

Panama Update

By Reverend Rhett Thompson
United Methodist Missionary, Panama
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The Bridge

After several days of torrential tropical downpours, the whole side of a mountain slid downhill and crashed into the San Juan River, just above the bridge connecting Cienaguita and Potrero de Palma. The mass of dirt, rock and trees created a dam behind which a huge volume of water began to accumulate. After a couple of days, the force of the water finally broke through the natural dam and a massive wall of water and debris roared downriver. One of the gigantic trees carried by the flood became entangled in the cables of the bridge and finally pulled down the tower on the upper bank of the river and even uprooted and dragged the other tower into the middle of the river.

After the flood subsided, the plaque fixed to the base of the bridge when it was dedicated could be seen in the middle of the river. A team of Volunteers in Mission from Tennessee led by Civil Engineer Glenn Abernathy, together with local residents, had built the bridge in 1989. Suddenly, 18 years later in June of 2007 this vital link was gone. None of the Ngäbe schoolchildren who used the bridge daily to get to school remembered the days when there was no bridge. Once again the children had to swim across the river to get to classes. When the river was high, the only way across was by way of a precarious "tree-bridge" or a basket suspended from a cable. No one imagined it would take over four years to get another bridge built across the river.

On numerous occasions a delegation from both the Ngäbe community of Potrero de Palma and the campesi-

no community of Cienaguita made visits to enlist the aid of the Public Works Department in David, the Capital of the Chiriqui Province. The answer was always the same. The project was not in the budget.

In the end it became necessary to build not one but numerous bridges. Doctor Steve Stokes (Covenant UMC) offered the support of the Rotary Club of Dothan, Alabama to assist in the purchase of materials. We contacted Patrick

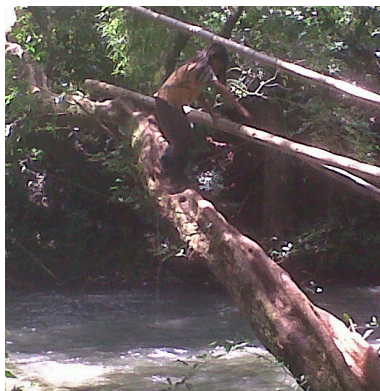
McKittrick and Manolo Rodriguez of the David Rotary Club who pledged their support for the project. They in turn contacted two Rotary Clubs in Canada for further financial backing. Patrick also made numerous visits and calls to the Public Works Department to get them to agree to do all the engineering work as well as to provide rocks, sand, transportation and technical workers. The Methodist Church offered the use of our Community Center to house and feed the workers as well as a secure space to store materials and equipment.

Work began in July of 2011 and continued for seven weeks during which time the towers and anchors on both sides of the river were constructed.

Our coordinator, Paula Rodriguez, supervised the use of the Community Center and kept track of receipts for food and other items. Carlos Rodriguez supervised local workers and kept track of materials in storage. Josefina Rodriguez kept everybody well fed. My cell phone became the communication link among all the various parts of the operation.



Old Bridge



Tree Bridge



Crossing on the Cable Car



Dr. Steve Stokes and Rhett

Work was interrupted in August by major flooding in other parts of the province that led to a shift of priorities on the part of the Public Works Department. Work on the bridge finally resumed in January of 2012 and in 3 weeks, the cables were secured and the corrugated steel plates welded to the floor supports. A chain link fence was installed to make the bridge even safer to cross. The resumption of work coincided with the visit of a group of Rotarians from Canada who got to see firsthand the fruit of their fundraising efforts. One of the Ngäbe men told me that they never imagined the bridge would be so beautiful.

It is a beautiful bridge for it stretches from Panama to Alabama and Canada. It has linked together not only the communities of Cienagueta and Potrero de Palma, the Chiriqui Province and the Ngäbe Bugle Reservation, but also the Public Works Department, the Methodist Church of Panama and the USA and the Rotary Clubs of David, Dothan and Canada.

In the light of the current struggle of the Ngäbe People, the bridge provides mute testimony to the fact that there are people of good faith in government, church and civic organizations and in the communities themselves who can work together for the benefit of the community. At times during the last four years, it seemed that the bridge would never get built, but there it is! Thanks be to God!

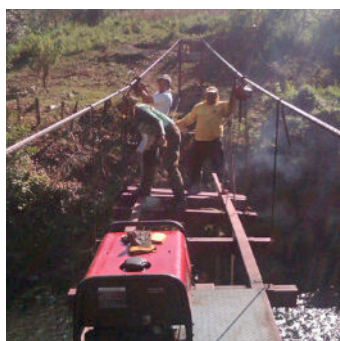
In closing, I would like to share a prayer attributed to Archbishop Oscar Romero: "A Prayer for Workers, Prophets and Ministers & All Those in Outreach Ministries."



Public Works and Ngäbe Laborers



The Anchor



Welding the Floor Plates

It helps now and then to step back and take the long view beyond our efforts, even beyond our vision.

We accomplish in our lifetime only a tiny fraction of the magnificent enterprise that is God's work.

Nothing we do is complete, which is another way of saying that the kingdom always lies beyond us.

No statement says all that could be said.



Pouring the Tower Base



Adjusting the Cables



Finished Bridge

No program accomplishes the church's mission.

No set of goals and objectives includes everything.

But this is what we are about: We plant the seeds that one day will grow.

We water seeds already planted, knowing that they hold future promise.

We lay foundations that will need further development.

We provide yeast that produces effects far beyond our capabilities.

We cannot do everything and there is a sense of liberation in realizing that.

This enables us to do something, and do it very well.

It may be incomplete, a step along the way, an opportunity for the Lord's grace to enter and do the rest.

We may never see the end results, but that is the difference between the master builder and the worker. We are workers, not master builders; ministers, not messiahs.

We are prophets of a future not our own. Amen.



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.

Contact Rhett: PanamaMissionRJT@gmail.com Webpage: <http://rhettthompson.weebly.com>