

Our Sister Parish Mission
by Rev. Robert Cook

In the early winter of 1999 I made a life changing decision. It was to move to Berlin, El Salvador to live and work with the Parish Team of the Parish of Saint Joseph. The road to that decision had begun nine years before in November of 1990.

That was the year I visited the canton El Tablon, which is one of the 17 cantons in the Municipality of Berlin. That year the canton was to receive 50% of the Rural Harvest Offering of Des Moines Presbytery. For several years I was Hunger Action Enabler for Des Moines Presbytery. Part of the responsibilities of that position was to write promotional materials for the Rural Harvest Offering. The visit to El Tablon grew out of my belief that by seeing first-hand the poverty of a foreign country that we were trying to impact that perhaps I could do a better job of promotion in the ensuing years. And so I made the trip that would change my life forever.

When I made that visit in 1990, El Salvador was in its 10th year of a 12 year-long civil war. The 16 days I was in El Tablon taught me the difference between an academic knowing about poverty and the existential smelling and hearing it. Poverty has an obnoxious odor. Its sounds are disconcerting. The sight of it brings silent sobs in the night. Environmentally it all melds into an array of discontent and disorientation. It eats at the heart and soul, and eventually surrealistic aberrations of reality fill the mind. The experience seared my mind and broke my heart. I vowed I would return, though at the time it was a statement that came more out of irritation at what I learned than what I thought I could do.

I returned home physically, but my spirit was broken. El Salvador poverty was always on my mind. Each year for nine years I visit El Salvador. Sometimes I took delegations to learn the reality of poverty that Salvadorans lived. Sometimes I went alone. Always I felt the pull to “do something” but the resources were limited for making much of an impact on the poverty of that land. I took it one year at a time, and from the perspective of the early 1990’s I could not imagine what the years ahead would bring. I only knew that the poverty I encountered each time I returned to El Salvador brought more consternation to my soul.

The moment of decision came one evening in the winter of 1999. Cold winds whipped at my face and the darkness of the season set the stage for what imaged in my mind. The bloated bellies of hunger and cries of body ailments and fears of

violence at the hands of ricos presented themselves, like a parade of vermin against the needs of life. It was a moment that is private and need not be elucidated here. Suffice it to say it was a moment of consternation, and it is in those moments that the spirit gives vision. I knew at that moment it was not foolish for me to believe I could be an instrument of God's love and justice to the poor of the Berlin mountainside. It was a sting of the Holy Spirit that would result in my move to Berlin two years later. The message was clear...leave behind the preconceptions of what life is and allow the spirit to make the way of life. So I said I would do it. And I told the world I was going to. I just had to believe that the resources would come and God's hand would prevail in a world of uncertainty

It would have been very presumptuous of me to say I knew exactly what I was doing and how it was all going to happen. One thing I did know was that I was going to become dependent on my Salvadoran friends for not only the basics of food and shelter, but also the very process of learning how to speak the language and to know the culture and customs of the land. It was a new beginning that has made full circle and brought me to the brink of another new beginning in my retirement that is at hand.

For over two years I spoke of my intentions to make the life-changing move. As the time grew closer I sensed a sadness that could have over-ridden my decision had the call not been so intense. My sons, Steven and Jason are very dear to me. They inhabit a large space in my heart, as do some very important and supportive friends. At times my heart would rise to my throat. To leave one's life of 58 years to begin anew in another land was a lonely trek. But I was not without the support of my sons and many others, and their frequent statement of pride in the change of life I was about to make helped me to move on and never look back. Except for a moment of reflection in the flight somewhere over Georgia when the true weight of what I had done struck me. For that moment I felt in limbo, unable to return to my former life and yet facing an unknown that left me wondering about my future. But it was only for a moment and it passed to never again haunt me.

The beginning of Our Sister Parish Mission was out of nothingness in a sense. It was a dream without resources. The Church was supportive, yet quick to remind me that the church could not pay me. I was just as quick to remind them I was willing to raise my own support. The Administrative Council approved a commissioning which was held the first of September at Park Avenue Presbyterian Church in Des Moines. The sanctuary was filled, and a special choir organized. The Moderator of Presbytery, Rev. Jim Kraph presided, and Rev. Mark Davis

preached. I felt comforted by the support, yet I knew that in a sense I was on my own.

When I left Iowa I left behind in storage only six boxes of books that would be shipped at a later time. I gave away or sold all other possessions. Then on October 21, 2001 I boarded a jet plane with two suitcases and two boxes filled with what was left of my personal possessions. I had launched a life of new beginnings and adventure. No one, including myself, had a plan to build a major mission on the mountainside of Berlin. But that is exactly what happened, guided by the hand of God and nourished by hundreds of delegates that visited over more than four years. I am proud, and happy to leave in the hands of a new person to administer the institution that Our Sister Parish Mission has become. It is a mission of love; a mission of hope; a mission that has exposed poverty that broke hearts....that then mended to become the force of the spirit that drives OSPM.

Records show that from 2002 to July 31 of this year 44 delegations from a variety of denominations and backgrounds will have visited Berlin. Those delegations represent hundreds of people. They supported (and continue to support) a variety of project developments, including potable water, solar panel electricity, community centers, health care and support, education support (both in scholarships and infrastructure), economic development, agriculture support (fertilizer) and construction of churches. Churches and individuals have given food, clothing and medicines for the poor. The hope manifest in all this has Gospel dimensions that defy total description in this small space. Let it be said that those hundreds of people, and scores of churches heard the call to feed the hungry, cloth the naked, visit those in prison (delegations always visit the women's prison in Berlin), care for the sick.....and responded with hearts of love and care.

All this has been an ecumenical mission par excellence. Our Sister Parish Mission development represents Presbyterian, Disciples, Catholics, and United Methodist churches. Nine Parish/Canton relationships have been developed where churches adopt a canton and agree to send a delegation at least once a year to provide support to the canton. In meetings between the Directiva (city council of the canton) and sister churches priorities are established and churches can then decide if there are sufficient resources within the church to assist with development of those priority areas. Relationships between churches and cantons include the following:

Heartland Presbyterian Church with the canton El Tablon
Ankeny Presbyterian Church with the canton Corozal

Trinity Presbyterian Church with caserio Casa de Zinc
First Presbyterian Church of Des Moines with canton San Filipe
First Presbyterian Church of Dallas Center with canton Virginia
Westminster Presbyterian Church with canton San Francisco
First Presbyterian of Newton with caserio Munosis
Wakonda Christian Church with canton Las Delicias
St. Boniface Catholic Parish with canton El Recreo

In addition to the sister canton relationships, St. Catherine Parish at Drake brings yearly student delegations, as does the University of Iowa School of Social Work and Wesley Foundation. Newton First Presbyterian and Sacred Heart Catholic churches annually bring a medical delegation, and St. Catherine Parish has begun that same service. Then there are those hundreds of individuals who have stepped up to the plate in time of special need.....like the time we needed food for those who lost so much in hurricane Mitch, or when Milagro's mother was gravely ill and needed a gall bladder surgery.

All this I leave with pride but also with a note of sadness. Our Sister Parish Mission is a response to God's call to care for the poor. We have done it well.