

Personal Reflection:
Mission history comes alive
By Kenneth D. MacHarg
LAM News Service

Balboa, Panama--For a few hours a week back I felt as if I was a living witness to mission history.

I was staying in the guesthouse of the First Baptist Church of Balboa, Panama, where I found a well-used guest book that faithfully recorded the autographs of many people who had used those facilities since February 29, 1963.

There, scattered among hundreds of signatures were some of the outstanding names of missionary history over the past half-decade. Just seeing some of them sent a tingle of excitement through my body.

The first entries were those of Leonard Booker and Ben Cummings, veteran missionaries with Ecuadorian missionary radio station HCJB. "I always wanted to be one of the first people to sign one of these books," noted Leonard in his "remarks" column.

Soon after followed the autograph of Abe and Delores Vanderpuy. Dr. Abe is a well-known missionary statesman and retired president of HCJB. It was through his efforts that the death of five missionaries at the hands of an indigenous tribe was broadcast around the world.

Next up, Marvel Iglesias, a remarkable Baptist missionary who worked among the Kuna Indians of Panama for several decades. Marvel married a member of the tribe and raised several children. I still have two of her books that she gave me, one with the intriguing title, *Beauty is a Ring in My Nose*, reflecting one of the "beauty aids" used by Kuna women.

Tom Willey—someone that I didn't meet until we moved to Miami several years ago. Tom was raised in Cuba as an MK, spent a period as a missionary in Panama, and now serves as the director of World Relief's office in Miami.

Several more HCJB people drift in and out of the page..Steve Hunter, the musician Gene Jordan and Joe and Betty Springer, John and Jack Shalenko and others.

I really jolted awake when I saw the actual signature of Clarence Jones—the founder of HCJB. Now, there is a man who made a major contribution to the evangelization of the world through radio, and it was a thrill to his personal autograph. I regret that I never met Dr. Jones, though his philosophy and enthusiasm for radio has affected any of us who ever worked at HCJB.

Syl Scarlett. That name brought back memories. Syl was the pastor of First Isthmian Baptist Church in Cristobal, Panama, a large congregation ministering with people of

Caribbean heritage who immigrated to Panama to help build the canal and later work on it. I have preached in his church on a number of occasions. The congregation remains active...I passed by the church as services were concluding just a few days later. But, it would be my guess that by now Syl is either in advanced retirement or has died. I'll never forget his ability to come to the pastor's weekly Bible study, ask what passage we were studying, and then expound on it without hesitation for 45 minutes. All with out any preparation.

Another influential Christian worker whose name I found in those pages was Peter Deyneka, the founder and long-time president of Slavic Gospel Ministries. His organization began Christian broadcasts in Russian and continues to have a major influence among Slavic people.

Later...Abe and Marj Vanderpuy. There is a lot of history between that listing and the first one for Dr. Abe. The death of Delores, the martyrdom of five missionaries including Nate Saint, and the later marriage of Abe and Marj.

Another known name among missionaries to Latin America is that of Cliff Holland, a former LAM missionary who has done so much to research the evangelical church in Costa Rica and other regions of Central America. His web site today is an invaluable tool for anyone seeking statistics on evangelical growth in the region.

Of course, there were some well-known names in Baptist circles, including Don Kammerdinger of the Southern Baptist International Mission Board and Jerry Rankin, the IMB's current president. I also saw the name of Ed Hatfield, a Baptist pastor from Louisville. And, I noted that of Nilson Fanini, the pastor of a major Baptist church near Rio de Janeiro and former President of the Baptist World Alliance. He was very gracious in helping me with an interview for an article I wrote several years ago.

Then there was Paul Johnson, a missionary in Chile. He later married Nelda and they moved with the Christian and Missionary Alliance church to Ecuador where they were friends of ours during our time there.

It was interesting to note that as the years wore on, the names changed. Now, one finds more autographs of younger people, short-term workers and certainly many more Latin American names. All of those represent the changing nature of missions in the last decade as the church in Latin America picks up much of its own work and Latin leadership is emerging.

Many of the great mission leaders of the past half-century have retired or gone on to be with the Lord. But in their place, new Latin American leaders have risen up to take their place and guide their own church into the new century.

I thought of one name that was missing—that of my good friend Walter Reitz, a Methodist missionary to Panama for over 30 years who died a decade ago. It is natural

that his name does not appear—he lived in Panama City and would most likely not have had any reason to make use of the guesthouse.

At the conference I was attending, one young Panamanian missionary, Robert Bruneau, was representing the organization that he now heads—Christian Camping International, Latin America. He represents the emerging leadership that is coming from the Latin church to step into the shoes of missionary leaders who have gone before him. One missionary that he credits with so much mentoring and inspiration is Walter Reitz. How appropriate for me to be there in his country, to review the names of those who have served for so long, and to be with the product of their work.

It was a nostalgic, moving several hours that I spent with that book, and I was pleased to be able to add my name to the bottom of the list.

Kenneth D. MacHarg is a Missionary Journalist with the Latin America Mission. He formerly served as a Missionary Broadcaster with HCJB in Quito, Ecuador.

Mission history comes alive, *LAM News Service*, Jan 24, 2003