

## **Dominican Republic: Entering the Field**

### **I. Initial Investigations and Contacts**

### **II. Planting the Church**

### **III. Building the Church**

### **IV. Into the Future**

Steven W. Wagenknecht  
Senior Church History Paper  
Professor John Brenner  
April 30, 1996

On December 11, 1994, a memorable event happened in a small rented chapel in Santiago, Dominican Republic. Eleven people publicly confessed their faith in the teachings of the Bible as they had been instructed in the Lutheran faith. This historic event was the first confirmation service of La Iglesia Luterana Cristiana de Santiago,<sup>1</sup> the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod's mission in the Dominican Republic. Missionary Ronald Baerbock chronicled the evening in his monthly report.

December 11 could well be termed the birth of our Dominican church. On that evening in Cienfuegos the following 11 were confirmed as the first communicant members of our church: Chavela, María, Niurka, Antonia, Dircia, Carmencita, Junior, Joel, Daniel, Emeliza and Divina (4 adults & 7 teenagers). Four of them were also baptized in the same service: Divina, Emeliza, Junior & Joel. On that same evening we also celebrated the Lord's Supper for the first time. IT WAS AN EXCITING EVENING! Afterwards we went to Chavela's and Dona Maria's house and had a little fiesta with refrescos and cookies.<sup>2</sup>

What great things the Lord accomplished through his Word in the young mission! This 'birth' of the Dominican church came quickly. Though the Dominican Republic had been in the minds of WELS Latin American missions for a number of years, not much more than some letter writing and a few basic studies were done before 'Lift High the Cross' funds became available in 1992.<sup>3</sup> Missionary Baerbock had been in the Dominican Republic for just a year and a half at the time of the first confirmations. Blessings are still coming quickly. At the writing of this paper, WELS is in its third year on the island and records 26 communicants and 34 baptized souls.<sup>4</sup> This paper will study how the Lord brought this mission to its present situation.

---

<sup>1</sup> The Lutheran Christian Church of Santiago.

<sup>2</sup> WELS-DR Monthly Report to Latin American Missions Executive Committee, December 1994.

<sup>3</sup> Pastor Baerbock made these comments in personal correspondence, early November, 1993.

<sup>4</sup> WELS-DR Monthly Report to LA Exec. Comm. March, March 1996.

## I. Initial Investigations and Contacts

The earliest contacts with people in the Dominican Republic were made by Pastor Ralph Martens of Puerto Rico in the mid 1980's. Pastor Martens found no reports or evidence of a Lutheran church active in mission work on the island. It seemed that there were few conservative Reformed churches there as well. A Pastor Martinez from Santo Domingo, the capitol of the Dominican Republic, contacted Pastor Martens. Pastor Martinez was associated with a Reformed body of about twenty-one churches and voiced concern about doctrinal decline in his church, especially concerning inspiration. Pastor Martens arranged for a two day visit to Santo Domingo accompanied by Pastor Raymond Wiechmann of Holiday, Florida. WELS did not enter the country at that time and Pastor Martinez later moved out of the country. But a report of the visit was given to the WELS Board for World Missions, helping to confirm that no confessional Lutheran church was actively feeding souls hungering for the gospel in the Dominican Republic.<sup>5</sup>

On page 80 of WELS Report to the Twelve Districts, 1992, brief mention is made of the country under the new areas being monitored by the Executive Committee for Latin American Missions. From August 3-10, 1992, Missionary Timothy Satorius of Puerto Rico and layman Eligio Rodriguez of Humacao, Puerto Rico, made an investigative trip to the Dominican Republic as a joint venture between the WELS and the Confessional Evangelical Lutheran Church<sup>6</sup> of Puerto Rico. It is significant to note that from the start, the Puerto Rican church took an active role in this mission effort. The goal of their trip as stated in the report was:

To explore the possibility of WELS mission outreach to and/or Puerto Rican national church contact with prospective Lutherans in the Dominican Republic in the interest of making disciples from all nations both on the part of WELS and IELC of Puerto Rico.<sup>7</sup>

---

<sup>5</sup> Pastor Martens shared this information with the writer in a phone conversation on April 27, 1996.

<sup>6</sup> La Iglesia Evangelica Luterana Confesional - IELC.

<sup>7</sup> Satorius, Tim. "Initial Investigation of the Dominican Republic." September 27, 1992, p. 3.

Three points stand out in the report that placed the Dominican Republic high on the priority list of the WELS Committee for Mission Expansion. First, there were no Lutheran churches active in the country. Roman Catholicism is the dominant state church, with about 90% of the population at least nominally Catholic. Evangelicals or Protestants were present, numbering about 2%. They showed signs of growth. Yet there were many areas where the gospel was being undercut by work righteousness or legalism, if not being totally left out. Not to mention that the Mormon and Jehovah's Witness cults were very active and visible in their traditional methods. Any WELS or IELC work would be outreach-church planting.

The people were also very friendly and open as the report says, "The people were always very receptive to us, and from all conversation and interviews are always receptive to the gospel."<sup>8</sup> One appointment with five people to show a portion of "Communicating Christ" had twenty-five people enter to hear what they had to say! Such a turn out for classes eventually could be considered characteristic of WELS mission work in the Dominican Republic.

Thirdly, the report indicates that there is not government opposition to church work. No invitation from already existing church bodies is needed to enter. The government is 100% pro-freedom of religion so religious visas are easy to obtain. The report recommended another exploratory trip in the near future as the next step toward planting a confessional Lutheran church there

While the WELS CME and Latin American Committee were acting upon the report and approving its recommendations, the Puerto Rican church was enthusiastically taking steps as well. This can be seen in excerpts from a letter by Pastor Satorius to Prof. David Valleskey (chairman of the CME) dated November 10, 1992.

---

<sup>8</sup> Satorius, "Report on Initial Investigation..." p. 8.

The PR national church in its biannual assembly (October) has budgeted \$1000 for each of the next two years to help in exploratory work in the Dominican Republic. At that meeting and in the past, they have expressed interest in sending lay people on a regular basis to the DR for the purpose of sharing the gospel and cultivating "prospects," if there are willing and able volunteers.<sup>9</sup>

Plans for exploring the Dominican Republic further were moving along well at the close of 1992. Blessings from the Lord soon made possible not only exploring, but entering the country! Sometimes God shows his people that the future is in his hands by frustrating human planning. This time God showed that human planning had not gone far enough when \$200,000 became available for three years of exploratory work in the Dominican Republic. The spirit of the Board for World Missions, recognizing God's grace, reflects in the 1993 Book of Reports and Memorials, page 154.

Somewhere in the fall of 1992 we realized that our most optimistic scenario was way behind what God's plans showed us and that we were running to catch up to his timeline. Back in 1990 we planned long-range to open six new world fields, God-willing, including the first mission in the USSR by the year 2000. To accomplish that, we brainstormed, it would take an updated list of ten countries which were identified, researched, and prioritized for possible initial expansion by 1995 pending funding. So much for our puny planning! God's 1992 and 1993 plans for us already included Russia, Bulgaria, Mozambique refugee camps, and preparing or calling missionaries for arrival in South Zambia, Thailand, Cameroon and the Dominican Republic. Missionaries are also assisting sister churches in Nigeria and Germany. This is all new work for our synod, the details of which are in the subsequent executive committee reports.

Pastor Satorius and layman Pedro Lugo of Guayama, Puerto Rico, contacted people from the first trip, made additional contacts and gathered more information in a December 1992 trip.<sup>10</sup> A third and final exploratory trip was taken by Pastor Satorius and Pastor Ronald Baerbock of Guayama from April 19-23. Satorius made minor additions to his Initial Investigation report and Baerbock reported to the CME and Latin American Committee about the cost of living and living conditions. The information had been gathered. It was time to take the next step and jump into the mission field with manpower.

---

<sup>9</sup> Letter is part of WELS CME minutes, found in the Synod archives room at WLS.

<sup>10</sup> *El Mensajero Luterano*, Vol. XIII, No. 5, Sept. -Oct., 1993, p. 6.

## II. Planting the Church

Shortly after the third visit, Pastor Baerbock received the call to serve as the lone pastor for the on sight exploratory work in Santiago, Dominican Republic. Santiago was chosen because there were more contacts and interest there than in Santo Domingo. He accepted and plans were made for him and his family to move in August of that year.<sup>11</sup> Since sending one missionary family alone to a new field without support is not the ideal, the church in Puerto Rico planned to send lay assistants to support the Baerbocks as outlined in *El Mensejero Luterano*:

The plan for work in the Dominican Republic includes ... the participation of two lay workers from Puerto Rico in the next two years. God willing, one worker and his family will live in the Dominican Republic for a period of one year, sharing the work according to his training and talents, supporting the new missionary and his family with companionship, and most importantly sharing the gospel with our Dominican brothers.<sup>12</sup>

The plan to send lay help did not materialize since the lay workers, although willing to go, were unable to get out of commitments in Puerto Rico. The Baerbock's would have to wait almost fifteen months before a long term assistant would arrive.

On August 20, 1993, Missionary Ronald Baerbock moved to Santiago, Dominican Republic with his wife Karen and two youngest children Matthew and Joshua. The Baerbocks planned on living with what fit in their suitcases until the unknown date when the permanent residency papers would come from the government, allowing the movers to bring their possessions. Soon, they rented a house, purchased basic furnishings and a car, the boys started school, and Bible classes began. To get a feel for the 'pioneer' conditions, perhaps the first couple months is best summed up by Pastor Baerbock's first monthly report to the Latin American Executive Committee, written in longhand because the computer and typewriter were in the move:

---

<sup>11</sup> Seminary graduate Tom Zimdars was assigned to the congregation in Guayama.

<sup>12</sup> Translated from *El Mensajero Luterano*, Vol. XIII, No. 5, Sept. - Oct., 1993, p. 7.

The electricity is very weak. Only 80 volts are coming into our house. Each appliance needs its own "elevador" to enhance the voltage. The fridge has one (it won't run without it.) We are awaiting one for the wash machine also. (The pile of dirty clothes is getting high.) Later the TV and computer will need a special unit. The electricity goes out at least once a day - sometimes 3 or 4 times. Wednesday it was out for 7 hours. There is no hot water. Most people use the water just as it comes from the tap. Our showers are "real refreshing."

The people have been kind and helpful. A neighbor is sharing his telephone with us until we get our own. He also helped us find some of our furniture. We found that some of his helpfulness also has its price. Often the people expect pay for their helpfulness.

Last Friday I was asked to have a 10 minute devotion before a boxing event in a vacant lot. 150 people were there to see the 10 events. It was called because of darkness and will be continued this Friday. We as a family have visited some of the families here, and will visit more as time allows. We find it very easy to get the people talking about the Word of God. One gets the feeling that they have a hunger which is not being fed. Soon I hope to get some Bible studies started although it will be a bit difficult since almost all of my materials are in the move and stored in Puerto Rico. I do have some things to begin with.<sup>13</sup>

After one and a half weeks in Santiago, the report mentions the first devotion. Even with all the hassles of waiting for the move, learning the city, and making the house a home, the reader should note that proclaiming the gospel never took a back seat. Baerbock himself might describe his mission methodology priority number one as, "Teach God's Word to as many people as possible whenever the opportunity presents itself. Whenever possible, set up a weekly Bible Information Class as a step toward confirmation of the first members." It was not a rare occasion for a class to start on what had been 'the pastor's one night off per week.'

By October, classes were being held in three areas of city.<sup>14</sup> In Ciruelitos, Gertrudi (Doris) Marmol, a relative of Eligio Rodriguez, was one of the earliest Santiago contacts and some of the first classes were held in the street outside her house. Through Doris during the exploratory visits, the missionaries had met Manuel and Carmen Toribio from Hoya del Caimito. The group in this area was anxious to get going to set up classes for Bible study. Manuel was a former boxing champion whose youth team soon considered Baerbock its newest fan. Baerbock used his

---

<sup>13</sup> WELS-DR Monthly Report to the LA Exec. Comm., September, 1993.

<sup>14</sup> Ciruelitos, Hoya del Caimito, and Villa Olimpica were mentioned in the video, "Dominican Republic Exploratory - First Report." Also see Map of Santiago, Appendix B.

friendship with the boxers as an opportunity for gospel outreach like the devotion with 150 people at the boxing event. The people of Hoya del Caimito showed much interest in Bible classes and soon became the focal point of the mission work. The church even helped the boxing group build an outdoor boxing ring which became an assembly location for worship and Bible study.

In November, Pastor Duane Tomhave<sup>15</sup> and Professor Larry Retberg<sup>16</sup> visited the field. When word got out that representatives of the parent church were coming, the group in Hoya del Caimito asked Missionary Baerbock to have the first service while the visitors were there. He happily agreed to their unexpected request though it meant a busy two days of arrangements and staying up until the early hours of the morning preparing the service. The first Lutheran worship service in the Dominican Republic occurred on November 7, 1993, with God's abundant blessings apparent in the large number, 45 attendees at the service. In the next monthly report, excitement and thanksgiving to God are obvious.

The big news is that we have started weekly worship services. Yes, they are being held outside in a boxing ring. A table is placed in the boxing ring which serves as the altar. The people sit outside the ring on chairs that we rent for the day. I did not think we would begin worship services until at least after Christmas, but the people asked for it. 45 people attended the first service. Putting together the program for the service is a cut and paste procedure since our things still have not arrived. We are using songs which we have been singing during the weekly Bible classes. We thank the Lord for this added opportunity to proclaim the Word.

Our first worship service happened to coincide with the visit of Larry Retberg and Duane Tomhave. It really added to the video which Duane made of our work here. The Monday evening following the first service some 60 people attended the Bible class - also good for the video.... We have also had the name of our church (Iglesia Luterana Cristiana) painted on the side of the boxing ring - the side that faces the main highway. To give us even more exposure we have sponsored some of the boxing events which involves a car with loudspeakers driving around the city with this message: "La Iglesia Luterana Cristiana de Santiago presents...."17

Worship in the boxing ring provided an excellent opportunity for mission publicity across synod when a picture of the service made the cover of the *Northwestern Lutheran*, February,

<sup>15</sup> Administrator for WELS Division of World Missions.

<sup>16</sup> Chairman of WELS Latin American Missions committee.

<sup>17</sup> WELS-DR Monthly Report to the LA Exec. Comm., December 2, 1993.



1994. Also, a video, called "Dominican Republic - A First Report," shared the mission work with the entire synod. The value of such publicity should not be underestimated, because it makes those in the states aware of what their fellow Christians are doing on their behalf. And when the missionary gets an encouraging letter saying, "I saw you in the video," it can ease the isolation that the foreign worker experiences.

Adaptability has been a key characteristic of the mission. For instance, a Sunday morning outdoor worship in the shade free boxing ring did not make for a comfortable worship atmosphere, attendance declined. Within a month, the service was moved to Monday evening. Adaptability was also necessary for starting new classes whenever possible. One such class was mentioned in the December 1 report. Started in a fourth area of town, Cienfuegos, it was the result of a hospital visit to a young man who had been shot. When the family heard that a pastor had visited the man, they wanted to meet him. The young man's mother was Doña María Molina, and his sister was Gabriela (Chavela) Molina. Bible information classes were started in their home and included some neighbors. This class led to the first confirmations one year later. In December, the group in Cienfuegos started attending services in Hoya del Caimito. Baerbock writes,

One neat thing is that people from our other area bible studies have also been coming to the Monday evening services. A group from Cienfuegos has been coming weekly. I am paying for the transportation of the people from Cienfuegos since they do not have the resources to rent the mini bus. The round trip cost is about \$6.<sup>18</sup>

Starting in January, Baerbock began making once a month trips to the capit<sup>a</sup>l for class with Rosita, whose has relatives in the church in Antigua. The opportunity to open a preaching station in Santo Domingo (two and a half hours by bus from Santiago) underscored the need for calling a second missionary to the field.

---

<sup>18</sup> WELS-DR Monthly Report to the LA Executive Committee, January 4, 1994.

Unfortunately, the hot sun was not the only reason for attendance decline in Hoya del Caimito. Perhaps there were pressures from the Catholic church. Baerbock writes on February 2:

One disappointment has been with the adults (men) in Hoya del Caimito. I don't see much of them anymore in the classes. I am not sure what happened. Perhaps their motive for being there was financial in the beginning. I hope that was not the case. Perhaps they are seeing that there is a difference between the Lutheran Church and the Catholic Church and are not willing to give up their saints and virgin worship.<sup>19</sup>

The mention of possible financial motives in Hoya del Caimito brings up charity in the mission. In the poor economy, there were many requests for financial assistance. While no minister of the gospel would ever want to replace the gospel with money, a delicate balance has to be weighed between social gospel on the one hand and cold-hearted lack of Christian love on the other. The monthly reports contain occasional references to financial aid from the missionaries given in Christian love and never overshadowing the gospel; helping with a house payment, providing food or medicine, medical aid to a woman awaiting surgery and an eight year old boy who lost an eye in a car accident, assistance finding a job, a new bed for a family of seven who had been sharing two mattresses, or an occasional peso given on the street corner.<sup>20</sup>

Even amid setbacks, there were always blessings from our gracious God to be thankful for. While reporting the following information, Baerbock wrote, "ALL OF OUR WORK HERE IS GOING WHERE THE LORD SEEMS TO BE LEADING US. We are still on target for our first confirmations [the class in Hoya del Caimito] towards the end of May."<sup>21</sup> The director of the English school where Matthew and Joshua attended invited Baerbock to teach a weekly religion class however he wanted. Another class was started in Cienfuegos and one in Via Olímpica. There was class with a deaf girl in Trinitaria. Contact was made with Eli Aguilera on a bus trip to

---

<sup>19</sup> WELS-DR Monthly Report to LA Exec. Comm. February 2, 1994.

<sup>20</sup> Such charity never came out of budgetary funding. It was provided either through special gifts or the WELS Committee on relief.

<sup>21</sup> WELS-DR Monthly Report to LA Exec. Comm. March 1, 1994.

the capitol. Bible information class was started in their home. (This class would lead to the second group of confirmations on Ash Wednesday of 1995.) In Gurabo, Pastor met Mercedes Peñalo Ortiz through her son Miguel who regularly came by to shine his shoes. February 1994 worship attendance had an average of 25, Sunday school 55, and bible classes 21.

Finally, six months and six days after arrival, the Baerbock's possessions arrived. Though the government is open to missionaries, it's paperwork is slow. Baerbock observed:

Dealing with the government takes a long time. One department does not communicate with another, neither does one know what the other is doing or requires. Because of the fear of corruption, they have built in a lot of safeguards which become a nightmare for the ordinary person trying to work with the government. Since Catholicism is the official religion one wonders how many more obstacles we have to jump which would not be there if we were Catholic. I do know that with certain things the Catholics pay one price and we a higher price when dealing with the government... Bribes are not as evident here as in Mexico. It is a policy of 'you scratch my back and I will scratch yours.' Maybe at times it almost seems like a bribe.<sup>22</sup>

On March 14, the 'boxing ring' services could finally move indoors. The first floor of Manuel Toribio's house was rented and dedicated during a visit from Pastor Tim and Lorna Satorius. Church attendance was up to forty per Sunday, with about twenty coming from Cienfuegos, and the family coming from Villa Olímpica. Later that month, Manuel and Carmen Toribio moved to New York. Pastor Baerbock planned to offset the loss of their influence in Hoya del Caimito by visiting the families more in their homes.

In April of 1994, Rosana Sanchez enrolled in bible class in Gurabo through William de Jesús Cruz Santos. William lived across the street from Baerbocks and often times rode along if Pastor headed to a class across town. He was quite helpful, and one Dominican whose did not expect pay for his help.<sup>23</sup> New classes began at every opportunity. Some classes did not continue as families moved out of town. God's Word was being presented. It would not return empty.

---

<sup>22</sup> Letter by Ron Baerbock from early November, 1993.

<sup>23</sup> Author's personal observation.

Missionaries share God's love in the Dominican Republic through baptisms in addition to teaching classes. In the lower income levels, the people can not afford baptisms because of the requirements (costly paperwork and government birth certificates) for Roman Catholic baptisms.<sup>24</sup> The first baptisms in the mission came in May. Rosio, Jen Luis and Jon Rodriguez, Chavela's children, were baptized in what Chavela remembered as a loud service. They were crying loudly throughout the baptism because she told them they were being baptized so they could go to heaven. The children thought that meant going to heaven during the baptism! After the service, they were happy to find out that they did not have to die to know for sure that Jesus loves them!

May also saw the assignment of a Middler from Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary to serve as vicar in the Dominican Republic. Vicar Steven Wagenknecht would go to Monterrey, Mexico, to learn Spanish for five months before becoming the mission assistant. He would fill the position that originally had been planned for a lay couple from Puerto Rico. Karen Baerbock would have to patiently wait another full year for the regular companionship of a pastor's wife to talk to.

Along with the joyous first baptism, there were anticipated firsts that did not happen. Confirmations of the first group in Hoya del Caimito hoped for at the end of May did not happen. According to the Lord's timetable, it was not time.

In June of 1994, the Baerbock family was scheduled for furlough. With only one missionary, that could have caused a discontinuation of the work. But Professor Lawrence Retberg and his two sons agreed to give up their summer to fill the vacancy. While the Retbergs faithfully served during the summer, two deaths across town from each other affected the groups in Hoya del Caimito and Cienfuegos in drastically different ways. A young woman from Hoya del Caimito accidentally drowned while swimming. There might have been the feeling that her death

---

<sup>24</sup> 'A Month in the Dominican Republic,' in Kingdom Workers Update, April, 1996, Volume 9, Issue 2, p. 3.

was somehow superstitiously linked to the presence of the Lutheran church. Whether it was superstition, or just realizing that the Lutheran church was different from the Roman Catholic church, there was a different attitude in Hoya del Caimito after that summer.

On July 25, tragedy struck the group in Cienfuegos. Dona Maria's son was accidentally shot and died. For Dona Maria and Chavela, the message of the gospel presented by Pastor Retberg was a great comfort and a joyful contrast to the deep, unrelenting, uncertain grief of a Catholic funeral. Pastor Retberg describes the events:

The people are almost completely neglected by the Roman Catholic Church. One example is of a young man killed by gunshot in late July. The mother and sister of the 27-year-old regularly attend our classes and services. We visited the family and attended the funeral. They show the bodies in the homes here, with the funeral the same or the next day. This was the first funeral I attended without the benefit of clergy! They threw the casket into the ground, and while the grounds keepers filled the grave with dirt, they complained to the mourners how little they were being paid. When one offered them money, they became rude offering a shovel to one of the female mourners. We felt this funeral was a God-given opportunity and visited the house and neighborhood every day for nine days to hold devotions and sing Christian songs.<sup>25</sup>

For two weeks in August, Eligio Rodriguez with his wife and daughter continued the classes and services between the departure of Retberg and Baerbock's return. Baerbock on September 6. That month, there were five more baptisms. Five of Mercedes seven children were baptized, including Miguel, who first got to know Pastor Baerbock by shining his shoes. Baerbock mentions the baptisms and sums up the changes during the summer in his September report.

The Lord has truly blessed us this summer of 1994. The highlight was the five children of Dona Mercedes that were baptized in our home on Friday, Sept 16... We will try to include them in our plans in Gurabo...

We have good attendance at our worship services but most of them come from Cienfuegos. We therefore plan in the next month to close the chapel we have at the end of October and open something up in Cienfuegos...

Note that the family in Via Olympica has moved from the area literally to different parts of the world. It should also be noted that Don Ramon passed away. He lived in Via Olympica and was at all of our Bible classes. We trust he is with his Savior according to the statements of faith that came from his lips.

---

<sup>25</sup> Retberg, Lawrence, 'World Missions: A Glamorous Job??' In WELS Kingdom Workers Update, December 1994, Volume 7, Issue 4.

We thank the Lord for being with us during the two month furlough during which we had the opportunity of speaking with more than 3000 people about the work in the Dominican Republic.<sup>26</sup>

The end of October, the chapel in Hoya del Caimito was closed. It was not a complete pull out shaking the dust from the feet. The Sunday school class continued at the boxing ring and anyone interested in continuing to worship was invited to come to the Baerbock house where Saturday evening services were started on November 12. On November 20, a small house converted to chapel in Cienfuegos was dedicated before an overflow crowd. The large crowds caused some disorder since many of the attendees were children who had trouble sitting through an active Sunday school, let alone a more subdued service. With the numerous Sunday school children in Cienfuegos and in Ciruelitos it was very hard for a single missionary to maintain order while trying to teach.<sup>27</sup> The Ciruelitos evening class moved from the street onto a small porch to maintain order. The problem of order and discipline did begin to work itself out with the arrival of a vicar. Pastor Baerbock and Vicar Wagenknecht were able to take turns teaching or preaching, with the one not teaching maintaining discipline. One was the teacher and the other was the 'bouncer.'

The vicar arrived on December 9. His first worship in Cienfuegos happened to be the confirmation service described in the introduction to this paper. It is doubtful whether any WELS foreign mission worker has ever experienced such a milestone so soon after arrival. December 11, 1994 marked the birth of a Lutheran congregation on the island of Santo Domingo. The Lord's Supper was celebrated. There were now members of the Lutheran church in Santiago.

---

<sup>26</sup> WELS-DR Monthly Report to the LA Exec. Comm. September, 1994.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.* November 1994

### III. Building a 'Church'

Even after the first confirmations, a large part of the mission work continued to be Sunday school or Bible history classes with children. Even though they often came to the class not knowing how to behave, it was still a tremendous opportunity to present God's love in Jesus Christ to children who had never heard it before. Large numbers of children came to sing, color and hear a Bible story. No other church in the area offered anything remotely similar to a Sunday school class open to anyone in the neighborhood. January of 1995 saw both the continuation of services and children's classes, and the start <sup>of</sup> many new instruction classes. The December report lists the classes which were planned to start in January.

SUNDAY: 10:00 a.m. - Youth Bible Class (10 kids) [at the boxing ring in Hoya del Caimito]  
 2:00 p.m. - Bible History with mostly children - Gurabo other side of river in a shack.  
 25 kids and adults. [Mercedes' house]  
 6:00 p.m. - Sunday School - Cienfuegos (80 kids)  
 7:30 p.m. - Worship Service (70 people)  
 MONDAY: 8:00 a.m. - Maria Monegro School - Bible Class with 25 high school kids  
 6:00 p.m. - Catechism class in Gurabo (to begin in January)  
 TUESDAY: 6:30 p.m. - Children's Bible History - street [porch] of Ciruelitos (30 kids)  
 8:00 p.m. - Adult Bible Class (2 people)  
 WEDNESDAY: 7:00 p.m. - Los Llanos de Gurabo Bible Class - [Aguilera] family of 6  
 THURSDAY: 6:00 p.m. - Catechism Class - Cienfuegos (40) just started  
 7:30 p.m. - Choir - Cienfuegos (40) just started  
 FRIDAY: 7:30 p.m. - Bible Class in Gurabo (4 adults)  
 SATURDAY: 7:30 - Worship service in our house (32 people average)<sup>28</sup>

The schedule provides an idea of the missionary's week. The Gurabo Monday night catechism class did not continue. And the Cienfuegos Thursday catechism class was divided into a morning, afternoon and evening class to try to regulate the number of children per class. The numbers for the last week in January include fifteen classes (Sunday schools, Bible studies, etc.) with a combined attendance of 240.<sup>29</sup> The attendance for two services was 70. Baerbock writes:

<sup>28</sup> WELS-DR Monthly Report to LA Exec. Comm. December 3, 1994.

<sup>29</sup> Children who came to Sunday school and Bible class would be counted once for each class.

It is evident we are working with a lot of people. You know and we know that some of these will not continue and are there for curiosity, but others will grow in spiritual strength and be leaders in the future. Only the Lord knows what the next ten years will bring.<sup>30</sup>

Friendship evangelism was the primary way of reaching lost souls with the gospel. An introduction to relatives of Dona Mercedes led to the January 15 baptism of her niece, Nanci Jimenez. Along with the evangelism in the young church, came the need for nurturing the confirmed. As Bible information classes were finished, Bible study was offered starting with John's Gospel. The teenagers in Cienfuegos also requested a choir and that was arranged. With untrained singers and untrained directors, choir practices were used to sing songs from the photocopied song booklets.

Four more confirmations occurred on Ash Wednesday (March 1, 1995.) Eli Aguilera and her three teenage children, Junior, Sofia and Diana, completed the Bible information class, confessed agreement with what they had learned and expressed a desire to become communicant members of the church. The special Ash Wednesday confirmation service was held at the Baerbock house in Gurabo. Members from Cienfuegos came by bus to cultivate fellowship between the groups.<sup>31</sup> Continued fellowship through joint services were arranged when possible.

From time to time at the classes, events would take place to really underscore the importance of WELS presence in Santiago. In the video "Dominican Republic - First Report," Pastor Baerbock told about an early Sunday school class when some of the children asked, "Who is Jesus?" A similar event happened on Easter Sunday, 1995, when some visitors came to the worship service. They knew that Holy Week was when everyone went to the beach, but they did not know that Easter was the celebration of Jesus' resurrection from the dead. We respond, "Ask the Lord of the harvest, therefore, to send out workers into his harvest field." Matthew 9:38.

---

<sup>30</sup> WELS-DR Monthly Report to LA Exec. Comm., January, 1995.



By God's grace, more workers were sent to the Dominican Republic to work the harvest. On May 15, a student from Wisconsin Lutheran College, Lutea Meyer, arrived as a volunteer to assist with Bible history classes and evangelism. The next day, Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary Senior Larry Schlomer received the call to Santiago. He and his wife Katie would arrive in August of that year, about a week before Vicar Wagenknecht returned to seminary and Lutea Meyer finished her three months of volunteer work.

In July, the Synod convention at Saginaw, Michigan, took another step towards doing more work in the Lord's harvest field. The 1995 WELS Book of Reports and Memorials included the resolution that the Dominican Republic advance past exploratory status and move into the budgeted program of Synod. Convention adopted the resolution.<sup>32</sup> The BoRaM reads:

Five areas have moved beyond the initial exploration stage and have been incorporated into the program and budget of the responsible executive committee of the board. Those five fields are Novosibirsk, Russia; Sofia, Bulgaria; Chiang Mai, Thailand; Santiago, Dominican Republic; and Guntur, India. We praise the Lord for his goodness in giving us so many opportunities to tell the good news about Jesus to so many people in so many places. Trusting the promise of God that his Word will continue to add souls to his church through the gospel we are proclaiming in a growing number of places around the world.<sup>33</sup>

July 1995 was also a month of many more blessings in the field. There were thirteen baptisms. Five young ladies completed the Thursday classes in Cienfuegos and four joined the church on July 23. The fifth one had been out of town that Sunday. She joined August 6.<sup>34</sup>

Persistent mission work paid off with a woman named Morena, Chavela's neighbor. Morena had come to Bible class in the early stages of work in Cienfuegos. But her husband had a bad experience with the Reformed church and forbid her to go to anything with 'those evangelicals.' Continued friendly contact by pastor and friendship evangelism by the members in

---

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.* March, 1995.

<sup>32</sup> WELS Synod Convention Proceedings, 1995, p. 88.

<sup>33</sup> WELS Book of Reports and Memorials, 1995, p. 50

<sup>34</sup> WELS-DR Monthly Report to LA Exec. Comm. July and August, 1995.

Cienfuegos got her back in the class. She was confirmed with two neighbors in January of this year.

A clerk at the business where all the class materials were printed, Juana Cabrera, expressed interest in having a class at her home in Pueblo Nuevo. Baerbock began the class and Pastor Schlomer continued it through her confirmation on February 3, 1996. She soon was encouraging five groups of friends to begin class as well, including some relatives in Santo Domingo.<sup>35</sup>

Baerbock shared another mission story in the September report to the Latin American Executive Committee.

Don Benito was confirmed this month in Cienfuegos. He doesn't read so he was ALWAYS sitting outside of Chavela's house listening to the classes and the songs. He had also been attending all the worship services. I finally decided it was time to ask him if he wished to take the Lord's Supper with us. His big smile was unforgettable. We reviewed what he had heard and he was confirmed. He is around 60 years old.<sup>36</sup>

The next report again shares some blessings and some disappointments. There were two baptisms in November, including Jacob Larry Schlomer, a healthy baby born to Pastor Larry and Katie Schlomer! The mission also took a step on the way to establishing an indigenous church body. Members in Cienfuegos agreed to begin teaching the children's Bible history class on Monday afternoons! By God's grace, these blessings offset the following disappointment.

With the joys there are also the disappointments. It seemed that some of the people in Buenas Aires in the Capitol of Santo Domingo were ready for confirmation. They had been asking about when they could take the Lord's Supper. When the time came, there was definitely a different attitude. It was as though someone else had been talking to them. So for the time being, there will be no confirmations with a third preaching station in the capitol.<sup>37</sup>

December saw Pastor Baerbock go to Cuba with Pastor Satorius of Puerto Rico to help strengthen the Lutheran group there. The Baerbock family was allowed to spend a rare Christmas in Wisconsin with family. The Schlomer's kept things going that month in much the same way

---

<sup>35</sup> WELS-DR Monthly Report to LA Exec. Comm. February and March, 1996.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.* September, 1995.

that the Baerbock family had done for a year and a half alone. Schlomer shares some gospel presentations in the December report.

Two deaths in Cienfuegos gave us additional opportunities to witness with the gospel. The aged father of Carmen, a member, passed away after a long illness and much suffering. We were called in to share with him the precious Word of God in his last weeks of life. He listened intently and responded "I believe" shortly before his death. It was also beneficial to the relatives who were always at the bedside during the devotions. A tragedy was the sudden death of Mari, wife of Dioni and sister-in-law of Chavela. It seemed to have been a brain hemorrhage or something of the sort. She was 24, but died suddenly after suffering severe headaches. Again opportunity was given to bring the Word of God to the family. It was comforting to see the reaction of the immediate family like Chavela. They have certainly grown spiritually in the two years we have been with them. Mari had been involved in some of our classes. Only the Lord knows what those words of Lord which we studied had worked in her heart.<sup>38</sup>

A number of January 1996 confirmations have already been mentioned. There is one more worthy of note. William, friend and neighbor of the Baerbock's confessed his faith in a confirmation service and joined the church. William had gone to many of the classes in areas across town. He must have sat through all 26 lessons at least three times. But he was not ready to make the commitment since he had jumped too soon in joining churches in his younger years. He took his time to make sure that our church was the right one.<sup>39</sup> In William, the Lord may have blessed La Iglesia Luterana de Santiago with a future leader, elder or possibly even a Bible institute student.

---

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.* November, 1995.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.* December, 1995.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.* January, 1996.

#### IV. Into the Future

Only the Lord knows where he will take La Iglesia Luterana de Santiago. The March 1996 report lists two preaching stations: Cienfuegos and Gurabo. Weekly worship attendance averages 62. There are classes or possible classes in eleven areas: Gurabo, Cienfuegos, Ciruelitos, Pueblo Nuevo, El Egido, Tamboril, Hoya del Caimito, Via Olympica, Las Americas and two areas of Santo Domingo. Combined attendance in these Sunday school classes, instruction classes and Bible studies average 300 per week. There have been 48 children's baptisms, seventeen children confirmed, one adult baptism, and nine adult confirmations. God is good! His Word is powerful!<sup>40</sup>

On April 13, 1996, the missionaries arranged the first of what God-willing will become at least an annual meeting with all members to review history and to brainstorm plans for future. Such meetings help make the American's church "our church" and take steps toward a national church. As of yet, the first church council and constitution have not been established. It has not been possible yet since many of the confirmed members are teenagers and there are only two confirmed men. The council, church incorporation and government registration are goals that will be accomplished according to the Lord's will. We ask the Lord to do great things through our brothers and sisters in the faith in the Dominican Republic!

Our missionaries have gone where the Lord has led them. The Lord opens doors and his people present the gospel, always willing to schedule another class or adapt to a changing situation. They keep busy teaching children and adults the gospel. The gospel achievements are miraculous blessings of God that could not have been predicted when one missionary family arrived in Santiago, Dominican Republic on August 24, 1993. We thank the Lord for our missionaries' faithful service and ask him to keep his watchful hand over them.

---

<sup>40</sup> Latest numbers available were found in WELS-DR Monthly Report to the LA Exec. Comm. March 1996.

## Bibliography and Sources

----- 'A Month in the Dominican Republic.' Kingdom Workers Update, Volume 9, Issue 2, April, 1996.

----- WELS Book of Reports and Memorials, 1993 and 1995.

----- WELS Report to the Twelve Districts, 1992 and 1994.

----- WELS Synod Convention Proceedings, 1995.

Baerbock, Ronald. correspondence and monthly reports to WELS Executive Committee for Latin American Missions, August, 1993 - March 1996.

Baerbock, Ronald. "Un campo listo para la cosecha en la República Dominicana." *El Mensajero Luterano*, (Official Publication of the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod) Vol. XV, No. 3, Mayo - Junio, 1995, p. 8-9.

Martens, Ralph. phone interview on April 27, 1996.

Retberg, Lawrence. 'World Missions: A Glamorous Job??' In WELS Kingdom Workers Update, Volume 7, Issue 4, December 1994.

Retberg, Lawrence. "Worship in a Boxing Ring." in *Northwestern Lutheran*, February, 1994, p. 6f.

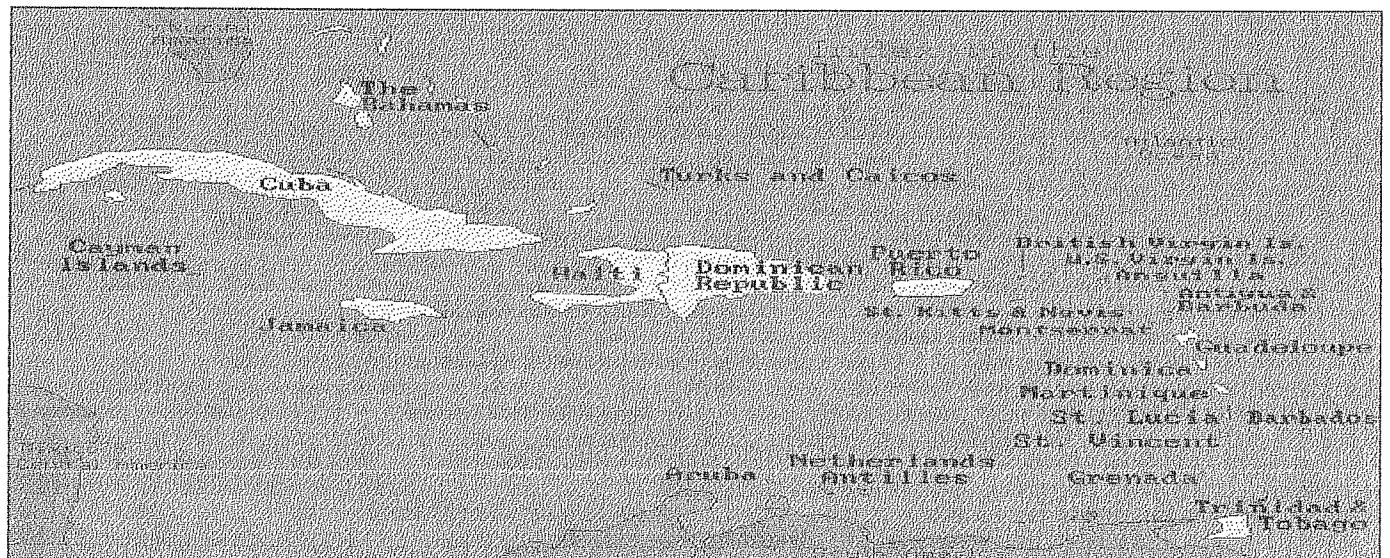
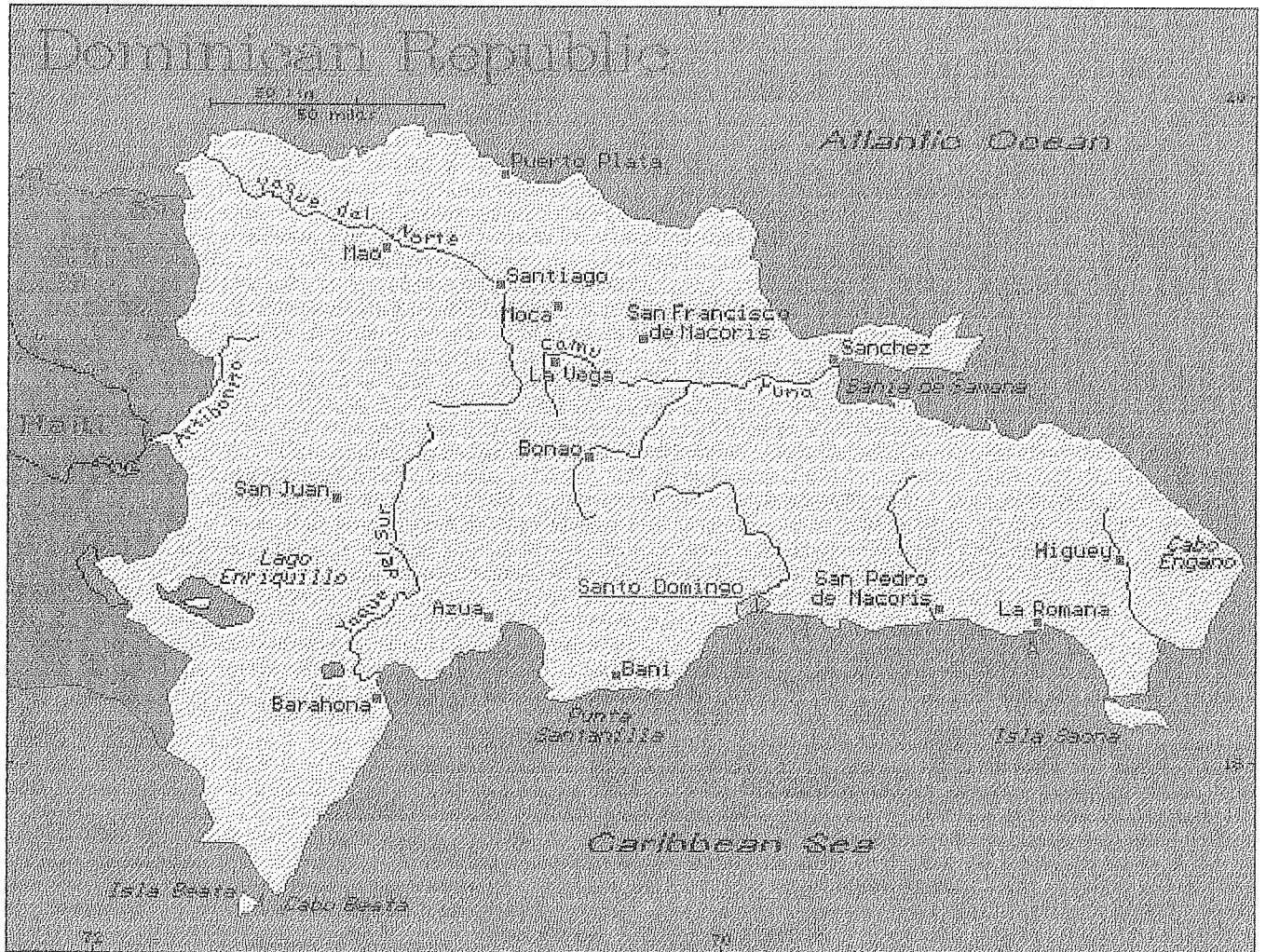
Satorius, Tim. "Alzad la Cruz." *El Mensajero Luterano*, Official Publication of the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod, Vol. XIII, No. 5, Septiebre - Octubre, 1993, p. 6-7.

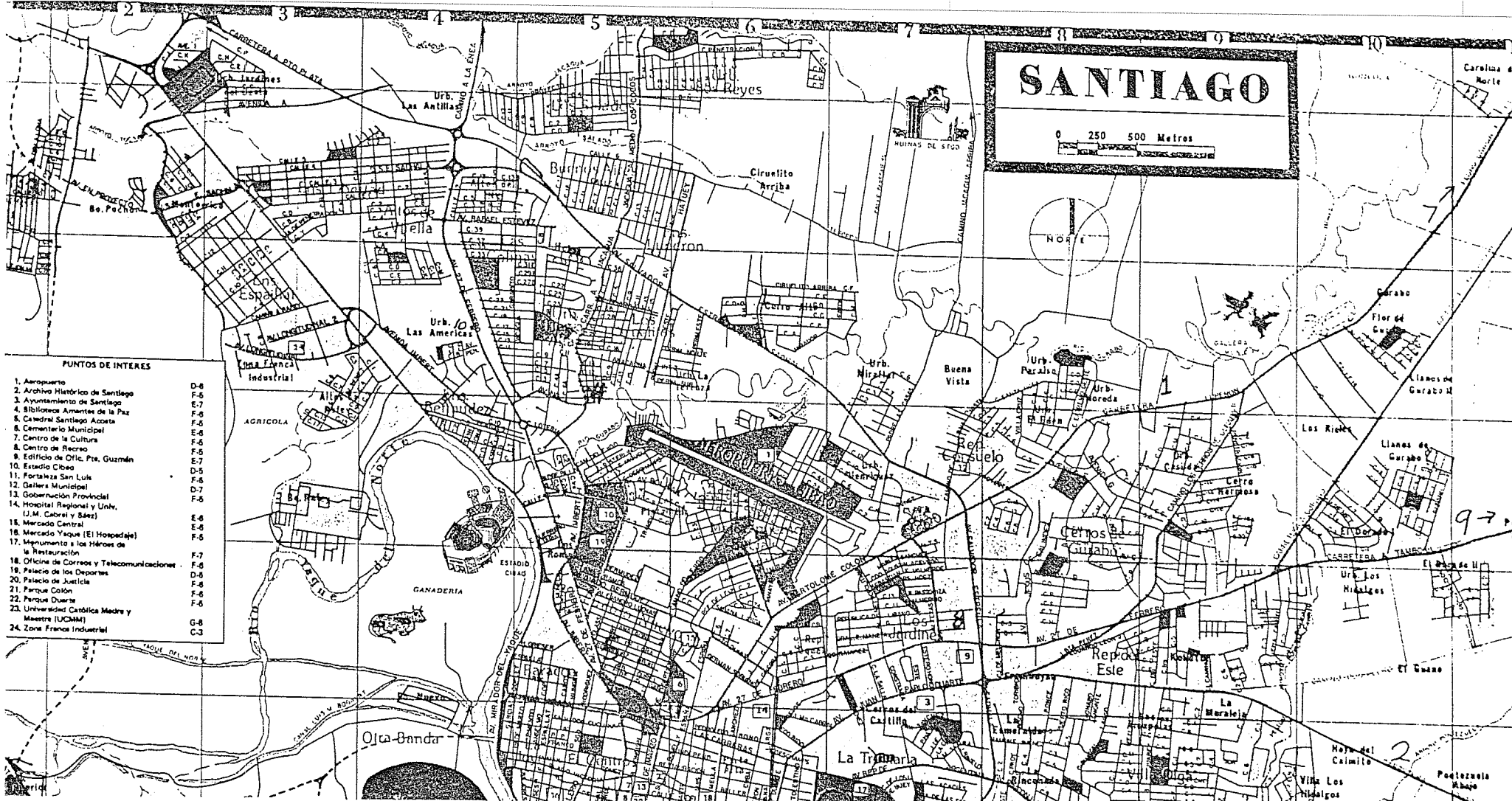
Satorius, Tim. "Initial Investigation of the Dominican Republic." September 27, 1992. This report may be found in the minutes for the WELS Committee for Mission Expansion in the Synod archives room at WLS. It was also amended May 3, 1993.

Schlomer, Larry M. Monthly reports to the WELS Executive Committee for Latin American Missions, August, 1995 - March, 1996.

Tomhave, Duane. Videos "Dominican Republic Exploratory - First Report" (1994) and "Banners of Love, 1995: Five New WELS World Missions." Produced by WELS Board for World Missions.

Appendix A: Map of the Dominican Republic





Appendix B: Map of Santiago de los Caballeros

1. Baerbock house - Gurabo
2. Boxing ring in Hoya del Cairmito
3. Cienfuegos chapel
4. Doris' house in Ciruelitos
5. Juana's house in Pueblo Nuevo
6. To Santo Domingo - 2.5 hrs.
7. To Puerto Plata - 1 hr.
8. Vicar apartment - Los Jardines
9. To Tamboril - 30 min.
10. Schlomer house - Las Americas

