The glow of the rising sun could be seen over the distant hills off to the east of us. We had been on the road for two hours putting the Bitterroot Valley of Montana farther in the distance in the bus rear view mirror.

We were headed for LaPenita, Mexico to build a church that would be led by a local pastor, for the local people.

This was not my first trip south of the border, and it would not be my last.

My first real trip across the border into Mexico was about a year earlier than this one. About fifteen of us traveled to LaPenita, some 1000 miles south of the Nogales border crossing. We had traveled more miles than that from Lakeside, Montana to Nogales, Arizona. We did that first leg in an old yellow school bus. It was not comfortable, but it was an uplifting and friendly journey with a team of Youth With A Mission, YWAM, personnel that made the trip.

Once in Nogales we stored our school bus at a local Baptist Church and sought train transportation that would get us to Tepic, Mexico. We would spend twenty hours on that train. Tepic was a two-hour bus ride to LaPenita which is located on the coast of Mexico approximately equivalent to the tip of the Baja peninsula.

I think we all thought a train ride for twenty plus hours into Mexico would be a fun adventure. Of course we were thinking of AMTRAK standards. Boy, were we ever wrong. The train was old, and not so well maintained. The seats were hard, dirty, and impossible to get comfortable in. The windows, those that were still present, were so dirty from the diesel smoke they were impossible to see out of.

As in any journey of this length, time would come when a potty break was needed. I made my way to the back of our railcar and found the toilet. I stepped in, closed the door behind me and turned to address the toilet bowl. The sight I found myself looking at was something to behold. The bowl had been broken with a crack of about an inch wide running from the rim to the floor. The bowl itself, which had seen no water in a long time, was filled to capacity with solid waste feces. It was piled higher than the rim of the toilet.

It was obvious from this scene that no one really cared that the facility was broken, and didn’t care either that they added to the mess by crouching above the stool and leaving their own deposit.

Tepic was a welcome site and we were happy to disembark and pile onto a local bus to LaPenita. It was a pleasant spot on the coast of Mexico that is frequented by the Mexican population.
for summer vacations, at least those who could afford such a thing.

This first trip was a scouting trip to find land to build a church on. We spent a week there looking at properties, doing ministries on the beaches, with a bit of tourist activity thrown in. It was a pleasant stay in bungalows right on the beach. We had adequate time for body surfing, swimming, or simply laying under a coconut palm tree on the beach. LaPenita was a fond memory for sure.

The journey home from this first trip was by bus to Tepic once again. But when we tried to catch the train again we failed. Rather than wait days for the next opportunity we opted for a Charter Bus to Nogales that was supposed to be exclusively for our team. That, of course, was not true.

It was a very crowded bus that stopped dozens of times to take on more passengers. The aisle would fill to capacity and I spent much of the twenty-four-hour trip standing in the aisle to make a seat available for someone more needy than myself. It was a long and frightening trip. I say frightening because the bus drivers, like the truck drivers, were fearless and often the bus side mirror seemed it would clash with the one of any oncoming truck or bus. The highways were so narrow that buses and trucks could just barely pass one another. Resting was not much of an option on this ride.

We did make it back to our school bus in Nogales and then on back to Montana safely.

My wife Judith and I weren’t sure who would build the church on the property we had found in LaPenita, but hoped somehow we could be part of it in the future sometime.

A year or so passed and we moved from Montana in search of what God would have us do. At one point in our journey we were so unsure what our direction was from the Lord, we purposed to just load our van and head out. We stopped at every major intersection and prayed about which way to go. We held hands and implored the Lord to show us the way. Then we would load up and head out again to the next intersection.

We did this from Oregon well into Nevada. In Wells, Nevada we felt a sure direction to turn back to Montana, specifically the city of Hamilton. That was not the direction we wanted. We had felt we were to go south to Mexico.

But we turned north and traveled to Hamilton where we encountered a Christian Real Estate lady who gave us accommodations the first night and we actually rented the apartment from her the next day. She invited us to her church on Sunday.

We went to the church and soon we were nicely settled into the Hamilton Assembly of God church.

We weren’t part of the church even a year when the pastor asked me to consider leading an outreach to LaPenita to build on the church. So, there it was, God’s plan being unveiled. God wanted us to go back to LaPenita, Mexico, but wanted us to stop in Hamilton first and take forty people with us.

Forty people did go with us and we linked up with YWAM to make the trip. We made the trip in a refurbished passenger bus that was so much more comfortable than the school bus of the previous trip. This time we drove the bus all the way to LaPenita.

So, let’s go back to my original start of this story.

And now here we were, forty of us of all ages, packed into this bus with the sun now pouring into the bus windows and the Bitterroot Valley gone in the distance behind us. We had made our way through the mountains of Idaho and were now cruising across the higher plains where remains of many a snow drift still lay along the highway.

The snow and ice gave way to desert shrubs and cactus as we pressed farther south toward Nogales, Mexico once again.
This time we arrived at the border and made the crossing with no problem at all. We continued down Mexico’s Highway 15, trying to get as many miles in as possible. We were scheduled for a stop in Culiacan for the night.

Warren, the driver, and I, had linked up to lead this group.

We zoomed down the highway into the Mexican darkness with our headlights showing the way. Suddenly there were red and blue lights behind us.

Warren shouted, ‘It’s the Federales.’

I stood in the aisle and shouted into the darkness of the bus, ‘It is time to pray.’

We prayed until the bus rolled to a stop alongside the highway in the weeds and dust of the Sonoran desert.

Warren swung the bus door open. A Federale officer boarded the bus and stood next to Warren and looked us over. The bus lights were on now and the officer surveyed the bus load of missionaries before starting down the aisle.

It was at this point that I saw that the officer was a female. She was a young lady of about thirty years of age and was sharply attired in her dark blue, almost black, uniform.

I was standing at the front of the bus and she stopped directly in front of me and said something in Spanish. I shrugged and replied with, ‘Missionaries.’

That seemed to satisfy her and she moved on down the aisle looking into every pair of seats before returning to where I stood in the aisle. She again stood in front of me. This time I noticed something else that she wore with her militant uniform. She had a gold chain around her neck. A miniature gold machine gun hung from the chain. It closely resembled the machine gun she held in her hands.

This officer was taking her job very serious, and seemed to have a love affair with machine guns. I hoped she didn’t think it was necessary to use it on a bus load of missionaries this dark night.

She looked at me, barked a command loudly and waved the machine gun toward the door. My understanding was instant. We were to get off the bus. I yelled the instruction to the others while Warren and I headed for the door.

Once outside the bus other officers joined in and they pushed us into two single file rows about an arms reach apart. The officer with the machine gun then walked slowly down between the two rows making eye contact with every one of us.

There were some questions to which we gave answers, but weren’t sure they were answers to the questions. All the while prayers were going heavenward to our Father. God was fully aware of our situation and there was no doubt he would rescue us.

The officer waved the machine gun once again toward the bus and shouted another command. We didn’t waste any time taking her up on her invitation to get back on the bus and get on the road once again.

We sped off into the dark night air just praising our Lord for whatever he had done to satisfy the Federales.

The rest of the trip went well and we were soon in LaPenita to start the church building construction.

We spent our entire ten days with pick and shovel digging a level spot on the property to begin the foundation work. We had enough workers to form a row of pick men, followed by a row of shovel men, and then a row of wheelbarrow men. The first row would pick the hard packed soil and rock loose enough for the shovel men to step forward and scoop it up and place in the wheelbarrow for hauling away. This went on day after day until the area was level.
About day two of our work, someone fashioned a makeshift cross from two heavy tree limbs and two of us carried it to a position high above the construction site and we planted it there to remind us who we were working for.

Team members who were not able to use the digging tools would rotate to a position at the foot of the cross to read scripture aloud. The scriptures could be heard all across the building site, and the reading continued as long as we worked.

Our days came to an end and the bus ride back to Montana was a restful one with a sense of satisfaction even though we had only been able to do the site leveling. We had gone and done what the Lord asked us to do. At least three couples of the forty people that went along on the mission trip, left jobs and went full-time into missions as a result of that trip.

Judith and I spent many years remembering that trip before we were able to once again travel to LaPenita. The Lord had spoken clearly to us to go and we got rid of all our belongings and loaded our pea-green Dodge van for the journey. We were leaving from Montana once again to make the week long trip.

This time it was only Judith, her son, Will, and I making the trip.

Once in LaPenita, accommodations had been made for us by the group of missionaries who were in LaPenita full time to work on the church. They had been there for a couple years, and some of them were friends of ours. We were to spend the first few nights in a grass hut with a thatch roof right on the beach. The waves actually washed our footprints away from the doorway every night while we slept. There were a few bugs that dropped from the thatch onto our bedding, but it was mostly a delightful experience.

We eventually moved into a second level apartment over a doctor’s office and pharmacy right in the middle of LaPenita. We had a gated driveway and a courtyard with Lime trees and a nice array of flowering plants.

The local Tortilla plant was just down the street from us and we would make the pilgrimage nearly every morning to get fresh tortillas.

But, back to our first night in LaPenita, the team we were joining called a meeting the very night we arrived. We walked to the meeting site a little early and I stood alone on the porch near the front door. I was gazing into the darkness at the beauty of the stars beyond the tops of the coconut palms when I felt such a strong sense that we were to go home. Back to the states!

I looked up as though looking for God and said, ‘But, Lord, we just got here. I don’t understand. Didn’t you ask us to come?’

I felt God say to me, ‘Would you have come if it were for only one day?’

I had to think about that question. Then finally said, ‘Yes, Lord. If you wanted us to come for only one day, we would have.’

The meeting started and I pondered the discussion I had with the Lord.

I began doing construction work on the two-story church building that had been erected on the level lot we had left two years earlier. I worked side by side with the leader of the team and learned much in the first hours of work. He was loving being in LaPenita and working on the church building. But, his wife was not happy. She felt they should have gone back to the states long ago. There was much strife in their marriage over this issue. The husband would not budge off of his desire to be there.

I talked with him on several different occasions and advised him to honor his wife, and only remain in LaPenita if they had agreement to do so.

The rainy season came to LaPenita about the same time that we did. Between the humidity
and rain there didn’t seem to be a dry moment. On one occasion the streets were flooded and we were driving around in our van picking up church members to take them to bible study. Judith would jump out of the van, hold her dress up and bound to the door in deep puddles of rain water.

The mosquitoes were horrendous. We were welted up badly and one morning Judith could not get out of bed. Sickness had fallen on her with fever and upset stomach including hot flashes and chills. I nursed her for a couple of days and then it hit me. I was down too.

It was at this point that Judith went to get something from the pharmacy located just below our flat. The pharmacist’s wife was a doctor and they lived at the back of the pharmacy. She came upstairs with Judith and checked me over. She prescribed and then provided the medication at no cost to us. We were free from what was Dengue Fever in a few days. Our native neighbors had been true neighbors and friends.

Will’s sixteenth birthday came and we wanted to celebrate. I made my way to the local ice cream shop and presented my best Spanish to order sixteen scoops of ice cream. I had to make an order because there was never that amount on hand, so I was told.

I returned the morning of Will’s birthday to pick up the sixteen scoops. I was amazed when they lifted a very large container of ice cream to the top of the glass counter.

Over the next few minutes my understanding of what had happened flooded over me like a river torrent. I had felt so proud that I had negotiated the purchase of the sixteen scoops, but I had ordered sixty scoops with my ill-prepared language skills. We ate a lot of ice cream for the next few days, with much amusement.

All of this and we had been here for only a few weeks. The thought of leaving and going back to the states wouldn’t leave me, even though we had thought we would likely be in LaPenita for a year or two.

Finally I talked to the leader of the mission group. He was adamant. We were not to go home. He insisted we weren’t hearing from the Lord. He asked if we would pray about it before making any decisions, and asked that we pray all week. We agreed.

The week ended and I still didn’t think we were to stay. I didn’t understand, but felt we were to leave.

The leader came to us and looked straight into our eyes and said, ‘You are supposed to go home. The Lord showed me a scripture verse that caused me to know for sure.’

So the confirmation came through the man who thought we surely were not to go.

We packed up and made the three-day journey out of Mexico. We had spent one month in LaPenita.

About three months later we heard from that same leader that he and his wife had themselves left Mexico and returned home to satisfy the wife’s desire. Maybe our purpose was more about speaking to this couple than it was for constructing a building.

It would be years before we crossed over into Mexico again.

Judith was diagnosed with lung cancer and at one point we left a Montana winter to find warmth and sunshine for her. We arrived in Arizona for a few days and then went to Tijuana, Mexico to see friends there. While there they asked us to housesit the YWAM Base there for a week while they all went off to Houston, Texas for a conference. We agreed and had a lovely week of sunshine and rest that greatly benefitted Judith.

My lack of Spanish never seemed to be a big problem when in Mexico. I would just wave my hands and say the few words I knew and somehow things got done. One day during our week there in Tijuana I was crossing the street when I encountered two Mexicans. One of them met my gaze
and spoke a few words.

I looked back at him and said, ‘I don’t speak Spanish.’

He smiled and said in perfect English, ‘I was speaking to you in English.’

We all laughed hard at that.

Judith died of the lung cancer about a year later. We lived in Gold Beach, Oregon at the time. I walked on the beach for three weeks every morning at sun up praying for God’s direction for my life without Judith.

Out of that three weeks I kept getting, ‘Do what’s at hand.’

The only thing ‘at hand’ for me was an invitation I had received. I had been asked to join a ministry group that took church teams to Mexico.

I called them and accepted their invitation.

My first mission trip with them was to Hermosillo where we traveled into various villages and preached the gospel of Jesus Christ. We also sought permission to preach in the local prison. We were welcomed and after entrance to the prison compound, we set up chairs for all those who chose to attend. About one hundred men showed up to hear the ‘Good News’ of Jesus Christ and his salvation offer from the cross, and many of them decided it was time to put Jesus in charge of their battered lives.

The second trip took us to Guaymas where we had arranged housing for our team in a Catholic School that was closed for the summer. Summer, and specifically August, is not the best time to be in Guaymas. The heat was intense at 105 degrees, and the monsoon rains were heavily upon us.

We drove by van into the surrounding villages with our PA system and presented Jesus at every opportunity while traversing flooded streets and maneuvered around down power lines and trees.

We had no hot water at the school, but that wasn’t a problem at all. The natural water temperature was warm, and even felt good when the water was cooler in the morning hours. Our first day I took five showers to undo the sticky, wet skin that resulted from the high temperatures and humidity.

The shower came to be an adventure in itself.

My first trip to the shower was so welcome. I couldn’t wait to get under the water. I stepped out of my clothes and entered the tiled and crusty shower stall. There were no doors and the debris in the corners indicated the lack of deep cleaning in years.

My anticipation of the water was high as I turned the knob. The water streamed my way and I closed my eyes and placed my head directly under the stream. It felt good and the thoughts of the unclean shower stall faded from my mind. I was in a blissful moment.

I felt a slight tickle on my foot, then my leg. I brushed at it with my hand while keeping my eyes closed and my head under the water.

More tickles, then more, on both legs.

I jumped to the side and shot a glance downward. I was shocked to see Cockroaches coming out of the drain in great numbers trying to get out of the flooded drain. They were endeavoring to get to high ground. That high ground was my body. They were scrambling up both legs as fast as they could go.

The cockroaches were the big ones, about three inches in length.

I began a dance that carried me around and around the stall. I was jumping, running, and swatting with both hands. They didn’t want to get off my legs any more than I wanted them on my legs. I jumped out of the stall and with a craze of energy I managed to swat them all away.
My next few minutes were spent annihilating cockroaches with one of my previously set aside flip-flops. I killed every one of them while dressed only in my wet skin.

When the battle was over there were about twenty dead enemies on the floor strewn about in an array of body parts.

I re-entered the shower stall and finished my cleansing with both eyes wide open.

I added a new step to subsequent showers. I would run the drain full of water and kill the fleeing cockroaches as they tried to escape before stepping in for my refreshing rinse.

Additional mission trips would be made to Mexico over the coming years to Juarez, Nogales, Puerto Penasco and LaSangre taking the message of Jesus Christ into the villages and barrios, or simply helping to feed the less fortunate.

Only once in my many crossings into Mexico were we ever denied entry.

A team of us from Payson, Arizona was taking a trailer load of building supplies to LaSangre to continue construction of a church building we had started on previous trips for that village. We spent many hours on hold at the border while the Mexican Department of Agriculture was deciding whether we could bring lumber in from America or not. The final decision came and we were denied permission to bring the lumber in.

There was no point of us continuing that mission trip because without the lumber there was nothing much for us to do at the church site.

One of the men of the team had constructed a beautiful cross for the wall of the church. It measured about eight feet tall, and we stood it upright proudly while we were waiting for our approval of entry at the border. There was no question what our team was all about.

I will gladly take the Good News of Jesus Christ into Mexico again when the opportunity arises. Even Machine Guns and Cockroaches couldn’t keep me from it.