

Diary Notes: This is a compilation of the daily reports that I wrote and posted on my Facebook page during the recent mission trip to the Dominican Republic sponsored by Christ Episcopal Church, Valdosta GA, from June 23-30, 2018. I have done some minor editing to correct a few details. If anyone spots an area that needs clarification or correction, please let me know.

Christ Church Valdosta GA
Dominican Republic Mission Team 2018
Diary by Julius Ariail -- draft 07/11

Saturday June 23

We made it. A very long day, but all stages were successful and all 14 of us are settling down in the Episcopal camp and conference center in our beloved El Pedregal, our mission field since 2001.

The first stage was getting all our luggage and ourselves from our Atlanta hotel to the Atlanta airport. That took two shuttle rides and a lot of coordination on both ends so everyone and all baggage wound up at the same gathering spot near the Delta check-in desks.

We lucked into a baggage handler who sensed that we were not sure how our large group of 13 should handle checking in. We were all on individual flight tickets but we wanted to check in together to see if we could get several bags free using the Amex Delta Platinum Skymiles credit cards three of us had. So our baggage handler took us to the "Special Needs" desk where we once again observed the power of wearing brightly colored team T-shirts. The desk clerks treated us as if we had a group ticket even though we did not, and we did get most of our 26 checked bags free.

Our flight to Santo Domingo boarded on time, but pulled back from the gate a bit late and then had another long delay on the taxiway while the captain worked with Delta navigation central to plot a different flight path to the DR to avoid storms on the usual path. As a result we took off an hour late, which got us into Santo Domingo an hour late after a bit of turbulence en route.

Then we all assembled to go through DR immigration control together (green shirts For The Win) and then DR customs (green shirts again got us through). There were three other mission teams transiting with us, all with their own colored shirt powers in evidence.

Oh, did I mention that all of our checked luggage arrived? It did.

In the Arrivals area we were met by Karen Carroll, the full time missionary who works on the staff of the Diocese of the Dominican Republic to coordinate the logistics of the mission teams coming in each year - in 2018 about 35 teams. And we greeted our 14th Missioner, [Mary Jeannette Pringle](#), who will be one of our sewing instructors. She is the wife of the Rt. Rev. [Moises Quezada Mota](#), Bishop of the Diocese of the Dominican Republic, and a professional seamstress and clothing designer.

Karen took our group arrival photograph and delivered sacks of empañadas and water to eat on the bus to El Pedregal. We had worked with Karen in advance to request this "on-the-go" food

and water so that we would not be delayed transiting the airport. Then our bus came up to the sidewalk outside the airport in a driving rain - which was no problem for our Missioners who loaded all the suitcases and supply duffle bags and then themselves on the bus and away we went.

The drive to El Pedregal took four hours, but we had a break about $\frac{2}{3}$ of the way at the Jacaranda rest stop just north of the city of Bonao, a favorite stop of our mission team for years.

We arrived at the camp at 7:15 pm, unloaded our bags into our rooms, had supper in the camp dining hall, and then settled down for the night.

And, as I mentioned above, we enjoyed the fact that we indeed did make it.

Sunday, June 24

A church day, a visiting day, a fun day, and a getting-ready day.

Breakfast at 8, then church at 9. We worshiped in the church that our mission team helped build in 2005 and 2006. The first service held in the completed building was in June 2006 while our mission team was there, and a Missioner from our team, Mimi Allen, was the first crucifer.

The church gradually filled up as the service went on. One highlight was the presence of lots and lots of children, and another was a new member (or perhaps an out of town visitor, we're not sure which). Padre Canela welcomed our team warmly and outlined our projects for the week so that the community would know what we were doing.

After church we walked to the house that our 2017 team built for Leidy, Jesús, and their son Emanuel. Several of the 2017 Missioners are on this 2018 team, and today was the first chance they had to see the finished building in person. We gave baby shower presents to Leidy, who is expecting her second child on June 28 - yes, Thursday this week.

Then we walked to a nearby house to greet a Campamento staff member, Zaida, who had given birth to a boy two weeks ago. We also brought baby presents to her and admired the new arrival.

Lunch was at noon. At 1:30 two minivans arrived to take us and Padre Canela's family to the annual Flower Festival in Jarabacoa, the large city just a few minutes away. This is a well-known regional festival highlighting Jarabacoa as the "region of the eternal spring" because of its mild climate and many floral greenhouses and nurseries. The festival was in a large park-like field with many vendor stalls and displays. Children in zip lines sailed back and forth overhead, and bands in several locations played music. There were even beauty queens strolling through the park greeting the guests.

At the festival we met Lisa and Orlando Fernandez and their daughter who run an animal rescue operation in Jarabacoa, taking in street dogs, nursing them to health, and then finding foster families for them - often in Canada. We have made plans for our two vets to hold a rabies clinic in Jarabacoa on Wednesday afternoon that they will sponsor and have already starting advertising. The clinic will be in the grounds of the Flower Festival, which had its final day today.

At 3:45 we all rode taxis back to the camp and started working on unpacking and setting up project materials for Monday - Vacation Bible School, sewing, playground repair and painting, mural painting, and bracelet making.

Supper was at 6, evening prayer at 6:45, then a general planning session for Monday followed. Next came detailed group meetings of those working with VBS and the two painting projects - which involved inventorying the paint by color and type (primer, color cover coat). We were pleased that Padre Canela had already purchased and had delivered all of the paint and plywood that we had specified for the playground and mural projects. We had sent funds for this purchase a month or so in advance.

The last activity of the day started at 8 pm with our fellow veteran Missioner Fred leading us in yoga exercises. Fred was on the first mission team from the Diocese of Georgia to work at this location - way back in 2001.

I will try to post some photos later tonight or perhaps early in the morning. The internet access I have is quite weak, but I'll see how it goes.

Monday, June 25

Julia and I have been coming on mission trips since June 2010. This is our ninth with the Christ Church team. Today may well have been the best first project day ever.

First, the overall schedule:

7:30 am Morning Prayer

8:00 am Breakfast

As soon as possible after breakfast, start of mural painting and playground repair/repainting projects

9:30 am start of Vacation Bible School

11:30 am end of Vacation Bible School, pause in projects

12 noon lunch

By 2 pm resume painting projects

2:00 pm start of sewing class

2:00 pm start of bracelet making class

4:00 pm end of sewing and bracelet classes

4:45 pm halt on mural and playground projects to put up tools and paint

5:00 pm rest

6:00 pm supper

6:45 p.m. Evening Prayer

7:00 pm VBS planning

7:45 pm yoga exercises

Afterwards, to bed.

I'll summarize the activities next.

Murals - painting designs on the walls in a kindergarten classroom on the theme of Noah's Ark with the big ship and little animals, fish and birds all along the walls. At the start of the day

some helper children were asked what special creatures they wanted, and they voted for "alligators." So two alligators are in place. Project status, about $\frac{3}{4}$ done.

Playground structure repair and repainting - Started with a careful inspection of the wood pieces and a determination that all was sound except for the plywood panels which had started to deteriorate. Those were removed. Then all of the remaining wood surfaces were scraped with wire brushes to prepare for painting. During that process, all screws were tightened since some had loosened and were hazards for little running feet. Next the wooded surfaces were primed for color painting later. Progress: about $\frac{1}{2}$ done overall, with priming step $\frac{7}{8}$ done.

VBS - started with an assembly in church with Padre Canela leading the children in prayer. Then the children were put into four groups by age and they walked to their classroom, accompanied by a Dominican teacher, a Missioner, and a translator. The teacher read the VBS lesson of the day, and then all adults led the children in crafts and games. At 11:15, another church assembly for five Bible songs, and then dismissal.

Sewing class - we had eight sewing machines all set up in a common room of our dormitory, and 8 village residents came to learn how to make curtains following a pattern made by Jesús, a professional tailor and husband of Leidy. I believe that by 4 pm most of the students had made progress, and they will take that project up again on Tuesday.

Bracelets: the special project of Caroline Hiers, one of the two teenagers in our team. Fourteen village teenagers came for the class which was held on the breezy porch of the second floor. The bracelets were "friendship" style made from embroidery floss woven together by changing finger patterns. At the end of the class, most students had mastered the basic process. More designs coming on Tuesday.

The weather was partly cloudy / sunny until just before 6 pm, when a sudden thunderstorm came over the mountain and deluged the camp. We had Evening Prayer and then ate supper during the heavy rain, but all of us were dry in the dining hall.

Then back to the dorm for planning meetings and yoga and bed.

Everyone on the team worked really well on their projects, often switching from one task to another when more help was needed in another area. In particular, the sewing instructors pitched in as mural and playground painters after the sewing class ended.

As a personal note, I had a profound experience soon after 9 am. One of the playground workers came to me and reported that all of the drill bits that he had put in his checked luggage were missing from his suitcase when he went looking for them this morning. They had been in an outside pocket of the suitcase which had come unzipped in transit and all contents were lost. Except for one or two stray bits, we had no others to use in our cordless drill to tighten screws and then reattach the plywood panels. The screws we brought required a special bit - forgot the type for now but not one commonly found. The Missioner asked me to check with Luca, the camp handyman, to see if he had a big set of bits that might have these special ones we needed. I found Luca raking the yard and asked him that question, and he said yes he did. Then he took me to the camp tool room and handed me a complete set of bits and sockets - no missing pieces and the special bits we needed. On the outside of the case was a note I had written in June 2016 asking the camp staff to give this set to Don Peeler and the Youth team

from the Diocese of Nebraska, who had followed us at the camp after we returned home. The set was originally our team's, used by our team for projects and then transferred to another team for their work, our partners in frequent projects at the camp and village including the initial construction of the playground structure in June 2014.

Mission teams helping other mission teams, even across the span of two years. If anyone wants to know why Julia and I love this mission work in the Episcopal Diocese of the Dominican Republic, read this anecdote again.

Will try to post photos of this tool set later today or early tomorrow.

Tuesday, June 26

Today was a six-ring circus, with one unexpected event and one distinguished visitor.

The six rings were our six projects, all in operation for the first time: Vacation Bible School, playground structure painting, mural painting, sewing class, bracelet class, and a veterinary rabies clinic.

1 of 6: Our VBS attendance was a little down today, but the teachers enjoyed working with fewer children so that they could give more individual attention. We started with 40 yesterday, deliberately down from the 120 we had last year. Many of the children have one or more parents who work in the school, which is in post-planning this week.

2 of 6: The playground structure repainting crew finished the primer coat this morning and had a good start on the color finishing coat by quitting time at 5. The heavy rain last night did not hurt the primer coat from Monday at all.

3 of 6: The mural crew finished the designs in the kindergarten room mainly because they ran out of empty wall space. The decorations in that room now include a large Noah's Ark, a dove, many sets of two-by-two animals, a smiling sun, and a very happy tree. They also completed a side project to repaint the school logo on a wall outside the school bordering the Main Street in the village, and almost finished a large panel board on the playground structure where children can place the faces behind one of three circular holes to pretend to be a monkey, a butterfly, or a snail.

4 of 6: In the sewing class, the students continued work on their curtain projects. Several became quite familiar with the sewing machine at their station and needed little coaching.

5 of 6: The bracelet class had to change location because of an unexpected event (see below), but worked through that challenge very well.

6 of 6: Our two veterinarians and two staff helpers vaccinated 43 dogs and cats against rabies this afternoon between 1:30 and 2:30 pm. No one, human or beast, was bitten, although some animals were less pleased with the process than others. But all of the owners were pleased, since this service was given at no cost and only steps from many of their houses.

The unexpected event was the school graduation ceremony, which we learned about on Sunday afternoon but only this morning learned that the event would be held in the common room of our dormitory floor. But between us and the school staff we cleared away our project supplies and the event started around 4:30 with a parade of the students led by a drum corps.

The graduation was more of an honors night than a total school graduation, with special focus on first graders who had passed a reading examination. As a surprise to Julia and me, we were called forward to receive a plaque giving thanks for the years of scholarship support contributed by the Home Team and the Go Team of Christ Church and other partner churches and friends in other locations. In the past 3 years, we have given 70 (at US\$350 each) scholarships for a school with 125 students enrolled. We gave Padre Canela a certificate good for 50 scholarships now, with probably more to come in early July after we get home and tally up trip expenses and recent donations. Anyone wishing to contribute to this scholarship fund (Thank you!) should arrange to get the contribution check to Christ Church by July 4. The address is DR Scholarship Fund, Christ Episcopal Church, 1521 North Patterson Street, Valdosta GA 31602.

Just after six we sat down to supper and were joined by our distinguished visitor, [Dayamo Ramirez](#), the head of the Environment and Natural Resources Division for the region of Jarabacoa. He is a native of El Pedregal and married to [Yissel Del Rosario](#), the daughter of the camp's longtime cook, Tomasina, who also joined us for supper with their young son. He will be our guest speaker at the Wednesday VBS session, with particular attention given to the older students who will participate in a question-and-answer session about environmental careers. As a thank-you for his presentation, we gave him two solar lanterns that had been donated to our 2018 team by a member of Trinity Statesboro.

The day came to an end with Evening Prayer, a schedule planning session for Wednesday, and then yoga exercises.

We're half-way through the eight days of the mission trip. All good.

Wednesday, June 27

A day of completions, of near-completions, a cancellation of part of a project, and a shopping expedition into Jarabacoa - and the start of packing up to go home.

The VBS classes wound up today after three days of lessons and crafts about the environment. To start the day, our special guest Dayamo Ramirez, Director of this region's Ministry of the Environment and Natural Resources, and his education specialist, Claudia Herrera, came to the VBS morning assembly to talk with the children about the importance of protecting the environment and our natural resources. Both were energizing speakers and the children eagerly got into their repeated phrase of "no water, no life."

Then the children went to their classes for Bible lessons and crafts. Two classes of older children went outside after the lessons to pick up trash and deposit it in the schoolyard trash cans.

The mural painters in the kindergarten room made a few finishing touches there, and then they joined in with the playground painting crew. By lunchtime, that structure was almost totally repainted. They thought that one small project to paint the name of the school high up on a wall facing the courtyard was a bit too unsafe to attempt using the tallest ladder that we had, so a decision was made not to undertake this one. To do this safely, one would need scaffolding, and we did not have enough time or resources to arrange for that.

After lunch, the veterinarians and their support staff headed into the nearby city of Jarabacoa to conduct a rabies vaccination clinic organized by a local animal rescue organization. They had rented a building in a very public location, but as it turned out only one dog and its owners showed up for treatment. However, that dog arrived as a passenger on a motorcycle, which is always interesting to watch. Our vets tried to corral another dog in a nearby shopping center that was about to be taken in by the animal rescue family, but that dog figured out something was up and successfully hid out under a car. So without more animals to treat, we closed down shop and went to the animal rescue family's house so the vets could check on two puppies and one bulldog that needed a visual exam. The puppies passed their "cuteness" test with blue ribbons, and the bulldog had some skin conditions diagnosed and remedies suggested.

After the house call, the rescue family and the Missioners went to a local fruit sherbet store for some incredibly concentrated frozen fruit essence, served popsicle style. And then we all came back to the Campamento.

At 1:30 both the final sewing class and bracelet class began. Both were successful, and especially in the sewing class several villagers finished their curtain project and went on to sew baby blankets. Both classes ended at 3:30 so the Missioners could go on a shopping expedition to grocery and souvenir stores in Jarabacoa, winding up at the same local fruit sherbet store.

The playground painters started back to work at 1 pm, and by 4 pm the project to repair and repaint the playground structure was essentially done. Only some panels remain to be put in place Thursday morning.

Our Dominican translator Leidy, her husband Jesús, and their son Emanuel had led the shopping expedition into Jarabacoa, and when it returned we said farewell to them for the day so that they could return home and prepare for their big day on Thursday, when Leidy's baby is scheduled to be born in Jarabacoa. We have plans for the whole team to go to the clinic in Jarabacoa in the late afternoon to visit the new arrival and her family. Tonight during evening prayer we prayed that all would go smoothly with the delivery.

After supper Missioners packed up the sewing machines and the remaining VBS supplies. The machines and the supplies will be donated to the conference center. In July, there will be a summer camp session for Dominican children, and those supplies will come in handy. We do not know the detailed plan to use the sewing machines in the future, but we are confident they will be placed into service to assist the local villagers with personal sewing projects and perhaps making items for sale.

And the day ended with yoga at 8.

I will post photos again when I get a sufficient internet connection. Please keep in mind that these images are unedited and are sometime out of order. I'll fix everything once the trip has ended.

Thursday, June 28

It's late, and I'm just too tired to post a full summary of the day. So here's the essentials:

Right after breakfast we assembled outside the dining hall for our traditional team group photo with our team t-shirts. Padre Canela and his wife, Ivelisse, also joined us wearing their team t-shirts.

We hosted a “splash party” on the front lawn of the conference center for about 125 children from the village and 25 adults, mostly teachers and other staff at the Episcopal school here.

After the party we took another team photo on the playground structure in the school courtyard and then another by the school logo on the outside wall by the main street of the village.

After lunch most of us walked about 1.5 miles to a nearby waterfall, and others rode there in a taxi. The waterfall features a wading pool underneath the falling water and magnificent views of the mountains and river canyon.

Then we called more taxis and we all went in three taxis to a hospital in Jarabacoa to visit Leidy and Jesús’ new daughter, born just four hours earlier. Her name is Brithany Sofia, and I have some photos of her up in the DR 2018 album on this Facebook page. The baby and her mother and father and big brother are all doing well.

Tonight we were the guests at a fiesta in the conference center’s dining hall honoring us and our work this week in our beloved El Pedregal. We gave the Dominicans who had helped us on our projects all week team t-shirts and crosses.

Won’t post more photos from today until I get home. The photos of Brithany Sofia will do for now.

Julius

Friday, June 29

From the village to the city, and encounters both expected and unexpected.

We had breakfast in El Pedregal this morning, said our farewells to the camp staff, and then loaded our baggage on our chartered bus for the ride back to Santo Domingo. Of course, there was a 30-minute stop at the Jacaranda rest stop for refreshments. Around noon we arrived at the DR diocesan office, where we dropped off Jeannette, and then went to our hotel in the historic district of Santo Domingo to check into our rooms which had been reserved in advance by the Mission Team Support Office of the DR diocesan office.

Missioners were free to rest or explore the historic and cultural sites this afternoon. Some of us encountered the Youth team from the Diocese of Georgia in front of the Roman Catholic Cathedral, including the sister of our Missioner Wil Brown.

At 6:15 we met in the hotel lobby and walked to a nearby restaurant where we met Bishop Moisés Quezada, our fellow Missioner Jeannette, Missionary Karen Carroll, and Mission Office support staffer Patricia Martin who had made many of the logistical arrangements for our trip,

including the chartered bus and hotel rooms. We all enjoyed supper in an historic building in a festive atmosphere to celebrate our last full day in the Dominican Republic on this mission trip.

Saturday, June 30

A quiet morning in Santo Domingo, and then a chartered bus ride to the airport and a flight to Atlanta.

The Missioners gathered in the hotel lobby at 10:15 a.m. to wait for our bus to arrive, but before that there was an hour or so after breakfast to check out the historic district and the vivid street scenes. While at breakfast, two Missioners happened to meet two members of another mission team in the hotel restaurant. They were from All Saints Episcopal Church in Hilton Head SC, and had been in Barahona conducting VBS sessions, one of their team's traditional activities. Like us, they were headed home today.

Promptly at 10:30, our bus arrived and we quickly loaded our luggage and boarded for the 30-minute ride to the airport. At the airport, we observed the Power of the Green Shirts one more time as a Delta staff person ushered us to a special check in desk for groups. One by one, we all checked in and got our boarding passes without difficulty.

Then we went through the Dominican airport security check, again with no problems. No one was pulled aside for any special inspections. Next, we went through the Dominican immigration check, which involved turning in an exit form and having our passports stamped.

By noon everyone was resting in the gate area or eating at a restaurant or exercising by walking in the concourse. Our flight started boarding around 1:30 pm, and that again went very smoothly.

The flight to Atlanta was uneventful, which is always a good thing. Upon arrival at the Atlanta airport, we separated into "vehicle pod" small groups, with people riding home in the same vehicle trying to stay together during the US immigration and customs checkpoint.

When we exited into the International terminal's arrival area, we boarded a shuttle to the domestic terminal, and from there most of us rode a shuttle back to our hotel where our vehicles were parked. This multi-shuttle stage of the journey went smoothly and quickly for some pods, and less so for others who faced long lines for one or both shuttles. One pod made a decision to call an Uber to go directly from the international terminal to the hotel to bypass the long lines for shuttles.

And then we drove into the evening toward home. My particular pod made it to Valdosta at 10:50 pm, and to Lake Park around 11:30.

Coming attractions: a narrative summary of the trip, and a comprehensive photography album. But both of those take time to create, so check back in a couple of weeks.

On behalf of the fourteen missioners on the Go Team, please allow me to thank everyone on the Home Team for their prayers for safe travel, for their financial and in-kind contributions for project and scholarship funding, and for being the people we were honored to represent in the Dominican Republic.