

Pastor's Corner August 2017
"Gracious Service"

There are two seasons in Panamá; Wet Hot and Dry Hot. It was Dry Hot. We had spent the morning collecting 20 foot poles from the nearby jungle, hacking down young trees with machetes and carrying them over our shoulders to our build site. One of the youth took one end of one and I took the other. I was beginning to feel the "burn" as the weight of the small tree dug into my shoulder. Almost there! I was proud of myself for making it this far without collapsing when out of the corner of my eye I saw Domi passing us at a brisk trot carrying a pole even larger on his shoulder BY HIMSELF! "I've GOT to exercise more!" I thought to myself. "Cuidado!" another voice shouted right behind us. It was Edelio, now trotting past us, carrying another pole equal to Domi's ... BY HIMSELF! As I arrived behind those two, and all the others who had passed us, I was drenched with sweat and thoroughly exhausted. Clifford (the youth who helped me) did not seem winded at all. As I think back on it, he probably could have carried that stupid pole without me . . . and never lose pace with the others. But out of deference to me he had allowed me to "help" him, and never once complained at my snail's pace. That is one of the things I was to learn about the Kunas of Abia Yala; they were not selfish, but consistently sought to support, uplift and look out for those around them. They are a people who understand the idea of "gracious service" to others.

What we were building was our first "Sanctuary". It consisted of 4 stout poles stuck in the ground to secure the four corners of the A-Frame above our heads that would support the tin roof we would put over it. Open, with no walls, and a slight A-Frame roof overhead to protect from the sun and rain. Maximiliano built benches to sit on for underneath the roof. It took us (mostly "them") a day to construct. Having had a number of Baptisms and the completion of the first Confirmation class the week before, we had decided it was time to have an "official Sanctuary" of our own. Now, in the late afternoon, we sat on our new benches under our new sanctuary and the topic of discussion was what we should name this brand new congregation. As the afternoon wore on, the discussion was zeroing in on one name: Bab Dumat ("Great Father", the Kuna name for God). Then, somebody stood up and addressed the congregation. "We should not call our congregation "Bab Dumat". If we do so we will exclude all of our Spanish speaking neighbors with a Kuna word they do not understand. We should, instead, call our congregation "Iglesia Dios es Grande" ("God is Great Church" in Spanish). And so it was that the very first act at the birth of this congregation was, itself, missionary in nature. They who had discovered how much they themselves had been served by God wanted to reach out and serve others with His Good News.

And it is Good News. No less to the Kunas of Abia Yala than to you or me or anyone else in the world. The Christian message is "Christ's " message; that though we have all separated ourselves by our sin from God and the perfect joyful life that He has planned for us, all is not lost. Being broken by sin, we all ill-equipped to restore what God originally called "good" . . . in fact we CAN'T return to Him . . . no matter how hard we try . . . no matter how much we DO . . . we CAN'T. Something "broken" cannot make itself "unbroken". The Good News that the Kunas rejoiced to hear is that God CAN and DID do something about our "brokenness". God Himself came to pay for our sin. He had the capitol to afford the redemption price; perfect righteousness. And He spent it all, even though it cost His very life, and then offered it as a FREE gift to us! FREE! To live forever WITH God in joy and perfection and WITHOUT sin, sorrow, sickness, sadness, anger, brokenness, and death is a FREE GIFT. We don't have to DO anything for it; just receive the gift with gratefulness. THAT is God's "gracious service" to all of us.

And the Kunas of Abia Yala were and are grateful. So much so that the now twenty plus year-old children of Domi and Edelio 25 years later continue with the same spirit as their fathers. On my recent return visit they showed me a new mission they had begun up the hill from Abia Yala in Las Nubes. They had begun a Sunday School which now has an attendance greater than that of their home congregation "Dios es Grande". It is filled

with children in two group, primary and secondary, aptly taught by these young people who themselves were faithfully taught by their fathers and mothers (my first students). “Gracious servants” who know how much they have been “graciously served” by God the Gracious Servant, Jesus the Christ.

“For even the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.” (Mark 10:45)

“Out of the anguish of his soul he shall see and be satisfied; by his knowledge shall the righteous one, my servant, make many to be accounted righteous, and he shall bear their iniquities.” (Isaiah 53:11)

“Behold my servant, whom I uphold, my chosen, in whom my soul delights; I have put my Spirit upon him; he will bring forth justice to the nations.” (Isaiah 43:1)



Dommi carrying a pole 1992



Edelio putting tin on the roof 1992



Pastor Nick visiting Primary Sunday School in Las Nubes 2017