

# Do drink the water

*Disillusioned missionary, 'Spirit-inspired' invention transform church's ministry.*

**DOMINICAN REPUBLIC** There is a traffic jam in front of the Iglesia Central Assemblies of God Church in San Cristobal, Dominican Republic. All day and into the evening, cars, SUVs, motorcycles, bicycles, burros, and pedestrians converge by the hundreds, sometimes for two blocks. For the most part, the people wait patiently.

They're here for water—the cleanest and cheapest water in town.

The church dispenses approximately 60,000 gallons of water per month to residents, charging a mere five pesos to fill a five-gallon jug. Local stores charge twenty-five pesos (about \$1) or more for the same amount. And the store's water is not as clean as the church's.

"It tastes divine," said one resident, standing in line with one of the ever-present blue water containers.

The water comes from a purification system installed by Healing

Waters International, a Denver-based non-profit organization. Since last year, Healing Waters has been installing about one water system per month in Dominican churches. By June, nine systems were functioning and another two wells were being drilled. World

Vision and other organizations have expressed interest in helping the agency install more systems at a faster pace. Expansion plans include Haiti and Mexico for next year.

The Healing Waters idea came after Tom and Dana Larson left their business careers in 1997 to live for a year in La Victoria, Dominican Republic, as volunteer missionaries to their Denver church's sister congregation. Tom was an award-winning advertising copywriter. Dana was a business systems consultant with Arthur Andersen and J.D. Edwards.

Disillusionment set in almost immediately after their arrival in La Victoria.

"We were miserable," Tom Larson said. "Just to show how pathetic we were, we would go to the Santo Domingo airport, sit in the Wendy's, and longingly watch people getting on planes headed for the U.S."

Part of the problem was with the

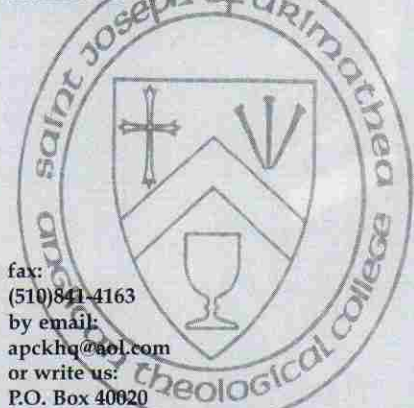


**RELIGION BY OSMOSIS:** The water purification ministry has opened the floodgates of goodwill in the Dominican Republic.

DEAN NELSON

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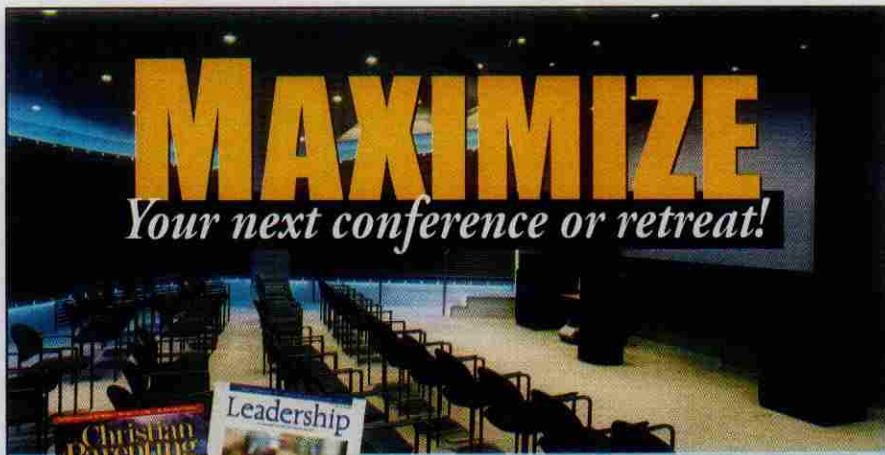
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church itself. "It was narrow-minded, legalistic, and judgmental," he said, "a little vicious, even, about anyone who didn't dress and act the way the church thought they should."

**After the hurricane**

The Larsons returned to the United States in 1998, wondering what had possessed them to spend a year that way. Then Hurricane Georges hit the island and devastated the La Victoria region.

Dominicans have long suffered serious health problems from contaminated drinking water. Sanitation systems are not well developed, and wastewater seeps into the underground water supply. Parasites in contaminated water create chronic dysentery and are the leading cause of death among Dominican children, according to the Pan American Health Organization. The hurricane made a terrible situation worse.

"I knew I had to do something," Tom Larson said. "As unhappy as we were there, that congregation still felt like my family."

A member of the Denver church approached him and said he had been working on a water purification system. He wondered if the La Victoria church could use it.

"That idea came right from the Holy Spirit," Larson said.

Larson and his friend installed the system at the church, and people flocked to the church for the clean water.

"The image of the church in the community changed overnight," he said. Residents used to drive by the open-windowed church, honk their horns and shout insults. But all that has changed. "Suddenly we were seen as a church that wanted to help, not withdraw and judge. The water became an agent of healing, both physically and socially."

The church also began providing water to a nearby Catholic school and medical clinic.

"The tensions between the Catholics and that Protestant church disappeared," Larson said.

**Going regional**

Healing Waters was born after regional church leaders asked if Larson could install systems in additional churches. The systems use chlorine, carbon, reverse osmosis, and ultraviolet light to purify the water. Each system costs about \$15,000, and is paid for mostly by U.S. donors.

All of the churches with these systems have seen their images enhanced in their communities. The San Cristobal congregation has grown because of its new service, members say.

"The role of the church is to improve the

community," said Hector Tejada, a member of a church that has a purification site in Sabana Perdida. "People understand that it is because of Christ that they can receive the benefit of this water, since it is because of Christ that people provide it."

Pastor Rosa Hermina Feliz said that many people in her community of Hererra did not know where her church was. Now they do, because they come for the water.

"It is much easier for us to go into the community and invite people to church,"

she said, "because people say, 'Oh yes—you're the church with the water.' They're much more open to us."

The symbolism of water and the church is not lost on Larson.

"I think a lot about what Jesus had to say about water," he said. "Life in the Dominican Republic is so hard. People struggle to live day to day. I like to think that people can come to the church to get a drink of cool water. They can come to the church and be refreshed."

• *Dean Nelson in Santo Domingo*

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