

From the Beach to the Church

by Dennis and Kyle Leon, with Paula J. Gillespie

As a young surfer in Costa Rica, Dennis Leon had numerous opportunities to live a destructive, self-indulgent life; God had other plans. Dennis grew up in Esterillos Oeste, a beach town – population 350, with one church and five bars. Dennis lived with his mother, grandmother and five older siblings. Looking back, Dennis says, “I grew up in what North and Central Americans consider extreme poverty, but I did not realize that. I would not change anything.” Dennis got his first pair of shoes, rubber boots, at age 6 so he could attend the two-room local elementary school. He excelled in school and attended high school in a nearby town. Dennis became proficient in English, and after graduation, secured a highly sought-after job as a tour guide.

Dennis often observed the “gringo” surfers who came to enjoy Costa Rica’s warm waves. He started surfing with his older brother and friends when he was 13. He witnessed them succumb to drugs and the party scene typical of that lifestyle.

Dennis made the Costa Rica National Surf Team for three consecutive years and was considered the “Best Latin American Surfer” at a world-qualifying contest in 2000.

One night, 17-year-old Dennis was on his way to the disco but paused in front of a church where several adults were holding a prayer service. He suddenly found himself asking Jesus to take away the emptiness and change his life.

Today, Dennis and his family are involved in a unique outreach ministry to transform Costa Rican communities.

Kyle Schmidt was born and raised in Santa Barbara, CA. The oldest of five, her family began attending the local Free Methodist Church when she was young. Kyle always sensed Jesus’ presence in her life. She was homeschooled in high school when the entire family moved to Esterillos, Costa

Rica, in 1999. Kyle’s dad had taken a teaching position at a boarding school. The Schmidt family met Dennis Leon, who helped them with the translation and transition that such an international move entails.

Kyle returned to Santa Barbara, and Dennis eventually followed her there. They married in 2002. Dennis started a Spanish language service at the Santa Barbara FMC, revived the local chapter of Christian Surfers, and took seminary classes while earning his psychology degree from Santa Barbara City College. Kyle earned her degree in communications at Westmont College. In 2005 their son, Elias, was born, and they bought a vacation house in Esterillos, Dennis’ hometown. This was the early unfolding of God’s work for them.

Kyle recalls, “Dennis and I would go to Costa Rica for a ‘vacation,’ but we ended up doing more ministry than anything else.” For one month every year, their house filled with friends and family. Dennis conducted impromptu Bible studies, and people returned the next night wanting more. The Leons observed that the youth of Esterillos lacked

healthy role models. Many lived in abusive family situations and had nowhere to go. After seeking God and the counsel of others, Dennis and Kyle started looking for ways to help address these needs. They sensed God’s call to move to Costa Rica full time and begin a ministry out of their home, offering safety and hope in Jesus.

In April 2009, backed by Volunteers in Service Abroad

(VISA) through FMWM, Dennis, a very pregnant Kyle, and Elias moved to Esterillos, Costa Rica. Arriving for Holy Week, they invited friends and family over to celebrate Easter Sunday at Pura Vida (Pure Life) Church Esterillos. The church was officially inaugurated in August 2009, a month after daughter Selah was born. With a handful of local youth, Dennis began a holistic discipleship program. The church



Holistic discipleship is making a difference in Costa Rican youth.



Dennis and Kyle, Elias and Selah Leon

grew as these boys brought their friends to church services. As the boys grew in their faith and knowledge of Christ, the doors opened to reach out in the neighboring area of Parrita, slightly inland and about 20 minutes south of Esterillos by car.

Parrita has one of the largest low-income housing projects in Costa Rica, with more than 800 homes. The area is prone to social problems of addiction, violence, unemployment and gangs. To reach young males, the most vulnerable of the neighborhood's population, the church opened Pura Vida Surf and Skate, a surfing and skating equipment store. This provided an avenue for relationship building with many youth and their families. Home Bible studies, tutoring and children's activities began. So began Pura Vida Church Parrita.

Currently, three youth live with and are supported by the Leon family and receive discipleship training. In addition, eight couples and 20 others are part of weekly study groups. Four more adults are in a pastoral training/discipleship track, and 15 more people are training to be leaders in Christian Surfers chapters across the country. Christian Surfers aims to "be a bridge from the beach to the church." Via this network, Pura Vida currently has a connection in ten coastal communities.

Currently 11 nations and four languages are represented at the three Pura Vida churches. Most services are in both Spanish and English, and language-specific small groups and Bible studies are conducted. Pura Vida Church yearns to see lives transformed for eternity, and understands part of eternity is the life that a transformed person will spend on earth.

Fifteen years ago, God transformed the life of a young surfer in Costa Rica. Now he and his family have the vision to restore hope – one individual, one family and one community at a time.

Pura Vida's presence brings life to small, coastal communities plagued with cycles of abuse, drugs, poverty and prostitution. These areas have often been overlooked by previous church-planting efforts because of their inability to sustain traditional churches due to their small size. The ministry of Pura Vida Church in Parrita, Esterillos and Tamrindo is to care for not only the spiritual, but also the physical and emotional, health of individuals. "Not only do we help restore people's relationship with their Heavenly Father through Jesus Christ as other churches in Costa Rica do, we also assist individuals, families and communities to improve their physical well-being through counseling, job training, microfinance, tutoring, scholarships, medical assistance, emergency aid and work opportunities. Through these ministries, many people have come to see the love of God in tangible ways," Dennis and Kyle write.

Opportunities to Support Pura Vida Church, Costa Rica

Give to Leon's Missionary Support Account of the Costa Rica Country Support Account

Online at: <https://give.fmcusa.org/>

Mail to: Free Methodist World Missions
770 N. High School Rd.
Indianapolis, IN 46214

(make checks payable to Free Methodist World Missions designated to "Leon-MSA.")

Serve

Projects for teams or individuals:

- Tutoring/mentoring
- Children's programs
- Construction teams
- Maintenance
- Microfinance/microenterprise development
- Community development classes
- State-side endorsements/cheerleading/representing
- Solar panels
- Playground equipment

Pray

Sign up for regular newsletters at:

<http://puravidachurch.com/connect/get-updates/>



Visit the Leon's website at <http://puravidachurch.com>
Go to <http://bit.ly/IZfeND> to find FM resources focused on sent.

