

The Legacy of Harry & Susan Strachan¹

Harry Strachan, 2015

Most of my 11 cousins, comprising the third generation of the Strachan- Roberts family, were born in the Hospital Clínica Bíblica in the middle of the last century. Dr. Cameron brought me into the world there. It was there I was taken for childhood illnesses and lost both my tonsils and appendix. When a teenage accident nearly blinded my right eye, it was saved there. Many years later in 1998 after a serious heart attack, it was the latest equipment and medicines of the cardiology unit that saved my life. Like many others in Costa Rica, I have personal reasons to be grateful for “La Clínica.”

This handsome volume captures wonderfully the history of the Hospital Clínica Bíblica. With text by Fernando Arraya and pictures from the archives, it tells the story of how the seed of a clinic for women and children in Susana Strachan’s home became the seedling of a small hospital inaugurated in 1929 and has grown over the last 90 years into a towering tree of life that is today’s premier hospital in Costa Rica.

The Hospital Clínica Bíblica in 2016 is one of Latin America’s best, recognized with accreditation in the United States. It has over 60 medical specialties and outpatient clinics and labs. It manages a number of local health centers for the government. It has innovated in telephone medicine, medical insurance, medical waste management. It is actively involved in research and training. It has recently begun an academy for training technicians.

The original 1929 two-story building was 908 square meters. Today the hospital has forty times that usable space. It has become a complex of five multi-story buildings covering three city blocks with over 70,000 square meters of construction if you include the six-story parking tower with heliport. (See V:7 Arquitectura de Vida, p. 168f)

Each year the staff devote hundreds of hours in voluntary service. ASEMECO, the non-profit organization which owns the hospital in stewardship for God, with its board of lay leaders, ministers and medical personnel, serves without remuneration and allocates hundreds of thousands of dollars of its services and surplus to those in need.

As this history makes clear, the hospital has evolved through at least five major epochs. In each epoch a generation or various generations of leaders have taken what they

¹ In 2015 I was invited to write the Introduction to a picture book history of the Hospital Clinica Bíblica founded in 1928 by my missionary grandparents, know in Spanish and Enrique y Susana Strachan. This is my English transation of that Introduction.

inherited, adapted it to the changing needs of the country and left it to the next generation bigger and more effective than ever.

Many collaborators built the hospital, among them the founders, Enrique and Susana Strachan, Dr. Cameron and her team of missionary nurses, Dr. Arturo Cabezas, his brother Enrique and Hector Alfaro who led the transition starting in 1968 to ASEMECO, and in this last period of growth, Jaime Cabezas and Bernal Aragon.

These “heroes” (if I may use that word) have left us two legacies. The first is the institution described above, whose services continue to bring us health. The second, perhaps even more important, is that of vision and values exemplified in the hospital’s history, a legacy of how to live and work with effectiveness, a legacy worth passing on to future generations.

For over 40 years, as a professor, consultant and investor, I have been fascinated by this second legacy, reflected in the work of my grandparents and parents. Enrique and Susana Strachan, my grandparents, were the founders of the Latin America Mission and hospital. My parents, Ken and Elizabeth Strachan, were part of the leadership of the Mission from the 1940s until their deaths in the 1960s as were my aunt and uncle, Dayton and Grace Strachan Roberts. Dayton played an important role in the transfer of the hospital to ASEMECO in 1968 and served on its board in the 1990s.

The Mission created not just the hospital, but also nearly twenty other ministries in Latin America including schools, day care centers and camps, radio stations and publishing houses. These were launched with no source of wealth other than the donations of many individuals in the United States and Canada. Ninety years later many of these organizations are still serving the region, all under local leadership. What was the secret?

In their writings, my folks make it clear that it was all “the work of Lord and to Him should go the glory” which I don’t doubt. But in following God’s way, what were they doing that was used in such an extraordinary way?

There are multiple answers to that question to be found in this book. I’d like to highlight four parts of their vision and values, which were particularly important in the past and which I believe are relevant to those of us wishing to perpetuate their legacy in the future.

Service. My grandparents would say, “We belong to God. Our life, our energy, our time, our talents, all our assets belong to Him. We are stewards of these for His glory and the service of others. We don’t live for ourselves but for God and others.” I’m told that don Enrique Strachan was a charismatic speaker, radiating enthusiasm. One of his favorite

sayings of Jesus was “I have come that you might have life and that you might have it more abundantly!” (John 10:10) He emphasized “abundant.” He believed that serving God and others does not diminish life, it enhances life. Give with joy, for it is in giving that you receive. That spirit of giving to all without reference to social class, religion or race was at the heart of the hospital. I understand that the nurses gave the hospital its distinctive reputation through their spirit and competent service provided with *cariño* and a smile.

Relevance. My grandparents and parents recognized that each generation lives in a unique moment of history, a period with specific needs and the opportunities provided by the technology and assets then available. They followed the social and political developments of Costa Rica and were therefore able to identify the unmet needs. They read widely and traveled on the lookout for how similar needs were met elsewhere. When they set about building the hospital, they tried to find the most appropriate model for Costa Rica. And they built this culture of constant adaptation into the hospital’s DNA.

Fernando Arraya has done a great job of describing the distinctive economic and political situation of each epoch, particularly the status of medical care and health in Costa Rica. He highlights the challenges and decisions faced in each period. Some are recurring challenges like solving the problem of solvency and maintaining the *mística* of service. Others, such as finding the right role for the Clínica are specific to the epoch, such as in the period when Costa Rica created a national health system with universal coverage.

I am a witness that this pattern of monitoring the environment and continuously adapting the strategy persists to this day. Around 1995 shortly after returning to live in Costa Rica, I was asked by Dr. Arturo Cabezas, Dayton Roberts and the ASEMECO board to consult on some serious issues of debt and strategy. New private hospitals and financial problems in the national health system were changing the industry. The board wanted a plan that would permit the hospital to return to solvency, have the surpluses necessary for its ministries and be able to make unique contributions to Costa Rica.

I joined the group working on this new strategy, which included among others, Jaime Cabezas, Bernal Aragon, Dr. Jorge Cortes, Esteban Brenes (a professor at INCAE) and Gerardo Sanchez, the new CFO and a recent INCAE graduate. Aided by the hospital staff, the group collected data, analyzed the problems using the latest management theories and tools, studied practices in other countries, tested for financial feasibility and made recommendations. When the team had done its work, the board took the recommendations, discussed them, prayed for the Lord’s guidance and confirmation, and

then supported them. They were following the process which previous generations had followed for staying relevant and effective.

Excellence. My forebears believed that being a good steward meant fully developing all the talents God gave us. As children we were told God wants us to be the best student, the best athlete, the best Christian we can be. In whatever work God gives us, whether doctor, teacher, preacher, artist or executive, we should “do it with all our heart, soul, and mind.” Don Enrique, in his inaugural address for the Hospital (I:4 Un Discurso Memorable, p.45), makes clear he saw modern science as part of how God performs miracles of healing.

There is no conflict between Christian values of caring and service and effective management practices. In fact, faith demands staying up to date in medicine and the delivery of service. When today’s businesses discover the importance of “social corporate responsibility,” they are discovering the pattern the hospital found in the Bible long ago. Jaime Cabezas, President of the board, told me “Accreditation in the United States has been valuable for us, not only for marketing, but also because it puts pressure on us for continuous improvement and exposes us to the latest best practices.”

Collaboration. The hospital doesn’t have workers, it has “*colaboradores*”. Each generation of leaders would be quick to emphasize that anything accomplished and built over the years is the work of hundreds and thousands of these partners. At its core the hospital is people working together; people who see themselves as stewards; people motivated to serve others; people doing their job with excellence whether as doctors and nurses or in the kitchen, maintenance, the laboratories, the pharmacy and in support services. It is people who identify new needs and find strategies to overcome obstacles.

These people don’t just happen. They exist because those from an earlier generation invested in them, helped them realize all their God-given talents.

From the beginning my grandparents and their fellow missionaries focused on individuals, cared about them, believed in their potential regardless of background. God could transform any life. If trained and empowered, these children of God had the potential to develop into future leaders. The story of don Hector Alfaro Hernandez’ rise from cleaning and supplies (*limpieza* and *providuria*) to General Administrator of the Hospital is a wonderful example. (IV: Cuadro 2, p. 122)

Another notable example is a little known story of Arturo and Enrique Cabezas, which my mother used to illustrate what I might become. Arturo, she told me, was one of the first *evangélicos* to go to the Liceo de Costa Rica. He worked hard and graduated first in

his class. Several missionaries including my father helped him get a partial scholarship to Wheaton College in the United States in the late 1930s and took money from their own salaries to help buy his travel passage. He worked his way through college painting houses, earning enough to bring his younger brother Enrique to Wheaton. Arturo went on to complete his medical studies and returned to become a doctor in the hospital. Enrique returned as a businessman.

When Arturo and Enrique left to study at Wheaton, no one suspected that 30 years later, they would be key figures in putting together the team that would save the hospital in 1968. I don't believe it was a coincidence that they were both motivated and competent to provide the necessary leadership. They shared the same vision and values of my parent's generation, the generation that had cared about and invested in them. And it is not a coincidence that the next generation of leaders includes their son Jaime and others for whom they cared and in whom they invested.

All of us are indebted to those who believed in us and one of the most important ways we collaborate and serve others across the generations is to put time, money and energy into those who follow us, support their development, and empower them in leadership roles.

The history of the Hospital Clínica Bíblica in this volume describes both the institutional legacy we have received and the legacy of vision and values that God used to build it. As you read it, I encourage you to ask yourself, as I have, "What are the vision and values I should take from this story for my own life?"