

One Lunch can Feed a Multitude

A ministry born out of the compassion of a 12-year-old missionary boy is offering nourishment and the good news of Jesus to hundreds of youngsters in Guatemala and Mexico

Teresa Pérez was desperate for medical, if not divine, help. The mother of six knew her 1-year-old baby was dying in her arms from dehydration and diarrhea. Medical help was miles away from her one-room, dirt-floor mud hut in Santa Lucía Los Ocotes—a remote village near Guatemala City.

Abandoned by her husband, Pérez seemed to have nowhere to turn. Then she remembered that three of her children were part of the feeding program at Wedding of the Lamb Assembly of God church. Without hesitation, Pérez rushed her son, Carnación, to pastor Luis Villatoro in the middle of that February 2001 night.

Pérez had two requests: prayer and that Villatoro would take her skin-and-bones child to a doctor. With only the equivalent of \$25 on hand and a public bus for transportation, Villatoro somehow got the baby to a physician, who gave him antibiotics for a severe stomach infection complicated by malnutrition.

Villatoro returned to the village and took the child back to Pérez. Then he and his wife prayed all night for God to save him. When Villatoro checked on Carnación the next morning, the child was eating and doing well.

“It was a miracle that God gave me,” says Pérez, 42, with Carnación, now 2, in her arms. “I was praying for God’s help

and that he would get well. He answered that through Pastor Luis and Charlie's Lunch."

Testimonies like Pérez's are becoming increasingly common as a result of a little-known, worldwide compassion ministry inspired by a 12-year-old boy named Charlie Stewart, who loved to give—especially to the hungry and needy.

The son of former Guatemalan Assemblies of God (AG) missionaries, Charlie died in Guatemala of a congenital heart condition in 1996, but his legacy of generosity would live on. The year after his death, Charlie's parents, Sam and Janey Stewart, unintentionally launched Charlie's Lunch after some street children knocked on their door begging for bread.

"I felt the Lord was telling me, 'Give them Charlie's lunch,' and so I did," recalls Janey, who in August 1997 returned with her husband to Guatemala from the United States.

Without large fund-raising efforts and publicity, the El Paso, Texas-based ministry has spread from Guatemala to Mexico, and it also has helped establish feeding centers in the Philippines and Africa. This year, Charlie's Lunch expects to be in Morocco, Africa, India and Chile, and the ministry plans to add more feeding sites in Mexico and Guatemala.

In the beginning, the feedings consisted of sack lunches. Since then, Charlie's Lunch has served as many as 15,500 hot meals a month. At least three times a week, about 500 children—ranging in age from 1 to 15—receive a lunch consisting of meat, rice or beans, fruits or vegetables and a drink. It costs an average of 50 cents a meal, or \$15 per month, to feed each child.

An offshoot of Charlie's Lunch, Charlie's Christmas also has blessed thousands. Typically sponsored by a U.S. church team, the outreach provides food, shoes and toys, and sponsors evangelistic events for the Charlie's Lunch children and their families. The care packages are also delivered as an unexpected blessing to the families of poor pastors.

Last Christmas, the gifts surprised several Guatemalan pastors at their homes. The ministers expressed gratitude with tears of joy. "This is a tremendous ministry in memory of Charlie," Efraín Reyes, who pastors a 45-member church in Guatemala City, told the team. "We can't repay you, but God will bless you."

Just as Jesus met physical and spiritual needs in the feeding of the 5,000, Charlie's Lunch offers the same to the multitudes of Third World countries. The interdenominational ministry aims to work alongside local congregations by installing a feeding center at the church, which primarily consists of a commercial kitchen that costs about \$1,800.

"It's a power tool in the hand of a pastor for evangelism and discipleship," Sam Stewart, 44, says.

Villatoro believes without Charlie's Lunch, Pérez's family wouldn't have been reached with the gospel. After Pérez's son recovered, he joined the program and has not been ill since. To show her gratitude to Villatoro, Pérez, who grew up Roman Catholic, began attending church, and she later accepted Christ.

"Thanks be to God, I do now know Jesus," Pérez says with a smile that spreads from ear to ear. "I felt God's love when I

came to this church. I now have peace and tranquility in my life. Charlie's Lunch is a blessing that God has brought to us here."

The church and Charlie's Lunch have also impacted Perez's oldest child, Teresita. "They have helped us so much," Teresita, 11, says. "I felt Jesus through Charlie's Lunch. This is our family now. They all love us here."

'Let the Children Come'

Through Charlie's Lunch, Villatoro's church, which sits on a hill, has become a beacon of hope in the poverty-stricken community of 6,500 people. The church's brightly colored Charlie's Lunch sign—which features Mark 10:14, "'Let the little children come unto Me,'" in Spanish—fittingly captures the heart of the ministry. More than 150 children find nourishment and nurturing there.

"I've never seen anything like this," says short-term missionary Steve Lovett, 28, who traveled to Santa Lucía in December with four members of El Paso's Jesus Chapel West. "This ministry has transformed this village. It's not just the food. The food just opens the door to the love and compassion of Jesus. The children feed on that just as hungrily."

Steve Walker, Charlie's uncle and Janey's brother, agrees. "No one in our family thought that Charlie's Lunch could be such an evangelistic tool," he says. "The purpose was to feed the kids. It became evident that God was using this to bring people to Himself. It was a sovereign move of God."

The children are taught personal hygiene, Bible verses, stories and songs, as well as prayers for other nations.

Having seen firsthand the life-transforming effect of Charlie's Lunch, Villatoro's church—which numbered three people when he took it over in December 1998 but now has about 65 adults and 125 youths in attendance—wants to offer physical and spiritual food to others who are needy.

Members told Villatoro that they “have faith in God” to be able to plant a church and support 20 children for a Charlie's Lunch they want to start in a neighboring village of 4,000 that doesn't have a Protestant congregation. This is amazing, considering the parishioners barely have anything themselves, and the church—which has wooden planks on cinder blocks for pews—has meager resources. But Villatoro believes his church has caught God's heart for their community.

“If Jesus was alive today, He would be doing Charlie's Lunch,” Villatoro, 28, says. “Jesus said if we don't become like little children, we cannot enter the kingdom of God. That motivates our church to love these children and to focus our ministry on children.”

Jesus' heart may be in a ministry such as Charlie's Lunch, but Sam Stewart remembers being hesitant to begin feeding begging children in a Central American country where 60 percent of the 12 million-strong population live in poverty.

“I said, ‘We can't start something we can't finish,’” says Stewart, whose parents were missionaries. “I grew up [with] the begging, having lived in El Salvador. I was sort of

desensitized to it. The Lord would teach me to look in the children's eyes to see their need, but I was afraid then that we were going to have a hundred kids at our door."

But Janey insisted. Instead of giving them bread, she made them what Charlie normally was served for lunch: a sandwich, bag of chips, piece of fruit and a drink.

She began feeding the children daily in September 1997. Although Janey invited the children to stay and eat, they always took the sack lunches with them. She later discovered that they were sharing their food with other kids and their families.

Several months later, around Christmastime, the Stewarts shared the story with Janey's parents in El Paso, and the testimony of the home-feeding ministry touched a member of their church family.

"He felt impressed to give us \$50, asking, 'Will that feed those kids for a month?'" Stewart remembers. "I said, 'Yes, it will, thank you.' The Lord spoke to my heart, and He said, 'I'll multiply that \$50 by 10 by this time next year.'"

A year later, in December 1998, Janey's father, Fred Walker, once pastor of an independent charismatic church, called the Stewarts with a request. "Can you find the poorest pastors and their families and provide Charlie's Christmas to them?" Stewart recalls him asking. "He sent \$500, which was 10 times \$50. The Lord then put it in my heart that this \$500 would be multiplied by 10 to \$5,000."

In August 1999, Charlie's Lunch was officially launched, with

Janey as its president. A year later, Janey's brother Dale Walker, who leads an international compassion ministry from El Paso, agreed to temporarily oversee Charlie's Lunch.

Most of Janey's four other siblings, including worship leader Tommy Walker, are in full-time ministry and have been involved with Charlie's Lunch.

Feeding Hundreds

Meanwhile, primarily by word of mouth, the ministry continued to grow. By Christmas 1999, \$20,000 had been received for Charlie's Lunch and Charlie's Christmas, which was \$15,000 more than what the Lord told Stewart a year earlier. "By then, we were just amazed at what the Lord was doing," Stewart says.

However, trying to juggle their duties as AG missionaries and helping to operate Charlie's Lunch was taking its toll on the couple, who during this time had just planted their second church in Guatemala City.

"We were caught in a dilemma because we were committed to church-planting and keeping Charlie's Lunch," says Stewart, who moved his family to Guatemala in 1993.

It wasn't until September 2000 that Stewart got a word from God about committing completely to Charlie's Lunch. During a routine visit to Villatoro's church, Stewart heard testimony after testimony from the pastor about how the ministry was changing lives in the village.

"As I was leaving, it was raining so hard that I had to stop

my pickup," Stewart recalls. "I began weeping in awe and thanksgiving to God for what He was doing there. Then I had a vision in my spirit.

"I saw Charlie looking out of heaven, saying to me: 'Dad, it's worth it all—the five heart surgeries, the weeks I spent in the hospital and the fear of dying. It's worth it all to see these kids getting saved,'" Stewart says. "Then I heard the voice of the Holy Spirit say, '[Charlie's Lunch] is worthy of a lifelong call.' That became holy guidance for me."

Stewart discussed the revelation with Janey, and they agreed to submit his resignation to the AG Division of Foreign Missions, effective at the end of his term in June 2001. That summer, the couple moved to El Paso, with Stewart taking over for Dale Walker as director of Charlie's Lunch.

"When I told [Janey], we knelt on the kitchen floor, and we asked God to help us surrender our lives for this lifelong call," says Stewart, who is still an ordained AG minister. "We wanted to walk in grace in feeding as many children as He gave us."

The ministry aims to feed the poorest children in the world. "While each country is unique and each presents different and distinct challenges, the similarities are remarkable," Janey says. "At each location, extreme poverty and malnutrition, often severe malnutrition, are common threads."

God has dramatically multiplied the ministry's reach, but Charlie's Lunch can feed only a small minority of the hungry because of limited funds. For example, in Guatemala approximately 1 million people, or 15 percent of the poverty-

stricken population, are malnourished. The ministry can afford to feed only a few hundred of the country's starving children.

In Santa Lucía, Villatoro's church feeds 153 youngsters, but at least 300 children could benefit from Charlie's Lunch. Villatoro remembers when he first came to the farming village, which didn't have running water until two years ago. "Everybody was sick and weak, and two or three kids would die each month from lack of food," he says.

Even after Charlie's Lunch started in Santa Lucía in October 1999 as a monthly outreach of sack lunches, malnutrition still was pervasive. "When we first came here, the children couldn't even smile when they were fed because they were so malnourished," Stewart says.

But after a regular feeding program and kitchen opened in July 2000 at Villatoro's church, the children became healthier as they ate better, and their countenance changed. Robert Medema, who helped distribute sack lunches in Santa Lucía in 1999, was pleasantly surprised at the turnaround when he accompanied a church missions team in December.

"I remember [in 1999] the kids were pretty lifeless, and a lot of them were numb from being hungry," says Medema, whose Foursquare church in Los Angeles has been a faithful supporter of Charlie's Lunch. "They're just so different now. They're happy and singing the Bible songs. Pastor Luis and Charlie's Lunch are really impacting the individual lives. God really does use the food from Charlie's Lunch to reach people with the gospel."

Presenting the gospel along with the feedings has proven to be

a challenge for the ministry because some of the countries are religious, yet hostile to biblical teaching. In Santa Lucía, the staunchly Catholic community initially spurned Villatoro's evangelistic efforts.

"Before they rejected us, but the people here accept us now," Villatoro tearfully says. "We talk and evangelize through Charlie's Lunch. It's a miracle of God. He has given us grace and favor through this."

Villatoro, who lives in a humble tin shack like most of the residents in the village, which is accessible only via a rock-strewn dirt road, says the community started changing about three months after the feeding center began. They brought Villatoro's family vegetables and invited them over for dinner.

"They began accepting me because they saw us loving their children," says Villatoro, who envisions starting a Charlie's Lunch in India someday. "For a parent, there's nothing better."

Steve Walker, senior pastor of El Paso's Jesus Chapel West, says the spirit of love and giving that drives the ministry is tangible and contagious. In December, he witnessed it firsthand when he traveled with four members of his church to visit three Charlie's Lunch feeding centers in Guatemala.

"We've seen some destitute kids, but every child responded to love," says Walker, 49. "Before we leave, they would give us hugs and kisses. They just warm up so easily. As we were leaving one site, I'll never forget a little girl holding some candy we had just given them. She kept asking me if I wanted

some. It was so touching that she wanted to give.”

Charlie Stewart, who gave his lunch to a hungry classmate on the first day of kindergarten, would have been proud.

The Boy Who Started It All

Charlie Stewart didn't let a heart defect keep him from doing what he loved—bringing joy to others with his generosity.

The Bible says that “it is more blessed to give than to receive.” The words of Jesus as recorded in Acts 20:35 may be a fitting life verse for Charlie Stewart, whose short legacy of generosity inspired his former Guatemalan missionary parents to start Charlie’s Lunch—a ministry that seeks to physically and spiritually feed the hungriest children in the world.

Born with a serious congenital heart defect, Charlie, the second oldest of Sam and Janey Stewart’s four children, wasn’t expected to live past his first 24 hours. But he miraculously survived, though he eventually endured five heart operations, including two open-heart surgeries.

Janey Stewart, 44, says although her son was physically handicapped by his heart condition, he was “one of the most spiritually alive kids you could ever meet.”

“He was a beacon of joy who loved to give,” she says of Charlie, who died suddenly at his family’s Guatemalan home Feb. 1, 1996—three weeks before his 13th birthday.

Janey remembers Charlie at age 5 sitting next to his new friend, Micah, on the first day of kindergarten. "Micah was eating Charlie's lunch, and Charlie had the biggest smile on his face," recalls Janey, who along with her husband, Sam, were Assemblies of God (AG) missionaries in Guatemala from 1993 to 2001, when they moved to El Paso, Texas, to direct Charlie's Lunch. "While he must have felt a little hungry watching Micah eat, Charlie's smile told the story. He loved to give and watch the joy it brought to others."

In the ensuing months and years, giving and sacrifice began to mark Charlie's life. When he went with his father to minister to the poor in Guatemala City and the surrounding communities, he often would come home with less than he took—giving whatever he could to a needy child.

"When we lived in Costa Rica, he sold his bicycle for \$8, and he used that to buy gum and candy for the children in the neighborhood," Janey remembers. "That's how his mind worked. We actually had to teach him to be a little more selfish. There was not a selfish bone in his body. He wasn't competitive in any way. He couldn't play any board games because he made the other person win all the time. He didn't have it in him."

Eighteen months after Charlie's death, the Stewarts returned to Guatemala, and the genesis for Charlie's Lunch began in September 1997 when seven street children knocked on their door begging for bread.

"It came to me that I could give them what would have been Charlie's lunch," she says. "So I made them a little sack lunch. They began to come every day asking for food, knowing that they would receive a lunch. With that spirit of giving in

mind, that's really how this ministry started."

Like the John 6 story of the boy whose five barley loaves and two fish were multiplied by Christ to feed more than 5,000, the lunches meant for Charlie have been increased by God. Reflecting the youngster's passion, it seems only fitting that Charlie's Lunch has become a growing, worldwide feeding and compassion ministry with operations in Guatemala and Mexico, with plans this year for sites in Morocco, Africa, India and Chile.

"It takes most people a lifetime to make an impact," says Steve Walker, Charlie's uncle and Janey's brother. "Charlie—in less than 13 years—is impacting thousands."

Last December, the senior pastor of Jesus Chapel West in El Paso, Texas, saw firsthand how God is multiplying Charlie's spirit of generosity when Walker traveled with four members of his church to visit three Charlie's Lunch feeding centers in Guatemala.

"We never dreamed that out of the ashes of his death would come such an incredible fruit to minister to the hungry children all over the world," Walker, 49, says.

Walker's daughter, Hillary, was part of the church's short-term missions trip to Guatemala and was equally awed by her cousin's legacy. "I never saw him much [because his parents were missionaries], but I feel like I know him better," 20-year-old Hillary says. "I'm seeing what his heart was, which was giving."

Danny Herrera, Charlie's best friend and the son of the AG

superintendent in Guatemala, says he was often the recipient of Charlie's unselfishness, once receiving a new pair of tennis shoes from him.

Asked how Charlie would respond to the global impact of Charlie's Lunch, Herrera didn't hesitate. "I don't know what he would think of Charlie's Lunch, but he would have a huge smile on his face," says Herrera, 20, who learned English from Charlie.

Janey says Charlie "wouldn't like Charlie's Lunch being about him," noting that he disliked hospital stays because it drew attention to himself. "He wouldn't like receiving a lot of attention from Charlie's Lunch at all," she says. "He would like it to be about the love of God being poured out."

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