

# Just as I Am: The Story of Tal Como Soy Covenant Church

---

*Tammi Biggs-Hernandez, pastor, Tal Como Soy, and global personnel,  
Evangelical Covenant Church, Santiago de los Caballeros,  
Dominican Republic*

**L**a Real is a community in Santiago de los Caballeros, Dominican Republic. It is a lower-middle class community without a school, park, baseball field, or basketball court. It was a community without a church. It is a community with a deep mistrust for evangelicals—and many bad experiences to back it up. Many evangelical churches have tried to start a church in La Real and have failed. Many of our neighbors in La Real have shared their frustration of not feeling welcome in evangelical churches that place great emphasis on what Christians should not do and how they should look, communicating in effect, “Jesus loves you, Jesus accepts you, but...guys, put a tie on before you come into church, make sure you don’t have any tattoos, and cut your hair short; ladies, make sure your skirt covers your knees, don’t have any piercings, and don’t listen to secular music.” There is a certain expectation that a person needs to change *before* coming to the church, a perception that God will not accept you the way you are. The people of La Real have experienced this over and over again. This is the community in which God has called us to plant a church.

## **Vision and Beginnings**

God placed a burden on my husband and me that could not be silenced. Our heart breaks for those God loves deeply but who do not feel welcomed by the traditional church culture. God placed in our hearts a desire to bridge that gap. He gave us a vision to reach those whom the traditional church has rejected, whether overtly or covertly. The majority

of our leadership team comes from church backgrounds that emphasize the discipline of perceived errors without a system of restoration. Many talented young leaders therefore had found themselves on the “outside looking in.” Our vision is to see more people, especially youth and young families, come to a real and life-changing relationship with Christ, *just as they are*. We want to see people worshiping God and following Jesus in their everyday lives. Our long-term projection is for our church to be a community center that teaches and demonstrates the love of Jesus in ways that are familiar to the community. Our emphasis is sharing the love of God through sports, cooking classes, hip hop, dance, and visual arts, and discipling those who do not know God in order for them to become deeply rooted in Jesus. We have a deep desire to love people where they are and allow God to convict and transform lives. We feel called to break down Christian stereotypes that are hindering people from seeing a very real God who loves them in a very real way.

One Wednesday in February 2019, we walked into our rented two-story house with only seven folding chairs, a speaker, and a microphone. That Friday we received a stove and huge cooking pot from a man who has a ministry in Israel. Saturday we held a domino tournament and mini-Olympics in front of a nearby convenience store. On Sunday we woke up with grandiose ideas that the people who had voiced interest in our new church would come. I cooked enough food for the entire neighborhood in anticipation of the after-church meal.

Our faith-filled, and perhaps somewhat naïve, expectations were replaced with lament when we learned that our neighbor’s adult son had been killed in a motorcycle accident the night before. A service of celebration became one of ministering to the brokenhearted in our new community. Our team grabbed the big pot of food prepared for post-church fellowship, and we crossed the street. We offered prayers and words of hope. We held hands with people we had only just begun to know. We gave the family food for the difficult road of grief that lay ahead.

In the early days of our plant, God connected us to twenty young men—many with tattoos and pierced ears—through our basketball ministry. These young men originally came only to play ball, but they also received an acceptance they had never experienced from evangelicals. They learned God’s love for them through Bible studies and, even more so, through interaction. We did not make church attendance a requirement for participation in the basketball ministry, but one by one the young men started coming. Seven made a confession of faith and were baptized shortly thereafter. Many more are still seeking. When I look

around on a Sunday morning, I see boys and young men who know they belong. These same young men are beginning to invite their mothers and siblings.

## **Ministry Philosophy and Practice**

Most people we have encountered have experienced the church as focused primarily on discipline. Kids need to sit down and not move. One needs to arrive to church with the appropriate clothes. Anyone who appears to be living outside the moral parameters established by the church is deemed “in sin” and placed on “discipline.” The system of discipline involves removing people from involvement in the day-to-day life of the church, whether in leadership or as a volunteer, and leaving them there. There is no real plan of restoration. When the leaders deem one worthy to return, they may or may not be allowed back in an active role. For this reason, many have found themselves on the outside looking in. Many have taken the strict discipline of the local church as a direct reflection of who God is.

Tal Como Soy—Just as I Am—is not simply the name of our church; it is our philosophy of ministry that starts with not emphasizing *who* is welcome at church or *how* one should come to church; all are truly welcome just as they are. We express this in many ways. For example, we have no explicit or implicit dress code. We welcome the neighbor whose activities the prior night are well known. We allow people to live out their faith and their doubts in a community that will love and walk through it with them. We allow people to fail and be restored. Children are encouraged to participate in the life of the church. One of our main priorities is to allow children to love Jesus in a way that is age appropriate. We allow them to grab hand-held instruments and plastic mini microphones and sing and dance up front during worship. Though it can be distracting when they are playing tambourines offbeat or trying a new dance move, one thing is certain: our children are learning both to love to worship and to love the God whom we worship. They are experiencing a freedom in knowing a Jesus who never pushed the children aside, and this is giving parents the opportunity to guide and teach their children in the “way they should go” (Proverbs 22:6).

Generally speaking, Dominican culture is male dominated and male focused, and the conservative evangelical Christian culture has largely perpetuated the elevated value of men over women. Very few denominations allow women in any form of leadership in the church. As an example, I was not allowed to translate a sermon for a visiting mission

team at another church. Women are allowed to teach the children and sing backup on the praise team. Many women are unable to come to church because of the need to cook for their family, especially if their male partner is an unbeliever. Meals are traditionally prepared by the woman of the house, and food is saved for the arrival of the man of the house, who is typically the breadwinner overseeing all finances and purchases. For this reason, meal ministry has been a priority of our church plant from the beginning. Our service begins at 11:00 a.m. so that we can share a meal after. This takes the pressure off women who would otherwise have to cook and allows them to bring a plate home to their husband if he does not attend. In the future we hope to replicate a sewing ministry that we helped develop in a large church in Puerto Plata as an outreach to women and young girls. In that context, the sewing ministry helped women escape prostitution, providing an alternative means of income. We have a deep desire to offer a similar ministry in La Real, where many women are caught in economic slavery and oppression.

My husband Jochy and I, along with our core team of leaders feel like surrogate parents and mentors for many of the youth and children in our church, whose biological parents are not present. Through relationships formed at Tal Como Soy, many are experiencing what it means to truly belong to a family—for the first time sitting down at a table for food and conversation, experiencing unconditional love, learning what godly love looks like and who God says they are. Many are learning that confrontation and consequences do not equal rejection.

God has opened doors for our ministry in surprising ways. The Neighborhood Association has given us blanket approval to hold whatever activities we would like in the community. Many neighbors have told us that this approval is “nothing short of a miracle because they don’t approve anything.” In summer 2019, we were invited to a meeting with the mayor of Santiago. My husband Jochy had some hesitation because he was concerned that we would be expected to simply “beg” for government help. However, we decided to attend in openness to however God might work. In his brief description of our community work, Jochy mentioned that we transport youth to another community for our basketball ministry because our own community does not have a court. Two months later the mayor himself came to La Real to announce the construction of a full-court community basketball court!

## Conclusion

Tal Como Soy is a laboratory for finding common ground in Jesus. As an intercultural, multiethnic family, Jochy and I (along with our two children) serve alongside dedicated Dominican leaders, seeking to be a truly welcoming church for young people and their families, who come from varying economic, familial, religious and generational backgrounds. We have found beauty and freedom in seeing our differences as strengths and celebrating the diversity of ideas and giftedness each person brings. As a community of believers, we are digging deeply into the truth of Scripture to look past what we are supposed to be and how we are supposed to act according to culture and tradition. There is no greater satisfaction or joy than seeing people being set free and living into the truth that is found in God's word.

It would be easy to focus on all we lack, like the disciples at the feeding of the five thousand, but God has showed us a different way. He is teaching us to take the \$3 offering we receive each week and give thanks that our young church is learning what it means to give to the Lord. He is teaching us that he is not defined or confined by budgets or lack of resources. He is reminding us that he is the God of nations by surrounding us with churches from around the world that believe in the call he has placed on us. He has placed in our path generous people and churches from other countries to support the ministry God has entrusted to us. He placed us in the heart of a man who had a ministry in Israel, who purchased our stove and big rice pot. He has partnered my husband, Jochy, with a musician from Kenya to record a musical collaboration in three languages. He is teaching us how to stretch \$3 with his blessing. He is supplying for our needs and teaching us that living without a six-digit budget can mean living with freedom and abundance.

The verse God placed on our hearts when he called us to plant the church was Isaiah 43:19: "I am about to do a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it? I will make a way in the wilderness and rivers in the desert." God continues to show us that we need to keep our eyes open to where and how he is working. God is always at work, often in ways that break through established traditions and practices. If we keep our eyes fixed on him, he will show us new ways of ministering and new ways of sharing the unchangeable message of his great love and redemption available to all through his Son Jesus. If we allow ourselves to see through God's lens, he will show us rivers springing up where we perceive nothing—rivers in the communities we have been entrusted

to serve, in those marginalized by society or church, in areas that have nothing to attract attention and, seemingly, nothing to offer. Rivers in the desert.

God is doing a new thing. Do you not perceive it?