

VENEZUELA RELIEF PROJECT 2021
Narrative Report

“Venezuela Relief” addresses complicated health situations

by *Elianeth Pineda*

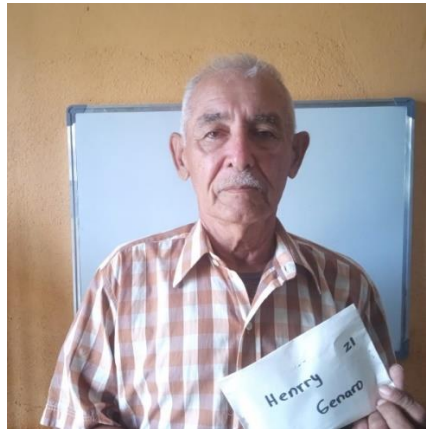
Translated: James Tino

Single mothers, parents whose children are in exile, widows, and retirees forgotten by the system to which they dedicated their entire working lives - this is the reality of some of the beneficiaries of “Venezuela Relief”, our program of mercy that has been providing medical treatment to chronically ill patients since 2017.

All of those who are helped by the program have a common denominator: dealing with a life-long illness while living in a country where finding something to eat - sometimes, only once a day - is an ongoing challenge.

Henry Aranguren, one of the beneficiaries, is a 68-year-old father who suffers from high blood pressure and diabetes. These health problems have now affected his eyesight which is now clouded by cataracts. In December 2020, a cerebral-vascular incident left him with memory loss, complicating his life even more. He requires eight different medications to slow the onslaught of his ailments.

Henry, who has worked as a candlemaker for over two decades, can no longer practice his vocation. He relies on what his daughter Zugeimar is able to earn to stay afloat.



**Henry Aranguren requires eight medications to address his complex health situation.
“Cristo es amor”, Barquisimeto, Lara**

Treating this Venezuelan requires an investment of \$70 dollars per month, a titanic undertaking if one takes into account the fact that the minimum wage is \$2.40 per month which - according to the Center for Documentation and Analysis for Workers (CENDA) - covers less than 1% of the basic basket of goods.

For the Aranguren household - which consists of three adults - receiving our donation of three of the medicines that Henry requires provides some measure of comfort in the midst of an overall socioeconomic catastrophe.

Relief from so much setback

En September 2021, we finalized the ninth operation of this mercy program, through which we send medicine to this part of the Caribbean which has been forgotten by so many.

This time, we sent 105,090 pills to help 1,051 patients.

In Barinas, the capital city of the state which bears the same name, they are thanking God for enabling the arrival of the packages of medicine in spite of the convoluted international situation, caused by the pandemic.



“Corpus Christi” church received 4,900 pills. Barinas, estado Barinas

“The obstacles are more formidable; however, you do not shrink back and you have continued your labor of love”, says Rosa Virginia Jimenez, member of “Corpus Christi” Lutheran Church, to which we also sent disposable individual communion cups for distributing the Blood of Christ in the Lord’s Supper.



At “Corpus Christi”, they appreciated the donation of individual cups as they believe that using them in the distribution of the Lord’s Supper helps to detain the propagation of the virus. Barinas, estado Barinas

Even though this programmatic assistance arrives only periodically, for the majority of the beneficiaries “Venezuela Relief” is the only health benefit that they have. In this land of Simon Bolivar, there are no social safety net programs which guarantee health care and medicines for patients with chronic illnesses.

“Each case is a story of pain”, affirms deaconess Luz Maria de Ernst who supports the ministry of her husband, pastor David Ernst, at Epiphany Lutheran Mission located in La Caramuca, a rural village in the Venezuelan plains.



**At “Epiphany”, the medicines were distributed after Sunday service.
La Caramuca, estado Barinas**

Luz Maria shared the case of her namesake Luz Marina Medina, a 45-year-old woman who was very emotional when she received the tablets which control her epilepsy, a disease that has afflicted her since childhood.

Luz Marina grew up without a mother, is a widow and has no children, and who lives with her elderly father who also requires treatment. She is one of the 710 women who benefitted from the most recent delivery through our program.

In a country where the minimum wage is less than three dollars per month but where it costs at least seven dollars to buy two pounds of cheese and a carton of eggs, securing this donation of pills - even if it is only a month's supply - means freeing up scarce resources to cover other household needs.

This is the reality that Luz Marina lives, and for that reason she appreciates being a part of a family in Christ which gives her the opportunity to alleviate her physical and spiritual discomfort under the shelter of the Almighty.



At "Epiphany", the delivery of medications is always an opportune momento to also share crops harvested by deaconess Luz Maria and her husband, pastor David. La Caramuca, estado Barinas

Delivery in spite of roadblocks

For some time now, the project coordinators in each participating church are required to go to the local office of the courier company in order to receive each shipment. Couriers have indefinitely suspended delivery to individual addresses.

The fuel supply shortage and the restrictions imposed by the government due to COVID-19 have impacted the distribution of the medications.

However, the demands of a chronic illness do not give heed to a 'cease fire'. The project coordinators assure us that they exhaust all resources to guarantee that each beneficiary receives their prescription as quickly as possible, even if that means walking for miles under a roasting sun.

Juan Guarapo is a 78-year-old grandfather, retired, and has been diagnosed with glaucoma, high blood pressure, and arthritis. After having served as a manager of one of the largest telecommunication companies in Venezuela, his delicate condition, both economic and physical, obligate him to stay home - a house which often hosted small groups for members of his congregation, "El Paraiso". Now, those same members go the extra mile to deliver him his treatments.



**Juan Guarapo poses with the medications that had to be delivered to his residence.
Barquisimeto, Lara**

In the context of the pandemic, it is difficult to maintain regular church activities. This is one of the reasons that members in several areas have organized themselves to deliver the pills to the patients in their homes.

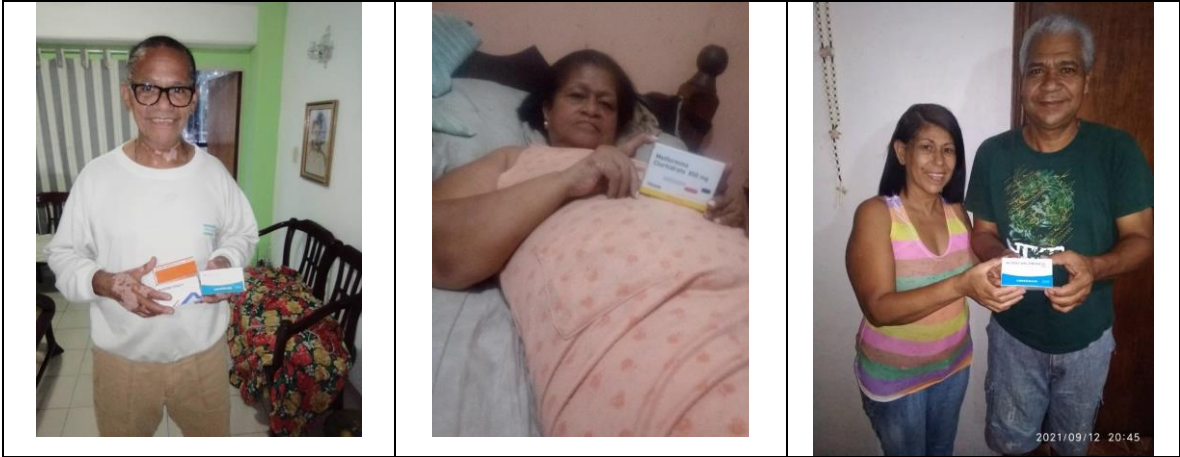
Such is the case in the “La Ascension” congregation, located in Bolivar state. There, they take advantage of the weeks in which the authorities “relax the sanitary requirements” in order to get out to the homes of the beneficiaries, who are anxiously awaiting their delivery from Chile.



Members of “La Ascension” receive our donation in their homes. San Félix, estado Bolívar

One of those who receives his treatment at home is Antonio Arocha, a throat cancer survivor who spends his days accompanied only by his cat, Federica. “He lives off his pension which isn’t enough for him or for any other retiree”, affirms Elsy Valladares, program coordinator at La Paz Lutheran Church and the person responsible for making sure that Antonio and the rest of the people served by that congregation receive their dosages.

Elsy also expresses her gratitude for the medicines that we provide to each congregation for general distribution. These “local pharmacies” allow each congregation to attend to common ailments such as colds, headaches, and digestive problems, among others.



Members of “La Paz”. Los Teques, estado Miranda



Each congregation also receives 7 different drugs for common ailments.

An Evangelistic Tool

“The precious donation”, as reverend Felix Zamora calls the pills that we supply, has for him opened doors to houses that were closed to the Gospel, and brought new people to his church.

“The Word has worked in their hearts the miracle of believing in our Lord Jesus Christ as their Savior”, pastor Felix emphasizes. He also shares that he has five new students studying for membership thanks to the evangelistic efforts supported by the medicine program.



Pastor Félix Zamora with members of his congregation, “Cristo Vencedor”. La Pica, estado Monagas

In Barquisimeto, a city in the western portion of the country, Juan Vielma, the leader of one of the groups we serve, also takes advantage of the program to preach to friends, neighbors, and acquaintances.

Juan’s health has been decimated by COVID-19; irregardless, his wife and three of their children help to distribute the pills because they know that the donation meets a critical need for that month.



From left to right: Jhonny, Juan, Jenny and Henny Vielma organize the pills. ILUVE, Barquisimeto, estado Lara

The reward for the volunteers in charge of the delivery of the treatments is the comfort that it brings to the patients, according to pastor Abel Garcia. He does not mask his joy upon fulfilling what was entrusted to him.

From Barcelona, Anzoátegui state, he shares that works of mercy such as this program show the love of God.



Pastor Abel García got the church all ready for delivery of the medicines. "Cristo es el Camino", Barcelona, estado Anzoátegui



The number indicates how many church communities are served in each state.

Volunteers: the key to every operation

The involvement of the members of “Divine Providence” Lutheran Church has been the determining factor in reaching our objectives.

The participation of this community of believers has enabled us to facilitate the logistics and reduce labor costs.



From left to right: Liisa (the wife of pastor James Tino), together with Coralí, Iván and Génesis, part of the “Divina Providencia” congregation. Santiago de Chile



Members of the “Divina Providencia” congregation are very committed to the program. Santiago de Chile

The process is very demanding. Hundreds of blister packs are cut, sorted, and repackaged into boxes that cannot weigh more than two kilos each in order to avoid confiscation by the customs authorities. Shipments can be confiscated if authorities suspect that we are re-selling pharmaceuticals.



710 women and 341 men received medications between August and September 2021

Taking into account our commitment to extending a helping hand to people who are unable to pay for their ongoing treatments, the goal is not to finish a shipment but rather to guarantee the continuity of the program.