

Please return



Casa Hogar

The House That Love Built



By Mary Taylor

Dedication

This book is dedicated to my cousin, Albert Lynn Baker, who has gone on to be with the Lord.

Foreword

One of the greatest blessings in my life is having been associated with Al Baker. Few people have had the courage and faith as Al. His entire life, as I knew it, was a reflection of the love of God to his fellow man.

When God called Al to give his life to children in Mexico, he followed this call as directed by the Holy Spirit. He didn't rush, nor did he lag behind; he simply walked with God.

Al's faith in God led him to "take up his cross" throughout his ministry as he experienced "...though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for thou art with me..." *Psalms 23:4a*. Every time I sat and talked to Al to encourage him, I came away more encouraged. His vision came to life through his faith, hope and love. He would get excited and cause me to be excited.

"For ye have need of patience, that ye may receive the promise." I believe he was one of the most patient men I have known. Things would happen or be delayed that would discourage most. The slow pace in getting anything done in Mexico—finances, children's sicknesses, lack of help, delays, promises unkept—never seemed to discourage Al. He just saw God in everything.

God gave him a prophetic view of the ministry. The last time I walked with Al in Mexico, he shared with me that he felt God was calling him to another area and asked me to pray with him about it. Little did I know

that this was a prophetic vision which God was giving Al. Things were progressing well at Casa Hogar. The foundation had been laid; now it was God's time to call Al home.

Al left behind a testimony that should not be forgotten. I consider him a Hero of the Faith—Hebrews 11:39, 40. The work continues and grows successfully under Francisco and Carol, and is being built on the foundation laid by Al and Jesus Christ, the Chief Cornerstone.

Pastor Bob Bernard

Chapter One

A Burden for Children

But Jesus said, Suffer little children, and forbid them not, to come unto me: for of such is the kingdom of heaven. Matthew 19:14

Ping! The pesos fell with a ringing sound on the tile floor as Al Baker wheeled around the patio, dropping Mexican coins here and there. "Now find them, Beto!" he called to the blind Indian boy, undersized for his four years of age, who hovered close by Al's wheelchair.

Beto obediently toddled over and bent down, groping around to feel for the coins. "Aqui!" he cried, laughing delightedly at his success in finding the first peso. "Bueno, Beto, good," Al congratulated, rolling closer to give him a pat on the shoulder. At the age of four, Beto was just learning to walk, and the simple exercise of finding coins was good training not only for his hearing, but for his coordination and dexterity.

As a quadraplegic, Al knew the range of his own disabilities, but he couldn't fathom the inky darkness that must envelop the world of blind children like Beto. He only knew that speaking and touching were important links to the outside world for this little fellow and he determined to communicate with him by words and human touch as much as possible.



*Al and Beto doing their
"find the peso" exercise.*

No one watching the two could miss Al's pride in Beto's success when he found a coin or Beto's delight in pleasing his mentor. But they might wonder, how did a 38-year-old single American male bound to a wheelchair come to play father to a blind Mazateco Indian boy?

The story of how Al and Beto met is the story of the beginning of Casa Hogar, a children's home founded on Christian faith and built with love in Oaxaca, Mexico. Although Casa Hogar began with a single child, today it houses 75 children who have physical disabilities or home problems that prevent them from being raised by their parents.

Now managed by caretakers Carol and Francisco Marin, Casa Hogar began in 1974 as a dream in the mind of Texan Al Baker, a quadriplegic who had lost the use of his legs and most of the use of his arms in a

motorcycle accident in 1958. Born Albert Lynn Baker, Al had been raised by Christian parents in Grapevine, Texas. But since his baptism in the Holy Spirit in 1972, he had been feeling the Lord calling him to the mission field in Mexico. Al especially felt a burden for the Mexican street boys and for children whose parents couldn't, for one reason or another, raise them at home.

At the time, he was working as a photo technician at Meisel Photochrome in Dallas and attending Irving Christian Center, a full-gospel fellowship in Irving, Texas. Quitting his job for the mission field would mean giving up a sure income and the benefits of retirement and heading for the unknown. But Al's small government disability check could be stretched further in Mexico than in the States. Besides, the unmistakable call of missions work and the prospect of being able to help others more unfortunate than himself made him determined to step out on faith, whatever the cost.

So after much prayer, the young Texan approached Bob Bernard, ICC's pastor, and asked if he could be sent out as a missionary for the church. Pastor Bob's first reaction was one of surprise, as he tells in a letter describing the founding of Casa Hogar:

"Al was a very faithful member of our church and brought someone with him to almost every service," Pastor Bob related. "He was with us about a year, during which time he had met the Johnson family, who were missionaries in Oaxaca. They had invited him to visit them; so in 1971 Al made his first visit to Mexico.

When he came back after two weeks, he gave a glowing report of the good time he had had and told how much he had enjoyed the mission field.

"The next year he took the regular vacation from his job and made another visit to Mexico. On his return from this trip, he came to me and said that God had given him a real burden for the handicapped children there.

"In Mexico City he had visited the slum areas and seen the children there without parents running around and rummaging in garbage cans for food. He realized that he couldn't help all of them, but he felt that since he himself was handicapped, this was an area in which he could help, possibly finding them a way to get therapy if their families couldn't afford it.

"His burden was to bring them in and make a home for them in Oaxaca and with government help, see that they got the therapy they needed. He told me he felt God was calling him to work full-time as a missionary in Oaxaca."

Pastor Bob's first reaction to Al's request was, 'Oh no, Al, not you – not on the mission field!' Of course, he didn't say it aloud, and later was glad that he didn't.

After sharing Al's desire with the ICC elders, they prayed about it for a couple of weeks while Al was patiently waiting. "In the end we told him that we felt it was good also, that we felt his desires were from the Lord," Pastor Bob reported.

So, on a prayer and a song Al Baker began planning to launch out as a missionary for Irving Christian Center. He would have his work cut out for him, building a children's home from scratch in a foreign country where he didn't speak the language and had no connections. How would he get the word out to families with handicapped children, and once found, where would he get the kind of skilled, caring staff needed to help care for them?

Chapter Two Launching Out

*Is it not to deal thy bread to the hungry
and that thou bring the poor that are cast
out to thy house? Isaiah 58:7*

Al Baker was one who certainly didn't despise "the day of small beginnings." After being commissioned by the church in Irving, he immediately moved to Oaxaca and moved in with missionaries Johnny and Merry Johnson and their six children. The Johnsons taught at a Bible School for pastors and had a home in the eastern sector of Oaxaca.

Six months later, Al had rented his own home across the dirt road from the Johnsons, naming it Casa Hogar Benito Juarez after the Indian peasant who had risen to become President of Mexico. As a hero of the people, hopefully Benito Juarez' name would lend credibility to the home in the eyes of government officials who would be approving paperwork.

Then Al proceeded to hire a Mexican housekeeper, Hermana Luz Barselobre, who brought five children of her own to fill the home: Rodrigo, Manuel, Laura, Patricia, and Jacqueline. Luz would stay at Casa Hogar for three years, acting as mother, cook and caregiver and, along with her children, providing a family atmosphere for the home.



Working in the garden with Luz' boys.

The first official resident of Casa Hogar was Alberto Alto Bartolo, the blind Mazoteco Indian boy who was to grow up to speak Al's language, serve Al's God, and to love Al like a father. Al and Beto's first meeting truly seemed to be God-ordained, since Al and his young neighbor John Wayne Johnson "just happened" to be in the Oaxaca government rehabilitation center on the one day when Beto was brought there by his mother from their village 170 miles away.

The date was October 23, 1975 and the two fellows making their way down the lobby of the center seemed unlikely candidates for helping children, handicapped

or not, since John struggled with crutches as a result of cerebral palsy, and Al's mobility was limited to his wheel chair. But the two were set on a mission: that of telling the hospital director about Casa Hogar and urging her to send any homeless handicapped children needing a home.

Entering the lobby, Al saw a little blind boy sitting on the floor, and he was immediately struck by a thought: "That little boy will probably live at Casa Hogar." As he retold the story later, Al noted that he quickly dismissed the idea, believing it to be too far-fetched.

While Al and John awaited their meeting with the director, the Indian woman came in, carrying her son and accompanied by a translator who could speak both Spanish and their Mazoteco tongue. Two doctors told them that the boy could be taught in their school for the blind if they could bring him in each day; otherwise, he would have to wait until he was 12 or 13 years old to get any training. Al couldn't understand all the Spanish, but he could see the woman's face fall—her village was five hours away by bus.

But a beautiful smile lit up her face when Al told the director that Beto could stay at Casa Hogar and go to the special school.

Clearly the hand of God was evident in the timing of this meeting, as Al related in a newsletter dated November 1975: "Six hours later we found out that the director was the Oaxaca governor's wife, who is in charge of all children's programs in the state. We had

heard how hard it was to meet her since you had to know someone to get through.

"It turns out that knowing Jesus is enough, and He led me there in my ignorance and blessed our meeting."

Al noted that Beto's pants that day must have been borrowed, because his mother took them with her; so Beto was delivered from his mother's arms with one shirt and nothing else. The child had never worn pants before, the translator told them, so his bottom was rough as sandpaper from scooting in the dirt all his four years.



Beto, after his major Overhaul.

At the time Beto came to Casa Hogar, he was four years old but Al described him as "about the size of a two- to two-and-a-half year old." At first he could barely walk with help, but Luz's children walked him all over the tiled courtyard that first evening, and the second day he was thrilled with his prize—a brand new pair of shoes.

"The doctor said to keep him walking as much as possible, so we are keeping him going about eight hours a day now and don't allow him to sit on the floor," Al reported. "At least two of those hours he holds onto the back of my wheelchair and follows me around in the house and patio."

Beto's health problems—lice, intestinal parasites, scabies, and badly infected feet—at first seemed formidable, but the Barselobres and Al got busy right way. Beto's hair was cut and burned to kill the lice; then he was given a good bath. After the bath, alcohol was applied to ease the itching caused by tiny dirt sores all over his body.

As time went on, Luz and the family took on Beto's potty training as a project, but the newsletter noted that it was a big hurdle for the four-year-old, "since he was learning to wear pants at the same time."

Language acquisition was another challenge, one that was especially a problem for Al since he was in no way bilingual, having never quite mastered the Spanish language, and since Beto's main language was an Indian dialect. The boy spoke 98 per cent Mazoteco and about two per cent Spanish.

"Most of his Spanish was curse words, but after two weeks, he rarely uses them anymore," Al noted. "His family lives by a bar, and we think they taught him to beg because for the first few days if he heard the clink of coins, he would say, 'Mister one peso for bread.'"

"The translator told us that Beto had never had meat or eggs and no milk since he had been weaned. He smelled of the first scrambled egg real good before eating it, but on the second day at breakfast he said "egg" before they were on the table. Two more weeks should see him using a spoon fairly well."

After two weeks at Casa Hogar Al described Beto as "already a new boy," and asked the saints to pray for him. "His starting place in life must have been around zero," he concluded.

By the time Beto was six years old, Al not only provided housing for Luz and her five children, but he had several other children who looked to him for food, shelter, clothing, and transportation to school and therapy for their disabilities. The tasks seemed almost overwhelming at times, and in those moments Al was reminded of the Lord and his invitation to "suffer the little children to come to me."

He also thought at times about his need for a helpmeet, one who would work alongside him and provide needed feminine support to his efforts. Luz did an adequate job as a housekeeper, but she was quite a bit older than he and came equipped with a family of her own. At one point Luz had hinted that she could promise her oldest daughter, Patricia, as a wife, but at the age of 16 Patricia seemed like a child to Al. Besides, he still clung to the very American notion of romantic love as a prelude to marriage.

Chapter Three

A Bride for Casa Hogar



Whoso findeth a wife findeth a good thing, and obtaineth favor from the Lord. Proverbs 18:22

“Hmmm. This man needs a wife.”

That was Brenda Pensinger's first thought when she visited Casa Hogar and saw Al Baker struggling with his own illness, a bout of the flu, while trying to run a household of six disabled children. Besides that, Al was tending a garden and raising poultry to keep food on the table, as well as teaching weekly classes on raising chickens in an outlying village. Casa Hogar, as a matter of fact, appeared to be full of chickens during Brenda's visit since Al had several penned up in the *sala*, or living room, for a future dinner.

At the time, Brenda was not particularly thinking of herself as the answer to Al's problems since she had just met him a little more than a week before. Brenda was working on a Bible translation for Wycliffe Bible Translators near the town of Mitla when she read a newsletter for missionaries in the area published by

John Wayne Johnson. In the letter it mentioned a potluck social to be held in Oaxaca.

At the social, Al's eye was caught by a tall, attractive brunette with two Indian children at her side. Always one to be friendly, he struck up a conversation and asked about the children. Brenda told him the children, afflicted with tuberculosis, needed medicine every day, and she couldn't leave them in their village eight hours away.

"You ought to come visit my children's home sometime," he told her. The invitation was casual enough, but Brenda decided to follow up on it when she found herself with access to a car the following week. "If I can only find this place, I'll make that visit," she thought, carefully following the handwritten directions from Mitla through the winding, rutted streets of Oaxaca.

At the age of 38 -- Al's exact age -- Brenda was still single. She had been working with Wycliffe for 14 years, translating the New Testament into Mixteco, a language that had never before been written down. She was used to the hardships of primitive living, having lived in a Mizteco Indian village down near the west coast of Oaxaca for many years.

But Al's situation was something else. Although he was in charge of a household of seven, he seemed in need of some TLC himself, and she invited him over to

the Wycliffe Center in Mitla for a home-cooked meal. After that first dinner, the two began double dating with Al's roommate Dale, who also began dating a Wycliffe translator. Al and Brenda quickly became a couple, realizing their common interests and background made them uniquely suited for each other.

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Al and Brenda at their wedding reception in Mitla

Love began to blossom and by the summer of 1977, Brenda was accompanying Al on a visit to his home state of Texas to meet his mother and dad in a town near Corsicana and all his friends from Irving Christian Center. On that trip, Al professed his love for Brenda, and the couple began thinking of a future together.

In a newsletter to the saints after Al returned to Oaxaca, he wrote, "I believe the first item I should share with you is that Brenda Pensinger and I are engaged....." The wedding was to take place in February, 1978 to be certain that the Mixtecan translation was complete and to give friends and family time to make preparations to come to Oaxaca. Soon however, Al learned that his father had been diagnosed with leukemia, and he suddenly had to make another trip to the States.

"It was a three-day drive, and I just couldn't stand to see him go by himself," Brenda recalled. They decided not to wait for the translation but to marry immediately and make the drive together. They drove to a village called Tlacolula and waited all morning for a judge to perform the rites, but when he didn't show, they went on to lunch at the Johnsons'. The day was saved when Johnny, as an ordained minister, volunteered his services. So in December 1977 Brenda and Al became man and wife at an informal ceremony across the street from Casa Hogar.

"Later in February we had a reception in Mitla with a Valentine theme," Brenda reported. Brenda's Wycliffe friends attended, with a young Mixteco girl

from the village and Luz' daughter Patricia serving as bridesmaids in the Mizteco Indian costume.

Thus began four intensive years of serving the Lord as caretakers and houseparents at Casa Hogar for Al and Brenda Baker. Already used to hard work in the village of Chayuco, Brenda found the life of a missionary's wife to be even harder, especially when the mission came equipped with a house full of handicapped children. But life with Al as a husband proved to be pleasant, mainly because of Al's laid-back and easy-going personality.

"Al rarely got upset, and the most I ever saw him do was shake his fist at some construction workers when they were building the new home and ignored his directions," Brenda said. "Al was so unique because he had all these disabilities, but he was a visionary who saw the big picture. He just didn't think about himself. His legs didn't work, but his brain was always working overtime.

"I would say that the life was very, very hard, but it never seemed to bother Al. He just wanted to help people."

By the time Brenda settled in at Casa Hogar, Luz had left with her five children, but others were there to fill in the gaps. Beto was still living at the home, along with Misael, who was on crutches, two deaf boys, and two other children with polio.

This was more than enough to make a family, but Al and Brenda wanted to adopt children of their own,

and soon two little Bakers, Rebekah Noel and Benito Robert, were added to the fold.

As the Casa Hogar family expanded, so did expenses and the need for growing room for the children. Al felt encouraged to look at land outside the city for acreage that would accommodate a children's home and where they could build from scratch. His eye was caught by three acres of land two miles beyond the city. It was cleared but totally undeveloped.

"Last week I felt impressed of the Lord to place a bid on the property," Al wrote. "Please join us in praying that the Lord provide this place for Casa Hogar."

Chapter Four

Suffer The Children

But when thou makest a feast, call the poor, the maimed, the lame, the blind: And thou shalt be blessed; for they cannot recompense thee: for thou shalt be recompensed at the resurrection of the just. Luke 14:13, 14

Jesus said, Let the little children come to me, and Al didn't take His words lightly. Over the years, he and Brenda took in scores of handicapped or abandoned children to receive therapy, attend school, and learn about the God of the Universe who created them.

By the time Beto had his sixth birthday, Al was acting as house father to eight, including three more handicapped orphans: Joaquina, Misael, and Abel. Like all the children that Al took in, each had a special physical handicap or home situation that caused them to need a caring home. Here are some of the stories of Casa Hogar's children:

Joaquina, an 11-year-old girl afflicted with polio, had scooted on the ground and on the dirt floor of her family's hut since birth. Her family was happy to find Casa Hogar, where Joaquina could get the therapy she needed and attend school. Shortly after she came to the children's home, she began walking with the help of a leg brace. "It makes me especially happy to see kids improve like Quina is doing," Al told his

supporters. "She is now attending school for the first time."



Misael, a nine-year-old boy with polio, was measured for leg crutches shortly after arriving at the home. Later, when a supporter from Dallas donated a child-size wheelchair, it took him less than a week to master the mechanics of his new vehicle.

"Misael loves to work," Al reported. "Yesterday I went outside and found him sitting on the arm of the wash basin with his head on the cement basin sound asleep. He went to sleep washing his clothes."

In his early twenties, **Abel** was older than any of the children, but he had been born blind and was small for his age. Of all the children Al dealt with over the years, Abel came closest to fitting the profile of the

boys who were the object of his original dream, a home for street boys. And like street boys, Abel was rebellious and hard to deal with.

"Please pray for Abel because he seems quite spoiled, and we don't know if he will be able to accept school or not," Al asked his supporters.

One child that was especially close to the Bakers' heart was **Fernando**, a three-year-old that Al and Brenda picked up in a hospital in Cuernavaca, Morelos. The child had been found by policemen in a cardboard box on the street. Nearly starved, he had been taken to the hospital, where he had stayed for about 15 months in a baby bed.



Al enjoys a bedtime cuddle with Fernando and Marco.

"Brenda's heart went out to the little guy, and we took steps to become his legal guardians so we could get him out of the hospital, which took about three weeks," Al wrote. "Since he had received very little personal attention, he couldn't walk or talk and didn't laugh very much. He's at the mental stage of about 15 months, grabbing everything small enough to hold and inspecting it.

"It's like having a one-year-old in a three-year-old body."

After two and a half weeks of holding, cuddling, and interacting with other children, Fernando was laughing and learning to crawl and scoot about. He could walk with the help of an adult holding his hand, but wasn't yet brave enough to let go and step out on his own. If Al or Brenda failed to show him some attention, he would grab their hand and hold it to his head, loving on it.

Fernando was so jerky when he first came to Casa Hogar that the Bakers felt he might be spastic, but as he continued to develop coordination of his motor skills they realized that the months of confinement in a crib had caused the initial jerkiness of Fernando's movements. The child had never been allowed to feed himself, and Brenda let him have a try right away.

"The first few days, he had food from ear to ear and from his eyes down," Al reported. "Day by day, the circle has grown smaller, and now there are just a few stains around his mouth after a meal."

Faithfully, the Bakers recorded each step of progress that Fernando made during the first three weeks: holding a spoon to his mouth for the first time, holding his own glass and then taking a drink without pouring the milk down his neck. One day Fernando, after putting his spoon in his mouth, laid it down and looked at it with an expression of "Why do they make these things when we have fingers?"

"Fernando's hands and fingers are so strong we have given him the nickname of León, meaning lion," Al said.

Another child the Bakers found in Cuernavaca was **Marco Antonio**, a cute three-year-old they described as "a walking doll that has been wound up and turned loose." Marco's parents were unknown, but since birth, he had been raised by a family that owned a bar near the city. The family had six children of their own and four grandchildren, so they decided to give Marco away.

Unable to have children of their own, Al and Brenda had already talked about adoption, and they were so taken with Marco that they hoped to be able to adopt him officially. However, the family that had been raising him decided at that time to take him back. So the Bakers decided to look elsewhere for two very special children who would have many "brothers and sisters" at home.



The Bakers: Al, Brenda, Rebekah and Ben

Their next step, the adoption of Benito and Rebekah Baker, was to bring them the great joy of raising a family of their own. In the spring of 1979, Al called "the biggest happening of the year" the adoption of three-month-old Rebekah Noel, whom they had found in a government orphanage hospital in Oaxaca.

"Of course, we think she is the most beautiful girl in the world," Al wrote in a newsletter. "She is small for her age, has white skin, enormous brown eyes, and curly brown hair. The adoption process was long and drawn out, but well worth the trouble."

They had first received her near Christmas time and were allowed to name her. "Rebekah" came from the

Bible and "Noel" for the time of year. She was a very special Christmas gift!



The Bakers on Casa Hogar's new property..

By the time Rebekah was a year old, the Bakers were already thinking of adopting a boy. In 1980 they adopted six-week-old Benito Robert, a Zapoteco Indian, who was to complete their family. His mother had died when he was born, and since his father knew he would probably die too, he decided to give the baby away. The Bakers went to the Indian village where Brenda typed the father's words on the village's only typewriter at the town hall, and then everyone involved signed it. In it, the Bakers promised to treat the child as their own son and educate him. So, after a relatively simple process with paperwork, finally they were able to make "Baby Ben" their own.

As Al's own family grew, so did the number of handicapped children at Casa Hogar, and that meant increased operating costs for the home. But Al noted that although expenses are higher for children with handicaps, the blessings are greater too. "We want to serve, but we get so much more than we give," he summed up



Al, Brenda, Beto and children

Chapter Five

A Second Home in El Moral

And whoever gives one of these little ones only a cup of cold water....Assuredly, I say to you, he shall by no means lose his reward. Matthew 10:42

"In July of this year we opened a second children's home in the village of El Moral, Oaxaca," Al wrote to his friends and supporters in the fall of 1977.

It was a busy time for Al, since he and Brenda had just announced their engagement and were planning to marry in February. He had been working with a local pastor to build a shelter for abandoned children or for those whose parents couldn't care for them, hoping to have 10 children by the end of the year. But at the end of the first month, 11 children were living in the new home.

El Moral is located in one of the mountains surrounding Oaxaca city, at an altitude of about 8,000 feet. The high altitude made for nice days and chilly nights, and Al used one newsletter to ask for donations of blankets, sheets, bedspreads and towels for the children. Another item on the want list was a butane stove which was needed not only for warmth but to get away from the wood and charcoal fires that were so time-consuming for cooking.



Al with his kids at El Moral.

So far, the Lord had been faithful in supplying every need, Al said, adding that "we are making headway in making the home more modern and livable with new cement floors and a shower and wash area."

Out buildings on the property were an outhouse, a chicken coop, and rabbit hutch. Water for general purposes was carried by bucket from a spring about 150 yards from the house, and drinking water was disinfected with chlorox and iodine. Residents could take a shower by pouring water into a barrel on top of a rock chimney, with a pipe running from the barrel to the shower stall. The water was heated by building a fire in the fireplace below.

"It isn't fancy," Al admitted, "but it's the only shower in the village of 50 to 60 houses, and we hope it makes the children enjoy bathing."

The next project to be tackled was a dining area large enough to be used as a meeting place for local Christians. Al hoped to have it completed in time to host a convention that would draw in believers from surrounding villages. To run the home, Al had enlisted the help of Brother Pedro, a native evangelist who knew some Christians living in the area as a result of a former work by a major denomination. When the village work was abandoned about 30 years prior, the believers were left with nowhere to worship.

"Brother Pedro is working in the villages to bring these dormant works to life and to unite the Christians in the area into a working body once again," Al wrote.

Al's letters home were always full of the color of village life, and he loved to tell anecdotes that communicated how the people really lived. In this newsletter, he went on to tell of a village near El Moral that had enough believers to enlist the services of a part-time pastor. After preaching in the village one afternoon, the pastor decided to spend the night, but the bedbugs were so thick in the house where he was staying that he finally went outside to sit under a tree.

Shortly before midnight, a cargo truck came through, and the preacher paid to sit on the cargo and ride eight miles to the next village upriver where he was going to preach the next day. A bad situation became even worse when it turned out that the truck driver had been drinking heavily, and so the eight-mile ride took almost five hours. "Needless to say, it was a very long night," the pastor said.

The Bakers were to oversee the home in El Moral from 1977 to 1981, when the work was turned over to local pastors. Just as the home at El Moral was coming together, Al described the ministry at Casa Hogar as "constantly changing and growing." He and Brenda had eight handicapped children to take care of, but they also found themselves playing host to Indians from villages where Wycliffe missionaries did their translation work. The Indians had learned that the children's home was a good place to stay while a family member was getting medical treatment. Most recently, two sets of parents had been staying with Al while their sons had operations in Oaxaca to correct harelip.

Al called this new turn "a ministry of motions and signs," because the Indians' Spanish was poor and their English nonexistent. "Whether you pay a compliment or insult them, they just smile real big and say, Si. We can only communicate with hand gestures," he reported.

At the same time, a young Mixteco Indian woman was staying at the home while her one-year-old baby was being treated for tuberculosis. This young woman, a Christian, knew Spanish and had no problem talking a lot; in fact, most of the time it was hard to keep her quiet, Al noted. With all these guests along with the children and visitors from the states, on any given night as many as 18 people might be sleeping at Casa Hogar..

Even while the ministry was growing and changing, Al kept his eyes on the original vision for Casa Hogar,

that of taking in handicapped children from surrounding villages who could take advantage of rehabilitation services in the city. Handicaps represented among the children included blindness, diabetes, polio, deafness, and mental retardation.

Daily, Al was seeing to it that the children attended school and had the therapy they needed, but he also was concerned about their spiritual state. His dream was that Casa Hogar would be an all-inclusive resource center, taking care of the children's physical, emotional and spiritual needs.

Bringing that dream to fruition would take the acquisition of a property large enough to accommodate both the children's home and a church, and knowing the unique needs of the home, Al really wanted to build from scratch. It was a large order, and one that Al knew would take a lot of work, a lot of help from supporters, and most of all, prayer.

Chapter Six

Palabra Viva -- A Vision for Ministry

*Out of the mouths of babes and sucklings
hast thou ordained strength because of
thine enemies, that thou mightest still the
enemy and the avenger. Psalm 8:2*

A church and a children's home sharing the same property and the same vision for ministry—that was part of Al's dream a quarter century ago when he founded Casa Hogar Benito Juarez.

Al was concerned not only that the handicapped children get the schooling and therapy they needed; he wanted them to grow spiritually too and to have the opportunity to accept Jesus Christ as their Savior. Al also dreamed of a school where village pastors could come in for teaching on the Bible.

If Al could have looked ahead into the 21st century, he would have seen his vision become a reality. Today more than 75 young residents of Casa Hogar participate in services at Palabra Viva, which is housed just a few feet away from their home away from home. Most of the children are physically handicapped and reside at Casa Hogar year-round, except for school vacations and holidays. They take part in church youth groups, drama teams, music programs, and worship.

“Having the church next door is a wonderful benefit for the children because of the godly mentors they

encounter," stated Pastor Sergio Fernandez, who serves as senior pastor. "God has given several of the young people a vision for ministry."



Palabra Viva in earlier days

The history of Casa Hogar is bound up with the history of Palabra Viva. Just after the present children's home was built, Al Baker began setting up Bible studies and home cell meetings with the staff so they wouldn't have to travel downtown to church. After a while, he brought in a staff member who could both work with the children and minister at church services.

Over the next two years, pastors came and went, and the little church held firm. Then in 1982, Pastor Sergio came with his family, having left a job as assistant superintendent over construction at Pemex, Mexico's national oil company. Sergio and his wife, Luz, and their three sons left the comforts of their two-story, three-bedroom home in Vera Cruz and moved to

a two-room apartment at Casa Hogar that had electricity but no running water.

When the family arrived, they found a church with no pastoral staff and no congregation to speak of, since only four people were coming to church. About this time, Pastor Bob Bernard was beginning to feel Al Baker's burden for a church on or near the property. "I didn't have the same burden at first, but when Al passed away, God began to deal with me, and the same vision began growing in my heart," Pastor Bob recalled. "So our goal was to get the property ready to take children again and to lay plans for a future church."

He recalled the first open-air campaign on the property in 1985 where many were saved, and the real work of the church began. Shortly thereafter a growing congregation of about 25 people called for the construction of a new church building.

So in 1988, the work began, with Pastor Sergio volunteering his engineering skills. His brother Manuel, a topographer, helped design a new church building, using an architect to draw up the plans. "At that time, the town people wouldn't give a permit to an evangelical church, so the design was changed to resemble a warehouse," Pastor Sergio reported.

Several individuals and churches helped with the building of Palabra Viva, including Pastors Bob and Ron Bernard of Living Word Church in Irving, Wayne Meyers from Christ for the Nations, Johnny and Merry Johnson and Earl Kellum, who brought groups of volunteers from Minnesota. Sergio Fernandez Jr.

recalled that he and his mother helped with bricklaying and electrical work.

It took three years for the church to grow to about 100 people, and that number had reached more than 300 by the year 2002. Pastor Sergio has also realized his vision for establishing missions in southern Mexico, with some 50 missionary churches now operating as offshoots of Palabra Viva.



Palabra Viva Church at Casa Hogar

Part of Al Baker's vision for the church was that it would be a place where village pastors could come in and be taught, and Pastor Sergio picked up on that dream. He noted that most local pastors had little opportunity for Bible school training. They simply fell in love with the Lord and started village churches without any formal training.

Because he travels frequently to visit Palabra Viva's mission churches, Pastor Sergio has been able to see firsthand the need for training. This led him to start a Bible school on the church property where

pastors are brought in for seminars and workshops on the Bible.

The Pastor credited Al Baker and his original dream of a partnership between the church and children's home for the success of Palabra Viva. "It got off to a slow start, but it is a partnership that has worked very well and has made a tremendous difference in the lives of all our young people," he stated.

Chapter Seven

Building on the Land

Except the Lord build the house, they labour in vain that build it: except the Lord keep the city, the watchman walketh but in vain. Psalm 127:1

"Yes! We finally got the deed to the land! It only took a year and a half for a two-month job."

This was Al's jubilant reaction to finally securing the deed to the new property where they would begin building a children's home from scratch. The property consisted of three acres of land about two and a half miles from Oaxaca, very near the present-day airport. It was also only a couple of miles from the government rehabilitation center and from some of the schools Casa Hogar children attended.

During the year-long wait, Al had painstakingly planned for the use of every inch of the property. The first step was to dig a well so volunteer work crews would have water for mixing cement, and a garden could be planted and fruit trees set out.

"Brother Ron Bryant and I prayed that the Lord show us where to dig the well," Al reported. Believing for the answer, they started confessing the well as a blessing from the Lord



The well-diggers hit gravel at just three feet.

The Lord was faithful, and although the property was surrounded by residents with dry wells that had stopped digging at 20 or 30 feet because of hitting solid rock, the well at Casa Hogar looked promising from the beginning. The well-diggers hit gravel at three feet, making it easier to dig, and at 17 feet, the first water began to surface. By the time the workmen quit at 39 feet, a good flow was coming in. Al and Ron were quick to give the Lord the glory.

The third week of September, 1979 construction began on the first building, a house for a caretaker who would live on the land with his family until living quarters could be built for Al and Brenda and their two little ones. The first part of Casa Hogar to be built would be the dining room and kitchen, with a

bathroom at each end facing the dormitory area at the other end of the property.

"We pray and ask you to pray with us that the Lord provide the funds needed to keep the building program going," Al wrote in October. "Right now we think it will take about \$15,000 to complete the project, but the longer we wait, the more it will take, as costs in the building industry are zooming."

Al's plan was to build two three-room dormitories, one for boys and the other for girls. As soon as the dorms were completed, he and Brenda planned to move in and use them for their quarters until their own living area could be built. They would eventually be housed in one of two three-room efficiency apartments in a three-story apartment-like building just off the dining hall. Al sent his mother a crude sketch of the building, which he described as "like three house trailers stacked up."

In October 1979, Al was anxious for the building crew to start work on the dining room and kitchen, since the dining room would be used as a living area for Heather Forrester, a sister in Christ from San Augustine, Florida. As soon as it was complete, Heather would come to teach the deaf children on the premises.

Heather was stepping out by faith to join the family at Casa Hogar, Al reported in his newsletter. "The sooner the room is finished, the sooner the deaf children can be learning the good things of Jesus," he added.

Before their quarters were finished, Al and Brenda got antsy to move on out to the property so Al could oversee the construction. So in Al's next letter home, he wrote, "We have decided to just put up a shell of the buildings as fast as possible and move on out there as soon as we have enough room for everyone."



The finished living quarters and dining area.

In the winter of 1979, the family moved into the dining room with Bekah and Ben. Beto and the two deaf boys lived in a partially finished dormitory, and all managed to live without electricity or running water for several months. They were cutting corners right and left, trying to save time and money so the work of the Lord could go on.

Building costs were a constant concern. Volunteer work was not a problem, since so many individuals and groups were willing to come and work on the property, but the entire building budget depended on contributions from individuals, churches, and benevolent groups with a heart for rehabilitating handicapped children. The land itself cost \$5,555, and

Al estimated that to keep the building program going it would take another \$15,000. The cost of digging the well alone was \$2,000, about \$600 more than Al had planned for.

Pastor Bob Bernard addressed the subject of finances in an article he wrote about the history of Casa Hogar after Al had gone home to be with the Lord:

“Al was receiving finances from churches and from people who just had a burden to help. He always encouraged everyone to come visit him, and some of the people who visited got a burden for his work.

“Whenever he and Brenda were in the States, they would take any opportunity they could to give a testimony and share how God was using them, so churches began to give as well. They didn’t have an abundance, but the Lord supplied all their needs.

“Of course, at that time it didn’t take much to live in Mexico—not nearly as much as it does now—so they could get by pretty cheaply.”

Once the dining room was finished, work began on the three-story living quarters, and though the building wasn’t entirely finished, in the spring of 1981 Al’s family finally was able to move in. “Whew! At last we are in our three-room apartment,” Al jubilated. “Alex and three brothers from Ennis came down and worked a week, wiring all four buildings, putting in the plumbing, painting, and putting glass in the windows. They built a temporary wall in the dining room so we

could have an office/living room space and then got us moved in. Praise the Lord!"



Drawing water from the new well at Casa Hogar

By the winter of 1982, the roof was on the apartments and two stories had been built, but Al was not to live to see the building completed. Because of his handicap, Al had only about 30 percent lung capacity, and over the years he had numerous chest problems. He had made it through one bout with pneumonia and another with hepatitis. But his main problem was to be a kidney infection he had contracted the previous fall.

In a letter to his mother dated January 20, 1982 Al wrote: "It's been three weeks since we had any medicine for the kidney infection, but the urine test showed there is still some infection, so I'll have to take medicine for five days and then have another test. I

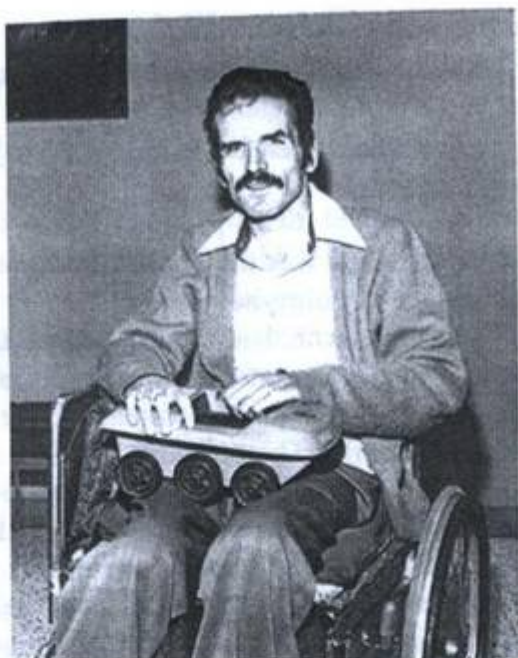
really feel good, and feel even better knowing that the building is almost finished so I don't have to deal with workers and buying materials anymore."

As the infection worsened, Al's urologist told him he needed to be hospitalized to remove a stone that was preventing proper drainage, but Al decided to wait until he could have the condition treated in Texas. During the last week of February, Al became ill again after a time of being apparently well, and the Lord took him home on February 25, 1981.

As Brenda related later in a letter to friends and supporters, "The last time of Al's being sick in bed lasted only seven days. He seemed to improve some, and then suddenly he was gone. "I was in shock when he went. Al had had so many opportunities in his life to die, and God had kept him alive that I believed he would go on forever, probably even outlive me."

Physically and emotionally, Brenda didn't feel capable of assuming leadership for the children's home, and she headed back to the States with Ben and Bekah to seek God's guidance and to sort out the future. The responsibility for Casa Hogar's future would fall back into the hands of Al's home church Irving Christian Center, renamed Shekinah Temple, .

"We had so many plans which we believed to be of God, and it all ended abruptly," Brenda wrote in her pain. "Whether the work with children will continue, only God knows."



Al Baker, when he was well and going strong.

Chapter Eight

Casa Hogar Today and Tomorrow

Whom shall I send, and who will go for me? Isaiah 6:8

Who will go? This was the question to be answered after Al Baker's going-home on Feb. 25, 1982. Brenda, in her heartache, had moved back to the States with Ben and Bekah for a needed rest, and the children at Casa Hogar returned to their villages to be taken in by friends and family. The property was left untended while Pastor Bob Bernard and others at Irving Christian Center looked for those willing to take up the work again. They organized work crews to travel to Oaxaca and refurbish the buildings, paint, and clean up, with the idea that Casa Hogar one day would reopen as a children's home.

Three single ladies from a church in Carrollton, Texas filled in the gap for about six months, when Greg and Darlene True, a Christian couple from Texas, felt called to be a part of the work at Casa Hogar. Greg was a construction man, and was helpful in organizing labor crews and beginning work on the new children's home.

For the next two years, the construction work went on, and once Casa Hogar had nine churches from the States represented in one work crew. Later, Greg and Darlene went into a related but separate ministry, and the Lord used Brother Earl Kellum to bring in another missionary, Carol Nagel, to oversee Casa Hogar. Carol was a young, energetic Minnesotan, who was

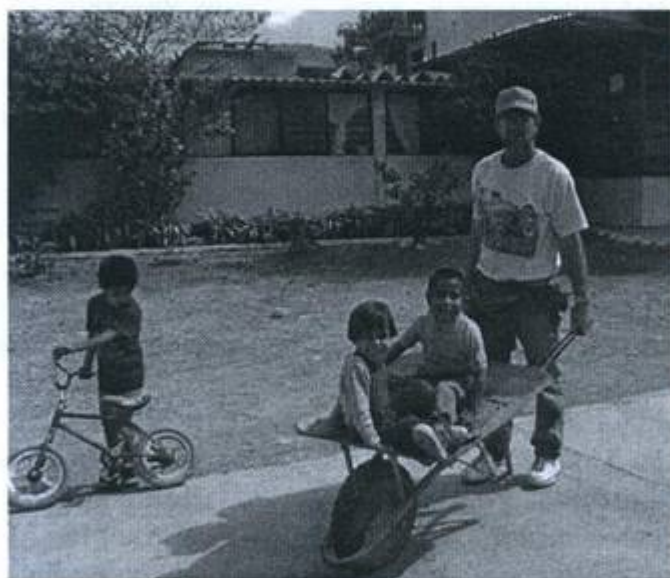
new to the mission field but who had a burden for handicapped children. Knowing her talents, Brother Kellum invited Carol to come to Casa Hogar and serve as director and caregiver to the children.

Carol didn't know Spanish, but she was willing to go to language school, which took about a year of study. Once finished, she settled in at Casa Hogar, opening the home with four handicapped children, including 17-year-old Beto, who had returned from several years of schooling in Texas.

Carol quickly got to work, managing the home and taking care of new children as they came in, enrolling them in school and seeing to it that they got the therapy they required. By the early 90's Carol was caregiver for 15 children, all of whom had schooling, therapy, and doctor's appointments to keep on a daily basis. The hectic atmosphere of raising so many children with special needs prompted Carol to share in an early news-letter a typical morning at Casa Hogar, which included a breathtaking ride that she called "The Morning School Run."

"It's Monday morning at 7:30 a.m. and time to get 15 children, their backpacks, lunches, science projects, and other school paraphernalia loaded into a 12-passenger van. Before the door is shut, the driver must make sure the wheelchairs and crutches are squeezed in too. Oh, and don't forget to bring a cloth to wrap five kilos of tortillas that will be bought on the way back.

"Once on the way out the driveway, we descend the five-foot slope that was built to keep the drive from flooding during rainy season. Wheee! It's a little like a roller coaster. And then it's time for the tilt-a-whirl, the ride down the open road (actually a dry creek bed) where everyone sitting in back bumps heads and loses their lunchboxes. But no complaints—what else can you expect when the car is navigating ruts that are easily 12 to 18 inches deep? Two blocks later, the van reaches the pavement, and from there on, the only obstacles to watch for are tall speed bumps, burros, oxen, sheep, people, dogs, pigs and buses."



Bob Wing w/friends.

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So running a home full of handicapped children required something more than ordinary fortitude—it often called for the stamina of one of David's mighty men and the organizational skills of a corporate

planner. In fact, managing Casa Hogar was not a job that could easily be done alone, and Carol often thought of the verse in Psalm 68:6, "*God setteth the solitary in families.*"

The scripture turned out to be prophetic for Carol, when she met Francisco de Marin, a widower who was also the brother-in-law of Palabra Viva's pastor, Sergio Fernandez. Francisco was raising two daughters alone, and he and Carol became friends when Fran made a visit to Casa Hogar to see his sister, Luz. The two began dating in 1996 and married a year later in Carol's hometown in Minnesota.

Carol and Fran have proven to be an ideal couple to manage Casa Hogar, having steered the home smoothly through a phenomenal growth pattern that quadrupled the population in just a few short years. Today the couple oversees schooling, therapy, and doctor's appointments, along with the needs of daily living for more than 75 children with home or family problems and special physical needs.

One of their latest projects has been the construction of an adobe brick oven, which the older children can use to provide bread for the home and sell locally to raise funds. They also have built a tin-working workshop so that the teens can learn a trade and have their own means of earning money in the future.

Praise reports from the home abound, as well as challenges. Recently when teens in Palabra Viva Sunday School were asked to stand and give their

testimony, they shared the wonders God had done in healing their hearts from emotional wounds and in giving visions of His plan for their lives. Although none of the teens had been Christians before they came to Casa Hogar, now every one living in the home has had a salvation experience.



Courtyard and children's dorm rooms.

Meanwhile, the challenges of operating a project of such magnitude go on. Recently while Carol was in Texas, Casa Hogar came under a spiritual attack that manifested in several ways. All vehicles had broken down, including the home's bus, which was used for school transportation. The brakes went out on one car, the transmission on another, and the driver of the home's only pickup truck had an accident. That same day, a truck delivering water to the home rolled over a 12-year-old boy with cerebral palsy, Ricardo Parada, who was sitting in his wheelchair. Mercifully, the wheelchair took most of the crunch, and Ricardo was more shaken than bruised.

At the same time, many of the children were sick, and Fran called Carol in Texas to see if she could make

it back early to help. As the two prayed together on the phone, the Lord showed Fran that the home was under attack because they were soon to be blessed with two vehicles. And the Lord was faithful to provide. As the result of a generous offering of funds from Christ Temple Church in Irving, Texas, Casa Hogar soon owned a 15-passenger van, and a Mazda pickup.

Such is the life of the everyday caregiver of a children's home that has been built by love and operates on faith. Carol and Fran face the daily challenges willingly, knowing that God is still on the throne and that He is well able to provide for the needs not only of their own family, but for the children of Casa Hogar as well.

As Carol noted in a recent newsletter, "We are so thankful the Lord is continuing to give the Mexican people a vision for our work and is continuing to build His team of support for Casa Hogar.

"Most of all, we are grateful to the Lord for his faithfulness in blessing the children. It is wonderful to see how God is working in their lives.. He takes someone the world would consider unlovable and unworthy and puts them in the first place."



The Marins: Carol, Francisco, Peter, Xu, and Nayeli.

The Marin family sends a big "thank you" to everyone who has helped Casa Hogar get where it is today. We are so thankful for the support of our friends from the U.S. who have volunteered their time and helped with prayers and financial support for the children's home. Also we are grateful that the Lord is continuing to give the Mexican people a vision and is continuing to build a team of support for Casa Hogar.

We now have more than 70 children with a number of disabilities who attend a total of 14 different schools. The Lord, who is called *Faithful and True*, is faithful to provide for all their needs with the help of churches and individuals who have a heart for missions. We invite anyone interested in the children's home to contact us at the following addresses:

Children's Home Address

Casa Hogar Benito Juarez
APDO 1340
Oaxaca, Oaxaca
Mexico 68000
011-52-951-15297
cahobj@prodigy.net.mx

Support Address:

New Covenant Church
Casa Hogar
2140 S. Hwy. #3
Northfield MN 55057
507-645-8829
amysteuck@juno.com

Correspondence Address:

Grace Life Church
Casa Hogar
305 Camden Dr., PO Box 406
Marshall, MN 56258
507-532-3187
gracelife2@starpoint.net

The Story of Casa Hogar

It started with a dream, and then the Lord began sending children to live at Casa Hogar, the orphanage founded by quadriplegic Al Baker. Al's heart for the needy, particularly for underprivileged children, led him to the mission field and to the exciting adventure of establishing a home for handicapped children in Oaxaca, Mexico. The story begins in 1974 when Al first was called to Mexico and continues to the present day, with its challenges to provide therapy, education, and Biblical teaching to more than 70 children needing a home. Although Al has gone home to his heavenly Father, the dream lives on at Casa Hogar, where daily God is faithful to provide.

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