

Our Sister Parish

Des Moines Presbytery Meeting 08/19/2017

The following is a presentation made at the August 19, 2017, meeting of the Presbytery of Des Moines.

Our Sister Parish ... what does that mean to you?

Some of you may be thinking “Our Sister Parish... is that the Catholic church up the street?”

Or... Our Sister Parish... hmmm... that has something to do with El Salvador, right?”



High School Scholarships

What Our Sister Parish means to Lorana, a young woman in Berlín, El Salvador who received a **high school scholarship** through Our Sister Parish, is that she was the first person in her family to be able to graduate from high school... third in her class! And with that high school diploma, she is planning to go on to become an accountant. Education is a critical component of breaking out of the crushing poverty that is reality for many in El Salvador. Lorana’s efforts and her dedication, with a little help from Our Sister Parish, mean that she and her family stand a fighting chance of making it.

EVERY YEAR about 150 students, like Lorena, receive high school scholarships through the Our Sister Parish mission. Without these scholarships, their families could not afford to send them to high school.

Medical Delegations

To 13 year-old Omar, Our Sister Parish means greater mobility and improved quality of life. Omar has Cerebral Palsy. For most of his life he has lived in a makeshift wheelchair, cobbled together with parts from three or four junked wheelchairs. His muscles were atrophying. His older sister often had to carry him on the rough dirt and mud roads in their village, but he was getting too big for her. Then two years ago the Our Sister Parish **Medical Delegation** stopped by his dirt floor house. After the doctors examined him and assessed his condition they made arrangements for a new wheel chair. And more importantly he is now receiving physical therapy to improve his muscle tone and make it possible for him to sit up straight and help himself.

What Our Sister Parish means to 10-year-old Daniel is that he now has a chance to grow up like every other little boy. Daniel has dwarfism and his 6-yr-old brother, along with

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almost everyone else in his village, towers over him. His condition could be reversed by hormone treatments, *if* those treatments are started soon. But just one treatment costs almost a year's income for his family. When the Our Sister Parish medical delegation held a clinic in Daniel's community last year the doctor who examined him made it his personal project to obtain the required treatments. Happily the required funds have now been raised and Daniel is receiving treatments that should allow him to develop into a normal adult.

Over 1,400 consultations were performed by the doctors during the first two **Medical Delegation** trips. In November, Our Sister Parish will send its third medical delegation to the villages surrounding Berlín, El Salvador. We'll be taking medical care and compassion out to as many as 800 people in the desperately poor communities. Places where some people have never been examined by a doctor... ever. The health treatment, education, and basic supplies they'll receive are tangible evidence that they matter to someone, that all God's children are worthy of tending... of notice... of feeling His loving hands made flesh in their lives.

Church/Canton Partnerships

What Our Sister Parish means to **Covenant Presbyterian Church** in West Des Moines, is that they have *family* in El Salvador. When they formed a partnership with the community of San Isidro six years ago, they started by writing letters to individual families in San Isidro. They got letters back from the San Isidro families, letters telling about their children and their lives. Stacks of letters and photos have made the trip back and forth over the years. When a Covenant delegation goes to El Salvador, they are greeted with joy as their Salvadoran family recognizes them and runs to meet them, calling them by name. Covenant prays for their Salvadoran families and the Salvadoran families pray for their Covenant families. As Covenant member **Deb Kellogg** put it:

"This mission builds relationships between people that might never have known about each other. ... It is the many similarities that are discovered between people they once thought they had nothing in common with ...people they have built a relationship with, through the power of Christ."

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Mission Support

To a family of **First United Presbyterian Church** in LeRoy, Iowa, Our Sister Parish means integrity. They explain it this way:

Mission is “just who we are.” But there are so many missions. It’s hard to know which ones to support, which ones are legitimate.

What we like about Our Sister Parish is:

1. We personally know the people who went there/go there to do mission
2. Then those people take their own time to come to our church
3. They tell us what they do and why. They tell us about the people, the need, and the value of our participation. They tell us how much our contribution actually means... real, personal stories.
4. We KNOW that the people we want to help are actually getting the money we send... for fertilizer and scholarships. We hear about how much it helped.
5. That’s why we choose Our Sister Parish as the mission we support.

Fertilizer Support

Another family at **First Presbyterian Church** in Lucas, Iowa, has this to say about Our Sister Parish:

You can’t imagine how good it feels to us to be able to feed a family for a whole year for just the cost of \$100 worth of fertilizer. I am used to spending \$100 for one acre of fertilizer on my farm. Imagine feeding a whole family for a whole year for that simple investment.

And the same good feeling comes every time we send \$150 for a scholarship. Education is the basis of all progress. It is astounding to us how much one scholarship can do, how much \$150 can do. So cheap! to change a life, to change the world.

And there is no administrative cost to our giving. For every \$100 for fertilizer, \$100 gets there. For every \$150 given for scholarships, \$150 gets there.

We are farmers. Education is important to us. Fertilizer is important to us. Water is important to us. These are things we understand and things we can support. Thank you Our Sister Parish.

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Memorandum of Understanding

Our Sister Parish is an approved mission of the Presbytery of Des Moines, with a **Memorandum of Understanding** and more than 25 years of accomplishments. Many congregations have entered into a relationship commitment with an individual community of Berlín ...to be their 'sister community'. The relationship between a congregation and its community is very special. Like siblings, they celebrate together when things go well, they grieve together when either suffers loss or trial, they listen to each other's hopes and dreams, they help each other through whatever life brings their way. They pray for each other. They model the love of Christ on Earth.

Mission Statement

Our Sister Parish has grown, changed, and evolved over the years. However, our mission philosophy remains the same, as described in our **Mission Statement**:

Our Sister Parish brings hope and development to the poor of Berlín, Usulután, El Salvador. Through committed relationships of solidarity between US churches and our Berlín brothers and sisters, faith will grow and the love of God will be profoundly experienced for all involved.

Visioning

As with many organizations, we've reached a point in our life cycle where we need to position Our Sister Parish to be as efficient and effective as it can be in today's environment; financially, spiritually, compassionately, and responsibly. To that end, the Our Sister Parish board has formed a steering committee that is working to envision the next phase of Our Sister Parish. This is especially challenging, now that we are 'between mission co-workers'... without that key component of smooth operations for Our Sister Parish.

An unpaid volunteer has stepped up to try to fill some of the most critical mission co-worker duties during this time of co-worker vacancy. But maintaining sufficient communications with the Pastoral Team in Berlín from Iowa is a challenge. And multiple flights to and from El Salvador have been necessary to accompany the delegations from the United States, which continue to make the trip, unabated. These duties, and many, many more, would normally be handled in a comprehensive, coordinated way by the co-worker living full time in Berlín. This need to rely on volunteers, and the many things that aren't getting done, are a critical concern for the Our Sister Parish board. (At the end of

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this presentation is a handout that outlines some aspects of what Our Sister Parish looks like with and without a co-worker.)

Don Justo – Coffee with Dignity

The Our Sister Parish board continues to promote the mission and raise funds to help support it. Our major fund-raising activities each year include selling crafts and **Don Justo – Coffee with Dignity** coffee. We have an annual *FUNraiser* event where we celebrate the achievements and successes of our mission partnerships and raise funds through ticket sales and a silent auction. We also send out an annual “ask” letter. These activities support the general operation of the mission. But these endeavors aren’t sufficient to support a mission co-worker.

General Operating Fund

Most funds from our congregations or individuals are designated for a partner community or specific project. One hundred percent of these funds go to the partner community’s projects... fertilizer, scholarships, water tanks, seed, etc. They cannot be used to support the General Operational needs of the mission.

General Operating funds are necessary to maintain the truck that transports fertilizer to the communities, the Pastoral Team conducting Our Sister Parish business, and our delegations visiting the communities around Berlín.

General Operating funds support those people and communities in Berlín who are not part of a partner relationship... providing things like fertilizer, medicine and emergency food packets.

General Operating funds help pay for the water, electricity, internet and fuel that keeps the Pastoral House in operation when there aren’t delegations visiting. And, General Operating funds pay the co-worker’s compensation and expenses.

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Request for Support

Our Sister Parish is a mission that this Presbytery and everyone in it can be truly proud of. It is a model Presbyterian mission. Its vibrant, effective, and meaningful manifestation has touched thousands of lives in El Salvador, in Iowa and beyond over almost three decades of service and spiritual connection.

We ask for your prayers, especially as we navigate this time without a co-worker on the ground in Berlín.

We ask for your congregation's continued partnerships with communities in Berlín.

We ask for your congregation's support of the General Operating fund.

And we will be asking for the Presbytery to include support for Our Sister Parish in its 2018 budget.

I have barely scratched the surface of all that Our Sister Parish does for the people of Berlín, for the partner congregations here in the United States, and for the Presbytery of Des Moines. For more information about Our Sister Parish or to learn about joining Central's next delegation to El Salvador, contact **Mike Bassett**, 515-321-6433 or mikebassett111@gmail.com.

In parting, the Our Sister Parish board is thrilled to share good news with you. We can't yet name names, but another of the Des Moines Presbytery's churches is on the verge of forming a new partnership and relationship with a community in Berlín. Our Sister Parish is alive and continuing to grow. Please help support Our Sister Parish and its projects... and join a delegation to Berlín.

Mike Bassett

Moderator, Our Sister Parish Board

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Missionary Co-Worker

Since its inception, the Our Sister Parish (OSP) mission has relied heavily on a full time co-worker, living in Berlín, Usulután, El Salvador. **A full-time co-worker** has become even more critical as the mission has grown, adding more and more Salvadoran communities and U.S. church partners. The co-worker provides a single focal point for the Pastoral Team in Berlín, the partnering congregations in the US, the OSP board and church delegations to facilitate projects and coordinate delegation trips and other activities.

The co-worker is the funnel through which all communications flow between those in El Salvador and those in the United States. The co-worker is the all-important translator, not just for language differences but also for differences in cultural and custom. After three and a half years, **Katherine Pater**, our latest co-worker, has moved on to other opportunities. We are ready to begin the search for our next co-worker, once we have the necessary funding lined up.

Major areas of concern when there is no full-time co-worker, on the ground in Berlín:

	With a co-worker in Berlín	With an interim volunteer in Iowa
Communication	A bi-lingual co-worker is the bridge between cultures, interpreting not only the words but the meaning behind the words, based upon customs, mores, understanding, and daily realities. Goes in both directions.	The interim is helping out, part-time. Communications are delayed, incomplete, more general because the Pastoral Team, ledgers, and project info aren't readily available to the interim.
Availability	A co-worker living in Berlín is part of the fabric of the mission on a daily basis and can promptly deal with the requests from both directions and whatever arises. The co-worker has a comprehensive understanding of all projects because they are involved on a daily basis.	The interim travels to Berlín with delegations. While there, the interim can get information and updates first-hand from the Team and communities... at best once per month, but usually less. When not in El Salvador with a delegation, the interim has competing obligations for time.
Delegations	As part of the job, the co-worker creates the delegation budget, makes/verifies travel arrangements for the group, plans/coordinates the itinerary, and accompanies the delegation throughout their visit.	It's more challenging for the interim to make arrangements from afar. It's more expensive for delegations because they cover the cost of the interim's travel. As a volunteer, the interim loses personal income from lost work during delegation trips (10 days per delegation, on average).

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Continued...

	With a co-worker in Berlín	With an interim volunteer in Iowa
Funding stream	Part of the co-worker's job is to come to Iowa periodically to educate, report, fund-raise for the mission. The in-person, first-hand testimony of the co-worker and his/her ability to personally relate the daily life of the mission, its successes and challenges, and the many ways the mission effects change is critical to our fund-raising efforts.	The OSP board does fund raise on its own. The impact is diminished without the in-person testimony of the co-worker.
Projects	The co-worker discusses the request, verifies the requirements, researches resources, monitors/documents progress, prepares financial and other reports. This transparency demonstrates to all parties that funds and projects are being properly managed as well as providing examples to potential donors of the mission's ability to deliver projects.	The interim travels to Berlín with delegations. While there, the interim can get information to prepare financial and progress reports for partners. The full life cycle documentation of the project is incomplete. The interim can't be as intimately familiar with the daily progress and issues of projects.
Trust	The co-worker is a member of the Pastoral Team as well as a member of the OSP board. In daily accompaniment with the Team, the co-worker becomes a trusted partner for the communities and for the Team.	The interim is only occasionally visible to the communities and can meet with the Team irregularly around delegation duties, when in El Salvador.
Services as needed	The co-worker is a paid, full-time position, dedicated to fulfilling the functions above, every day.	The interim's travel expenses are covered by the delegation but, to-date has received no other compensation for services rendered or lost work. This cannot continue indefinitely. In general, mission services are fragmented, delayed, or incomplete without a person dedicated to filling them.