

Glimpses of the Kingdom; Reflections on the GIVINGTHANKS trip

By Michelle O'Neal

"It will be life-changing," she said. Really? Could that be true? I'd vacationed in the Dominican Republic and participated on mission trips as a teenager. But yes. The person who boarded a plane in the early hours of Nov. 18 was not the same person got off a plane on Nov. 24. I am changed emotionally, psychologically and spiritually. I would say the same for my son and daughter. Just as Rev. Sally Wright predicted. It wasn't just seeing exploitation and poverty up close. Or learning about the broken systems and politics at play. Though all that will easily take months to process. It was more. It was in the connections made and relationships built.

The GIVINGTHANKS trip is an all-ages, all-skills mission trip that began in 2019 through Village Church's Dominican Republic Medical Partnership (DRMP).

This year's team of 29 spent four full days supporting the DRMP's Dominican health care partner, Fundación Enciende Una Luz (Light a Candle Foundation) in four different bateyes (impoverished communities of Haitian sugarcane cutters and their families). We helped with hypertension screening, administered fluoride and anti-parasite treatments, educated children about dental health and nutrition, painted church buildings, among other tasks. Some of the group attend Catholic churches, some were Village families, some travelled to participate in medical mission. On the first morning, we got on the bus as strangers. But we returned that afternoon as friends—relationships cemented in the shared joy and heartache of our experience.

Within minutes of exiting the bus at each day, the children were tossing balls, giving piggy-back rides, playing chase. No pretense. Just kids being kids. Pick-up games of basketball broke out. Girls painted each others' nails. Babies got rocked and fell asleep in arms. Ailments and symptoms were described to doctors who triaged as best they could. Teenagers in the batey generously offered to help us translate, recognizing how much Spanish and Creole we lacked.

Choppy conversations broke out between adults—assisted by Google Translate, emoji's, and good old charades. Extra portions of rice and beans were shared. Baseball caps and sunglasses were given away. Smiles and laughter were abundant.

This year the Light a Candle team wanted to try something new with our group: a mobile hair salon. So we took a generator, trimmers, portable washing bowls, shampoo, combs, aprons—all the gear we would need. We set up under a tent each day near the communal



water source in each batey. We filled buckets and pitchers with this precious resource to wash hair. It was a holy, intimate act, something akin to baptism or the washing of a guest's feet, as was done in Jesus' time. In our faith tradition, the waters of baptism remind us of our truest identity, a child of God, one that can never be stripped from us. I hoped, as I poured water over each person's head, that they were reminded of this identity and God's steadfast love. I found myself saying silent prayers for each person I



touched: "May you be safe. May you be healthy." More than once, I'd exchange glances with the people in the chair and tears would be glistening in both pairs of eyes.

On the last day, I heard some French words (which were actually Creole) being exchanged between the women. Tentatively, I tried to make conversation. Even though we need not speak the same language to speak kindness, there was celebration when we realized we could communicate, if only a little. We made halting conversation for the next 20 minutes about our families and life. As I massaged conditioner into a woman's hair, she locked eyes with me and said, "Je suis très contente." (I am very happy.)

Words from a November sermon given by Rev. Tom Are came to mind. He said, "We have never reached that promised day. But if you have eyes to see, once in a blue moon you might find yourself standing on Nebo getting a glimpse, and God whispers in your ear, 'See, it's all true. Everything I promised you is true.'" Here, under the Caribbean sun and surrounded by acres upon acres of sugarcane, I found myself standing in

Batey Magdalena, catching glimpses of the kingdom, God's promised day.

Barbara Jaekel, Village Church member, had a similar experience and shares these thoughts, "Being the oldest participant on the GIVINGTHANKS trip to the Dominican Republic, and bringing two 13-year-old granddaughters with me, was truly an act of faith. But faith always wins. From the minute we arrived, Ella and Matilda approached this country and its people with open hearts and minds, making friends easily and pitching in to do whatever was needed in the bateyes: distributing medicines to children, taking weights and measurements, washing hair and polishing nails in our mobile "beauty shop," playing soccer with the kids and loving on the babies! It gives me great hope to know that these young people will lead us into a better world—where boundaries, racial divisions, inequities and abuse will vanish, and all people will be treated as God's children."

On the fourth and last day, a large tour bus rolled up and parked outside Batey Las Cejas. At this point, our team was fully integrated into the community—seeing patients, playing with children, planting flowers in the church yard. Dozens of tourists filed out and strolled past on the road, maintaining a safe distance. It was a strange and poignant moment for everyone. I recalled the parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:25-37), as these travelers "came to the place and saw, and passed by on the other side." Tommy Millard, a high-school freshman, later shared how he felt angry and appalled by the tourists but at the same time, a profound sense of solidarity with our brothers and sisters in the batey.

Twenty-nine people learned this wasn't simply a trip to a tropical place where you could do some work, check a box and feel good about it. This journey was about being willing to see the world from a new perspective, build relationships and be transformed. To lean into humility. We saw what Jesus meant by 'trusting the seed.' Sowing the power of love everywhere you can. We witnessed what one shampoo, one coat of paint, one conversation, can do. It gets us a little closer. It provided a glimpse of the kingdom, or the 'kin-dom' as Rodger Nishioka likes to say, of heaven. A day when all of God's children will be treated as God's children. Standing among the vast fields of sugarcane, I'd wager that more than one of us heard a whisper, "There it is... See? Everything I promised you is true."