



## God's work through our hands

Team journal by Matt Conn and Gladys Lane, team members of a September 2009 *Thrivent Builds Worldwide* team led by Anita and Loren Sites to the El Salvador Community

**Matt's summary:** The power of God's work through our hands was in ample evidence during our recent 10-day mission trip to Thrivent's Habitat for Humanity build site in Santa Ana, El Salvador.

Our group of 15 dedicated volunteers: Wayne, Vickie, Boyd, Jeanette, Darren, Crystal, Duane, Barbara, Dan, Sharon, Gladys, Susan, and Matt were led by Anita Sites and her son Loren. Our group was informed during orientation Friday evening that we would have the hardest job of all, foundation work. A nervous smile could be seen on some of the group member's faces and a little bit of laughter could also be heard. As for me, a first-time participant who has never done anything like this before in his life, I was left with the dreadful feeling of "what have I gotten myself into?"

As orientation continued, I listened to other members express their expectations for the week and was comforted by what I felt God was saying to me through them. Specifically, that this could be a time to "remember what is important in our lives, not what we have made important." Not allowing nervousness and fear to dictate my mood, I decided to keep my mind open to all that was to come.

The next morning we loaded ourselves into the vans that would take us the 15 minutes down the road to the build site. Conversation was lively and the air full of energy as we turned onto the dirt road that led us back to the Habitat community. Suddenly, the van became silent as we became face-to-face with the local people living in the run-down shacks we had only seen from a distance before. We saw the farmers working the fields by hand and we saw the children looking at us in the same curious way we were all looking at them. Reality was setting in. This wasn't our world. This wasn't a world most of us like to think about, let alone visit. If anyone in the group was still groggy from the early morning van ride and did not feel the passion to grab a shovel and get to work by being God's servant, they sure did then.

Angel and Natalia, the family we were there to serve, were on hand to greet us and after a brief meeting, we walked our way down the rocky, grass-filled street to the freshly-dug trenches that



would hold the foundation of Angel and Natalia's home. Some of us got to work mixing cement while others moved blocks and dug holes and still more used buckets to get the wet cement where it needed to go. The sun was relentless and the work seemed endless but by day's end I was amazed to look around and see all that God accomplished. We were joined that day by volunteers from El Salvador, mostly poor women who, despite their extreme poverty, still found it in their heart to help those even more fortunate than themselves.

The work days followed with more block moving, hole digging, cement mixing, and reinforcing the walls with chispa (a cement-like substance to help protect the home during earthquakes). By Friday, the foundation was not only complete, but a good portion of the cinder block walls were in place and all the gigantic holes were dug, too. Strong and lasting relationships were also constructed during those busy days. Not only friendships amongst our group that we can easily continue with the Internet, but also strong bonds with the locals we tried to serve and may never see again. The first few days we did not know what the locals were saying to us but, by week's end we understood them so much more. In the time we all spent together working on a common goal, playing soccer in the blazing sun; and breaking bread together each afternoon for lunch we learned that despite our cultural and geographic differences we are all pretty much the same. We are all God's people who care, are kind, and are happy.

As the work week ended, Angel and Natalia were with us once again to thank us for all we did. As Natalia cried, I could not help but think of all they did for me, and probably other members of the group. The time we spent together working on the foundation of their home was such an excellent example of how all us need to make sure the very basic things in our lives - our foundation - are in good shape. Are we constantly sifting out the rocks that enter our lives and are we reinforcing our faith walls to withstand the earthquakes the world sends our way? Are we digging deep enough to support the spiritual heights we wish to achieve? Are we leaving behind what we have made important in our lives, instead of what truly is?

**Gladys' summary:** Day one, and our red-shirted Thrivent group is already a cohesive team. We've met Angel and Natalie, the future homeowners; we've been introduced to the masons and workers who will guide our efforts. As Susan comments, "God's hand is in all of this—to take 15 strangers from around the country, to join them with poor workers from a different culture, to work shoulder-to-shoulder in love and harmony—and to see footings poured and walls rising is miraculous."

Santos Vitoria Barillo Ortega walks by for the umpteenth time, her wheelbarrow loaded with bricks. Fifty-five years old, less than five feet tall, always smiling, always moving. She is working on site because “God has blessed me. I want to give back those blessings – and so I work as hard as a man. God has been so good to me,” she says as she raises her hands in prayer.

“We serve God by serving others,” says Darren, as he and his wife Crys agree that El Salvador is a lush green country, but suffers from a disturbing gap between rich and poor. Darren adds, “Working with Habitat gives us a well-rounded view of the country and its people—and the children are so beautiful.”

“The building process here is different—slow for us Americans—but it gets done. And the Salvadorans are so hospitable, patient, gracious, and welcoming” says Sharon. We translate flexibility—Anita’s watchword—into Spanish, as we recall that we are here to accompany Salvadorans on their journey to a better life, not to imprint our culture on theirs. As perspiration drips into the chispa, the rock-filled mortar, the masons keep a watchful eye on the construction. One took time to share his thoughts. “I’m enchanted, delighted with the volunteers. This is God’s work. In my life God comes first; then my family; then Habitat Thriver.” In response to my question about the new president of El Salvador, he responds, “My life is comfortable. There is not much violence in Ahuachapan, where I live. But there are so many poor; they cannot find jobs. They need education; they need work. Salvadoreans are energetic, ingenious, willing to work hard at any job.”

Another mason is less confident. “People are afraid because of the violence. There is still much hatred and anger.” Someone walking behind us casts a shadow, and he lowers his voice, almost whispering.

“People kill, rob, shoot each other because of the hatred still in their hearts. It’s not just the economy—it’s hatred left from the war.”

Did the war leave permanent scars on the Salvadorean heart? Is it too much to hope that caring volunteers, working shoulder to shoulder with Salvadorean poor, can replace hatred with love? As José rises to return to work, he looks over the work site. “We thank God for all of you.”