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Dominican Mission Report

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Beloved, I do not consider that I have made it my own; but this one thing I do; forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus. (Philippians 3:13-14)

Dear Mission Partners:

At times God speaks a word of hope through the stars. When God wanted to reassure Abram of the promise of a son and innumerable descendants, God pointed to the stars. "Look at the sky and try to count the stars; you will have as many descendants as that!" The Genesis chapter 15 account states that Abram put his trust in the Lord and because of this the Lord was pleased with him and accepted him. Many years later, God got the shepherds' attention in the sky with a heavenly host of angels. They proclaimed God's message - "Glory to God in the highest heaven, and peace on earth to those with whom God is pleased." This promise of peace, sorely needed then as it is now, was fulfilled in the birth, life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

A group of American Brethren found themselves looking up at the stars recently, searching for God's meaning as they processed an intense cultural experience in the mountain village of Viajama. This village is home to a small, historically-significant Brethren church in the Dominican Republic. By many accounts it was the first congregation the Brethren founded in the country. The village is nestled in a beautiful area at the junction of three rivers which often flood during hurricanes which ravage the country. In 1979 disaster relief work in the area following Hurricane David had led to the founding of this congregation by Puerto Rican Brethren. This location was also the scene of terrible flooding during Hurricane George in 1998.

On a recent night in Viajama in early November, six American Brethren women who were part of a Faith Expedition group, sat outside their host's home visiting with

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the family. As they looked up they realized they were privileged to see what they could never view at home – a sky view completely covered with countless stars, a brilliant view of the Milky Way, and a spectacular view of God's infinite galaxy. This near-telescopic view was made possible by the high altitude and the absence of electricity in this somewhat isolated village. This village also lacks running water, phone service, and ready access to cooking fuel. In the midst of obvious shortages of items considered essential to most Americans, the visitors found themselves appreciating the ordinary as a treasured blessing. As they and their Dominican hosts sang songs under the starlight, shared their common faith in Christ, and watched the shooting stars overhead, they appreciated the gift of Christ's peace which is often crowded out in their too hectic, busy lives. The message, "Glory to God in the highest heaven, and peace on earth to those with whom God is pleased," took on a new meaning for them.



Members of Harrisburg First enjoy a meal with members of the Los Guaricanos Church during a recent Faith Expedition. (Photo by Donna Benson)

These are some of the treasured stories which the Faith Expedition group of 16 persons from Southern Pennsylvania and Atlantic Northeast Districts shared after their 7-day visit. Overnight stays in the homes of Dominican Brethren church members have become a highlight of visiting mission groups. This group divided up for their home stays and spent two days in the Los Toros, Tabara Abajo, and Viajama communities. They learned to know church members, shared in worship, walked through the communities, and formed rich friendships. Community Development staff Beth Gunzel, who hosted the group, helped them to become acquainted with the economic development program and English program as well as cultural and historical sights in the capital. As we said goodbye to the group, we encouraged them to continue pondering the meaning of experiences such as that star-filled night. What could God be saying to them in the midst of their ordinary lives? In what ways could they live out the blessing of God's Incarnation in Jesus Christ?

In another view of the mission program, a sizable group of theological students continue to ponder the rich teaching they received during a November theological conference. Familiar concepts were presented with a new twist by conference leaders Jeff Wright and Jeannette Buller of the Center for Anabaptist Leadership in California. Topics somewhat familiar such as cell group formation and the development of strong leaders through coaching were matched with a challenging presentation of new ideas for planting new churches. Using the book of Acts as a model, Jeff Wright challenged the students to let God's Spirit lead them in surprisingly new ways to reach the unchurched members of their communities. His presentations received hearty "Amen's" by students

eager to be better equipped to share the good news of Jesus Christ with their neighbors. Currently 48 students are enrolled in this program of theological training.



Faith Expedition member Waneta Benson finds a new friend in the Dominican Republic. (Photo by Donna Benson)

These two delightful and energizing experiences are balanced by current significant and painful challenges in the life of the Dominican church. While there is so much to celebrate in the life of the churches, there are also significant challenges. It continues to be difficult for the Dominican leadership to take steps toward the mutually agreed-upon goal of gradually assuming greater responsibility in the support of their own churches and mission projects. This challenge presents an opportunity for deeper stewardship and leadership development on their part. However, to move in this direction also requires vision, courage, and a counter-cultural approach in a society where heavy dependency on North American resources is commonplace. Your prayers are welcomed for the leadership here that when they meet together to struggle with these challenges they might respond with a loving, Christ-centered, trusting attitude. Your prayers are also welcomed for one congregation in particular which has an opportunity to pioneer in this regard. The Sabana Torsa congregation is located on a privately-owned "bateye" (sugar cane plantation) about an hour away from the capital of Santo Domingo. Its 84 members have been meeting for

worship in a small one-room house but the permission to use this space often appears to be in jeopardy. Now that land has been purchased with funds donated from the American church, they are ready to take on the challenge to build. The congregation faces the necessity of embracing the agreed-upon challenge of doing their part to raise some of the funds for the project. In the next few months they will hopefully be starting to carry out some creative fund-raising projects such as selling sugar cane sticks and candied sweets.

Even small fund-raisers seem monumental in an environment where workers are paid the equivalent of a few dollars to cut a ton of sugar cane! The despair, discouragement, and sense of hopelessness are palpable in the community. However, the church members have faith in a powerful God who raised Jesus from the dead! If they can catch the vision that God can manifest this resurrection power and multiply their "loaves and fishes" ideas, efforts, and dedication, this will be a huge motivation for other churches which struggle to take steps toward a more mutual partnership. Please pray



with us that their efforts will be successful and that this success will be contagious, spreading hope to other churches.

We conclude with **thanksgiving** for God's many blessings:

- God's presence with ESL teacher Rob Raker who returned to Pennsylvania in November to visit his mother who had suffered a stroke. She is making good progress recovering and Rob continues to enjoy his term of service here greatly. He teaches English classes in three churches.
- ESL Interim Teacher Coordinator Jewel Renee Reyes's successful recovery from dengue fever. She is back to teaching her class in Los Toros and giving support and oversight to Rob's work.
- An enjoyable celebration of Thanksgiving as a staff in the Heishman home. We enjoyed a turkey and "all the fixin's" thanks to the generosity of Agape Flights mail service volunteers who donated the items.
- A recent and joyful celebration of baptisms at the Arroyo Salado and Bastida churches.
- A joint effort by several churches in the San Juan de la Maguana valley area to support the Viajama congregation in offering an evangelistic service there.
- The joy many churches are experiencing in continuing to nurture children who attended VBS for the first time and are still participating in the life of the congregation.
- The upcoming graduation of two university students, one a lawyer and the other an agronomist.
- A simply beautiful fall and winter climate with cool nighttime temperatures and exceptionally beautiful sunny days. (We do enjoy reading about US snow storms, though, and our children certainly miss the white fluffy stuff!)

In conclusion we invite your prayers for our partnership as American and Dominican Brethren, for together we are privileged to share in the work of Jesus Christ in the Dominican Republic. We desire that all would long to "know Christ and the power of his resurrection" more and more and to have that aspiration to Christ-likeness fixed at the center of our faith.

Blessings to you and your family this Christmas,

Irv, Nancy, Timothy, and Jennifer Heishman