

Christ Episcopal Church, Valdosta, Georgia

2017 Mission Trip to El Pedregal, Dominican Republic

June 12-19, 2017



Team members – Leaders Julia and Julius Ariail, Valdosta; Deacon Leeann Culbreath, Tifton; Bonnie Hanson, Valdosta; Caroline Hiers, Thomasville; Meg Hiers, Acworth; Phyllis Hiers, Valdosta; Father Dave Johnson, Valdosta; Paul Johnson, Valdosta; Grady Lacy, Woodstock; Bill Querin, Valdosta; Fred Richter, Statesboro; Paul Stevenson, Valdosta; and Erin Twomey, Adel.

Projects – Build a house for Leidy Rosario and her family, teach Vacation Bible School to 125 children who attend the school we helped build in previous years, put up new basketball goals and a volleyball net, provide new basketballs, volleyballs and soccer balls, conduct a rabies clinic for dogs and cats, and work with the teachers and camp staff to entertain the 125 children with a splash party with pools, slip-n-slides, games, pizza, cake and ice cream.

Organizing a successful mission trip in another country requires a lot of planning. As this was the sixteenth year Christ Church Valdosta launched a mission trip to El Pedregal in the Dominican Republic, one would think that this was all routine. Not so. Every mission trip is different because the people who go on the trip have different talents and needs. Our home team supports different projects with wonderful enthusiasm. This year's mission trip required more than usual forethought and organization because of the complex projects we undertook.

Thirteen team members signed up initially and a fourteenth joined the group in March. A group of Christ Church "home team" members helped organize a very successful and entertaining DR Mission Dinner and Auction with a Mardi Gras theme at the Cotton Corner in downtown Valdosta on February 23, 2017. We raised \$13,667!

After team leaders Julia and Julius Ariail visited the Dominican Republic in February, the team set the major project as building a house for our long-time friend and translator, Leidy Rosario. The initial plan was to build a two-story house on narrow property owned by her mother, located next to her grandmother's house. This plan proved unworkable. Leidy found a second piece of property where we could build a single-story, 750-





square-foot, three-bedroom house. Julia and Julius built a cardboard “tiny house” to display in the parish hall selling colorful construction paper bricks for \$1 each. The congregation liked the idea and supported the project putting donations in the money jar every week.

In past years Christ Church mission teams had partnered with the Nebraska Youth team to support house projects in El Pedregal, but this is the first year the team had ever undertaken to build a house alone. Working with the Episcopal priest in charge of the Campamento Monte de la Transfiguración, Padre Daniel Samuel, we sent money for the project to begin

in February in hopes that we could finish the project during the week of our mission trip, June 12-19, 2017. The team hired a local construction foreman with whom we had worked in previous years, Euclides Grullon.

Working to improve our Spanish, several members of our team made arrangements with Señor Filiberto Hernandez from Tifton to meet on Wednesday afternoons at 4 p.m. in March, April, and May. A native of Mexico, Señor Hernandez brought lessons relevant to missionaries in the Caribbean. Despite the varying levels of prior knowledge of the language, we learned a lot in the short time we studied. Senor Hernandez gave us many photocopied sheets of vocabulary words and grammar. One very useful thing he gave us was some recordings of Spanish religious songs for children. We used the songs in the VBS assemblies every day at the camp.



In previous years the team has flown on JetBlue airlines from Orlando, Florida to Santo Domingo. However, the Orlando flight times have become difficult for convenient arrival and departure times. For



the first time in the sixteen-year history of the team, eleven members of the group flew from Valdosta to Atlanta, met the other three members of the team in the Atlanta airport and continued to Santo Domingo on Delta Airlines. The 4:00 a.m. assembling of the team at the Valdosta airport was a challenge. Julia and Julius Ariail brought coffee, juice, muffins, and homemade bread to smooth the transition to wakefulness. Team member Bonnie Hanson provided a remarkable gift to the team by using credit card privileges and SkyMiles to have all our baggage checked for free instead of the \$715 baggage fees we would have been required to pay.

We had a 3-hour layover in Atlanta where we had a second breakfast, met our other 3 team members, and talked to another mission team from Alabama. After a smooth flight, the team arrived at the Santo Domingo airport at 1:20 p.m. and worked our way through immigration and customs. The American missionary at the Diocese of the Dominican Republic in charge of mission teams, Karen Carroll, met the team at the airport and bought empanadas and bottled water for the group to eat on the Servitur

chartered bus for the four-hour trip. After a brief stop at the Jacaranda rest stop, the team arrived about 6:00 p.m. to a warm welcome at the Campamento by Padre Daniel Samuel and his wife, Deacon Aurianne Rosier.

After moving into our dorm rooms on the second floor of the Stevens dorm, we gathered for supper and in the process enjoyed a grand reunion with some of the camp staff, including Tomasina and Saidy, the cooks. After supper, the team members who would teach Vacation Bible School the next morning met with Leidy Rosario and her first cousin, Anny Penalo,



who will serve with Grady as our translators. Phyllis Hiers coordinated the VBS team of Julia Ariail, Deacon Leeann Culbreath, Bonnie Hanson, Caroline Hiers, Grady Lacy, and Erin Twomey. Meg Hiers, Father Dave Johnson, Paul Johnson, Bill Querin, Fred Richter and Paul Stevenson made up the construction team. Bonnie Hanson and Deacon Leeann Culbreath joined in the construction team in the afternoons. Julius Ariail photographed our efforts the entire week and maintained communications with our home team by posting daily summaries of the work and events. On Monday night, we all enjoyed sitting on the porch, watching the lights from the houses and hotels on the mountain beyond the palm trees come on, and just being in El Pedregal again.



On Tuesday we began our routine of morning and evening prayer led by two different team members every day. After morning prayers and breakfast at the dining hall, the construction team headed off to begin work on the house with Euclides. The VBS team went to the school where we discovered that the school was still in session. As this was the last week of school, the teachers would help with the VBS. The children enjoyed the songs at the 9:00



a.m. assembly and the arts and crafts and stories in their classrooms. We distributed a VBS booklet prepared and printed by the DR Diocese with lessons and activities for each day. The construction team worked from 9 - 11:30 a.m. and 2 - 5:00 p.m. Today they removed the concrete rubble from the floor and then "leveling" what was left in preparation for mixing and pouring concrete on top to form a thick slab throughout the house. Some leveling involved adding more sand and dirt. In the midst of the leveling, an electrician was laying power cable in trenches in the floor. Once his pipes and cables were laid, the trench was covered to match the overall level of the floor. The team also sifted sand through a



screen to use in the concrete mixing operation on Wednesday. Julius photographed the team members all day at various sites and sent a Facebook report today and every day of the trip.

In the afternoon, the VBS team restructured the plans for Wednesday to include the teachers as the readers of the Bible stories and preparing for the arts and crafts the next day. Grady and Leeann wrote the instructions in Spanish for the teachers. There was a brief intense rain shower from 5:15 to 5:30 that cooled the area. The air temperature has been in the mid-80's, but with the sun almost overhead at midday, it felt

much hotter. After supper we held our evening prayer and then shared details about the day's activities describing the moments that had touched us the most. Fred Richter led a yoga session to help us stretch out all the tired muscles.

Wednesday morning began with morning prayers in the dining hall followed by breakfast. VBS started at 9:30 with an assembly in the church for religious children's songs accompanied by recordings on Julia's cell phone broadcast through a speaker system. The children had musical instruments like bells, sticks, small drums and triangles they used to play along with the songs. Then each age group separated to return to their classrooms where the teachers read the Bible lessons and helped with the discussions. Next our team did craft projects including string bracelets, worms made from pipe cleaners, butterflies made from coffee filters. At the closing assembly there was a demonstration of good dental hygiene and a hilarious skit by two of our teenagers, Caroline and Erin. After the songs, the children left with a bag of dental supplies gathered by Bonnie Hanson and members of Christ Church.



At 2:00 p.m. several of the 7th and 8th grade students came to the dorm, where Caroline and Erin taught them how to make a variety of friendship bracelets with embroidery floss we brought as a gift to the girls.

The house construction was very hard work today. They mixed many buckets of concrete in the street beside the house and brought the buckets into the house to pour the floor beginning in the back rooms and moving forward. We had three Dominicans working with us, including construction supervisor Euclides, whom we deeply respect for his skills and willingness to work with us; and Leidy's fiancé, Jesús; and his friend, Robinson. At the end of the day, three bedrooms, two bathrooms, and





the central hallway had been completed. About $\frac{1}{4}$ of the kitchen/living room was done. Completion of that room plus the front porch will be our construction task for Thursday morning. The team was more than ready for supper, evening prayers, yoga and bed.

Thursday was a national holiday in the Dominican Republic, the Feast of Corpus Christi. After morning prayers and breakfast, Fr. Dave and Paul Stevenson installed two new basketball rims and chain nets, replacing two older rims with broken net hooks. This involved drilling new bolt holes through the metal backboard since our goals had holes in not quite the right places. We had a drill and bits in several sizes, as well as replacement bolts and nuts, and a spiffy level to make sure the key parts were horizontal.



From 9:30 to 11:00 a.m. Meg Hiers and Phyllis Hiers, assisted by several other team members, Leidy and Anny, held a successful rabies clinic for 53 dogs and cats in the school yard, plus 3 more in the main street of the village for late arrivals. Two of the dogs arrived on a motor bike sandwiched in between the owner and a friend. The cats came in towels and pillow cases. The owners were very pleased with this free service. No one was bitten or hurt and only one dog escaped.

The construction team completed the concrete floor of the house for Leidy and her family. That was a backbreaking job since the concrete was mixed on a nearby street about four feet above the ground level of the new house. Buckets of concrete had to be handed down that gap and walked into the house, over and over again.



After lunch, Leidy called a small bus so we could take an excursion into town for shopping and a leisurely snack at a popular restaurant. When we returned to camp, some of the team walked about two miles to the local swimming hole at the river running below the bluff where the camp is located. Hundreds of people were celebrating the holiday at the river. There was an amateur boxing match, children and adults jumping off the cliff into the river, people having picnics, music from boom boxes and horses with riders passing by. At dinner that evening we made presentations of gifts to the kitchen staff as well as to Padre Daniel and Deacon Aurianne. We presented a certificate for 50 scholarships at the K-8

Episcopal school for the next academic year. We anticipated that we will have more scholarship donations once we return home. In the past two years, we have given 70 scholarships worth US \$350 per child.

What a full day! After evening prayer and discussion of the Friday schedule, Fred led us in yoga.

Friday began as usual with morning prayer and breakfast. We had an early start to VBS at 8:30 as the children are going to enjoy the splash party we host from 10 to 12 noon. The splash party started with the children in their swim suits splashing in the wading pools and skidding on soapy tarp "slip-n-slides." There were also pickup games of basketball and volleyball going on at the same time. The children have a remarkable ability to entertain themselves without elaborate toys or play equipment and played and played for an hour and a half. There was music blasting loudly from a sound system the entire time. Then food was served - first pizza brought from Jarabacoa, and soft drinks; then cake and ice cream. The team members helped serve the food and refill drinks.



After lunch and rest time, the team members went on a walking tour of the village, seeing the various types of houses with special note of the houses built by Christ Church Valdosta and our partner mission teams in the past. Several members then stopped at Leidy's house and worked for an hour digging a trench for a sewage pipe and removing trash behind the house.

We had a special dinner in the evening with the vestry of the Monte de la Transfiguración Episcopal church. This farewell dinner is usually held on the last night of our visit, but a group of young adult Episcopalians were expected at the camp for a religious retreat on Saturday night. At the supper each



team member received a personalized coffee mug with his or her name and hometown written on top of a picture from the camp and a bar of Dominican Wave soap, gifts from Padre Samuel and Deacon Aurianne. The soap was made at an Episcopal church in Puerto Plata by a fellow DR Missioner at her one-year-old soap-making operation. Padre Daniel sang a Haitian song during dessert.

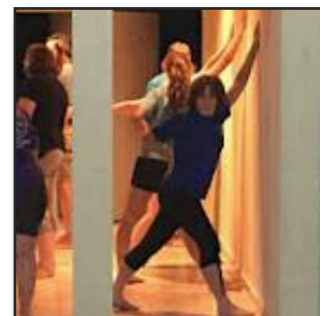
After supper we came back to our dormitory with Leidy and her family. We gave them a house warming shower with gifts we had brought from home. The most significant gift was

an antique drop-leaf table bought and refinished by S.J. and Pat Denmark in Valdosta. We had disassembled it, packed it in a duffle bag, carried it through customs, brought it on the bus and reassembled it in the dorm. We also gave her a set of dishes, flatware, pots and pans and towels that were donated by friends who had known and appreciated Leidy over the years the team has been visiting El Pedregal. Leidy thanked us graciously for these gifts and for all the work we had done on their new house.

On Saturday morning we organized an expedition to a local waterfall, Salto Baiguate, about two miles away. Most of the team walked there on a path that features crossing a river on a



suspension footbridge and walking through agricultural lands. The rest of us called a truck/taxi and transported all the housewarming gifts to Leidy's rental house. Then we went in the taxi to the waterfall. There we met the other team members and enjoyed the falls and the scenery for about 90 minutes. At 11:30 a.m. we called three truck/taxis and rode into Jarabacoa to visit the annual flower festival held in a park. There were tropical flowers everywhere - hanging in large baskets from trees, in an archway leading into the park, and on the stage set up for entertainment and lectures on plants. There were booths set up around the perimeter selling flowers, plants, food, as well as arts and crafts. At 12:30 the taxis returned to take us back to the Campamento for a full afternoon of resting and decompressing.





At the supper we learned that the Dominican youth group expected that evening had cancelled their reservation. After evening prayer, we discussed our travel plans for Sunday and packed for our return. Fred led our last yoga session.

Sunday was our last full day in the Dominican Republic. We attended the 9 a.m. church

service that was only about half-full when the service began, but was full by the end with lots of adults and children. Padre Samuel conducted parts of the service in English and Deacon Leeann read the Gospel in English after Deacon Aurianne read it in Spanish.

Following communion, Padre Daniel called Fr. Dave to the front and thanked everyone on the mission team for all they had done for the community during the week.

After a round of hugs and goodbyes, we returned to the dormitory to change into traveling clothes, load the Servitur bus trailer with our luggage and set off for Santo Domingo on our last ride through the village. Leaving El Pedregal is always difficult – happy and sad at the same time.

After an hour on the road, we stopped at the Jacaranda rest stop for snacks and cold drinks before moving on to Santo Domingo. When we arrived at the Hodelpa hotel at 1:30 p.m., our rooms were not ready. We stored our luggage, and all but two went out exploring the city. The remaining missionaries watched over the luggage and monitored the gradual assignment of rooms.

Julia Ariail and Erin Twomey attended the 5 p.m. Roman Catholic mass at the oldest cathedral in the Americas that dates from the early 1500's. At 7:00 p.m. we gathered for a gala dinner at Buche, a restaurant in the colonial

zone around the corner from our hotel. It is located in what was a three-story building, but all traces of that building have been removed leaving the walls of adjacent structures plus a Plexiglas dome between the restaurant and the open sky. Hundreds of plants and ferns hang from the brick walls, and a three-story waterfall is at one end of the restaurant. Karen Carroll, head of the mission team support office in the Diocese of the Dominican Republic, joined us and heard all about our week at the Campamento. After supper, some of us went back to the hotel, while others walked around the Colonial Zone and enjoyed an outdoor concert.





On Monday morning the team had free time to shop for souvenirs and go on a tour of the cathedral where we rented headphones that described in English different aspects of the church. We checked out of our hotel and boarded the bus to the airport at 11:15 a.m. At the airport we used a variety of discounts available to several missionaries through frequent flyer or credit card accounts to waive the new Delta policy about charging for the first checked bag. As a result, we did not pay for any of our first bags and only one of our second bags. The savings adds up to one full scholarship for an El Pedregal student, so it is worth the back and forth negotiating.

The check-in was a total success, but we ran into a problem at the security checkpoint. There were long lines at both entrances to the security screening, something we had not experienced on earlier trips. We all got through eventually, but as a result we did not arrive at the departure gate until 1:00 p.m. and the plane started boarding at 1:30. There was no time for a leisurely lunch and several of us had to juggle take-out lunch and drinks as we boarded the aircraft.

The flight to Atlanta was uneventful, but we ran into yet another unanticipated problem at US immigration control. Our group was separated into several smaller groups with different queues moving at different speeds. As a result, some of us whizzed past the checkpoint and others were delayed over 30 minutes. Two of the missionaries driving home from Atlanta got through very quickly and headed for the exit, while two others were in the slow line. It all worked out in the end since it was easy for our group to reassemble since we were wearing identical t-shirts and our baggage was easy to spot with neon flagging tape.

The ten missionaries flying to Valdosta had a leisurely supper on the concourse with our flight's departure gate. The flight was delayed about 30 minutes because of the late arrival of our airplane. Eventually we boarded and made the trip to our home base in Valdosta where eager friends and family members were waiting to greet the weary travelers and whisk them away for a good night's sleep. All our checked baggage arrived with us.

Every trip is unique because of the talents and personalities of the missionaries. This trip was a very pleasant blend of sharing the love of God with our friends, working hard, enjoying the exuberance and happiness of the children of El Pedregal; renewing old friendships and making new ones; having three teenagers as missionaries, and seeing new aspects of the communities of El Pedregal and Jarabacoa.

We received additional scholarship money at the beginning of July and sent \$24,500 for 70 scholarships to El Pedregal for the 2017-2018 school year by way of the Dominican Development Group. On July 26 Leidy, Emanuel, and Jesús moved into their new home.

Until next year...



An album of photographs from this trip is available here: <https://goo.gl/photos/LdTuy7jqLGv4QjC19>
This report is posted online here: <http://christchurchvaldosta.org/docs/2017-Mission-Team-Report-Christ-Church-Valdosta.pdf>