

Faithful Connection

A pastor in need, a gift of life

By John W. Kennedy

Pastor Robert Jimenez may live another 20 years, thanks in large part to a fellow Royal Rangers leader — and an inquisitive 11-year-old boy in his congregation.

Jimenez, 60, has led Whiteriver Assembly of God on Arizona's White Mountain Apache Reservation for the past 13 years. A couple of years ago, Joshua Kaytogy, now 14, asked Jimenez what Acts 1:8 means today for Native Americans living in the forested mountains of eastern Arizona. In that passage, Jesus commands His followers to go to the ends of the earth preaching the gospel, beginning with Jerusalem and Judea.

Jimenez explained that Jerusalem is like the reservation where they live, which has increased from 3 percent Christian in 1995 to 53 percent today. Judea, the pastor told Joshua, involves people in regions beyond the reservation, and that's why Whiteriver members take missions trips to remote and scorching villages often ignored by others around the Grand Canyon State.

But what about to the ends of the earth?

While Scripture commands it, Jimenez didn't think Whiteriver Assembly of God could embark on an overseas missions trip, at least not until he had a kidney transplant.

Three decades after being diagnosed with diabetes, both of Jimenez's kidneys shut down in 2006 — following a heart attack and stroke in 2003. He began thrice-weekly dialysis treatments

of 3½ hours per session. In hopes of receiving a kidney transplant, he went on a waiting list, which can result in years of hoping and lingering.

It's not as though Jimenez hasn't met challenges head-on before. Early in his ministry he worked with gang youth in Los Angeles. In 1996, Arizona District officials asked him to take over an indebted church that had dwindled to 40 attendees.

"I didn't know anything about Indians except what I had seen in John Wayne movies," Jimenez says.

He was welcomed into the community and established a vibrant ministry, but his diseased kidneys sapped his energy. The prospects of receiving a transplant were slim. Most recipients obtain a kidney from a cadaver, but more than 1,000 die annually waiting for a transplant. Some family members donate a kidney to a relative, but even so, only 7,000 transplants occur each year in this country. Meanwhile, 250,000 Americans need dialysis.

"Dialysis is hard on the body," Jimenez says. "It keeps you alive, but the body starts to deteriorate because of the constant removal of blood, purifying it and putting it back in."

Nevertheless, Jimenez began to fervently pray about a foreign missions opportunity. After Nestor Medina, an Assemblies of God missionary to Nicaragua, spoke at the church, Jimenez sensed the Lord impressing members of Whiteriver to go to the Central American nation.

In faith, Jimenez, who is an Assemblies of God Intercultural Ministries missionary, scheduled the trip for July and trusted God to provide a kidney donor. He also prepared physically for the yet unscheduled surgery. Once nicknamed "Two Belts" by fellow leaders during his years of Royal Rangers ministry to boys, Jimenez lost 90 pounds off his 300-pound frame.

Rather than sit idly by for the waiting list to produce a match, Jimenez began to search for a living donor himself. He knew that non-relatives rarely agree to relinquish a kidney to someone in need.

"People from all over the world were praying," Jimenez says. "Whenever I would get discouraged, I'd get an encouraging card in the mail. When we least seem to think He is hearing our prayers, God is in control. He is never late."

But by Feb. 1, 2009, the situation didn't look hopeful. Nine people had volunteered to be tested, but for one reason or another none qualified as a donor.

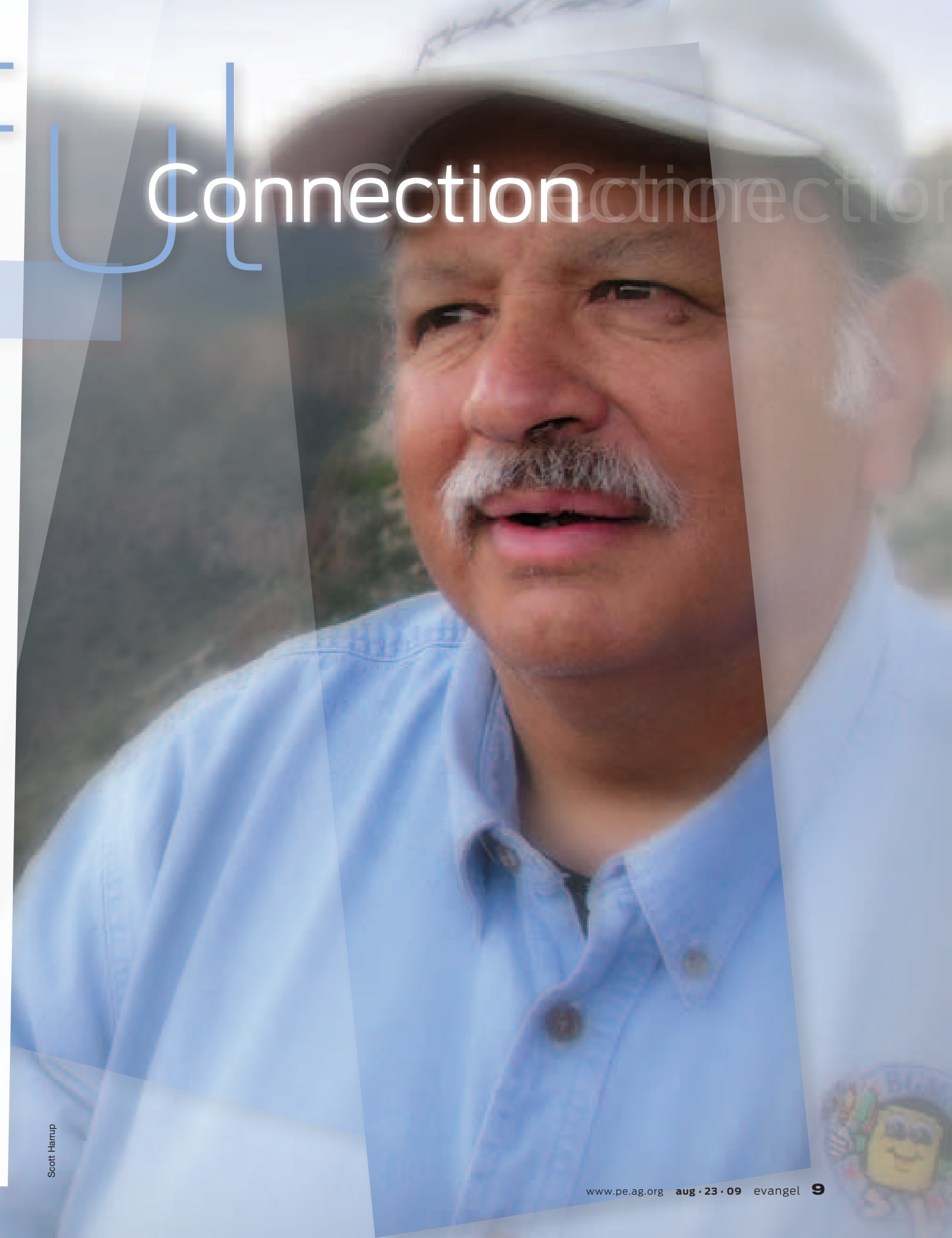
A donor connection

Jimenez says God assured him that everything would work out. The next day, Feb. 2, doctors at Henry Mayo Hospital in Phoenix determined that the 10th volunteer on the 11-person list had qualified as a perfectly matched donor.

Sterling Nuesca had met Robert Jimenez at a Royal Rangers jamboree in 2005, yet they hardly considered themselves close friends.

Last October, Nuesca received a Royal Rangers e-mail detailing

continued on page 10



Scott Harup

Faithful Connection

Jimenez's plight involving his search for people with O-positive blood to be considered as a match as a kidney donor. After prayer, Nuesca, an Arizona Royal Rangers sectional commander, agreed to be tested on behalf of Jimenez, a deputy district commander.

Nuesca, who attends Harvest Church, an Assemblies of God church in Peoria, Ariz., underwent a battery of physical and mental evaluations to confirm his compatibility. He had the option of changing his mind at any time along the way. Physicians explained that if he donated a kidney he must relinquish contact sports, eat well and exercise regularly the rest of his life.

"I had no regrets," says Nuesca, who retired from the U.S. Army in 2002 after 29 years. "The Lord told me that this was the right thing to do."

Nuesca didn't learn that he qualified as a perfect match until Jimenez told him a week before the St.

four small incisions on Nuesca's left side plus a three-inch cut below the belly button to extract his left kidney in the laparoscopic procedure.

The transplanted kidney started functioning even as Jimenez remained on the operating table. Nuesca only needed to stay hospitalized one day. Within four weeks he returned to work as a security officer.

"I've had no complications," Nuesca says. "It's like I never donated a kidney."

Unexpected outcomes

However, during surgery, a nerve of Jimenez's was severed, resulting in a loss of feeling in his right leg. Phoenix is four hours from Jimenez's home, and he planned to be hospitalized for four days. It ended up being six weeks of hospital care and intense rehabilitation. Jimenez slowly regained sensation after medical personnel grafted a nerve from his right calf to the severed ends of his femoral nerve in his abdomen.

"I traded three days of dialysis a week for three days of rehabilitation," Jimenez says.

There is a bright side.

After Jimenez became pastor at Whiteriver he brought the church out of debt. Now, even though more than half of the congregants are unemployed, the church gives 41 percent of its budget to missions. Jimenez didn't want to go into debt in his personal life. So last fall, he contacted churches around the country where he had a connection, explaining his medical and financial realities. Jimenez managed to raise the \$50,000 to pay for the costs that his health insurance wouldn't cover.

Contributions, most of them small, came from across the country, including Puerto Rico and Hawaii. Congregations put on yard sales, car washes and concerts to raise funds for the surgery and hospital stay.

There is even a blessing in the botched operation.

"The hospital said, 'No charge; we messed up,'" Jimenez says. So he has been able to donate \$35,000 targeted for the hospital bill to missions, primarily to the 45 missionaries the church supports.

Only acquaintances before, Jimenez and Nuesca now keep in touch regularly as friends. Many relatives and friends tell Nuesca he is a hero, but he shrugs off such talk.

"The Lord just gave me the courage, the confidence and the willpower to go through this for a brother in Christ," Nuesca says.

As for the missions trip to Nicaragua, the outreach included 10 members of Whiteriver and 14 more from a nearby congregation. The team brought donated puppets, clown costumes and other supplies to 10 Nicaraguan congregations coming together to learn how to minister to children.

Jimenez didn't get to lead the construction team that built a church roof as planned in Nicaragua. In June, he spent four days hospitalized due to complications with his incision. His family physician told him the trip would be too risky because of potential infection, and suspected that Jimenez's vigorous rehabilitation efforts to gain leg strength had contributed to the setback.

"He told me not to take physical therapy so seriously," Jimenez says.

But with the replaced kidney, Jimenez knows there will be other missions opportunities.

Nuesca is grateful that the Royal Rangers program enabled him to help a fellow ministry worker in need of a lifeline. The transplanted kidney is expected to extend Jimenez's life by a couple of decades.

"I'm glad I was able to give a gift of life to someone I knew," Nuesca says. "We were brothers in Christ. Now we're kidney brothers." **e**

JOHN W. KENNEDY is news editor of the *Pentecostal Evangel*.

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

ABCs OF SALVATION

To know God and be ready for heaven, follow these steps:

A. Admit you are a sinner.

"There is no one righteous, not even one ... for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God." Romans 3:10,23 (See Romans 5:8; 6:23.)

Ask God's forgiveness and repent of your sins.

"Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved." Romans 10:13 (See Acts 3:19.)

B. Believe in Jesus

(put your trust in Him) as your only hope of salvation. "For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life." John 3:16 (See John 14:6.)

Become a child of God by receiving Christ.

"To all who received him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God." John 1:12 (See Revelation 3:20.)

C. Confess that Jesus is your Lord.

"If you confess with your mouth, 'Jesus is Lord,' and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved." Romans 10:9 (See verse 10.)

For further help, contact the Assemblies of God church near you.

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Robert Jimenez (left) is comforted by kidney donor Sterling Nuesca.

Patrick's Day surgery. The 54-year-old Nuesca made the sacrifice because he felt as though the Lord had spared his life earlier. He underwent a mitral valve repair in open-heart surgery in 2004. He emerged grateful, and vowed to do whatever the Lord wanted him to do. That turned out to be volunteering to teach third-, fourth- and fifth-grade boys in Royal Rangers.

For the transplant, surgeons made