



A Cup Of Life

Healing Waters quenches thirst and builds bridges in the Dominican Republic.

by Dean Nelson

Water makes life difficult in the barrio of Gualey. Dwellings—made of scraps of tin, plywood, fabric, anything to keep the rain and the sun out—are built into a severe hillside below Santo Domingo (population 4 million) and above the Ozama River. The frequent rains and the hurricane season send water from the city above cascading down the hillside, carrying trash and fetid waste water.

The rains also make the polluted river rise, trapping or displacing the 20,000 residents of the Gualey slum. They're trapped by dirty water. They call it black water, a term plumbers know well.

But it isn't the water from above or below that causes Gualey its most serious problems. It's the water from within.

The Dominican Republic's municipal water supply is notoriously porous. Underground pipes have been in disrepair for decades, leaving them susceptible to sewer leaks. The resulting contamination problem is the leading cause of death in children, according to the Pan American Health Organization.

Residents can spend valuable time and fuel boiling water to kill parasites, buy overpriced water from local stores, or just drink the tap water as is. But there is now a fourth alternative, available through Cristo Justicia Nuestro (Christ Our Justice) church. In a system designed and installed by a Denver NGO called Healing Waters International, water passes through a filtration system of sand, carbon, chlorine, ultraviolet light, and reverse osmosis. The church dispenses tens

of thousands of gallons of water each day, charging just 10 pesos (about 31 cents) to fill a jug.

"Healing Waters has been an answer from God," said Pastor Ramon Antonio Rodriguez. "The vision I had when I came here was to serve and help people. I prayed 'God, can you give me a tool to help people?' Providing water is a dream turned into a reality. But it's more than just water. It is also spiritual water because it is serving the community and making our church grow."

MORE THAN 30 CHURCHES in the Dominican Republic have Healing Waters filtration systems. A church in the city of La Romana dispenses 60,000 gallons by 10 a.m. each day. It has made the church's pastor so popular that the community wants him to run for public office. Recently, systems were also installed in churches in Mexico, Guatemala, and Kenya.

The filtration systems come with strings attached. Money brought in through water sales must be used to hire local people to dispense the water, maintain the system, and do the accounting—each system funds an average of two and one-half full-time positions. The money is also used to purchase supplies for the system, pay for electricity, and fund community service projects. And each church with a system must donate water to local schools, orphanages, and hospitals. None of the money from water sales may be used for the church's own budget, and none goes back to Healing Waters.

Tom and Dana Larson founded Healing Waters after spending 1997 in the Dominican Republic as volunteer missionaries. Both were successful professionals who, challenged by a sermon about a sister church in need of help, moved to the La

Victoria community outside of Santo Domingo.

They hated the experience. They felt that the Protestant congregation they worked with was narrow-minded and judgmental. Preachers there turned the church's PA speakers toward the street and preached about how all Catholics were going to hell. The community was 80 percent Catholic.

"As pathetic as this sounds, Dana and I would spend Sunday afternoons in the Wendy's at the Santo Domingo airport and longingly watch people board planes headed for the U.S.," said Tom, laughing. "We couldn't wait to get out of there."

They returned to the U.S. confused, wondering how they managed to waste an entire year away from home. But a few months later, Hurricane Georges ripped through the Dominican Republic and devastated several communities, including La Victoria. The Larsons racked their brains and prayed about how to respond.

After a scientist from the Larsons' church told Tom about an inexpensive water filtration system he was working on, the two men went to La Victoria and installed the system at the church there. The water had zero contaminants. When word got out that there was clean water at the La Victoria church, hundreds of people began arriving. The community's view of the church improved quickly and immensely, especially after the church began donating water to the nearby Catholic school, hospital, and orphanage. Centuries of hostility between Protestants and Catholics in the neighborhood evaporated.

Pastors in the region asked the Larsons if there were any more of those filtration systems available. Healing Waters International was born.

"WHEN THIS BEGAN to grow, I felt like Moses telling God that he's got the wrong guy," Tom said. "I know who I am, and this seemed so brilliant, which just proved that God was the author of it from the beginning. God was using water to bring people together. The local church became the solution to its community's needs."

Healing Waters partners with U.S. churches to raise the \$20,000 needed to install each system, which includes filtration equipment, storage tanks, plumbing, and construction costs. After the initial investment, the system largely maintains itself. Tom said that Dominican churches soon will be able to sponsor systems in other countries.

"As poor as the Dominican Republic is, there are 100 countries more poor than this one," he said. "Imagine the impact of the DR helping other countries have clean water—one poor country offering a cup of cool, clean water to another."

For now, though, it is enough for churches to offer water to their neighborhoods. "When the community sees us serving them in this way, they receive the love of God," said Antonio Del Rosario, who pastors a barrio church outside the mountain city of La Vega. "I can't say I love them unless I am serving them."

A 2004 Harvard University study showed that people who use Healing Waters as their primary source of drinking water experience diarrhea 68 percent less frequently than their neighbors who using unpurified tap water. The study also demonstrated that residents of the largely Catholic communities polled had a drastically improved impression of Protestants after a water system was installed.

At a dedication for a new filtration system at Cristo Rey, a Catholic church in Chiapas, Mexico, the bishop spoke on the theme of Protestants and Catholics needing to work together in the name of Jesus, to move beyond their history of division, judgment, and mistrust. He also had a Presbyterian give a dedication prayer at the service—an unprecedented act in that community.

"Before this point, I was thinking of Healing Waters primarily as a means for physical healing," said Tom Larson. "Now I'm seeing it work as a tool for spiritual and social healing as well."

OUTSIDE CRISTO JUSTICIA Nuestro church in Gualey, vendors chop sugar cane, and young girls hang laundry on rooftops. Motorcycles, bicycles, and burros clog a street known as one of the most dangerous in the country. Drugs,

prostitution, and gunfire are common, and a stray bullet from a gang called the Twelve Disciples recently killed a 3-year-old girl from the church. On the sidewalk, a line of people swells past the church and wraps around the corner. Their common thirst for clean water brings them to this place.

The heat stifles. The noise deafens. The poverty overwhelms. The crime terrifies. But the water saves and refreshes.

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