

- Works of Evangelism
- Establishing Churches
- Equipping Nationals

April 2025



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A palpable energy filled the church auditorium as I approached the pulpit for my last message at the missions conference at Calvary Baptist Church in Midland, MI, on Wednesday, March 19. Over the past four days, I had spoken nine times, six at the church, twice at their Christian school, plus a television interview. I was passionately hammering out the theme, "Your Missionary Family," in which I was challenging the church to be everything we can be here, so we can be what we need to be over there, the vast and varied mission fields of the world. The days had been a tapestry of joy and purpose. Reconnecting with dear friends, sharing stories of faith, and spending time with EMU missionaries Tim and Cheryl Chapman and their family brought a sense of warmth and camaraderie that only deepened my resolve for the final message. I began with a question as old as the Great Commission itself: "Where will we find the next generation of pastors, missionaries, and Christian workers?" The answer is closer than we think. If we want to mobilize the next generation of church leaders, we must seriously pursue an inside-out approach locally if we are going to make a difference globally. I titled the message, "Homegrown Heroes." It's a phrase that conjures images of quiet yet profound determination—ordinary men and women who rise from the very soil beneath our feet to become catalysts for extraordinary change. The heart of global missions beats strongest where local faith flourishes.

When EMU International was founded in 1946, its focus on Uruguay reflected the seeds of transformation planted in a single nation. Decades later, as our ministry expanded its reach to eleven countries, the mission remains steadfast: to strengthen and support the Church both locally and globally. Prior to my trip to Michigan, I had spent a busy seventeen days, rubbing shoulders with a group of these heroes in Uruguay.

Dr. Bill Hill, executive director of Equipping Nationals Worldwide, and I flew from Asheville, NC, to Uruguay on February 21. This was Bill's fifteenth time traveling to Uruguay and my tenth. We had never traveled at the same time, so last year I set in motion a plan for the two of us to travel for our Annual Workers' Conference. We spoke ten times on the theme, "Let Us Encourage One Another." It was our desire to come alongside these precious workers, not as experts, but fellow servants who understand some of the challenges they face in their ministries. We wanted to support and uplift each one of them and provide materials that would be helpful and worth sharing with their congregations.

We each had five opportunities to speak on themes such as perseverance, ecclesiology, prayer, stress, evangelism, and theology proper. I also had the privilege of having one-on-one conversations with each of our workers. It is always a joy to hear updates on their families and their ministries.

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Pedro Donz , picked us up at the Carrasco International Airport in Montevideo, on Saturday morning. Customs was a breeze for both of us. I was a little concerned as I had a suitcase full of homeschool material for the Espinel family and batteries for cordless drills that Rick Jensen had sent for our camp maintenance staff. We stopped for a delicious lunch at a restaurant that Gaby Gomez, one of our pastors had recommended. We sampled several different milenesas (pounded, breaded, and fried cutlets of meat) which when coupled with a long flight through the night, made for a sleepy afternoon when we arrived at camp. I would have loved to have taken a nap, but I had to prepare for the messages I would preach in a couple of churches the next day. Bill remained at the camp and connected with Pastor Carlos Olivera, his wife Mabel, and Carlos and Beatriz Alberti. Saturday evening, Pedro drove me to Montevideo to meet Chicha Rodriguez as we had bus tickets for a 6 1/2 hour trip to Rivera, a town on the Uruguay-Brazil border. This was my first time on a bus in Uruguay. It was surprisingly comfortable. We arrived at 1:30 am and were greeted by Pastor Pablo Billafan and his wife Cristina.

Sunday was a great day of ministry and fellowship as Chicha and I ministered at the church at Rivera Chico in the morning and then at Calvary Temple with Pastor Pablo on Sunday night. It was exciting to see the growth in this ministry that is celebrating 55 years in its current building. Pablo's son Anderson does a tremendous job leading the music. Before Chicha and I caught our bus back to Montevideo that left at midnight, we enjoyed a delicious meal and time of fellowship with the Billafans.

The ride through the night was on an even nicer bus than the one the day before. I don't sleep well on planes and buses, but this one had Wi-Fi, and I was able to work some and catch a few winks before we arrived at 6:30 am. We were met at the Tres Cruces bus terminal by Matias Espinel and Marcos Gomez, Pedro's assistant at Campamento Emanuel. We dropped Chicha off at her house and then headed to camp. Marcos made a quick stop at one of the biggest and nicest Starbucks I have ever seen. Monday then was a day of preparation for the upcoming Workers Conference.



The camp was in excellent condition as this summer they celebrated its 50th Anniversary. We all enjoyed the fruit of labor by Rick's work team back in August and the excellent maintenance staff. Henry Castro has served as our camp caretaker for the past several years. He and Pedro are already putting together a project plan for another work trip next August. If you are interested in more information on how you can join this work trip or be a blessing to our camp financially, please shoot me an email at jeff@emuinternational.org.

One of the exciting additions at camp is a new maintenance helper, Josue Mendez, the nephew of our mission evangelist Juan Gonzalez. He and his wife Katha are now living in the casita. They have added a fence around the property and have added a personal touch. They moved from Treinta y Tres about six months ago. Josue's background is in automobile restoration, but he is a quick learner and each of our staff members talked about how grateful they were to have his help. Katha works in a nearby town as a teacher.



On Wednesday and Thursday, Bill and I split time speaking two sessions in the mornings and one at night. Before arriving, we sent notes to Pedro that he had translated into Spanish. I used much of my free time to use the notes to convert my PowerPoint slides to Spanish. We also enjoyed spending some of our time in small group study.

Tuesday morning, our workers started arriving and joyful hugs and Uruguayan kisses were exchanged by all. I welcomed the group and then began the first session with an encouragement to "Persevere Despite the Obstacles." John Mark Steel was a huge blessing as he translated for the entire week. The first day, we had a session in the morning and a session in the evening. That gave me plenty of time for interviews with the different workers. I was encouraged to hear how most of the churches are doing a good job of caring for their pastors. All of our pastors are now supported by their churches except one. Most of our churches are also turning their attention outward with a focus on global and local missions. We are praying that God will raise a generation of homegrown heroes in each of our ministries.

For these camps, the pastors always take advantage of the opportunity to spend time together in prayer and discussion. I had a profitable meeting with all of our pastors during the afternoon as we talked about future ministry leaders and how we as an association of churches and pastors can work together. I was excited to learn that each of our churches has students in our Bible Institute which is led by John Mark Steel. The Bible Institute has 34 students enrolled this semester and FEBU, our Bible college that is a cooperative effort with several other fundamental mission boards has 21 students. Matias Espinel is the director of that ministry. I was encouraged to hear how Pastor Ovidio in El Cerro who recently retired is shepherding his church through a pastoral transition. They still don't have a new pastor, but the focus is on younger men in the congregation who are empowered to preach and lead. Though Pastor Carlos Olivera in Pando hasn't officially retired yet, he is doing the same with some of his young men. The other pastors are also working with young men and giving them more opportunities to speak.

We concluded the workers' conference on Friday morning so those traveling would have plenty of time to return to their respective ministries. Friday afternoon was catch-up time for Bill and me as our email inboxes were overflowing. I then turned my attention to preparations for my presentations the next week. Heroes come in all shapes and sizes. Pedro could not do what he does without the help of his wife Patricia who spent much of her time in the kitchen preparing the delicious meals. Maxi, their six-foot, six-inch son who wears a size 14 shoe, is studying at the university, but he also was around much of the time to help. Sunday was a full day. Matias Rios and his wife Sara, daughter of Carlos and Beatriz, took Bill and me into Montevideo for the Sunday morning service at Calvary Temple. We were greeted by Pastor Gustavo, his wife Alejandra, and a familiar group of ministry friends. Matias leads the sound and technology ministry and his brother and sister-in-law, Luis and Ruth, help lead the music ministry. The song service was energetic and worshipful with a healthy blend of new and old hymns. Bill preached and Sara did an outstanding job translating. At the end of the service, we were privileged to celebrate the Lord's Supper. Following a delicious lunch at the church, Pedro picked up Chicha and me and drove us three hours to Calvary Temple in Durazno.

We were greeted by Pastor Jose Kowalczyk. He will be 82 years old in April. He officially retired last year but is still carrying the burden of much of the ministry. He has two wonderful families that the church has empowered to take leadership. We enjoyed a delightful time of worship as I spoke, and Chicha translated again for me. Following the service, I met with the entire church family to discuss future plans for the ministry. After a light dinner, we returned to camp and arrived around 1 am.

Family Camp began on Monday morning, with a decent size group of over 60 participants. This was Bill's last day in Uruguay, so he preached two practical messages on the family. At teatime at 6 pm, the kitchen workers prepared tortas fritas, those chewy and delicious snacks made from fried dough which are like a hug from the heart of Uruguay. Pair them up with a scoop of dulce de leche and you will want to move to Uruguay as a missionary. The crew filled a sack for Bill to take with him on the airplane. After he finished his last message, he was given a Camp Emanuel tee shirt with his name on the back and the number 50 for the 50th anniversary of the camp.



I preached the remaining eight sessions over the next four days. My subject was "Your Missionary Family," the same subject I preached in Michigan. I added a challenging biographical sermon on "The Family Legacy of Faith of Adoniram Judson." Matias Acevedo, nephew of Pastor Ovidio Acevedo, translated for us all week. He pastors Iglesia Biblica La Tuna, about twenty minutes from our camp.

The temperatures for the week were very hot with daily heat indexes over 100 degrees. For the last couple of days, we moved our sessions into the dining room because it has air conditioning. I was also honored with a 50th-anniversary tee shirt with my name.

For our last weekend, Chicha and I were with Pastor Alberto Diaz and his wife Carolina at Emanuel Church in San Fernando. Leading the music was Pastor Pablo's son Jefferson who is married to Aleberto's daughter Analía. Along with their son Ivan, we enjoyed a delicious lunch at the Pastor's house.



They have added a few classic pieces of furniture that they rescued from the EMU Mission House before we sold it last year. Later that afternoon we drove a couple of miles away where we spoke at Iglesia Cristiana Emanuel of Mont Grande. Pastor Jose's sister Zulma is married to the pastor, Carlos Lopez and his brother Alejandro goes to that church. We then drove with Pastor Alberto to another church that he is helping which is without a pastor, Iglesia Bautista Ebenezer in Las Piedras, north of Montevideo. We then drove back to Chicha's house and Pedro picked me up to stay with him for my last night in Uruguay. My return flight left on Monday night.

As I reflect on my seventeen days in Uruguay, I echo Paul's sentiment when he expressed his love for the Philippian believers in chapter 1 verse 7, "I have you in my heart." I celebrate these Homegrown Heroes, many of whom are now with the Lord, such as Fred and Seva Dabold, and George and Marilyn Jensen. We had a lady at our family camp named Mercedes who is over 100 years old. She was led to Christ many years ago under the ministry of Ursula Thiesen who went to Heaven this past year. Our ministry in Uruguay has a heritage of faithfulness, but there is also tremendous hope for the future as we focus on raising that next generation of Homegrown Heroes.

A week earlier, just before he left Uruguay, I asked Bill Hill, what encouraged him the most from this trip. He mentioned the number of pastors who are intentionally working to train the next generation. He mentioned Gaby Gomez, Gustava De Oliveira, and Rubito Rodriguez who shared with him how they are working with young men and how they are using Bill's materials. He was especially encouraged by our youngest pastor, Nico Gomez, who serves in Tacuarembó. Nico is 38 years old, and he already is trying to train his people to think this way. He has requested more materials from Bill that he can use in his ministry.



"Homegrown Heroes." It's a phrase that conjures images of quiet yet profound determination—ordinary men and women who rise from the very soil beneath our feet to become catalysts for extraordinary change. The heart of global missions beats strongest where local faith flourishes. To view photos from Jeff's trip and to listen to the message "Homegrown Heroes," follow this link: <https://emuinternational.org/uruguay2025/>



As I write this letter, our hearts are heavy with the news of the devastating wildfires in the Table Rock region currently raging in upstate South Carolina, which have consumed over 12,000 acres, making it the largest mountain wildfire in South Carolina's history. The fires are fueled by debris left from Hurricane Helene in September 2024, which created an abundance of dry timber and vegetation. Strong winds, low humidity, and dry conditions have exacerbated the spread. The fires were ignited by human activity, with some linked to negligence by teenage hikers. Despite the efforts of over 550 firefighters and the deployment of specialized equipment, including Very Large Air Tankers (VLAT) capable of dropping thousands of gallons of flame retardant, containment remains challenging. Evacuation orders are in place for hundreds of residents.

Governor Henry McMaster has urged prayers for rain and reminded residents of the burn ban in effect.

Thankfully, the weather forecast for Monday, March 31, 2025, brings a glimmer of hope. Rain is expected, with a high chance of showers throughout the day. This reminds me of Zechariah 10:1, where God encourages His people to seek Him for rain: "Ask rain from the Lord in the season of the spring rain, from the Lord who makes the storm clouds, and he will give them showers of rain, to everyone the vegetation in the field." This verse is not just about literal rain; it's a metaphor for God's abundant blessings and the spiritual revival that comes when His people turn to Him. It beautifully underscores the relationship between divine provision and human dependence on God.

As we anticipate the rain that will bring relief to the fires, we also pray for the spiritual "rain" of God's blessings upon our missionaries and their work. Simply put, we need God's blessing. We must have God's blessing. As rain nourishes the earth, we ask God to refresh and sustain His servants as they labor in the harvest fields. Please pray with us that His blessings will flow abundantly, bringing renewal to the lives they touch.

Thank you once again for your faithful partnership in this ministry. Your prayers and support are a vital part of the work we do, and we are deeply grateful for your commitment to the cause of Christ.

April

- 5-8 Trinity Baptist, Williston, VT
- 12-14 Faith Baptist, Danville, IL
- 20 _____ Easter (Open)
- 27 _____ (Open)

May

- 4 Reedy Creek, Lexington, NC
- 11 _____ Mothers Day (Open)
- 18-21 Calvary Bible, Berkley Springs, WV
- 25 Family Baptist, Minneapolis, MI
- 29-31 Fellowship Baptist, WI - Family Camp

June

- 1 Fellowship Baptist, WI
- 8 _____ (Open) Greenville Area
- 15 _____ (Open) Greenville Area
- 22 _____ (Open) Greenville Area
- 29 Victory Baptist, Port Charlotte, FL

SCHEDULE

Congratulations to Caleb & Jamie as they are expecting a new addition this summer!





Congratulations to our son-in-law, Caleb Prigge as he graduates with his MDiv. in May. Please pray for our daughter Abby's family as they move to Minneapolis where Caleb has accepted a call to serve on the pastoral staff at Fourth Baptist Church.

