

Views of the Pastoral Team from a solo delegate June 15-24, 2006

Within my church; Heartland Presbyterian in Clive, I have been blessed to be a small part of the relationship and journey with the Pastoral Team in Berlin, El Salvador and our partner relationship with the Canton El Tablón and now El Tablón Cerna. Within Compañeros, the blessings grew as I learned of the journey of other groups here in Central Iowa and beyond. Now, as Project Coordinator for Don Justo, Coffee with Dignity, I am overwhelmed with blessings.

These blessings have spread within my family. My son Paul was one of the first student interns last summer - spending his days teaching at one of the marginalized schools in Berlin in the morning, and tutoring English to several high school students and even a couple of teachers in the afternoons. He was there nearly 3 months. Paul chose to go again this summer. Volunteering his time and resources to serve those whom he has grown to love.

Each year, I join a delegation to El Salvador with my church. There are usually at least a dozen of us. The trips are filled with education, love, sweat, many tears, and attempts to walk in solidarity with our brothers and sisters so far away.

Last summer I took my first 'solo' trip - using Paul as my excuse to visit alone... as if I needed one. It was such a great experience that I found I needed to do a solo trip again this summer.

Being in the Pastoral House without 12 other people in tow is so very different. Unlike a group, I have no itinerary... and the Pastoral Team does, for the most part, what they do when there are no visitors. I sort of blend into the group. Not that I'm very productive... although I have become pretty good at washing dishes - and they even let me do theirs! I've explained to the Team that it makes me feel a little less of a 'lump' if I am able to contribute in a small way. If I attempted other chores, I would be more trouble than help. I need to be honest about that. I 'helped' Cecelia in the kitchen one day and I peeled one potato to her eight! Good grief... I've been cooking my family's meals for over 25 years... what's the deal? I guess I have different kitchen gadgets that spoil me greatly.

Here is how I spend my days when I am alone:

- - I love to walk the town so I find excuses to go to the market... Walking the town is fabulous - a few people recognize me and will stop and talk - strangers are so kind. I don't get stared at as much as I used to, and there are plenty of warm smiles and greetings from passers-by.
- - I always spend a day with Paul at his school - and what a joy to see the mutual love between Paul and his students as well as the camaraderie of his fellow teachers.
- - I have much time to reflect and journal.
- - I have time to visit with the Team personally - and since I was there quite a bit with no translator (Bob or my son), I picked up a bunch more Spanish than I normally would in a week.
- - I have sporadic meetings with members of the Pastoral Team about the coffee project and other Compañeros work

This trip, I was able to participate in a very special occasion. Once every 2 months, representatives of all the 17 cantons come to the Pastoral House for a meeting; 2, 3 or even 4 from each canton. This meeting happened to fall while I was in town! What a JOY to be a part of that. About 50 were in attendance. They would begin straggling in around 8 a.m. for the 9 a.m. meeting. The Pastoral Team scurries to make huge pots of coffee and hand out pan dulce (sweet bread) to everyone as they wait for the meeting to begin. It is a great social time. It begins with Jesús presenting a very moving and powerful session about working together, community and faith. This lasted about a half hour. Then Balmore presented a 'workshop' on immigration - pulling thoughts and opinions from the audience and then educating them on

alternatives and encouraging communities to work together and stay put to create better lives for themselves in their own homes! He spoke over an hour. About 15 minutes into it, Blanca (many blessings to her as I was getting a headache trying to keep up with all this Spanish) motioned for me to come out of the chapel. She said I didn't need to sit through all that and that they needed help in the kitchen! We poured pineapple juice into 100 baggies and tied them off (I ended up doing the pouring because I couldn't master the tying off part)...then we filled plates for all and bagged and tied those.

Then Blanca said it was my turn to speak. I was SO thankful I had spent a couple hours the night before agonizing about what I should say and then writing it down. I didn't want to just stand up and say 'howdy' and then sit down. I felt some responsibility as a representative of not only my church and Compañeros, but also as a representative of all the churches who have partnerships with the communities represented in that room! I also felt I had an obligation to the Pastoral Team. This was a wonderful opportunity to express our gratitude and our need of the Pastoral Team. The relationship that the Presbytery of Des Moines (and many other denominations now as well) has with our brothers and sisters in El Salvador could NOT be successful without the Pastoral Team. They are the voice of their communities and they become our voice to our partner communities. And they do it so well. They serve with love, with the Holy Spirit always in their hearts and with respect for all. They encourage communities to work together...to stay united...to have common goals and to work together to create a better future for themselves and their families. They tirelessly (and voluntarily I might add) work for justice and inspire us to do the same. I hope I was able to convey that gratitude. A young Peace Corp volunteer translated for me. I needed the words to be correct and I was grateful for his skills.

Then Blanca spoke to the people from each canton - getting and giving updates about work being done in their community. I learned that Don Justo profits had been used for a water collection roof in one canton as well as to provide desks & other supplies for a canton school! Que chivo!

That took about 45 minutes.

Then it was time for lunch. We all pitched in to hand out plates and drinks. People ate (or saved their plates to bring home to their families) and socialized or had 'mini-meetings with members of the Team. Then it was over and time to clean up.

What an incredible morning! What a blessing to have witnessed this important piece of Pastoral Team life!

I learn during my solo visits that there are so many pieces to the work of the Pastoral Team. I don't think any of us truly understand the scope of their service to their communities and to us. I always leave humbled by their loving service and spirit. I also leave with the desire to do more; to work harder, to talk more and to reach out more to try to involve others in this important work.

We are all brothers and sisters. Place, language and the color of our skin are irrelevant. It is what is in our hearts that matters. Justice matters. Basic human needs need to be met. No small act of kindness or generosity is a waste.

My hope is that all of us will keep our hearts open to possibilities; that we will all take time to learn of the realities of others, to see beyond our own reality. And with that education, my hope is that we will desire to work towards justice and do what is right.

Please consider joining the effort. Visit www.oursisterparish.org to learn more and see how other churches have become involved. Even if visiting El Salvador is not an option for you or your church, there are a myriad of ways to support this work; from the more involved community partnerships all the way to the humble drinking of a specific cup of coffee.

This is a journey that could fill your heart to overflowing.
Yours in faith,

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