

Dear Friends:

Christmas greetings and blessings to all of you! It may be that this past year has been an especially difficult one for you, or perhaps it has been one filled with much joy. Whatever the case may be, the Christmas season is for you, for Christmas is not about giving and receiving gifts or even about surrounding ourselves with loved ones as we enjoy a sumptuous meal or singing carols by the fire sipping hot cocoa. It is about God making good on his promise to send us a Savior, the “good news of great joy” that is truly for all the people (Luke 2.10).

Precisely because this day is not about all of those things that our culture emphasizes, the lonely, the hurting, the hungry, the marginalized and dispossessed, can also celebrate Christmas, as the day marks the arrival of the Jesus, whom the Spirit of the Lord anointed to bring good news to the poor, to proclaim release to the captives, recovery of sight to the blind, and freedom for the oppressed (Luke 4.18). That is reason enough for everyone to celebrate, no matter the circumstances!

Because we have just concluded our annual Christmas outreach events here in the jungle, and in keeping with the spirit of the season, I briefly write to share some of the highlights with you. We always give thanks for those of you who help to keep this ministry moving forward through your faithful contributions. But at this particular time we also want to thank all of you who contributed either funds or gifts toward this special project, for it enabled us to carry the message of hope in Jesus, as well light up smiles on 400 children with gifts that your donations provided. We visited three new pueblos, and formed some new friendships. God has indeed blessed us, and we hope we have been a blessing to these people! So here are just a few highlights. The pictures tell the story best!



*This year, the Christmas Story was told by an elefante named Trompita ... here in Chimurria the children listen attentively to what the animals observed in Bethlehem.*



*Our first year visiting the pueblo of Jerusalén, where we collaborated with church planter/Pastor Franklin from Nicaragua.*

*We had planned on 300 children and had to serve 400. Relief and an enjoyable visit came via Jason Bell (l) and Will McCorkle (r), who brought gifts and helped kick off the Christmas season on the river with the fiestas in Chimurria (r) and La Ceiba (below). FYI, for my Canadian friends and family who receive this newsletter, Jason is from New Brunswick.*



For myself, two particular events were particularly special, each one completely different from the other. Perhaps they are significant to me because of what they represent in terms of what our ministry stands for. The first is the pastors' retreat that I attended with my young friend Armando, who used to live in Arbolitos, and who spent virtually all of his free time helping me in the library. He and his family moved away several months ago, but I tracked him down and invited him to help me as we visited the pastors from the *Iglesia de Dios de la Profecía*. Armando received a lot of hugs and words of encouragement from these pastors. As names were called, the people applauded. Then, as Armando presented the gifts, each parent gave him a big hug and kiss. Each gift was given one at a time, so from someone who has 5 children, Armando received 5 hugs! So, spending time with my young friend, and watching him experience this blessing brought me great joy. I also enjoyed the visit with the pastors themselves. The gifts of food, I told them, represent a small acknowledgement of the sacrifices they incur in service to the Lord and to the community, to let them know that their efforts are appreciated and that they are not alone. At the end of our time together, they invited themselves for a day retreat in Arbolitos, which we will be thrilled to accommodate!



We delivered food baskets to other pastors in the area, not just the ones with the Iglesia de la Profecía de Dios. During one of those visits, I got the distinct impression that there was very little food in the house at that particular moment. The pastor and his wife immediately invited us in to gather around the little basket of food, and to give thanks to God for his provision. And to think that I had almost decided not to visit them! Traveling distance, bad roads, lack of time ... it is so easy to find reasons to not do something, but thankfully I allowed that gentle little nudge saying, "do it!" to overcome my attempts to get out of it.

Finally, our visit to the pueblo of Progreso, a village we have visited for four years running, has to be declared an extra special one for me. Even though we have visited this village every year, this particular visit ministered to me, I think, more than the other way around. Indeed, the sense of joy that I felt during that little celebration has not worn off yet! Yes, we need to give God the glory and credit for it, but I also need to say that one of God's great and humble servants has much to do with it. And that person is Arlin Solano, a neighbor of ours in Arbolitos.

Arlin is from Punta Gorda, Nicaragua, and he manages a rather large and sprawling farm here. He and his wife Marta have four children, and all of them accompanied us on the river trip to Progreso, which made it a fun family outing for the Solanos. Neither he nor his wife Marta have any formal schooling, but both are a testimony as to how, when someone seeks the Lord with their whole heart, the Spirit will provide wisdom and discernment way beyond any seminary course ever can. Barely literate (I put his songs to paper in a readable way), Arlin is a gifted singer, songwriter, and musician. His extra-special touch in Progreso made it a Christmas fiesta to remember. Not timid to speak from his heart, he also shared words of encouragement to the children and their families, and led a time of singing with the children forming a chorus and playing cymbals, maracas, and little percussion instruments.



On the boat ride back home, I was wondering, how are we going to follow up on that next year? But when we dropped the Solano family off at the riverbank below their home, Arlin says farewell with, “well, I guess we're in for next year, too.”

We are working with Arlin and some leaders in the little Catholic church we have here in Arbolitos, to launch a music program for children. I am thrilled to be granted the privilege to collaborate on this, as I also am thankful for new relationships formed this year with Franklin, pastor and church planter with the Church of the Nazarene. With Franklin, I am planning some training events for the group of lay pastors he has working with him. Add to the recipe the Church of God of Prophecy, and we have a pretty ecumenical Christian soup brewing here! Fun, and yet challenging, it is part of fulfilling the “new commandment” of Jesus that we love on another just as he has loved us, so that everyone will know that we are his disciples, and that his name be glorified above all else. You never know, some of those the walls that we have erected amongst ourselves, based on doctrine, denomination, ethnicity, politics, economic class, nationality, even biblical interpretation--just might start to crumble and tumble, if we put love first!

*Love and blessings to you all ... Ruth*