



Eastern Washington-Idaho

Synod supplement

Costa Rica adventure brings blessings

Participants learn about their role in the kingdom of God as they help build Habitat homes

By Elizabeth Luiten

Eleven days spent on a Thrivent Builds with Habitat for Humanity trip is a life-changing and life-filling experience.

Throw together 15 strangers who are eager to serve, mix in the common thread of faith, bundle them up and send them to Costa Rica: The end result is the chance to build houses and relationships too. Through daily Bible study, they discover that the point is not only building houses or relationships—but also building up the kingdom of God.

Our 11-day journey (Nov. 28-Dec. 8, 2007) was filled with red clay dirt, calloused hands, treasured picture albums, shared meals and questions: What does it mean to build the kingdom of God? How do we do that?

I had the blessed opportunity to be part of this Thrivent/Habitat brigade to Alajuala, Costa Rica. What began for me as a “big” adventure to mark my 30th birthday quickly became a solid experience to mark my life as a child of God and a “kingdom builder.”

Bob Baker, executive director of Lutherhaven Ministries in Coeur d’Alene, Idaho, organized the beginning stages and advertised the trip through Lutherhaven. Group leaders, Mike and Janet Feiler, Couer d’Alene, put everything together and led us on the trip.

Others on the trip included, Fred and Bonnie Ebbesen, Appleton, Wis.; Janet Gilliam, Spokane; Jerry and Sharon Hanson, Couer d’Alene; Cindy Haugen, Couer d’Alene; Melanie McQuaig, Wenatchee, Wash.; Luanne Niggemeyer, Spokane; Davee Pullen, Chewelah, Wash.; Bonita Roach, Spokane; and Melissa Skindlov, St. Paul, Minn.

Twelve of the group members were Thrivent Financial benefit members. Thrivent gave a \$800 grant to these 12 toward the cost of the trip. Thrivent also gave another \$6,500 to the local affiliate to go toward future homes. These funds allow us to leave a lasting impact in the country we served.

Our group of 15 worked on three Habitat houses for six days in Rosario, an area of Naranjo. When we arrived, two of the houses were near completion and the third had ground leveled and ditches dug for the foundation. Our tasks on this house were tying rebar to create the foundation, unloading 500-pound concrete blocks for the walls, carting cement in wheelbarrows, erecting the walls, tying the walls together with wire and leveling the floor. We saw it progress from a flat piece of dirt to a home with walls, ready for roof and concrete floor.

Another job was to level dirt behind the other two houses to create patios. We spent a lot of time breaking the hard, red clay with pick axes, shoveling and carrying it away in wheelbarrows. Each piece of dirt had to be moved by hand. We all discovered new (sore) muscles that hadn’t been used before.

Through our physical labor, we were blessed to spend time with the three families and the workers. We used our limited Spanish and learned more while teaching English words to our new friends. As we shoveled and



My counting buddy, 4-year-old Andres, stands in the doorway of his house.

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ried, we laughed and shared stories.

The children ran about, sometimes barefoot. The older ones tried to help us. Andres, a 4-year-old boy, followed me and picked up scraps as we counted together in Spanish.

One day Carmen, the matriarch, taught us how to make empanadas. Afterward, we gathered in a huge circle and sang “O Suzanna” and a silly camp song that got everyone waving their arms, clapping and laughing.

Making friends

We built relationships through work, and we also built relationships through daily Bible study and at mealtimes. We befriended the hotel staff, cooks, bus drivers and tour guides. Everywhere we went we encountered smiles, eager conversations and new friendships.

We spent three days sightseeing and enjoying beautiful Costa Rica. We toured the capital, San Jose, on the biggest shopping day of the year (Christmas season was upon us). We saw the National Theatre and a gold museum.

We toured a coffee plantation, visited a butterfly and waterfall garden, and attempted to see the crater of a volcano but were enveloped in clouds. We took a river tour and saw toucans, a caiman and howler monkeys. We also spent one day in the rainforest canopy, whizzing through the trees on a zipline.

On the last day at the work site, we gathered in the not-yet-finished house to pray. The circle became tighter as more and more entered the house and grabbed hands.

We prayed for the food that would be shared in the future kitchen, for sweet rest in the future bedrooms, and for those who would share laughter, love, stories and tears in the

future living room.

I felt grateful to be standing on red clay dirt, inside strong, tall walls, holding tightly to small brown hands.

Afterward, we were treated to a fiesta—complete with white tablecloths, ice cream, and a piñata filled with candy and peanuts.

As we gathered to say goodbye, we again joined hands in a circle to pray and sing one last, silly song.

I realized I was so full I was spilling over. Our hugs were tight and familiar, and our tears began to slip out. By the time we climbed on our bus, some were weeping in joy and gratitude. As the bus pulled away, we sang to each other, “*Feliz Navidad!* Merry Christmas!”

We sat silent, too full to speak. The wind washed over us, and we accepted this grace. “Fill us, Lord,” we prayed. “We are full.” □

Luiten is a director of youth and family ministries at Immanuel Lutheran Church in Moses Lake, Wash.



The whole group rests in front of the future house they were working on in the Thrivent/Habitat project in Costa Rica.

Luis (from left), Leo, Bennicio and Eliezer carry a 500-pound cement block that will become part of a wall off the delivery truck.



Life!

In these waning days of Lent a great and cosmic struggle will heat up to white-hot intensity. The struggle will be between those forces bent on the destruction of Jesus and our God, the author of Life with a capital L. I say the struggle “will be” because the most intense struggle of all of life is still between these two forces.

This is the confirmation that we live between the first Easter when God conquered death in the resurrection of Jesus and the final consummation of life that God will inaugurate at the end of time.

So the perennial question for us is whether we are fit, ready and confident as we face these old questions of Life and death. It is a hard question because the forces of death still bedevil us with their power. The forces of death are in us, vying for allegiance, pitted against God and Life and powerful, powerful!

These forces discourage us when “life as usual” seems the only path. These forces constantly draw us toward depression, clouding our hope and sapping our strength. These forces argue for “realism” when faced with evil, forgetting God’s triumph over evil is real.

These forces fool us through our “Two Kingdoms” doctrine by making us think the realities of this world, the kingdom on the left, are more powerful and consequential than the ultimate reality of the kingdom on the right, the one of God’s salvation.

In other words, everything will be arrayed to try to keep us in line, bound by an ideology of realism, fear and futility, calling into question our Easter proclamation, “Christ is risen. Christ is risen indeed!”

Brothers and sisters, let us engage this struggle for Life! In some ways the hopes of the world rest on whether there will be legions of light-bearers constantly declaring and enacting the victory of Life over death.

Light-bearers shine in dark places where evil is still hiding in cowardice. Light-bearers offer real hope to those threatened by a sense of futility. Light-bearers reflect Jesus—the light of the world—in concrete acts of undeserved kindness.

Light-bearers trust Jesus as the way forward when the maps of the world fail. Since Christ is risen, “The strife is o’er, the battle done!” (Evangelical Lutheran Worship, 366).

Blessed Easter,
Bishop Martin Wells



About the organizations

Habitat for Humanity International is a nonprofit, ecumenical Christian housing ministry that seeks to eliminate poverty housing from the world and to make decent shelter a matter of conscience and action. Thrivent Financial for Lutherans is a faith-based, fraternal benefit society.

Thrivent and Habitat have joined in an alliance called Thrivent Builds with Habitat for Humanity. The alliance helps Lutherans and others express their faith by helping families achieve greater economic independence.

Thrivent Builds trips happen all over the world, all the time. If you are interested in joining a trip, go to www.thriventbuilds.com for places, dates and other trip information.

SOURCE: HABITAT FOR HUMANITY
AND THRIVENT FINANCIAL FOR LUTHERANS

Church of the Master has renewal

By Karen Bates Olson

Lutheran Church of the Master, Lin Pasco, Wash., has had quite a year. It follows on the heels of some hard times. Following a conflict, the congregation lost about half of its membership, including most of the younger families. After a change in pastors, some significant and serious conversation, and some ardent prayer, the congregation decided to enter a transformational ministry process.

The first step took place in December 2006 when the remaining congregation members, generally of a generation dubbed as one that positively resists change, voted unanimously to take part in a conversion process that would look to turn things inside out, upside and over.

Four people, including the pastor, took part in a transformational ministry training event in March 2007.

These four were charged to come back to the congregation, invite another four members into their midst and become the guiding leadership for the process.

The process was led by the Rev. David Daubert of the ELCA. The event included a number of challenges to look at faith and ministry in a whole new light.

What if congregations were centered on the book of Acts? What if congregations took their mission and principles from that book?

What if congregations put away thinking of themselves primarily as centers to which people need come to find the faith and began to look at themselves as a people called to share the faith outside of church doors?

What if, besides talking about the absolutely vital proclamation of how God is present in word and sacrament, members also started to engage in conversation about how God is present in the whole world, even in the lives of those unsure of the faith or who reject it?

In light of this last question, participants were taken into the heart of Seattle, given a bus ticket and a little money and set loose to ask people what they thought of their community—what they liked, what they would change and how, maybe, God was part of it all.

Those who left on the trek were a little unsure of it, to start. But it was a wonderful exercise in discovering the gospel.

One member was given rich bread from a vendor who had come from Italy and was soon returning. The conversation centered on how God was present in that bread.

He offered the team a few loaves—refusing pay, simply to give thanks for the conversation. The congregation used the bread for communion the next Sunday.

Inspired by the training event, the transformational leaders invited the other members to discover its mission and guiding principles through the book of Acts.

Members were invited to a study on Acts in Easter 2007, and four guiding principles came forth:

- Jesus Christ is Lord and Savior.
- Expect miracles.
- Surprise the world with love.
- No fear here.

The congregation then began looking at its assets and gifts. What did this smaller congregation have to offer?

Two large bulletin boards were filled with sticky notes, listing one charism after another. Some had gifts of leadership. Another had a large backyard. Another could organize finances. Another could create worship services. Another could teach. And another could make really good sand castles! On and on and on.

The team then began to move into the community, as it had in Seattle. Working in pairs, they went into the neighborhood around the congregation and in to the soccer complex just north of it.

They started to observe and ask questions: Was God already there? Absolutely, in the prayers one neighbor was making for her neighbors. Absolutely, in the love the soccer parents had for their children. Absolutely, in the conversation people had about how the neighborhood was ethnically diverse and how much joy there was in that diversity.

There also learned from people in the community what it needed, as well as what it had.

The next step for this congregation? To prayerfully attend to what God is calling its members to do—given its assets, its guiding principles and its conversation with the community.

The congregation already is beginning to see change—slow change, but good and wonderful change. Gospel change.

And it all centers on this: No longer does the congregation rest in that old children's rhyme, "Here is the church. Here is the steeple. Open the doors and see all the people."

No, it goes also like this: "Here is the church. Here is the steeple. Open the doors. There go the people!" □

Olson is pastor of Lutheran Church of the Master in Pasco, Wash.