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Welcome to Oaxaca

In a remote village in the rugged state of Oaxaca (Wa-HA-cuh), two hundred miles southeast of Mexico City, men, women, and children had invited Mission Aviation Fellowship pilots to their annual fiesta. The villagers considered the pilots, who brought supplies and transported their sick, godly men. *Surely they will want to join us in honoring our patron saint*, they thought.

The pilots, led by MAF program manager Josue (Hosway) Balderas, said yes, they would come, though they had no plans to pay homage to St. James in this typical Catholic village in a very Catholic country. (An estimated 88 percent of Mexico's citizens are Catholics.)¹ Instead, the pilots would pay honor to Jesus by showing a film documentary of His life and discussing their faith in Christ with villagers and their leaders, if possible.

This opportunity was made possible when local officials asked the pilots to show the film *Jesus*, a skillfully acted film of Jesus' life based solely on the gospel of Luke. The leaders wanted a religious film at their religious fiesta, and the pilots, who had been showing the *Jesus* film throughout the region, gladly brought their screen, projectors, and speakers to the village. Christians back home had given funds for the equipment and even electrical generators to power the projectors. Campus Crusade for Christ provided the Spanish version and produced the film. The gospel of Christ comes through clearly in *Jesus*, which is now available in 170 languages and is shown by missionaries around the world.

The MAF crew of eight and their wives mingled with the people, developing friendships and hoping to present the gospel. As night approached, they began setting up the movie equipment. Meanwhile, the visiting priest was readying for his busy day. Tomorrow he would perform many weddings and infant baptisms, an annual tradition at the close of the fiesta. The village had no permanent priest or Catholic church, and leaders looked forward to this special visit. Neither the priest nor the missions team, however, knew the other would be there.

Soon the priest heard that missionaries planned to show the film. When he finally spotted the missionaries at the projector, he marched to the local authorities.

"You can't do that!" he told the officials. "If they show the film, I have to leave, and tomorrow you won't have any weddings or baptisms." His words confused the leaders. They thought both the priest and the missionaries served God and told Balderas that they wanted to see the film.

"Well, let me talk to the priest. Perhaps we can come to some agreement."

But the priest refused to talk about the film. "You can stay here if you like," he said. "But I have to leave." Even-

tually Balderas and his staff convinced the priest to join them and discuss the film. They met in a small hut.

“Please stay and watch the film,” Balderas pleaded. “Afterward, tell me what you think of it. This film has been shown in Catholic churches in other parts of the world. It has nothing to do with Protestantism. It’s strictly about the life of Christ. It’s straight from the Bible.”

“I know who you men are,” the priest answered. “You do all these good things for the people, but later you try to convert them to Protestantism. You have other reasons for coming to the village.” The priest then cited problems that MAF and another missions group, Wycliffe Bible Translators, were having with the national government.

“Let me tell you why I’m here,” Balderas said. He tried to calm the priest. “You’re right. My main mission is not to come and feed these people. I do love them and want them to be fed. But I really want them to know a God who loves them—a God *I* know. I want them to know Him so bad. And He wants them to know Him so bad. And I think you want them to know Him.”

The priest did not reply.

“That is my true motive. I want the people to know God as I do,” Balderas continued. “The reason we bring food and take their sick out is because God loves them. He demonstrates that by having us here and sharing our lives with them.

“This is the reason we’re here. You can ask the villagers how many times I have preached at them.”

The priest already had asked and knew that the pilots had never preached the gospel directly. Instead they had performed acts of service, saying God’s love motivated them.

“I really do want you to stay. Watch the film. Let’s discuss it. And the next day you can perform the weddings.”

“No, I will not stay,” the priest answered. “I will do nothing with you here.”

It was 8:30 in the evening; darkness had fallen. Outside in the village plaza, a thousand people waited to see the film. Balderas turned to the village leaders.

“You need to decide by yourself. If you don’t want to see the film, fine. If you want to see it later, that’s OK. You invited us; we’re here for you. Whatever you want to do is fine.”

“I’m not sure if we’re ignorant,” one official said. “We may be. But one thing we do know. Alas de Socorro are the only people who have ever helped us.”

The leaders went outside to meet the people. They told the audience that the priest would not stay if the film was shown. All the people still raised their hands in favor of watching the film. The officials returned to the hut. “Everyone wants to see it. Please show the film,” they told Balderas.

The priest chided the officials. “You are unaware that these people come from North America and have American customs and beliefs that are not good for you. They will bring a different religion.”

“I’m not sure if we’re ignorant,” one official said. “We may be. But one thing we do know. *Alas de Socorro* [The Wings of Help, MAF’s name in Mexico] are the only people who have ever helped us. No one, not even the government, has come here to offer food or take our sick out. Only *Alas de Socorro* have come, so we want them to stay.”

“I was embarrassed he said that in front of us,” Josue recalls. “But at the same time I said, ‘Lord, thank You that this is true. People know that we are the only ones here.

Thank You that they want to know more about You because we are here.”

The priest walked out of the village, leaving behind the officials, townspeople, and a group of nuns who lived there. The missionaries showed the film and afterward told interested villagers what it means to believe in Christ.

“I’m unsure how many accepted Christ as their Savior, but because of the film, a small mission now exists there.” A pastor each week comes to the village by plane to lead services and encourage new believers. His journey takes only thirty minutes. By land, he would need three days to reach the people. “Without an airplane, I doubt any pastor would commit to come regularly. We can bring a pastor one morning, and he can stay two full days. And we bring supplies with him.”

Josue Balderas is a young missionary pilot. He is the father of two small girls, has been four years on the field, and is thirty-five years old. (Most pilots begin service at age thirty-three.)² Unlike most young pilots he has been quickly thrust into a leading role at the Mitla station in Oaxaca. He is program manager of all flights from Mitla, serving villages in a 120-mile radius. Like most young pilots, he has gone through challenge and growth in His walk with God during his early adult years and cares about the spiritual welfare of the nationals he serves. And like other young pilots, he considers himself a missionary who uses flight and mechanical skills.

“The Lord really challenged me to missionary work while in the Air Force,” Josue says. “I didn’t even know about missionary aviation.” He was an aircraft mechanic and crew chief who did not have a close relationship to Christ. Though Josue was a Christian when he entered the Air Force, to Josue the military meant money, independence, and a future college education. But a couple months

after being sent to Spangdhalem, Germany, Josue met two representative of The Navigators, a Christian discipleship and evangelism organization. His Navigator friends, Bible reading, and prayer slowly turned Josue from wanting money to wanting to win converts to the Lord.

The Christians in his Navigators group joined him in a series of Bible studies that fueled his passion to evangelize the lost, both in the military and eventually in Mexico, his birthplace. Later, he told his Navigator friends he wanted to be a missionary pilot. One mentioned Moody Aviation as a good school and Mission Aviation Fellowship as a major mission for pilots. Josue filed the information away and pursued the inspiring yet challenging discipleship program. Six other pilots, their Navigator leader, and Josue stayed busy memorizing Scripture, studying the Bible, and praying together.

“Through our study I developed an intense desire to return to Mexico and reach my people. What I learned was the basic stuff, but the actual living it—working out the Christian life—was something I never had done before.” Now Josue and his friends from several Navigator small groups witnessed in the barracks. They formed a soccer team and grew close, winning several games in the process.

“Once I knew there were missionaries who were aviators, I became very interested. I was enjoying working with planes in the Air Force. Since the Lord gave me those skills and I enjoyed it, I got excited when I heard there was such a thing as missionary aviation.” While completing his Air Force tour of duty, Balderas wrote MAF about his interest.

He returned to California after his Air Force duty and decided to prepare for becoming a missionary pilot on his own. He took courses in airframe and power plant at a community college for two years, and he enrolled in flight school to log hours for a pilot’s license. But the full-time

course work and a full-time job competed for his attention. Josue felt overwhelmed and decided to look at Moody Aviation. A few friends at his church recommended Moody Bible Institute in Chicago, even though they were students at Biola University, a Christian school in nearby La Mirada, California. Josue's pastor also commended MBI as strong in missions. Later some officials at MAF offered a similar endorsement for Moody's missionary aviation program. "They told me that Moody had the best aviation program."

Josue completed MBI's two-year pre-aviation program in Bible and general education in 1982, and the Moody Aviation requirements in an additional two years, thanks to his one-year training in airframe and power plants. Josue planned to return to his birthplace, Mexico, as a pilot; his wife Lynn, fluent in Spanish, would be his helper. During his senior year at Moody Aviation, Josue flew cross-country as required. The trip included a stop in Mexico. There MAF leaders told him they needed Mexican pilots and invited him to apply to the mission. The government was limiting visas and were suspicious of the program. As a Mexican national, however, Josue would not need a visa, and the government surely would not be suspicious of him.

Initially Josue was uninterested. Though he had contacted six aviation organizations, including MAF, he didn't want to live in a missionary compound, thinking he would be isolated from the Mexicans he wanted to serve. Instead, he would either go independent of a mission or join a small one where he could be part of the community. Nonetheless, after graduating from Moody Aviation, Josue decided to drive with his wife to the mission station in Mitla. He also investigated other flying opportunities in the area, but he began to reconsider MAF while visiting with the agency's

new program director. Duane Marlow had the same missionary vision as Josue. Marlow wanted pilots to continue to service other missions agencies, but he also felt pilots should help to link the isolated villages to services and the gospel.

“There are hundreds of villages and we want to provide services and also promote new churches,” Marlow said. MAF would do that by bringing pastors into the area to start churches and introduce the gospel to the isolated villages. But the reduced number of visas was changing the MAF work, Marlow said. Several missions agencies were unable to continue a strong ministry because of visa restrictions, and MAF was flying fewer missionaries. The agency wanted to move directly into the villages with Mexican pilots. Again, Josue could join them.

“For the first time, I became truly interested in MAF because of their expertise and the opportunity to share the gospel,” Josue says. He also accompanied local pastors entering the villages. “Watching [MAF] in action confirmed my desire to be part of the local church going into remote places.”

The local Mexican pastors were promoting missionary work in the churches as they took “the whole gospel into isolated regions,” Josue notes. During their drive back to California, Josue told Lynn he was applying formally to MAF to be a missionary pilot in southeastern Mexico.

Two years later they arrived in Mitla, after learning several lessons in patience. Josue admits he was very independent then—he had wanted to work as a pilot alone to meet the villagers on his own instead of being part of a missions team. He had always been that way. At fifteen he left home to meet other Christians and learn English his way, in the United States. Later he resisted attending Moody Aviation, despite recommendations, choosing to go to a local college for mechanical training.

As he began to raise prayer and financial support, God taught him greater trust and dependence. The new manager of Latin America operations said, “Don’t think that because you’re from Mexico, you’re automatically going to Mexico. Wherever MAF needs you is where we will put you.” Josue had a hard time accepting that reminder that missionaries go where needs are, not where they desire.

“I went through all this [preparation], because I believe the Lord wants me back with my own people. Now in joining MAF I learn I could be anywhere in the world. That could be all right, but that is not where my desire was.”

For one year Josue was unsure whether they would accept him and whether he even wanted to stay with the mission. At first Josue was confused. *Why did You lead me this far, God? They once were excited to use me. Now they aren’t sure. Why?* Those thoughts did not lessen when leaders told him that the Mexico ministry itself was indefinite. They could scale back the program or end it because of political and financial obstacles. *I could go through the whole process of choosing a mission again!* Josue told himself.

Josue finally arrived in Oaxaca to fly among twenty landing strips, some of the toughest worldwide for MAF pilots.

Eventually he realized that God wanted him to stay with MAF and accept any obstacle. “Lord, You want me. I will simply be submissive,” he prayed one night. “I know I must be submissive to MAF. You are truly working through MAF, and they’re doing this for You, so I have to allow myself to be put in a situation where I must trust You that they will make the right decision.”

Months later Josue was accepted and “it was go for Mexico,” he says. All the uncertainty and turmoil were positive, Josue now concludes. “I had to admit to God ‘Maybe this is my own desire. If You want me somewhere else, I’ll have to trust that I will then make the right decision.’”

Josue finally arrived in Oaxaca to fly among twenty landing strips, some of the toughest worldwide for MAF pilots. “Every strip is different, of course,” Josue says. “MAF classifies strips as A, B, or C, with C being the worst. We have all C strips, except at our Mitla station. So landing is a concern all the time.” Often pilots in southeast Mexico face tricky crosswinds that try to push the planes off the strip. Most are one-way strips that permit pilots only one type of landing approach. And every one changes according to the weather. After a heavy tropical rainstorm, the pilots contact ground communicators to evaluate whether to take off for their destination. A soft and muddy strip will play havoc with the landing, grabbing tires and possibly turning the light aircraft. Unexpected pools of water can make braking difficult and dangerous.

Countless mountains and hills punctuate the quiet valleys and numerous meadows. The station rests at 5,600 feet, rimmed by hills, and the neighboring airstrips vary in elevation from 4,000 to 5,000 feet. The threat of landing accidents in this area is high. Josue learned how high when he arrived. Program Director Marlow told Balderas about a potentially critical accident he had had only a month earlier. A propeller broke off in flight, but somehow Marlow managed to land the plane without injury. The plane suffered slight damage in landing, but it would not fly again for months.

Equally unsettling, the Mexican government had told Marlow that his flight permit limited him to training pilots. He should not be transporting passengers, including mis-

sionaries, they ruled, and no longer could do so. That news was as distressing to Balderas as hearing about the recent accident. Accidents could be avoided, but if a flight director could no longer perform his ministry for pastors, missionaries, and local residents, the MAF program itself was threatened. Josue could receive training under Marlow, but meanwhile the program director could not perform his ministry. It appeared that no pilot could fly the missionaries, and with the government denying visa renewals, Marlow probably would have to leave.

“Here he was with me, a brand new pilot,” Josue says. “If he leaves, the program closes—MAF won’t leave me here by myself. It was bad news. I asked myself, *Why am I here?* As far as trusting in God, the story never ends, I guess.”

For six months Josue underwent intensive field training with Marlow. The program director taught him how to fly the different strips. He explained the changing terrain and maneuvers and, of course, the politics and bureaucracies of the local governments. The director and his student had completed most of the training when Marlow left because of family needs and the government’s restrictions. During their final months together, Josue learned that the government had charged the MAF governing board, located in Mexico City, with failing to pay certain fees. The missing payment, apparently lost in the paperwork, threatened to close the mission in Oaxaca. Back home, MAF leaders looked at the impasse and began to think about closing the mission.

As MAF pondered the mission’s future, Josue began to appreciate his budding ministry to local villagers. They sensed his compassion for them and natural understanding of the culture. Ironically, he learned most about the value of the MAF ministry when he himself walked away

from an accident. During his third landing one day, a supporting bracket on the landing gear cracked as the airplane was braking halfway down the airstrip. The plane quickly listed to the right, veering off the runway. Josue tried unsuccessfully to steer the plane back onto the strip. Instead, the right landing gear jumped a large rock and the left gear struck it.

The plane spun sharply to the left and the entire gear collapsed. The right wing quickly hit the ground. Though the engine was undamaged and the propeller had only minor damage, the crippled gear and wing left the plane useless.

The long hike made Josue understand their tough daily lives and how the pilots help.

Josue hiked for two days, up mountains and down into valleys. By nightfall of the first day, after seven hours of walking, he reached the next village. The next morning he walked six more hours over rugged terrain, down a valley, across a river, and up a hill. Finally some coworkers with a pickup truck met him.

When the men of the nearest village heard about the accident, several came to see whether Josue was OK. They wished him well. Among the group were several new believers who had received Christ as Savior when the pilots showed the *Jesus* film in their village. The new believers, though few in number, came over the hills to the MAF station to thank Josue for his part in their finding Christ.

“They made me aware of the influence we were beginning to have in those areas. There were now believers because we had gone there.” In addition, the long hike made Josue understand their tough daily lives and how the

pilots help. “Those hikes are an everyday part of their lives. These people are really living and dying with sickness. Things that are common in America and we can easily treat are serious problems for them—typhoid and TB, for instance. Had I not had the accident and walked out, I would not have known the reality of their tough lives.”

Still, Josue was convinced MAF would not continue in Oaxaca. One plane lay damaged and Josue himself caught typhoid fever, becoming very ill. Josue realized that he was in a keen physical and spiritual battle. “Here we are with no airplane, I was sick, and things in Mexico City were not working out.”

Months later MAF decided to end its role in the Oaxaca ministry. Josue, their remaining pilot, was not fully trained and was recovering from typhoid. The MAF Mexico City board had not satisfied government requirements. MAF concluded that they would reassign Balderas to another field after his recovery. The young pilot accepted their decision as correct but was still confused about God’s reasons for shutting the Oaxaca program. “After all my preparation, I wondered what God was doing.”

Josue, Central America director Roy Haglund, Latin America regional director David Jones, and a MAF board member flew to Mexico City and met with the governing board. They formally told the board that MAF headquarters would withdraw from the ministry. The governing board, composed of successful Christian businessmen, listened quietly. The governing board had begun twenty-five years ago and was designed to be a liaison with the Mexican government. Composed of local citizens, the board members had acquired increasing power over the years, but their incomplete reporting and part-time management had caused disputes with the government.

Neither the director nor Josue tried to change the members’ minds. Instead they said thanks for the times of

ministry. “You have the airplane and the building. You’re the board. The equipment is yours. Thank you for this opportunity to serve you. Now we’re ready to leave,” Jones said simply. They were relinquishing their involvement and by law would leave the facilities and planes behind.

The MAF representatives rose to depart. What happened next Balderas calls “the first miracle.”

“Well, you’re right. It’s time to make a change. Would you consider staying in Mexico?” one member asked the Oaxaca team.

“They wanted us to take over everything, including the planes and starting the program anew, even with new people,” Balderas explains. He was stunned, considering the long-term members set in their ways. “All of a sudden, all control was given back to MAF.”

MAF officials conferred about the proposal and then one official said, “We’ll resume the program if all the board members resign. We will put new people in the positions to take control of the entire operation. How we conduct business and run the ministry will be at our discretion.”

The board agreed. That was another miracle, according to Balderas. The chairman of the civil board also agreed to redo misplaced and incomplete paperwork. After four months, the paperwork was back in order and *Alas de Socorro* was operating again with a new civil board.

Mission Aviation Fellowship began board operation on a trial basis. Jones now turned to Balderas. “Josue, you’re it. We want you to be the program manager. Do you believe we can still have a ministry that impacts the people?”

“Yes. I know we can, without a doubt,” Balderas answered.

With no other pilot at Mitla and an infant board in place, Balderas began directing Oaxaca operations. Three

years later he is one of three pilots flying two Cessna 185s and a Cessna 206 across the territory. Josue has upgraded airstrips, added a few new ones, and improved relations with the government.

“I’m sure Josue’s preference would have been not to have had that position (program manager) so quickly,” notes Latin America regional director David Jones. “Yet once MAF put him in that position, the abilities that God gave Josue blossomed. He’s an example of what happens when a person rises to a need. He has good technical abilities and a good sense of safety. He wants to do things right.”

*“He wants to be their pastor,
and they see his pastoral heart.
That’s the epitome of a missionary pilot.”*

Josue also has built a network of friendships that have opened the way for both evangelism and greater cooperation with officials. “He has spent several overnights with people,” Haglund says. “He finds out their needs, their aspirations and hopes. The people love him.” Josue has developed a positive relationship with the key civil agency representative in Oaxaca, the commandante. One day he asked the commandante, “What can we do to get everything in perfect order for the government?” The commandante gave him a long list, and Josue did all the tasks. He straightened the paperwork and enforced the required maintenance inspections. He made sure that parts that arrived from the United States had proper receipts for customs.

“As a result, he gained the respect and admiration of the commandante,” Jones says. Most program managers

“develop some friendships during their contacts but concentrate on flying,” according to Jones. Josue, however, “is able to make contacts and build friendships.”

The three MAF pilots based at Oaxaca transport three Wycliffe missionaries, a missionary with United Indian Missions, and several nurses, doctors, and dentists with a medical mission. They also fly pastors and members of local churches into the other villages. “We want the local churches to get the vision for what we are doing.” Balderas estimates that 70 percent of the villages desire the pastors and missionaries to teach about Jesus. MAF pilots often stay with the pastors to assist in ministry.

As program manager he coordinates all flights, inspects planes to be sure they are airworthy, and acts as liaison with the government. But he yearns for the spiritual salvation of the people. Often he visits local Mexican churches to request prayer support and participation as MAF helps to evangelize nearby villages.

“There are still places in Third World countries where we are the only link to Jesus. People are hungry in Oaxaca. I’m from Mexico, yet I never knew about these isolated places where people are desperate to know about Jesus. It’s exciting that God can use me to do the flying to bring the people to Him.”

During a recent furlough Josue told MAF President Max Meyers, “Sometimes I feel torn down the middle. I know flying planes is my job, my task. But everywhere I go the people want me to come and be their pastor.”

Meyers marvels at the motivation of his young pilot. “He wants to be their pastor, and they see his pastoral heart. That’s the epitome of a missionary pilot.”

Notes

1. Edythe Draper, ed., *The Almanac of the Christian World* (Wheaton, Ill.: Tyndale, 1990), p. 123.
2. Based on average starting age for an MAF pilot during the years 1989-1991; from MAF personnel records, Redlands, California.