

Hiss Twenty years of Volunteers In Mission

Central America *and* Mexico: Land of History, Beauty and Poverty

By Don Wiley

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Twenty years ago, in 1993, a group of nine volunteers from the Hiss United Methodist Church flew from BWI to Costa Rica, a place they'd only heard of but were not even sure where it was! They were off for a ten-day mission and were, for the most part, venturing into an unknown territory. Some were understandably apprehensive, others were elated. The end result of that trip was that the lives of those with whom the VIM team associated were changed. Equally as important, the lives of the new missionaries were changed as well. A side benefit was, and continues, that the image of the United States was changed in the minds of those served.

Central America and Mexico¹ is that region of the world that your Volunteers In Mission (VIM) team has focused upon for nineteen of the twenty-seven mission trips undertaken by the VIM team. The VIM group has also worked on eight projects in the U.S. during the same period. Since 1993, the Hiss VIM team has worked in five of the eight countries represented. The volunteers have not visited only Belize, and Panama.² In 2013 the team added the Dominican Republic on the island of Hispaniola as a destination. This part of the world has a wide variety of physical characteristics: high mountains and low coastal plains, lush tropical rainforest and desert. In the mountains frost can be expected and searing heat – with its accompanying high humidity – in the lowlands. Natural disasters such as volcanic eruptions, daily earthquakes – mostly not felt – and severe flooding from tropical storms are more than just a nuisance to residents. It is a region rich in history with ample evidence of this hemisphere's earliest established society, ancient monumental architecture, and stories of The Conquest.

Ancient monumental architecture is evident in most of the area. In Mexico near the capital city named Mexico City there is *Teotihuacán*. In 750AD, that city was the 6th largest city in the entire world! Some have estimated the population at 200,000. Paris and London were but a few shacks on the banks of muddy swamps! In Guatemala there was the great economic center of *Tikál*, considered by many to be the New York of Ancient America, and in Mexico there was the great metropolis of *Calakmul*. Not to be overlooked was the Athens of the New World, Copán in Honduras, a center of art and astronomy. Many of the Ancient cities of Middle America are designated World Heritage Sites. Yet, with those attractions, U.S. tourists still mostly neglect the region.

Water is one of the physical world's anomalies in Central America. Because of significant rainfall, there are hundreds of rivers in the region. Those draining to the

¹ A large portion of the area is widely known as Mesoamerica. Mesoamerica is the region south from Central Mexico, all of Belize, Guatemala, and El Salvador, and portions of Honduras, and Nicaragua.

² The six countries of Mesoamerica visited are Costa Rica (1993), El Salvador (2002), Guatemala (2004, 2008), Honduras (1998, 1999, 2003, 2005, 2011, and 2012), Mexico (1995, 1997), and Nicaragua (2000, 2001, 2005, 2007, and 2010).

Pacific Ocean side are short and swift, and sometimes dry during the summer³. The rivers that drain to the Caribbean are longer and provide inexpensive hydroelectric power to the area. The *Chagres River* in Panama supplies the water that fills *Gatun Lake*. *Gatun Lake* in turn supplies the great volumes of water required to operate the locks of the Panama Canal. Nicaragua has Lake Nicaragua, known as *Lago Cocibolca* to the indigenous – one of the world’s large lakes. That lake is home to the world’s only fresh water sharks. The once salt-water billfish that lived in the lake have not been seen in many years but their fossil remains can be seen at the museum adjacent to *Volcán Masaya*. In the Yucatan Peninsula of Mexico there are no surface waters because of a porous limestone base. Rivers tend to drain underground. Even with all of this water, the availability of clean water to the population is missing. Bottled water is a huge business in all of the area. North Americans that venture into the area are still admonished, “Don’t drink the water!”

Mineral resources in Central America are scant. There was a small quantity of gold but that has mostly been depleted. Silver resources are gone as well. The Spanish Conquistadors, to finance their wars in Europe and against the Moslem hordes from Anatolia (modern-day Turkey), carried off most of that gold. In Guatemala jade can still be found and that provides a flourishing business in jewelry manufacture. The most reliable mineral resource is the mining of construction materials such as sand and gravel. Agriculture remains the principal industry. While subsistence agriculture is common, there are vast “factory farms” that provide fresh fruits and vegetables to North America and Europe. Some industry transferred from North America is moving into the area, mostly the needle trades and some electronic assembly. Tourism is on the increase, however scant it may be. But with its scenic landscape, rich history, and wonderful ethnic diversity, Central America is also an area of extreme poverty.

Wealth among the people of this area is not distributed as it is in the United States or other more developed nations of the world. In Central America there is a concentration of wealth within the top one and half to two percent of the population. Even though there are many large cities here, there is still a very large rural population.⁴ Good jobs are scarce and unemployment is high in every one of the eight countries. In the rural areas there is virtually no employment opportunity and many rural families exist by subsistence agriculture. Average per capita income in the whole region is about \$10,760. This figure is a bit misleading since Mexico, with by far the largest population, has a per capita income of over \$14,400, and Costa Rica’s is over \$11,000. Income in Honduras is but \$3,770 and Nicaragua is at the bottom with a per capita income of only about \$2,790. Incidentally, Haiti in the Caribbean is the poorest nation in the region with a per capita income of but \$1,180. In the Dominican Republic, the team destination in 2013, income is \$9,030. The relatively high income level is largely influenced by high

³ Winter and summer are defined by seasonal distribution of precipitation, not sun angle as in North and South America. Winter is during the rainy season that generally corresponds to North American summer, and summer in Central America is the dry season.

⁴ Some authorities list Mexico City as the world’s largest with an estimated population of about 19 million. Tokyo/Yokohama is widely regarded as the world’s largest metropolitan area. Other cities in the region being discussed with populations of more than 1 million are Guatemala City, Managua, San José, San Salvador, Tegucigalpa, and six more in Mexico.

incomes along the north coast where the tourist industry flourishes. However, the area in which the 2013 team worked, in the south, is among the poorest areas of the world according to the host agency. It is unfair to compare this part of the world to the United States, but just for information, the 2012 World Population Data Sheet, the source of the above income statistics, lists the U.S. per capita income at \$47,310.

Housing throughout the region is largely substandard. Flimsy frame shacks, adobe structures, and sometimes homes of only plastic sheeting, some with metal roofs and others with tile roofs. Tile roofs are the most dangerous to occupants when earthquakes strike. The collapsing roofs during these events cause severe injuries or even death. It is not unusual to find flimsy squatter housing erected in median strips of major highways. Often agriculture is taking place within the same spaces. There is no indoor plumbing or running water. Rural families walk miles carrying pails and plastic jugs in order to dip water from a stream or spring. That stream may also be the place where women do laundry, animals defecate, and families bathe. It is the source of much disease and the cause of much infant mortality.

It is in these rural and poverty areas that your VIM team has become increasingly active. The first three missions to the region, Costa Rica in 1993 and Mexico in 1995 and 1997, were devoted to church construction. The team quickly learned that it was not new and bigger and more elaborate churches that the people required. It was, and remains, decent housing, health services, access to clean water, and educational opportunities that were desperately needed. As a result of that enlightenment the team has concentrated on these necessities. New earthquake resistant housing has been constructed in El Salvador, Honduras, and Nicaragua. The team built a water project in Nicaragua that was in two parts. One was the capturing of a spring on the side of a mountain and piping the water down the mountain and along the road through the village. The second part was construction of a new well on the opposite side of the almost dry river. Reforestation has been another focus of the team. In Honduras the team assisted a local volunteer agency in the collection of basic health statistics and the distribution of vitamin A and deworming medication to school children. The Guatemala trip in 2004 had the team participating in the construction of a public school addition. During the summers of 1998, 2005, 2010, 2011, and 2012, the VIM team provided medical services to several rural villages, seeing an estimated five hundred patients on each VIM trip. The team has also helped with the construction of a new rural school and continues to construct concrete floors in homes with previously dirt floors.

Even though electricity is relative inexpensive in nearly the entire Central America region, it is not always available. In remote areas extending the lines to some of the many villages is simply too costly. Twice the VIM team worked in such remote areas. In Nicaragua, the village of *Los Cocos* where the water project was built had no electricity. However, when work was finished for the day the team was transported back to the town of *Ciudad Dario* where electricity was available⁵. While in Honduras during

⁵ An interesting item about this trip was an indication from the host agency that our housing in Ciudad Dario had running water. That turned out to be only partially true. "Running water" was supplied by

2003, the team worked in *Corallitos* and ate and slept in *El Nuevo Porvenir*. These two villages were about a mile and a half apart and neither had electricity. In *El Nuevo Porvenir* there was a portable generator so we could take our dinner with light. Otherwise, it was lights out at 6:30 pm when the sun went down!

Frequently, members of the VIM team are questioned about the safety of Americans in these countries. It can be safely stated that the Hiss VIM team has never felt threatened in any way during its travels to Central America, nor has it ever experienced an act of violence or loss of property while at location. In every instance of travel the team has been made welcome and has been treated with respect. The team has participated in village cultural activities and has worshipped with the community. Even though Spanish is the language, the VIM team has always been able to communicate. It seems that there is always someone among the team that can speak rudimentary Spanish or there has been an interpreter along.

There are VIM teams around the Baltimore/Washington Conference that concentrate on other areas of the world and the U.S. as well. Teams regularly go to Africa (Zimbabwe in particular), to Bosnia, to Russia, and to Haiti. In the U.S. teams regularly go to South Carolina, to West Virginia, to help repair the ravages of flood in the U.S. Gulf States, and to Indian Reservations in the Dakota's or in the Southwest. In recent years there have been VIM teams to Baltimore and to La Plata. A question is often asked of the Hiss VIM volunteers, "Why can't you work at home?" The answer is simple. There are needs everywhere. The Hiss team has found a need in Central America and is doing what it can, with your support, to relieve human suffering in that region. In addition, Hiss participates in the Baltimore County Christian Workcamp that is conducted annually during the third week of July. Some of the volunteers participate in both of these mission opportunities. In addition, recent years (2010, 2011, 2012, and 2013) Hiss has sent a team of volunteers to Murfreesboro, Tennessee to work on housing with Habitats for Humanity. Since November 2004, Hiss Church has been participating monthly meals for the Eastside Shelter (formerly Sarah's Hope), a homeless shelter in Eastern Baltimore County.

To quote from the Resolution submitted by a Hiss member and passed by the 2002 Annual Conference, the one setting aside the third Sunday in September as Volunteer In Mission Awareness Day, "... no one can do everything but, that everyone can do something." Hiss participation in that event used to be Sunday evening sessions with food, music, reports on activities that included a slide show, and even drama presentations. Sadly this practice has been abandoned for the past several years. To date, the Hiss VIM team has had nearly one-hundred different volunteers representing twenty-one churches of various denominations. The team once included a Japanese national here in the U.S. as a temporary worker. Volunteers have ranged in age from eleven to eighty years of age.

climbing to the top of a large water storage tank dipping water by the bucket-full, and pouring the water over the missionaries for showers and hair washing.

There are three principle lessons learned from the twenty-year experience: first, and this is directed mainly to the volunteers themselves, “Blessed are the flexible, for they shall not be bent out of shape.” The second relates to the relationship between the missionaries and those being served, “The project is the people.” The second lesson is the hardest for some volunteers to accept. Lastly there is this, VIM changes lives. Both the served and the servers each gain a different perspective of the other – for the better. Your team solicits your continued support in its efforts to improve the lives of the less fortunate in this hemisphere.