

## BELIZE MISSION

# What could we possibly accomplish in only one week?

BY ANN DEVEAU

This question nagged at Christ Church Cathedral's 26-member mission team during many meetings before we travelled to Belize, Central America. It dogged us when we saw the unmet needs and untapped potential in this beautiful, poor country full of friendly people. And it certainly was the most frequent question we faced when we returned home from our enriching, enlightening and exhausting March Break "volunteer vacation."

The question of accomplishment can be answered in many ways, especially considering the team ranged in age from 17 to 79 and embodied a variety of life experiences and expectations.

One yardstick is construction projects undertaken in Belize. St. Barnabas's Anglican School now has beautiful tiled floors, instead of concrete, in two classrooms. St. Andrew's Anglican School now has a large classroom painted a clean, bright blue plus a dozen teachers who received some basic first-aid training. At St. Hilda's Anglican School, the rocky ground was dug by hand under a blazing sun, a foundation installed and a concrete floor poured for a badly needed bathroom.

"The physical work was hard, and there was a deep sense of satisfaction when we finished tiling and painting," Diane Stevenson said. "But it was talking with the kids that touched my heart."

Cathedral puppeteer Justin Upshall agreed. "It was great to see the floor done with time to spare, and it was awesome to see the huge smiles on the kids' faces," he said. For team organizer Beverly Morell, taking part in her second mission trip to Belize, it was as important to focus on relationships as on results.

"I feel that we are God's hands and feet in the world, that we're helping in some small way to further His kingdom," she said. "The important thing is that we were establishing relationships with our brothers and sisters in Christ, who happen to live in Belize. We were sharing our common faith, and the mission allowed us to grow in faith."

Jamie Yeamans also spoke of common faith. He enjoyed meeting senior warden Norman Simplice, 88, and worshipping from a familiar liturgy with the congregation at St. Andrew's Anglican Church in the bustling town of San Ignacio, Belize.

"It gave me a real sense of being part of the broader Anglican community," Jamie said. "And the people were very warm and gracious to us."

The Rev. Canon George Porter of Fredericton assisted in that Sunday service with a local Spanish-speaking priest. A veteran of eight short-term mission trips, he thinks missions are key to accelerated spiritual growth.

This was true for Linda Dawe. "Being part of the team has had a tremendous impact on my spiritual growth," Linda explained. "In addition to the love given us by the Belizean people, I have grown in my interactions with the team members. Our young people and their faith have left an imprint on my heart forever."

The youth, including Alastair Joyce, presented lively, faith-based puppet shows. He

loved experiencing a different country, culture and climate. "I'd go again in a second!" Alastair said enthusiastically.

His mother, Elinor Joyce, returned to Fredericton with "a renewed appreciation for all the things that we take for granted – comfortable homes, clean water, knowing that our children have hopes for the future."

Like other team members who are teachers, Elinor taught daily with dedicated Belizean counterparts in ill-equipped classrooms full of polite, eager children. "So many of the children won't be able to afford to go past grade eight, and their futures are so uncertain," she remarked. "In the midst of that, I keep seeing their beautiful smiles, and their joy in all the simple things that they do have."

It was like Christmas morning multiplied. Thanks to the generosity of the cathedral congregation and many Fredericton businesses, each person brought up to 50 lbs. of donated goods to Belize. All 700 children received new toothbrushes and tubes of toothpaste along with lessons in good hygiene from the health ministry team. The schools received many boxes filled with essentials like pens, pencils, pencil sharpeners, erasers, rulers, calculators, loose-leaf paper, crayons.

"Words cannot express how we feel," Joyce Shaw, principal of St. Barnabas, said. "We love you."

At St. Hilda's, the entire school expressed its gratitude by singing and by presenting handmade thank-you cards. One colourful card caused a recipient to burst into tears. It read: "Your generosity and encouragement helped us to bloom like a flower."

This ceremony moved Harry Palmer deeply. "We give out of our excess, but they give out of their poverty," Harry marvelled. Mary Rogers saw this aspect, too. "I was often struck by how happy, giving, content and relaxed the people of Belize seemed to be," Mary said. "The country was so poor, but with joyful heart, quiet determination and much hard work, they carried on their lives in glad spirit."

So, in the end, what was accomplished in only one week? Canada and Belize joined hearts and hands. Tasks were completed, friendships blossomed, challenges were met, lessons learned. We felt God was watching over us, and we felt uplifted by our prayer partners at home.

"We felt blessed to be able to give something back to help others," Doug Milander summed up. "They worked with us, and we learned so much from them. I've thought of the people I met in Belize every day since I got home."

The team is already talking about follow-up activities so that the short-term mission is not the end of the relationships developed with the Anglican diocese, schools and people in Belize. Aside from what the cathedral may eventually develop, the trip had a huge personal impact on Rebecca Tremblay.

"I want to do this with my life," Rebecca decided. "I am studying in cultural anthropology, international development and Spanish, so the trip to Belize was right down my alley. I plan to continue through NGO work abroad. I feel that projects such as these allow an amazing connection of love between people. It will last for a lifetime."

In addition to the people quoted, the Belize mission team members are Neil Hayter, Sam Mayo, Blaine Phillips, Katie Dunn, Susan Watson, Ken Howlett, Deanna McGarry, Patrick McGarry, Rachel McGarry, Caryn Gunter, Mark Gunter, Leith Box, Isabel Cutler and Ann Deveau, author of this article.



PHOTOS  
COURTESY  
OF  
MISSION  
TEAM  
MEMBERS