



Danelle: Happy to Be Working Herself Out of a Job

By Beth Foreman,
Features Editor

[top] The relationships built with the kids in the Sunday school carry on throughout the rest of village life.

Every day, when Danelle Putnam goes to work, she walks past the banana trees outside her home in the Dominican Republic, gracefully balancing her life as an American missionary in a foreign country, with the ever-present reminder of her favorite Bible verse Isaiah 55:10–11:

As the rain and the snow come down from heaven, and do not return to it without watering the earth and making it bud and flourish, so that it yields seed for the sower and bread for the eater, so is my word that goes out from my mouth: It will not return to me empty, but will accomplish what I desire and achieve the purpose for which I sent it.

The Dominican Republic, affectionately known as “the DR” to many, sits about 1,000 miles off the southeast coast of Florida and boasts more than 800 miles of pristine Caribbean sandy beaches. Many recognize the country as a home to cigars, sugar cane, and baseball great Sammy Sosa. Along with Haiti, the DR shares the island of Hispaniola, the second largest island of the West Indies, where Christopher Columbus’ three ships landed in 1492.

A year later, in 1493, Columbus returned to this island with 17 ships and founded La Isabela, the

first European town in the New World, as part of Spain’s effort to spread their power and also to spread Christianity.

Unfortunately, the DR’s history has been filled with civil unrest, power struggles, dictators, and poverty, and the people have suffered. In the midst of this suffering, however, God’s promise in Isaiah is being fulfilled.

Sail forward to 2009. Danelle Putnam, one of the first Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod missionaries to this country, is bringing His Word to this land.

When people hear *missionary*, images of grass huts, wild animals, and dirt floors come to mind. Danelle’s living conditions, however, are not primitive. She lives in a small house in a Santiago middle-class neighborhood about two hours from the capital city of Santa Domingo.

“We’re not out in the bush or anything like that. We have a car. [She and her team travel a couple thousand kilometers each month!] I have running water. I have toilets. The conditions we live in are fine. I can get Internet and things like that.”



LUTHERAN WOMAN’S QUARTERLY (USPS 322-660) is published quarterly – spring, summer, fall, and winter – by the Lutheran Women’s Missionary League of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod, P.O. Box 411993, St. Louis, MO 63141-1993.

Periodicals postage paid at St. Louis, MO. Canada #R129889093.

POSTMASTER: Send address changes to LUTHERAN WOMAN’S QUARTERLY, P.O. Box 411993, St. Louis, MO 63141-1993. Annual subscription rates: 10 copies or more to one address, \$4.00 per year; individual subscriptions, \$5.50 per year. Single issues available for \$1.50 plus postage. Call office. (Available in Braille, large print, or on cassette tapes free from Lutheran Blind Mission, 7550 Watson Road, St. Louis, MO 63119.)

In her spare time, she hangs out with friends, indulges in an almost daily chocolate fix — Dove® chocolates are her favorites! — fights off the mosquitoes, deals with ninety-nine percent humidity, and eats plantains and chicken. “Lots of chicken!” she said.

Danelle is busy sowing seeds of faith in a country that has never had LCMS missionaries until recently. Her work includes visiting an orphanage for children with developmental disabilities and teaching Vacation Bible School at one of the churches where last spring more than 130 children learned about Jesus and His love.

“In the fall of 2005, I went to the DR and started working with Pastor Walter Ries of the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Brazil. My call was to be a disability outreach worker, to share the Word of God and reach those with developmental disabilities such as cerebral palsy, Down syndrome, mental retardation. I am called to help provide services for education to families.”

Her mission heart for those with disabilities formed during her childhood in Montana at Our Savior Lutheran Church in Stephenville.

“Our youth group never had money to go to the national youth gatherings, so we started going on servant events to Good Shepherd Lutheran Home of the West in Oregon. From fifth grade through high school, I spent two weeks every summer in Oregon doing day camps, physical labor, VBS, and spending one-on-one time with the individuals.”

She continued, “Those experiences shaped me as far as learning how to serve the Lord by serving others, and they also gave me a heart for those with disabilities.”

At a young age, Danelle was already learning about balancing her life and priorities as a Christian in a not-so-perfect world filled with hurting people who don't know Jesus Christ.

“I learned that life isn't about me. It's about sharing God's love. It's about sharing Christ's love with others.”

Her path to the mission field wasn't a straight one, however. “I never really strived to be a missionary or go into church work,” she said. “I kind of fell into it!” she added with a laugh. “I don't have a story: *since I was three years old I wanted to be a missionary.*”

Majoring in Spanish in college, Danelle spent time abroad, studying in Mexico and Ecuador. Back in the States, she worked with teens in a government-funded program, but she couldn't share the Gospel with those kids. “I wanted to be able to openly share Christ with the kids.”



After college she spent 18 months in Guadalajara as a volunteer missionary. “That's what got me on the LCMS missionary path. I kind of went in the back door.”

After her work in Guadalajara, she returned home and searched for other volunteer opportunities.

Like many twenty-somethings, she shared, “I didn't know what to do with my life.” That's when a door opened for her to work in Panama with women, children, and youth.

While many young adults struggle with their life's direction, Danelle focused on God's direction. Instead of asking *Who am I?* Danelle would have asked, *Whose am I?* And she already knew that answer.

“I was excited to go to Panama, but I never went there thinking that this is who I am or what I do. But by my third year in Panama, I started seeing that this is what I was called to do. This is what I was called to be.”

Her Spanish language training, her patience, her years of experience working with persons with developmental disabilities, her trust in the Lord — these gifts synthesized into her work in the Dominican Republic.

“I was in Panama for six years when I heard about work in the DR. I sent my résumé, and a year later I was called to serve there. We were starting from scratch,” she shared. Danelle's work in the Dominican Republic with Pastor Walter T. Ries is now joined by Pastor Ted Krey and his wife, Rebecca, who are focusing on building the first Lutheran congregations in the country.



[top] The kids love to sing!

[next] Pastor Walter Ries talking with vicars, Willy and Joseph.



[top] Pastor Ted Krey and [inset] Pastor Walter T. Ries lead worship.

Some of Danelle's work is in the busy metropolitan streets of Santiago. Other times, she's working in rural areas such as Palmar Arriba (population 3,700) about four miles northwest of Santiago. "We work with quite a range of people: poor, middle class, professionals. We find the people are open to hear the Word. They are willing to listen to the Gospel because we are foreigners."

Her goal is a beautiful missionary goal: to work herself out of a job. She wants to educate others to minister to the suffering, the developmentally disabled. "We're trying to use the disability ministry to teach what it means to be a merciful Church and to be vessels of Christ's mercy to people who are suffering," she added.

Her desire is to sow the seeds, to teach the people. "Our emphasis is teaching other people to do the work, helping them to learn how to become leaders. In one of our churches, we have a group of 11-, 12- and 13-year-old girls helping to teach Bible stories and classes so that, in a few years, they will be able to do it by themselves. Part of our job is to be facilitators to help the people do the mission ... and work ourselves out of a job!"

Sowing these seeds is not without obstacles and challenges, however.

According to Danelle, the greatest obstacle for many missionaries isn't guns, alligators, or disease. She admitted that *she* can be her own biggest obstacle.

She explained that it's "dangerous" to depend on your abilities instead of the Lord. "One of the biggest challenges is to remember that I am a servant." Even though she likes the work, she needs to remind herself that it's not about *her* work but about teaching the *other* people to do the work.

She tries to listen to her own advice: "I try not to depend on my own skills, talents, education or whatever and just depend on the Lord and those around

me. Not one person is going to build the Church. It's Christ's Church and He built it. He uses all of us."

The challenges are also within the community itself. "The DR has a lot of poverty, social problems, holes where the government can't step up. But the church can help. There are so few services for people with developmental disabilities here," she said. She has worked hard to understand the needs of the Dominican people and their families — especially those with developmental disabilities — and then to teach the church families to serve them.

According to Danelle, the Dominican people with whom she works understand the "essence of being a Christian. They are saved by God's grace, and they share that with others in a very active way."

Presenting opportunities for active service is one of Danelle's goals. For example, a neighboring government-run orphanage, CONANI, is filled with developmentally disabled children — children who are hurting. "Most of the CONANI children were abandoned by their families at birth."

So Danelle and the others have organized bi-weekly visits to the orphanage for the church families in Palmar Arriba. "We show the children a Bible picture, and we speak words of salvation to them — that Jesus loves them, Jesus died for them, Jesus washed away their sins, and Jesus is with them every day."

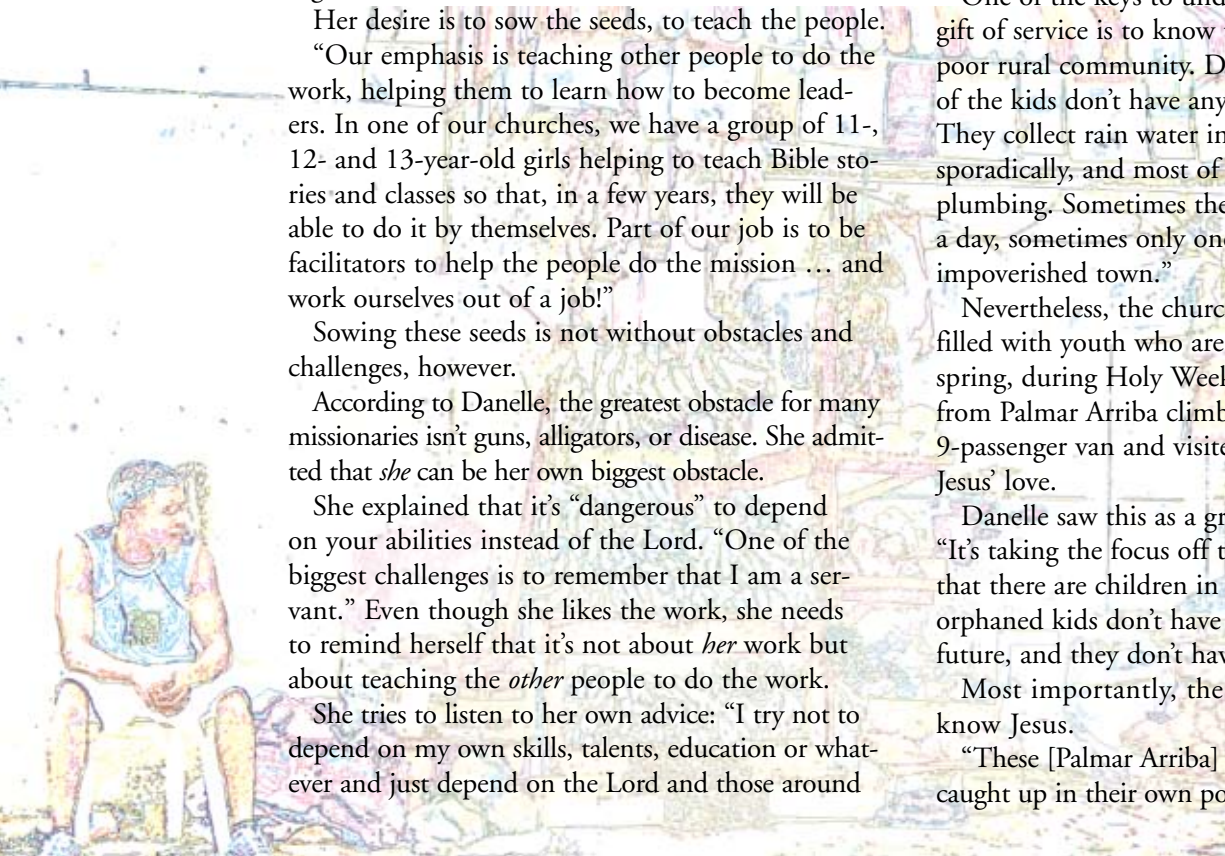
One of the keys to understanding this precious gift of service is to know that Palmar Arriba is a poor rural community. Danelle explained, "Most of the kids don't have any water in their homes. They collect rain water in barrels, electricity comes sporadically, and most of them don't have indoor plumbing. Sometimes they eat a couple of times a day, sometimes only one meal a day. It's a very impoverished town."

Nevertheless, the church in Palmar Arriba is filled with youth who are eager to serve others. Last spring, during Holy Week, 23 youth and adults from Palmar Arriba climbed into Pastor Krey's 9-passenger van and visited the orphanage to share Jesus' love.

Danelle saw this as a great teaching experience. "It's taking the focus off their poverty as they see that there are children in even worse poverty. The orphaned kids don't have a family, they don't have a future, and they don't have education."

Most importantly, the orphaned kids don't know Jesus.

"These [Palmar Arriba] children, who might get caught up in their own poverty, instead see them-



selves as people who can share. They have God's love that they can share. They have God's Word they can share. They have their joy they can share."

These orphanage visits and other service opportunities change the youth. "These are children who don't have their hands out waiting for someone to rescue them, looking for someone to solve their problems. Instead, they have become children who understand that their daily bread comes from the Lord, and no matter what their educational level is or how poor they are, they can serve someone in need."

To illustrate, Danelle shared a story.

"We started teaching the people in the church about stewardship by taking offerings for someone in need in the community. The first time, we gave the money to an elderly woman in the hospital. The youth went to the hospital by themselves to give her the money — oh, about \$12."

The next time they took an offering, Pastor Krey asked for ideas about who needed the money. "Most of the people sitting in that church could have used the money themselves, but nobody raised a hand. Maybe a minute went by. The pastor asked again. No suggestions. Finally an eleven-year-old girl said, 'Let's give the money to the CONANI kids.' They decided the kids needed shoes and socks." After collecting offerings for three weeks, the youth went to the market to shop.

The seeds had been sown. God's Word nurtured these youth, and their actions were the fruits.

"What's great about this experience is that at this young age, the children are thinking about *real needs*. They already understand that the Gospel is about sharing in each other's sufferings, being a friend, showing others how Jesus is their friend, and talking to them about their need for His love and salvation."

And Danelle casually added, "It's pretty cool."

Danelle's work days are varied. "Certain activities take place daily such as Bible studies. But some days I'm meeting with people, government officials, doing administrative things, catching up on the 520 e-mails in my inbox!"

Certainly, Danelle's challenges to balance her life, her work — answering over 500 e-mails! — and her service are similar to women in the States. The only way she keeps her focus is by being in the Word and prayer every day. "There really is no other way. He keeps me grounded."

She is also blessed with good friends — fellow missionaries and the people in the DR. "I love being with the people, and they are a great encouragement to me."



Ever mindful of her favorite Bible verse, Danelle reflects on her work as a missionary. "It's not so much about what fancy programs we can conjure up or how well we can get something organized. Sometimes we can't. It's about sticking to the basics of loving, showing mercy, and sharing His Word."

She believes that this is not just true in a foreign mission field. It's true in our own neighborhoods. "We all have to be proclaimers of Christ. That's the way He works."

She's quick to point out that sharing Christ "doesn't depend on us or what I can or can't do."

Five hundred years ago, when Christopher Columbus stepped onto the beautiful beaches of what is now the Dominican Republic, the lovely island was already blossoming with lush tropical foliage. But God had a plan to bring forth eternal fruits through the Living Water.

And so, today, the island blossoms beautifully as Danelle and her team work in His Kingdom. Faith in Christ Jesus grows in the hearts of many Dominican people across this land — from the bustling streets of Santiago to the quiet rural villages of Palmar Arriba.

It will not return to me empty, but will accomplish what I desire and achieve the purpose for which I sent it.

God's Word came to this island over 500 years ago. And in the midst of suffering, His light shines, and He will accomplish His purpose — through His people.

Editor's note: At their request, we are unable to share pictures from the CONANI Orphanage where Danelle does much of her work.

There were tons of children at the event, and even a fair number of adults. Adults as well as children listened to the Gospel.