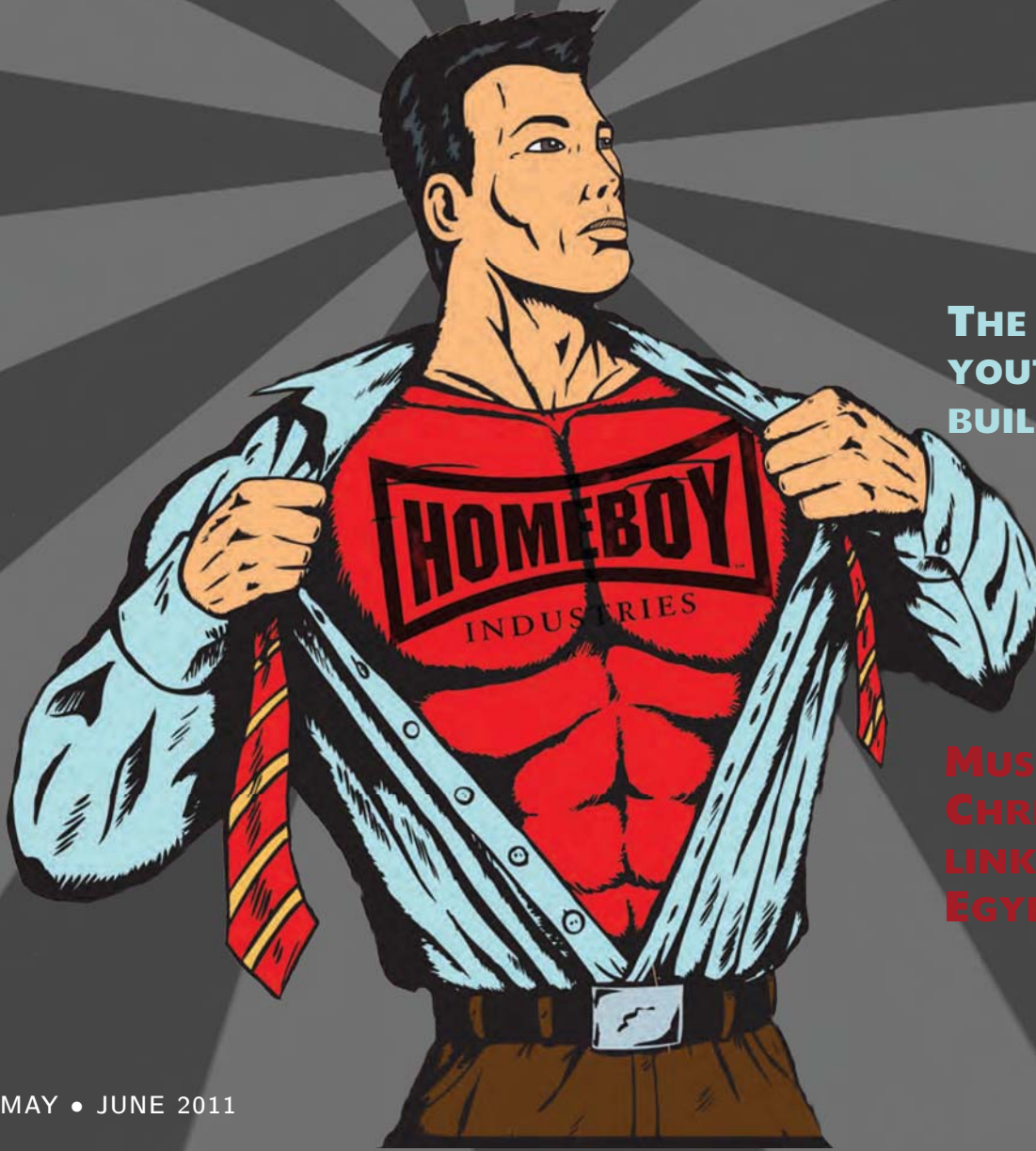


PRISM

NOTHING STOPS A BULLET LIKE A JOB
FORMER GANG MEMBERS FIND NEW DIRECTION AT HOMEBOY

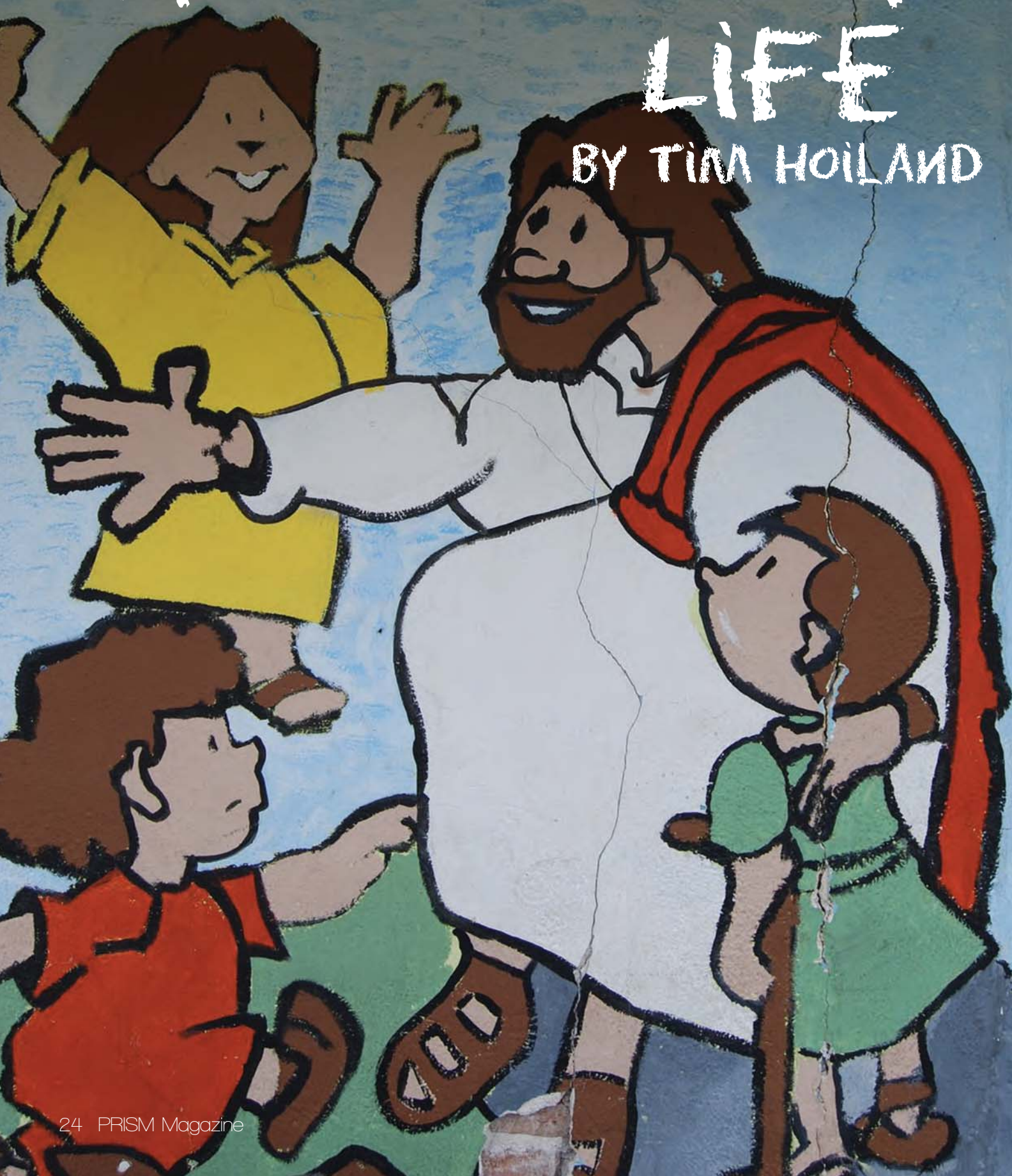


**THE IMMIGRANT
YOUTH MOVEMENT
BUILDS MOMENTUM**

**MUSLIMS AND
CHRISTIANS
LINK ARMS IN
EGYPT**

A HOME FOR LIFE

BY TIM HOILAND



The first thing I noticed as the bus rolled into Managua that hot March night was an illuminated Christmas tree standing tall in a traffic roundabout. At the next intersection was another, and then another. The second thing I noticed was the graffiti. Lots of it, everywhere, all saying basically the same thing: ¡Viva Daniel! ¡Viva La Revolución!

My taxi driver explained the significance of both the next morning. The government-commissioned Christmas trees stay up year-round as a constant reminder of all that Nicaraguans have to celebrate with “the people’s president” at the helm. And the graffiti, of course, reminds them of the very same thing. It appeared virtually overnight, allegedly commissioned by a government all too familiar with history’s left-right-left-right march of power. The Christmas trees and the graffiti were embodied statements of the obvious: Power is worthless if not clutched, flaunted, and defended.

The beat-up taxi headed south, past five-star hotels and roadside comedors, and out of the city towards San Antonio Sur. I’d been forewarned about Nicaragua’s address system, devoid as it is—almost comically—of street names and numbers. Using the directions I’d been given, with approximate distances and seemingly nondescript landmarks, and after several wrong turns and stops to ask for directions, we finally found the destination on a rutted dirt street. I paid the driver, and the taxi rattled away.

TAMBOURINES AND CROSSES

I had come to visit Hogar Belén, a ministry of Mustard Seed Communities and home to some 20 children and teenagers with a variety of disabilities who had been abandoned or orphaned at some point in their young lives.

When I arrived, the children and staff were gathering for their daily chapel service, held in a breezy room with a crucifix up front and tambourines on the chairs lining the walls. I was immediately struck by this juxtaposition: the crucifix a well-known Roman Catholic symbol, the tambourine a stereotypically Protestant musical instrument.

Sitting down afterwards with Sandra Sandoval, the director of Hogar Belén, I asked about this, knowing that in Latin America there exists between Protestants and Catholics an uneasy and sometimes hostile tension. The administrators, she told me, were for the most part Catholic, while those working with the kids were generally Protestant. As far as she knew, this was the only faith-based organization of its kind in the country; the rest separate along the Catholic-Protestant divide.

“We worship the same God and work for the same mission,” she said. “Sometimes differences arise, in chapel for instance, but we can all agree on our higher cause.”

Anita Patterson-Vans, who works at the modest on-site health clinic where the children’s medical records are kept, told me the same thing. “What these children need is love,” she said. “They don’t have families, but we are able to give them love because of our faith. Regardless of our different



Opposite: A mural at Hogar Belén reminds the children of Christ’s love for them.

Above: Amilkar lights up a room with his smile.

Below: A therapist works tenderly with one of the residents.



backgrounds, we believe what Jesus taught, in Matthew 25, that whatever we do for the least of these we are doing for him.”

The order of worship in chapel followed a mostly liturgical style, presumably drawing on Catholic influences. When it came time to sing, however, the tambourines were put to good use, filling the room and spilling out into the courtyard in a cacophony of sound both erratically offbeat and contagiously joyful. Once or twice, strategically placed staff members intervened to keep certain tambourine virtuosos from hitting their neighbors repeatedly on the head.

After a brief sermon about the woman Jesus refused to condemn, it was time for the passing of the peace. As I was a noticeable guest in the room, several of the children seemed especially interested in shaking my hand. One small girl approached me timidly, extended her tiny hand, and then, with a giggle, withdrew it quickly and hobbled away. A teenage boy, the oldest of the group—who required close supervision by the gatekeeper, the only male staff member—gave me the heartiest handshake I can remember, and without words in any discernible language welcomed me to his home.

A HOME FOR LIFE

Without a doubt, Hogar Belén has become a home to these kids. As abandoned children in the second-poorest country in the western hemisphere, they have been spared a life—a very short one, judging by statistics—of extreme vulnerability and suffering. And as abandoned children with disabilities, the shelter and love that orphans sometimes find through adoption would have very likely been out of reach.

Many of the children come to Hogar Belén without names or birthdays, just stories shrouded in the tragic unknowns of abandonment and neglect. Some are referred by a Ministry of Health program called Mi Familia, which exists to protect the rights of children and ensure they get proper treatment and medicine. In other cases, ordinary Nicaraguans who know of Hogar Belén by reputation may discover abandoned children on the street and bring them here.

Because of the wide age range represented among the children here, and because of the need for additional space, Mustard Seed Communities opened a new home for older children in Diriamba, about 20 miles south, to protect the

younger ones from being picked on by those who are stronger and perhaps unaware of their strength.

“Our philosophy is that these children have a home for life,” Sandoval told me. This is because very few families would be willing to adopt them, and no other organization or institution in the country would be willing to take them until they are 25. Even then, the most likely option is the mental hospital.

“Omar came to us with a lot of aggression when we found him on the street,” she says by way of illustration, referring to the teenage boy who had greeted me during chapel. “He is much less aggressive now, because he has experienced patience and love. But mental hospitals are environments of





Elvira gets some exercise with the help of her therapist.

Later, during lunch, Gonzalez pointed to a laminated schedule pinned to the wall beside the table where the children eat their meals. Every day, she said, the staff emphasize the daily routine, which is spelled out in detail: First, thank God for the day, then go to the bathroom, wash hands, get dressed, eat breakfast, go to chapel and class from 8 to 12, wash hands, eat lunch, clean up, change clothes, free time, rest, wash hands, dinner, clean up, change clothes, go to sleep.

"With time," Gonzalez said as she watched the children with a motherly smile, "they begin to remember the process. You start to notice them doing it on their own."

When he was finished eating, Becker, a 10-year-old who had just told me of his interest in baseball and his dream of visiting the United States, took his plate into the kitchen. He did so with a proud grin and without any prodding. He came back and wiped off his spot at the table, which wasn't even messy. Then he turned and cleaned up the spot where 3-year-old Alexi had spilled his rice during a futile search for phantom chunks of chicken.

MUSTARD SEED FAITH

Mustard Seed Communities, Hogar Belén's parent organization, was founded in Jamaica in 1978 by Father Gregory Ramkissoon, a Diocesan priest. Now present in the Dominican Republic and Zimbabwe as well as Jamaica and Nicaragua, MSC remains committed to serving the vulnerable by creating communities that foster mutual respect and interdependence—but it always starts small.

"We can't build huge institutions," Ramkissoon says. "We must go very small where people can manage it. If you start very small with a methodology, with a goal, and with an objective that the people themselves can carry on, it is much more viable in the long run. This is why we call it the mustard seed."

Twice in the gospel of Matthew, Jesus mentions mustard seeds in his teaching. The first comes in a progression of

parables, when he tells the crowd, "The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed, which a man took and planted in his field. Though it is the smallest of all seeds, yet when it grows, it is the largest of garden plants and becomes a tree, so that the birds come and perch in its branches."

A bit later, just after the transfiguration, when Jesus' face shines like the sun and his clothes glow with holy light before the dazzled eyes of Peter, James, and John, a man brings his epileptic son to Jesus' disciples, who have tried in vain to heal him in Jesus' name. After Jesus heals the boy, even casting out a demon, the disciples come to him privately, wondering what they have done wrong. Why have they failed to heal the boy?

Jesus answers, "Because you have so little faith. Truly I tell you, if you have faith as small as a mustard seed, you can say to this mountain, 'Move from here to there,' and it will move. Nothing will be impossible for you."

The disciples, like each of us, were people of little faith, people with hearts prone to wandering. In the corresponding account in the gospel of Luke, we read that no sooner has Jesus healed the boy than an argument breaks out between the disciples over who is the greatest. Jesus has a response, but his answer is the furthest thing from their minds and the furthest thing from our own. He takes aside a small child—a Jennifer, an Alex, a Becker—and says to his disciples, "Whoever welcomes this little child in my name welcomes me; and whoever welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me. For whoever is least among you all is the greatest."

Paul picks up on this theme in his first letter to the battered and scattered Corinthians, teaching them what it means to be one body with numerous parts, each designed for a unique purpose to be exercised for the good of the whole. "God has put the body together," he writes, "giving greater honor to the parts that lacked it, so that there should be no division in the body, but that its parts should have equal concern for each other. If one part suffers, every part suffers with it; if one part is honored, every part rejoices with it."

To an impatient, power-hungry world, the mustard seed comes to us as a radical alternative. It remains true across time and space that who Christ calls his disciples to be is precisely what the world needs and what the children of Hogar Belén have truly found: a body of people who hold their power with open hands, eager to give it away in small acts of faithfulness among a chosen few for a very long time.

To learn more or donate, please go to MustardSeed.com.

Tim Høiland is a journalist focusing on the intersections of faith, justice, and peace in the Americas. For more please visit TJHolland.com. Look for his cover story on de/reforestation in the next issue of PRISM.