

Feeding

the children
of El Salvador

By Ken Horn
photography by Ken Horn and Jeff Nene

"I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in" (Matthew 25:35, NIV).

He noticed her as students entered to begin their school day. A beautiful, dark-haired, 6-year-old wisp of a girl who should rightly be full of life. But she wasn't. He saw her squat alone by the wall and put her head in her lap.

In a moment Convoy of Hope's Kenton Moody was crouching next to her. "Hey, honey, what's wrong?" he asked.

"I'm hungry," she replied.

"Didn't you eat anything at home?"

"No."

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Below: Children are served a nourishing lunch every school day at the Liceo Cristiano in San Vicente.



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Below middle: Clara Garcia with two of her five children.



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Convoy of Hope's strategic partnership with the Liceo Cristiano school system is a model for providing physical and spiritual food to needy children and their families.

Bringing hope to refugees

With abundant rainfall, El Salvador has no water shortage. But it does have a shortage of clean water. Contaminated water regularly claims the lives of Salvadorans, many of them children. Because of this, Convoy's water purification program is of immense significance.

Three years ago, the Santa Ana volcano erupted, damaging farmland and displacing hundreds. The Los Angeles refugee camp is a sprawling slum at the edge of El Salvador's second-largest city, Santa Ana, where disease has run rampant. Convoy's tests of the water here revealed the presence of E. coli bacteria in the wells, often caused by seepage from nearby latrines. Convoy of Hope has provided water filters, food and nutrition that have made a huge impact on the health and well-being of the community.

"Why not?"

"There's nobody there to give me anything."

Maria's parents were out working, trying to eke out a living for the bare necessities of life ... and not doing very well. This tiny child, smaller even than her years would warrant, got up alone, dressed herself, and came to her afternoon school session without even a morsel of food in her stomach.

How can children learn in the afternoon if they haven't eaten all day? Moody thought. Soon Maria was devouring every bit of a chicken dinner, plus a dessert.

As Moody shared the story with his fellow Convoy of Hope team members, they agreed this had to change for Maria and many other children.

Fast forward a few years. I am on a whirlwind tour of this small Central American nation, El Salvador, where Convoy of Hope has come alongside existing ministries to provide food and hope for those who have very little of either.

Convoy of Hope has had an ongoing presence in El Salvador since they responded to the need after the deadly Hurricane Mitch struck in 1998. In 2001, they stepped up their involvement, responding to the earthquakes that struck a month apart, the first a 7.6 on the Richter scale. Three years

next to grinding poverty. Traveling the capital's main highway, we find an upscale mall on our right and a shantytown of sheet metal and wood-scrap homes on our left.

El Salvador emerged from a devastating civil war in 1992. Called the Land of Volcanoes, it experiences frequent earthquakes and volcanic activity and is extremely susceptible to hurricanes ... the reason Convoy of Hope began its ministry here. This need is driven home when I'm shown a hill where several people were buried and killed in a mudslide during an earthquake.

Densely populated, with a median age of just 22 years, El Salvador is indeed a needy nation.

Strategic partnership

Early morning, as we are driving to San Vicente, Gloria Ramirez, a single mother of four, is also beginning her journey. Every day she travels by foot and bus from Tecoluca, where Convoy did a much-needed distribution last year, to the Liceo Cristiano Rev. Juan Bueno, a school at the edge of San Vicente. There is no work in her village, and as the sole supporter of her family, she views the long daily trip to San Vicente as well worthwhile. Ramirez has been blessed by both the job provided by the school and Convoy's nutrition program.

Convoy of Hope's strategic part-

ago they began a feeding, nutrition and health program that is making major breakthroughs in health and opening doors wide to the gospel.

Disaster-prone nation

El Salvador, a mountainous country that borders the Pacific Ocean, is the smallest country in Central America, not quite as big as the state of Massachusetts. It's a mostly poor nation, but affluence can exist right

nership with the Liceo Cristiano school system is a model for providing physical and spiritual food to needy children and their families. John Bueno, current director of Assemblies of God World Missions, and his wife, Lois, came as missionaries to El Salvador in 1961. John soon had a burden for the nation's children. As he reached out to the street children of El Salvador with the love of Jesus, God gave him a vision



▲ At-risk children

Convoy of Hope actively looks for effective Christian ministries with which to partner. Hermano Johnny founded a children's home 12 years ago after he saw a news story about an abused child. He couldn't get the story out of his mind. He gave up his good-paying job and began the home in an abandoned school.

The children here all have their stories. Most have been abused in some way. Here they are loved and led to Jesus. Convoy of Hope has come alongside this ministry with its nutrition program.

for feeding and educating them. That burden resulted in what is today the largest private Christian school system in the world. Its 37 schools serve more than 16,000 students. In its 45 years of operation, more than 700,000 children have benefited. The current director, Moises Ramirez, is himself a product of the school system — he attended from kindergarten until graduation.

Because of Bueno's national impact, the Salvadoran government renamed the schools in his honor following his departure.¹

Convoy initially provided rice, beans and chicken protein to three schools. Since then the program has expanded; it now feeds more than 5,000 children a hot, nutritious meal daily and assists their struggling families with food and guidance every month. (The number of children fed daily swells to more than 18,000 when the other targeted countries — Kenya, Nicaragua and Haiti — are included.) The ministry tracks the physical and mental growth of the children. Increased spiritual growth is a result of the improved health. Water filters have already reduced disease in supported areas.

As we near San Vicente, our guide points out a sprawling valley in front of the San Vicente volcano where the Convoy disaster response team once

library, new desks, fencing and more.

Some might think there is too much of an emphasis on temporal needs, but local pastor Arturo Barraza Piche knows better. He has seen many people come to know Christ through the school. And churches are growing wherever Convoy of Hope's nutrition program is functioning — because of the love shown.

"We work with local pastors," says Enrique Martinez, El Salvador national director for Convoy, "giving them the resources so local churches become the helpers to the community, not Convoy. They share Jesus with the people."

At the home of Clara Garcia, mother of five, her 7-year-old daughter, Hildah, proudly announces to us that she has already completed her homework. Clara expresses her appreciation for the physical, educational and spiritual impact on her family.

"The meals help so much," she says. Another San Vicente resident, Paula Chica, is anxious to tell us that since Nurturing Hope began, she has seen her son Francisco put on weight and grow healthy.

Las Delicias

On our way to Las Delicias, we pass a truck packed with sugar cane, a national staple. The sugar cane harvest is over, and haze from the

erected temporary homes for displaced Salvadorans.

At the school, we meet Sister Deysi, the school's director, who is illustrative of the quality of the Salvadorans who minister in the schools. She left a higher-paying job with the public schools to come here when the school was in danger of closing. Since then, three years ago, "God has blessed the school through Convoy of Hope," she says — with a roof, fresh paint, a

burning fields obscures portions of the roadway as trucks transport the valuable commodity.

The Las Delicias school was founded after a severe earthquake in 1989. Las Delicias is an example of a community where John Bueno's impact has extended far beyond the school. Bueno's ministry approach, reaching multiple needs in a community, was tailor-made for this partnership with Convoy of Hope. Of 205 mothers of

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Below: This single mother of six, shown with four of her children, is eking out an existence in Santa Ana's Los Angeles refugee camp. Convoy of Hope has helped the struggling family keep its head above water, even to the extent of providing supplies for the mom to learn a trade.



"God has blessed the school through Convoy of Hope with a roof, fresh paint, a library, new desks, fencing and more."

— Sister Deysi

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Left: Paula Chica with now-healthy son Francisco.

Below middle: Convoy of Hope also mobilizes groups from the States that provide massive amounts of labor and supplies. Shown here is a church erected by a team in just a handful of days. A group of 30 arrived soon after we left and distributed 5,000 school supply kits, backpacks and clothing.



Caring for the elderly and homeless

Convoy of Hope has also come alongside another sacrificial ministry. Pastor Fabricio and his church have been feeding and clothing the elderly and abandoned in Santa Tecla, near San Salvador, for four years. The ministry includes a homeless shelter and ministry to many of the street kids in the city.



students at this school, 190 of them volunteer at the school. This year many have lost jobs, and the feeding program has been an important stop-gap. Some families are completely destitute as they await a distribution. Convoy has also begun providing food for the neediest in the interim.

Maira's daughter Helen was malnourished when she began attending the school. Maira wanted her to attend just until she became healthy. But the sight of her thriving daughter caused Maira to reconsider and leave her enrolled at the school permanently. She decided the teaching about God and spiritual things, coupled with Convoy's instructing the parents how to feed and care for their children, were indispensable.

At every school we visit, parents clamor to share their joy with us at having happy, healthy children who love Jesus.

Comecayo

Pastor Rafael greets us in Comecayo. He pastors a church of 750 and partners closely with Convoy and Liceo Cristiano.

Pastor Rafael tells me their ministry to the poor is something that has grown recently.

"We've been doing small things by ourselves," he says, "but Convoy of Hope is the answer from God to help us do bigger things. This has opened doors to the community that had been closed before."

Marlena, a mother with two children at the school, says her husband

this. All are committed Christians; they start every school day at 6:30 a.m. with devotions and prayer.

Rededicating the school at Achiotal

In Achiotal, a community in El Salvador's lower, more tropical area near the coast, the Liceo Cristiano was forced to find a new location very quickly. This turned into a blessing as donors funded a new location and excellent new facilities. The land was purchased through Latin America ChildCare, the sponsoring agency for the school system, and the building was funded through Convoy.

When the dedication service is held, people from the entire community turn out. The alcalde (mayor) of the city attended a John Bueno school himself.

"There's a sweetness about the students here that you don't see at other schools," the mayor tells the crowd. He attributes this to "the Spirit of God. That's what we need more of," he asserts.

The strategic partnership of Liceo Cristiano and Convoy of Hope has created ripples of influence throughout every targeted community; indeed, these ripples have traversed the entire country.

What is happening in El Salvador is a model for compassionate Christian ministry. Hungry children and families of El Salvador are being fed — with food for the body and the soul. **tpe**



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is out of work and many times there was no food in their home. With the help of the feeding program, she says, her children are healthier and have more energy. A refrain commonly heard is, "The children who attend the school don't have the problems other children have."

The teachers have a lot to do with

1. See the June 3, 2007, World Missions Edition of Today's Pentecostal Evangel, available at tpe.ag.org.

KEN HORN (pictured above right with students) is the editor of Today's Pentecostal Evangel and blogs at Snapshots (khorn.agblogger.org).

E-mail your comments to tpe@ag.org.

Top: A local public high school marching band performs at the dedication of Achiotal school.