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STORIES OF HOPE RESTORED

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Mission to the World

Kintsugi: Hope in the Broken

by Roger Lowther

Students and professors packed the lecture hall, part of a week-long series of events at the university. An ambassador and other dignitaries attended as well.



I spoke about *kintsugi*, the traditional Japanese art of joining broken pottery shards back together with gold, and the people who have been personally impacted by this art form—a woman mourning the loss of her husband, a man estranged from his grandchildren, a young couple beginning a new life together.

Kintsugi is not about fixing; it's about recreating into the new. Our world is fracturing and falling apart, but that's not the end. There is hope, and *kintsugi* speaks to us about this hope, one broken piece at a time.

During the Q&A that followed, one young woman tentatively raised her hand and asked, "Can something be too broken to fix? Can there be a future for ... such a person?"

She trailed off as she began to cry. The whole room became silent, moved by compassion for this young woman. Not knowing what else to do, I ended the lecture, came down from the stage, and walked up the aisle to her seat.

"Would you mind if we prayed for you?" I asked gently.

"If you want to ..."

We bowed our heads. As everyone prayed together, we understood the gospel in new and powerful ways. A broken Christ on a broken tree does not end with a Good Friday evening, but the brilliance of an Easter morning. We tangibly felt the presence of God bring healing into the unexpected realm of a secular lecture hall. There is hope, and *kintsugi* whispers to us of this hope, one broken piece at a time. [n](#)

Ukraine War Weighs Heavily on English Camp Students

by Jon Powell

This year's English Camp in Lviv, Ukraine, had a war heaviness about it. One student's uncle even died on the front lines during the camp. But the seriousness of the war may have contributed to students' willingness to think about their own lives—their direction, future, and ultimate meaning. Through it all, it was a meaningful, memorable week together filled with English lessons, English Bible lessons, hobby classes, sports, evening talks, games, and late night chats.

One student had many deep discussions with various camp leaders and volunteers. One evening he spent over an hour talking very frankly with a missionary about what our local church is like and why it exists.

Another student does not have a church background. She came to the camp with all sorts of negative stereotypes about Christians. But she had an open mind. Through the daily Bible readings and interactions with other Christians her view of Christianity changed completely! She is looking forward to the student ministry meetings this fall to learn more about what faith in Jesus entails.



Another student has a tattoo on her arm that says "Heroes don't get happy endings." It is her way of honoring her father, who died on the front lines a year ago. She left the Greek Catholic church she grew up in as a teenager, finding nothing compelling in it.

But during the camp her perspective changed. She now claims faith in Jesus and believes that He gave His life for her sins.

There are many similar stories of the Holy Spirit's work among the participants, some of whom are second-year volunteers, who often grow more when they hear the same stories and explanations a second time around. [n](#)

BY: OLIVIA CUNNINGHAM

My Internship in Japan: What I Learned About Prayer and Sharing the Gospel

"One of your goals for this internship is to share the gospel with one person ..."

Hearing that expectation set months before I went to Nagoya was simultaneously underwhelming and overwhelming. Obviously, going on a mission trip means sharing the gospel. That is the usual expectation.

So why was the expectation so low? Why did the goal have to be expressed?

Japan presents missionaries with some unique difficulties. Japanese people are private and polite. They could "listen" just to be nice and move on with their lives. Like many mission fields, sharing the gospel in Japan is rarely a one-time activity. It is expected that sharing the gospel involves getting acquainted with the individual personally. In Japan, that means intentionally communicating, connecting, and investing despite cultural and language barriers. It is a daunting task that did not seem accomplishable in two months. Even so, the other interns and I were encouraged to pray for those unknown people with whom we would share the gospel. The challenge of trusting God with this task had just begun.

THE UNEXPECTED CHALLENGE OF CONNECTION

Prayer is a difficult task. The effort, time, and intentionality required can cause us to sweep prayer to the side in favor of something more tangible. But it is vital to the life of a Christian

and even more so for a Christian in a country filled with spiritual darkness and an absence of God's light. Whether called to be a missionary overseas or called to minister at home, we are all commanded to pray. "Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you," (1 Thessalonians 5:16-18). What a hard task to accomplish! Praise the LORD for His grace in forgiving us for failing in this command. For how is it even possible to pray without ceasing?



Olivia Cunningham on a rainy day in Nagoya

I arrived in Japan with apprehension and excitement. My first week was exhausting and busy. Jet lag and the early rising sun woke me up at 5:00 a.m. every morning, but I was starting to feel comfortable navigating the subway and train system. Then a couple of days into our first week, our orientation again reminded me of our goal. Share the gospel with one person; pray for that person while you wait for God to open the doors. I was determined to meet this goal. >>



MTW Japan interns (Olivia fifth from left)

>> I garnered the courage to start conversations and complimented others while traveling to and from the homes where I tutored. But despite my small desperate efforts, I could not seem to make a genuine connection. In between my tutoring responsibilities, I found myself with extra time, but not quite enough to go back to my apartment. Instead, I made my way to one of the many Starbucks in Nagoya. The often busy coffee shops were the perfect place to read my Bible, write updates for my supporters, seek out opportunities to talk to other college-age students, and pray. All of a sudden, I had time to pray deeply and constantly. Between my commutes and my free time, God had provided time for me to be alone with my thoughts and prayers. Though constantly surrounded by people, the language barrier forced me to communicate with the only One who fully understands me.



Nearly every day, I wrote out prayers in my notebook, whispered prayers on the subway, praised the LORD as I enjoyed the beauty of Japan. God gave me a glimpse of how to pray without ceasing. It is easy to talk to people here in the U.S.;

Nearly every day, I wrote out prayers in my notebook, whispered prayers on the subway, praised the LORD as I enjoyed the beauty of Japan. God gave me a glimpse of how to pray without ceasing.

it is hard to remember to talk to God here. But when you do not know the language of the people you are surrounded by, it is all made simple. I talk a lot and God was there in Japan to listen. What could have been many moments of loneliness became moments of companionship with my King. Moments that could have been overwhelming became moments of peace. What a gift to be given! And though time continued without any success at making connections, my goal slowly became not something that I was setting out to achieve, but something that I knew God would open the door to and give me the courage for in His time.

A NEW FRIEND AND ANSWERED PRAYER

Toward the end of June, I was able to serve by working in the nursery at a Nagoya-wide youth group. With my elementary-level Japanese, I was less intimidated by spending time with younger-than-elementary-age children, and I was not working

with the toddlers alone. A younger college-age Japanese girl also worked in the nursery. She had an impressive understanding of English and because of this, we were able to communicate and get to know one another. I got her number and we agreed to get coffee a couple of weeks later. I served at the youth group several times afterward, but she was never there again. Though there was some connection that was unknown to me, I am confident that God was working through that specific moment and individual situation.

Now I knew who I was praying for! God had given me a gift and a path forward. I kept looking for opportunities to start conversations and make connections, but God gave me a peace that accompanies trusting Him. And then I saw firsthand God’s promise fulfilled in Psalm 37:5, “Commit your way to the Lord; trust in him, and he will act.”

I got coffee with my new friend, and we talked for hours. God gave me the courage and the words to share the gospel with her. Though she did not receive faith that day, God had given me the boldness to plant seeds. While my heart longs for the day that her heart is open to the truth, she is in God’s hands alone. I continued to spend time with my friend throughout my time in Nagoya when we could; now I text her occasionally and pray for her often.

Though this was not the first time I ever shared the gospel with someone, through the experience God taught me many things. First, I am not in control of what situations God presents me with, but I am called to be watchful in prayer. As Colossians 4:2-3 says, “Continue steadfastly in prayer, being watchful in it with thanksgiving. At the same time, pray also for us, that God may open to us a door for the word, to declare the mystery of Christ ...”

Second, I have nothing lasting to lose, but everything lasting to gain from sharing God’s love with others. As Matthew 6 commands us, we are to store up treasures in heaven.

Third, boldness is a gift resulting from true hope (2 Corinthians 3:12). And what a gift it is to serve God by sharing that hope.

Last, prayer is powerful. Seen and unseen, God is working. He always has been and always will be. Jesus has torn the veil that separated us from God and now we can speak intimately with

the God of all things. How could we pass up that opportunity? “Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you. Do not quench the Spirit. Do not despise prophecies, but test everything; hold fast what is good. ... He who calls you is faithful; he will surely do it” (1 Thessalonians 5:16-21, 24).

By the end of my trip, God had opened the door for me to share the gospel with two other young women. I pray for the salvation of all three girls and marvel at what a transformation God did in me through those experiences. Praise be to God, our Savior, Creator, and Friend.



Olivia with a Japanese friend, J-Chan

Over the course of the summer, God transformed me and gave me a more tender heart for missions in Japan. Upon my return home, I took time to pray and debrief. After about a month, God was still stirring my heart to serve Him in Japan. I worked eagerly to make my way back to Nagoya and God has opened the door for my return this fall. This time, I’ll be working with the same missionaries and seminary for six months. I will get to tutor missionary kids, serve Christ Bible Institute, share God’s love, and be hands and feet where needed. I’ll also have the chance to spend more time with my Japanese friend and show her the love of Christ. I am so grateful for this opportunity and I look forward to seeing how God will continue to work in my life and in the lives of the Japanese He places in my path. [n](#)



rescuing the unseen

MTW's CEMIPRE Center for the Blind Restores Hope in Chile



The deadliest fires in Chile's history swept through its hilly, coastal center of Valparaiso in February. In an area gripped in a 10-year drought, 160 separate wildfires raged for a month.

When the embers cooled, MTW's Viña del Mar team started looking for people to help, using MTW Compassion Fund donations.

They reached out first to people from their CEMIPRE ministry centers for the blind and visually impaired community. Were any of their people impacted?

Six families.

They contacted ministry partners, talked with pastors, and met families. That network prioritized widows, families with a member with a disability, and families with children who were temporarily split up to go to different shelters.

"We went where they told us to go," she says.

In a charred building, they found a blind squatter named Fernando.

"Quite honestly, as a blind person myself, I'm not often surprised by what blind people can do, ... But this one really freaked me out."

"Quite honestly, as a blind person myself, I'm not often surprised by what blind people can do," CEMIPRE founder John Rug says. "But this one really freaked me out. His tools were destroyed in the fire so he asked if we could help replace his chainsaw and ax. I mean, I really freaked out."

Fernando had gone through CEMIPRE training for the blind years before where he had learned job and life skills. He said, "Well, John, you told me I could do anything I wanted to do, and [preparing firewood] is what I had always wanted to do."

The MTW team replaced his chainsaw with the same model. He immediately started it up and then showed the team his surprising accuracy using the ax to split wood. With the new tools, he was able to provide for his family again.



MTW team leader John Rug (center) presents Fernando with a chainsaw to replace the one he lost in the fires.

The wildfires were followed by flooding so severe that it has made up for a decade of drought.

MTW relief teams from the U.S. arrived between those disasters to build structures. Next, CEMIPRE worked to provide beds so people were off the floor as winter approached.

Now, they are helping families—a total of 30 in all—get basic appliances.

"What we did was a drop in a bucket," John says. But it helped them, and it helped us connect people with churches. Slowly, they are returning to CEMIPRE's own growing work.

RESCUING THE UNSEEN

The fires forced an intensified season of a long-standing theme: *The team goes looking for people who can't go looking for them.*

Often isolated and alone, blind residents don't know that help or welcome is open to them.

And in a culture that can be as austere about disabilities as the Andes mountains, they learn that they are sought-after guests at Jesus' banquet table.

CEMIPRE, the Presbyterian Ministry Center for those with disabilities in Chile's central Valparaiso region, grew out of MTW's local church-planting work more than 20 years ago. Team members John and Cathy Rug and David and Danielle Grotton serve both the center and the local Presbyterian churches, as well as partner with Gospel 360, a regional church planting network in urban areas.

Chile is a visually lush country, made up of beaches, mountains, high deserts, and skies smeared thick with stars. It's an "astronomer's paradise," housing about half of the world's astronomy infrastructure. Filled with soaring mountain ranges, it is a skiing and mountaineering paradise as well. Popular guides for the city of Valparaíso tout its steep funicular railways and "labyrinth of cobbled alleys." Delightful for tourists. Torture for the visually impaired.

Viña del Mar, where the original center is located, is itself a beautiful beach town ringed with hills and high-rise beach condos. But, as the Grottons put it, five blocks off the >>



Wildfires destroyed thousands of homes in and around Viña del Mar.

"We knew we could help more than six," MTW missionary and CEMIPRE administrator Danielle Grotton says.

So they went to the burned-out places looking for more.

Every disability has consequences, so the center works in Jesus' name to reduce the spiritual, emotional, social, and professional consequences of disability that Jesus eliminated in His miracles.



CEMIPRE teaches orientation and mobility, also called cane travel.



A CEMIPRE teacher instructs a client learning braille.

>> beach is where tourism dollars end and “where reality begins for most residents.” Highrise buildings mix with houses made of scraps on steep hillsides.

“Jesus said... ‘But when you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind, and you will be blessed.’”

— Luke 14: 13-14a (NIV)

THE CHURCH LEARNS TO SEE

CEMIPRE has grown slowly from one location to three, but this also feels like a drop in the bucket compared to the need. “It’s slow because the Church needs to grow its vision. I want the Church to know that it is time to wake up,” John says.

“When Jesus tells us whom to invite for a feast, he tells us to look for the poor, the lame, the blind. That’s significant because we are seeing His priorities,” John says. “We like to spiritualize that to mean people who are spiritually poor, spiritually lame, and spiritually blind, but I don’t see that in the text. Jesus is dealing with the physical side of people as well as the spiritual side.”

Danielle adds, “It is slow, but it is happening.”

The center’s newest braille teacher is a woman who woke up. She heard a church presentation about the center and signed up for its “Put Yourself in My Place” training program. Her passion grew, so she learned braille and started helping in different ways.

“She’s taking her vision for what God is doing back to her church, and her congregation’s eyes are opening as well,” Danielle says. “Our prayer is that the Lord would continue to awaken the Chilean Church.”

THE VISION GETS PERSONAL

John himself had to wake up to that bigger vision.

Blind from birth—he typed his seminary papers on a braille typewriter—he wanted nothing to do with ministries for people with disabilities.

Sure, he helped people who happened to be in his church, but he resented the assumption that disability ministry was automatically his niche to fill. “The hackles would go up on my neck,” he says. Instead, he became a cross-cultural church planter.

“It was a pride thing that the Lord had to crush. Which He did.” A few years into his ministry, kids from the church youth group regularly came to his house just to use the pool, with an arms-crossed attitude. They registered little interest in relationships at church or in the gospel.

“I thought to myself, these kids need to learn to serve!”

The Lord prompted him, “Yes, but who will be their example?”

So John started teaching computer skills at a local school for the blind and saw the tremendous need.

“It became very clear to me that people with disabilities could die in their homes and nobody would ever know.”

He visited Cuba to see how the Church engaged in ministry to the blind. It inspired him to map that model into a Chilean context. For instance, the largest Protestant denomination in Chile emphasizes miraculous healing. When asked, John doesn’t

hesitate but answers smoothly, as if he has had this conversation hundreds of times: People need to hear that the absence of a miracle is not a lack of God’s love.

“I recognize that God can do what He pleases, but often it pleases Him to say, ‘No, I have other plans.’”

Every disability has consequences, so the center works in Jesus’ name to reduce the spiritual, emotional, social, and professional consequences of disability that Jesus eliminated in His miracles.

Danielle gives a small sampling of a long list: overcoming fear of loud noises and moving objects, learning to use a cane, getting safely around a house, learning braille, and adapting to new communication tools that move people out of isolation.

They also have a lot of fun keeping people engaged with games, folk singing, and excursions.

REACHING THE HIDDEN

It is growing in scope as well as size.

Marcela Molina is an occupational therapy student at a local university in Valparaiso and an intern at CEMIPRE. Efferrescent and dedicated, she has wanted to work with the blind population since she was young when she would “practice” doing tasks with her eyes closed. The CEMIPRE occupational therapist has taken her blindfolded through the streets so she could experience using a cane. “Everything they taught us at

school was wrong,” she says with a shake of her head. “It’s all from a book with no interaction. They didn’t even show us braille!” Centers like this are so rare that she didn’t know any existed before her internship.

Now, she is meeting people who have been isolated for years. “They are hidden,” she says. “We don’t see them because they don’t come out from their homes. They don’t know how, and they feel like everything is against them,” she says, her young voice heavy.

“One man told me that he used to have a job and a wife and family. Now all that is gone, and he can’t even make a cup of tea.

“We help them to be able to walk outside again and feel the sun on their skin.”

CEMIPRE’s vision is to expand to reach the estimated 1.1 million vision-impaired people in the country. The services are critical, but the soul-satisfying piece is helping people see the tremendous love of the cross, the team says.

“Then, when they hear how much they are loved—wow!” John says with a laugh.

People who think of themselves as only a burden come to know that they are no less made in the image of God.

They discover that God, through His Church, is looking for them. [1](#)

ADDICTS to Pastors

The Gospel Transforms the Lives of Two Bulgarian National Partners

God is in the business of redeeming sinners, a truth Boris Kolev and Niki Genchov, two of Mission to the World's national partners in Sofia, Bulgaria, understand intimately. From early adolescence through their young adulthood, both men were ensnared in the throes of drug addiction. Each man was homeless, lonely, and desperate until the Holy Spirit flipped the script—pulling both out of their hopeless situations into loving relationships with Jesus, and eventually calling them to full-time ministry.

BORIS'S STORY

Boris was born in a small Bulgarian village in 1984. He never knew his father and lived as an only child with his mother and grandfather. Boris's mom died tragically when he was only 12 years old. Before she died, Boris was placed in institutional care, but the conditions there were not always very safe. Gangs of kids would bully other kids who were considered weaker. He would participate in the bullying to avoid being bullied himself. He survived by avoiding thinking about his situation and living one day at a time. Orphaned and completely alone, Boris learned to fend for himself.

He spent his teenage years couch surfing from one friend's house to another, wondering why he was in this situation and longing for a normal family. During this time, Boris found solace in drugs. He continued his nomad lifestyle well into young adulthood, wandering from city to city trapped in a cycle of theft, incarceration, and substance abuse.

He eventually hit rock bottom at the age of 30. "I was so broken. Everything I had was broken and I heard from friends about this Christian community that lives together," says Boris. His friends were talking about Reto—a Christian rehab center in Sofia that provides housing to men struggling with substance abuse while addressing their addiction. When he first heard about Reto, Boris had no interest in seeking help and told himself he would only go as a last resort. He kept thinking his circumstances would improve. Eventually he realized this wasn't true and admitted he had a big problem that he couldn't fix on his own.

He went to Reto and quickly realized he was in for more than he had bargained for. Every morning the Reto staff began the day with a Bible study and worship, and they regularly told him about Jesus.

"I started to listen to the gospel, but at the beginning I didn't really understand. I thought that everyone was crazy and that I was the only one who was a little bit normal," he says. "I told myself I would stay two months then I would leave."

Day by day God began to open Boris's heart. For a while he was annoyed the Reto staff kept preaching the gospel to him, but he saw how the Christians on staff fostered deep relationships with each other and the residents. Boris had never experienced a community in which everyone did everything together, and,

after being on his own for so long, he found this way of life attractive. Then, a year and a half after Boris first came to Reto, everything changed. He attended the morning Bible study and felt as if the speaker was talking directly to him.

"I was at the end of my strength ... and after the meeting I prayed, 'Lord Jesus, forgive me,'" says Boris. "I'll never forget that moment because after that I was free. This was when Jesus came into my heart and showed me who I am and that He was something I really needed. It really changed my life."



Missionary Trevin Hoot (right) with national partners: pastor Stefan Zarev, Boris Kolev, and Niki Genchov (left to right)

NIKI'S STORY

Niki was raised in a non-Christian home by atheist parents. He delved into drugs when he was 12 years old. He prefers to keep the details private, but mentioned that for 13 years he tried everything from marijuana to heroin. When he was 25, an acquaintance told him about Reto and he decided to go and seek help.

"I went to this center because I was very broken and in a very bad situation. Even my parents didn't want to see me. My mother told me that she didn't care whether I went there or lived on the street."

At Reto he heard the gospel and read Scripture for the first time. He attended every prayer and worship service and, like Boris, he thought everything was strange and everyone was crazy.

He couldn't help but be a little disappointed. He had come to Reto looking for help and the staff kept telling him Jesus was >>

>> the solution to his broken situation. But Niki, having never heard the gospel before, didn't believe them and just wanted everything to stop—he thought the Bible was boring, he was weary of constantly hearing about finding new life in Jesus, and he didn't know what to do. He said that leaving the center was a horrible option because the only life he knew was that of a drug addict, but staying at the center felt intolerable.

“I thought to myself, ‘I’m 25 and in a desperate situation. I have no friends, no money, no job, no past, and no future. I don’t know what to do with my life. I have absolutely no idea.’”

“My situation was exactly the same. I still had no money, no job, no friends—but my heart was different, and everything changed,” said Niki.

THE PATH TO NEW LIFE

After calling Boris and Niki into a saving relationship with His Son, God set each of them on a new path. Following his conversion, Boris spent another year at Reto then stayed in Sofia to look for a job and a church. Despite his natural ability to connect with people, Boris struggled to find a church that

became members at New Life Church, the interim pastor and MTW missionary Trevin Hoot asked each if they were interested in the church's new pastoral internship program.

A NEW CALLING AS PASTORAL INTERNS

Trevin and his wife, Ruthie, joined Mission to the World's Sofia team in 2019 to help plant New Life Church. Team Bulgaria thrives at training missionary interns, mainly from America and fresh out of college, for full-time ministry. One day, about three years ago Trevin and his teammate, Vlado Hristov, were discussing

program three years ago and just finished in August, has used his outgoing personality and ability to make connections to lead the church's outreach efforts and a Bible study at the local hospital. Niki's love for studying and conversing about theology has made him a great fit for the teaching and discipling responsibilities he has taken on at the church.

“Our philosophy is that there are plenty of people who have really good doctrine but don't have good hearts,” says Trevin. “So if we can find a good person with a good heart who is interested in being a pastor we are more than willing to train them because the Lord has



Boris (right) shares the gospel at a local hospital.



Niki preaches a sermon.



Niki and his wife, Christina, at their wedding reception



Boris with his wife, Geertje



Members of New Life Church



New Life elders: Dave, Vlado, Trevin, Boris, and Niki

He decided he had no choice but to stay, and that if he was going to stay he may as well try to understand Christianity. He continued to read the Bible, started praying, and asked the Christians around him why they were so different. But the more he learned about Christianity, the more he didn't understand, and the more disappointed and depressed he became. Finally, one morning about six months after he came to Reto, the Holy Spirit sparked a breakthrough.

“I was scared about my past and my future and started praying. I didn't understand the story of the Bible, but I remember this particular morning. I realized just two things and they are the most important things in my life—that God was the creator and that He sent Jesus,” says Niki. “It was the moment that God's grace came into my heart and I decided to surrender myself.”

This transformed Niki's entire outlook. He realized the Bible was the truth and he recognized God's grace in the hearts of the Christians at Reto and everything they did to lead him to this moment. Gratitude for Jesus and His love replaced the depression and disappointment he had experienced for so long.

mirrored the inclusive atmosphere he enjoyed at the rehab center. A recommendation from a friend led him to a church planted by MTW missionaries called New Life Church, where he found a welcoming and open gospel-centered church family.

“They didn't speak Bulgarian very well but they were very kind and inclusive. Many invited me over as their guest,” says Boris.

Niki on the other hand stayed at Reto for eight years to serve men who, like him, struggled with substance abuse and addiction. He left in 2018 in search of an opportunity to study the Bible and theology in Sofia. For two years he was involved in a charismatic church, and though he enjoyed the community, he wrestled with theological differences and a lack of opportunity for deeper biblical study. He started visiting New Life Church in 2022 and found warmth, friendship, and compelling preaching.

At this point in their journeys both men were content and grateful for how God had seized them from their previous lives as addicts to new life in Jesus and led them to a supportive church family. But God wasn't finished redirecting their lives. Shortly after each

ideas for how this internship could be a blessing to the Bulgarian church. Since New Life Church wants to plant other churches, including Bulgarians in the team's internship program would help raise national pastors and Christian leaders for new church plants. Vlado had the idea: “Why don't you start an internship?”

With the help of the team, Trevin outlined a two-year program for men interested in exploring a call to be pastors but don't have the resources or theological background to pursue pastoral ministry. The church would pay the interns part time while the interns receive a comprehensive theological education, lead various ministries, and, eventually, preach regularly. At the end of two years the interns would be fully equipped to get ordained as pastors in the Reformed denomination Mission to the World works with in Bulgaria. Once these plans were in place, Trevin recruited Boris and then Niki to be the test case interns.

Each jumped at the opportunity to pursue pastoral ministry and have thrown themselves into their calling with vigor and enthusiasm. The pastoral internship has provided a way for both men to exercise their natural gifts and passions. Boris, who began the

already done the hard work. These guys definitely have good hearts.”

It is difficult for both men to put into words their amazement and gratitude for God's grace in their lives.

“I was so broken before that I never thought I would be in the church and especially be a pastor preaching in the church. Ten years ago [when I left Reto] that was only a dream. It wasn't ever going to be real,” says Boris.

Niki echoed saying, “It was so unexpected and surprising to me when two years ago Trevin just offered me this pastoral internship position and I think it is a way God continues to work in my life. It was a big testimony to me.”

Boris and Niki recently experienced another significant life change that may be more exciting than their work as pastoral interns—this summer both married women they met at New Life Church. They are living examples of God's redeeming work in the lives of sinners. He set them free from bondage to sin and drugs, gave them new hearts, brought them into His kingdom, and now sends them out to tell others of His great mercy, compassion, and love. [1](#)

So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God. Eph 2:19

Grief Transformed by Community:

Venezuelan Refugees Find Family in Panama

BY: WINNIE SMITH

Could we have a Christmas Eve service this year?

Scott and Meghan Dillon had missed the service that they had loved when they were in the U.S. When they were church planters in Peru, Christmas Eve services were met with little enthusiasm. Instead, in most of Latin America, Christmas Eve is a highlight of the family calendar with gifts and a late-night dinner.

Now in Panama City, Panama, working with a new congregation, one of Scott's elders, William, actually requested a Christmas Eve service. Scott planned something meaningful, brief, and early in the evening. After the service ended at 8:00 p.m. Scott suggested it was time for dinner to close out the evening.

"William had a very different Christmas Eve celebration in mind," Scott says.

William Contreras and his wife, Sol, refugees from Venezuela, had planned a family-style celebration for the church with games and activities, food, and a gift exchange. It was meaningful, but not brief. The Dillons finally went home around 1:00 a.m.

William and Sol know the ache of loneliness for refugees and others who have left homes and cultures. They know what it is to be alone when they once sat at a crowded table.

The Contrerases now offer an invitation to a new community that they received and then embraced at Iglesia Comunidad de Cristo. Along with the ache, they also know the surprise and joy of being knit together in a new family through the gospel.

Scott and Meghan, along with teammates Ross and Angela Floyd, moved to Panama City in 2022 to serve the church plant in a central city neighborhood. The team also includes Eric and Megan Kelly, who partner with rural Indigenous church leaders in addition to supporting the work of the city church.

This grieving of what was lost and reweaving something new is a pattern the Panama City team sees repeatedly as ICC, comprised largely of Venezuelans, becomes a new family.

William and Sol know the ache of loneliness for refugees and others who have left homes and cultures. They know what it is to be alone when they once sat at a crowded table.

The team also sees this young church flip the common script. They are immigrants looking for ways to serve and witness to their host culture.

They are serving sacrificially in a town that values financial hustle.

FOREIGNERS WELCOMING FOREIGNERS

William and Sol's path to faith started with Easter eggs.

They had been in Panama City for just a few months and went to a park so their energetic 8-year-old could play, William said.

It was Holy Week and a group of American and Brazilian missionaries had organized an event with food and games for children. Their son joined their Easter egg hunt.

The missionaries were foreigners like William and Sol, "so we felt comfortable," William wrote in an email interview. One of the women struck up a conversation.

"I don't remember what she said," William continued. "I remember that she simply listened to our story and our heavy burden of the political stress of Venezuela. We were so relieved to talk about the struggle of starting over in another country."

William and Sol were surprised but excited when the conversation turned to spiritual topics. "We grew up in culturally Catholic homes and didn't talk about faith."

They exchanged phone numbers with the missionaries, and then visited a Bible study at the home of then-MTW team members Marc and Sam Summers.

"More than that, we saw in these missionaries a humility and love for foreigners, which for us at the time was inexplicable."

FINDING CONNECTION IN THE PARK

Scott said stories like William's share common threads with most of their small congregation. Many are from Venezuela and their story with the church often began in the Andres Bello park in their neighborhood.

Hospitality is a huge piece of Latin culture, Scott said. In Peru, the sacred spaces were people's homes. But here, it didn't seem as though hospitality—being invited into someone's home—was a strong value.

Looking closer, hospitality isn't missing, he said. It happens in public spaces. And one of God's gifts to ICC is the local park.

"If you trace almost any of the stories of our people, there is some touch point to the park."



The community gathers in the park to watch a soccer match.



A church member paints the face of a young girl.

This step was hard to take, William said. There is a stigma against Protestant Christians in Venezuela, he added, but they wanted to learn English and loved both the comfort they received and the international community they were invited into.

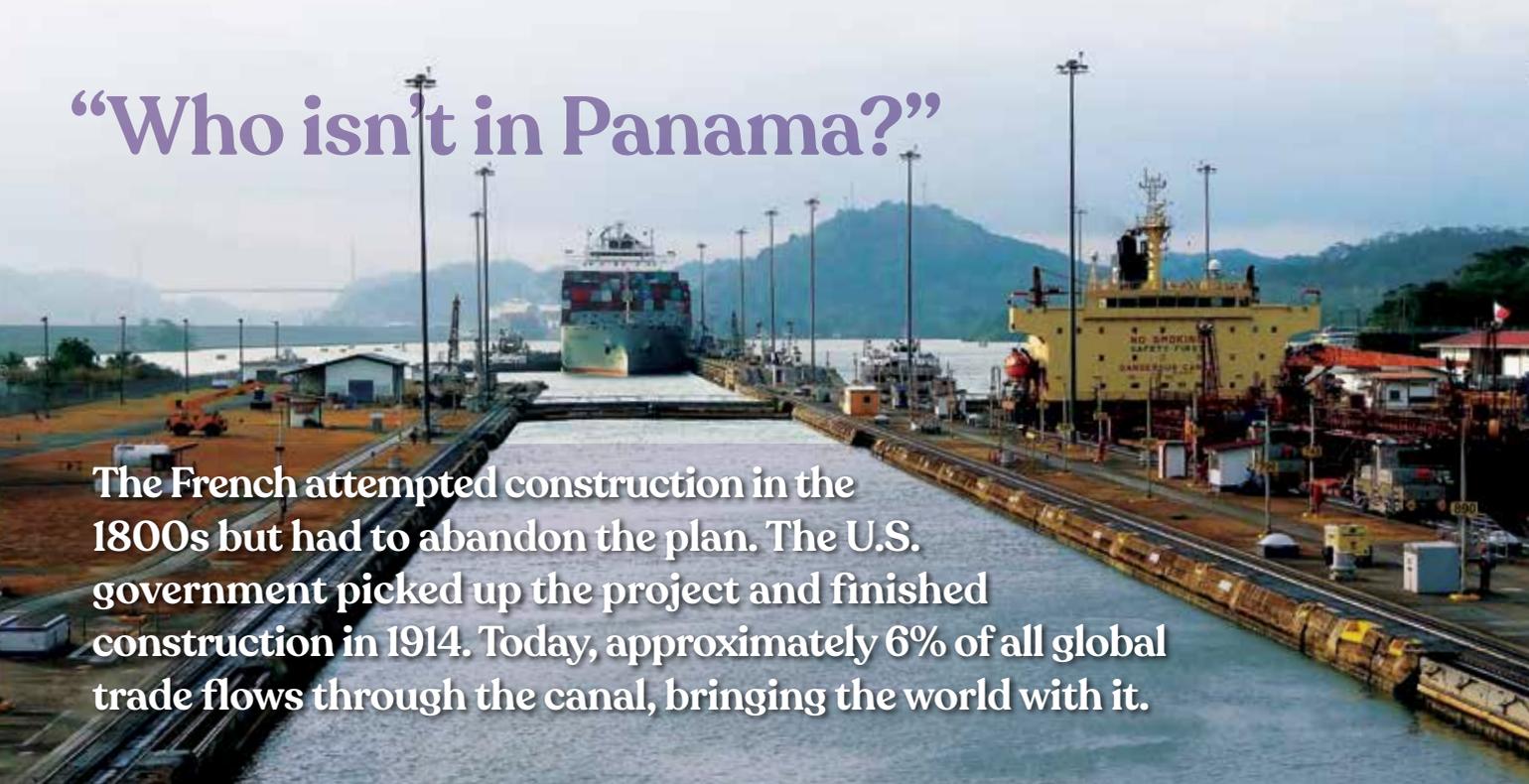
"We began to learn the truth written in the Bible," he said. The discussions allowed for questions and doubts, which were many, and sparked an intense curiosity to know the God described in the Bible.

People come into this neighborhood because it is a social park. They are looking for connection. The park has been a surprising key, not just a place to meet people but to deepen friendships.

"So the church is intentional about spending time there," he said. "We've passed out water, or just started talking with people." As a self-described "outgoing introvert," Scott wouldn't try that in many other places—too awkward. But it's expected here, he said. Plus, his dog Baxter makes a good conversation starter. >>

“Who isn’t in Panama?”

The French attempted construction in the 1800s but had to abandon the plan. The U.S. government picked up the project and finished construction in 1914. Today, approximately 6% of all global trade flows through the canal, bringing the world with it.



A Panamax cargo ship enters a lock on the Panama Canal.

>> Public hospitality is another distinctive in the nation’s capital that is already wildly different from other nations in the region. Its geography makes Panama a conduit for both the wealthy and the desperate.

A STRATEGIC COUNTRY FOR CULTURAL CONFLUENCE

“It would be impossible to accomplish such a feat.” – papal secretary to Rome in 1538, on the idea of a Panama canal.

The power dynamics of European exploration, riches extracted from South America and sent to Spain, and the California Gold Rush have fueled the imagination for a shortcut around Cape Horn for centuries.

Was there a way to shave off the 8,000 nautical miles of sailing around South America?

And could that shortcut be through the mountainous ribbon of land that is now Panama?

Vasco Núñez de Balboa explored the isthmus in 1516 and sent word that only a narrow strip of land separated the Pacific and Atlantic oceans. But in 1534, the royal governor of Panama advised Spain that building a canal would be impossible.

The French attempted construction in the 1800s but had to abandon the plan. The U.S. government picked up the project and finished construction in 1914.

Today, approximately 6% of all global trade flows through the canal, bringing the world with it.

“Who isn’t in Panama?” Scott asked.

Since Panama has been a trading hub for centuries, it is a strategic country for almost any industry. Its history and architecture reflects the different cultures that have been here for hundreds of years.

Now, China and India are investing heavily in infrastructure, bringing more expat residents—the third and ninth leading immigration source countries—and with them Buddhist, Hindu, and Baha’i temples.

But the number one country of immigration is Venezuela, which in 1970 was the richest country in the region and one of the 20 richest countries in the world.

Through politics and world events, its economy went into freefall in 2014. Now the nation is in shambles, and refugees pour out of the country, either to bordering countries or north to the U.S.

Its recent prosperity means many Venezuelans arrive in Panama City already educated with work experience. Those who can afford it take a ferry. Those who can’t have to cross through southern Panama through the treacherous Darien Gap.

Those who can stay, stay to make money, Scott said.

“Panama City is where people in the region come to get rich. But the church founders laid an excellent foundation for seeing the church as a family. I think it speaks heavily that this small church in a city that values economic success is finding ways to serve,” he said. Now they are looking for ways to connect to their Panamanian neighbors.

People moved here originally for prosperity and then found mission, giving their time and money.

“That might work if we were a prosperity-gospel church,” Scott said with a laugh. “But we know it is the Spirit at work.”

AWAKENED TO A NEW CALLING

William and Sol are exploring a new way to serve.

William lost his job of six years in February. “I started knocking on doors of different businesses, praying ‘Lord, just give me an interview.’”

A few weeks later he was invited to give his testimony in Guna Nega, a village behind a landfill only 15 minutes from the city’s skyscrapers. Most of the houses are made from discarded material from the city and the whole village smells of trash.

But the smells and the colors grabbed his heart and stirred memories of growing up in a similar place.

It awakened a new calling to connect with the people there.

“When I looked back, I saw that God, from the moment I changed my career plans from military to teaching, was preparing my way. I felt an incredible love because I saw that God had always accompanied me, even before I confessed His name.”



Top: Daniel, a ruling elder (left), presents William as a candidate for pastoral ministry. Bottom: A short-term team joined church members for an ESL camp last spring.

Psalm 139 is William’s favorite psalm, reminding him of how he is wrapped in God’s provision. “Now I want to use my life for ministry and help others find and use their gifts in the kingdom of God.” William is now under care to become a teaching elder, in addition to a ruling elder, and is taking seminary courses to prepare for pulpit ministry.

“We are very grateful that God allowed us to know Him through new people filled with Him, whose lives were the greatest testimony, and then to go and know Him in the Scriptures, where we fell in love with the gospel and the work of Christ on the cross.” [n](#)

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photo feature



Small congregations in Scotland are struggling to find pastors. MTW is helping to provide them. In this photo by missionary Beth Beaver, a woman cares for her infant during worship at Buccleuch Free Church in Edinburgh.

How will you steward God's gifts?



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FROM THE COORDINATOR

Prepare for the GMC by Reflecting on What He Has Done

How should we prepare for the upcoming PCA Global Mission Conference in Atlanta, November 1–3? Mission conferences are opportunities for God's people to rally together, worship, and commit to furthering God's mission. Perhaps we are already thinking about what we could do for missions. But before we jump into what we can do for missions, we might reflect on what God has done for us.

Think about the Old Testament saints. On Mount Sinai, God's people received the law of God and promised, "All that the Lord has spoken we will do" (Exodus 19:8; cf. 24:3). Toward the end of Joshua's life, he gathered the people of God and challenged them to "choose this day whom you will serve" (Joshua 24:15). The people responded, "We will serve the Lord" (Joshua 24:21; cf. 24:24). But of course, the people could not keep their covenant promises. And so God had to come and establish a new covenant, a new people of God, a new kingdom that would last forever.

Did the disciples know the significance of what was happening as Jesus gave His sermon on the mountain? "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven ..." (Matthew 5:3). They were there

to listen to their rabbi. He was there as the One greater than Moses, teaching the ethics of the kingdom of God. And toward the end of His life, Jesus, the One greater than Joshua, would defeat our enemies of sin and death on the cross and open a way for us to enter the heavenly promised land. What we could not do, Jesus has done for us.

How do we prepare for the upcoming global mission conference? *We first reflect on what Jesus has accomplished for us. We then ask to be filled with His Spirit. Finally, we come expectantly listening to His Word preached and applied to us.*

Can you imagine a gathering of thousands of people, hearts full of gratitude for the gospel, filled with his Spirit, awaiting God's call for their lives?

Even if you are not attending the conference, may this be your preparation at every Sunday worship service. May every Sunday be a missions Sunday. If there is anything that should unite us as a denomination, it should be the good news of Jesus Christ and its propagation to the ends of the earth. Please pray with us to this end. [📌](#)

Lloyd Kim



Dr. Lloyd Kim



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IN JAPAN



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THE
UNSEEN



ADDICTS
TO
PASTORS



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