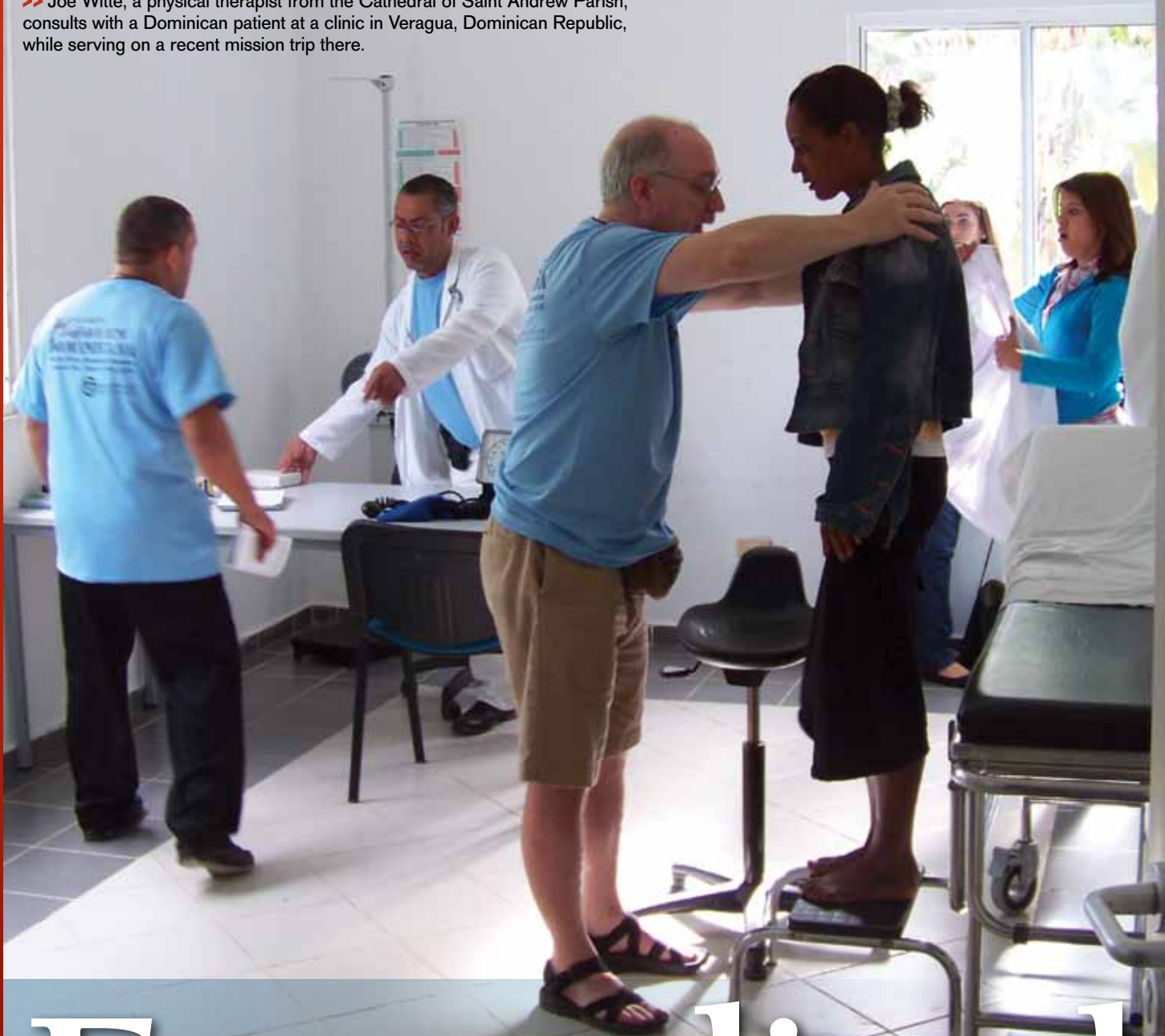


>> Joe Witte, a physical therapist from the Cathedral of Saint Andrew Parish, consults with a Dominican patient at a clinic in Veragua, Dominican Republic, while serving on a recent mission trip there.



Evangelized

Joe Witte thought he had lots of reasons why he couldn't go on a mission trip to the Dominican Republic – "I don't have a passport. I don't know Spanish. I'm too old to go..." When the 56-year-old physical therapist realized he was allowing excuses to get in the way of serving God, he removed them by deciding to just go for it.

by the poor:
A mission to the Dominican Republic

By Meredith Walsh-Beteta
 Photos courtesy of Father Joaquim Lally, C.S.P.

In March, Witte and ten others from the Diocese of Grand Rapids accompanied Father Joachim Lally, Paulist priest and associate pastor of the Cathedral of Saint Andrew, on a nine-day mission trip to the city of Cabarete (pron. Ca-bah-reh-tay), just east of Puerto Plata on the Dominican Republic's northern coast. The mission trip team, which included parishioners of the cathedral and students from Aquinas College and Grand Valley State University (GVSU), was the guest of Bishop Julio César Corniel Amaro of the Diocese of Puerto Plata. St. Luke University Parish in Allendale, was a main sponsor of the trip.

"I heard about the mission trip one Sunday while attending the student Mass held here on campus," said Bridget Tiffany, a GVSU student. She and fellow GVSU student Jen Butts collected financial contributions in support of the mission as well as donations in the form of hospital and school supplies, shoes and t-shirts.

While this trip was a first for most of the participants, Father Lally has traveled extensively to the Dominican Republic over the years, contributing good works in almost every part of the island nation. This trip marked his thirty-seventh mission and fiftieth visit there.

"I think that the main thing," said Father Lally, of why he feels people should participate in mission trips, "is to have a consciousness of how people in the third world live and that they have little in material possessions."

Comforting those in need

Upon their arrival in the Dominican Republic, Father Lally's group, along with 11 volunteers from Santo Domingo, were divided into three teams – construction, schools and medical – to do mission work for some of the area's neediest people.

The medical team worked with local doctors and nurses, who were also volunteers. Together, they were able to see 1,700 patients at two free clinics. Eighty people received



>> Helping to paint a house in the Dominican Republic are (far left) Nolan Miklusicak, from the Cathedral of Saint Andrew Parish; (third from left) Kristen Hayes, from St. Luke University Parish; and Bridget Tiffany (far right), also from St. Luke University Parish.



>> Miklusicak (on ladder), Mike Walton, from St. Luke University Parish and a Dominican missionary paint a house in the mountains of Pallio in the Dominican Republic.

physical therapy from Witte who saw patients for soft tissue or joint massage, providing comfort, relief and relaxation for people in pain.

“I was honored to receive the gifts of smiles, food and prayers so generously bestowed on us by the people we went to serve,” Witte said. “It was a prayerful and enlightening experience that was beneficial to my own spiritual growth while we ministered to and with some of the poorest of God’s people.”

During the first two days of the mission Butts and Tiffany assisted the medical group providing translation and acting as a go-between for nurses and doctors, as they assisted patients and wrote prescriptions. Tiffany helped distribute medication to patients. The women then joined the construction group, working in small villages in the mountains outside Cabarete.

“Every morning we carried our supplies up the dirt trails, and through and across small rivers to get to the neighborhoods,” Tiffany said.

The construction group went into the mountains to paint and perform other basic repairs and upgrades; in fact according to Witte “twenty six houses, a chapel, and a school,” received some kind of TLC.

The school team distributed supplies and even taught lessons to the children, which “brought much joy and delight,” said Witte, “(And) we visited a few orphanages and made hundreds of balloon creations during our week-long stay.”

A transforming experience

Although the Dominican people have little in the way of money or material possessions, it was evident to mission team members that they are a people rich in spirituality, Witte said.

Other members of the mission agreed.

“The people of the Dominican Republic shared their simple and wholesome lifestyle, positive attitude, and strong faith,” Tiffany added.

“After this experience I have come to understand that those lacking faith, simplicity, love, happiness, and community are truly those who are less fortunate,” she said.

“I think it was just a really eye-opening experience,” said Butts, of the mission trip, “and it was so great to work with the Dominican people.



>> Aquinas College student Lydia Good (far right) and Jennifer Butts (second from right) from Grand Valley State University worked with this medical missionary team serving in the Dominican Republic.



>> Dominican children wait for treatment inside the clinic in Veragua, Dominican Republic.

They were the kindest, happiest people I have ever met, and I’ve done lots of volunteer work.”

Participants in the mission returned with a new sense of faith and spirituality, said Father Lally.

“The poor will always evangelize you,” he added. “They teach the real gospel

because they’re put in real situations where they must trust in Jesus.”

For more information about how you can be of service to the people of the Dominican Republic, please contact Father Joachim Lally, 616.456.1454 or joachim@cathedralofsaintandrew.org