

Chiapas Connection

Spring 2020



The Road to Volunteering

Soaking up the sun at the beach and having towels shaped like animals waiting for you on your bed's plush mattress is NOT what to expect as a medical volunteer to a developing nation. However, it's also not sleeping outdoors in a hammock while swatting at mosquitoes.

The mission established by the Sisters of St. Francis near Palenque, Mexico, is located in the southern Mexican state of Chiapas, bordering Guatemala. The area is known for its mountainous highlands and dense rainforest, dotted with Mayan archaeological sites and Spanish colonial towns. It's this magnificent terrain that complicates the outreach to the more than 140 villages included within the Parish Church of St. Dominic in Palenque, Chiapas.

The bi-annual medical mission is a small part of the Sisters of St. Francis pastoral ministries in the region. The Mayan Sisters, who are trained nurses, speak the native Cho'l and Tzeltal dialects as well as Spanish. As they accompany the indigenous people on their journey of faith, they assist with medical education and care when needed.

Prospective volunteers contact Sister Nancy Zelma at Stella Niagara, New York, to express their interest in helping. Sister Nancy carefully puts together a team with the best possible complement of skills to ensure the success of the week-long mission. Ideally, the team consists of several doctors and/or medical residents (such as family practitioners, ob/gyn, pediatrics, dental services, orthopedics), nurses, and translators. Others have provided massage or acupuncture services, or tackled maintenance projects at the sisters' clinic and residence. A Mexican physician, familiar with common illnesses and available medication joins the team when possible.

Volunteers make and pay for their own travel arrangements, carefully coordinating arrival times so they can share transportation to the Sisters' Casa Franciscana. Once there, meals and comfortable accommodations within the secure convent walls



are provided by the sisters. While hot water may be hit or miss, there is running water and a warm welcome!

The next morning provides time for rest and an orientation of the region's political, social, economic, cultural and religious realities.

Monday and Tuesday are village clinic days, and each day can be quite different. One village may not be prepared or rain will keep patients away. On the contrary, leaders in the next village may go out of their way to assist with room set-up, provide interpreters from native languages to Spanish, and volunteers to help with patient flow. One learns to "go with the flow."

Services are provided at the convent's clinic for the rest of the week. Overall, it can be busy. In February 2019, 565 people received medical attention in just five days! Vitamins, parasite treatment and medications were dispersed, reading glasses were given if needed, and everyone got a toothbrush! 175 children received fluoride treatment and were screened for follow-up dental appointments. 55 children had cavities filled, teeth extracted, and dental infections treated. One of the physicians was able to do five house calls —traveling some distance to see patients facing some very serious issues.

Yet that busy-ness melts away at the day's end when the team has time to relax, share a meal and stories, and perhaps play a game of cards over a cold cerveza!

There are many immigrants from Central America in Mexico and a lack of infrastructure to provide for them. Parish groups are working together to provide food, and a place to rest for thousands of people who arrive in caravans or by foot in small groups as they head for the U.S. border.

The healthcare system in Palenque reflects a larger reality of corruption. Federal supplies and medications are taken by professionals to use in their private practices. The local hospital has not met accreditation standards and continues to provide minimal service due to a physician-nurse strike that has been going on for years. Medications are often unavailable, or very limited and expensive.

The country is experiencing a major transition since the new President was sworn in at the end of 2018. His vision includes providing care for the most vulnerable people: seniors, people with disabilities and chronic illness, education and employment opportunities for youth, raising the minimum raise, etc. The challenge of the involvement of drug lords in politics needs to be addressed including corruption and impunity at all levels. While there is much to be accomplished, small changes have begun and there is **hope**.



ST. CLARE FAMILY CLINIC
Palenque, Chiapas

Mission:

Nurturing communities toward holistic wellbeing, especially those most in need.

Vision:

Communities enjoy a life that is healthy, holistic and balanced.

Values:

Respect: Inclusivity, diversity of cultures, everyone treated equally, without distinction, sensitivity to cultural practices.

Quality: Quality of care that takes into consideration the dignity of the person.

Vitality: Integration with our Mother Earth, harmony, balance, alternative medicine that uses local herbs.

Compassion: Human kindness, tenderness.



The Rewards of Volunteering

Personal Reflections from Volunteers

“This experience gives meaning to my life. Seeing children who are in a lot of pain and then being able to do something about it is rewarding.”

“Being part of this Medical Mission has been a gift from God and I am grateful to the Sisters for providing this opportunity for us to be here. It was a privilege.”

“I come from a background of County public health nursing. Being in another country where there is such a need and a totally different culture, gave me an opportunity to give back.”

“It was such a rewarding experience to see the peoples’ faces light-up and be so grateful to us for how we helped them. I take all of this ‘happy feedback’ from the people home with me. The team worked so well together and it was so rewarding to work with people who have the same intention as me: we are here for the people.”

“I can’t solve all of the problems in the world, but I can do something when I am here in Palenque.”

“For me, this has been a beautiful experience of seeing the face of God. I have felt so much peace this week and the welcome from everyone has been wonderful.”

Reflections of the Sisters of St. Francis

“The people here have so many needs and the number of illnesses are great. We are grateful to the medical team for the quality of service given and how they work so well together in such a collaborative way. We receive as we give.”

“I see the people’s faces when they leave, how they give you a kiss, hug or a handshake in gratitude. You are remembered with affection.”

“There is no doubt that the people see you as a part of us. That is a real blessing! Thank you for being who you ARE and for bringing kindness to the world.”

“You come for a week, but for us, when you come it is like you re-charge our battery. Thank you for helping us carry out our mission. We could not do what we do without you!”





Are you ready to give back?

Volunteers are needed!

Doctors, dentists, nurses, interpreters.

If you can lend your medical expertise, please consider this important ministry!

Needed Donations and Supplies:

Cash to purchase medicines

Tylenol and Ibuprofen

Reading glasses—all strengths

Eye drops (i.e. Visine)

Anti-fungal ear drops

Topical antibiotic cream (i.e. Polysporin)

(Contour Next) Glucose Strips

McKesson lancets: Push Button Safety lancets

Small plastic baggies

Vitamins for children, adults and pre-natal (bottles of 500)(not gummy variety)

Non-latex Gloves (large)

Alcohol swabs

Cotton balls

Hand Sanitizer



Thank you, friends and donors, for making this possible!

It's easy to donate online and to get the latest news of the ministry by visiting www.stellaosf.org

Sisters of St. Francis of Penance and Christian Charity Chiapas Medical Mission

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Mission Statement

Responding to Jesus' call to serve the materially poor, the medical missions of the Sisters of St. Francis minister to the indigenous poor in and around Palenque, Chiapas, Mexico. The collective spirit of mission members is characterized by compassion, respect for the God-given dignity of each person, and quality health care.