

ST. BARTHOLOMEW’S ANGLICAN CHURCH IN THE TOWN OF TONAWANDA

The Rev. Fr. Arthur W. Ward, Jr. + Rector

“An Unforgettable Experience”

THE DOMINICAN REPUBLIC MISSIONS TRIP

Many of you know that I had the opportunity along with 26 of our members to go on a Missions trip to the Dominican Republic this past April. It was the first international missions trip that our parish has ever participated in. And I believe it was a great success. But before I say anything else, I would like to thank everyone who prayed for us and those who financially gave towards the expense of the trip. We were able to raise all the funds needed to go. And I can honestly say that I felt the prayers being said on our behalf while we were away.

This was my first missions trip overseas, and frankly, after experiencing it firsthand, I wish I had gone on one year earlier. I can see why people who are in missions say that in order to truly understand the need for the gospel to go out into the world and for gaining a heart for those overseas, you need to go yourself. There is no other way. When Jesus gave the Great Commission He said, “*Go and make disciples of all the nations...*” And the only way to do that is to go into the world.

SCORE INTERNATIONAL

The ministry that we partnered with is called *Score International*. Score was founded by Tennessee Temple College Basketball Coach Ron Bishop in 1985. In that year, Coach Bishop resigned as the basketball coach at Tennessee Temple University to start a sports missions ministry. Taking a basketball team to Mexico, this unusual ministry had a national impact. Since then, thousands of athletes have traveled with SCORE to 20 countries and have preached the Gospel to thousands of spectators at halftime. In addition, millions of others have heard the message through television and radio coverage.

SCORE has now expanded and is taking church youth groups, senior class trips, educators, choirs, medical teams and construction teams all in an effort to mass evangelize, expose people to missions and edify the local church. SCORE has established orphanages in Costa Rica and the Dominican Republic. A medical facility in the Dominican Republic has been built and will serve local pastors and missionaries, as well as the poor who cannot afford medical care.

The ministry has grown to include a sports complex and housing complex for missionaries. The beautiful state of the art sports facility with that can be used by teams from the US and the DR. Baseball teams use it on occasion too – the Washington Nationals and San Francisco Giants are most recent examples. The missionary complex is a renovated former two story hotel with an open courtyard and pool. This is where we stayed. SCORE hosts about 3500 people throughout the course of a year. We shared the facility with other church groups. One of the reasons we partnered with Score was the WNY connection and the fact that pastors we knew had already gone. So it was neat to be with folks from Kenmore Alliance Church and Amherst Baptist. There was also a group from W. Virginia and another from Maryland.

THE DOMINICAN REPUBLIC

Our mission field for ten days was the Dominican Republic. It is on the second largest island in the Caribbean. Named Hispaniola by Christopher Columbus it was one of the first places Columbus landed when he made his voyage to discover the New World. The capital of Santo Domingo became the headquarters for the Columbus and the Spanish Empire in the New World. The Dominican Republic shares the island with the nation of Haiti. There are about 10 million people living in the Dominican Republic and another 10 million on the Haitian side of the island so with a total of 20 million people it is by far the most populous island in the region with twice as many people as Cuba.

Most Dominicans are descendants of the slaves brought by the Spanish from West Africa. The majority also have some Spanish ancestry and others some Indian ancestry as well. About 15% are Caucasian, 11% black, the rest varying degrees of mixed ancestry. Race is a problem with the darker skinned citizens often discriminated against. This is especially the case when it comes to the immigrants from Haiti. People who still work the sugar cane fields. Haiti successfully conquered the DR until the Dominicans drove the Haitians out in 1844 and finally achieved independence. So there is still animosity between Dominicans and Haitians who are now Dominican citizens. Those with Haitian ancestry are the poorest of the poor and are treated like second class citizens.

Believe it or not in 1870, President Ulysses S. Grant and many in the US government wanted to annex the DR to the US but this failed with a tie vote in the Senate. The Dominican Republic often has had periods of instability and infighting and as a result, the US occupied the country from 1916-1924. Troops were sent in again by President Johnson in 1965 to prevent communists from gaining power. Abortion is illegal in all circumstances which accounts for the high number of orphanages plus the fact that the government does not allow non-Dominicans to adopt their children.

Today, the Dominican Republic is a democracy though corruption is still a problem. Baseball is the national sport, and all Major League Baseball Teams have baseball academies in the country. This accounts for the fact that after Americans, there are more Dominicans playing major league baseball in the USA than any other nationality. The DR flag is unique in that it is the only national flag in the world that has a cross and a Bible on its coat of arms.

SCORE INTERNATIONAL IN THE DR

As noted above, the Mission of SCORE is to spread the message of the gospel through word and deed. They have planted churches in 7 villages and are looking to increase that total to 12 in the next couple years. Eventually 40 villages are targeted. This is a drop in the bucket when you consider there are about 3500 villages in the country like the ones we visited. The goal is to plant nondenominational indigenous churches that can eventually function without outside help. In addition, SCORE helps support three orphanages in the country. Finally, medical teams are sent out to address the health needs of the population. And as noted earlier, SCORE also sets up sports events in which the gospel is shared afterwards.

OUR ROLE

The role of the short term missionaries is to assist in the above goals. We typically would visit an orphanage and a village during the day. We would play with the children, share testimonies, perform a skit, and then share the gospel. We also brought food, did work projects like build wooden pews for a church school, and paint the inside of another village church. The purpose is to not only share the truth and love of Christ but to build relationships so that churches can be established and the villages transformed. So we were in fact, helping SCORE fulfill its mission which in essence is our mission – to build the Kingdom of God. We would have devotions in the evening and in the heat of the day would usually come back for lunch and a break.

SOME SURPRISES

Of course, whenever you go to another culture there are things that you are not used to. Let me share a little of the things that sometime to get used to. **Water and sewage system:** obviously you don't want to drink the water and the toilets cannot handle toilet paper – that goes in a trash can next to the toilet. **Garbage** – since plastic is not biodegradable and much of the population has not been educated in the importance of taking garbage away from the area, there is a lot of litter. Recall that our nation conducted an intense campaign in the seventies and early eighties against littering. Remember the crying Native American and the message :please don't litter?" When we were coming back from a church service our first Sunday we passed a garbage truck. To which Mark DiMaria, asked, “Is that a garbage truck?” When someone answered “Yes,” He retorted, “Why?” Seriously, they do have garbage pick-up in the cities but it didn't appear so in the smaller villages. **Driving** was another thing to get used to. In the towns, there were five motorcycles or scooters for every car. And since many don't have trucks we saw every conceivable thing being carried on the motorcycles – like a kitchen table, a fully decorated cake, 5 people on one motorcycle, ladies in dresses riding side saddle, and no helmets! 99% do not wear helmets. Intersections can be a free for all with the bigger and more aggressive vehicle getting the right of way. And forget about pedestrians having the right of way. If you get hit by a car or truck it is considered your own fault. Most vehicles hit the horn as a warning as they come near pedestrians and they do not slow down. Concerning the color of the traffic lights, one driver said, “Green means go, Yellow means go, and Red means go.” Amazingly, we did not see one serious traffic accident. The **heat** was pretty intense – 100 heat index with high humidity.

HOW GOD WORKED

Let me just say that I was very proud of our entire group. They worked hard, they worked together, they were gracious to all we came in contact with and they trusted the Lord to do great things in our midst. Our first visit was to an orphanage of girls and then the boys of another orphanage joined us. We played with them and then had a little service. Sunday we went to a church in a place called Spanish Village. The Pastor there was a church planter from Costa Rica. And we had the opportunity to worship with the people in Spanish. Monday we drove into a poor village. There were some men sitting and standing outside their shacks, garbage along the roadside. It was a bit intimidating. Then the bus turned around and pulled in front of the school house. Each village has a public school house. But in order for a child to go to school they must wear a purchased uniform. If you don't have a uniform you can't go to school. As we entered the school we found about 30 kids nicely

dressed at their desks. The teacher brought kids from another class to join us so I would say there was about 45 children total.

As our youth were getting ready to put on the skit, the power went out. One of the girls looked up at the ceiling fan and just shook her head. Rolling brownouts are a common occurrence in the DR. So no lights and no fans, and so we just got hotter. But the kids paid attention.

After a couple testimonies, I had the opportunity to share the gospel with the children. The government allows churches to share Christ and read the Bible in the public schools. What was I going to say? I felt the need to give these children hope and the Holy Spirit led me to talk about **Jeremiah 29:11: "For I know the plans I have for you," declares the LORD, "plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future."** As I was preaching I pointed to their national flag and how their founding fathers knew that Christ and the Word of God is our only hope. I asked, "Who here wants a better life? They all raised their hands. I told them that they could have a better life if they trust in Christ. They could change their families, their community and their nation if they follow Jesus and His Word. Some of the kids that were there, had been at the church we had visited the day before.

From there we went out to play baseball and other games with the kids. These were kids that weren't in school. Why? They didn't have uniforms. The afternoon we went to a village that was in even worse shape than the first. Who was the first child that I met to play with? A nine year old named *Immanuel* – God with us! Right then and there I knew God was trying to tell us that we were doing His work. His brother came by and it must have been his twin. I asked if they were *hermanos* and they just smiled. We then gathered them together with mothers and a few other adults and shared the skit, the testimonies and this time Jeff Hackett preached. The dogs there are skinny and don't bark. But when Jeff was leading the sinner's prayer, would you believe that a dog fight broke out? Jeff, though, kept praying the prayer as some of the villagers prayed to receive Christ. And I prayed that the Lord would bind Satan. It was undoubtedly a spiritual attack.

This was the pattern for most of our remaining time. I think it was at the orphanages, though, that were most moving. One of those orphanages is called *Jackie's House*. It takes care of children whose mothers are prostitutes. The moms still having parental rights, but drop the kids off to be taken care of indefinitely. The house is kept open by private donations. Some of the children have physical problems. When we went there to begin playing with the children I noticed one young boy who didn't look like he was doing well. Dr. Denise Callari was with us and she saw him. Sure enough he had been dealing with worms and had a fever so Denise shared with Jackie's daughter what to do as well as gave her some medication for the boy. But there was one young man who stood out. His name was Israel. He was in a wheel chair because of he was born with deformed limbs. Because he was small it took me by surprise when he said he was 15. His English was good and after we shared the gospel he asked us to sing "Open the eyes of my heart" in English. He then closed with a powerful prayer for us asking God to send his warrior angels to protect us and that the blood of Christ cleanse us, and empower us. He teaches Bible to the other kids. But what is even more incredible is that he is the son of his older sister.

And then there was the special needs orphanage where most of the kids can barely understand Spanish let alone English. How were we to minister to them? The building was at the end of a long dirt country road off the main highway. It was somewhat unfinished as are many building in the DR. But the staff kept it incredibly clean. We started intermingling with the kids and each of us took time with different child. I spent an hour driving Lydia, a girl with Down's Syndrome around in a wheel chair. She was not wheelchair bound but liked riding in one. Jim Thompson brought his harmonica which turned out to be a Godsend. The kids loved it. By the time we left 90 minutes later many of the children were happy and full of joy. What started out as an awkward time turned into one that was filled with the love of Christ.

On the final Sunday, I took the opportunity to go with Jeff Hackett and some of the missionaries to *Las Montanas* village. This was a village that did not have a viable church a few years ago. When Jeff preached there some 6 years ago he was met with hecklers and resistance. But eventually, the same guys who heckled Jeff gave their lives to the Lord and are studying to be pastors. More people came to Christ and a church was built some two years ago. That afternoon, it was filled with over 80 people. In fact, there are now 400 of the 1000 villagers who are believers. What is different about this village? Garbage is picked up, the field is mown and there was a spirit of joy and peace in that place unlike any other that I was at. It is a living testimony to how faith in Christ can change a community.

THE MISSION OF THE CHURCH

You know some seven months ago we began a Mission Initiative called "Let Us Arise and Build." The mission is to build Christ's Church, and we pledged to tithe 10% of all that was given to the work of the Lord. In other words, the campaign was and is not just about the church building but it is about building the Kingdom of God. How do we build the Kingdom of God? We do it by investing in people.

I believe if we are to truly be a Great Commission Church Mission and Outreach must be front and center of everything we do. Evangelism and Discipleship is the heart of building the Body of Christ. It is why Jesus said in **Mt. 9:38**, *"The harvest is plentiful but the workers are few. Therefore, pray that the Lord send laborers into the harvest."* It is why we are told in **1 John 3:17-18**: *"But whoever has the world's goods, and sees his brother in need and closes his heart against him, how does the love of God abide in him? Little children, let us not love with word or with tongue, but in deed and truth."*

And in **James 2:15-16**: *"Suppose a brother or sister is without clothes and daily food. If one of you says to him, "Go, I wish you well; keep warm and well fed," but does nothing about his physical needs, what good is it? In the same way, faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead."*

My prayer is that every member of our church family would fight complacency and sincerely ask the Lord what can I do to engage in mission and outreach in Christ's name? We have been given much in this nation and the truth is, we waste a lot of time on trivial pursuits. The challenge is to prioritize our lives in such a way that God's ways and will become more and more a reality in our everyday life. It is not easy. But the effort is worth it. And the reward is eternal. In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, AMEN!