

## Episcopal Diocese of North Carolina's Involvement in Southern Honduras

The Episcopal Diocese of North Carolina has been involved with southern Honduras since 1988, when former Peace Corps Volunteer Jefferson Boyer led a delegation from the Diocese there. They were interested in establishing a working relationship with the Roman Catholics there to assist with sustainability for the region. (For more detailed information, please see "Toward Sustainability and Liberation? Forty Years of Struggle in Southern Honduras" by Jefferson Boyer - a paper presented at the 100th Annual Meeting of the American Anthropology Association, November 28-December 2, 2001.)

In 1989 "Las Comunidades Unidas" (United Communities) was created among six towns and villages with the goal of working together to obtain sustainability for their communities. They organized community cooperatives, placing central grain silos in each participating communities. They purchased some land (two manzanas, or about 3.5 acres) and built grain silos, a meeting center with dormitories and classrooms, plus a computer center and a small pharmacy. In the 1990s there were a number of medical missions sponsored by the Diocese of North Carolina, especially administered by Church of the Nativity in Raleigh. Since 2001 St. Stephen's Church in Durham has taken on the administrative coordination for this project.

The Honduras Health Mission serves at the invitation of Las Comunidades Unidas. There are four services the health mission provides during the seven days that we are on location: medical clinics, health education for health promoters, dental training, and hands-on training for health promoters.

**Medical Clinics** – The first service we provide is 4 1/2 days of medical clinics in two different geographical locations. With nine medical professionals (doctors, nurse practitioners, and physician associate) over 1,600 patients were seen in January 2006.

**Health Education for Health Promoters** – For the past four years, on the first full day in country, the health team has provided a day of continuing medical education for the local health promoters. Historically these health promoters have been trained by the Roman Catholic Church – one per village – and these individuals have been the major source, if not the only source, of health care in the southern highlands. In January 2005 there were approximately 17 health promoters attending the Saturday of training to learn about confidentiality, ear infections, and use of blood pressure cuffs, otoscopes and stethoscopes, as well understanding the importance of this type of equipment.

The dentist also trained health promoters in the application of fluoride varnish. In 2006 there were 47 health promoters in attendance, and the continuing education day focused on confidentiality, infections and antibiotics, as well as reinforcing the utilization of blood pressure cuffs, stethoscopes, and otoscopes, of which we brought 30 into the country. Our dentist, along with the senior Honduran health promoters, trained new promoters in the theory and application of fluoride.

**Dental Training** – The third service we provide is our dental training of the health promoters in fluoride application. The January 2005 Mission group transported fluoride varnish and instructional materials to Honduras to set this dental project in motion. We provided enough Duraphat® fluoride varnish to treat 1,000 first graders twice a year. This is the approximate number of first graders in all the villages served by Las Comunidades Unidas.

Public health dentists have determined that fluoride varnish is the most clinically effective as well as cost effective means of increasing the resistance of teeth to decay due to poor or inconsistent oral hygiene and diet problems. In January 2005 the cost of the fluoride varnish, toothpaste and toothbrushes came to \$2,050 for 1,000 children. In January 2006 the cost of the fluoride varnish, the toothpaste and toothbrushes for 2000 children totaled \$4,847.32. The cost to protect one child's adult teeth is a little over \$2.00 per year. This is for the two applications.

This fluoride project grew out of research by our dentist – Jim Clare, MD, MPH – into what could make a difference for this population where a toothbrush is a luxury item, as is toothpaste. After our group leaves, the health promoters go into the schools and register the children in the fluoride project and then varnish their teeth.

**Hands-on Training for Health Promoters** – The fourth service provided by our medical group is to work alongside the local health promoters in the clinics. This is a great opportunity for ongoing training and development, and not only for the Honduran health promoters. It also provides our medical professionals a very different perspective regarding limited resources.

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Since beginning our involvement in 2001, the total number of patients seen is greater than 7,200. A subgroup of medical professionals and interpreters designed, drew and published a public health focused coloring book in Spanish, of which we take 1,000 copies in to be distributed through the schools. So far over 3,000 have been distributed.

As the dental project continues to grow by one grade each year (2007 saw 1st, 2nd, and 3rd grades having their teeth varnished) the costs of this project will also multiply exponentially.

This health mission demonstrates what can be done when various parts of the Diocese come together to work together. St. Luke's Episcopal Church Foundation, Salisbury, NC, has been instrumental in assisting us with funding a pharmacy and fluoride treatment. The Kenan Foundation of Chapel Hill, NC, has also assisted financially. Church of the Nativity, Raleigh, has been very active in sending many participants, and also in pre-packaging children's vitamins and analgesics. St. Stephen's, Durham, has shouldered the administrative responsibilities and the financial accountabilities since 2001. The Episcopal Diocese of Atlanta has sent a number of participants during the past three years.