

Mission Trip to Belize – DFUMC

February 2010



Belize is a country in Central America, formerly called British Honduras. It has a diverse society and is a relatively short flight from Atlanta. Its neighbors are Mexico to the north, Guatemala to the south and west, and the Caribbean Sea on its eastern shore. It is just over 15 degrees north of the equator. For comparison, New Orleans is 30 degree north. The Belize Tourism Board cites its natural attractions such as the longest barrier reef in the hemisphere. It has hundreds of islands offering numerous snorkel and diving locations. One can also visit ancient Maya sites, either those which have been excavated or those still jungle shrouded.

Seven members of Dalton's First United Methodist Church recently returned from a week long missions trip to Belize. The local temperatures were in the nineties, while north Georgia temps here were barely over freezing. A winter vacation? Perhaps a business junket? Hardly.

Dalton's missionaries spent a week in "The Burial Ground" in Belize City, the former capital, ministering to some of the world's poorest people. The Burial Ground, a slum occupied by squatters, is aptly named as a cemetery is only about 100 feet away from where they were staying. The city borders the cemetery on a second side, the ocean on a third, leaving only a swamp towards which it can expand. It is built on boggy land, atop a garbage dump, which may be covered by as much as a whole foot of top soil. While digging a post hole for a porch footing, a team member removed about a foot of dirt before hitting a plastic bag full of rotting garbage, then water.

Houses are generally one room, constructed of available materials and would probably be called shacks here in the United States. Most are, approximately 20' by 20', usually having only one room. Electricity is non-existent and potable water has to be carried from communal taps for drinking purposes. There are no flush toilets. A shower consists of pouring a bucketful of water over yourself to lather, and another bucketful to rinse.

Our DFUMC seven person team consisted of Associate Pastor Billy Beard, Gene Tibbs, Jeff Tatum, Blake King, Chad Anderson, Zac Long, and Phil Meyer. They caught a non stop from Hartsfield Jackson on February 6 and returned on February 13. Billy Beard said that all paid their own expenses but had some donations to help with cost of the trip and purchase food to give away.

Food purchased as part of the mission trip consisted of 100 pound bags of beans, rice, and flour, which are staples of the local diet. This was then re-packaged into 5 pound bags. Team members would then call on residents, share the gospel with them, give a small bible, and a basic ration of food. This was usually a bag of each staple. Beard said that when there was a large household, double rations would be issued. He added that they bought a total of 3,000 pounds of food at \$0.60 per pound, wholesale. This \$9.00 ration would greatly boost the diet of a family for two or three days, depending on what else was available.

For daily tasks, the DFUMC team split into two groups. One would distribute food and Bibles, the other would help individuals. They had picked a couple of people who were really trying to improve their lives. The members bought some materials, furnished manpower, and knew how to do some small repairs. One Belize resident, Michael, who is a baker used a propane stove without a door inside his house. He also had a grate in his yard. On the two, he would bake bread then ride his bicycle, fitted with a large basket, to sell his goods in the community. The team secured another stove for Michael. They also replaced roof materials and built a porch for his house.

Employment for most living in "The Burying Ground" is pretty much odd jobs. One man, Cecil, has an old weed eater, and would leave from time to time to cut weeds or edge lawns. Another man sits in front of a Shell service station and will fix bicycles and pump up tires.. Most of the businesses outside the Burying Grounds are small Mom and Pop operations generally hiring family members. Tourism, the second largest part of the nation's economy, has its attractions some 30 miles away. It does not appear that there is a public transportation system which would take labor to the sites.

Billy Beard put the mission team together from church members. It was a follow up to several previous mission trips to the area conducted by Gene Tibbs. Billy Beard said "the trips are a way to see God at work in ways which American culture does not allow due to its many distractions. The things we fear most turn out to be our biggest blessings." Elaborating on this, he said that one day they visited a prison housing the worst criminals being held in super-maximum custody. The team was able to talk to 45 inmates. They are so dangerous, however, that they were divided into three groups, escorted by 7 armed guards.

In these sessions, Reverend Beard or Gene Tibbs would give a presentation on Christ and invite the prisoners to accept Him as their savior. They would then sit down and talk with the prisoners on an individual basis. Billy said that they had no trouble with the prisoners. Some would talk about their lives and share their stories. However, he said “you could tell that they had their guard up” as they talked. The missions team went into another section of the prison and shared the gospel from cell to cell. This was a real blessing, as these men were very interested in the Gospel of Jesus Christ. A very large number of them received Jesus Christ as their savior.

In addition to the food distribution, team members also went to schools distributing bibles. According to Gene, they visited classes ranging from 4th grade through high school. They would make a presentation about Jesus Christ and give bibles to the children. The reception which the team received was very polite, according to Gene said. He added that they gave away a total of 1200 bibles on this one trip.

The mission group also worked with the homeless at a downtown park, and street people whom they met. They would give them clean clothing, food, and bibles. Again, the team would share Christ with these people and pray with them. Gene noted that baseball caps and tee shirts were quite useful on these mission trips. Also, eyeglasses could be recycled there and were quite impactful to those that received them.

While mission trips may be old hat to some of the DFUMC missionaries, for some, it was their first time on one. According to Phil Myers, he didn't know what to expect on his first trip. Phil noted he had many doubts about going on the trip, which were lifted from him when he the DFUMC congregation prayed for him and laid on of hands prior to leaving. When he stood up, he “knew that he was going, and felt that God was telling me all was OK.” He added that the trip helped spiritually. His faith, he said, is much stronger now, with a new perception. Phil stated that he had many concerns initially and that resources and his work had been obstacles. He and his wife Wendy prayed about this and at the last minute a cancellation by another person resulted in an airplane ticket which he could use.

Another team member, Zac Long, offered a somewhat different view. He had been on a mission trip in December 2007-January 2008 to the Dominican Republic that took him to a Haitian refugee camp. He said that conditions there were bad and that the conditions in The Burying Ground were about the same, as he had expected. Zac was the unofficial photographer of the mission trip and is credited for many of the pictures accompanying this report. When asked how the trip to Belize affected him personally, he said that it changed his perspective and opened his eyes to what is truly important in life, showing and sharing the hope of Christ. This is causing him to view life and people

differently, and that God is so much bigger than the normal routines that I so often find myself in.

Each day there was a mix of activities. For example, Blake King was helping to build Michael's porch one morning and in a school sharing the gospel and handing out bibles that afternoon. When asked if the trip affected him in any certain way, he said "most definitely." He called the entire week a blessing. In his words, "It was the most emotional and spiritually moving experience of my life after the birth of my children. It greatly strengthened my relationship with God and my family." He added that he prays for the trip to become an annual event in his life.

The trip would have to be rated as a win-win situation for all involved. Many impoverished people were introduced to Jesus Christ and led to accept him as their savior. Participants felt positive changes in their lives and a strengthening of their faith in Jesus Christ. Perhaps, like a spark spreading through tinder, those introduced to Jesus Christ will introduce him to others, and the missionaries strengthened their faith to present Jesus to others here.

According to Gene, the most enjoyable part of the trip was sitting on the veranda and talking about their relationship with each other. As they talked about daily activities they would pray to Jesus Christ and talk about Him working in their lives. They gave Him all the praise for the Holy Spirit working in their lives and in the lives of those whom they were serving.

Words on paper can not describe how the trip really went. Gene Tibbs said it was "a God thing", and that they prayed He was glorified in many ways.

