

St. Paul's key in building 50 homes in Nicaragua

Church raised \$250,000 for program

By JULIANA GOODWIN Special to the Globe

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A new house owner receiving the keys from the mayor of San Ramon. He has promised to bring water and electricity to the houses. This is something that we are going to follow up on to make sure it gets completed. Courtesy | Dan Distler

Ten years ago, St. Paul's United Methodist Church in Joplin made a commitment to help support the work of Rainbow Network.

For the past decade, it has sent money and parishioners on mission trips to small villages in rural Nicaragua, which is one of the poorest countries in the Western Hemisphere.

Then in 2014, the Rev. Aaron Brown approached his congregation about making an even bigger change in lives of the people — building houses.

"We were able to raise \$250,000 in the course of a few months to relocate 50 families and build 50 homes," Brown said. "The cool thing about Rainbow Network is the families have to have ownership. The families that

receive the homes have to pay a mortgage. They will be part of the microloan program so they are starting their own businesses.”

This month, Rainbow Network marks a major milestone: It will complete and dedicate its 1,000th home in Nicaragua.

“It’s a huge deal,” said Keith Jaspers, founder of the nonprofit. “St. Paul’s has built 50 of those houses for us financially. Rainbow Network is an interdenominational Christian ministry and the backbone is churches. We work with 100 churches of 17 denominations. St. Paul is one of the key churches in that group.”

EVOLVING MISSION

Jaspers founded the nonprofit in 1995 and its mission has continued to evolve. Before Rainbow Network, Jaspers was a hotelier, businessman, and served on the international board for Habitat for Humanity. His background has helped shape how the organization is run.

The goal is to raise the standard of living and make people sustainable and break the cycle for future generations. This is accomplished by focusing on four areas: health care, education, economic development and housing.

In taking a business approach, the homes are not free, but families pay them off interest-free. The money from those homes goes back into Rainbow Network’s mission and helps pay for things like schools.

There’s always a pay-it-forward or leadership component, too. For example, Rainbow Network sponsors high school scholarships, and those students must come back and serve in their community and teach at the primary school for example. In order to send a child to a feeding center, the child’s family must plant a vegetable garden. Rainbow Network gives them seeds and teaches them how to grow a garden. That is reducing the number of children fed in those centers.

Those are reasons Lin Harris, missions ministry director at St. Paul’s United Methodist Church, loves Rainbow Network.

“John Wesley, who founded the United Methodist churches, his big mantra was ‘do no harm.’ A lot of times when you are giving to people, you can overgive. As Americans we think to throw money at a problem, and that is not always the solution. Our thought is we come along beside them. We give them the tools and provide schooling and things to better themselves. We are enabling them to help themselves, not be dependent upon us and that is important.”

THE HOMES

Dan Distler, member of St. Paul’s, was recently in Nicaragua to see the final dedication of homes built by the church.

“It was truly an amazing experience. The people live in wooden shacks with dirt floors, so to be able to see the joy on their face whenever they received this house, it’s an experience unlike any I have had before,” Distler said. “What we are doing from these houses is freeing them from modern-day slavery, and I don’t use that word lightly.”

Most of the people live and work on coffee plantations. Plantation owners will either house them in a barn or warehouse with 15 to 20 other families, or if they can muster enough supplies to cobble together their homes, they have to buy the supplies from the plantation owners. Families cook on open fires inside the homes, causing a slew of respiratory problems. A lot of times, children work in the fields instead of going to school. The homes allow them to be more independent and have a chance for a fresh start, he said.

The homes were built in two phases in two villages. The first set of 25 were built last year in a village called Las Rosas and the second in El Carmen.

Distler recently had the opportunity to go back to Las Rosas and see what changes had come in the past year. People were able to plant food to grow, which was not possible without their own land. They had added onto their houses. The standard of living had been raised, and they were visibly happier and healthier, he said. The homes are concrete blocks with metal roofs and cement floors, but they keep vermin out, parasites off the floor and the rain off. People respond as if they have received a mansion, Harris said. On average, eight people live in each house built by Rainbow Network.

“The 50 houses St. Paul so graciously built will impact up to 400 lives,” Distler said. After purchasing the land and building the homes, St. Paul donated another \$23,000 to help build steps because the terrain was so hilly and the people needed a way to navigate.

While Distler was in Nicaragua, a woman approached him and asked: “Why does a church that is so far away care about us?” “I didn’t know how to answer that,” he said. “I just said the people of Nicaragua are in our hearts and it’s truly Jesus Christ at work.”

Rainbow Network does not require conversion to Christianity when people receive help from the nonprofit. Jaspers, the founder, said he does what he does because it’s the right thing to do. Others in St. Paul’s United Methodist Church echoed the same sentiment.

“We don’t want to be Bible thumpers; we want our actions to show what we are about,” Harris said. “This is the perfect time to say, ‘We are followers of Jesus, and that is what we are called to do.’”

Online

Rainbow Network's website is www.rainbownetwork.org. St. Paul’s United Methodist Church in Joplin is online at <http://spwired.com> and <https://www.facebook.com/pages/Saint-Pauls-United-Methodist-Church/52701193365>.