

The Seminary Explores Podcast
Healing, Teaching, and Learning on a Healthcare Mission to Honduras
Released September 7, 2026
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Episode Description:

Joining approximately 100 doctors, dentists, nurses, and volunteers, Dr. Susan Cole participated in a mission to a remote region of Honduras to conduct an annual clinic that provides healthcare to hundreds who otherwise have no access to healthcare in their day-to-day lives.

She delves into the economic and other factors that impact the health status of children and adults and emphasizes how important basic education in simple health practices is to potentially changing the future health of the patients they treat.

Transcript

00:00

United Lutheran Seminary presents the Seminary Explorers podcast: conversations on faith, art, people, politics, theology, life, and more, with voices from around the corner and around the globe.

Jerry C. 00:16

A mission to Honduras. Hello, I'm Jerry Christiansen. It's very good to be back with the Seminary Explorers, and my guest today is Dr. Susan Cole, who is in dental practice in the Gettysburg, Pennsylvania area, and she has been on a number of missions for with her dental expertise to Central America. How many of these have actually done?

Susan C. 00:40

This past year was my fourth mission. The first one being Guatemala, about six years ago. This is my third to San Luis, Honduras.

Jerry C. 00:51

How hard are they? What was the hardest one? I mean, just physically and emotionally. The first one. The

Susan C. 00:59

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first one was the most remote. Was the the most primitive conditions conditions taking care of the people. And when we arrived in the village, I think the shock of being met at the airport by military. I knew that was going to be the case, but then led out to the country and told they had decided where to go two weeks prior because they had to change because of militia in the country. And arriving, I actually probably within an hour of arriving and trying to set up, told the person leading it I thought I was going to go vomit because I was so moved by the circumstances, and the leader of their group had said that there were actually three suicides in that past month because of dire conditions and the locals feeling hopeless.

Jerry C. 01:54

That kind of gets right to it, but let's let's focus on your most recent trip, which was to you said Honduras,

Susan C. 02:02

yes,

Jerry C. 02:02

and that was just a few months ago from of this recording. You land in in a in a major city, is it, or do you Tegucigalpa? But how far away from that are you when you get to the place where you do this mission?

Susan C. 02:17

Well, that's that's interesting that you know that other airport or that other big city, but it's actually San Pedro Sula, which is that took. How do you pronounce that? The other city, Tagusagalpa, which is one of the most I think dangerous airports in the world. They don't typically land there anymore. The big airlines have chose San Pedro Sula instead.

Jerry C. 02:37

Well, this kind of puts it in perspective. You're out far out into the country and up on up in San

Susan C. 02:44

Luis, which is Santa Barbara Province, which is almost like a county or state of Honduras. Correct, maybe three hours outside of the main city.

Jerry C. 02:54

Who sponsored all this? This is

Susan C. 02:55

run by Medical Ministries International, which is a group that goes all over the world. If anyone wants to look online, they go to many places in Honduras, and there's probably 20 countries.

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And as of today, there's there could be I don't know six six other brigades. They call them teams currently in other places around the world,

Jerry C. 03:22

and about how many were there of you that went along? 50, 100?

Susan C. 03:27

We had probably 20 health care providers from the North America. There was probably another 10 to 15 people who showed up saying they will do whatever is needed, and then when we arrive, there's probably 20 or so Honduran healthcare providers, maybe 30, 40 lay people who volunteer, who help us, who cook, who clean, just volunteer to translate anything of that nature. So in total, there's probably 40, or sorry, 100 people that come into this town, village to assist.

Jerry C. 04:12

And specializations within the medical team.

Susan C. 04:15

There are ER docs,

Jerry C. 04:17

right?

Susan C. 04:18

Ob-Gyn, radiologists, eye doctors, pediatricians, oral surgeons, oral plastic surgeons, general dentistry, nurses.

Jerry C. 04:34

And what specialization did you carry with you? General dentistry.

Susan C. 04:38

General dentistry, where on this particular trip, for the last three years, it is split into an oral surgery team and a dental team. The general general dentists from United States do all the general dentistry, so all we're doing is fixing teeth. The Honduran team is based out of a hospital. San Pedro Sula, the leader, and he brings people who either dentists or oral surgeons, plastic surgeons, or dental students, and they do extractions and interpretation.

Jerry C. 05:10

You were helped by some young volunteers, or do you know Spanish well enough to carry that for yourself? Well, apparently that's the answer.

Susan C. 05:20

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I have a personal goal. At some point, I would like to be casually fluent. So I have been working for a couple of years on using the Abdul Lingo for my Spanish every day with my coffee. Every year it's better, but every time I go, I would like it to be even better. So I try.

Jerry C. 05:40

You're going back.

Susan C. 05:41

Yeah, absolutely. I'll go back. Yes, I will continue. But there are many Honduran volunteers, and there's also Spanish-speaking volunteers that come with us. And the school that we end up working with or at, they have the children who are upper-level high school students who then volunteer to help us.

Jerry C. 06:03

Is there equipment there already for your use, including drills and dental chairs and X-rays and so on, or is that ...

Susan C. 06:12

We do not have X-rays 99% of the time. On occasion, we've had an endodontist, which is a root canal specialist, or someone that brings something that replicates taking X-rays, but we function without X-rays. All of the team, their equipment is there. Our chairs are there. Our chairs for the patients. A lot of the supplies, the the handpieces, things of that nature. However, we a lot of our products in dentistry can't be kept in a in the heat basically for a year, and they would expire. So there's a lot of things that we order online for our group and or for the medical team that are sent ahead of time, or we bring in suitcases separately, or we purchase in Honduras.

Jerry C. 07:05

Ah, I was going to ask, how do you get the medications through customs and all?

Susan C. 07:10

It's actually quite entertaining because there's some part of that. Having this been my third year, I have two years in a row, not this year, had a suitcase full of miscellaneous, and you have to declare it ahead of time. You have to walk through security. Then they want to investigate it.

Susan C. 07:27

One of the things that I find encouraging is they check to make sure it's not expired. I realize that there are some things that you know if they're on the border, it's not going to hurt anyone. However, they don't want people being treated or things being brought into the country and having them 10 years old. So I 100% agree with that. So it is stressful every year bringing products because they could easily at the airport, and we've had years where this has occurred, where they've held it, and this is what we're going to use, and held you, held all of us.

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Jerry C. 08:05

I had that in one interview years ago. That they tried to fly the supplies. A nice volunteer was going to fly the supplies in. Well, he got held up in an intervening country when he went to refuel because he had an airplane full of drugs. You know, makes sense, right? Okay, sure. Sure. What is your What was your typical daylight? How did you organize? How many people would show up, and and how did you line them up? Where do you begin with the beginning?

Susan C. 08:31

Well, interestingly enough, part of the experience is this huge group of people become like family, and in the morning, because of the time difference, and because there's a lot of people that you know have different energy levels, we actually have a group that we call the Running Club, the Honduran Running Club or Walking Club, where some of us wake up early. It's usually like five a.m. 515, and we will some people walk or run while we're doing that, and we're going out of our gated area, you're walking past people who are already showing up in their cars and jeeps and things, waiting at the gate of the school across the street to see us. We go for a couple, three more, four more, depending on what you're doing, walk, hike, run, and then come back. And we have a daily devotional where there's some songs and prayers. Usually, someone speaks, and then we have breakfast and coffee. Most important of the day, start your day with coffee. And we go down, and these people are presented to the clinic. The Red Cross or other groups have gone out ahead of us, arriving and have encouraged communities that that our brigade is coming, and would they like to join us? They purchase for a very very nominal fee just out of pride, you know, like a equivalent of \$1 ticket, and then they they show up and they are either guided into medical needs or dental needs. So there's hundreds of people waiting for us

Jerry C. 10:02

including

Susan C. 10:03

as we start. Correct,

Jerry C. 10:05

including lots of children, children who are already in dental and medical needs.

Susan C. 10:09

Yes.

Jerry C. 10:10

How does their day go?

Susan C. 10:15

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They wait in line. They wait in line, and then they wait in line. They basically, as they show up, and some people are there bright and early as we go for our walk runs, trying to get in first. But the people that show up at the end of the day, they could be there eight hours of the day. Part of the service we provide or the group provides in us going is food for them for lunch because some people are there for seven eight hours, but they wait basically to go through a triage, to go through, there is somebody that speaks to them about Christianity as part of the presentation because it is a Christian-based medical ministries international, and then they are separated then into medical dental, and then they wait in a line. Basically, most people are very kind and tolerant and patient, know that this is going on. Some people it is stressful because they arrive thinking that they'll be seen. Who knows? In an hour, two hours, and maybe their truck that they came with 20 people in the back of it is leaving because other people are done. But they basically wait in a courtyard-ish for to be seen.

Jerry C. 11:21

Do you do your own triage?

Susan C. 11:22

We do as the dental group. We have you know 100 and something people lined up in what looks like school chairs in a courtyard, and one by one. And I've done this for a couple of years. We look at their have them come look the mirror and explore basically in a school chair, and decide what can be extracted, what can be kept. Most people, on average, need multiple teeth taken out. That goes from children to adults, and then what teeth can be saved. Whether we're saving back teeth so they can chew, front teeth for cosmetics, and pride and function. You know, can they buy a few years of time? They are seen in the dental clinic first, having the dentistry done, maybe for an hour or two. Who knows? And then they go over to oral surgery. So sometimes those people are there waiting and/or being treated for a couple of hours.

Jerry C. 12:17

We'll have to get back to treatment and how it affects these individuals personally, and also on the issues of hygiene and poverty, and all that goes with it. You're listening to the Seminary Explorers podcast. I'm your host Jerry Christiansen. Good to be back with you, as I am occasionally in retirement. And my guest is Dr. Susan Cole, who has gone several times to medical missions in Guatemala and Honduras, and we're talking especially about the most recent one in Honduras, where she served with a medical team specifically as a dentist. You've got them in the chair, and you're making you and she or he are making life-changing decisions.

Susan C. 12:58

Yes, yes, we are, and some of these people may have never seen a dentist, or may not see a dentist for a number of years. This could be their only care. I have had a couple of circumstances where people have said that they actually came the year before we did one half of their mouth, and then the next year we do the other half, and that's they're so appreciative, but yes, life changing in that some of these people need all their teeth removed and may never

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get a denture. I shared an experience with a young child who was seven, doing an exam and looking at their teeth as they're holding a soda in their hand at about 815 in the morning, and I found 13 cavities on a seven-year-old, including multiple teeth that needed to be extracted that were permanent. And I looked at the mother, and I looked at the young child, younger child, and I said, "Can I please look at their teeth translating to a interpreter? And the mother said that they didn't have a ticket. And I said, "It doesn't matter. Please put the kid in the chair.

Susan C. 14:02

The child was three, and they already had six cavities. So we had a discussion, and I am known for this of stopping and saying, "Can somebody please talk to them about hygiene, diet, educating? And as of last year, we started educating people while they were waiting. This year, we came with to my insistence paperwork that every one of them received, stating how to take care of their teeth, what they should do or not do. So, at the very least, we're trying to utilize the time and influence them, not just in treating them, but how they can care for themselves moving forward.

Jerry C. 14:39

What are what are what are the reasons for for for that you could observe for some of this this these conditions of of seven cavities and a three year old and 13 cavities and an eight year old or 10 year old, what is is it poverty, lack of education?

Jerry C. 14:58

I think they're poor, aren't they? They're working poor.

Susan C. 15:00

They are extremely poor and and poor beyond what we see in the United States. I think it's a combination of things. I think we all don't know what we don't know, and if you've never seen a dentist or you don't have an education, you know maybe the parents went to sixth grade in a Honduran school in the middle of the jungle. I don't know. Maybe they rarely went to the dentist. Maybe they have dentures. Maybe they think giving fruit juice is healthy.

Jerry C. 15:31

You mean giving giving soda or

Susan C. 15:33

Well soda, fruit juice, whatever they hear fruit. You know, it's a combination of things. They're used to. Interestingly enough, as you as you go through these little villages, there's I want to say the word there's a there's a term they have like little stores in front of all their houses, and you look at it and it's you know chips soda little chips. There's no fruit. There's no. That's not the normal diet kind of thing. So culturally, and yet there's others where I would do an exam and they had perfectly healthy, beautiful teeth, straight, clean, and I would stop and again ask my interpreter. You know what is it they're doing? Do they drink soda? Do they brush their teeth

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every day? Do they floss? Blah blah, and I would tell them, "Hey, your child is here. Please do whatever you're doing. You're doing do for them. Share with your family. Please keep doing it because what you have is quite remarkable. And somehow, that's a rarity, but it does happen.

Jerry C. 16:36

In the time that we still have, I'd like you to share some of your personal experiences. What about your interaction with the with the team or interactions with the patients, it must have been a what's what's the word these days a terribly impactful experience.

Susan C. 16:54

Yes, absolutely, and you know I think we when any of us volunteer, you think you're helping other people, but very often you're impacted as well, and that's part of what makes people continue. You realize, you know how how it moves you. I have had multiple people volunteering to assist me that, in turn, impacted me for my life by what they said as far as encouragement. Young teenage kids, you know, who I still am on social media with, that I befriended six or eight years ago in Guatemala, a 17-year-old girl who was wonderful, and some of the assists or the volunteers last year came back this year, even though they still weren't in school because they wanted to say hi to me because we met last year. The patients are kind and appreciative, and it's interesting because here in the United States, we don't always appreciate how lucky we have it. Now, not everyone has the services that each of us have. Some people have to sacrifice or don't have insurance, or or have to go to certain places that that you know maybe are further away. But there, they have so little, and they're so appreciative. And in my experience, they don't move. They're kind. They say please, thank you, and they're nothing but gracious when you're there. And as far as the team goes, the experience of seeing so many people volunteering is moving. You know that I had shared with you previously, the the one young lady from Zimbabwe, who came to the United States as a child, went to volunteer and said she wasn't quite sure how she was going to feel volunteering, and after being nervous, not knowing, she said that she was moved to see so many people who just were kind and supportive and wanted to use their expertise to help people. And where here is a professional 50-something-year-old being nervous and admitting it that she had to go get a dental guard because she was so scared that she turned around and thought, you know, what was I thinking? Anybody can volunteer, whether it's in a community or across the world,

Jerry C. 19:23

yeah. The the the condition of these folks that you're dealing with to switch back again. They're they're living in small villages. Are they mostly engaged in a kind of what what what they seem to call a slash and burn agriculture? They move into do they seem to be farmers of some kind?

Susan C. 19:40

In in these communities, they are farmers, but they are pretty stable there. There, I mean, where we go is out in the middle of the boonies, and there is very little to do other than agriculture. There's coffee, bananas, yeah. Mangoes, things of that nature. There are very few jobs, and

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one of the things I asked was that the people who volunteer in the kitchen, I noticed the same women every year, and then they said that one of the people that volunteers to control traffic, ish for people coming and walking through the the our location was her husband, and I said, "Does this take them away from the jobs that they have? That they're coming to help us? And they said, "No, they get paid. They may not actually have a job because there's so little to do.

Jerry C. 20:31

These are difficult circumstances. You're going to go back next year. What are you looking forward to? The

Susan C. 20:39

group of people, the people who volunteer, the students who volunteer that that can't be more excited to practice their English to help. I think they look forward to it every year. I enjoy providing my expertise in a way that doesn't involve insurance companies, doesn't involve somebody paying. It's purely because I can use my God-given talents and expertise to help people. And

Jerry C. 21:15

look, Susan, they're getting the service for a buck.

Susan C. 21:17

Yes, they are.

Jerry C. 21:20

I'll have to try that next time. You're going back also because there's a certain I'm guessing there's a certain spiritual dimension.

Susan C. 21:27

Absolutely, absolutely. Well, it's moving. It's being Christian based. The songs are are beautiful. We sing the the people. The the backgrounds. Some are Catholic, some are Lutheran, some are Seven Day Adventists, and to learn from them what their experiences are and their beliefs, and to see those the amount of people volunteering, you have to believe in God.

Jerry C. 22:03

Yeah, and this therefore is a religious based mission, and you think that makes a difference.

Susan C. 22:11

I do.

Jerry C. 22:12

It's different. I'm not saying it's better than or worse than others, but it makes a difference.

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Susan C. 22:15

I do. I do, and I think the patience. see that we are using our skills, and they're out of kindness, and that the rest of the world and other people care about them. So I think that's moving for them.

Jerry C. 22:33

Dr. Susan Cole is a dentist in practice in the Gettysburg, Pennsylvania area. We've talked about a mission to Honduras. You'll have to promise to come back after you go the next year for comparison.

Susan C. 22:44

It'd be my pleasure any time.

Jerry C. 22:45

I'm Jerry Christiansen for the Seminary Explorers. Good to be with you again, and have a very good day.

22:53

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