

DURAS

Elmer Martinez' tattoos once showed his loyalty to his gang. Now they are a barrier to employment — and place him at risk of an early, violent death.



This cemetery on the outskirts of San Pedro Sula is filled with fresh graves of young people killed by unidentified assassins, possibly by vigilantes who target suspected gang members.

Marked man

By Rachel Miller Moreland
Photographs by Paul Jeffrey

Elmer Martinez' past is literally written on his face. The "Sur 13" tattooed in black ink on his forehead stands for Sureños 13, a sub-group of one of Honduras' largest and most brutal street gangs.

Once, the tattoo was a sign of Martinez' commitment to a group that provided him with a sense of acceptance and identity, two things he never experienced in his own family. Now the letters are a reminder of the violence, drugs and despair that he is striving to leave behind.

Fear of an early death still follows him, as seemingly indelible as the ink under his skin. The tattoo marks Martinez as a target for "social cleansing brigades" and rival gangs and as an object of disgust to the general public. The gang, with its promise of protection and drug money, is a constant temptation.

Martinez, 24, is among dozens of former gang members finding hope through an MCC-supported program operated by the Honduran Mennonite Church's Peace and Justice ministry in the cities of San Pedro Sula and nearby La Ceiba. Through Bible study, service projects and constant encouragement, the program assists the young men as they attempt to reintegrate into the larger community. In one San Pedro Sula neighborhood, gang activity has almost ceased. The program can also help former gang members get rid of their biggest obstacle to acquiring jobs and safety — their gang tattoos — thanks to a recently-acquired tattoo-removal machine supplied by a U.S. church.

Martinez' story is similar to that of many other gang members, who now number 32,000 in Honduras, a country of 6.7 million. Raised on the outskirts of San Pedro Sula, a steamy, sprawling city in the tropics of northwest Honduras, he began "running wild in the streets," he says, after his father abandoned their family and there was no money for school fees.

In 1994, lonely and angry, Martinez joined the Sureños

13 and plunged into a world of crime and territorial battles. He brandished a "chimba" (homemade gun) and used and sold cocaine, marijuana and other drugs.

Gang membership was exploding all over Honduras and other parts of Central America in the 1990s, fueled in part by new U.S. laws that led to massive deportations from the United States of immigrants convicted of felonies. Young men who had spent most of their lives on the streets of Los Angeles and Washington, D.C., poured back into their homelands, bringing with them gang affiliations and networks for dealing in drugs and weapons. Their arrival coincided with new Honduran economic policies that slashed social services and plunged many Hondurans even further into poverty. For thousands of youth who awoke every day to a grim struggle to survive, the glamor of gang life proved irresistible.

This social explosion continues to devastate entire neighborhoods in Honduras. Parks and other public spaces become dangerous, graffiti-marred spots to avoid. Businesses shut down because suppliers and customers are afraid to enter gang territory. Children are afraid to walk to school.

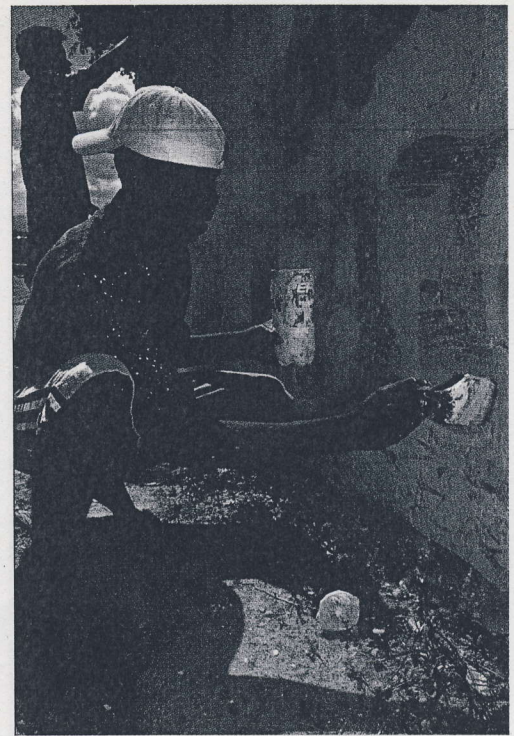
The gangs also leave their mark on individual lives. To prove his loyalty, Martinez had his gang's symbols tattooed on his face, hands and arms. Nearly all gang members in Honduras have tattoos, although not all tattoos are in such conspicuous places.

Eventually, Martinez' gang activities landed him a three-year prison sentence. Terrified at the brutality of prison life, he came face to face with the dead-end path he was traveling. When visiting pastors shared the Gospel, Martinez decided to give his life to Christ. Upon his release, his brother told him about the Peace and Justice program.

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HONDURAS

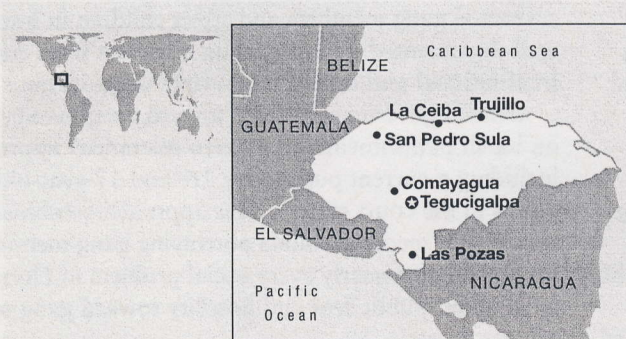
“A lot of gang members are tired of their style of life, of being afraid all the time,” says Denis Mata, who oversees the Honduran Mennonite Church’s gang ministry in San Pedro Sula. “But to change their lives they need support. They need someone to pay attention to them.”



Former gangster Javier Witi paints a wall covered with gang graffiti. The Honduran Mennonite Church coordinates community service projects like this one to help reformed gang members rebuild trust in their neighborhoods.

the program in Lopez Arellano, Martinez’ neighborhood in San Pedro Sula city. “But to change their lives they need support. They need someone to pay attention to them.”

For Martinez and many others, the program has provided that support. Begun in 1998 at the request of local Mennonite pastors whose congregants were afraid to travel to and from church because of gang violence, the program is a haven for those who want to leave the gangs.



HONDURAS AT A GLANCE

Population	6.7 million
Area	112,090 sq km (twice the size of Nova Scotia or slightly larger than Tennessee)
Per capita GDP	45,713 Honduran lempiras (\$3,444 Cdn. / \$2,600 U.S.)
Life expectancy	67 years
Literacy rate	76 percent
Languages	Spanish, Amerindian dialects
Religions	Roman Catholic 97 percent Protestant minority (including 20,716 Mennonite, Brethren in Christ and related church members)

SOURCES: WORLD FACT BOOK, MENNONITE WORLD CONFERENCE

Participants build relationships through weekly Bible studies, community service projects, activities such as soccer and workshops on nonviolent conflict resolution, communication, employment and sexuality.

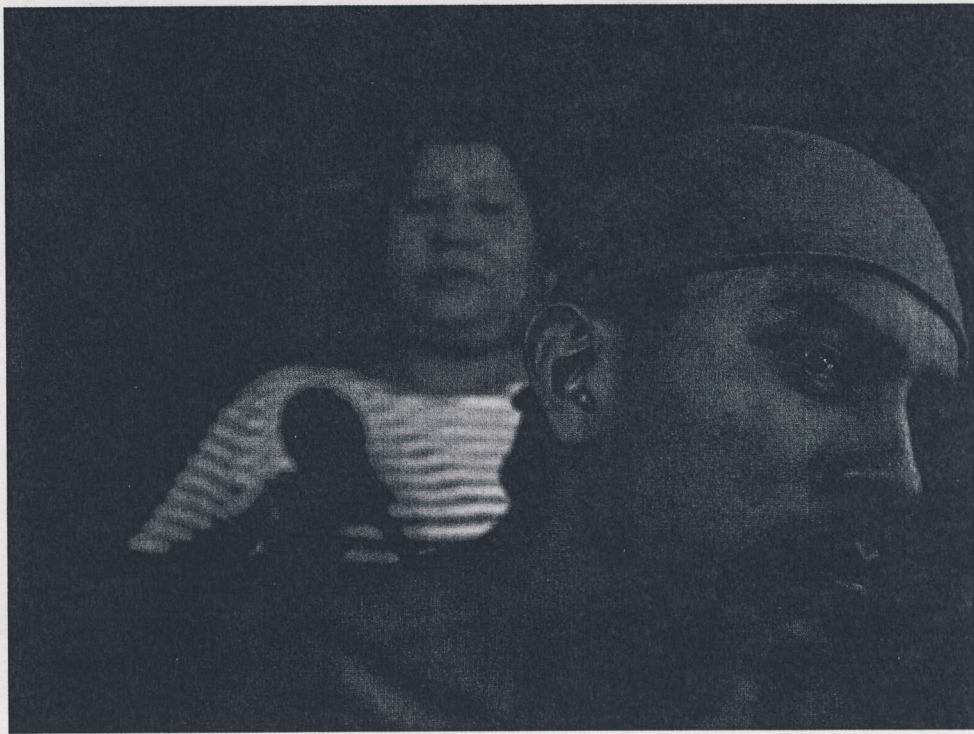
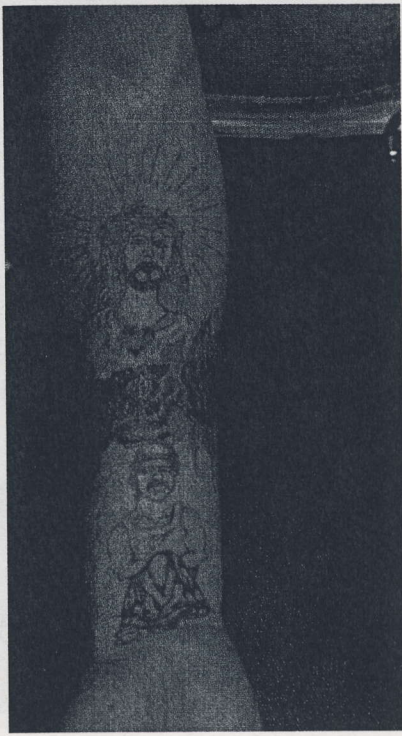
Staff members including Mata and MCC worker Ricardo Torres, program coordinator, encourage participants as they make sometimes painful changes. For many of the youth from broken homes like Martinez’ — and such homes are common in the slums of Honduras’ large cities, where rapid urbanization and intense poverty devastate family and social structures — this is the first time an adult male has shown an interest in their lives.

Last year, the program worked with some 100 youth. In addition to assisting former gang members in Lopez Arellano, staff members reach out to children in another neighborhood with activities designed to prevent them from joining gangs. More recently, the program also began working with gang members in two prisons in La Ceiba.

Program organizers face an uphill battle. Few jobs are available in Honduras, and gang members — whether or not they’ve reformed — are not at the top of the hiring

HISTORY IN BRIEF

Maya settlements dating back to at least 1000 BC can be found at Copán, western Honduras. These city-states were mysteriously abandoned around 900 AD. In 1502 Christopher Columbus arrived at Trujillo, naming the area Honduras, Spanish for “depths” because of the deep water off the Caribbean coast.



Jimi Jeancarlos Machuca endures the painful process of having gang tattoos burned off his back. Nurse Sonya Reyes, a technical adviser to the Honduran Mennonite Church tattoo removal program, uses infrared light to sear away the ink-filled skin cell.

list. Young men are routinely asked to remove their shirts at job interviews to be checked for tell-tale tattoos.

Martinez, who is unemployed, admits that worries over money and the seeming hopelessness of finding a job are what most tempt him to re-join the gang. At these times, he is sustained by his love for his 2-year-old daughter and his dream of helping neighborhood youth avoid gangs.

“I don’t want them to go through what I’ve gone through,” he says.

While Martinez has escaped the daily violence of gang life, he remains at risk. He and others rejecting gang life face reprisals from their former fellow gang members, who consider them traitors. “Enemy” gangs are also a threat. Of the 35 original participants in the program, 10 have died violently. Of last year’s 100 participants, only 75 survive.

“I know I’m in danger,” Martinez says. “When it’s necessary to leave my neighborhood, I put on gloves and a hat and ask Denis to come with me.”

Youth with gang tattoos are also at risk from shadowy “social cleansing” brigades — which, according to a 2002 United Nations report, often include Honduran police offi-

cers. Dissatisfied with official efforts to end gang activities, these vigilantes want to do away with gang members by whatever means necessary. The brigades have murdered suspected gang members and street children in hundreds of well-documented cases, drawing attention from Amnesty International and other human right organizations.

Official government policy toward gang members relies on harsh punishment and a “zero tolerance” approach, including a current push to try 16- and 17-year-olds as adults in the court system. This approach combined with sensational media accounts portraying gang members as responsible for nearly every social problem in Honduras have raised public fear and hostility toward gang members to near-hysteria.

Mata and Torres say the growing hostility and emphasis on force rather than on addressing what they see as the root causes of gang activity — disintegrating families, poverty, few jobs — is one of the most discouraging aspects of their work.

But they are motivated to continue when they see how the program is changing lives. Last year former members

1537

Spain establishes a capital at Comayagua.

1570

Gold and silver are discovered near Tegucigalpa, attracting British and Dutch pirates.

Sept. 15, 1821

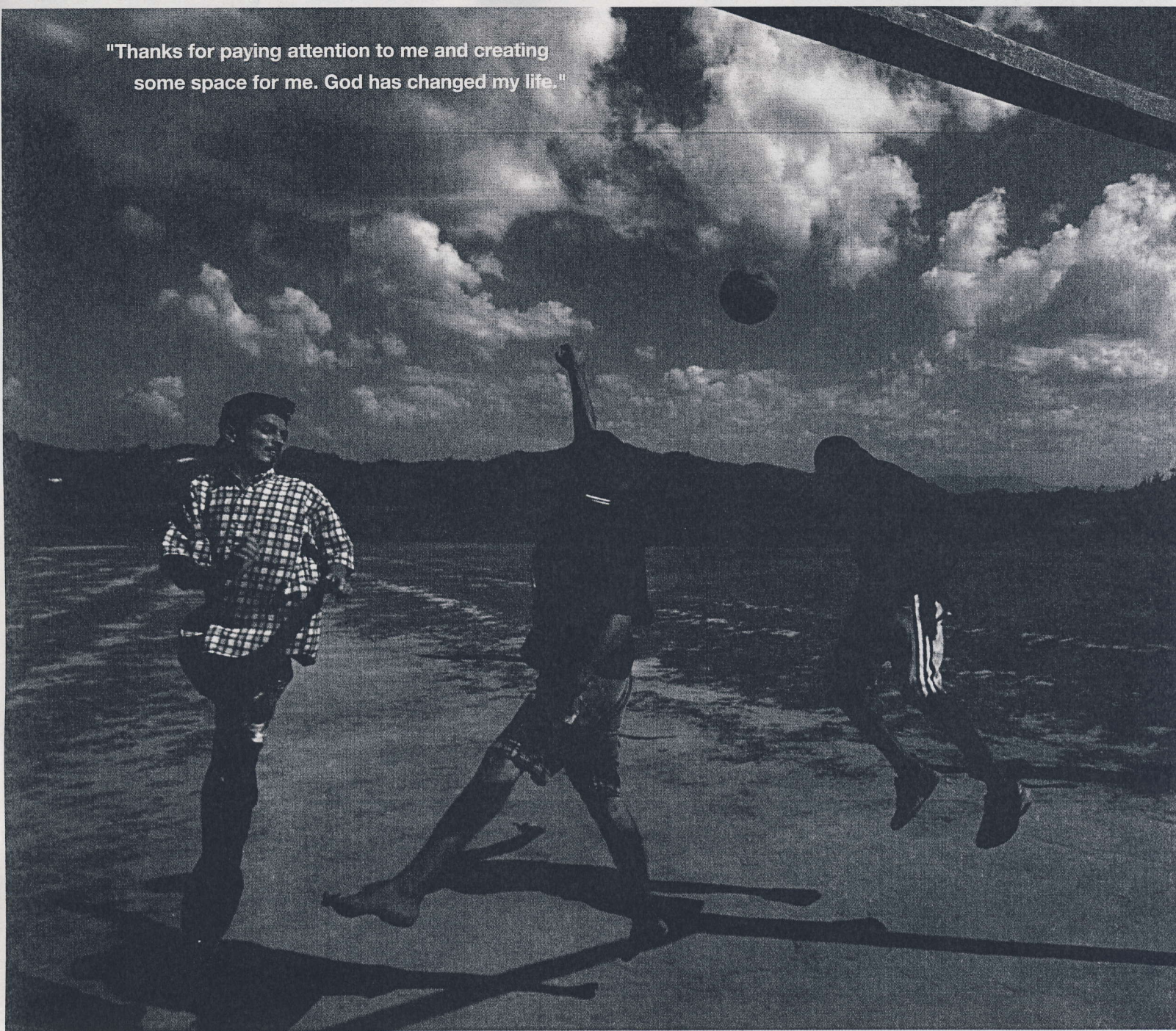
Honduras declares its independence from Spain.

★ ★ ★

Nov. 5, 1838

Honduras becomes an independent republic. Military governments predominate in following years.

"Thanks for paying attention to me and creating some space for me. God has changed my life."



of two enemy gangs who had participated in program activities helped mediate a peace agreement; gang activity has now all but ceased in the Lopez Arellano neighborhood. The agreement was the result of two years of working with the young men on issues of forgiveness and nonviolence as well as analyzing the roots of the conflict.

"Before they were killing each other," Mata says. "Now they're playing soccer together."

Torres describes meeting a former program participant.

"Today I am working in a factory," the young man told him. "I tell my co-workers there that I was once a gang member, but thanks be to God and some good friends I have left that behind me."

"Thanks for paying attention to me and creating some space for me," he continued. "God has changed my life."

Mata and Torres are also pleased when they see how the program's service projects help former gang members rebuild trust with neighbors.

Late 19th century

U.S. companies buy land for huge banana plantations that still operate today.

1969

Honduras and El Salvador clash in a 100-hour war, sparked by

Honduras' alleged mistreatment of Salvadoran immigrants.

1981

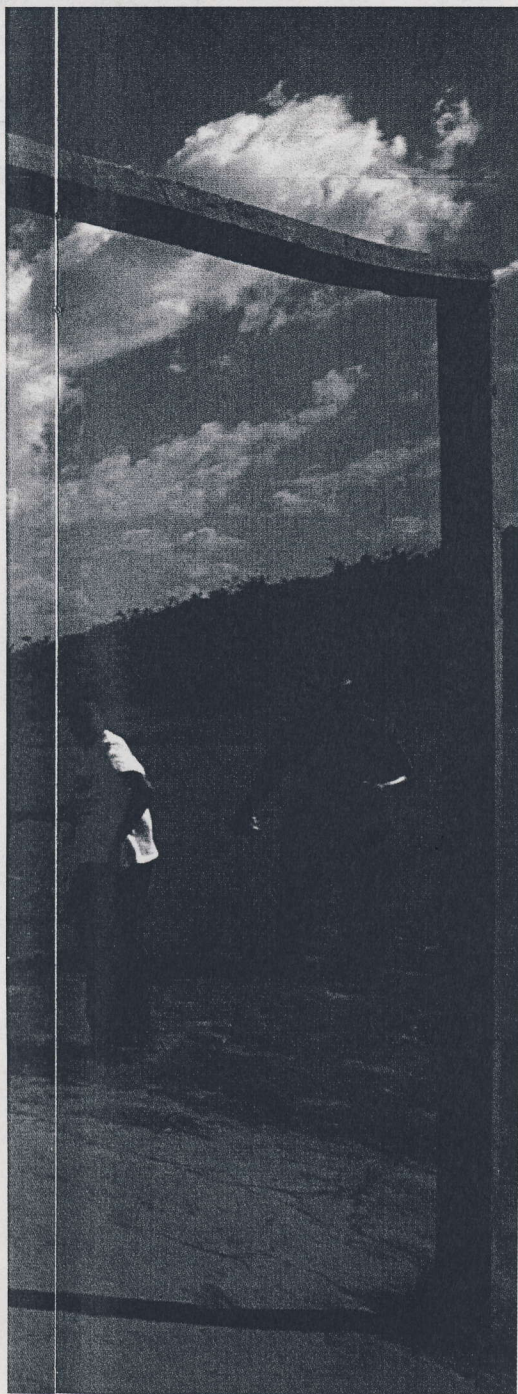
First elections in nearly 20 years. Civilian presidential elections are now held every four years.

1980s

U.S.-backed Contra rebels in neighboring Nicaragua use Honduras as a base.

1990

Government introduces structural adjustment, an economic plan that follows International Monetary Fund



Former enemy gang members compete in a soccer game, part of a local Mennonite church program to involve former gang members in peaceful activities.

“We use the youths’ own ideas about what projects to do,” Mata says. “They’re cleaning the walls they used to mark up with gang graffiti. They are

cleaning up the park, the cemetery, the school. The community sees this work and is grateful.”

Thanks to a recent gift from Whitehall (Pa.) Mennonite Church — a tattoo-removal machine, one of only seven in Honduras — program participants now have a chance to remove their most visible barrier to restored relationships and employment.

In the meantime, Martinez and other gang members have new hope as they strive to overcome the memories

MCC IN HONDURAS

MCC workers entered Honduras in 1981 to help with housing at Mesa Grande, a refugee camp for Salvadorans. After the Honduran Mennonite Church formed a Social Action Commission in 1984, MCC volunteers began working alongside Honduran Mennonites to promote health, education and development in poor communities.

From 1990 and 1995, MCC volunteers also served in the Mosquitia area, teaching at a technical school and working with public health, wells and latrines. After Hurricane Mitch devastated Honduras in 1998, MCC provided relief aid valued at more than \$7.8 million Cdn./\$5.9 million U.S. Some of this money and MCC-organized Work and Learn teams, made up of short-term volunteers, helped rebuild 500 houses.

Currently, MCC works with Honduran Mennonite Church Peace and Justice programs, including gang rehabilitation, and with natural disaster preparedness. MCC also assists Honduran Brethren in Christ Church community development work, including water programs in southern Honduras.

Program budget for 2004: \$265,000 Cdn./\$200,000 U.S.

Personnel: 9

that will remain even after the tattoos are gone.

When the fear and discouragement become overwhelming, Martinez says, he reflects on one of his favorite Bible verses, Joshua 1:9: “Be strong and courageous. Do not be terrified; do not be discouraged, for the Lord your God will be with you.”

“Yes, God is with me,” he concludes. “I don’t have to be afraid.” ■

Rachel Miller Moreland is an MCC writer. Paul Jeffrey is a free-lance photographer based in Tegucigalpa, Honduras.

	1995	1998	Today
reforms for indebted countries. Inflation soars while wages remain low. Many are left jobless.	Forced military recruitment is abolished. Honduran Mennonites are instrumental in bringing about this change.	Hurricane Mitch devastates Honduras, killing more than 5,600 people and causing at least \$1 billion U.S. in damage.	Honduras is one of the poorest countries in Latin America. Seventy to 80 percent of the population live in poverty; 40 percent live on less than \$1 per day. Rural families are migrating to urban areas in search of a better life. Many Hondurans are risking the dangerous journey through Mexico to enter the United States illegally.