



MISSIONS: Beyond the wheelchair

Miami woman travels to Dominican Republic

By CAROLYN NICHOLS
Newswriter

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Courtesy photo

Todd spoke to a gathering of elementary students at the school of First Baptist Church, Puerto Plata, Dominican Republic. She distributed sunglasses as an illustration of her teaching on “Seeing through the Eyes of Jesus.”

MIAMI (FBW)—“If I can do it, anybody can,” said Bernadette Todd in challenging her fellow Southern Baptists to venture into the international mission field. Wheelchair-bound Bernadette Todd, a member of Christ Fellowship Church in Miami, returned recently to her home from a 10-day speaking tour in Dominican Republic, and is already planning another mission trip to Bolivia in July.

Bernadette Todd was diagnosed at age five with infantile spinal muscular atrophy, a form of muscular dystrophy. Doctors in her native Kingston, Jamaica, told her parents she would never walk, and probably would die before she was eight. Todd began praying to be spared until she reached her parents' age – 30.

Her parents, Bernard and Yvonne Lilly, struggled to find medical treatment for their daughter, and once unknowingly entrusted her to the care of voodoo practitioners. The family moved to North Miami Beach in 1976 where Todd received surgery enabling her to breathe and speak easier, and enabling her to attend public school and community college in Miami. It was at Miami Dade Community College that she met her future husband Jeff Todd. When he proposed marriage, Todd outlined a daunting list of the things she would never be able to do, to which he replied "One day with you is worth more than a lifetime without you."

The couple has been married almost 19 years, and 39-year-old Bernadette Todd relies on her husband for even the most basic care. He bathes her, brushes her teeth and hair and feeds her meals. In an interview two years ago, Todd told *Florida Baptist Witness* she still had limited use of her right hand, but it is an ability she no longer can claim. However, her total physical disability has not slowed a full schedule of speaking engagements at churches, women's conferences, banquets and retreats.

In 2004, a pastor's wife in Imbert, Dominican Republic, was looking on-line for encouragement and inspiration and found the April 2004 *Witness* article about Todd. Soon after, Gladys Acosta de Sanchez and Bernadette Todd began an on-line friendship. About the same time, Bernadette and Jeff's friend, Bill Hagewood, pastor of Stanton Memorial Baptist Church and a former missionary to Dominican Republic, told Bernadette he had been praying that God would expand her speaking ministry beyond the U.S.



Courtesy graphic

"He told me 'Perhaps you should consider the Dominican Republic. In fact, if you go, I know a perfect interpreter for you. Her name is Gladys.'" Bernadette said. "Immediately I asked him if was talking about Gladys Acosta de Sanchez. I couldn't believe it was my friend from the Internet!"

The new friends and their husbands met face to face last September when Gladys and Samuel Sanchez visited Miami. The Sanchezes returned to their island home and told churches about Bernadette and her speaking ministry.

"Within no time I was invited to speak in several churches across the country," Todd said.

In a ten-day visit Feb. 24 – March 6, Bernadette, traveling with her husband and the Sanchezes, spoke 11 times in nine different cities. She gave her testimony at Baptist churches in Puerto Plata, Imbert, la Union, Montellano and Santo Domingo, and led a women's retreat and spoke at the Baptist Education Center in Puerto Plata. She spoke twice a day several times, and three times on one day. Todd said she adapted her message to each congregation, relying on the pastors to tell her of their needs. She said her testimony was "well received" by the different groups.

According to Todd, disabled people in the Dominican Republic, like those in Jamaica, are "mostly overlooked and banished from society" so her audiences were "astonished to hear from someone in my

condition,” she said. “People were simply amazed to hear and see for themselves what God has done in my life and how He is using me.”

In a society that makes little effort to be “handicap accessible,” Todd was lifted by her husband in and out of a rented minivan and up and down stairs into churches and schools. She found that poorly equipped public restrooms necessitated her traveling with her own toilet seat. “Where there is a will, there is a way,” she quipped.

Visiting the Caribbean for the first time since she left there as a child reminded Todd of the “breathtaking natural beauty of the tropics” and the taste of authentic Caribbean cooking. The Sanchezes escorted the Todds throughout the country, and, according to Todd, “worked tirelessly alongside us evangelizing, handing out tracts and distributing toys.” The pastor and his wife also served as tour guides, driving the Floridians to the beach and historic sights and even arranged a time that Jeff Todd could swim with dolphins, a dream come true according to his wife.

The trip to the Dominican Republic also reminded Todd of the heavy influence of voodoo and witchcraft in the area.

“All of this brought to the forefront the reality of my childhood years,” she said. “I found myself crying as I shared those particular parts of my testimony – and I never cry when I speak – because the things I was describing became real again.”

The “unknowns” of international travel and mission trips can be worrisome to even healthy travelers, and Todd admits fretting over the physical challenges and accessibility obstacles she might face there. Even her wheelchair is dependent on an electrical charge which might not be reliable.

But her faith enabled her to overcome her “what ifs.”

“We are never truly walking into the unknown if we walk with the Lord Whom we do know. In His hands is the best place to be. Only He could have orchestrated this entire trip for me,” she said. “He placed Jeff and me in the care of just the right couple who would go the extra mile to help us carry out our mission.”

Saying that the Dominican Republic trip “won’t be my last mission venture,” Todd plans to travel to Bolivia in July and is looking for others who will join her in the effort.

“The country may be foreign to us, but it and its people aren’t foreign to God,” she said. *Todd may be contacted through her website www.BernadetteTodd.com.*

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