

Stitching a Dream

Pennsylvania “Godmothers” partner with women from Honduras to create sewing cooperatives and improve lives



BY ROBERTA UPDEGRAFF

“If only we had three or four electric sewing machines,” said Pastor Braullio Ruiz of Iglesia de Santidad in Talanga, Honduras, “how much more we could accomplish!”

Just a few years ago, that dream—modest by North American standards—seemed all but impossible for the women’s group of that church. As a natural extension of their weekly Bible study, the women operated the equivalent of a Goodwill store from the upper room of the church, taking apart old clothing, washing and sun-bleaching the fabric and then creating new garments using two foot-treadle (non-electric) Singer® sewing machines.

“The Bible tells us to serve one another,” one member noted. “For us, this was the most practical way. We gather every week and we like to sew. What could be better? It is a small service we give the poor of our community.”

Plumbing and electricity are luxuries that most Honduran women do not enjoy. Their day begins before dawn, using outdoor adobe stoves to make enough tortillas to feed their families. Yet these Christian women find time to sew for less fortunate neighbors, who include many single mothers. “It’s a hard

life,” Nidia Servellon says. “It was my mother’s life. Women work from sunrise to sunset to put food on the table and, like my mother, they dream of a better life for their children.”

That dream, shared by mothers all over the world, spoke to women 5,000 miles away in Northumberland, Pennsylvania. Common dreams and Christian love spanned a continent, drawing together two groups of women in one mission—a mission that not only meets practical needs, but also promotes community.

Identifying the Needs

In 1999, Northumberland Presbytery partnered with Cristiana Comision Desarrollo (CCD), a Honduran ecumenical ministry promoting self-development, in response to the unprecedented disaster caused by Hurricane Mitch. What began as a two-week mission trip to rebuild homes destroyed by floods and landslides in Honduras, blossomed into a partnership.

During the presbytery’s first mission trip, team members discovered that many Honduran children could not afford to go to school because their families lost their possessions,



Serving one another—women from Iglesia de Santidad in Talanga, Honduras rework old clothing for less fortunate people in their community.

homes and income in the floods that followed the hurricane. After the mission workers returned to the United States, Northumberland Presbyterian Women established a scholarship fund to support the children of one storm-ravaged neighborhood they served during that first trip. Today, teachers and children from Honduras exchange letters and photographs with their Pennsylvania “godmothers,” the name they’ve given their sponsors in the United States.

In 2000, following the second presbytery-sponsored mission trip, Northumberland Presbyterian Women (NPW) partnered with the women of Santidad, determined to supply the four sewing machines for

which the Honduran women had prayed. The Pennsylvanians soon discovered this was a project made to order, since many NPW members quilted or participated in sewing ministries. This hands-on approach to ministry rallied several women's groups that had not been active at the presbytery level for years.

"I love going to garage sales," said Carrol Morehart, "but now I have a mission! I search for used sewing machines, buy low and then take them to my repairman, who puts them in excellent shape to go to Honduras. Sometimes people just give me the sewing machines when I tell them how they will be used."

Two community quilting guilds joined the endeavor, transforming the Presbyterian project into an ecumenical venture. "It was a way to know one another," Chris Kroboth said when asked about the boxes of new fabric donated from her quilting shop, Our Gathering Place, in Montoursville, Pennsylvania. "We don't get much chance to communicate woman-to-woman across cultures."

Those hard-working Honduran women trying to improve their lives impressed Chris. "The working poor get so little recognition," she said. "I just wanted to be an encouragement—make their lives a little easier."

"It was a simple thing," NPW Moderator Carrol Morehart said of their gifts. "But in love, it is much," responded one of the recipients of the recycled garments who used a few bananas to buy her dress and in paying for it built her self-respect.

Respect, Braullio says, is desperately needed in this poor community. "Single women and children are the most vulnerable—it is their needs we try to meet. God's love we can offer, because we, too, found it in our destitution."



Fall Gathering of Northumberland Presbyterian Women

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Equipping for Success

In the end, Northumberland Presbyterian Women collected the four sewing machines—plus 40 more! They also collected 300 boxes of fabric, sewing notions (materials such as needles and thread) and other supplies needed for the sewing cooperative in Talanga. The overwhelming response to this project prompted the husband of one NPW woman (and a two-time veteran of the mission trips to Honduras) to embrace a dream of his own and address Cristiana Comision Desarrollo's need for transportation. He purchased a small used school bus, then he and three other Presbyterian men loaded it with all the sewing machines and notions that had been collected for the Honduran sewing cooperative. Taking turns behind the wheel, they drove the 5,000 miles from Pennsylvania to Tegucigalpa to donate the vehicle and its contents.

Six new sewing machines were given to the women's group of Iglesia de Santidad in Talanga and the rest were used to launch a sewing college in Tegucigalpa—the dream of another pastor, Vicente Reyes, and his wife, Gloria de Reyes. A skilled craftswoman, Gloria de Reyes wanted to teach machine embroidery and simple clothing construction to members of her congregation and community. Several of the donated machines were changed into treadle machines that could more easily produce beautiful embroidery stitches. Others were modified into portable, individual workstations. Gloria and her women's association started a vocational college in a newly constructed addition to the church, originally earmarked as her husband's first real office. When asked about the sacrifice, Pastor Vicente Reyes laughed. "What can I say? When a woman asks for something, she gets it—particularly if that woman is your wife."

The soft-spoken man added a more serious postscript. "Women are close to God. They have big hearts, I think, so responding to the needs of others first is second nature to them." Vincente's church houses the elementary school program attended by many of the children receiving scholarships from NPW. He pointed out that the NPW scholarships also include a new pair of shoes for each child. "Only mothers and grandmothers would think to include new sneakers," he added.

The sewing college in Tegucigalpa is an outreach to neighborhood girls who interact with gang members. Gloria's homespun wisdom, tempered with love, attracts these girls. Barely five feet tall, the petite woman reminds one of a mother bobcat protecting her kittens when she talks about the young women she mentors. "So many of our women are barely literate. They lack the strength to stand up to men who frequently abuse them. They do not see themselves as their own persons. We try to restore pride, to help them regain their God-given dignity."

A Dream Inspires Other

In August 2002, the fifth presbytery work team visited the fledgling sewing cooperative in Talanga, now proudly operating out of a newly

outfitted room downstairs in the church. Six Honduran women greeted the work team, immediately drawing attention to their most prized possessions. "These machines were gifts from our sisters in the United States," one Honduran woman explained, a smile lighting her eyes. "They, too, care for the poor and we thank God for them every day."

Another bus was donated in 2002, to be used in a ministry to gang members in Tegucigalpa. That ministry will mark the fourth Honduran church to launch a women's sewing cooperative. Northumberland Presbyterian Women also have distributed sewing machines to two additional congregations and a nearby orphanage.

When Northumberland Presbyterian Women learned the sewing cooperative in Talanga was outgrowing its new quarters, they immediately made the down payment for an expansion. Pastor Braullio and the women's association are hoping to purchase or construct a facility large enough to house the cooperative, a small storefront and classroom facilities.

Another 38 sewing machines, more fabric and sewing notions were collected in 2003. One contributor had an epiphany of sorts while working with the NPW women spearheading the project. "I'd drifted away

[from church] during college, but this mission made Christianity seem more real and church the place I wanted to be," she said.

Today, snapshots of the Honduran women at work grace dozens of church bulletin boards throughout Northumberland Presbytery and framed photos of the work teams from Pennsylvania adorn the walls of the cinderblock sewing room in Talanga. But perhaps the most treasured result of this mission venture has been the friendships that have developed. North and Central Americans are gathering together to serve Christ in community. Whether stitching hope in Central America or sharing Christ's love over a cup of tea at an NPW Gathering, these women are hands-on evangelists, changing lives one heart at a time. They understand the value of even the smallest coin and are putting it to good use.

"We've been blessed to be a blessing," said Evelyn Updegraff, an NPW participant, now deceased. "Mission is what we do because we cannot do less." 🍷

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