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WITNESS

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rms.org

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Dominican Republic Trip

Grace Barnes

Somos flexibles! We are flexible! This became a theme for the 2024 RMS team to the Dominican Republic in January. Plans were made and changed so many times, but we kept our smiles and found things to do to minister to those around us regardless. We learned patience and an appreciation for a culture that is not tied as closely to the clock as we are at home.

The main construction goal of our group (made up of five men and four women from Michigan, Iowa, and California) was to replace the roof on a rural church in Batey Nuevo, a small village of Haitian immigrants outside of Sabana Grande de Boya. This is one of 19 Reformed churches that exist in this region by the grace of God and the ongoing ministry of Dr. Neal Hegeman.

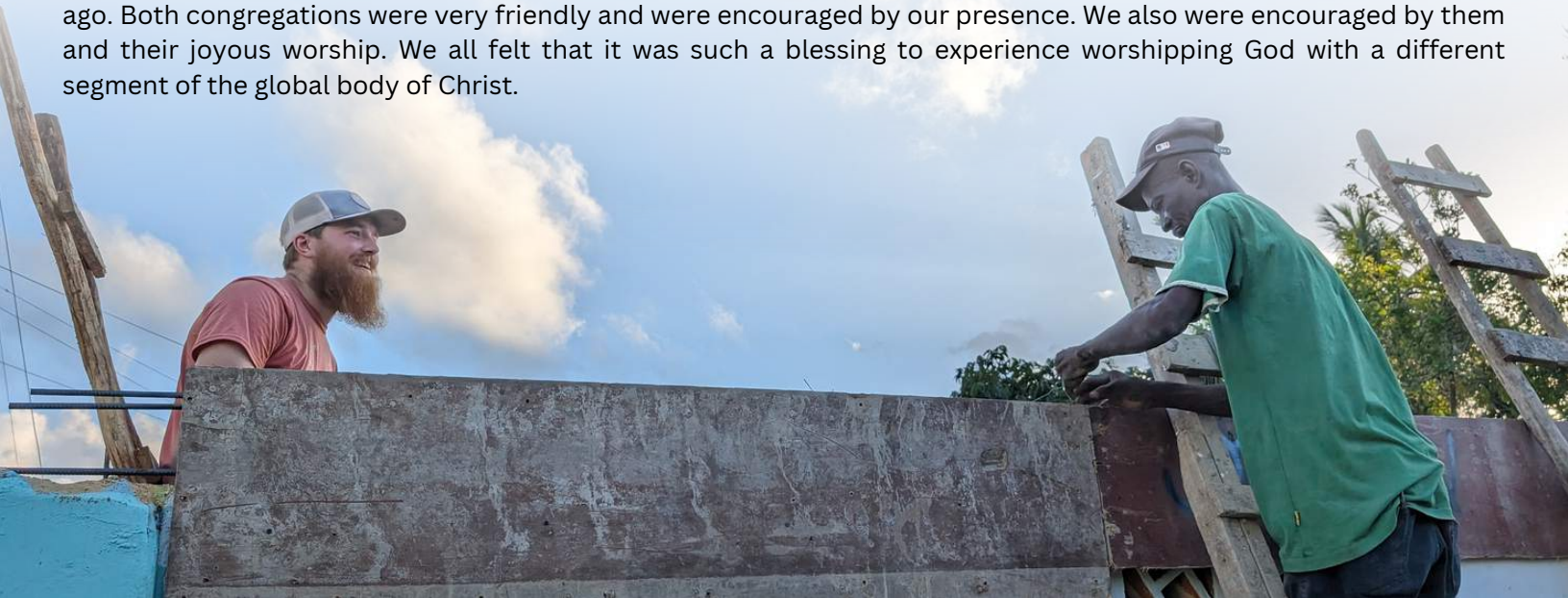
After a long day of travel by airplane and van on Thursday, the group arrived at the Reformed Ministry Center which would be our home for the next seven days. Due to the mild climate, the Ministry Center, like most of the buildings we saw, is made of concrete block and stucco, with rooms and hallways open to the outside air. There were doors on the rooms and slats on the windows, but no glass windows or screens. The resident minister Pierre Gonzoles and his lovely wife live there with their children. They were very friendly and generous hosts to us. We enjoyed visiting with them through our meager Spanish skills and Google Translate.

Friday and Saturday saw the team make lots of progress on the church building project. The old, rotted roof and beams were removed along with the crumbling blocks that had formed the peaks on each end of the rectangular structure. The Nationals mixed concrete by hand, and then a fresh pour of concrete was laid along the top of the walls in the forms we had mounted. We all enjoyed working alongside of the many Nationals who were invested in refurbishing this church – it seemed to be a neighborhood project. Flexibility was required, as tools were in short supply. We often let the Nationals use our tools while we cleaned up the rubble or played with the many children who came to watch us. We worked late on Saturday and ended up finishing our concrete pour by the light of several cell phones.



The team members celebrated their accomplishments by going to local Heladerias (ice cream shops) nearly every night after group devotions.

Sunday was a different pace. We worshipped with two local congregations – one that met in the school adjacent to the Ministry Center and another a short distance away whose building had been a project of RMS teams a few years ago. Both congregations were very friendly and were encouraged by our presence. We also were encouraged by them and their joyous worship. We all felt that it was such a blessing to experience worshipping God with a different segment of the global body of Christ.



In the morning service, the congregation heard reports from a dozen local ministers; after the reports, Dr. Hegeman preached a sermon that was translated sentence-by-sentence into Spanish and Creole and English (for the American visitors). In the evening service, there was no translation, but Dr. Hegeman promised to explain the gist to us later. In both services we sang a song in English for the congregation.

After a restful Lord's Day, our flexibility was tested again as the week began without the supplies needed to continue on to the next step of the project: building new rafters. We completed some block work and cleaned the site some more. To use our time well, we adopted a new project: making tables for the Ministry Center. (Photo on front cover) This region of the Dominican is plagued by termites, and wooden furniture does not last. A nearby hardware store had the supplies we needed to make several tables for dining and studying.

Wednesday morning, we were delayed because of car trouble, so we really went to work on the tables – sawing, drilling, screwing, sanding. When our ride was ready, we drove around to several local hardware stores in search of the plywood used to stabilize the rafter joints. We finally found some and had to hold the sheet over our heads inside the van as we traveled the several bumpy miles to the job site – fun memories.



We worked hard on that last workday to make as much progress as possible with the materials that had finally been delivered. We were handicapped somewhat by a lack of electricity (no power saw), but we were flexible (!) and used hand saws instead. There were many willing workers, and by the end of the day, we had 11 of 16 rafters made and installed. Again, we finished by the lights of our cell phones.

On Wednesday afternoon, we were able also to give away the many gifts we had brought for the local children. They were very grateful for the art supplies, balls, toys, candy, and clothing. It was fun for us to see their joy at our simple gifts. A few of our team members played basketball in a nearby schoolyard with many of the local children. We got lots of

thankful hugs as we packed up to leave for the last time. Seeing the happiness of these people with so few resources made our group ponder the materialism that surrounds us at home. Contentment and cooperation are the values we witnessed again and again.

One of our team, a very flexible young man, stayed behind in Sabana Grande de Boya even as the rest of us left to travel home. He stayed another week to see the project through to completion and to do a few other tasks required at the Ministry Center. We were glad he was able to send us photos of the finished roof on the church.

Our group devotions each evening focused on the various phrases of the Lord's Prayer. The lesson on "give us this day our daily bread" struck me particularly. The author of the study connected it to the portion of the Sermon on the Mount in which Jesus urges his listeners not to be anxious about food or clothing because we can see how richly God clothes the flowers and feeds the birds (Matthew 6:25-34). We witnessed a culture in which people do not store up food and supplies the way we do in America; our hostess shopped every day for fresh

bread, meat, and fruits. God instructs us to ask for daily bread, depending on His grace each day, like the Israelites did with the manna in the wilderness. This concept is more meaningful to me after having completed this short-term mission. May the Lord teach us all to be less anxious about things we cannot control anyway and to lean even more on His Sovereign care.



International Christian Community Development (ICCD)

-Eric Hoeksema

Agriculture and in particular cows were an early interest of mine while growing up in northern Michigan. At an early age, I began getting up before dawn to milk cows for neighboring dairy farmers, and by the age of 15 began my own little hobby farm, raising a rare breed of milk cows called Dutch Belted Galloways. This profound intrigue left me with little doubt that God was leading me towards a career in agriculture.

While in my first year at Dordt College, everything changed. God's providence and His mysterious ways dramatically altered the course I thought my life was taking. While on a spring break service trip to Mississippi, three fellow students on the team told me of an opportunity for agriculture students to go to Ukraine to study agriculture during the coming summer. Ukraine, famously known as the breadbasket of the world, was a country I knew little about and a place I had never imagined myself traveling to. I jumped at the opportunity. Amazed by the people I met, the culture I experienced, and the food I tried, I was left with a yearning to return. The following summers provided more opportunities through Dordt College, and by 2005 I moved to Ukraine to spend a year immersed in volunteering and teaching in a Reformed boarding school in western Ukraine.



God instilled in me a love for this part of the world and for the people there. A passion for missions and a keen interest in the work of the church in Eastern and Central Europe grew in me. Transcarpathia, the western province of Ukraine, along with the neighboring country of Hungary became a home for me.

An unexpected offer of help came the next year to begin a 501c3 nonprofit organization. This led to the formation of International Christian Community Development (ICCD). Without a clear direction or plan, I wondered what God had in store. God's providence is never lacking, and I was asked to teach conversational English at an English camp at a Reformed boarding school. God has opened many doors and opportunities and what began as an unexpected, seemingly insignificant event, has expanded greatly. Today God has blessed us with the opportunity to use the English language as a tool to conduct weeks of summer English/outreach camps in five countries (Ukraine, Hungary, Poland, Romania, and Croatia). Partnering with local churches every summer to share the Gospel of Jesus Christ and to connect hundreds of young people to their local church.

My wife (Stacey) and I were married 13 years ago. We continue to be amazed by the work of God's hands with opportunities to conduct ministry, using English/outreach camps, English clubs, and classes, Bible studies, Bible retreat weekends, work with Roma (Gypsy) people and many other opportunities.

Our growing family of young children has changed the ministry greatly and provided new and unexpected opportunities. Sadly, the Covid years and the war in Ukraine have brought great change and challenges. Our hearts break for the people of Ukraine and we mourn the death, destruction, and uprooted lives. We look to God, trusting in His sovereign control, and are confident for this too, to be used for His glory and the spread of the Gospel.

We are very thankful for RMS. Rob Brinks and RMS, have faithfully advocated for us, encouraging us in our ministry. We are grateful to RMS for promoting and advertising our summer English/outreach ministries. We are appreciative of



the volunteers who have come in the past through RMS to serve and work beside us sharing the Gospel through these ministries that God has given. We are always grateful to have future volunteers with an interest in missions and an appreciation for Eastern and Central Europe join us as volunteers in our English/outreach camp ministry.

God's faithful presence abounds. A deep love for cows and a great appreciation for agriculture remain in me. But I am awed by God's work in my life and how He builds His kingdom. "He is the Rock, His works are perfect, and all His ways are just. A faithful God who does no wrong, upright and just is He." Deuteronomy 32:4

Interested in joining Eric in Europe? Contact him at ehoekse@hotmail.com

Heidelberg Theological Seminary - International Studies

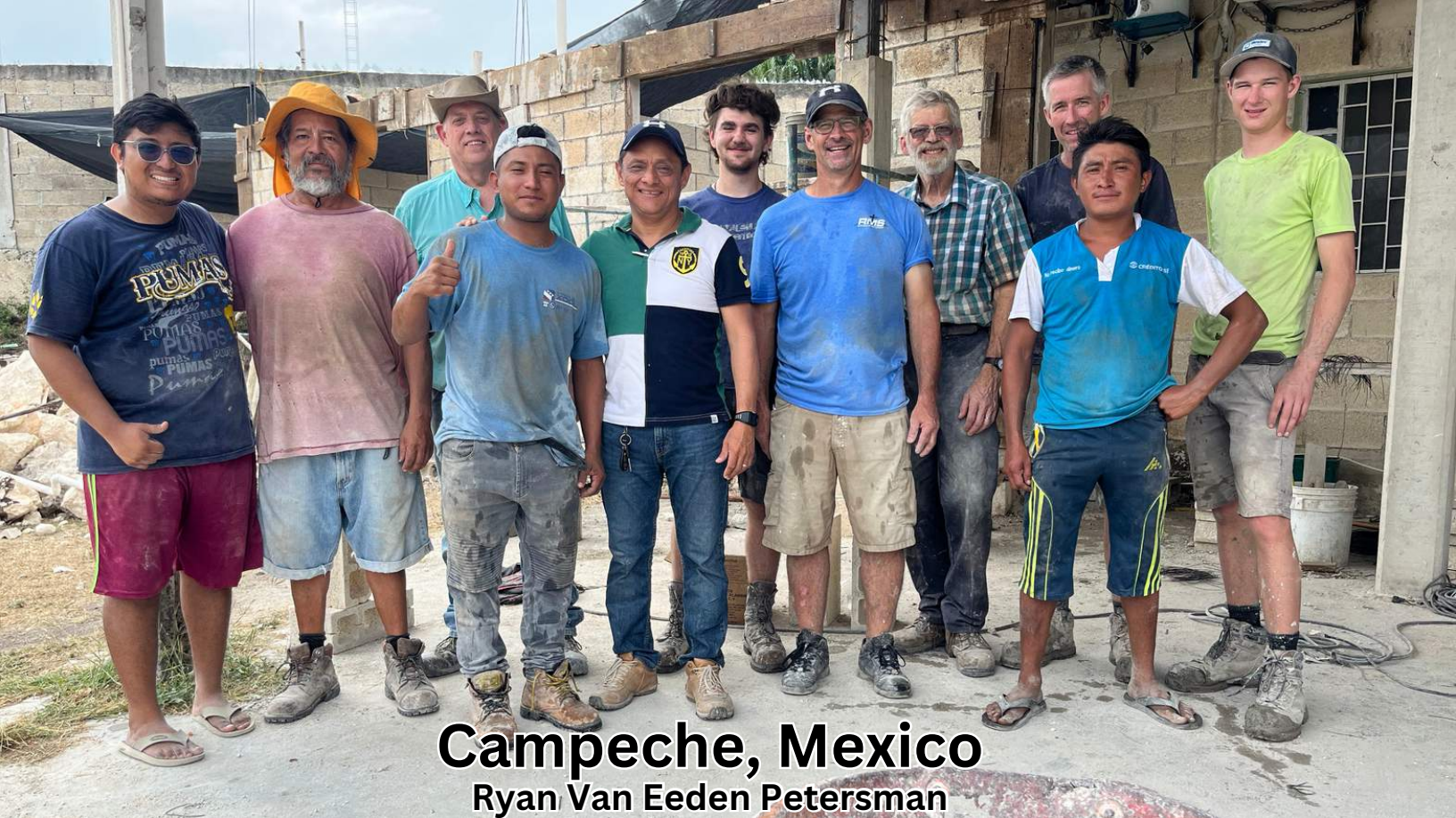
Heidelberg Theological Seminary (HTS) is currently conducting online classes in both the Philippines and Africa, aiming to glorify God and equip His servants in their respective contexts. Students in the Philippines attend classes online on Friday evenings and Saturday mornings, while at seven stations around Africa, classes are held on Thursday afternoons. Some students in Africa travel several miles by foot to attend these classes and the fellowship that follows. Each student is trained with two courses per semester for both African and Philippine students. Students can also view other classes via Zoom that are being taught at the Seminary in Sioux Falls, SD. More than 100 students are being served at these two locations.

In January, the Board of Reformed Mission Services agreed to raise funds and help cover the cost of course materials, internet access, computers, and other expenses for this project. We give thanks to God for the means of technology that makes these classes possible and that we were able to raise the funds needed to enable HTS to cover these costs.

Those interested in continuing to support these efforts can do so at rms.org/donate. For more information about Heidelberg Theological Seminary, visit heidelbergseminary.org or contact Dr. Maynard Koerner via his email at mkoerner@heidelbergseminary.org. Please pray for the safety of the students and the success of this important work in the Philippines and East Africa.



We are pleased to announce that IRBC, Reformed Fellowship, and RYS have shown interest in utilizing space in the ministry center. For more information, please visit rms.org/ministry-center.



Campeche, Mexico

Ryan Van Eeden Petersman

My daughter had joined an RMS team to Peru last fall. Although I was proud of her for venturing out of her "bubble" of home, church and work, I'll admit I was a little envious as I would have loved to have joined her when she started sending pictures home and sharing stories. So a few weeks ago when the request for volunteers came to join a team to go to Campeche, Mexico and my son was thinking about it, I was eager to sign us up together.

After an exhausting day of travel we finally met the rest of the team in Merida, Mexico. Walking out of the airport that afternoon we were blasted by the heat; it was going to be a hot week! We soon arrived at the Iglesia Presbiteriana Puerta del Cielo (Gate of Heaven Presbyterian Church) in Campeche, Mexico. This was a new site for RMS to partner with so we didn't know much of what to expect. I remember thinking that the way they welcomed us that it was going to be a good week in their midst.

Our project was working on a parsonage. Pastor Roger and his wife are currently living in a small classroom on the property. A contractor from the church had started with his crew on the pilings and footings prior to our arrival. Throughout the week we worked alongside the local crew as we tied rebar, formed pillars, laid block and mixed batch after batch of concrete manually. The days were very hot and labor intensive, yet a productive time together as we were able to get the walls built and columns poured.



The warm reception and hospitality that we received from the church members was incredible. Although we were almost always soaked in sweat, a typical greeting from anyone was always a warm wet hug!

Sunday worship with this congregation was the highlight of the trip for me. As we walked to the church we could hear the music playing through the open doors - what a witness to the neighborhood! We were welcomed as their guests and they had gone thru great lengths to translate much of the service for us. They had even learned "Holy, Holy Holy" and "Amazing Grace" in English to sing with us. As we worshipped with them, we could echo the words of Psalm 96: 1-4:



"Oh sing to the Lord a new song; sing to the Lord, all the earth! Sing to the Lord, bless his name; tell of his salvation from day to day. Declare his glory among the nations, his marvelous deeds among all the peoples! For great is the Lord and greatly to be praised; he is to be feared above all gods."

We had the opportunity to tour around the city of Campeche with our hosts where we learned a lot about the culture and saw a city with a lot of history and beautiful Spanish architecture. Pirate attacks in the 1600s were real here, so the original city of Campeche is walled and fortified!

Working with a group of men who are all giving of their time, talents and resources to serve the Lord through RMS is a beautiful thing to experience. Please pray for the continued work of RMS and support this ministry as you can. Perhaps the Lord is calling you to serve on a project team. Thank you to RMS for all the work in planning and preparation and for the opportunity to join this team in Campeche Mexico. May God continue to use this ministry for His glory and praise!

Funding is still needed to complete this project. Learn more and view additional photos at rms.org/projects.



Nepal Update



Suraj standing in front of the building

Norlan De Groot, Southeast Asia Coordinator for MINTS International Seminary, recently shared an update on the seminary work in Nepal.

"For many years, I have been working with Suraj Kasula, Nishan Nagarkoti, Richan Karmacharya, and others who are committed to training the next generation of Reformed, Christian leaders in Nepal. In the past, the seminary was limited to only training students who lived in Bhaktapur. But when the new seminary building is fully complete, it will be able to house residential students from all parts of Nepal. This will allow Reformed theology to saturate the nation as students are trained in Bhaktapur and then sent back to their villages in Nepal equipped to minister to fellow Christians there. This was the vision of the founders of the seminary, and it is now becoming a reality thanks to you and others who shared this vision and supported it through prayer and finances. Thank you for your commitment to this cause."

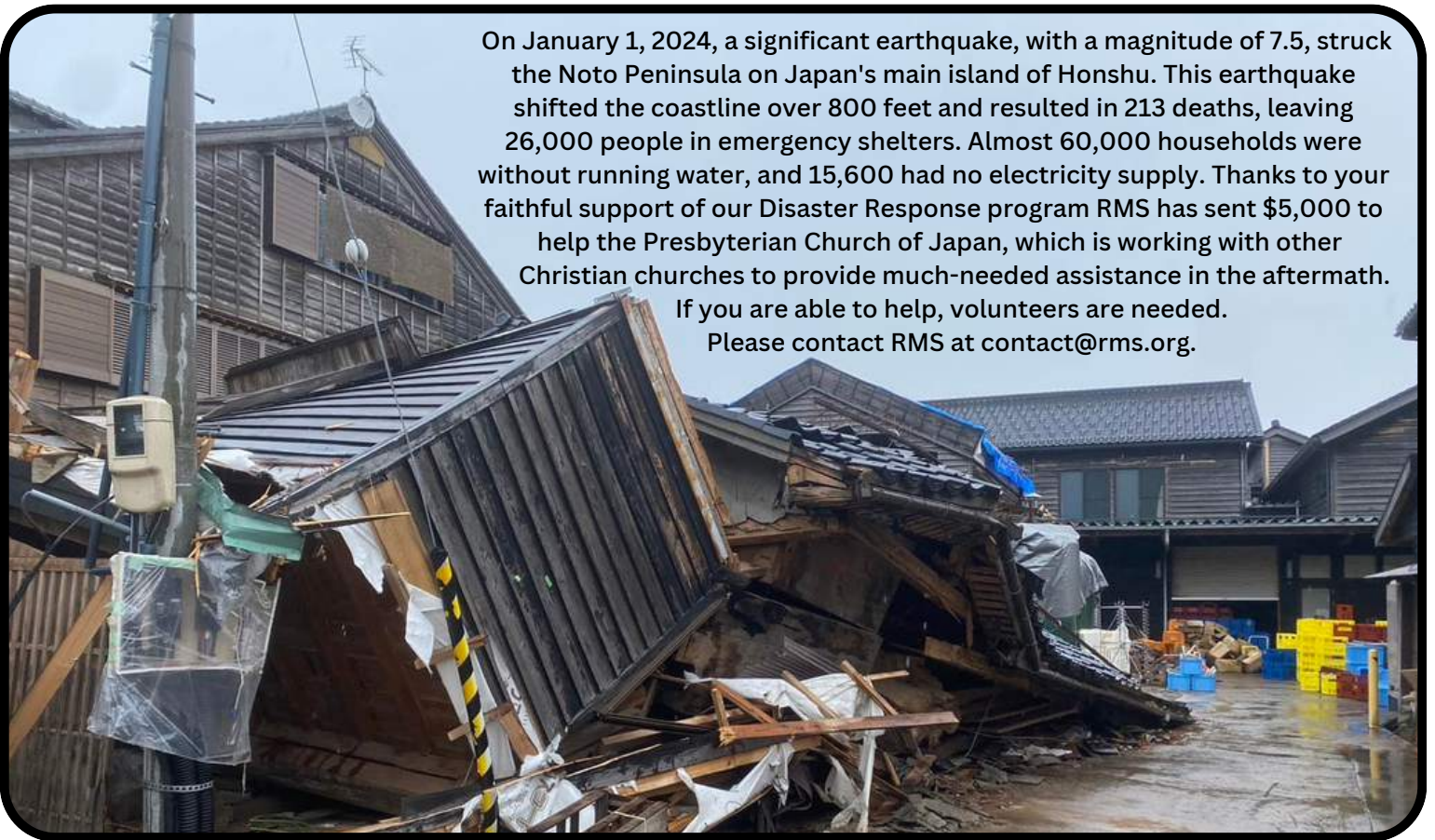
The project is progressing smoothly, thanks to recent funds received that will allow us to complete the third floor of the seminary building. This floor will serve as a dormitory for students during their studies. However, we still need approximately \$33,000 to finish the fourth and fifth floors. These additional floors will provide much-needed space for food preparation, extra dormitories, and an outdoor patio.

For more information about this project and to view videos of the property, please visit rms.org/projects. Thank you for your continued commitment to this project.



A view of the first floor

On January 1, 2024, a significant earthquake, with a magnitude of 7.5, struck the Noto Peninsula on Japan's main island of Honshu. This earthquake shifted the coastline over 800 feet and resulted in 213 deaths, leaving 26,000 people in emergency shelters. Almost 60,000 households were without running water, and 15,600 had no electricity supply. Thanks to your faithful support of our Disaster Response program RMS has sent \$5,000 to help the Presbyterian Church of Japan, which is working with other Christian churches to provide much-needed assistance in the aftermath. If you are able to help, volunteers are needed. Please contact RMS at contact@rms.org.



NEW EMPLOYEE!

RMS is excited to announce our new employee, Mr. Steve Poll! The Board of Directors hired Steve to be the Assistant Administrative Director. Steve will be leading RMS trips and helping largely with the TASC program. Please pray that God will use Steve and his talents to further His kingdom.

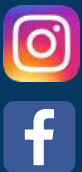
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Hello, my name is Stephen Poll. I am a member of Dutton URC in Caledonia, Michigan. I am 28 years old and have been a High School Youth group leader for the past 4 years. I have attended TASC events in Michigan, North Carolina, and Mexico as well as other mission trips to Peru, Haiti, and Puerto Rico. Whether it be for mission trips or personal pleasure, traveling has been a huge part of my life and a major factor in who I am today. In total, I have traveled to 24 countries and am always looking to add to that number. Along the way, I have had the privilege to worship with fellow believers on four continents across many different cultures and have seen firsthand the transcendent power of the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Prior to accepting the position of Assistant Administrative Director with RMS, I worked in the field of Landscaping for 10 years. I am very excited to be taking on this role and look forward to all the new opportunities and experiences that come with it! I ask for your prayers as I learn and grow in this new position.



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6607 Center Industrial Dr.
Jenison, MI 49428
616.466.8214 contact@rms.org