



One day Ron Bueno was sitting with Pastor Victor Herrera in his humble parsonage in San Jose el Naranjo, El Salvador. A woman knocked on the door. Seeing the two in conversation, she did not interrupt but left a small bag of corn by the door.

Pastor Victor was embarrassed that Ron was there to see him receive the simple gift. "I don't want to take an offering from this woman," he said. "She barely has anything. But this is how I live as well. I would love to help her and others like her to plant new crops and earn a better living, but I just don't know how."

Today, Jerusalem Church in San Jose el Naranjo is reaching out and transforming its community with the help of ENLACE (en-lah-say).*

ENLACE:

Training and equipping churches to transform their communities

BY JANET WALKER
Photography by David McGee

With a warm climate and rugged landscape, El Salvador is a rustic paradise. Yet most of its 6.9 million people struggle economically — the aftereffect of a devastating 12-year war that ended in 1992.

About the size of Massachusetts, El Salvador is the smallest and most densely populated country in Central America. Nearly half the population lives in rural communities where poverty is rampant. On average, workers make less than \$5 a day and struggle to provide adequate shelter, health care, education and clothing for their families.

* The name ENLACE is both an acronym and a word in Spanish. The letters stand for Entidad Natural Latino Americana de Cooperación Estratégica or "Latin American Entity for Strategic Cooperation." The word *enlace* is Spanish for "the link."

ENLACE

MANY OF THE PASTORS THEY VISITED EXPRESSED A DESIRE FOR THEIR CHURCH TO MAKE A DIFFERENCE IN THEIR COMMUNITY.

Since 1993, the ministry of ENLACE, directed by missionaries Ron and Michelle Bueno, has been training and equipping churches in rural El Salvador to make a difference in their communities. Currently, the Buenos and the 27-member ENLACE staff (including missionaries, pastors, agronomists, business administrators and a medical doctor) work with 13 churches ranging in size from 30 to 1,000 people.

Ron was born and raised in El Salvador by missionary parents John and Lois Bueno. After completing graduate studies in anthropology and economic development in the States, he returned to El Salvador in 1993. He and Michelle married in 1996.

As the Buenos walked from community to community, they witnessed the poverty and desolate living conditions of the people.

“I realized for the first time in my life,” Michelle says, “that this is the way the majority of people live.”

Many of the pastors they visited expressed a desire for their church to make a difference in their community, but they didn't know where to begin.

“ENLACE was founded as a ministry to support these pastors,” Ron says.

Initially, Ron admits, he started the ministry with a “bag of initiatives and programs.” He knew

how to start a project and carry it through to completion. But soon he realized ENLACE was investing a lot of time, money and energy in equipping church and community leaders to do good projects, but the end result had little effect on people's relationships with each other.

During one project, people worked together to build a

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(L to R) Michelle, Jack, Grey, Ron and Micaela Bueno



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water system everyone needed. But as soon as a problem developed with someone’s spigot, the rest of the group would not work together to help that person resolve the problem.

“Only an ongoing, dynamic relationship with Jesus Christ can truly change someone’s heart to think of others before themselves,” Ron says. “That is the first and most important step in community transformation.”

ENLACE’s goal is to help churches:

- Discover their biblical mission.
- Work with their community to build relationships and identify initiatives and programs needed.
- Collaborate with community leaders in developing sustainable solutions to poverty, health, infrastructure and economic needs.
- Implement only those programs that can be managed and resourced over a long period of time.
- Replicate this ministry in other churches.

At first, church leaders in rural, impoverished areas of El Salvador believed they did not have the financial or human resources to effect change. But when

ENLACE helped them look at their churches more closely and partner with their communities, they discovered a wealth of skills and resources among the people. They also witnessed a deep commitment on the part of believers in the areas of stewardship and compassion, making the churches a reservoir of resources to transform their communities.

“When a church discovers its biblical mission and begins to focus on others’ needs before its own,” Ron says, “it



Ron Bueno demonstrates one of the stoves ENLACE developed in El Salvador.

Randy Hurst

In rural El Salvador, acute respiratory infections are a leading cause of death for children between the ages of 1 and 4 due to chronic smoke inhalation from cooking fires inside their small homes. ENLACE worked with a technology expert to design and improve stoves to greatly reduce smoke inhalation and minimize wood consumption.

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“OVER THE LAST 14 YEARS, I HAVE LEARNED HOW IMPORTANT IT IS FOR A CHURCH TO BOTH UNDERSTAND AND DEFINE ITS MISSION.”

— RON BUENO

becomes an unstoppable force within the community, impacting the lives of people in life-giving ways.”

Miguel Duran agrees wholeheartedly. He pastors The Good Samaritan Church in Las Delicias — the first church ENLACE began working with several years ago.

“Most of the 1,500 residents in the semirural village of Las Delicias are small-scale farmers or factory workers, living on less than \$2 a day,” Duran says. “Water is scarce. During the six-month dry season, most people in the community spend about one-third of their income to buy water that is pulled from one of the dirtiest streams and trucked to them as potable water.”

The Good Samaritan Church was the first evangelical church in the community, and townspeople initially stereotyped it as a cult. When the congregation started work on a building, vendors refused to sell them water

to make adobe brick after they learned it was for the church.

As ENLACE trained and equipped The Good Samaritan Church to reach out to others, the community’s attitude changed and the outlook of the church leadership was transformed.

“Church leaders now come to me and say, ‘Look, pastor, there’s a need. Let’s go,’” says Pastor Miguel. “We’re all united. The blessing has been so big that we’ve had to change

church buildings because the first one became too small. The community no longer sees our church as an enemy. Now they seek us out because they say we are God’s blessing living among them.”

Together, The Good Samaritan Church and the Las Delicias community have paved two local streets, built



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ENLACE established a research farm to increase the quality and quantity of produce — helping small-scale farmers gain access to markets with new crops and better prices.

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two homes and 300 temporary shelters, enabled families to start small businesses, and opened a local health clinic. Their latest project is a water system that will benefit more than 10,000 residents in three communities.

“The Good Samaritan Church is fulfilling the integral mission of the church through effective proclamation *and* demonstration of the gospel of Christ,” Ron says.

It’s a church with seemingly no resources, led by a pastor with a first-grade education. The area is plagued by poor health, violence and natural disaster. Yet believers have found effective ways to show people how much God cares.

“At ENLACE, our commitment to the churches is to simply join them in listening to God about what He wants to do in their communities, and then move forward,” Ron says.

Abelines Assembly of God and Pastor Victorio Paz partnered with ENLACE a few years ago. Born and raised in Abelines, Pastor Victorio has led the church for 15 years. Always a respected leader, he is now known as the pastor of a church that is transforming the community.

Located in a remote, rural region in northeastern El Salvador, Abelines is accessible only by four-wheel-drive vehicle or on foot. Most of the 2,500 residents live in adobe houses with dirt floors. They do not have electricity, running water or paved roads.

Abelines was a crossroads of guerrilla activity during the 12-year civil war.

“There is not a family in this area that didn’t suffer the loss of family members at the hands of the guerrillas or government forces,” says ENLACE community advisor Doris de Leon.



Randy Hurst

ENLACE

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— PASTOR VICTORIO PAZ

Over the last five years, the Abelines church has partnered with community leaders and associations to develop a community health program that includes preventive health education, a local health clinic, sanitation facilities and a clean water system. The church is looking at other opportunities such as housing and economic development.

“Since we’ve been working with ENLACE,” Pastor Victorio says, “the church is now dedicated to working not only inside the four walls of the church but also for the good of our entire community. God is at work. The Bible study and training we’ve received from ENLACE have helped us commit to helping our community, and we’ve seen good outcomes. The community now believes in what the church does because they have seen what the church believes in through proven action.”

Some churches are surprised by ENLACE’s approach. The ministry does no marketing in the country. Instead, staff members wait for churches to come to them for help. When they are approached, they ask what the church is already doing in its community and how ENLACE can help the church serve more effectively.



Holding tank under construction for Las Delicias water system.

Pastor Miguel says the most important challenge in motivating the local church is to get its members to look beyond what seems to be a lack of resources. The people often think of themselves as poor and needing to be served. Pastor Miguel responds by telling them the story

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“THE COMMUNITY NOW BELIEVES IN WHAT THE CHURCH DOES BECAUSE THEY HAVE SEEN WHAT THE CHURCH BELIEVES IN THROUGH PROVEN ACTION.”



of Jesus feeding the 5,000. The disciples were distraught because they were looking at only the few resources they had. But as the disciples obeyed and shared what little they had, God did a miracle of provision.

Ron Bueno expects the number of churches that partner with ENLACE to increase to at least 50 by 2010 as the 12 current churches replicate their model among other congregations.

“Over the last 14 years, I have learned how important it is for a church to both understand and define its mission to become a restored body of believers and to become an effective agent of transformation



in its community,” he says. “A church that does not include both elements in its mission either turns inward and becomes a ‘lifeboat’ waiting for Christ’s return, or it becomes externally focused and acts as a social agent without transforming power.

“In my experience, the church will accomplish both parts of the mission only when it becomes an authentic community of people actively waiting on God — listening, obeying and being poured out to transform its community.” **tpe**

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E-mail your comments to tpe@ag.org.

Visit world.ag.org to see more of David McGee’s photography in El Salvador.

