

The Wellness Journey of Pastor Matias & Pastor Martina



Pastor Matias Antonio Bonilla Rivera was born February 24, 1960.

In January 1981, at the age of 21, Pastor Matias was horrified when government forces murdered a local priest who was said to be very much like Oscar Romero. Most of the townspeople fled to the mountains and Matias joined the FMLN army.*

On June 10, 1984, as he was walking in line with the army, he was hit with a grenade that seriously damaged the right side of his chest. A backpack saved his life when the explosion which thrust him backward kept him from hitting his head on a large rock. He spent the night outside but changed his clothing in the morning and managed to get on a bus, even though he didn't have any money. When he got off the bus, he started looking for members of his family. After ten days, a woman from church recognized him and helped him escape from the National Police. The woman brought him some of his personal items.

On October 1, 1984 he awoke in an urban hospital with his entire family crying at his bedside. At this time he met Medardo Gomez, a Lutheran pastoral candidate, who cared for him.

On November 20, 1984, he underwent surgery on his upper right ventricle, since that area of the lung was not functioning, according to the doctor in charge of his care. When the sutures were removed eight days later, it was discovered that a surgical sponge had been left inside and had caused an infection. At that time they took him back into surgery and put in a catheter to allow the site to drain. Matias suffered six months with the catheter prior to its removal.

The mother, father, and sister of Matias were refugees and lived in a Lutheran refugee camp. In May 1985, Matias was confirmed as a Lutheran.

During the war Matias was imprisoned and tortured with the blunt end of a gun causing further injury to his right side. He left prison on his birthday, February 24, 1987 and sought exile in Nicaragua. In June 1987 the International Red Cross flew him to Moscow for medical treatment. Afterwards he went to Cuba for seven months with just a guitar and a small suitcase. He returned to Nicaragua in December 1987 and remained there until 1991.

Martina also experienced extreme hardship during the war. Her mother and the father of her children were killed on the same day, and the homes of various family members were burned.

In 1988 Matias was working as a custodian in a church and had to fill in for the pastor. During the winter of 2002 Pastor Matias suffered several bouts of pneumonia and bronchitis. In 2004 he was formally diagnosed with asthma and Chronic Obstructive Pulmonary Disease. In 2010 his conditions worsened and he was critically ill for 15 days.

On October 4, 2016 he suffered a further crisis of pneumonia which required that he use oxygen even after returning home. He experienced a lot of pain, and the low oxygen levels made it difficult for him to preach, play the guitar and sing.



By 2022 it became more and more difficult for him to breathe, and he was repeatedly admitted to the hospital for antibiotic treatments. In 2023 the old wound opened and liquid seeped out. It was getting more and more difficult to find antibiotic treatment that could help him.

Pastors Matias and Martina were miraculously able to obtain a medical visa to come to Mayo Clinic, and on June 28, 2025 he arrived in Chicago. They were greeted by Pastors Kristian and Anna-Kari Johnson, who have supported their various ministries for many years.

Matias underwent a comprehensive visit on June 2 and 3, 2025, at the Mayo Clinic in Rochester, MN. On July 7 they met with the surgeon, Dr. Stephen Cassivi, who agreed to fit Matias into his incredibly busy schedule in order to perform this life-saving surgery. On July 10 he underwent a 13 hour surgery which reconstructed his right lung cavity. The wound was left open and the doctors performed 4 separate debridements and irrigation of the large incision. On July 22, the surgical site was closed with an additional surgery which lasted eight hours. Four days later he was released from the hospital and went to the Nazarene Well House in Rochester to be close to medical care, as needed, while he recuperated.

Upon the release of Matias from the hospital, Martina was provided with a long list of instructions, medications and exercises as she became his nurse, cook, and care giver. She is a woman of incredible strength and endurance. Along with her duties in Rochester, she remained faithful to her pastoral duties in El Salvador, communicating several times per week with Pastor Guadalupe, who was helping to make sure that the scheduled services and other events in their five churches took place in their absence.

While at the Nazarene Well House, the pastors received help from several Seeds of Hope committee members and other volunteers from delegations to El Salvador. These individuals drove Martina to the store, purchased groceries and medical supplies, and as Matias' health improved, took them out to dinner.



Matias and Martina were in contact with family, friends and congregants in El Salvador, who supported them daily with their love and prayers. During the middle of their stay, a delegation from Chicago brought a \$597 check collected from their five churches El Salvador. It was such a generous, loving gift sent by people of very meager means.



On August 30, Pastor Matias was well enough to travel, and he and Martina went back to Chicago and participated in a worship service with Pastors Kristian and Anna-Kari Johnson. The next day, August 31, they flew back to El Salvador and were greeted at their home by a large balloon reception. Pastor Matias was so delighted to be able to greet his community without the use of oxygen.

Miracles do indeed happen and prayer certainly changes lives. Thanks be to God!

Watch on YouTube “A Testimony of Healing– Pastor Matias” by LivingLord-Lutheran for a video review of Pastor Matias healing journey.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wZZcldwkqGs>

Go Fund Me link- <https://www.gofundme.com/f/help-pastor-matias-get-lifesaving-treatment>

* **Historical note:** The Salvadoran Civil War began in October 1979 and lasted until January 1992. The Salvadoran government, backed by the United States (Carter/Reagan) fought against the Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front (FMLN) a left-wing guerrilla group backed by Cuba and the Soviet Union. As a result, more than 75,000 people were killed, including civilians and there are 8,000 reported disappeared persons.

Children’s Day in El Salvador



Día del Niño is celebrated on October 1 of each year. Its purpose is to help children and youth feel valued and to provide a reminder of the importance of protecting their rights. In educational centers and churches children are treated with parties, games, balloons, clowns, magicians, pastries, piñatas, special food as well as musical and dance performances.

These photos are from Emaus Lutheran’s celebration in 2024. This year the congregation will honor it’s children and teens on October 11.



What Are They Doing Now?

The following Seeds of Hope students are from the Emaus church community in Santo Domingo:

Gerson Noe Mancía Ayala graduated in business administration. He works in a permanent position as an assistant accountant which allows him to also help his family.

Wilfredo Alexander Cartagena Granadas is employed as a licensed English teacher at the Colegio Liceo Cristiano. He is happy to have steady work which allows him to help his family.

Wendy Crespín now has a degree in marketing and works as an assistant manager in the Farmacia San Nicolas. She is also pleased to be able to help her family.

Erika Crespín has completed her 5th year in her licensure program in education with a specialty in English. She is currently working in a Call Center and is able to assist her family due to her stable income.

Ana Lucía Cucufate Hernandez has earned a license in English (even though she has not graduated) and works as a teaching assistant. She is pleased that this position is helping to further her academic development. She also has a small business in her home.

Estefan Portillo has earned a 3-year technical degree and works as an assistant for an Internet business. She is now able to help her family.

"The next Seeds of Hope Team is excited to plan our upcoming Accompaniment Trip to El Salvador, scheduled for July 2026! We'd like to 'plant a seed' now—encouraging you to consider whether this life-changing, faith-deepening experience might be the right opportunity for you. Stay tuned for more info!"

New Seeds of Hope Leadership



Meet Jenny and Jason Florio, the new Seeds of Hope co-leaders at Family of Christ! Jenny is a 4th grade Spanish Immersion teacher at La Ola del Lago Elementary in Prior Lake, and Jason is a mechanical engineer in defense at Northrop Grumman in Plymouth. They moved to Chanhassen from Port Washington, WI in 2021 for Jason's job and are parents to Olivia (5th grade) and Vince (4th grade), who both attend Clear Springs Elementary in the Spanish Immersion program. Jenny and Jason each traveled to El Salvador on the most recent accompaniment trip, where they fell in love with the people and met their sponsored student, David. Jason is passionate about helping the students of El Salvador and following the ways of Jesus, while Jenny loves connecting with children,

speaking Spanish, and traveling to Spanish-speaking countries. Together, they hope to inspire Family of Christ families to build meaningful connections with their El Salvadoran students and their families and to encourage more families to sponsor more El Salvadoran children and join us on future summer trips.

Thank you for your continued support of this amazing ministry!

Your Seeds of Hope Team: Jenny Florio, Jason Florio, Gary Dosdall, Pastor Josh Nelson, Patti Rude, Sue Provo, Pastor Kristie Hennig, Pastor Jeff Eisele, Jill Cornell (Trinity Lutheran Church/Long Lake)