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Missions
Amid
Pandemic:
A Global Perspective

mtw
Mission to the World

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BY: ANDREW SHAUGHNESSY

Photo: iStock - songdech17

When a remote jungle community needed the gospel, nothing could stand in Tony Elswick's way ... not even quicksand.

There's no road to this tiny village that developed around a missionary airstrip.



Deep in Panama's Darién Jungle, through forests dense with towering ceiba and mahogany trees, lies the tiny village of La Reserva, a remote community of the indigenous Emberà tribe.

There's no road to La Reserva, no bus route or train connecting to the outside world. Instead, aspiring visitors face a long, harrowing journey.

It all begins with a two-hour drive from Panama City to a little border town on the edge of the jungle's frontier. From there they take an hour ride in the back of a pickup truck taxi known as a *chiva* to a trailhead, where they must hike a mile through the jungle—steep trails, up and down in the sweltering sun and overwhelming humidity, all while carrying a 50-pound pack of water, food, a hammock, and everything else they will need to survive. Finally, just before reaching La Reserva, they must cross a muddy river—either fording the jungle waters on foot or taking a canoe.

MTW missionary Tony Elswick heard about La Reserva soon after he arrived in Panama with his wife, Amber, and their kids. An old friend of theirs named John Gordon was serving in Panama as a missionary with Sport X Change, a ministry that uses sports to connect to remote communities and open doors for the gospel. For six years John had been building relationships with the people of La Reserva and had been praying for ministry partners, specifically an ordained pastor to lead worship services and train local believers to plant their own church.

That was music to Tony's ears.

"Tony's deep heart is for the people that nobody else cares about, ... who don't have resources, ... the ones that nobody else is dreaming about," said Amber. "Tony dreams about those people."

"Look, I'd love to have you come and work with me," John told Tony, "but I can't take you in the physical shape you're in right now."

There was just one problem: Tony wasn't fit enough to safely make the journey.

"Look, I'd love to have you come and work with me," John told Tony, "but I can't take you in the physical shape you're in right now."

Before he became a missionary, Tony was an accountant, crunching numbers in an air-conditioned office. He loved

planning, theology, and watching "Doctor Who." Fitness and outdoor adventure weren't in his vocabulary. He just wasn't prepared for the jungle's challenges.

And yet, the people of La Reserva needed him. They needed good biblical training, men and women equipped to disciple and lead, and a church of their own.

Determined to reach La Reserva, Tony began to train.

REVOLUTIONS AND PROVIDENCE

The Elswicks got their start in missions in 2013 serving with MTW in Nicaragua. There Tony trained rural pastors, Christian leaders, and church planters using Thirdmill theological education materials. While Tony discipled and trained the pastors, Amber would minister to their wives, building relationships and doing theological training with them as well. It was tough place to live and serve, but the soil was ready and they were making enormous progress. Pastoral trainings were going well, with several cohorts of church planters and leaders graduating from two-year training programs led by Tony, and they were moving toward forming a Presbyterian denomination for Nicaragua.

In 2018, civil unrest and violence erupted across the country. Tony and Amber were in the U.S. on Home Ministry Assignment at the time. The reports they heard back from friends on the ground horrified them: barricades and battles in the streets, people tortured or killed by the police. Every one of their friends in Nicaragua, it seemed, knew someone who had died. In the end, both MTW and the Elswicks determined it was simply too dangerous for them to return—particularly with their four daughters in tow.

After a long, painful season of uncertainty, the Elswicks moved to Panama. A new field. A new start. It was enormously frustrating, but God had something bigger in mind for them. Nicaragua had been the perfect training ground for Tony to learn Spanish, get ministry experience, and hone his skills as a theology teacher. When the opportunity to reach La Reserva presented itself, his mind and heart were ready. There was just the matter of preparing his body.

TONY'S ROCKY MONTAGE

First things first: To make it in the jungle, Tony had to lose weight. He started dieting, counting calories. He cut down on his habit of nightly Oreos and milk. Before long, Tony had lost 20 pounds.

Next: fitness.

"I don't like running," Tony said. "I didn't even bring tennis shoes when we moved here because I knew that my buddy John—the sports guy—would try to get me to come jogging, and I didn't want to do that."

He wasn't wrong. Their first Sunday in Panama, John asked Tony to join his running club.

"We do a little Bible study at the end," John said. "Come out and run with us!"

"Nope!" Tony laughed. "The Lord's not calling me to do that. I told him: 'I don't do any kind of sports activity in front of men I want to respect me.'" >>

>> Of course, that was before his call to La Reserva. As a pastor, Tony had plenty of books. To build stamina, he began loading up 20 pounds of books into his backpack and walking around his neighborhood for a few miles. Next, knowing that the jungle trail was hilly, he started carrying his weighted pack up and down the stairs in their apartment building—all 30 stories.

But it wasn't all just physical training. For hours every day, Tony practiced Spanish—diving deep into the difficult vocabulary he needed to master to teach theology well. He began spending extended times in focused prayer, crying out to God to send His Holy Spirit before him.

Soon, Tony was ready.



John Gordon (l) and Tony Elswick preach to the Emberà.

INTO THE JUNGLE

In his backpack, Tony carried food, water, clothing, a hammock, and six Spanish Bibles—50 pounds, all told. He had survived the trip thus far: the drive from Panama City, the bumpy ride in the back of a chiva, even the harrowing hike through the jungle. The last thing he had to do was cross the river.

“Fording a river? That was 10-year-old Tony’s dream!” he said. “That’s Indiana Jones stuff.”

Though the Emberà were sending a canoe to ferry them across, Tony was just too excited, and he began wading across the river. Just as he was about to reach the far bank, he stepped in the mud, and sank up to his knees. The mud held him fast with a suction grip—quicksand. Eventually, one of the local men came by in a canoe and helped work him free.

“I think they still joke about it,” said Tony.

Though Tony’s dramatic entrance helped break the ice, that first visit was still tough for him. The jungle was so hot and uncomfortable that he had trouble thinking straight, let alone preaching and teaching. And yet the relationships being built were invaluable.

Tony spent some time with a man named Swardi, one of the most mature Christians in the community. Swardi told Tony the history of La Reserva—that it had started more than 50 years ago when aviation missionaries built a landing strip and a community formed around it. That the missionary pilot trained a local man as a pastor; that the missionary and the pastor would fly around to surrounding communities to preach and teach and train. That Swardi himself, just a boy at the time, grew up in the church led by the local pastor and came to know Jesus. Then he told Tony about the day in the mid ’70s when the pilot, flying back to La Reserva with their beloved pastor, crashed the plane—killing them both.

“Swardi was just 15 years old,” said Tony. “His kids have grown up without church, and now his grandkids are growing up without church or any gospel witness. It was breaking his heart to see that.”

The next day they left. As Tony walked out of the sweltering jungle, he was struggling physically. His limbs ached, and sweat dripped down his face.

“I don’t know, Lord,” he prayed. “I don’t know if I’m really cut out for this. It’s so hard for me.”

But then, he thought about Swardi’s story. He thought about the reality that the people of La Reserva had been waiting for someone to bring them a gospel witness for 50 years.

“If it’s not me, it’s not like there’s another guy to do this,” Tony said. “Particularly not another ordained pastor. ... I realized—somebody has to come out and do this. ... And it might as well be me because I’m the one here, right?”

When he returned to Panama City, Tony started exercising even more. He bought himself a pair of tennis shoes and joined a gym. As a result, the trips have become much easier for him.

THE POWER OF THE WORD

In La Reserva, God is clearly on the move. After spending some time building relationships and earning trust, Tony began to lead Bible studies as well as more focused theological training for those with potential to lead a future local church. Every trip he brings a few more Bibles to distribute to the community, and the number of people learning about Jesus continues to grow. There are practical mercy ministry components too—Christmas gifts for the kids, a clean water project. Neighboring communities are beginning to hear about the changes afoot and ask questions: “Who are these gringos? Why are they helping you?”

In August 2019, Tony led their first church service in La Reserva. Several young Christians have already asked to be baptized.



A young Emberà believer bows his head in prayer during a Bible study.

“I think of a lot of it is just the power of the Word,” said Tony. “We just go in, and we’re giving them the skills to understand their Bibles and allowing the Holy Spirit to work. That’s the most fundamental thing which helps engage their hearts.”

“Thirdmill’s motto is: ‘Every Christian deserves a well-trained pastor,’” he added. “That’s what we feel like. Up the river they might have just 50 people in their community, but they deserve to have a well-trained pastor who can preach and teach to them about the Bible in their local language. We don’t want poverty to be a barrier to their theological education.”

Tony and Amber’s dream is that the Christian leaders of La Reserva will become self-sufficient—able to lead church, disciple men and women in the faith, and share the hope of the gospel themselves. As for the Elswicks, 10 years from now you’ll find them at the next La Reserva, somewhere even deeper in the jungle, ministering in yet another community that still needs to hear the good news of the gospel, that still needs a church. [n](#)

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A curious lemur watches his photographer closely.

Praying For Lemurs

In Nosy Be, Madagascar, a young believer discovers the power of prayer.

The hot, humid air surrounded Ladis like a blanket. Off in the distance, he could hear the waterfall that made this part of the jungle so special.

For several weeks, Ladis and many men from his village had been coming here, just a 20-minute canoe trip from their beach. They all find work in the tourism industry of Nosy Be, Madagascar. Those who can speak French, Italian, or English work as tour guides, guiding people through the island's lone nature reserve; others work as canoe paddlers, cooks, or guards of the jungle.

Normally they would take tourists farther down the coast and enter the reserve there, but the people living in the village near that entrance kept raising the "admission fee," growing vanilla in the jungle, and neglecting the plants and animals. So Ladis and his friends decided to create a new entrance into the reserve. They worked hard clearing trails, removing dead limbs, building shade structures where tourists could sit and eat, and cleaning up the area around the natural waterfall so tourists could cool off after their hike.

BY: BRYAN MCREYNOLDS

Photo: Rebe McReynolds

But they had a major problem. There were no lemurs! Lemurs are the crown jewel of any nature reserve in Madagascar, and any tourist visiting the reserve in Nosy Be would be very disappointed if they did not see any. For several days the men brought bananas into the jungle hoping to lure lemurs to the area, but without success. They were worried and stressed.

JESUS V. SACRED ROCKS

"The men from the other village must have put a curse on this place to get revenge on us for not bringing our tourists to them," some of the men said. "Maybe we have done something to upset our ancestors. Maybe there is a spirit in this part of the jungle that is not happy with us."

Some of them disagreed on the source of their predicament, but they all agreed on the solution: They needed to appease the ancestors and the spirits by finding a sacred rock and making an offering of honey, rum, incense, and red and white cloth. In Sakalava culture, each of these items has the power to appease and manipulate the ancestors.

As the group of men sat around discussing their plan, Ladis' heart pounded. For the past few years he had been learning more and more about the God of the Bible, and he knew he should say something to these men; it was the right time. But he was scared. What he needed to say would go against their tradition, against the way they had always done things. Even so, he had truth that they needed to hear.

He stood slowly and said, "You all know that I am a Christian now, and the God of the Bible does not require all of these things from us. He is not found in a rock because He made the rocks. He made everything, everything in the ocean and in the jungle. He does not need honey because He created the bees that make the honey. He doesn't need anything from us. Yet He has told us that He will take care of His children like a good father does. So before you perform the ceremony, let me pray to God for our needs. I will walk into the jungle and offer a prayer that God will bring the lemurs to this area. I will bring two people with me to be witnesses. Please allow me to do this, and we will wait a few days."

When the men agreed, Ladis walked into the jungle and made his request to God.

GOD ANSWERS PRAYER

The next day, one of the local guides had two French tourists who wanted to explore the reserve. He explained two options to the tourists: They could go to the original entrance and be sure to see lemurs, or they could go to the new area with a beautiful waterfall, but they might not be able to see lemurs. Surprisingly, they decided on the second option. All the men back in the village eagerly awaited their return to hear the "vao-vao," that is, "the news from their journey."

Photo: Rebe McReynolds

As the group of men sat around discussing their plan, Ladis' heart pounded ... What he needed to say would go against their tradition, against the way they had always done things. Even so, he had truth that they needed to hear.

And the "vao-vao" was—lemurs! Lots of lemurs! Everywhere there were lemurs! Two groups of lemurs on the trail, and another group of lemurs relaxing by the waterfall. They even spotted a rare nocturnal lemur. One of the men who was with Ladis in the jungle when he was praying began telling everyone in the village how powerful his prayer was and that Ladis' God answers prayer!

Ever since that day, every time the men have taken tourists to their new entrance to the park, they find more and more lemurs waiting for them. This is a tremendous story of God's provision, a testimony of His goodness and faithfulness to the village we live in, and care for His children. As for Ladis, his faith has been strengthened to continue speaking gospel truth to the men around him. [1](#)

Bryan and Rebe McReynolds serve with MTW in Nosy Be, Madagascar, with their kids.



As the COVID-19 pandemic continues to grow, MTW missionaries across the globe are facing new challenges. From Madrid to Sydney, from the Bahamas to Berlin, hospitals are filling, people are self-isolating, and economies are suffering. Simultaneously, leading Bible studies, growing a church plant, or running mercy ministries becomes much harder when meeting in person is no

longer an option. And yet, even amid the difficulties and danger, MTW missionaries and the global Church hold fast to the hope of the gospel and seek to live out that hope in love to their neighbors.

Here are some of our missionaries' experiences, in their own words.

Joshua Jacobs – Paris, France

Bonjour! I write this from our apartment, where my housemate and I have remained for the last few days as France is under quarantine. While we are technically allowed to leave the apartment, we are required to carry a note with one of five approved reasons stating why we are outside. Exercise is one of those approved excuses, and it has been an eerie experience jogging through a mostly silent Paris with just a few people in the streets.

A lot is uncertain right now. My language school is still technically in session, though efforts to host classes online have been only partially successful.

I divide my French studies with Greek vocabulary and grammar, in preparation for ordination exams.

Please pray for my Muslim friends E* and M*. I am confident that with modern technology we can still discuss Scripture despite the quarantine. Please pray for my church and all of us who belong to it, to effectively minister the gospel to a world that is suddenly aware of how we are not as in control as we thought.



Phillip Luther – Athens, Greece

Our team is planting an intercultural church in Athens and working with unaccompanied refugee minors. Many refugees are dependent on job sectors that have closed completely due to the COVID-19 crisis, such as construction and housecleaning. We are on a mandatory lockdown, so you cannot even go to the grocery store without filling out a government issued form. Refugees do not have access to their usual support systems, and because of the lockdown, we are unable to bring them meals and groceries to help.

Our church community has gone online, but for refugees without dependable internet, access is difficult. Simultaneously, refugees are struggling to get updated and dependable information on the pandemic because of their lack of access to local news in their own language. This poses a health risk.

This week, our church plant organized a diaconal team to specifically address the needs of the refugees in our church community who have no source of income and will increasingly struggle with things like groceries and rent. Since we cannot visit them, we plan to use online grocery stores who can deliver groceries to their door even during the lockdown.



Missions Amid Pandemic: A Global Perspective

Julian and Christiana Russell – Nassau, Bahamas

We're still dealing with the massive devastation of Hurricane Dorian in the Bahamas, and now the global outbreak of the coronavirus has put everything on hold. The government has established a curfew, as well as ordering that no groups larger than 10 persons meet—even for worship, weddings, funerals, etc.

Thanks to modern technology, we have been able to hold a Bible study via Zoom. We "met" this past Sunday via desktops, laptops, iPads, and even phones. May the Lord grant us wisdom and strength in these times of testing. I am reminded of how the early church met in the outskirts during times of persecution. What a beautiful reminder that the Church is not the building. We are the people of God—living stones building up a spiritual house. Shalom!



Robert and Joanne Tanzie – Madrid, Spain

We live under lockdown in Madrid, a metro of 6.2 million. The city center is a ghost town. Police patrol the ghost town streets and drones fly about shouting in a robotic voice, "Stay inside! Stay inside!"

On March 9, Joanne and I decided to isolate ourselves. Shortly thereafter, the Spanish government ordered a "state of alarm," which will likely be renewed indefinitely. Given that the door to travel to the U.S. will soon close, we have elected to stay with our people here. Though the economy has shut down except for food stores, pharmacies, and (very Spanish) tobacco shops, the Spaniards show amazing solidarity and self-discipline.

All our churches are meeting, holding classes and fellowship virtually, including Sunday worship. We five elders (including MTW missionary Dale Cho) deliver a daily message of encouragement in a weekly cycle. As the economy collapses around us and we await an exponential increase in infections, we draw comfort from a sovereign Lord who loves His Church more than we can imagine.



Jim Jung – Sydney, Australia

In Sydney, we've moved all our ministries to no "person-to-person" basis. Our worship services have moved to live-streaming and pre-recording, and all small group studies and prayer meetings have gone to video conference meetings.

Some businesses that are able have elected to allow their employees to work from home. Small retail businesses suffer. Many closed, and many people are losing jobs. There are signs that we are moving bit by bit toward total lockdown.

We are looking at this as an opportunity to affirm the peace and security in Christ our Eternal

Redeemer, and all the more to appreciate the fellowship we have with one another. We are also encouraging our church to sacrificially lend help to our community—even as they take precautions. We have outlined ways to help with physical resources (food, paper products, etc.) by dropping off to those who need them, and calling those we haven't heard from to check up on them. We're still looking for other effective and creative ways to foster Christ's community.

Chaos Disrupts a Fruitful Ministry



Photo: iStock - 1001nights



Photo: iStock - 1001nights

In Haiti, MTW missionaries are equipping leaders, serving the poor, and bringing many to Christ, but the country's ongoing political turmoil is creating unprecedented challenges for the ministry.

Haiti has always had more than its share of economic struggles, political corruption, and violence. But in the last few years, the Caribbean nation's fragile peace has crumbled to the brink of collapse, creating unprecedented challenges for MTW ministries in Haiti.

The descent into chaos began in the summer of 2018, when people took to the streets by the thousands to protest a sharp spike in fuel prices. Since then, that initial unrest evolved into a larger movement against government corruption. As the economy struggled and the cost of living rose, demonstrators faced off with the police in increasingly violent confrontations. In the summer and fall of 2019, the turmoil reached new heights—much of the country's electrical grid failed, plunging Haiti into darkness. Protestors blocked roads and well-armed gangs took advantage of the chaos to expand their territory.

"Haiti is ... unpredictable," explained MTW missionary Esaie Etienne.

Esaie and his wife, Natacha—both native Haitians—have been doing ministry with MTW in Haiti since 2008. After a series of natural disasters in 2009 and 2010 forced them to leave, the Etiennes relocated to the U.S.

and travel back and forth to Haiti throughout the year to lead and develop their ministry—Living Stone Reformed Mission.

"The main focus of our ministry is church planting," said Esaie. "We have planted three churches since 2008, and we are working on a fourth one now."

Esaie was also instrumental in starting a small seminary to train pastors and church planters from across the island. There's an

... in the last few years, the Caribbean nation's fragile peace has crumbled to the brink of collapse.

active mercy ministry component too: disaster response when there's a hurricane or earthquake, and medical mission teams that come several times per year. These open doors in the communities in invaluable ways.

One particularly exciting part of the Etiennes' ministry is Dociné Christian Academy—a school that provides a good Christian education, basic medical care, and free meal to more than 500 children in the impoverished Haitian village of Dociné.

"It's an educational ministry ... but it's also an evangelistic ministry," Esaie said. "It's a way for us to preach the gospel to the kids, and through the kids to reach the parents and eventually the community. The school provides hope."

Over the years, many of the students at Dociné Christian Academy have come to Christ. In 2017 alone, 28 kids made a profession of faith. The Spirit is clearly at work in and through the Etiennes' work, transforming hearts and futures. But the country's ongoing political turmoil is making ministry more and more difficult.

SCHOOL AND MINISTRY DISRUPTED

In July 2018, a group of MTW missionaries travelled to Dociné Christian Academy to give an annual teacher training. Midway through their trip, another round of violent riots swept through Haiti's cities. With the roads blocked, the missionaries were trapped, unable to safely travel to the airport for several days.

Since then, Haiti's political turmoil has continued, rendering the country too dangerous for many of MTW's ministries to properly function. Two medical teams were forced to cancel scheduled mission trips, deterred by the threat of violence. The September 2019 launch of a Reformed presbytery in Haiti—a momentous event three years in the making—was also canceled out of fear for the safety of visiting delegates and leaders.

And it's not just visiting foreigners and short-term trips that are impacted. Even Esaie has been prevented from traveling there. And Dociné Christian Academy, like many schools all across the country, was shut down for months—from September 2019 to January 2020.

"The country was in lockdown," Esaie said. "It's not only schools that can't function. It's businesses, banks ... We gave checks to pay the teachers and employees of the ministry, but they couldn't go to the bank to cash them. It's very difficult. It effects everything and everyone."

KEEPING STEADY AMID THE CHAOS

As protests waned in December, the government tried to return things to normal—at least in the capital. In Port au Prince, schools and roads re-opened. But still, according to Esaie, in smaller cities like Gonaives and villages like Dociné, nothing is functioning as it ought.

"The ministry is working," he said. "The churches are working, but still we need peace. We need stability. ... As a minister of the gospel, my conversations with God are prayers of intercession—interceding on behalf of the people, of the country."

Despite the many challenges faced by the Haitian people, MTW's ministry there is growing. In the face of violence and poverty and the spiritual forces of darkness, the church fights on with the love of Christ—teaching, healing, feeding, and educating village kids and budding pastors poised to change their country for the better. And despite the unrest and turmoil, Esaie continues to work, to preach, to build, and to hope. [▶](#)



Children at Dociné Christian Academy

To support Dociné Christian Academy's life-changing work, visit mtw.org/loveone to give to Haiti LoveOne and sponsor a child's education for just \$35 per month. | Editor's note: As a result of COVID-19, Dociné Christian Academy has closed again. Please pray for God's mercy in Haiti.



VIEW FROM THE CHURCH

My Prayer Journey to Cusco:

MTW'S HISPANIC RADD TEAM CATCHES A VISION IN PERU

When Barbara Jones, MTW's senior national diversity mobilizer, first invited me to be a part of the Cusco, Peru, prayer journey trip I was intrigued.

BY: OMAR ORTIZ

All of my previous experience on mission trips had been work trips to Latin American countries in which the team I was on was helping to build or repair something (a school, a retreat house for pastors, a church, a camp). Additionally, in virtually every trip I was one of the few



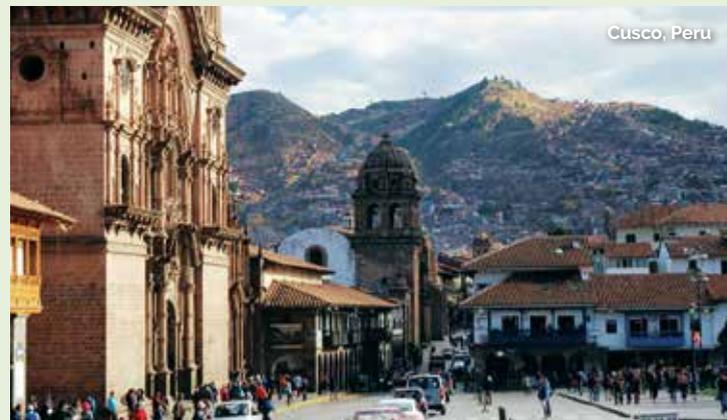
Omar Ortiz (back row, right) and the prayer journey team with MTW missionaries

people (if not the only person) who spoke Spanish. This trip to Peru, in contrast, was going to be focused on prayer as the front line of kingdom expansion. And thanks to the efforts of MTW's Reformed and Diverse Delegates initiative (RADD) the team was largely comprised of Spanish speakers.

The trip had physical challenges, and living at an elevation of 11,000 feet for seven days proved difficult at times. But what was even more challenging was the spiritual and mentally taxing nature of the trip. The facilitators of the prayer journey, MTW missionaries Ken and Tammie Matlack, were teaching

us to see prayer as the crucial work of ministry, as work on the front lines. But we were not just going to do this from the comfort of a room at the church. In order to really understand the importance of prayer, we were going to take the things that we were learning to the streets! And so we learned to prayer walk.

On one walk we went to Casa Josefina, the orphanage run by the MTW Cusco team, to pray for the children and the workers. When we arrived we saw construction of a building next to



Cusco, Peru

the orphanage, and one of our team members asked what the structure would be. The missionary informed us that it was going to be a brothel—and so we proceeded to pray! Some of us even laid hands on the building, praying against the evil forces at work. We asked the Lord not to allow the brothel to be built next to the orphanage. We even prayed that the Lord would be so gracious as to allow this building to become a part of Casa Josefina so they can serve more children in the community. We then entered the orphanage and began praying with the small kids in a language they could understand.

As an American it can be tempting to think that the important work I have to offer in the mission field is physical (i.e. construction) or intellectual (i.e. teaching). These are certainly important, but the prayer journey to Cusco reminded us how the central the work of prayer is for mission both in Peru and back home. [n](#)

Omar Ortiz is the leadership development director for Christ the King PCA in Boston. He is also the leader of the Hispanic RADD team with MTW.



VIEW FROM THE FIELD

Teaching Scripture in the Context of ISIS

I was sitting with a group of a new of believers in the Middle East teaching about leadership. They had recently come together for study and worship and were hungry for God's Word. We were trying to encourage them to be leaders of their group.

We were studying the story of Nehemiah and his heart to lead for God's glory and the good of the people. As we read chapter four where those rebuilding the walls were being threatened, I tried to show them how Nehemiah motivated the people to be strong for the sake of the Lord and their family. "Do not be afraid of them. Remember the Lord, who is great and awesome, and fight for your brothers, your sons, your daughters, your wives, and your homes" (Neh. 4:14).

I was prepared to discuss how we lead and serve for God's glory and the good of the people. After we had discussed this verse for a while, one young man, Amged,* raised his hand. He asked if, based on this verse, it was OK for him to seek revenge and "fight" the people who had killed his sister. Was he understanding the verse correctly?

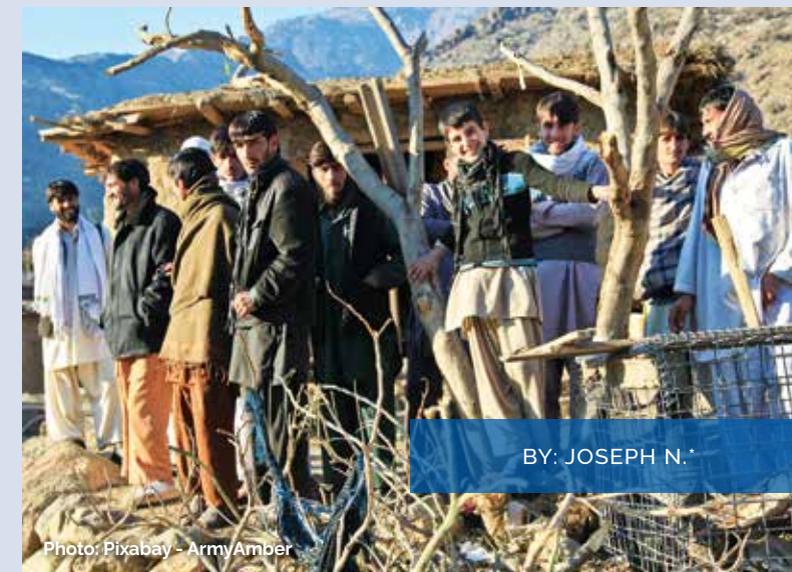
THE "EXPERT'S" STRUGGLE

This question wasn't on my agenda. I hesitated to answer. As I did, he explained that his sister had been taken and killed by ISIS. I tried to understand the deep struggle Amged felt. It was most certainly outside of my personal experience. In his new faith, he knew that he was supposed to forgive. Yet here was a story, a verse that mirrored his context.

I was the "expert" in the Bible and I positively highlighted Nehemiah's response as a leader. When I read the story, I see Nehemiah's motivation for leadership. Amged sees something different. He wonders how Nehemiah's call to fight for your family related to the loss of his sister. Our different cultures and life experiences generate different questions. Despite our

differences, we share a commitment that the Bible has answers to life's questions, whatever they may be.

This is the struggle and joy of missions. It is trying to understand people's culture and struggles and show how the Scriptures and the person of Jesus relate to them. Although everyone in this



BY: JOSEPH N. *

Photo: Pixabay - ArmyAmber

group is less than a year old in the Lord, their hunger and insightful questions are a beautiful picture of God's work in building His Church as He promised.

This group, and others like it, need discipleship, teaching. They need a pastor to shepherd them. The harvest is indeed plentiful. We are praying to start a team in the region to join what God is doing and walk alongside and learn with our brothers and sisters. We'd love you to join us! [n](#)

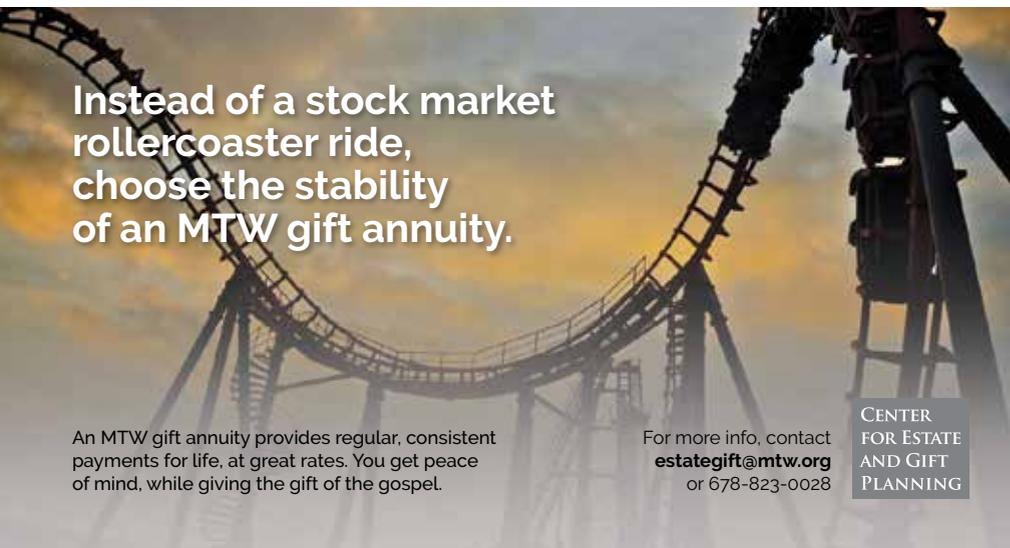
Learn how you can be a part of our work in the Middle East. Email go@mtw.org.

*Names have been changed



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Our mission: Making disciples among the nations.

Lloyd Kim MTW Coordinator
Amy Glass Editor-in-Chief
Melanie Benedict Managing Editor
Tom Mills Art Director
Andrew Shaughnessy Staff Writer

Editorial offices:

1600 North Brown Road
Lawrenceville, GA 30043
(678) 823-0004
mtw.org



Please send address changes to: hello@mtw.org

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photo feature

Moving forward in spite of the rain. MTW Japan planned a ministry of prayer and outreach for the 2020 summer Olympic Games. The Olympics have been postponed due to COVID-19, yet the sun will rise again. In the face of pandemic, challenges, and fear, the gospel remains true and the work in Japan continues.

Photo: Michael Allsbrook (recent MTW intern)

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FROM THE COORDINATOR

What Will We Endure for the Great Commission?

What does radical love and generosity look like? My wife was speaking to a Chinese woman at her local Bible Study Fellowship (BSF) earlier this year. The woman was getting updates on the coronavirus directly from friends and family in China through social media. She said that the city of Wuhan, the epicenter of the coronavirus, shut down its borders early after the outbreak. They would not allow people to come in or out of the city. The problem was that about 5 million Wuhan citizens were outside the city when they closed the roads in or out. Where would these 5 million people go? Where would they stay?

She went on to describe how Chinese Christians began opening their homes to these strangers, letting them stay with them without cost, putting themselves at great risk. The guests of course were wondering, ***“What would compel these Christians to be so kind, so generous, and so self-sacrificing?”***

We know the answer. It's Jesus. He is the One who welcomed us when we were strangers. He is the One who not only risked, but sacrificed His life for us, for our safety, for our salvation. And He is the

One who commissions us to proclaim His gospel of the kingdom in word and deed. What has always been interesting to me is *how* Jesus healed the sick, the diseased, the lepers. While He certainly could have stayed at a safe distance and merely spoken the word, in most cases He comes close and touches those who need healing (Matt 8:1-4; 14-15; 9:18-26; 29-31). In doing so, He puts himself at great risk. Jesus enters into the suffering, shame, and isolation of the most vulnerable. He takes their disease, uncleanness, and infirmities and replaces them with his perfect, spotless, cleanness.

This is the pattern He sets for us, who have experienced the transforming power of the gospel. “He took our illnesses and bore our diseases” (Matt 8:17). What then are we willing to risk for the sake of others? What are we willing to endure to carry out our Lord's Great Commission? Our challenge is to enter into the suffering, shame, and sickness of the most vulnerable with the healing love and generosity of the gospel of Jesus Christ. Would you join us in this high calling from our Lord? Would you pray that the gospel of the kingdom would advance throughout the world? [n](#)



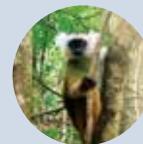
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