

**San Juan:
The Beginning of a World Mission Congregation
in Puerto Rico**



by
Rick Pamperin

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SAN JUAN: THE BEGINNING OF A WORLD MISSION CONGREGATION

This paper studies our early WELS mission work in San Juan, Puerto Rico. What at first seemed a "closed-door" or "infertile ground" for our mission work has now become our fastest growing church on the Island. In this paper we'll give general information about Puerto Rico, an overview of our early mission efforts in San Juan and then a brief history (1982-1988) of the "IGLESIA -- MI DIOS VERDADERO" (=My reliable God congregation).

General Historical Background

Puerto Rico, the smallest of the Greater Antilles was discovered by Christopher Columbus on his second voyage to the New World (1493). At the time the native Indian race, the Tainos, called the Island, "El Borinquen." The Spanish christened the island with the name, "San Juan," and called their major port, "Puerto Rico." Later, for some unknown reason, the island and the city's names were traded, so that the island became "Puerto Rico" and the city, "San Juan."

Upon the arrival of the Spanish, the island's native Indians either died or intermarried with the "conquistadores." Then, as the Spanish imported African slaves to take the part of the native workers the races began to form the blend that we have today. The island's culture reflects all three of these influences as well the more recent influx from the United States. In fact, the ties

with the United States have increased in the 1900's to the point that there are now nearly as many Puerto Ricans on the US Mainland as on the island of Puerto Rico. 1

For three centuries the island remained part of the Spanish empire and was governed by governors appointed from Spain. In 1508 Ponce de Leon became the first governor of the new settlement. It was first in 1898, after the Spanish-American war, that Puerto Rico became a US possession. Before the war, Spain had promised independence to Puerto Rico, but when the island was ceded to the US, resentment arose especially in the "Independent Party" of Puerto Rico. In 1917 Puerto Ricans became US citizens and in 1952 they were granted status as a "Freely Associated State." That status was reaffirmed by a referendum in 1967. The major issue in Puerto Rican elections today revolves around the decision to maintain the "status quo" or to seek statehood. 2

Our WELS missionaries are concerned about this history because it may affect the relations between the Puerto Ricans and us. Do the Puerto Ricans resent US influence today? Would the desire for independence hamper our mission work? Does the Spanish language create a significant barrier for our missionaries? The history of the island may explain slow acceptance or even resistance to us as servants of the gospel.

Geography

The geography of Puerto Rico also plays an important part in our study of our mission work in San Juan. Puerto Rico is an island approximately 161 kilometers long by 56 kilometers wide (110 miles X 35 miles) located at the junction of the Caribbean Sea and the Atlantic Ocean. Although relatively small for US standards, it is divided by a small mountain range that runs across the island. As a result, a trip from San Juan on the north side of the island to Guayama on the south side takes over one and a half hours.

The mountain range forms a natural boundary that also greatly affects the rain, agriculture and population. Forty percent of Puerto Rico is mountainous terrain and only fifty percent of the land is cultivated. 3 The rainfall varies greatly from 200 inches in the northeast corner to less than 15 inches a year in the south west. The population in accordance with these factors is concentrated mainly in the eastern third of the island. 4 As of April 1986, there were 3.2 million people on the island of Puerto Rico with one third of that population in the San Juan metropolitan area.5 Our mission work concentrates in this eastern third of the island.

The climate of Puerto Rico does not vary greatly during the year. In the summer the average temperature reaches approximately 86 degrees and in winter reaches an average

of 82 degrees . Those temperatures may vary 10 to 15 degrees as one goes from the coast to the mountains. 6

The climate and geography have great influences on our mission work. For instance, although the year round heat and high humidity may be oppressive, the Puerto Ricans are very formal in their attire. They never wear shorts in public unless they are going to the beach. We from the Mainland, who may not be as sensitive to such detail in attire, must be very careful to project a favorable image.

Industry

"At the start of this century, most people worked in agriculture, but today Puerto Ricans hold jobs in a variety of industries as well as in service institutions and businesses common to all metropolitan areas.⁷ Some of the members in Mi Dios Verdadero are teachers, secretaries, lab-technicians, surveyors and factory workers.

The original economy of Puerto Rico was based primarily on the "production of cattle, sugar cane, tobacco and coffee." But after World War II, "the island began an intensive industrialization program, and today it is a major producer and exporter of manufactured goods, high-technology equipment and pharmaceuticals." Puerto Rico is also famous for its exportation of Rum. The Bacardi Rum corporation pays the highest rate of taxes in Puerto Rico, over 200 million dollars a year and exports the majority of its rum to the

US.^{yet} The largest industry in Puerto Rico today is the tourist industry.⁸

Because of its industrialization program, Puerto Rico enjoys a relatively high standard of living. The people in the metropolitan areas enjoy many of the modern conveniences that we have here on the Mainland; restaurants, malls and entertainment, such as: McDonalds, Pizza Hut, Kmart, Sears, Basketball, Baseball, VCR's and cable TV. Those outside of the metropolitan area are never far from phone or electric service. One member's wife, an employee of the phone service, told me that Puerto Rico has the fifth most modern telephone equipment in the world. There are cellular phones and satellite connections in many parts of the Island.

THE BEGINNINGS OF THE WELS IN SAN JUAN, PUERTO RICO

In late 1962 "the Board for World Missions of our Wisconsin Ev. Lutheran Synod desired to extend the World Mission work of our Synod into a new area. It felt it could not overlook the vast area of the world in which the Spanish language was spoken. It made the decision to have a survey made of Puerto Rico as to determine if it would seem wise to make a start there in the program of Spanish outside of the U.S. ⁹

There is not a great deal of documentation on the beginnings of the work in Puerto Rico. Yet, one very helpful document covers the basic history from 1962 to late 1968. It is a summary, to which I will add information from interviews and questionnaires.

To fulfill the desires of the World Mission Board, the Reverend H.C. Nitz of Waterloo, Wisconsin was asked to make

a survey of the island. He accepted that assignment and in January of 1963 began a six week survey of the Island. His favorable report of a mission field "ripe for the harvest" moved the Board to begin its Spanish mission work in Latin America. The Board authorized the calling of two "missioners" for Puerto Rico.¹⁰ The plan has been to use Puerto Rico as our "stepping stone to Latin America."

The Reverend Rupert A. Eggert of Pensacola, Florida became the first man of the two-man team for the Island. He and his family started Spanish language studies in Miami, Florida sometime in September of 1963. In March of 1964 the Pastor and his family moved to Puerto Rico and located in Rio Piedras Heights, one of the many urbanizations of San Juan. There they continued Spanish studies and began to accustom themselves to the Island.

In June of 1964 the Reverend Roger J. Sprain, of Douglas, Arizona also accepted the call to serve in Puerto Rico and became the second missionary for Puerto Rico. He and his wife were sent to Saltillo, Mexico for language studies. It was September of 1964 when they arrived in Puerto Rico with their son and twin daughters. The Sprain family located in an urbanization called "Round Hill," just a short distance from the Eggerts. Pastor Sprain continued his language studies and also joined in a survey^{of} the Island for potential mission areas.

The mission outreach in those early years was very slow. The missionaries were new to the language and culture. They were just beginning to acclimate themselves to the Island. They took the first "baby steps" that are necessary in any foreign culture. Pastor Sprain writes, "I think you have to realize that when the Puerto Rico work was begun we knew little or nothing, though we read quite a bit, about doing mission work."¹²

It must also be stated that the mission work in Puerto Rico was not to be in competition with other Lutheran bodies. Pastor Eggert says, "When we went to Puerto Rico in 1964, we were instructed to search out places to begin the work in areas where the Lutheran Church was not working...We were not sent to be in competition.... Since there were a number of the LCA churches in the San Juan area, we looked for other places on the island."¹³

In January of 1965 the Board for World Missions approved the missionaries' recommended areas for work on the Island. "The principal cities which would serve as centers for evangelizing would be Caguas, Guayama, Humacao, Fajardo and Cayey--all in the highly populated eastern half of the Island."¹⁴

In April, Pastor V. Winter of Tucson, Arizona was sent to confer with the men in Puerto Rico and share some of the benefits of his 15 years of experience in Spanish mission work. It was the first Spanish conference in our Synod.¹⁵

Later that year, in August, the Synod established the Executive Committee for Latin American Missions. The committee was appointed by the Praesidium and consisted of the Reverend Harold Essmann, the Rev. Henry Nitz and Mr. Claude Hesse. 16

The Lord's work in Puerto Rico would continue throughout all of 1966 with both missionaries living in San Juan and traveling to other parts of the Island. In April of 1967 radio services were broadcast from Guayama on the south side of the Island. The missionaries had started broadcasts in Humacao earlier, but the response was more visible in Guayama. They followed up on the leads, many of which were "very disappointing."17 They canvassed both cities as part of the follow-up program and in some cases they were able to help the people.

By October of 1967 "it was felt that the missionary team should divide up, so that a man could cover each of the two cities, Humacao and Guayama."18 The Executive Committee decided that the Sprain family go to Guayama. (The Eggerts continued to live in San Juan while serving Humacao.)

Pastor Sprain states that the missionaries thought it would be best to split-up the team, but that they didn't decide the matter. "Neither of us wanted to decide who would go where and work where. I think that neither one of us wanted to say something that might hurt our good working relationship--it was a mistake."19

The decision was left in the hands of the Executive Committee. Pastor Sprain feels that it may have been a mistake because the Sprains had several contacts in the San Juan area, which were then lost when they moved to Guayama. Yet he says, "but on the other hand it seems to be what God wanted."²⁰ Later there was a schooling problem on the south coast and since his wife was a teacher, she was able to teach the children for about a year, until they had a school for them again.

The Sprains moved to Guayama in 1968. The work was very promising there while the work in Humacao was slow. For the next two years Pastor Eggert continued to live in San Juan, but did no active mission work there. He was busy in Humacao with; canvassing, placing Bibles in homes, obtaining names and addresses for mailings and follow-up.

THE SAN JUAN FIELD LAYS FALLOW

In May of 1971, Pastor Eggert accepted the call to serve as "Friendly Counselor to Mexico." A vacancy remained in the field until Pastor Ralph Martens and his wife Roxanne arrived in December of 1972. They too had studied Spanish in Saltillo, Mexico.

An interesting anecdote in this story was that the Martens were married very shortly before he accepted the call to Puerto Rico. "They left for their honeymoon and have never come back. It has lasted over 15 years."

When the Martens arrived, it was decided to concentrate the work on the south side of the Island. San Juan would "lay fallow" for several years.

Little contact was made in San Juan over succeeding years. Pastor Sprain accepted a call and left for Colombia in 1974. On August 20th of the same year Pastor Flunker and family arrived in Puerto Rico. They, too, lived in Guayama, but weekly traveled to San Juan to continue their language studies.

It would seem that there was no active mission work in San Juan for almost a complete decade. But many contacts were established through our members on the south side of the Island. Maribel (Mary) Madera, a teenager that had lived close to one of our churches in the South tells how she came into contact with our church. She later moved to San Juan and became an original member of that congregation. In an interview, when she was asked, "How did you get to know of the Lutheran Church and become a member," she replied:

I was studying a Bible course with another church, but it did not satisfy my needs. One day my older sister and her fiancé came to me to ask me to find out about the Lutheran Church in our barrio (village), because they wanted to get married there. At first I didn't want to, but finally I went. You, Pastor Flunker, were giving a Bible Study to the young people. You invited me to stay, and I liked what I heard. The problem of my sister's marriage was solved and I joined an instruction class. I enjoyed how the Word taught in the Lutheran Church satisfied my needs. So I was confirmed--about 10 years ago.

(The wedding of Maribel's sister Virginia Madera and Ruben Martinez took place on Nov.22, 1975. Ruben Martinez, Virginia

Madera, Marible Madera and two others were confirmed on June 13, 1976). 21

Two other sisters of Mary Madera kept in contact with the Word through our church on the south side. Gloria and Delia both visited our church services several times. Delia was married and lived in the San Juan area, but would often come down south with her family for weekends. She had three children and every summer they would attend VBS classes. They were interested but the distance was always prohibitive.

Mary's other sister, Gloria, soon was engaged and also desired to be married in our church. She and her fiancé, Kelly Alvarez attended adult instruction classes and were married in Guayama on September 16, 1978. Shortly after the marriage they dropped-out of the class. On February 3 of 1980 their daughter, Kenia, was baptized in our Guayama church. Kelly tells of the importance of the patience and love shown to him in those early years of contact.

I went to many churches but never joined them. I was always looking for a church to fill up the emptiness inside of me, but I didn't know what it should be. The sister of my wife, Mary Madera, invited me to attend her church in Barrancas where she was a member. At first I felt good in that church. Pastor Martens married us, and we began instruction classes. But because of my work and because we also lived two hours from Guayama, we left the classes and the church. But I felt that something was missing again. After some time I talked with Pastor Martens again, and he informed us of a group that was gathering in San Juan....finally the Lord knocked at the door and convinced us that it was important to go. We took the instruction classes and were confirmed in 1984. (From his first contact to confirmation 8 years passed.) 22

One other early contact with San Juan made through our southern churches in Guayama was established through Celsa Corujo, a member of our church. She invited her sister, Luz (Chiqui) Corujo to a service in 1980. Although Chiqui lived in San Juan, that November she started her first adult instruction classes in Guayama. She continued until lesson 17 and then was unable to finish. She would still visit the services regularly and took her two sons for Sunday School. Chiqui says that what attracted her most was the emphasis which is given to the Word and grace of God in our church. She had been catholic for many years, but was dissatisfied with their teachings. So she took an active interest in our church. 23

The San Juan field may have been "fallow" for many years, but some important contacts for the future were established through members on the south side of the Island. In the early 80's the Puerto Rican mission team was expanded to 3 missionaries. Pastor Paul Hartmann became the third man and began working with the missionaries on the south side. Shortly afterwards Pastor Hartmann and his family moved to Humacao and re-established many contacts there. However, he was not there long when he received the call to become "Friendly Counselor" to Mexico. He accepted the call in 1982 and there was a vacancy on the Island.

Missioners Martens and Flunker decided that it would be best to split up the team to cover both the northern and

southern halves of the Island. In December of 1982 and January of 1983 the Flunkers moved to Humacao to pick-up on the work of Pastor Hartmann. The idea was to carry on the work in Humacao and begin exploratory work with our contacts in San Juan. Pastor Martens writes that the field was reconsidered in "mission council discussions," when "it was apparent that San Juan was still expanding and that there was probably room for a conservative Lutheran voice there as well." 24

SEEDTIME AND HARVEST

In the early months of 1983 Pastor Flunker was busy establishing a congregation in Humacao and following up on contacts in San Juan. The seeds that had been planted through earlier contacts were growing. By March 6, 1983 "a service-Bible study was held every Friday evening with about 10 souls from 3 different families attending."25 Cesarina Rodriguez, a transfer from our congregation in Corpus Cristi, TX was the first communicant member. The Bible study gatherings were sort of a "hybrid new-mode" approach with a distinct worship setting in homes. But instead of a formal sermon, they held Bible studies in that portion of the service.

By June of 1983 Pastor Flunker reported that besides the Friday worship services, classes were being conducted every other Sunday at 2:00, 4:30 and 7:00pm. There were 8 in

adult instruction and one teenager in a catechism class. The worship service average attendance was 11 with the possibility of 21 known contacts. In the mission council, the possibilities of a VBS program were considered. Pastor Flunker's opinion of the field at that time were: "The work in the San Juan area is a joy and fun which shows promise."26

At the end of 1983 the San Juan congregation was averaging 15 people for the Friday evening services with Bible classes continuing every other Sunday.

Pastor Flunker in correspondence to Pastor Essmann of Waterloo dated September 21, 1983 writes about the work in San Juan:

(In San Juan) the five families that I am presently serving are stretched out from one end to the other, from Bayamon to Carolina...By the grace of God there are presently 14 people studying in the adult instruction course in San Juan every other Sunday. Two are men, who have taken an active lead in the classes, to my pleasant surprise.... The Lord's Word is powerful and never ceases to amaze me. When these two men and their families do not make it to Friday evening Bible Study and worship in San Juan, they have occasionally come to Humacao for worship--a 50 minute drive. By furlough time I should have finished with these present classes, and we should better be able to see what direction it will go in San Juan. 27

Other contacts were established including a Puerto Rican family that came to us by referral from Pastor K. Gawrisch in Waukegan, IL. They had been members of the LCA of Puerto Rico but spent a year in the States on sabbatical. Miguel Toro relates their story:

Twenty-two years ago I became a member of the Lutheran Church, which is a member of the Caribbean Synod of the LCA. In 1981 my family and I moved to Waukegan, IL. There I found Emmanuel Lutheran Church and Pastor K. Gawrisch. We soon became members of that church. One year later we moved back to Puerto Rico. Pastor Gawrisch contacted Pastor Martens of Guayama, and contact was made with the WELS again. After instruction in Spanish all 4 members of our family were confirmed in December of 1984 by the pastor from Humacao (Flunker). 28

1984-1985

In 1984 the classes and work continued as planned. The Flunkers went on furlough and Vicar Bryan Dose covered the work on the northern half of the Island with the help of a layman from Humacao. It was decided that the Mission Council on the Island would keep up quarterly history reports on the mission work starting in 1985. ^{Those reports} ~~It~~ offers brief summaries of many noteworthy events in the life of the congregations.

The year 1985 marks many changes for the little congregation in San Juan, beginning already in January. Mary Madera, the young woman confirmed in Guayama, would be married to William Roman who was studying in the adult instruction class. A treasurer and Pastor Flunker set up the first treasurer's books. Two adults were confirmed in March and a teen catechism class was started by Vicar Hirsch for one student. In 1985 the congregation began their search for a rental building in which church services could be held because the houses were too small. They also sought a permanent place centrally located.

The little church group was also sharing in the fellowship with their Christian brothers on the Island. In September one member, Miguel Cortijo, was chosen as the San Juan representative in the Bible institute for training lay-members for service in the church. Many from the congregation also took part in the two semi-annual joint worship services for all our people on the Island.

By the end of November, a rental building was secured for use on Sundays after 4pm. It is situated in Rio Piedras at the address of 869 Munoz Rivera. Cost: \$200/month. The first service was held in the "Shaklee" meeting room on December 1, 1985. The following week Vicar Pamperin arrived and began to work with Pastor Flunker on the northern half of the island. A used organ was purchased for \$600. The San Juan congregation chose the name, "MI DIOS VERDADERO" (My Reliable God) on the third Sunday of December 1985.

1986

The year 1986 sees the first Joint New Years Day worship service of the San Juan and Humacao congregations. The youth are invited to a picnic day at an old fort and the first baptism in our young congregation, Lenia Marie Madera (daughter of Mary), brings joy to the whole congregation.

In January of 1986 the voters of the little congregation chose Kelly Alvarez as their representative to the first Latin American Delegate Conference to be held in

Monterrey, Mexico during the month of April. The blessings of fellowship in the conference moved the members to designate part of their offerings for use in future conferences.

In efforts to promote the church and its mission work, an artistic youth from the congregation designed a seal for the congregation. It is printed on the bulletin covers which members take to friends and neighbors. The services continued on Sundays at 6:30pm with family sing-alongs and Bible studies following.

In the early spring organ lessons began with several youths in the congregation. A mid-week VBS type study for adults and children began in the "Los Robles" (the Oaks) condominium where two of our families reside. The results are not tremendous in number, but the Word of God is taught. In the Spring of 1986 the San Juan congregation also hosted a joint Good Friday service with the members of Humacao. Fifty-three people were in attendance.

One un-expected change for the congregation came at the end of May, 1986. Pastor Flunker received the call to be a missionary to Brazil. He deliberated the call while on furlough and in July advised the congregation of his decision to accept the call to Brazil. The Flunkers returned to the Puerto Rican field until they received visas from Brazil. Vicar Rick Pamperin received an extension on his call because of vacancies in the field.

The next few months were spent preparing the congregation for vacancies--it was a time of great spiritual growth in the members. The Holy Spirit used this opportunity to focus the members on the urgency of preaching and teaching the Word. With the cooperation of the Humacao congregation, the worship services are changed from 6:30pm to 9:30am on Sunday mornings. The Bible classes for all ages continue. Those Bible classes seem to be responsible for some of the success in San Juan. Pastor Flunker writes that those Bible classes were one of the greatest joys of the work on the Island.

"'And Mary sat at the feet of Jesus hearing His Word.' The Lord gave me the joy of seeing the congregation in San Juan put that verse into practice, with almost 100% attendance after every worship in Bible Class--Sunday School participation. The Lord will bless. 'She has chosen the one thing needful.'" 30

In September and October the confirmed men of the congregation began to work on a constitution for the congregation. By November the newly written and approved constitution could be read to the congregation during a Bible class. The men were also working on the legal incorporation of the congregation in Puerto Rico. The incorporation papers are signed and sent in at the year's end.

1987

MI DIOS VERDADERO was officially and legally incorporated with the government of Puerto Rico on February 4, 1987. The first official elections are held on March 29th. Kelly Alvarez was elected president, Ivan Cortijo--secretary, and Miguel Toro--treasurer. 31

Now the members began to assume a more active role in their own church. Dennis Cortijo plays the organ for one service and Kelly Alvarez does the liturgy in another. Five more adults were confirmed in their faith and the Lord's blessings continue to increase.

While the Flunkers have been busy preparing for their departure, a new Pastor has been called and studied in Mexico. Pastor John Strackbein, his wife and their five boys remain in Mexico until the end of July. The Flunkers search for a house in the San Juan area which could serve as residence for the Strackbeins and hold Church Worship services on Sundays. A new location is found in another urbanization of San Juan at the house --#451 Los Robles, La Cumbre, Rio Piedras, PR 00926. It is rented for \$650/ month with the congregation paying \$200. The Flunkers moved to this house on June 30th and "house-sit" until the Strackbeins arrived. Then they are moved down to Guayama, to the long vacant missionary house. There are now three missionaries on the island after almost a year and a half vacancy.

In August of 1987 MI DIOS VERDADERO left the Shaklee building and held its first services in the newly rented house. The congregation also bids farewell to "Student-Assistant" Rick Pamperin and wishes him God's blessings in his studies at the Seminary.

Pastor Strackbein preached his first sermon in Puerto Rico during the month of September. During that month Pastor Flunker helped to ease the Strackbeins' transition to the new culture and language. It was a "road ministry" for him as he made the hour and a half trip from Guayama to San Juan several times each week. At the end of September, 1987 the Flunkers received their visas and prepared to enter Brazil. Pastor Flunker had served the congregation from January of 1983 till September of 1987. Pastor Strackbein assumes responsibility for the northern half of the Island in October of 1987.

1988--and the future

Today the average attendance in San Juan is between 25 and 30 people. The first offerings that were taken in June of 1983 had totaled \$40.00. Now the average monthly offerings are around \$900. There are still many new contacts to follow up and the missionaries are planning an aggressive evangelism program.

There may be many several changes in the future for the San Juan mission field. Pastor Martens, from Guayama hopes

to leave the southern congregations in the charge of Pastor Baerbock who arrived in Puerto Rico in December of 1987. Then Pastor Martens would be free to serve in Caguas, a fast-growing suburb of San Juan. He hopes to establish a base for the Puerto Rican Bible Institute and future evangelism work in the San Juan area. Two native Puerto Ricans from the San Juan congregation have also expressed interest in becoming evangelists or pastors of the Lord's Church.

The future seems to be opening up for our mission work in San Juan, Puerto Rico. All the missionaries and members who were interviewed for this paper stated that the field is ripe and the harvest is starting to come in. We react to this good news as the Lord has directed us: "Ask the Lord of the harvest, therefore, to send out workers into his harvest field." May that be our desire and prayer for this young flock of God's people!

Endnotes

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Several interviews and questionnaires were taken. See the endnotes for more detail information.

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