



BAPTIST PRESS
News Service of the Southern Baptist Convention

NATIONAL OFFICE
460 James Robertson Parkway
Nashville, Tennessee 37218
Telephone (615) 244-2355
W. C. Fields, Director
Jim Newton, Assistant Director

BUREAUS

ATLANTA Walker L. Knight, Chief, 1350 Spring St., N.W., Atlanta, Ga. 30309, Telephone (404) 873-4041
DALLAS Billy Keith, Chief, 103 Baptist Building, Dallas, Texas 75201, Telephone (214) 741-1996
NASHVILLE (Baptist Sunday School Board) Lynn M. Davis, Jr., Chief, 127 Ninth Ave., N., Nashville, Tenn. 37203, Telephone (615) 254-1631
RICHMOND Jesse C. Fletcher, Chief, 3806 Monument Ave., Richmond, Va. 23230, Telephone (703) 353-0151
WASHINGTON W. Barry Garrett, Chief, 200 Maryland Ave., N.E., Washington, D.C. 20002, Telephone (202) 544-4226

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Baptist Choir, Medical Teams
Make Impact on Dominican People

PENSACOLA, Fla. (BP)--A Baptist musical-medical mission to the Dominican Republic has resulted in what one Latin American affairs expert has called the biggest U.S. "intervention" in that Caribbean island since President Lyndon B. Johnson sent American troops ashore during the 1965 Dominican Civil War.

But while the intervention of American troops resulted in "rancor" which still exists today, the Baptist-sponsored "intervention" will undoubtedly leave behind a large reservoir of good will, according to an analysis by Miami Herald Latin American Editor Don Bohning.

James Pleitz, pastor of the First Baptist Church of Pensacola which sponsored the two-week medical mission and choir trip, added that "not only did they represent our country well, our youngsters did a terrific job representing the Lord."

During the day, the 80 young people, 10 physicians and 39 adult sponsors and workers divided into 17 medical teams, setting up clinics in some of the poorest sections of the Dominican Republic and treating everything from the common cold to performing cataract surgery.

During the evenings, they performed benefit concerts to raise funds for the country's rehabilitation programs. They sang twice in the Royal Palace before top government leaders including the president, and performed in city squares and on television before thousands of Dominican people.

President Joaquin Balaguer was so impressed with the Baptist youth that he invited the choir back to the Royal Palace to sing for him a second time and offered them the use of the presidential yacht for an entire day.

Though informed political observers like Bohning have praised the project for building good will between the Dominican Republic and the United States, there is no way to gauge its spiritual impact, said Pleitz in a telephone interview after the trip.

It is a little easier to gauge the medical results, he said. The medical teams treated more than 2,000 Dominican people, Pleitz estimated.

There were 22 patients who could not see before the Baptist teams arrived, but with surgery performed by the project's ophthalmologist with the help of the teenagers, they "walked away" from the clinics with sight, Pleitz added.

Several of the participants, in interviews after the trip, agreed that the experience probably made a greater impact on the team members than it did on the Dominican people.

"I'm sure we got a bigger blessing out of it than they did," said Dr. Connally Pickens, a Pensacola pediatrician who participated in the medical mission.

"It really makes you appreciate your own country," added Nix Daniel, 19-year-old student at Wake Forest University from Pensacola. "I'll never take a warm shower for granted again," he added.

Daniel told of an experience he had working with Dr. Charles Clevenger, the ophthalmologist who performed two dozen cataract operations, when a 79-year-old Dominican woman after surgery saw her daughter for the first time in 30 years.

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"Things like that are tangible," Daniel said. "You know you have actually done something to help these people to be better off physically, and I think that a lot of the work we did physically for these people is going to help Baptist missionary work down there in the future." Anytime you help a person physically, he is bound to be more receptive to you in other ways," the youth added.

Pleitz pointed out that in the city of Santo Domingo, the eye surgery was done in the sanctuary of Baptist Temple on the very spot where the pulpit is located. "I couldn't help but think that right there where the preacher had talked about the power of Christ to restore sight to the blind, that very thing did happen in the name of Christ," the pastor said.

The group divided into 17 medical teams, setting up clinics, laboratories and dental offices in four cities--Santo Domingo, Santiago, Bani and Bonao.

The teenagers who made up the choir for the musical presentations had been assigned months in advance to each team, headed by a physician and had been trained to do everything his nursing staff would do in the U.S.A.

The four dentists on the team pulled an estimated 1,680 teeth during the two weeks, and one dentist confessed to muscle spasms after yanking 76 teeth in one day. "You wouldn't believe some of the abscesses we saw," said Pleitz, describing beautiful young teenage girls with teeth rotting away because of lack of care.

A chartered jet plane from Pensacola to Santo Domingo carried nearly five tons of medical supplies and equipment, including everything from lighting to dental chairs, to the island republic. Most of the medical supplies and some of the equipment was left in the Dominican Republic for future use.

In most cases, the medical teams worked in the poorest of the slum areas. They gave the people inoculations, filled prescriptions, assisted the physicians in patient treatment and tried to show their love for the people.

For more than a year, the teenagers had been studying Spanish every Sunday evening for an hour to give them an elementary understanding of the language of the people. Daniel said there was no communications barrier, for their message was "a universal language in itself."

Paul Royal, minister of music for the church who coordinated the mission trip, said that there was quite a contrast between working with the poorest of the poor in the medical clinics and singing in the Royal Palace for the top government officials, but it was this willingness to witness to all the people that won much approval by the Dominicans.

There was also no effort to separate the groups into musical and medical sections, since the youth participated in both aspects, he said.

In the Dominican Republic, the group was called "El Coro, Por Amor, de Pensacola" (literally, "The Chorus, For Love, of Pensacola"). In the U.S.A., the project was called "Operation: Good Samaritan South." The English-language name was not used in the Dominican Republic to avoid any appearance of paternalism, Royal said.

The project began more than a year ago when the church began thinking of ways to get youth and others involved in helping people in need, said Pleitz.

Royal said it went back even further to 1969 when a group of teenagers went to Pass Christian, Miss., to rebuild a church destroyed by Hurricane Camille. The youth realized then that Christianity is something you do, and that they should put their faith into action, he added.

Contact was made with the Southern Baptist Foreign Mission Board and it was ultimately decided the group could best be utilized in the Dominican Republic.

The day after their arrival in the country the choir presented a benefit concert at the Royal Palace before top government leaders, including President Balaguer and Vice President Carlos Gorco.

The president insisted that the youth take an eight-hour cruise on his yacht and that they return to the palace for a second, private concert to sing his favorite songs from the performance, a Dominican popular song entitled, "Por Amor," from which the group took their project name and "Pass It On" from the religious folk musical, "Tell It Like It Is." At the second concert, the president greeted each teenager individually.

Singing before the president was a thrilling experience, Royal agreed, but performing before an estimated 2,000 to 5,000 people in the public square at Banao and about 1,500 in Bani was equally exciting in a different way, he said.

"We weren't prepared for their reaction," he said. The crowds jammed closer and closer to the platform and at one time even came up on the platform with the choir. They shouted and clapped their approval in the middle of the songs, often drowning out the music with thunderous applause. In Banao, the crowd stood in a hard rain to hear the choir.

Twice the group sang on nationwide television on one of the island's most popular programs. They gave about a dozen concerts in all, each concluded with a brief sermonette by Pleitz.

There were no evangelistic crusades conducted as a part of the effort, although there were probably a dozen professions of faith in church services in which the choir teams sang and gave personal testimonies.

But the long-range effect on Baptist mission work in the Dominican Republic will no doubt be significant.

Already "relationships in the community are more solid as a result of the groups' work," said Missionary Howard Shoemake of Santo Domingo in a ham radio-patch telephone interview after the trip.

"There was excellent response to everything the group attempted," Shoemake said. He added that a Dominican physician had told him that he could not think of a better way for Baptists to have shown how they think and work."

Shoemake said that the extent of press and radio-television coverage was tremendous, and "we couldn't have asked for one word more" in coverage.

He added that in the wake of the tragic murder of Mr. and Mrs. Paul Potter, SBC missionaries to Santiago who were found stabbed to death in their bed, the people there "are watching us to see if we really mean what we say as Christians in regard to our faith."

Although news reports indicated that anti-American slogans had been written on the Potter's car, Pleitz said that the Pensacola group encountered no anti-American sentiments on the trip. The closest thing to it was an incident in Santiago when it looked as if some Dominican youth were going to throw stones at some Pensacola youth, but nothing happened.

In fact, both Pleitz and Royal agreed, the group was overwhelmed with the friendliness of the Dominican people. "They once were almost too friendly," quipped Pleitz, relating an incident when they offered the group some rum to drink.

When the choir left, both the Americans and the Dominicans wept openly. They did not want to end the close friendships brought about by the "Por Amor" project.

Royal said the youth returned convinced that they had received far more than they had given, and convinced that they must do more at home to meet human need similar to those they found in the Dominican Republic.

"They felt to the man that in order for us to enjoy the integrity of proclaiming the reason we did this, we must carry out the same sort of ministry, the same sort of sharing right here in Pensacola," said Royal.

"They told me repeatedly, 'We've found more joy in sharing and really giving of ourselves than we ever found in our lives,'" Royal concluded. "And they asked, 'Why don't we do this at home?'"