



*Belize, Central America*

## MORE PRECIOUS THAN GOLD

*By The Rev. Keith Daniel, Director of Duke University Chapel PathWays Program*

**W**hen asked if I have any regrets from my experiences as a Duke undergraduate, I always reply, “Yes, I regret that I never studied abroad or went on a mission trip.”

For me, being able to go on my first mission trip to Belize with nine Duke undergraduates, retiree John Willard, and Chapel Worship Coordinator Meghan Feldmeyer, was a redeeming gift from God.

There is much that I could share about our time in Belize, especially as my emotions run high writing this reflection on day seven of our ten-day trip. My role as Director of PathWays is to serve as a facilitator of learning, relationships, and friendships between students and faithful servant leaders, so this reflection focuses on the life of a local servant-leader I’ve been blessed to meet. Vernon Wilson is a retired jeweler turned Christian missionary living in Belize and co-founder with his wife Francis of Holy Cross Anglican Primary School located adjacent to the poverty stricken San Mateo community of San Pedro Town, Ambergris Caye.

When we first arrived at Holy Cross, Vernon gave us an orientation of the school and a walking tour of San Mateo. During this time, he revealed that he never went to college. He began his career working in construction, but soon found himself unemployed. While looking for work, Vernon researched “recession-proof” careers. One career that struck him was the manufacturing of jewelry. So, with only \$10 of start-up capital and a wife in college, Vernon obtained some basic tools for his new chosen profession, and started out making coins in his home. Money was so tight at that time that he learned to prepare “362 different recipes for hot dogs.” Nevertheless, he had found a passion and set a goal to become a custom-made jewelry artist. And, he did just that, much to the chagrin of countless people who said his path was a dead-end. He won multiple national and international awards for custom-made jewelry, becoming a two-time winner of the international pearl competition in Tokyo, Japan, the first and only U.S. citizen to earn such an honor. Vernon specialized in crafting gold and platinum custom jewelry for an international clientele. Eventually, he was working with and producing some of

the most expensive jewelry in the world. Not only was he a master craftsman, but he also was a wise investor collecting precious gemstones and amassing millions in wealth. Eventually, his accumulated wealth afforded him the luxury of needing to work only a few hours a day allowing much time to travel and enjoy a lavish lifestyle. He decided to sell his store after 18 years in the business.

Vernon explained that he considered himself as always having a relationship with God. He came to embrace Judaism explaining that his first wife was Jewish. After they divorced, he met and married Francis, who had previously been married to a Jewish man. There came a point where Vernon and Francis started attending an Episcopal church regularly and Vernon slowly began to embrace his faith in Christ more firmly. Vernon shared that the church led a retreat weekend that Francis wanted to attend; however, the men/husbands were required to attend as a prerequisite for the women. What Vernon thought at the time was a “camping trip with the guys” ended up being a major turning point in his relationship with God. During the retreat the men were assigned to go off on their own to

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produce an art design or poster depicting their journey of faith in Christ. While working on his poster, Vernon sensed a call to begin producing Christian jewelry. The vision came as an audible and visual encounter that Vernon described as, "The Lord stood by my side and said He would be with me for the journey."

Not long after the retreat Vernon's new journey with God began. He came across a company called Roman, Inc., the largest marketing company of Christian jewelry in the world. He contacted the president of the company, arranged a meeting, and signed a contract. His calling was coming to fruition. Vernon, however, maintained his production of custom pieces for his non-Christian clientele.

One month into his new line of business

while traveling to a church healing service, Vernon was involved in car accident that left him completely debilitated. He lay mostly in bed for four years unable to work or move without pain for any more than 30 minutes a day. It goes without saying that Vernon had lots of time to think about life and death, about what really mattered to him and to God. He frames his tragedy and lengthy debilitation as a wake up call from God to release all control over his life of security and luxury. In his words, he had "to let go of his security blanket." He decided to donate his collection of precious gems to Habitat for Humanity. Although he wanted to make an anonymous gift, Habitat persuaded him to go public with his donation as a means to attract and inspire other potential donors. His highly recognized name and success would prove to be quite an attraction, including a spot on Oprah's Golden Angels segment and feature articles in People Magazine, NY Times, and other news publications. His precious gemstones seed would produce a harvest leading to the largest donation in the history of Habitat. Three days later, Vernon's debilitating condition was for the first time diagnosed as a ruptured disc, which had gone unnoticed by all other previous physicians. The diagnosis was a major turning point and clearer road to hope and full physical recovery.

Vernon was now looking to retire from jewelry making. He wanted to donate his tools and equipment to a school and possibly teach. However, no one school wanted all his stuff and he didn't have

the educational requirements to teach. In 2000 Vernon and Francis learned of their home Diocese of Southern Virginia's relationship with the Diocese of the Virgin Islands. The VI Diocesan Bishop expressed great interest in having Vernon and Francis serve as missionaries there and open a school. After a year of preparation and just days prior to the arrival of the moving van, the Bishop decided the school would be too expensive to operate and told us to 'wait a while' before moving. Francis shared, "Friends we met during our mission training session called while we were in 'meltdown' - they were visiting Virginia and were only a half hour drive away. They had been assigned to El Hogar in Honduras and invited us to visit and possibly locate there. The Director suggested that we visit Belize Bishop Romero as part of our trip to Honduras. We visited him and accomplished more in a few hours than we had in a year of working for the VI placement - truly a miracle!!"

We experienced many miracles during our short time in Belize. I was overwhelmed by the gifts of miracles and blessings that were showered upon us from the daily exuberant hugs and kisses from the children, to the daily school meals prepared with love, to playing basketball on the beach with 20 children and a highly competitive teacher. Perhaps the greatest miracle was witnessing and appreciating God's calling upon the lives of nine Duke undergraduates representing five different nationalities as we reflected, laughed, cried, and prayed together.



*Keith Daniel works during a spring break mission trip to Belize.*