

Rotary's gifts lift Honduran villages

By Carol Frey

Roman Catholic missionaries settled Nueva Palestina, Honduras, in 1975 with 50 families who scraped a meager living from the land for decades after.

Those migrants came searching for free land, more farming and better living conditions than coastal Honduras had offered them, says Raimundo Osorto, who grew up in Nueva Palestina with his seven siblings. What the new families found in the Olancho province was far from the land of milk and honey they had sought, says Osorto, the area's unofficial "mayor." There was nothing: no roads, schools, medicines, doctors or governance of any kind. The settlers ate plants and the animals they could kill, drank surface water and found themselves at the mercy of malaria and parasites. "A lot of people died from stomach diseases and infections," says Osorto, now known as Padre Mundo Osorto, cathedral priest of the Diocese of Juticalpa.

Ten years ago Rotarians from North Carolina found a way to do what the government of Honduras couldn't do for sparsely populated areas: Rotary provided clean drinking water at a reasonable cost. An investment of less than \$70,000 has created conditions that may well feed the economic development of northeastern Honduras – one of the world's poorest and most violent countries.

Water filters distributed by the Rotary project were the first gifts many people had ever received, according to Padre Raimundo, and that has made a difference. "The people felt something, maybe hope. That has had a profound impact on the way people live," says Ricky Burn, for 15 years a regular visitor to Nueva Palestina. Burn and others have been deeply involved there since 2000 when their church, St. Michael the Archangel Catholic Church in Cary, N.C., formed a sister parish bond with Nueva Palestina's parish, Our Lady of Suyapa.

That collaboration was all the talk seven years ago when Rotarian Mark Wainwright stopped in to see his chiropractor, Rob Baric, who had just made his first trip to Nueva Palestina. As Baric described what he and his brother Mark had seen, Wainwright remembered a 2008 article in *The Rotarian* about bio-sand water filters that cost \$75 to build and could remove effectively 96 percent of fecal pathogens from water passed through them. Wainwright began to think about the potential impact Rotary could make in Honduras with a relatively small investment in Nueva Palestina.

The Barics agreed on the need for a strategy attacking Nueva Palestina's health problems at their origin: the taps for drinking water. Testing had earlier confirmed the water was contaminated with parasites that had bedeviled the fragile population. "It looked clear," Marc Baric said, "but tests done in 2007 found that it failed on all levels."

The church was budgeting \$20,000 a year for medications to treat stomach infections that would recur when the medicine ran out, said Baric, who leads St. Michael's work in Honduras. "We can't send enough medicines for a growing population so we had to start working at the source of the diseases. If we can solve problems at the source – water filters and latrines for health – we can give them a better life for 50, 60 years."

Based on an earlier trial, Padre Mundo knew that water filters and latrines could lead to better health for his parishioners and eagerly embraced the promise of more. Joining forces with Rotary's global network could extend the church's reach further into remote areas of the Olancho province. Since Hurricane Mitch had left 80 percent of Honduras without clean drinking water in 1999, the national government had focused its efforts in urban areas, leaving Nueva Palestina and its 91 neighboring villages with little hope of ever receiving a reliable source of clean water.

Wainwright talked to five Rotary Clubs in St. Michael's hometown about investing in bio-sand filters for a trial run in Nueva Palestina. Four of the five clubs agreed to put in \$1,000 each and Wainwright's Cary Page club allocated \$2,000 toward a district matching grant to help St. Michael install 189 water filters.

Since the \$14,000 grant project ended in 2010, spending for medicines has dropped to near zero. "The water filter works. Bad water goes in, good water comes out," says Baric. Residents clearly recognize its value. "Children are taught now to stop at a house with a filter to fill up containers before walking home from school," Burn says.

Inspired by those results, Wainwright lined up the Danli Rotary Club in Honduras to serve as host club for an expansion of the clean water project for Nueva Palestina and some of its surrounding villages. The water filters used in the initial project were manufactured in Danli by Fabrica de Filtros Bioarena. Wainwright figured a global grant would be needed to make a more significant dent in the area's water problem.

"There's just so much need down there, I just thought I've got to do it again," he said.

He enlisted North Carolina's Rotary District 7710 to make donations, and his home club, Cary Page, climbed aboard again. With those contributions and the Rotary Foundation's global grant approved in February 2015, project managers had \$42,250 with which to install 305 water filters and 59 latrines built by the user families themselves.

Key to the project is the longstanding relationships the Catholic parish had built with the people of the Nueva Palestina area. "The church is a very strong influence in the lives within this very needy community, and clean water is a major cause of concern for those without water filtration," St. Michael leaders wrote to the Rotary Foundation during vetting of the grant application. "Thus, working with Nuestra Senora de Suyapa parish and St. Michael Church will allow Rotary a way to help the poorest of the poor with great success."

Underlying that prediction are the church's 100 health promoters who are trained to validate performance of the water filters in people's homes, assess their needs, review applications for upgrades such as flooring and roofing. "Sometimes they'll take a canoe to reach some villages," said Burn of St. Michael. Padre Mundo meets with each of these health promoters for debriefings four times a year.

"To have sustainability," says Wainwright, "you need people and organizations who are involved in the project or program continually... Rotary isn't able to be in that remote area yet. So the answer is to work with organizations who are continually involved with sustainable and ongoing projects."

Historically, the largest families have been the strongest in the mountainous area of Honduras near Nicaragua. They have survived with only their basic living requirements – shelter and food – met by working hard in the fields, but still they have only had a protein-shy diet of rice, beans and corn tortillas to show for their labors. Not only is there no cattle, but also the mountain animals have been hunted out. "There are no animals," says Mark Baric. Widespread malnutrition resulted.

Government finally reached Nueva Palestina's home province in 1985, but the officials in Juticalpa focused their efforts, not on malnutrition, but on education, basic health care and clearing land for roads, Padre Mundo says. In fact, extracting the area's mahogany and other hardwood resources overshadowed any real effort toward economic development. "The big equipment they brought was for filling holes in the roads" [used by loggers], he said.

Then Bishop Maurus Muldoon, the newly appointed prelate of Olancho, struck up a friendship with Monsignor John Wall of St. Michael church in North Carolina. Theirs was a collaboration in the 1990s that led to the sister parish relationship, creating new collaborations that caused change "in a practical way."

For solutions to the malnutrition problem, Baric said St. Michael leaders turned to N.C. State University's College of Agriculture and Life Sciences in 2012. A practical approach was to help Olancho's farmers get more food from their land.

George C. Naderman, a St. Michael parishioner and N.C. State soil specialist, provided the link that Nueva Palestina needed. Naderman had seen successful farming techniques developed by the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization – land clearing methods to replace burning and careful use of chemicals to control pests, for example – and he took them to five villages near Nueva Palestina in 2013. N.C. State also brought a connection to the national agricultural university of Honduras and knowledgeable students willing to work in Nueva Palestina's farms.

With those partners in place, Nueva Palestina began addressing productivity in earnest.

“Yields are measured in terms of bushels per acre,” Naderman said, “and I’ve been told they brought in 30 to 50 bushels per acre this year, probably doubling the yields they’ve seen in the past.” One 3.5-acre farm, for example, increased its corn production this year from 13.1 bushels per acre to 24 bushels per acre. “To them, it is the 83 percent yield increase that counts,” Naderman says.

The potential exists for even greater productivity, given that a comparable field in the U.S. would produce 150 bushels per acre, he said. “If a farmer can double the yield, he can grow beans on half of his land as well as corn,” he said. Village farmers now have to barter for beans to feed their families.

Most of the area’s farmers aim primarily to meet the dietary needs of their families, but yields are improving enough that some can afford to start exporting, Padre Raimondo says. Some 20 percent of the town’s farmers and those of the 91 tiny villages within 500 square miles are exporting livestock, cassava and some coffee.

More food and less malnutrition promise to strengthen Olancho’s population against malaria, even more among those benefiting from clean water, and in ways far beyond their physical health.

Since work on the filters and latrines was completed in June 2015, Baric says Padre Mundo has been able to redirect even more money that used to be spent on medicines for water-borne illnesses. Some funds go to purchase vitamins, antibiotics and eye care.

“Now education is a priority,” he says, and 95 percent of children leave the fields, where their families need their labor, to go to school.

It was only two years ago that the first students of Nueva Palestina’s schools graduated from high school, but in 2015, there were 40 graduates, Padre Mundo says. And the parish has as many as 17,000 names on a waiting list for its offer of \$1,500 scholarships for the first year of college.

An initial \$10,000 budget for agriculture helped 25 farmers buy pesticides and herbicides for two or three harvests. More farmers will enjoy auxiliary benefits stemming from the sanitation improvements provided by the Rotary grant, such as more land available for planting. The church is helping 46 farmers now, and Baric said he expects a multiplier effect on agriculture as funds for health projects can be redirected.

Word is spreading that good things are happening, Padre Mundo says, and the area has become “a place of migration from Nicaragua ... There’s a gold rush mentality.” The population has swelled to 40,000, building a market for new retail stores offering clothing and hardware in Nueva Palestina.

Yet even with 1,000 water filters installed, thousands more families remain without them. Now, though, there's hope for the future, Padre Mundo says.

“There's better health, more work and people are starting to talk about ‘dark water’ [sewage] and paving streets,” says Mark Baric. “More people help each other now, seeing us help them.”