

OXFORD PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH & THE SEVENTH PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH IN BARRANQUILLA COLOMBIA REJOICE IN PARTNERSHIP

In 1995, the Miami Valley Presbytery in Ohio and the North Coast Presbytery in Colombia created a Partnership Covenant that eventually matched churches in each Presbytery to sister churches. The Oxford Presbyterian Church thus became matched with its sister church—The Seventh Presbyterian Church of Barranquilla, Colombia. Through the years that followed, our Partnership blossomed as friendships formed between the two congregations. We have held joint services that began as a telephone connection to the pulpit and then morphed into a Skype connection on a big screen so that both congregations could see and greet one another.



Miami Valley Presbytery in 1997 was the first group to visit Colombia

In 1997, eight adults from our Miami Valley Presbytery visited Colombia to discern how to best create relationships with the Presbyterian churches there and understand the needs at that time. The group included Holly Gage and Melanie Ziegler from our church as well as John and Paula Ewers, Fred Richards and three others. They visited the Seventh Presbyterian Church and also the displacement camps.

In 1999, Holly's son Jessup Gage went to Colombia and stayed with Gina Zabala for three weeks. Then in 2002 Omar David and Mario, Gina Zabala's two sons, came to the U.S. and stayed with Holly Gage and attended Kirkmont Camp. Omar David and Mario later returned to Kirkmont to work as counselors. Since then, Mario attended Seminary

in Dayton and is now a Presbyterian minister in New York. Omar David now lives in North Carolina with his wife and baby.

In 2000, Holly Gage returned with a group of youth from our Presbytery. They joined with Colombian youth to build bridges between the young people in hopes of forming lasting relationships and creating trust between the people of our two countries. The youth worked on a service project to clean and freshen up the Colombian Presbytery Summer Camp as well as visiting various community projects, and over the weekend they were guests in the homes of church members.

Alexander Steffanel visited our church as a representative from the Seventh Church and became enamored with Oxford and Miami University. He and his wife Carmen Guerrero decided to attend Miami University for graduate work and also were active in our church for three years. Their first son was born while they were here. Alexander is now teaching Spanish at Lee University in Tennessee and continues to maintain a close relationship with the Seventh Church in Colombia.

In 2003, a delegation of about 10-12 people came from Colombia and stayed in our congregation's homes for the weekend. In 2006, Mark Barnes was part of the Delegation that went to Colombia to celebrate the 150th Anniversary of the Presbyterian Church in Colombia. Each summer, the Miami Valley Presbytery sponsors several young adults from Colombia to visit our Presbytery's churches and Kirkmont Camp.

During the summer of 2013, a team of seven members--Deanna Maxwell, Connie Everhart, Karen Shearer, Mary Jo McFadden, Sara Smith, Robert Smith, and Mark Barnes--visited our sister church in Barranquilla and they were able to see first-hand the dedication and enthusiasm their congregation had for serving the neediest women and children in their city.

The country of Colombia has been dealing with violence and strife between drug cartels, government forces, and groups competing for power for many years. Rebel groups took over rural villages, gathered the men and marched them away—never to be seen again. The women and children were forced to flee to the cities where they often live in abject poverty. The Seventh Presbyterian Church of Barranquilla is dedicated to serve these displaced women and children in addition to providing assistance to women and their children who are victims of domestic violence.



The Seventh Presbyterian Church sponsors and staffs with volunteers the Bethesda Christian Community Center. Their key objective is to reduce child poverty and to create conditions to achieve social inclusion and access to quality education and health care. They are presently working with children to teach Christian values through Biblical stories, sports, arts and culture. They meet weekly with single mothers for prayer groups, vocational training, and counseling. They assist poor families with urgent needs for medicine, food, and school supplies. The Seventh Church is currently hoping to expand their services to provide more Christian psychological counseling for children and parents. They also hope to decrease the high levels of malnutrition by providing daily meals for small children.

Our church sends money to support the GOEL Project that enables needy children to attend public school in Colombia. GOEL is an initiative through the Bethesda Center.

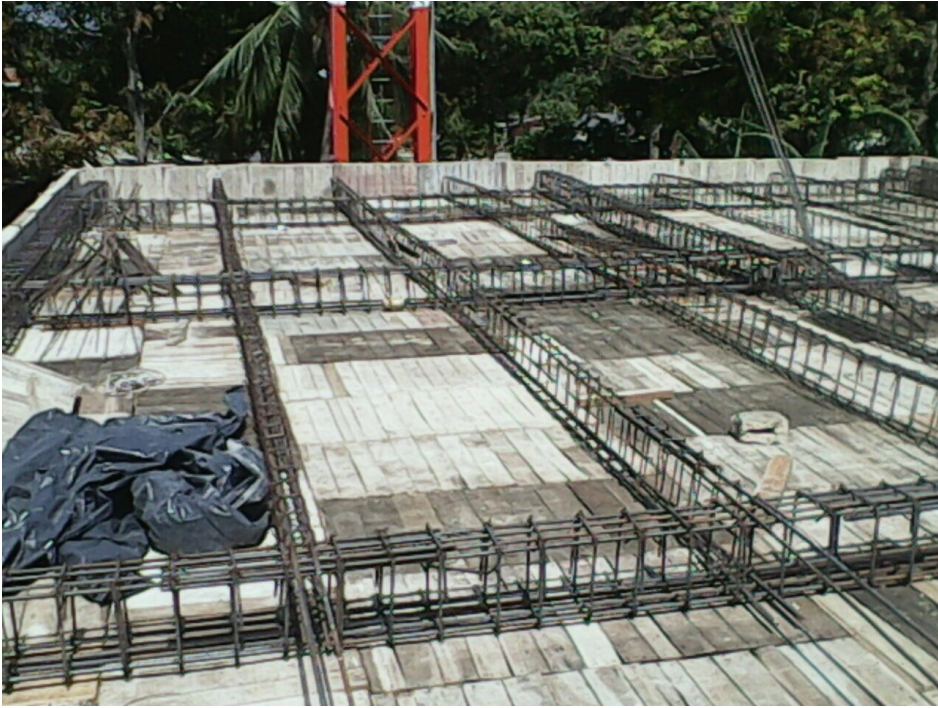
The Oxford Presbyterian Church Team in 2013 was impressed with the total dedication of the Barranquilla congregation to its mission projects. The OPC Team noted that the Bethesda Christian Community Center building was small and in a dilapidated condition—probably beyond repair. At the Fall Thank Offering Gathering of the Oxford Presbyterian Women, the Mission Team gave a presentation to share their visit to the North Coast Presbytery and the Seventh Church. A discussion followed, concerning the need to replace the Bethesda Christian Community Center building with a larger and more substantial building so that services could be expanded to reach larger numbers and additional services could be added.

In January of 2014, Johana & Daniel Nuñez visited our church in Oxford. Johana is a Deacon in the Seventh Church and OPW shared our idea of applying for a grant to build a new Community Center. Johana agreed to take our information back to Colombia and ask their Session if they would partner with us in this venture. The Seventh Church Session endorsed the project with great enthusiasm. After prayer and exploration, Oxford Presbyterian Women decided to apply for a grant to build a new Community Center through the National Presbyterian Women's Birthday Offering. We commenced writing the grant proposal that was submitted in May 2014

In October of 2014, OPW received notification that our grant proposal had been selected to be the recipient of the 2015 PW Birthday Offering of \$100,000 and a nationwide campaign commenced to raise the funds. We also raised funds within our church to buy land next to the present Center to allow for expanded outdoor activities.

In May of 2016, our Sister church received the first \$50,000 payment of the Birthday Offering and they gratefully and happily began the project by demolishing the old building and started construction of the new building. They received the second payment of \$50,000 in January of 2017.

These are pictures of the construction in progress:







Our partners at the Seventh Church are very dedicated to their mission and they continue to serve the women and children by holding activities outdoors and also within the unfinished building! Construction should be completed this summer and the new building will be dedicated in August.