



# MIL GENERACIONES

1,000 GENERATIONS

BY BECKY WEHRSPANN, FEATURES EDITOR



*'Truly, I say  
to you, as you  
did it to one  
of the least of  
these ... you  
did it to me.'*

Matthew 25:40

The acronym K.I.S.S., a reminder to Keep It Super Simple, is often used to keep us from overcomplicating situations. Proclaiming the Gospel doesn't have to be complicated, either! God encourages us to keep it simple by giving us His Word and every day opportunities to proclaim His love to all people.

For more than two decades, Melissa Salomón and Deaconess Tere Montoya have worked together at *Mil Generaciones* (1,000 Generations) in Tijuana, Mexico. What began as the Lutheran Hour Ministries Mexico office (*Cristo Para Todas Las Naciones*) has become a refuge for "the least of these" in the outskirts of one of the fastest growing cities in Mexico.

In 1998, Concordia Lutheran Church and School in Chula Vista, California, and their pastor, Rev. Richard Schmidt, were the first donors to *Mil Generaciones*. "When I began the work in Tijuana, I needed a couple people to do the work with me," Melissa says. "Tere was a student and was recommended to me. She is an amazing woman who never tires, never quits looking for places to serve, or gets weary of midnight calls. She, her husband, and three sons are active in the ministry and in the church."

Tere and her husband, Vicar Sadoc Martinez, live in Tijuana and operate the *Mil Generaciones* Community Center, while Melissa, who lives in Chula Vista, does most of the fundraising for the organization. It is a partnership led by God. Together,

they build trust and relationships with the people of Tijuana through programs for the poverty-stricken community which include sewing classes, elder care, and counseling and medical clinics.

"We gather the people around something they need," Melissa explains. "We have sewing classes; we teach them how to make piñatas and pizzas or some simple craft like tea cloths and knitting or crocheting so they can sell them in their neighborhood." But the classes aren't just to learn a skill. They also include instruction of God's Word and His promises to us. "We teach the true God as He's revealed in Scripture — He made us, He loves us, He watches over us, He forgives us, He died for us, and He's always with us. Those are the basics we teach in every single program."

Deaconess Tere prays for and with those who come to the medical clinic. Many come from a Catholic background but have very little knowledge or understanding of Scripture.

"They are very skeptical, so it's difficult to build trust, but, once they begin to trust us, they will pray, and they will offer prayers," Melissa shares. "That's been a beautiful thing for us — to pray with them as a group and also individually."

Physical abuse, drugs, kidnappings, and murder are, unfortunately, common in a city of two million. These are challenges individuals and families face on a daily basis.

Melissa recalls more than one mother fleeing an abusive husband with her young children, and families whose loved ones had been kidnapped. "When faced with these stories, we call upon God to work in the lives of these people — these women and children and families — to keep them safe. The result is often a growth in faith, because they have someone there to support them, to teach them, to pray with them, and to assure them that God is not a horrible God who is punishing them — which is the notion of God in much of Mexico and Latin America."





"I pray with a lot of women who are terrified for their children because they have to walk to school," Melissa continues. "Walking in the streets in Tijuana, especially where we work — on the outskirts — is very dangerous. You really don't know if they will come back alive. It's a daily reality. Teaching women to pray for their children is a powerful thing."

The assurance of God's presence and love is critical when sharing the Gospel. "They are facing actual hunger, danger, poverty, and violence, so, when they hear about a loving God who protects them, who loves them no matter what, they accept that message more readily because of their great need. They find hope and confidence that there is someone greater than they are, greater than all their problems, greater than all the danger that surrounds them."



The border region of Mexico is unique, with its own customs, needs, and patterns. The poverty is so oppressive that people will pick up and move themselves and their families without much incentive; therefore, there is a sense of urgency to share the Gospel at every encounter. "We don't know if we'll have another opportunity. In two weeks, they may be gone, so we proclaim the basics, similar to what you would share with a child," Melissa explains. "We don't worry about being sophisticated — just proclaim a basic understanding of who God is. We share encouragement and teach them they are never alone. They are filled with the Holy Spirit!"

On the outskirts of Tijuana is the village of La Miseria — literally meaning "misery." There are no services — no electricity, no water, no churches, and "homes" are made of wooden garage doors and tarps over a dirt floor. The team has been working in La Miseria for more than three years. "We respond to their need and give them what they seek — a living and loving God who is powerful, who has given His Word to guide us, and His Word is true," Melissa shares. "This is great comfort for those who suffer."

Page 9: Deaconess Tere Montoya teaching on the outskirts of Tijuana.

Top: Deaconess Tere Montoya (left), Pastor Job Jimenez, and his wife, Diana (center with glasses), teaching children about Jesus.

Bottom: [left to right] Concordia Chula Vista Pastor Rev. Richard Schmidt, Elder Tony Pacheco, Vicar Sadoc Martínez, Deaconess Tere Montoya and Mrs. Lugo rolling burritos to distribute to people waiting outside the hospital. Only one person is allowed to accompany a loved one into the hospital. Family members will take turns, while others wait outside, sometimes overnight, to learn of the condition of the hospitalized. Some go hungry in order to save money for any medicines or care their loved ones might need. "People are very grateful to pray with us and their prayers are urgent. One woman I prayed with was just told her daughter did not make it. Most are afraid for their loved ones. It is one of our vital ministries," Melissa explains.

During the pandemic, their message didn't change, but the approach did. Tere began a cellphone ministry where she could send and receive messages of prayer around the clock. As businesses and schools closed, suddenly there were people literally starving — with no food for themselves or their families. “We had to be an organization of sustenance,” Melissa says. “We loaded up rice and beans and delivered them to people — on their doorstep. They’d be on the patio, and we’d pray with them. We also made copies of songs and Psalms, and coloring sheets for the children — whatever we could think of. We continued to work, and our witness continued to be a powerful one. When we have the opportunity to be with parents and children, we don’t take that opportunity lightly.”

After 25 years, God answered their prayers to grow the ministry beyond the Community Center. A small mission church — in affiliation with the Lutheran Synod in Mexico — was built 10 years ago, and a lay pastor has been serving the congregation for nearly five years. This past March, he was ordained as their first pastor. Now the outreach will continue for the next generation and beyond.

“The mission church is a place we can send people to grow and learn,” Melissa relates. “Now we can add Word and Sacrament. That was something we worked for all these years! We are so excited about that, because we’ve had to have guest pastors come in for communion, and we could only do that twice a year.”

“God has been so gracious to put us in partnership in this ministry, and I’m so grateful I got to be a part of it,” Melissa continues. “My commitment to the ministry in Tijuana is: I will retire when I go to heaven. This will not be something I ever retire from! We keep doing the same work we did 25 years ago. It’s just to different people. I love it! I’ve been so privileged to be a part of it and see what God has done.” *Q*



Learn more about *Mil Generaciones* on YouTube.

Melissa Salomón serves as Community Life Coordinator for Concordia Lutheran Church and School in Chula Vista, California. She has been involved in Hispanic ministry in the Los Angeles area and ministry across the border in Tijuana, Mexico, for more than 35 years. She considers it a special blessing to live on the border and be able to serve both countries. She has two adult children and is enjoying being a grandmother to Santiago Alejandro and Sofia Grace. She also has an artistic side and shares her faith through calligraphy lettering.

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**Linda Gage**  
[linda.gage@lfnd.org](mailto:linda.gage@lfnd.org)

**Carol von Soosten**  
[carol.vonsoosten@lfnd.org](mailto:carol.vonsoosten@lfnd.org)

**800.741.4138 | [lwmlgiftplan.org](http://lwmlgiftplan.org)**



Carol von Soosten

Linda Gage

