

A Courageous New Take on Health Care, Done in Jesus' Name

While their country is plagued with violence, drug cartels and poverty, many Colombians literally can see a brighter future, thanks to a Dallas-based ministry whose force is 90 percent volunteer.

Among the benefactors of Medical Ministry International (MMI) is Maria, who despite the risks of public identity as a Christian, wanted to overcome her poor eyesight to be able to read the Bible.

Then there is Antonio, 59, whose blurred vision left his wife struggling with a doubled workload. After his operation, he and his wife looked into each other's eyes for the first time in three years: "I began to weep. The surgery had worked!"

Five-year-old Leslie was born blind because of cataracts. After corrective surgery in 2012, her mother says she is now able to do normal child-like activities.

Such stories abound in the files of MMI, whose health centers treated an estimated 543,000 people last year.

"We do 90 projects a year in 23 countries, so the stories are plentiful," says CEO Sam Smith, who prior to 2012 served as CEO of Mercy Ships for four years. "We're not about coming and doing good. Where we go and work, we're not leaving."

Founded in 1968 by missionaries in the Dominican Republic, MMI offers multiple medical services, including dental and vision care. It operates with a U.S. staff of just 12, plus some 200 internationally. Most of the 2,000-plus volunteers raise their own support annually.

A key to MMI's approach is that it charges for its services. Smith says a leading complaint from pastors and government officials in other countries is Americans' creating a "culture of beggars" by handing out free goods and services.

"We may only charge someone a nickel for a surgery that would cost \$10,000 in the Western world, but that nickel is a lot to them. If they invest in something, they will deem it of value."