

Volunteers in Mission To Belize

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Stewartville United Methodist Church



Coordinators: Rev. Dennis & Barb Glad

Team Members: Vicki Beech, Ada Beh, Diane Bushyager, Joan Campe, Edward Chapman, Faye Christensen, Russ Christensen, Richard Collman, Bonnie Gibbs, Sheila Gronemann, Jim Gryc, Bonnie Hvistendahl, Jim Hvistendahl, Tanya Oberg, John O'Brien, Terry O'Brien, Dorothy Orde, Bruce Paulson, Ruth Paulson, Barry Reid, Gretchen Reid, Jill Tetrick, Merrell Thornton, Bill Thornton, Marilyn Townsend, Linda Wilde, and Jane Windmeier

RUSS: What an adventure!

25 Minnesotans and 4 Nebraskans traveled to Belize at the beginning of February.

- Most were retired, but a few were still working.

- Most were United Methodists, but our team also included Catholics, Presbyterians, and United Church of Christ members.
- Some were on their first mission trip, but others had been on other trips, and Tanya has been on over fifty.

Many of those 50+ mission trips have been with the Glads.

Rev. Dennis & Barb Glad were the coordinators of this Volunteer in Mission trip---as well as many others dating back to 1991.

They are now retired---following this mission trip to Belize.

We all feel a huge debt of gratitude for their tireless devotion.

They have coordinated 29 mission trips and mission cruises to all parts of the Caribbean over these many years.

Barb & Dennis have made it possible for hundreds of people to undertake some unforgettable experiences in Mission.

We thank them and wish God's every blessing on them in their well-deserved retirement.

FAYE: Our mission team worked together and worshipped together:

The 1st Sunday we worshipped at the Belmopan Methodist Church which was just up the hill from the Methodist High School.

[Pictures from Belmopan Methodist Church]

The 2nd Sunday we worshipped in 3 different Mennonite Church settings in Spanish Outlook, Belize.

[Pictures from the four churches where we worshipped in Spanish Lookout]

Our worship experiences did not stop on Sunday mornings.

Each evening after dinner, members of the VIM team gathered for devotions and music.

[Pictures of our gathering in the chapel at Camalote]

Our work in Belize was a rich experience in a very poor country.

[Map of Belize]

Belize is the former British Honduras and is on the Yucatan Peninsula, on the eastern coast of Central America.

The average annual individual income is about \$600 Belizian dollars or \$300 U.S. dollars, according to the Caribbean Development Bank.

Only 45% of youth attend school beyond the primary level according to the General Board of Global Ministries.

[Shots of homes along the highway]

Housing for most Belizians consists of small wooden, weather-worn structures on stilts. The stilts allow for airflow underneath the structure, providing cooling.

A common sight was junked vehicles and debris in the front yards.

Most had small gardens near the homes.

It was common to see folks selling vegetables and fruit from tables set up next to the road.

[Fruit sellers near the road]

Education is not free.

It is expensive and many cannot afford to go to school.

Government-run primary schools, for example, cost approximately \$120 (\$60 U.S. dollars) annually, according to the principal, Maureen Cayetano.

If one attends higher education, the costs rise sharply.

For instance:

- The government high school in Belmopan, costs \$300 (\$150 U.S.) per year.
- The Methodist High School costs \$700 (\$350 U.S.) per year

- And the Catholic High School costs \$900 (\$450 U.S.) per year.

According to Indira, the math teacher, the Belizian government pays 70% of their salaries.

The rest of their salaries plus the cost of operating and maintaining the high school is borne by the Methodist Church and donations.

When asked about the needs of the school, the teachers and the students, Indira quickly stated “resources.”

According the principal, Ms. Cayetano, students rely on government scholarships and donations to attend school.

They purchase their own:

- uniforms,
- text books,
- snacks and
- lunch.

Some lucky students have an older sibling who gives them their uniforms and books as hand-me-downs.

Admission standards are high.

Rigorous tests are applied in primary school and must be passed with at least a 60% grade in order to determine eligibility and have any hope of attending high school.

For those who are hoping to attend the Belmopan Methodist High School, they must obtain:

- an endorsement from their primary school teachers following
- successful testing outcomes, passing by at least 60%.
- The students then meet with 2 Methodist High School teachers.
- If the teachers agree on admitting the student,

- the principal then interviews her or him for a final admission decision. A student's attitude is very important in this selection process.

Health & medical costs are also expensive in Belize.

If one needs care beyond simple medical procedures such as

- lancing a boil,
- treating a headache or
- stitching a minor laceration...

...it is cost-prohibitive for most Belizians.

We were told by several Belizians that their hope was that they and their family members would stay well and not get hurt since they would be unable to afford more complex procedures.

Home remedies are usually used rather than seeking medical care.

[Belmopan Methodist High School upon arrival]

Helping to build the second story of the Methodist High School was the primary purpose of this mission trip to Belize.

BUT, as other needs were identified, the team responded & met the needs.

Upon arriving at the Belmopan Methodist High School, we saw two buildings---angled but not joined together.

One had 2 floors, the other had one floor with a 2nd floor being constructed.

The buildings were attractive and it was evident that the Methodist Church put value into the construction and upkeep of them.

The Belmopan Methodist High School is an Advance Special through the United Methodist Church (#3021922).

The Belmopan Methodist High School is relatively new.

In 2012, a Volunteers in Mission (VIM) team from MN.

In fact, several team members who were on this trip were also on the trip in 2012 which started the construction.

They had dug the footings for the school in the winter of 2012.

The high school opened on Aug. 28, 2013.

It was evident that many people had helped with the construction of the school.

According to the principal, Ms. Cayetano, lots of teams have helped the Belizian professionals build the high school.

Each year since 2012, teams have ranged in number from 14 to 18.

This year, 18 teams are expected.

[Construction workers on the 2nd floor]

These volunteer teams have been invaluable.

The VIM construction team members acted as laborers to help the professional Belizian construction workers.

Since construction in Belize is different than construction in the U.S., the Belizians lead the process.

For instance, bush poles were used to shore up the planks used to build the ceiling of the 2nd floor.

I'm quite sure that bush poles are not used much in the U.S.

Equipment such as cement mixers and power tools were in short supply or were needed in other construction areas---or were non-existent.

According to the Belizian construction workers, they receive:

- no health or medical benefits,

- no social security and
- no workers' compensation if they are hurt on the job.
- no unions to represent them and
- if it rains, they receive no pay for the day.

Wages range from \$10 - \$16 Belizian which is \$5 - \$8 U.S. per day.

The assistant supervisor who worked each day with the VIM team receives \$20 per day (\$10 U.S. dollars).

On our final day at the school, we were invited to donate our tennis shoes and work shoes to them if we didn't need them.

Why?

Because the construction workers' shoes were in such bad shape---some held together with duct tape---& they couldn't afford to buy another pair.

The school was in session during the 2 weeks we were there & 264 high school children were in class.

All wore uniforms---white shirts with tan skirts or trousers which were sewn by themselves or relatives.

According to their principal, Maureen Cayetano, students usually had 2 – 3 uniforms.

I talked with several of the children and found them to be very polite, neat and clean.

They ranged in ages from 13 – 17 yrs. and conversed freely with adults.

Next year, in 2017, the Belmopan Methodist High School will celebrate their first graduating class.

[Students]

I had a unique opportunity to sit in on a class which was in session. Ms. Cayetano talked with Ms. Diane Hall, Life Skills teacher, who agreed to let me sit in on her class one day.

The class on this day was about communication and listening skills. There were 37 students crowded into the classroom.

Listening became very difficult because the classroom was between two other classes which, of course, were in session at the same time.

The classes were separated by thin wooden partitions.

Because of the activity in the classes on each side of the Life Skills class, it was very difficult to hear each other speak.

Due to no fault of the teacher nor the students, the irony is that it was a listening skills class in a class where they had difficulty hearing each other.

Most of the high school classes are not as large as the life skills class and further relief will come in the fall of 2016 when the 2nd floor is completed and available for use.

It is much needed.

Some of the other projects our team worked on included:

[Volunteer workers making desks]

DESKS: Many of the students' desks were old, in disrepair and needed lots of attention.

Under Jim's direction, team members used parts of other broken desks as well as new wood to repair the desks.

54 desks were made/remade during those 2 weeks.

The desks were taken to the Methodist High School as well as a high school in Belize City which was in need.

[Workers sewing]

SEWING PROJECTS: Several of the VIM team were involved in sewing and knitting projects.

The sewers took items to the Marla House of Hope in Belmopan and visited with the women.

The Marla House is for teens and young women who have suffered extensive problems at home such as incest, abusive relationships & teen pregnancy.

Three of the young women are students at the Methodist High School.

The following are items which were delivered to the Marla House of Hope or given to nurses who visit new born infants and their moms after delivery:

- 68 baby caps
- 52 receiving blankets
- 36 bibs
- 26 skirts (10 of them are reversible)
- 9 baby towels
- 8 aprons
- 4 pillowcases
- Various sewing items

[Gardeners working]

GARDEN: Richard worked with the Camalote Camp and neighborhood children to create a garden approximately 3,000 square feet. 'A huge garden!

They worked the soil, bought seeds & fertilizer to plant vegetables and herbs for the camp as well as the surrounding community.

Six rows in mounds were completed while we were there.

SPORTS EQUIPMENT: The Methodist High School had a basketball hoop but lacked basketballs.

The principal talked with the physical education teacher and they gladly accepted basketballs and soccer balls which our team was able to acquire.

[Workers painting the front of the school]

PAINTING: One rainy day, we worked under the cover of the overhang of the school and painted the outside of the school.

The bottom 3 ft. of the two buildings was painted red and the upper walls were painted white.

The new paint gave the school a fresh look.

The painters wanted the school to look as fresh and clean as the students.

The team also painted one of the adjoining bathrooms and several hallways.

As work for our VIM team was coming to an end, several painters helped another team from KY who were worried that with their limited number of volunteers, the Catholic school they were painting wouldn't be finished before they left.

Several of our painters helped them out and the job was completed in a timely manner.

[Team staining the library]

STAINING: A building had recently been purchased & placed near the Methodist High School.

The plans for the new building was that it would become a library and a counseling office.

Our team stained the building as well as the steps into it.

They also filled in and stained the woodpecker holes!

When they finished, the building had a bright, new appearance.

[Library workers & books]

LIBRARY: The inside of this building was a challenge also. Hundreds of donated books were stacked on desks and tables within the library.

Some of the books had been cataloged. Most had not been.

Our team was asked to work with the books.

So the team:

- wiped them off,
- culled them out,
- placed pockets and user cards in the back covers,
- reinforced the bindings of the paperback books,
- separated them into categories using the Dewey Decimal System,
- cataloged and shelved them.
- We were fortunate to have Marilyn on our library team because she had worked in libraries for over 40 yrs.
- She took charge of this project and other team members helped.

[Students posing in front of empty book cases]

The 1st day we worked in the library we saw that it contained a small book shelf with 2 shelves.

That was it for shelving, so the need for more shelving was obvious.

The VIM woodworking team designed, constructed, stained, delivered and installed 5 beautiful, large bookcases for the library.

The library they had been using was in a primary school several

blocks away.

It contained lower-grade, elementary books.

Several high school students visited their brand-new, on-site, future library many times during our stay and we started to get to know them by name.

Some students helped alphabetize the authors of the fiction books and expressed their excitement for getting a library.

[Books in the library]

As our team members became aware of the lack of good books for the high school teens, they were ready to do something about it.

They talked of gathering books & sending them to the Methodist High School.

The problem, of course, was shipping costs.

A plan soon developed to make this venture happen.

How's this for a God-thing:

- Gretchen & Barry, two of our team members, have a daughter who is a pilot for SW Airlines.
- SW Airlines encourages its employees to do volunteer & charity work, so their daughter offered to fly the books to Belize free of charge!
- Gretchen & her 2 grand-daughters will fly down with the books and take them to the Methodist High School.
- Ms. Cayetano, the principal, will then contact the Minister of Finance in Belize to request an exemption from customs for the books.

The students of Belmopan Methodist High School are hungry to read and learn.

They---and we---are excited about this wonderful addendum to our mission trip.

[Books on the shelves]

[Methodist High School sign]

One of the most visible signs that our VIM team had been to the Belmopan Methodist High School is the sign itself.

It was designed and painted by Vicki who also made signs for the bathrooms as well as the library & counseling building.

Other team members poured a concrete foundation for the sign and set it in place.

This VIM trip involved a lot of hard, labor-intensive work as well as mind and spirit work.

We came away believing that with the help of the Holy Spirit whom we felt was with us throughout our two weeks in Belize, we may have made a small difference in the lives of our new friends.

We hope so.

NOTE TO THE VIM TEAM: You may want to share the memorable adventures in Belize we experienced---after all, this mission trip wasn't all work, was it? Experiences such as hearing the stories and learning from the Belize Mennonites; going cave tubing at the blue hole; learning about the Lamanai Archaeological Reserve & climbing on the Mayan Ruins; the leisurely boat ride down the New River while feeding the spider monkey, watching the large iguanas, being surprised by the river crocodile sunning itself, being amazed at the sight of beautiful birds in the rain forest---and the express speed boat ride back home; the boat ferry across the Belize River which was pulled with a rope to the Banana Bank; the jaguar at the top of the hill, swimming in the magnificent pool next to the huge home with the art gallery on the top floor; staying in huts at the Bermudian Landing with the horses roaming throughout the grounds, the howling monkeys, the nature hikes and the canoeing. **AND**, who can forget the excellent and relaxing accommodations at the Camalote Camp with the delicious meals prepared by Ethel. What a wonderful adventure of service, friendship and spiritual renewal.