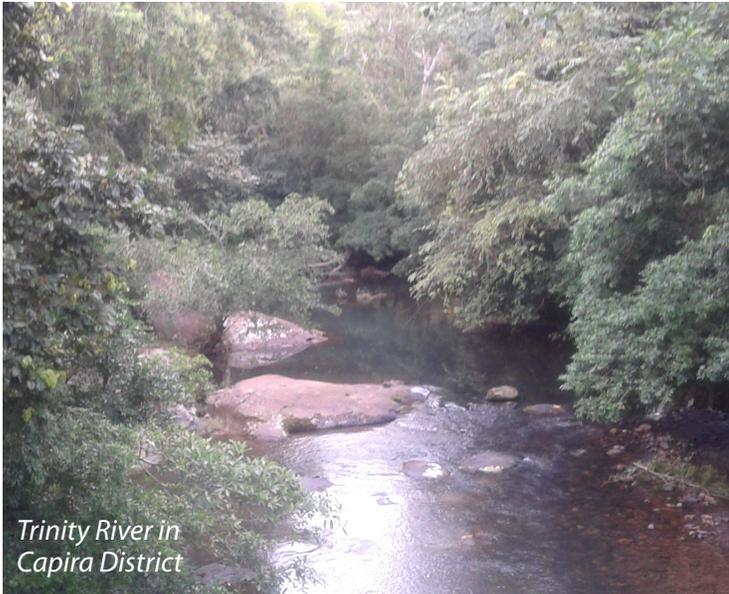


Panama Update

By Reverend Rhett Thompson
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Trinity River in
Capira District



Children's Folkloric
Dance Troupe

God's Love and Leshmaniasis

It is both humbling and exhilarating to be a part of God's amazing work to heal the sick and comfort those in tribulation.

In mid-January I accompanied a group from the Panama District of the Methodist Women's Federation on a visit to a remote rural community about an hour outside Panama City. I had been warned to wear good boots because the last part of the journey would be over difficult terrain. However to everyone's delight in this election year the local government representative had had the road to the community completely graded. So the two buses, loaded with gifts for the children (a belated celebration of Three Kings' Day) were able to drive the group of women and accompanying men all the way to the swinging pedestrian bridge that provides access to the community across the Trinity River.

We had a grand celebration! After the ceremonial words of welcome by community leaders, the children's folk dance troupe delighted us all with a lively presentation. Following this activity we sang some Christmas carols and then the children were divided into different age groups to play games, receive their gifts and take turns bludgeoning their respective piñatas. The day culminated with a community meal of sancocho (Panamanian chicken soup) and white rice.

In spite of the fact that the children seemed generally much healthier than the children we often see in the Ngäbe Homeland, I was disturbed to see a number of children with ugly

sores on their faces and other parts of their bodies. Some had bad scars where previous skin lesions had healed. When I asked about the sores, I learned that the children were suffering from leishmaniasis. This particular zone is one of the few places in Panama where this disease occurs. Flea sized flies bite and suck blood from wild and domestic animals that serve as reservoirs for the parasite that causes leishmaniasis. When these same flies bite the children or adults, they inject the parasite. Standard treatment involves very painful daily injections over as many as 40 to 50 days. However the mothers of some of the affected children told me that there was no longer a doctor at the nearby government clinic. They were told to go to the Gorgas Institute in Panama City. None had attempted to make that journey, so all of the children were going untreated. "No," I thought. "This can't be!"

Determined to find out what was going on, the next day I googled "Leshmaniasis in Panama" and found an article published in the local newspaper that very day describing a new painless topical treatment developed by the Gorgas Institute. On Monday, after a half a dozen calls, I finally contacted the clinic offering the treatment. After I explained the situation, the clinic manager said that if we would get a list of people in need of treatment, they would send a vehicle to pick them up and take them to the clinic where they would receive a complete medical examination and then be enrolled in the treatment program. Everything would be free of charge! You can imagine how my heart rejoiced when I heard these words.



Good Boots for the Trail



Children Playing Games in Capira



Children Awaiting their Gifts



Community Leaders Welcoming the Methodist Women to Capira



Cooking Sanchocho in Capira

Following this conversation, I called Benjamin, our contact in the community, who in turn organized a census of affected individuals. For now only children 5 years and older as well as adults can be offered the treatment. Authorization to treat children as young as 2 years old is imminent.

We were not on a health mission. We just wanted to bring a little cheer to a bunch of kids. But God was at work bringing all things together at that precise moment. And God presented us with an opportunity to do something. I think these opportunities arise daily. We just have to be paying attention and follow the impulse of the Holy Spirit. I believe that God's love was at work in the scientists who developed the new treatment, in the Methodist women who have been making these annual visits to the community and in Benjamin and his helpers. I just got to be a link in this chain of God's love and mercy. Thanks be to God!

Reverend Rhett Thompson is a Board of Global Ministries United Methodist missionary assigned to the Republic of Panama, serving as pastor of an Evangelical Methodist Church in Panama City.



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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