

What do you get if you drive your car down a busy New York street, pick up a hundred and fifty random pedestrians, take them to your house, give them all a job to do, and come back to check on them in a month? If your pedestrians are also from six different continents, twenty separate nations, and every socioeconomic sector there is, then you have a decent idea of life on a Mercy Ship, or at least on the Caribbean Mercy. If you want the Anastasis, then increase the numbers to three hundred or so people from thirty-eight countries, and park your house in Africa, and give it three-inch roaches and part-time plumbing.



Our fleet chaplain came up with that analogy. How does it all work? The only explanation he could see was God's love at work in people's lives. I don't know any other way a tight community like this could function longer than about two days before people started to bludgeon each other with blunt objects. We do have our moments, but despite our many mistakes, it really does work. It's probably worth remembering that in the earliest years of the church, Christians were not known for the beauty of their buildings (they had none), or the vitriol of their TV soundbites, or the minutiae of their doctrine. Secular historians of the day did not marvel, "See the number of their denominations!" They marveled, "See how they love one another." The early church had problems of its own, but I guess all of us could take a lesson from that.

For the Caribbean Mercy, the work goes on. Next month we'll sail to Halifax and then to Boston for our latest PR phase, and come August, the ship will depart from Canaveral, FL for the next outreach. We will be serving the people of Belize, home of world-famous coral reefs, Rodents Of Unusual Size, and – always, everywhere, it seems – much poverty. The Belizean government has been asking Mercy Ships for several years to come in. Right now we're in North Carolina for repairs, but we've just returned from the Dominican Republic, and the images are fresh in my mind.



I had the chance to spend several days working with patients in the ship's optical clinic there, which was housed on a nearby Dominican army base for lack of space on the ship. First we'd give the patients a preliminary exam (right), writing the results on a record sheet that they'd carry to another area where a translator would take their medical history. After they'd seen our ophthalmologist in the next room, he or she would send them back to a waiting area where they would wait again for us. They held those papers with a visible mixture of hope and trepidation as they shuffled through the process, knowing that by the time they reached the last step, the sheets held their fate – one already written, but in a language they could not read. Many of them could not read in any case. About two-thirds of the patients I screened, in addition to their eyesight difficulties, had never learned.

We cared for them one by one, according to what the ophthalmologist had written on their papers. Often it would be in the form of a prescription, and we'd go over to the spectacle racks and search the logs until we found a pair that matched, out of the seventeen thousand in our donated inventory. Those were the good experiences. We were able to refer others



with treatable problems to the ship for our few remaining open appointments. The hard ones were where I'd take the doctor's notes from the patient's nervous hand and read, "Cannot treat." The news would be mine to break. One of those was a girl nineteen years old (left), born with strabismus, or crossed eyes. Pedro, the translator I was working with, asked me to take a photo so he could try to raise some funds for her on his own. She'd come from the other side of the country in the hopes of finding help, and our last surgery slot had been filled fifteen minutes before. I had to turn her away.

Here in North Carolina, it's a different world. The first trip to Wal-Mart after I return to the States is generally a bit of a shock. Yet the ship is working here, too, though in a different way. For the next few months, my job on board will be with Esperanza, the team that goes out and simply builds friendships with people in local schools, churches, prisons, and villages wherever the ship stops – whether in Latin America or the USA.

Despite the drastic differences in health, in income, or on any other yardstick you might choose between nations, the hole in every human heart I've ever seen is shaped the same. To slightly subvert a fine David Wilcox song, "You can get what's second best, but it's hard to get enough." I'm grateful for your help in allowing this work to go on.

Jeremy