



MIGRANT CHILDREN'S MINISTRY; NICARAGUA GRADUATIONS!

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Dear Supporters and Friends:

I hope that you are well. Some of you are likely to have been directly affected by the current pandemic, if not by the illness itself then perhaps by the economic fallout. Fortunately, my family is thus far staying healthy, and I hope that this is true for you as well. The "fallout" for me is that I am unexpectedly running a day care operation for our four grandchildren (my "real" work is done at night and on weekends). I am enjoying the precious time I have with them. Obviously, this means that Carlos and I are in the US. We left Costa Rica with only a few days to spare before the country closed down at the end of March. Unlike other travelers who found themselves unexpectedly stranded with no place to go, we have our home in Virginia, and Carlos has occupied himself with his vegetable garden (at least half taken up with watermelon and cantaloupe) as well as working with my sons in our masonry business.

While we do not expect to return to Costa Rica until the end of October, that does not mean that ministries and initiatives of SIGA are on hold. We continue our work with Franklin and Yolanda in Nicaragua (western side) and the Indigenous church pastored by Hilario on the Caribbean. Then there are the Rama university students for whom we supply scholarships (an update on the students is provided later in the newsletter). First, though, an update on our outreach to the Central American asylum seekers that are in migrant shelters in Mexico.

MINISTRY TO CHILDREN IN SHELTERS (TIJUANA, MEXICO)

OUR OCTOBER NEWSLETTER announced a pilot project to minister to children of asylum-seeking families during their months-long wait for hearings. Central America has been the focus of our ministry since 2005, so when Central America came to our southern border, it seemed natural to follow them there. Frequently, when I mention asylum seekers, someone wants to know why don't they come "legally." That is what they are trying to do! The legal process, albeit highly simplified is this: they make their way to a legal point of entry into the US and ask for asylum. Immigration laws require that their request be considered, and while that process is underway, they wait in Mexico--for many months--for a hearing with an immigration judge. Actually, they wait many months in Mexico before they are even allowed to the border to request asylum, and then they wait months longer while the process unfolds. Many of these families have no place to go, and are housed in churches turned into shelters. That briefly describes the situation before the COVID-19 pandemic halted the process completely, and before Mexico shut its economy down in an effort to slow the contagion.



(families live inside tents erected inside shelters)

Of course, the pandemic has forced us to adapt. For the shelters, offerings and financial support have dwindled, those migrants who once had jobs in the Mexican "informal economy" are no longer able to work, and yet, people still need to eat. So, at least for the interim, through a collaboration with Robert and others who are already there, we are providing food to shelters ("I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me ..." Matthew 25). We also provided funds to micro-entrepreneurs in Tijuana that provide cleaning supplies to shelters, as they diligently attempt to prevent the virus from spreading among guests who have no choice but to live in cramped quarters. We are extremely grateful to individuals and churches who have provided funds for this purpose.

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(the children's classroom before computers)

Meanwhile, the pilot project for educational and enrichment outreach to children and youth continues. Just as many business have, by necessity, moved to a virtual format (a boom for Zoom), so has this project. This is only possible for us now, especially since the border has been closed, because of relationships established during my visit last year. Now though, through our collaboration with individuals who are active in ministry in Tijuana, we are pleased to announce that the first pilot project is operational. Led by Guillermo, volunteers built a classroom and updated electrical wiring in one shelter, and SIGA purchased furniture and computers. Guillermo has lined up an organization to provide online, interactive educational programs to the children and literacy instruction to adults. Meanwhile, asylum seekers will also have access to online workshops and legal aid to assist with the immigration process. We look forward to collaborating on a second project once Guillermo and team have selected the appropriate location and format.

SCHOLARSHIPS TO INDIGENOUS (RAMA) YOUTH IN NICARAGUA

FIVE YEARS AGO, we began a project to send Indigenous youth to university. With a few delays due to political unrest (which is ongoing but currently overshadowed by COVID-19), I am happy to announce that TWO of our scholarship recipients have successfully completed their academic studies. After defending his final project to a committee of professors, Jossly graduated with a bachelor's degree in biology. His capstone project focused on the environmental impacts of natural disasters and human encroachment on Rama lands. Also graduating in December was Shoylette, who received her certificate in elementary education. Blessings on both of them!



Unfortunately, due to COVID-19, spring classes were suspended for our remaining students. Hopefully they will be able to (safely) continue with their academic studies soon.

I must mention, however that our scholarship funds are virtually exhausted, and I have been told that there are two and possibly more new students who would like to attend university next year, so we may have as many as five potential aspiring scholars. A \$350 annual scholarship makes all the difference. It pays for the boat ride to the university, enrollment fees, and provides a small monthly allowance for expenses. It is a small amount, but it makes all the difference.

GENERAL MISSIONS SUPPORT

Finally, I would like to express once again thanks to all of you who continue to support our ministry. Some of you may know that we have a guest house in our village of Arbolitos, and that Christmas is a great time to visit and interact with our neighbors. However, for the last two years both the guesthouse and the library have been without running water. Any activities we host require first that we haul water from our home, so group visits are impossible at this time. A project to bring water to the community has been in the works for a while now, but deadlines have been pushed down the road, and while we are hopeful that water will be available by the end of this year, we still are not certain that this will be the case. Once we have water, we hope to be able to receive visitors again, so we will keep you posted!

Muchas bendiciones,

Ruth Clowater

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