

Panama Update

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Christmas in Cienaguita

Early on Christmas morning about thirty members of the congregation of the El Salvador Methodist Church of Pedregal boarded two church buses loaded with lots of toys and goodies as well as cots and foam pads. Shortly after sunrise we crossed the Centennial Bridge that spans the Panama Canal and headed down the Pan-American Highway towards the Province of Chiriqui and the Ngobe-Bugle Reservation. Since Christmas of 2010, the children and adults of our Sunday School Department have been organizing and celebrating what we call "Sharing Christmas." Instead of buying gifts for the children of the Sunday School, we raise money to purchase gifts for the children of Cie-

naguita and surrounding communities. Our children help wrap and distribute the gifts.

By the time we arrived in Cienaguita it was almost lunchtime. The coordinator of our Community Center, Paula Rodriguez, and her crew of volunteers had already been working for hours preparing four huge pots of rice with chicken. We quickly organized the team from Pedregal in order to begin the feeding of the 500 Ngobe and campesino children, youth and adults. We had to scrape the bottom of the last pot in order to feed everyone, but we all breathed a sigh of relief when the last of our guests was fed. Now we know how





side the Pan-American Highway: "Some people strive to leave a better world for our children. That is good. But it is even more important to leave better children for our world." We hope that sharing Christmas contributes at least a little bit to the formation of better children for our world.

the disciples felt back in Galilee when they fed the last of the hungry multitude.

Next we all gathered under and around the pavilion which provided welcomed shade from the tropical sun and began to sing Christmas carols and praise choruses followed by a brief message about the meaning of Christmas. Meantime, other members of our team began dividing the over 300 gifts in four distribution points in preparation for the moment that was on the minds of all the children gathered for the Christmas celebration. Matching gifts with the names on the endless lists of children turned out to be more difficult than we had imagined but finally we were ready to share the Christmas cheer. The children ran excitedly to their assigned distribution points and anxious looks were soon replaced by smiling faces as the children opened their gifts. The heads of households received a bag of groceries with enough beans, rice and other staples to be able to prepare a few meals back home to share with the other members of their family that had not made the trek to the community center.

By late afternoon the work was done and the crew from Pedregal had their share of chicken with rice as well as tamales made by one of the neighbors. Afterwards some made their way down to the river to cool off or bathe. Others prepared the cots and pads for the evening rest. Everyone, especially the children, felt a sense of joy of "sharing Christmas" once again.

On our way back to Panama City the next day, I saw a sign that somebody had written on a banner along-



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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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