

BELIEVERS INTERNATIONAL

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NEWS

After The Storm, A Bright Outlook

By George Smith

It has been almost a year since it happened. To most people in America, it's old news. The magazines and newspapers no longer mention it, even in the back pages. It was a tragic moment that captured the attention of the world for a few days, but quickly and inevitably was eclipsed by the next crisis. But to millions of people living in Honduras and Nicaragua, the once-headline events of October 30, 1998, still overshadow their daily lives.

What would normally have been three years worth of rain saturated Central America in just five days, as a hurricane named Mitch passed slowly over the land. In one six-hour period, 25 inches of rain was recorded in Tegucigalpa, the capital of Honduras. Reservoirs burst, sending 45 feet of floodwaters rushing through the streets of the city. In the countryside, entire villages were swept away in rivers of mud. Sixty percent of the country's bridges and roadways were completely destroyed. Wells and water treatment plants were literally swallowed up. Thousands died. Hundreds of thousands of survivors were left to start over in a world that had been suddenly and savagely transformed.

Within a few days of the disaster, we were able to establish contact with many of the nearly 80 pastors that live in the two countries that were the hardest hit: Honduras and Nicaragua. Early reports we received were reassuring, in that they knew of no lives that were lost from among the more than 8,000 believers in that region.

Two weeks after the disaster, we made our first trip to the devastated areas, taking with us emergency supplies and financial support. What we discovered was that many families had been left with little more than a sheet of plastic or a piece of cardboard to protect them from the bone-chilling temperatures of the night. Food was scarce, and the crops, which provided yearly income, had been completely destroyed. Sicknesses, mostly from contaminated water, were beginning to spread, especially among the children. We determined that a long-range program of monthly support would be needed to help the saints begin the process of rebuilding and putting their lives back together.

We began by asking how many people within each congregation depended strictly on agriculture for their living, since they were the ones that would suffer the most long-range hardships. Next we determined how much it would cost to purchase food to feed a family of five for one month (approximately \$45, we learned). Then we came home and began to put our plan into action by making these needs known to the believers here in the United States. Within



days we were able to begin sending support to more than 450 of the neediest families.

A second, month-long trip was made in February, and it was far different than our first, rushed visit. This time there was no hurry as we made our way – by foot, horseback, and canoe – into areas that were so remote that often the local pastor was the only one among the believers who had ever met a fellow believer that was from outside their own small community. At every stop we took the time to say more than “Hello,” and “What are your needs.” We visited their homes and viewed the damage that was done by the hurricane, listened to their testimonies, answered questions, prayed for the sick, and often ended up by having a service before we left.

We found that nearly every place we visited was in need of food and a means of purifying their drinking water, both of which we were able to provide immediately. But we also encountered a variety of other real needs as well, as the following stories will illustrate:

Brother Ernesto Mendoza is the pastor in Choluteca, Honduras, an area where the flooding was particularly severe and the water system was completely destroyed, so he decided to dig a well in the front yard of the church. With a pick and two shovels, he and five other brothers dug, by hand, a well four feet in diameter and 42 feet deep, sometimes removing rocks weighing 100 pounds or more. We supplied them with concrete casing and a submersible pump, and on this trip we were able to see it in operation, furnishing fresh water to the entire community. Brother Mendoza also operates the ‘main base’ of a CB radio network that now connects pastors living in the most isolated areas of both Honduras and Nicaragua. Before the hurricane, he was in communication with a few pastors that live in his immediate area, and they were able to contact one another immediately and report their condition after the storm.



Word of God Tabernacle with Pastor Ernesto Mendoza (left) and the well.

We realized that if his network were to be expanded, he could be of tremendous help to us by providing updates regarding the needs among the believers in the various hard-to-reach areas. We up-graded the main base unit, and other brothers from the US have donated additional radios, which are now scattered throughout both countries, creating a vast communications network.

Just off the coast of Honduras is Isla Weepo, where Brother Humberto Trujillo pastors a church of about 20 families. They make their living by fishing, and they are not able to grow any crops on the sandy island that is their home. They must depend on their boat for everything: bringing in fresh water from the mainland for drinking, transporting their catch to market, and medical needs that arise. Before the storm, they were selling snapper for 12 lempira (less than a dollar, US) a pound. In the distressed economy since the storm, they were only getting 5 lempira a pound, which is not enough for them to feed their families. Their needs amounted to about \$200 a month (for the entire congregation) for six months, plus enough money to do some repairs on their boat, which was damaged in the storm.

Brother Venancio Almendarez, is from a mountain area known as Perico de Manchones, Nicaragua. He had over 60 families in his church, and in January, just before we arrived, he baptized 36 more people. Even hurricane Mitch could not keep him from sharing the Message with everyone he comes in contact with, and bringing new converts to the Lord! This is one of several places where the pastors asked if they could receive the two films, 20th Century Prophet and The Deep Calleth to the Deep, which they had never seen. We have promised to send them copies of both, and to help them with a small generator and some video equipment, which they will share with other churches in the area. They have been following the Message since 1978, but have never had an opportunity to see Brother Branham's films! I was overwhelmed by the ministry needs that I found here.

In my journal, I wrote: "We'd walked for over an hour, when a brother showed up with horses, then we rode for another hour till we came to a home on the top of a mountain, where Bro. Omar lives with his family. The constant rain, which came just days before they were to begin reaping, ruined all his fields. He has no possibility of recovering anything from these crops, but he hardly talked about his losses at all. He wanted to talk about the Word, and with the brethren that were with me, that is what we did. After awhile, someone brought up the fact that this whole episode of the hurricane has served one good purpose, and that was to bring us all closer together. Many of them had not seen

each other for months, and doctrinal differences had crept in. They were just so glad to see each other again."

At Brother Gilberto Leyton's in Guanacastal, Nicaragua, everything is dust – about four inches deep. The houses have all been condemned, but the people have no place to go. We were planning on a short visit, but Brother Leyton said. "Well, we have some of our people here already, so could we have just a little service?" We were miles from anywhere, and I didn't see any other people around, but I said, "OK, let's have a little service."

We went to the building next door, and in about 15 minutes, the place was full. As I was speaking, it was getting darker and darker, then I noticed that someone was behind me working on something. Suddenly, two dim over-head bulbs came on. They were tiny, 12-volt automobile brake lights, powered by a battery they had taken from the tractor. That was the extent of their church lights (and any other light, as far as I could see). When the battery runs down it goes back in the tractor, which they push start, then the battery is ready again for the next service. We will try to help them with a small power plant, along with money to buy food and medicine.

One day when I was with several brothers in Choluteca, Honduras, they mentioned another pastor whose name I had heard of but had never met. "He's not far away," they told me.

"How far?" I asked.

There was a pause, then one of them said, "Maybe a bit further than four kilometers."

That didn't sound bad, even though it was really crowded by the time we'd all squeezed into the ancient little pick-up that belonged to one of the brothers. We bounced along a very rough road for a while, dodging animals and crossing several rivers (or maybe it was one river that we crossed several times, I couldn't tell). Soon I was thinking, "This is a very long four kilometers!"

About an hour and ten minutes later, we stopped on the side of the road where a trail led up into the mountains. "This is where we begin our walk," they told me.

I couldn't help but smile. "Will it be about four kilometers?" I asked.

"We were afraid that if we told you how far it was that you wouldn't want to go," they admitted.

Quickly I let them know that I never wanted them to feel that way again. "I am sure," I told them, "that the saints who have contributed the money to help you through this crisis, and who have made it possible for me to be here with you, would want you to know that there is no place that is too far, or too remote for us to go to reach out to our brothers and sisters in a time of need."

As we traveled through both countries, so many times we were told that the support they had been receiving from the saints through Believers International had literally meant the difference between life and death, by making it possible for them to feed their families and plant new crops.

Walter & Douglas, standing guard over the new crop of watermelon planted in the sandy soil left by the flood.



We are now receiving reports that these new crops are being harvested, and families are once again able to be self-sufficient, and move forward with their lives. Perhaps best of all, the believers everywhere are working together to rebuild homes and churches, as they rejoice in the fellowship that has been restored as a result of the crisis. As one pastor pointed out, "Brother Branham said that when the water level came up above the fence line, all the ducks got together for fellowship. He did not specify if it was literal water or not."

What a joy it is for us to be able to bring this good report to each of you who helped to provide the means by which this quick recovery has been made possible. This year has

also given us a better understanding of what is needed to help with the furtherance of the Gospel throughout Central America. Now that the urgent physical needs have been met, one of the essential requests of the people that we will be turning our attention to is that of Bibles. We found that many families, especially the newer believers, do not have their own Bible to read in their home. For just under \$5.00 US, we can supply a Bible in any country of Latin America. With the Lord's help, together we will continue to help these and many others of our household of faith as we press on towards the mark. ☐

This Is The Day!

Last year, in a region of central Africa ravaged by war, one desperate man prayed for hours under a tree in the jungle. God heard his prayer, and answered it in ways he could have never imagined.

Brother Oscar Niyiragira had lived prosperously in the country of Burundi with his wife, Regina, and three young children: Mystere, Sandrine, and Gad. Educated and articulate, he had been friends with the President of the country, and had been appointed to a governorship for his region. With a good job, a car, and a house, Brother Oscar had much to be thankful for. "I was a good man, and went to a Message church, but God wanted more from me."

The trials began when the country broke into a bloody civil war in 1993, between the Tutsi and Hutu tribes. Brother Oscar knew it meant especially big trouble for his little family.

Though the Tutsi tribe was a three-to-one minority, its members had nevertheless dominated the government in Burundi since the 1960's. With the rushed reorganization of the country into a democracy in the early 1990's, and the subsequent landslide election of a Hutu president in 1993, the country was headed into a tribal war. Within three months, the new president was dead in a full-scale military coup.

The trouble for Brother Oscar was that while he was a Hutu, his wife was Tutsi. Since their marriage crossed tribal lines, their lives were threatened by both sides. The best they could hope for was to keep a low profile.

As war ravaged his land, unspeakable horrors befell the family. Brother Oscar actually witnessed his mother and father being killed before him. His brother was also murdered. Soon soldiers burned down his house and stole his car. Clearly, trying to keep a low profile was not going to work.

Like many others, Brother Oscar and his family became what the UN calls 'displaced persons'. Refugees. And like



many others, they fled north, to the safety of neighboring Rwanda.

Of course, in hindsight, they were truly going "from the frying pan and into the fire". A year of war back in Burundi had killed an estimated 250,000 people. When Rwanda quickly became engulfed in the very same tribal war, over a half-million people were killed in the first three months. Asked what Rwanda was like, Brother Oscar merely says, "It was very easy to die there." That could be the understatement of the year. He will only quietly talk about the endless rows of bodies that they saw, but would clearly rather forget.

From Rwanda they fled to Zaire. When conditions deteriorated there, they moved on to Tanzania.

The family, now expanded with the birth of a son, Billy, ended up in a UN refugee camp. Even in the camps, it seems, the tribal rivalries are too much to set aside, and three distinct camps had been built: one for Hutus, one for Tutsis, and a camp for mixed marriages, which is where Brother Oscar and his family ended up, with nearly 300 other people.

It was in this camp that Brother Oscar was brought to a desperate place with God. Everything he had, and all that he had been, was gone. He was not even able to provide for his family, and the rations from the camp were just barely enough to keep from starving.

It was during these dark days that Brother Oscar found himself earnestly praying under a tree, in the jungle outside the camp.

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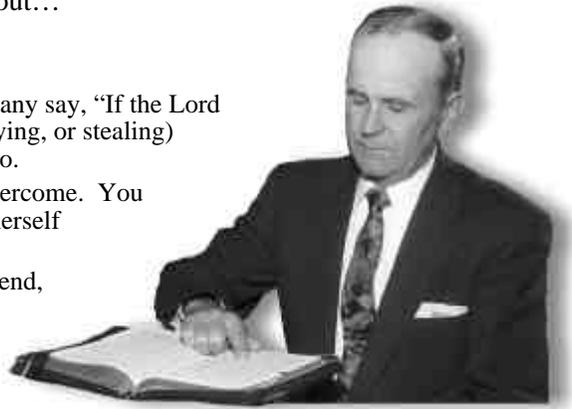
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A Closer Look at what Brother Branham said about... **Overcoming**

“If you notice, it said, “She has made herself ready.” [Revelation 19:7] So many say, “If the Lord will take this evil spirit from me...” (from drinking, or from gambling, or from lying, or stealing) “...then I will serve Him.” But that’s up to you. You’ve got to do something, too.

“They that overcome shall inherit all things.” [Revelation 21:7] They that overcome. You have the power to do it, but you must be willing to lay it down. “She has made herself ready.” I like that Word.

You see, God could not push us through a little pipe, pull us out on the other end, and then say, “Blessed is he that overcometh.” You had nothing to overcome! He just pushed you through. But you’ve got to make decisions for yourself. I have to make decisions for myself. In doing that, we show our faith and respects to God.



(continued) It seemed there was no hope for the little family. Had God abandoned them? What was to become of them now? As he sought answers to these questions, he made a promise to God, a promise made with more earnestness than he’d ever expressed.

“If You will save me from this place, and put me in a city where I can be with other believers of the Message, I will serve you always, with all my heart.” This prayer he wrote out on a piece of paper that he had taken from the camp. “And I will sing a song for you,” he added, after a moment’s thought. He knew there were plenty of believers in other countries in Africa, if the Lord would just get him out of this camp!

With this matter firmly in the Lord’s hands, Brother Oscar returned to camp. Little did he know what God was preparing for him, as a result of his earnest prayers under that tree.

Within two weeks, the camp director told Brother Oscar that there was a possibility he would soon be moved, but he didn’t know where. Several months passed before a UN official told him that he would indeed be leaving soon. To his utter surprise, he was told that he would be re-settled in America!

Working through a private, Catholic-run charity, the UN had obtained permission from the US to re-settle the refugees from this camp, dispersing them throughout the country. Brother Oscar did not know the name of the city that he would be traveling to, but he was happy to go.

Upon arriving in the US in December of 1998, Brother Oscar and his family were placed in temporary housing in a large city while they adjusted to their new lives. One of the first things he did was get out a map of the USA and try to find Jeffersonville. He had heard the Prophet speak about his hometown, and Brother Oscar was determined that someday he would find it, and see the Branham Tabernacle. Unfortunately, Jeffersonville did not appear on his small map.

One of the workers with the Catholic charities was visiting his family in their apartment one night when Brother Oscar asked him about the Ohio River. He had heard Brother Branham on the tapes saying that the Ohio River was near Jeffersonville. The worker casually pointed out the window at a river that was less than a mile away, “That’s the Ohio River.” The Catholic charity that had moved Brother Oscar from Africa had settled his family, out of all the families in the camp, in Louisville, Kentucky!

“Where is Jeffersonville?” he asked, thinking maybe it was still hundreds, perhaps even thousands of miles away.

“Jeffersonville, Indiana?” the worker asked, “It’s right over there.” He pointed towards the buildings and lights on the other side of the river, which were clearly visible.

Barely able to sleep that night, Brother Oscar rose early the next morning, and walked across the bridge to Jeffersonville. (Foot traffic is illegal on the bridge, and there is no sidewalk. That first day, Brother Oscar was nearly hit by a truck!) It took several days, working block by block on foot, with trips across the bridge each morning and back each night, to finally find the Branham Tabernacle. How far he had come from the tree where he had pleaded with God to put him somewhere, anywhere, that there might be just a few believers!

By February, having mastered the public busing, he took his entire family to church Sunday morning. The desire in his heart as he had knelt under the tree to pray so many months before, had been to provide a Message church for his family. They went with such joy that they had little time to marvel at the snow that was falling from the sky, something none of them had ever seen. “Does this salt fall from the sky with the ice?” they asked a brother after church, picking up the large grains of salt that had been dispersed to clear the roads.

As it happened, that brother was David Erickson, who lives in Jeffersonville, and after a moment’s thought, he recognized Brother Oscar as the man he’d seen several weeks before walking across the bridge from Louisville, and nearly getting killed by a truck! Upon hearing the rest of his remarkable story, Brother David began helping the Niyiragira family in any way he could. Furniture, food and clothing were collected, and before long a suitable car was even found.

Brother Oscar now works in a computer assembly plant at night, and his wife found employment in a laundromat during the day. The children have started school, and even with such a difficult schedule, Brother Oscar says with a broad grin, “Life is easy, so easy here, my Brother.”

At Easter services, 1999, Brother Oscar Niyiragira stood before the church in the Branham Tabernacle, and kept the second part of his promise to God. His voice trembling with emotion, he sang in the Swahili language, “This Is The Day”. We can only imagine how heartfelt such a song could be for him. To have come so far, and to escape death in so many ways, ending up with a real church home and caring believers all around him. This is the day, indeed. □