

Doing Good

April 9, 2015

The University of Wyoming saw over 300 persons at their clinic in Agua Salada last week. Being Holy Week we had some concern that they might not have as many patients as they would on a normal week. But, Wyoming's clinic is well established with developed relationships of trust. Regardless of the week, the people turn out. Laura and I visit them twice, but because they are so busy, we have little time to engage with the brigade members. Mostly we just observed the coming and goings of the residents and their interactions with the students, nurses, dentist, and doctors.



We recognized an older woman who had also come to the clinic when Wyoming was last here in November. She would be memorable to almost anyone; that soft, grandmotherly look and manner that inspires you to want to care for her. She's trying on reading glasses. She had done the same thing at the last brigade and I recalled that she didn't have a need for reading glasses. Perhaps her memory is a little challenged. This time as before, two or three brigade members come to assist her. I inform them that she doesn't need reading glasses. They ask her if she has difficulty reading and she answers that she doesn't read. "What about sewing? Can you see the material and the thread?" "Yes," she responds, "I can sew just fine." She's disappointed when they explain to her, as they had at the last brigade, that wearing reading glasses for her poor distance sight would not help her, and might even hurt her. Still, she and the brigade members are having a great time, laughing and conversing. Solicitous of her, the brigade members search out ways to help her. I think that they already had.



Laura spoke with one of the brigade members, thanking him for all the good work Wyoming is doing. He asked, sincerely, if in fact they really are doing any good. It's a jarring question. A lot of brigades either never ask it, or answer it quickly and affirmatively to avoid their personal insecurity. But the question is the beginning of discernment, the beginning of mission. Everyone wants to feel helpful. It's another thing entirely to actually be helpful. The former is about ego. The latter is about commitment. The question itself provides the map outlining the journey from ego to commitment.

On our second visit there was a meeting with the community leaders. The clinic has never been part of the Honduran health system and therefore has only been open when the University of Wyoming is present on brigade. The situation has changed now and there is a possibility for the clinic to be operational on a daily basis. This would mean regular health care for the inhabitants of Agua Salada and the surrounding areas. The community leaders expressed gratitude and praise for the committed individuals who have been coming to their village for years. They even spoke about memorializing them by hanging their photos on the walls. Then the community leaders expressed the fear they were feeling. If the clinic becomes part of the Honduran medical system would that mean that Wyoming would stop coming? Wyoming answered the question definitively. No, they would continue to come. They would continue to provide health care. They would stand by the side of the community as they developed. This response eased the fears of all present.



Is the University of Wyoming doing any good for the community and individuals of Agua Salada? Well, they built a clinic here. They've provided health care for years. The community

is now poised to obtain regular, ongoing health care. They are known and respected by the residents. The community wants them to continue coming. Wyoming is committed to standing by their side. But even with all of that, the question is a scary one to ask, and even more elusive to answer. Though it is so tempting to document proof of our generosity, “good” is not subject to empirical measurement. It is only and always a thing of the heart.



When Wyoming next returns to Agua Salada, I suspect we'll see the older woman return again. She will again search the reading glasses, again be dismayed that the glasses will not help her, and again find comfort in gathering around her two or three young Americans. They'll talk and laugh and gently lead her about, searching out ways that they might help her. Once again, the question will be asked. Once again, the answer will elude us. The question, however, is so much more important than the answer.