

2. Impressions

Culture

One of the most important aspects we have been challenged with during our missionary career has been the importance of learning another culture. To better understand culture, I think of soup. There are vegetables and sometimes meat in soup, but most of the time, the main ingredient is broth. Culture is the broth of each person's life.

It has been delightful to participate in original music, dances, and sharing of local and indigenous foods. It has been enlightening to learn various traditions, languages, and history. At the same time, it has been challenging to live with distinct work habits, mental infrastructures, and world views.

Living in different cultures has helped us be aware of our own culture and how much of our culture and way of life we were taught and unconsciously absorbed. Being able to identify the culture we were raised in has helped us understand ourselves better, along with those who are unique from us.

Living immersed in diverse cultures, learning the ways of our brothers and sisters in other parts of the world, and having the privilege to serve alongside them has been life changing. I could never imagine my life without these impressions.



3. A memory

Crossing rivers

Bolivia

Gordy and I have crossed many rivers in the years we have served with our Bolivian and Dominican brothers and sisters. One of these times was in Bolivia. One morning, as we were headed to the Tiu Rancho Center with our pastor Gustavo Loza, we came to a point on the road where people were marching and blocking the highway: this was a common occurrence on the main road between Cochabamba and the Tiu Rancho community, located 45 minutes outside the city. The Bolivian people have and continue to take to the streets to protest the many injustices in the country.

On this particular day, the staff at the Center were waiting for us to continue planning the many ministry projects that were in progress. Instead of turning around and heading back to Cochabamba, we decided to try and get to our meeting by first driving around the protesters. Those roads were also blocked. The only option we had was to drive through the Urkupiña festival grounds, which were south of the smaller city of Quillacollo. This route would take us through the city dumping grounds, to come up the community of Payacollo. The road appeared clear, and we were hopeful...until we reached the bridge of the Payacollo River. The community had been doing repairs on the bridge and it was closed. Given how far we had come, we did the only thing we could think of: we parked the car, rolled up our pants, crossed the river by foot, and walked the rest of the way.



The staff were all wide eyed when we arrived walking into the grounds, wet up to our waists yet so happy to be with them.

Dominican Republic

Pedernales is a small town in the southwest corner of the Dominican Republic, on the border of Haiti and the DR. On the Haitian side, just across the river, lives a Dominican refugee community of Haitian descent. Never having lived in Haiti, but having that ancestral background, they were deported from the Dominican. With nowhere to go, these officially unrecognized Haitian-Dominicans set up a refugee camp called K-2, just over the Dominican border.

To get to this camp, we had to cross the Masacre River. This river has a bloody history. It is where the former Dominican dictator, Rafael Trujillo, massacred 25 thousand Haitians during his Reign of Terror.

As we crossed the river, an older woman came from the Haitian side to meet me in the middle of the flowing water. She asked me if I needed help, took my shoes, and handed them to a young boy to carry. Even in the midst of such need, we were welcomed with generosity.



In this small community camp, people live on the scraps of life.



For years, the people of Haiti have been cutting trees and converting the wood into charcoal, deforesting their lands, making them vulnerable to climate change, flooding, and landslides.



Our reason for crossing that historical river to meet with the K-2 community, was to offer them solar ovens, an alternative to cooking with firewood and charcoal.

Shade was scarce, and the heat and humidity were intense. A crowd of nearly 100 people gathered together to build the solar ovens and cook the rice and beans. At the end of the two days, we watched the K-2 community cross the river back into Haiti, with their solar ovens on their backs.

Crossing cultural boundaries sometimes means crossing rivers, all the while knowing God is with us every step of the way.



4. Hope

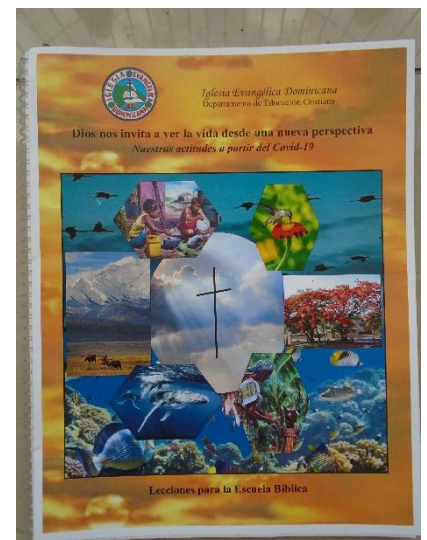
In the time of Covid-19

The presence and effects of the Covid-19 virus have brought fear, controversy, and frustration, and we have suffered as a global community.

In response to this collective suffering and confusion of the last year, our Christian Education team; Reverend Betania Figueroa, Jose Rafael Peguero, and myself, decided to develop a Sunday School curriculum for children. It was written to try and help the children understand the virus, its impact on their society, and to come to know the hope we have in Christ.

Each lesson begins with a prayer, confessing to God that we as humans cannot control or manage this life alone. Rather, we acknowledge and proclaim God's infinite love and care in the mist of our struggles. This prayer is a daily invitation to the Holy Spirit, to cast upon us wisdom and insight during these challenging times.

We decided to explore three characters of the Bible: Mary, Jesus, and King Solomon. The structure of these lessons aims for children and



youth to study the life values of these characters and open a space to contemplate Biblical truths. We challenge young people to look at life from different perspectives: the perspective of a poor Dominican mother with two children; the perspective of a whale, a tree, a hummingbird; and the perspective of our Triune God.

Every lesson ends with time for gratitude and singing a chorus, which is new for us. This is the chorus:

What does the Lord require of you?

What does the Lord require of me?

Justice, kindness, to walk humbly with our God.

To seek justice and love kindness and walk humbling with our God.

5. Reflection

Food Baskets to Dajabon in the time of Covid-19

On Monday 18 January 2021, we set out for Dajabón, a Dominican border town in the northwest. Our plan was to contact as many solar oven recipients as possible in four rural villages near to Dajabón: Clavellina, La Gorra, Chacuey, and Loma de Cabrera.



The idea was to invite people to meet us in the center of their villages for a time of fellowship, followed by us sharing baskets of food with each family. The baskets consisted of 10lbs of rice, 3lbs of dried beans, and half a gallon of vegetable oil.

That was the idea, but the reality turned out to be quite different. Erasme had forgotten to mention the food baskets in the invitation. This meant that people were being invited to leave their daily activities for a meeting about solar ovens, and a short Christian fellowship. His justification for the food omission was his assumption that we would be overwhelmed by crowds of people.

When we arrived at our first stop in Clavellina at 8am, there was not a soul in sight. We waited a half hour before one woman showed up, followed by an additional three. It became clear to us that attending a solar oven meeting on a Monday morning was not high on anyone's to-do list.

We had 150 food baskets for distribution in four villages, and it appeared we might be taking the food back with us. We pondered our situation and decided to consult a local leader, Alejandra, someone well-known and well-respected in the community. Alejandra recommended we take the

food to her most vulnerable neighbors, to those who are ill, disabled, and not well enough to leave their homes. Alejandra guided us to them.

One of the homes where we stopped was that of a woman who was bedridden after suffering a heart attack. Next to her, was her mother, who was dying of cancer. And next to her was the woman's daughter, dying of pancreatic cancer. We prayed together in silence for these three women and left them three food baskets.

Next, we visited a home of an elderly, blind man, living alone. He lost his sight five years ago, after a lifetime of making charcoal. He thanked us for the food basket and expressed how much it meant to him that we visited him in his home.

We visited another elderly woman, who took us to visit her son and daughter-in-law, Natalia and Caesar, who were milking one of their four cows. Their one-room home was built of scrap lumber with four-inch gaps between the boards. Asleep on their bed, was their ten-month-old baby girl. Caesar had previously attended a solar oven workshop but had been unable to afford the 20 dollar cost.



Our next destination was the village of Chacuey. Upon arrival, we pulled up to a *colmado*, a small kiosk with essential goods and snacks. Next to the *colmado*, was a patio with a roof and open sides, also used as a church meeting area. More people here had received the invitation and attended, and we were able to hand out ten more food baskets.



Pastor Erasme then asked the pastor if there were any folks in need in the community we could visit. This request opened the door to the rest of the community. The pastor made phone calls to notify the neighbors. The pastor's 12-year-old son and his friends took off on their bikes to spread the word about the food baskets.

People arrived steadily in groups of two, three, and four. One man came on his donkey, less interested in modern transportation, more interested in reliable companionship, and he certainly was saving on gas.



A basket was delivered to an elderly woman nearby. We learned of this woman from another elder, who arrived barefooted. She had been praying and crying, as there was no food in the house. She said the gift had arrived just in time.

We handed out 50 baskets in Chacuey, and though we certainly could have left them all, we kept an additional 20, as we had one more stop to make.



In Loma de Cabrera, our final stop of the day, we met with our Dominican hostess, pastor Ester, who guided us to the homes of those in her congregation. As we had done in the other towns, we asked pastor Ester to take us to the homes of her congregants in most need. Ester took us to what she referred to as “hidden” neighborhoods, where we distributed the remaining baskets of food.

Our experience in the Dajabón area was another example of why we seek out the ‘least of these’. And that is, the closer you get to persons who are forgotten and suffering, those who are vulnerable, who live ‘outside the walls’, the closer you get to the presence of Jesus as recorded in Matthew 25. Another Scriptural mandate is to seek first the kingdom of God and God’s righteousness (justice). When you pair that with the words of Jesus in the Beatitudes, “blessed are the poor for theirs is the Kingdom of heaven”, then it is valid and wise to look for Jesus where we know he can be found.