



## Journal of our trip to El Salvador with Thrivent Builds

By Addie Brandt, team member of a July 2009 *Thrivent Builds Worldwide* team led by Kelsey Midthun and Erin Gladstone

**Friday, Day 1:** Well, the day has arrived to leave "peaceful" Pemberville and go to an unknown country. I have to admit that I have "reservations" about this trip, but thanks to my husband, Bob, he encourages me at all times and I am trusting God that this is what we need to do. Keith Brandt, our nephew is going with us. He is 16 years old. Keith has raised most of his funding for this trip. We drove to Cleveland and stayed overnight at the Hampton Inn to get our plane VERY early in the morning on Friday, the 24<sup>th</sup>. The Continental flight arrived on time and we were on our way to Houston, where we would meet up with others on our team, then fly on to San Salvador, the capital of El Salvador. I put on my red shirt that we were told to wear so that others of the team would know that we were part of the group. We weren't in the airport long when we were spotted by some of the team members from Minnesota and Indiana. It was good to see them and to connect. This was not all the team. Others were coming from West Lafayette, Indiana through Atlanta. There would be 18 of us, all total. Our plane arrived in San Salvador on time. The flight was not really that long-about 3 hours from Cleveland and 2 ½ hours from Houston and everything went according to schedule.

When we arrived, the first thing we noticed was the STIFLING heat! The airport was very crowded with families there to meet loved ones. We were told that there probably would be lots of people, families in the airport. The El Salvadorian people are very family oriented. We met the others coming in from Atlanta. We got our luggage and went through customs with no difficulty. As a matter of fact, the custom's agent was very pleasant. Gail, a Habitat El Salvador employee, escorted us to a waiting mini-bus. It was very nice and AIR CONDITIONED! Milan was our driver. On the way to Santa Ana and Hotel Sahara, we stopped at a gas station/convenience store called, On the Run. They are a chain store and are also in the U.S. We were able to get snack items. Bob and I chose ice cream and v-8 juice. They had many items available. A couple of attractive young women met us and were giving away cups of El Salvadorian coffee. On our way to the hotel, we saw other businesses familiar to us in the states, such as Pizza Hut, Burger King, Kentucky Fried Chicken, Dell, Citi Bank and others. There are also a lot of family owned businesses. Drinks available are Pepsi, Coke, and Fanta, plus an assortment of other beverages. We, also bought bottled water. It will be the only water we can drink while we are in El Salvador.

After a 2 hour bus ride from the airport, we finally reached the Hotel Sahara where we would be staying most of the week. It was very clean and pleasant, but very hot and thought to ourselves, we probably do not have air conditioning in our rooms, however, we were wrong. Each room had its own air conditioner, thankfully! We are so spoiled! There was a consistent reminder NOT TO PUT TOILET PAPER in the toilets! To put it in the waste basket! Very hard habit to break! I did forget twice. I'm sure others forgot, also, but for the most part, we remembered. They do not have the means to take care of toilet tissue in septic systems. Each day our rooms were neatly cleaned and bedding changed and wastebaskets emptied.

After we got our room numbers and put our belongings in the room, we went to an orientation given by Carlos, the church relations person with Habitat. He gave a lot of facts about El Salvador and its people, especially those who are living in sub-standard homes. He also told about the work being done by Habitat in conjunction with Thrivent. Thrivent for Lutherans is a benevolent Financial/ Insurance Co. Habitat is building 75 homes in the area where we will be working and is financed by Thrivent. Thrivent has financed projects all over the world. Here in El Salvador, Habitat has been working since 1992 and was founded in Santa Ana. They have helped more than 31,000 Salvadorians achieve decent and affordable



housing. The community where we will be working is called a “model community.” Each project will provide families with land, a house, basic services and “social infrastructure.”

After the orientation, we rested for a bit and then went to a chicken place, called Pollo Campero. It is like Kentucky Fried Chicken. It was a very busy restaurant. There were lots of families. The restaurant had a play area like many of the fast food restaurants in the U.S. have.

Our evening closed with team reflections. One of the questions was: What do you expect spiritually/emotionally from being part of Thrivent Builds Worldwide El Salvador Community? For me, the answer will come later, because I do not know what I expected. I was still processing why I was here.

**Saturday, Day 2:** We are up earlier than planned because of the time change. El Salvador is two hours behind us in Ohio. We had a good night’s rest. Breakfast was very good. We had pancakes, scrambled eggs with ham, and frijoles (beans that are cooked into a sauce) watermelon, papaya, and pineapple. We also had fresh squeezed OJ and coffee. There were also delicious rolls.

After breakfast, we were on our way to the worksite. We went in two vans. Ramon was our driver and would be our driver all week. We drove for about 30 minutes. Part of the way was on a very good highway and then we turned down the road to the site where we would be working. At the beginning of the road is a soccer field. Soccer is a very big sport here as well as in most of Latin America. When we were coming from the airport, we saw a large soccer stadium that holds around 35,000 people. Along the road to the site, we saw people walking. Many people walk, sometimes many miles to their destinations or to catch a bus. Many of the buses are old school buses from the U.S. and painted very bright colors.

We arrived at the site. The community is called Villa Esperanza (translated to Hope Village). Many of the homes have been completed and are being lived in. We learned that there is a community here of 60 homes built and financed by a church in Charlotte, NC.

We gathered at the daycare that has been built, but not used yet. They hope to begin using it soon. We had a time of devotion and orientation. Carlos, led us in a time of scripture and prayer. Then we met the masons we would be working with. The masons are Salvadorians. There will be a total of 15, but today there are only 14. There are also some people, mostly women, from the church, Iglesia Luterana Cristo Rey, where we will be attending tomorrow. Also, some students from the university here, as well as those who will be putting “sweat equity” into their home. For each day of construction, at least two members of the partner family must help build. About 69 people, volunteers and masons and helpers will be working today. We were assigned to masons by numbering off from 1-15. I was assigned to Juan and Bob was assigned to David. Bob, as well as others, would be digging trenches for curbing, mixing concrete, and filling in around previously poured curbs. I was the only person to work with Juan. I had a feeling he was saying to himself, “Oh, boy. I got one and it had to be a weak looking woman.” But, I surprised myself and him and did alright. The other people on our team worked at various jobs from hauling sand, sifting sand (which was my job), digging septic systems, mixing cement and anything else that needed to be done. Later on, Miriam, one of our team members came over and helped me sift sand. It is better with two people. Miriam is from Minnesota and is our team leader Kelsey’s mother. Miriam was a Spanish teacher for 33 years. We removed large and small stones from the sand by using a box with a screen over it. The sand will be used for cement making. Miriam and I enjoyed conversation while we worked and she also proved to be a lot of help when translation from Spanish into English was needed.

The sun was not too hot for some of us in the morning, because we had some shade until later when there was no shade and it was HOT! Fortunately, we took breaks. We had two 15 minute breaks during the day, but were encouraged to break anytime and drink plenty of water! For our break, one of the ladies and a recipient of one of the homes, brought some refreshing fruit-Sandia(watermelon) and Pina (Pineapple) It was very delicious and served cold! What a treat! We went back to work feeling refreshed at least for awhile.

Keith, our nephew is 16 years old. One of his jobs is to dig a septic tank hole, 6' x 8' x 7'. Deep. Keith has represented "flexibility" our word for the day. This is Keith's first trip out of the country. There are three other young people, one from Indiana and two from Minnesota. They are hard workers and an example to us older ones. They have demonstrated "flexibility. Sometimes it is hard for us older ones who like to follow a schedule. We are learning and leaning on the ONE who humbles us and is the extreme example of servanthood. My prayer for the week is that we will be lights to shine for others and witness for Christ here in this place. As we get to know others from our team as well as the nationals, we come to realize and appreciate each other's unique gifts and talents given to each by God.

Now back to work! Miriam and I continued to sift sand free of stones and others on our team worked at other jobs. The sun grew hotter and perspiration wet our bodies. Good perspiration! Actually, I hope to lose a few pounds-I don't know with all the good food we have been served so far, it may not happen. Noon arrived and lunch was served. It consisted of hot tortillas, meat, rice, and a very good salsa. We also had cold beverages and fresh fruit. A couple and their little girl brought us lunch. It was very good and the hour long rest was much appreciated!

There are a lot of adorable children in this community. We met several of them. Jacqueline, a real charmer, is 9 years old and her sister, Alexandria who is 7. Alexandria reminds us of our granddaughter, Lydia. Eddie and Lupita were also with them. We found out from a couple of children in school uniform, that school is year around with breaks. They go to school in two shifts—morning and afternoon.

One thing that we learned from our information, but observe for ourselves, is how neat and clean people are. The children are always dressed neatly. The laundry is done by hand in the homes of the poorer people. Some older women working with us at the job site, wore skirts and blouses. One very beautiful young woman, who worked with us today, wore jeans, a top and pretty shoes, and at the end of the day still looked very good, even though she was down in a hole, digging out dirt for a septic system! Most of us were sweaty, grimy and smelly! One woman, Rosa, a delightful lady is the recipient of one of the homes we are building. She and her teenage daughter, who cannot speak, will move in when the home is finished. A woman in the states is helping her to provide schooling for her daughter.

Back to our day! We finished working about 4:00PM and returned to our hotel, thankful for the day and also, thankful for a shower and rest. After dinner, several of us walked to the plaza several blocks away. Santa Ana was having a festival. We found that it lasted the entire month. It is called the Festival of Santa Ana. We walked through stalls that were selling some very interesting looking food and crafts. There was lots of music and food. There is a beautiful cathedral in the plaza. They are doing some renovating on it, so we could not go into it. We walked back to our hotel to a welcome rest.

**Sunday, Day 3:** Today is the day to worship our Lord with brothers and sisters in Christ in the Salvadorian church and relax. We had a little more time in the morning. We did not leave for worship until 9:30. We worshipped at Iglesia (Church) Luterana (Lutheran) Cristo (Christ) Rey. The church is located in a very poor area and most of the people who attend are from there. We were greeted warmly by the children and youth of their Sunday School. The Bible teacher is the pastor's wife. They sang a song for us and showed us what they were doing. They call it Bible School, rather than Sunday School. After a while, people began gathering for the worship service. At first, there were only a few adults and the children. After awhile, more people appeared until the seats were all taken. We sat along the wall and others did too. The service was all in Spanish. The hymns were not familiar-at least the tunes were not. The liturgy was familiar and of course communion was the same as ours. We were very touched by the generosity of the pastor, his wife and the congregation. The pastor gave each of us a cross. We were told that the cross was made out of wood that was found after the last earthquake in El Salvador. The area where the church is located was damaged by the earthquake. Each of us came up to receive their cross and they did not have enough to give one to Bob, so Pastor Carlos took his off and gave it to him. The children had colored pictures for us and as their names were called, they came up and chose who they would give their picture to. We also received a hug from each child. It was a heart warming experience and one that we will not forget. After saying goodbye, we headed back to the hotel to change clothes and head to Lagos (lake) Coatepeque. The lake is very large and is the cauldron of a volcano. We had lunch at Hotel

Torremolinos. The hotel faces the lake. There were a lot of people there. When they were ready for us, we were escorted out to a platform on stilts. It was kind of rickety, but seemed stable (not OSHA approved in the states). They seated us at a long table and then came and took our beverage order. Pastor Carlos, Anna Marie from Habitat, El Salvador, and a young woman, her husband and small daughter, who are one of the recipients of one of the homes we are working on. The meal was very good. After lunch, we went down to the lake and got into boats for a ride on the lake to the spot where those who wanted to, could swim. The lake is quite deep. The shallow part is not very long, so it drops off very fast. I waded and Bob sat on the lawn. The lawn was part of a beautiful home. We were told that the owner rarely visits. The rest of the team enjoyed swimming and visiting. After swimming, we got back into the boats for a tour of the lake. We saw several large homes owned by wealthy Salvadorians.

We returned to the Hotel Sahara to rest and wait for dinner. When we got to the hotel, there were a lot of people all dressed up and learned that it was a quinceañera celebration for a young girl who had just turned 15, a turning point for young women in the Spanish tradition. The young lady had on a beautiful formal, the men and young boys had suits on and the women and girls had on fancy dresses. They had lots of very loud music (we noticed that they played their music loud here, not unlike in the states). It was fun to watch.

Our reflections of the day and devotions, were held on the roof of the hotel. They have a very nice open veranda. The weather was very nice. Before devotions, we watched a fireworks display coming from the celebration at the plaza. It was an impressive display! Bob and Keith led the devotions based on the book of James. "Be ye doers of the word..." There was also a discussion about who Bishop Oscar Romero was. Bishop Romero was a Catholic Bishop who was murdered because he spoke out about the abuses of the poor in El Salvador. He became a hero to the poor of El Salvador. We reflected on several questions, one of which was-What did you experience in the worship service that connected you with your faith? Someone mentioned the fact that though the service was in Spanish, the reading of the gospel message was the same one that we would be using if we were home-The feeding of the 5,000. I felt that the presence of the Holy Spirit was there in that small Spanish-speaking service, and when we prayed the Lord's prayer and took communion together, we felt connected to the body of Christ.

After devotions, we headed to bed to prepare for the coming long day. The young lady's celebration was still going on and it was below our room, Thankfully, the fiesta ended at 11:00PM.

**Monday, Day 4:** After breakfast, we once again headed out in the vans for the work site. This was to be another long day. Temperatures were warming up. It would be in the 90's with lots of sunshine. We arrived at the site around 8:30AM and began with devotions. The scripture was Ps. 27 and 91. One of the masons gave the sermon. We met Patti, one of the coordinators with Habitat here in El Salvador. Patti is a delight. She also speaks very good English. We could tell that she enjoyed her work and the people.

We were numbered off to be matched with a mason. Bob and I and Doug were matched with Alex. We carried steel beams from a storage area in the community center (they had been painted on Saturday by members of the team) These beams are used on the roof of the homes. (A side note, all the homes are steel reinforced to keep them from collapsing during an earthquake, which happens frequently.) Well, Bob and Doug picked their beams up and placed them on their shoulders and carried them to the building site. Alex took one look at me, and with a smile on his face, he picked up his end and I picked up mine and away we walked. However, once at the site, Alex indicated that we would need a few more. So, Bob and I and Doug walked back to the community center and once again, Bob and Doug put theirs on their shoulders and then tried to show me how to carry one on my shoulder. Needless to say, I decided I would be better at screening sand and that's where I went and spent the rest of the workday. Lillian, one of the women who will be getting one of the homes we are working on, was already there screening sand, so she and I proceeded to work together. Lillian has two sons who will be sharing the home with her. She did not speak English, but we were able to communicate. We smiled a lot and motioned to each other. Of course I called over Miriam to come and translate when it was necessary.

One of the things we discovered on our break was that there are two stores in the community. These are completed homes that people are now living in and to make a living have opened up little convenient stores in their front room. They are across the street from one another and we are encouraged to patronize both of them. We found a special drink called Pina Coco (pineapple and coconut) that is very refreshing. It is cold and delicious! The cost is very small compared to what a bottle of that size would cost in the states.

A couple of people on our team were not feeling well. One member stayed back at the hotel today and another person was taken back to the hotel after lunch. After lunch, Kelsey led a few of us to the home of Azucena. There is a gold plaque on Azucena's home, indicating it to be the 7,000th home built by Habitat for Humanity in El Salvador. Azucena is the mother of Jacqueline and Alexandria. She has a beauty shop in her home and also goes out and does hair in homes in the community.

There are many single mothers in this community. I don't know all the reasons, but I have to say that their homes and children are well cared for and loved. The one thing that is very noticeable about those we have met, is the love shown to their families and the tidiness of their homes and themselves. I really admire these people, especially the women. They are also very hard workers.

It has been a long and exhausting day and we are thankful for showers and rest back at the hotel. Dinner is very good. Scalloped potatoes, chicken (Pollo) and delicious dessert. We had our usual nightly reflection on the roof of the hotel. It was a lovely evening. The discussion centered around family. Jeff led the devotions. We were encouraged to write postcards to our families and mail them free of charge at the hotel. I chose to take mine home and mail it from Pemberville. We were told that it might take up to two weeks for them to reach their destination and we would already be home.

**Tuesday, Day 5:** Thankful for a good night's rest. The morning is pleasant, but I know that it will get hotter as the day wears on. Once again we have a very good breakfast consisting of fruit, scrambled eggs, frijoles (beans) and rolls. I have started to make coffee in our room, since we have a coffee pot and bottled water, and the coffee is provided. The coffee tastes so good. They also have it at breakfast. The coffee is grown here in El Salvador.

We are on the road to the site at 7:30AM. This is supposed to be a shorter day. It promises to be hot as usual. However, we have nothing to complain about. The people that live here live with this temperature every day. There are only two seasons-hot and wet or hot and dry. I have to say that as we drive along the roadway and walk around the community, we notice the beautiful flowers and crops of corn. Corn even grows in the tiny yards along with flowers and also, beans and squash. It also grows on the side of mountains. All of it is planted and harvested with manual labor, mostly the family's labor. There is a field of corn next to where I am working. We notice that beans are growing up some of the stalks. Some of the corn we have seen is at least 12 ft. high. Corn is a staple crop, because it is used daily in the making of tortillas. Speaking of tortillas, they are different than what I expected. I expected the kind that we find in the grocery store in the states. Here they are very thick. They also make a food called pupusas that I will describe later. Flowers that we see growing are zinnias, cannas, Castor Bean plant as tall as a tree, bougainvillea, croton, coleus and other plants. I noticed that they do not seem to have a problem with mildew on the zinnias like we do. There are many beautiful butterflies (mariposas).

We arrive at the site for devotions and job assignments. The passage of scripture used today was Isaiah 1:18-20. The sermon was given by Ricardo, one of the masons. I continued my work screening sand, Keith and one of the other teenagers, Trent, worked on digging a hole for the septic system and Bob put primer on the inside of one of the houses. Others worked on shoveling dirt, finishing curbs, putting on stucco, etc.

The sun (sol caliente) grew hotter as the day progressed, but thankfully the breezes and a few clouds came in. As I worked, I thought about people who were sentenced to the Gulag or other places of heavy

labor. I thought to myself, this is luxury compared to what they have experienced. We eat well, we can break anytime, we have a nice place to rest and an air conditioned room to go back to. All things to be grateful for and a reminder to pray for those who are in a situation where they are forced to work. At 2:30, we quit working to clean up and prepare to leave to go to an archeological site called Tazumal, Mayan ruins. Before we left, we had a snack of fruit popsicles that were very delicious. We were a little disappointed that we did not have time to return to the hotel and clean up before we went to the ruins, but the park closed at 4:00PM. So we went dirty and sweaty.

While at the park, Bob and I sat on a bench and a man and his daughters came up and sat down and began to talk with us in English. We came to find out that he, his wife and daughters were from California and were vacationing and visiting relatives in El Salvador They were originally from El Salvador

We returned to the hotel for showers, rest and dinner. After dinner, we had our time of reflection. The theme was Hospitality. One of the questions was: What examples of hospitality have you seen experienced so far this week? The scripture was Mark 12:41-44. The widow gave all that she had to the temple despite living in poverty. We have seen many examples this week, so far, of people giving beyond their means to make us feel at home and to show their appreciation.

Bob and I got to bed a little earlier. We watched a little of Fox news (English) They had several stations in English, but most were in Spanish. They have a lot of "junk" like we do on TV. Some of it, unfortunately, is imported from the U.S.

**Wednesday, Day 6:** The day began as usual with rising early (5:00AM). Breakfast is served at 6:30. This morning we had pancakes (very good) eggs, frijoles and watermelon, papaya, and pineapple. The vans arrived at 7:30 to take us to the site. When we arrived, we had devotions based on Luke 6:27-36. Christina led us in a prayer and also gave the sermon. Christina speaks very good English, but because some were there that did not speak English, she gave the prayer and sermon in Spanish and Miriam translated.

We went the duties of the previous day. Some hauled block and stone and painted. I continued screening sand. This time I worked mostly by myself, using a block of wood to push the sand gently through the screen. When working by myself, I played a little game by using the alphabet. I prayed for people whose name began with the letters and I tried to see how many Spanish words I knew that began with the letters of the alphabet. A great way to pass time. Elsy, a coordinator from Habitat was with us today. She started working for Habitat after college, two years ago. She also speaks very good English. Anna Marie was also with us part of the day.

Lunch consisted of lasagna (Salvadorian style). It was very good. It did not have as much tomato sauce as we have. There was also rice, which we have every day and is very good. There was also tomato and cucumber. We have been told not to eat tomatoes because they may be washed in their water. Cucumbers would be alright, because they are peeled.

This afternoon was our cultural exchange, so we did not go back to work after lunch. However, some of the masons had challenged our team of volunteers to a soccer game. Several of us did not play, but watched. Actually, I laid down on a bench in the shade and fell asleep. After the soccer game, we returned to the community center. The women of the community had worked very hard to prepare food for us and a lot of it. We had pupusas (filled tortillas) and they were very good. They are filled with cheese or meat. We also had 2 kinds of tamales, an espanada, a donut filled with cream, and something like rice pudding. Three police officers played several songs of the Beatles, using guitar, a recorder and Mayan pipes, and drums. They are very talented. They were selling their CDS and we purchased one. There were several times when the police and military came into the community and I wondered what they were doing there, but I was told that they were asked to come and make sure that things were okay. The 3 police officers that played were there to mingle with the community on a different level. A fun part was trying break piñatas. There were two. One was in the form of a girl and the other one was in the form of a

boy. They were brightly colored and quite large. Some members of our volunteer team were blindfolded and each one tried to break the girl piñata by hitting it with a stick. The pinata was on a rope hanging from a tree and someone on the other end of the rope would swing it so that you would have to find it to hit it. When it broke after several tries, the children ran to collect the candy. The children each took turns being blindfolded and swinging at the boy pinata until it broke. Lots of fun! Our team also led those gathered in singing Praise Ye the Lord, Alleuia. First we did it in English and then in Spanish. (Alaban El Señor, Alleuia) We had practiced it earlier in the day.

We returned to the hotel tired, but enjoyed our time with the community and finding out a little bit more about their culture.

**Thursday, Day 7:** We arrived at the work site around 8:30AM. We had devotions based on Philippians 2:1-18. Christina gave the sermon. She told a parable called "The Wooden Doll." The parable was similar to the Parable of the wedding banquet found in Luke 14:15-21 and Matt. 22:1-10. Orval, one of our team members shared his testimony how the devil tried to keep him from going to El Salvador with all kinds of arguments against going and the Holy Spirit kept encouraging him to come. The Holy Spirit won! Even while he was here the devil kept telling him he was too old! Thankfully, Orval did not listen to him, because he was able to accomplish a lot. He and some others spent most of the time digging out dirt for the curbs, a back breaking job!

After devotions, we went to the jobs we had been doing most of the week. I went back to screening sand, Bob, Joe and Miriam to painting, Jeff to placing stucco on one of the houses, Keith, John and Trent continued digging the hole for the septic and others to working on curbs and anything else that need done. Our break at 10:30 was yogurt and it was very refreshing and good. We went back to work and then lunch at noon. We had a very good lunch of baked fish (it had a seasoned breading on it) vegetables, rice and beverage. We had our evening reflections after lunch, because of our schedule, today. Bill led them. The topic was on service and stewardship. One of the questions was: Many of you wanted to experience a week of "giving back" through service. Do you feel you are giving or receiving? I had to say that it is both. At times, I feel that I have received more than I gave.

Today, was our day to go to the Rio Thermal Springs about 30 minutes away. At 2:00PM, we left the sight and drove to Rio. I was very surprised that it was so modern and similar to water theme parks in the states. They several pools, all from natural springs. One of them had a water slide. There were lots of people! The water was wonderful! Very refreshing ! We stayed there about an hour until the park closed and then went to the hotel.

At the hotel, we showered and rested for awhile before going to Love Restaurant. (Kind of a funny name for a restaurant) Christina, the architect from Habitat, joined us. Our meal was very good. It consisted of salad (which we did eat, despite the warnings about not eating lettuce), beef consomme, steak, vegetable and roll. The meal started with a delicious drink made with rice milk. For dessert, we had a piece of yellow cake with a frosting similar to the seven-minute frosting I have made. It was sprinkled with cinnamon and was very good! We returned to the hotel and to hopefully a good night's rest!

**Friday, Day 8:** Today is our daughter Melissa's birthday. I called her to wish her Feliz Cumpleaños (Happy Birthday). Kelsey has two cell phones that can be used internationally, and we have been able to call home when needed. There is WI-FI at the hotel, so others have their laptops and have been putting pictures online of our week. Keith has an I-Pod that can send text messages and e-mails, which he has been sending home.

Bob and Pastor Joe led the devotions this morning. We worked half a day, today. After lunch, some of our team who are a little more energetic played soccer again with some of the masons. Others of us sat around and talked and rested. Miriam injured her knee this morning, our first injury. One of the masons made her a walking stick—a very sweet gesture. She has been teaching him English and he felt bad that his English teacher had been hurt.

While we waited for the soccer players, I visited with Christina, the architect of the Villa Esperanza. We had a conversation about the availability of drugs, drug cartels and gangs in El Salvador (not necessarily an uplifting topic, but one of concern for them as well as us). There are many gangs and many of them are mixed in with the general population and they don't know who is a gang member and who is not. They used to wear tattoos, but have removed them, making it difficult to pinpoint gang members. She said someone in your own family could be a gang member and you would not know it. They are very powerful and even get into the government. They get "rent" from businesses and if they don't pay up something bad can happen to the business owner. She is very hopeful of the new president of El Salvador, who was elected recently. He has promised to do a lot for the poor. However, promises are not always kept. The gangs and drug lords are influential. She spoke of how these concerns affect her and her family. However, she also said that we need to rely upon God- He is their hope as well as our hope! I mentioned to her that we do not see many people smoking. She said that was because of the high cost of cigarettes- 90 cents a piece! Alcoholism is a problem here just as in the U.S..

Our last day at the site ended with a celebration for the volunteers, masons, the Habitat and Thrivent staff and people from the community. There was a mariachi band that some people danced to. The music reminds me of polka music. The celebration ended with the handing out of certificates. The certificate has the group picture on it that was taken on our first day at the site. The certificates were handed out to each volunteer by the masons. As our names were called we went up to receive the certificate. It was a very meaningful time. We also received a little metal bucket, symbolic of our work and a small cross necklace. We had a delicious cake provided by the Habitat staff. Farewells were very touching. We had become like family and it was especially hard to say goodbye to one another. Kind words were shared in Spanish and in English, as well as some tears.

We left the site with good feelings of what had been accomplished, but yet with a "pang" in the heart for those we left behind. We drove back to the hotel to clean up, get our belongings. We met Benjamin who would be the tourist guide through Saturday. We drove 1 ½ hours through a downpour. I admire the van drivers. Driving in El Salvador is dangerous enough, but our drivers are very skilled and do a great job of getting us places safely.

We arrived at our hotel Alicante Montana (mountain) It is located in the mountains, on what is called the Ruta de los Flores (Route of Flowers.) This place is a resort. The accommodations are like log cabins attached together. After getting room assignments, we went to the restaurant here at the hotel. We enjoyed a very good meal and the restaurant closed after we finished eating, so we needed a quiet spot for reflections and the bar was the only place open. There was only a bartender, so we found a spot and began our reflection time. One of the questions was: who made an impression on you this week and how so? It was hard to say exactly who, because everyone made an impression. All of the volunteers and the staff, the masons, the pastor and congregation of the church and others we met in the community all made an impression and touched our lives in a positive way. However, the 4 teenagers, Keith, Trent, Jessie, and John were amazing. They worked steadily and without complaint. After reflection time, some stayed to sing Karaoke and others like us went to bed. It had been a long day.

**Saturday, Day 9:** We are up early as usual. It is another beautiful day. The sun is shining after a very hard rain last night. This is a lovely place where we spent the night. The grounds are well kept. The flowers are beautiful. We walked around the place and saw parrots in a large fenced area and also monkeys. There is also a swimming pool. The Alicante looks like a very nice place to spend a few days. However, we have miles to go before reaching San Salvador and our flight home tomorrow. Today we are driving the Route of Flores (Flowers) It is called that because of the beautiful flowers on the coffee plants in May. They say it is a "sea of white flowers." On the telephone poles made of concrete, there are paintings of flowers done by artists. We were told by our guide, Benjamin that the coffee plant has flowers in May, then green berries and then in December bright red berries. Coffee is harvested December to January. As we drive, we saw lots of coffee grown everywhere, on hillsides, mountain sides and even near the road. There are many plantations, but not as many as before the war, that ended in 1992. Our

guide told us that the guerilla fighters would ask the plantation owners for money to buy arms and they would leave them alone.

We stopped at a lookout. It was an awesome sight. We saw a town nestled in the valley. There were also field of strawberries and coffee. There was a couple setting up some beautiful art work and other items to sell along the very busy road. We talked to him (he spoke English) and he told us that he painted all the items and had a studio in the next town. We did not buy anything, because we were in a hurry.

The first town we drove through was called Juaya. I believe it is the town that we saw from the lookout. It has cobblestone streets and a beautiful church in the center of town. We saw the cutest little taxis. They were red and three wheeled and open on the sides. They would hold 2 or 3 people. It almost looked like a rickshaw, but they electric or gas powered and had a driver. We saw women carrying corn on their heads. Benjamin told us that they were taking the corn to the mill (Molina) to be ground to make tortillas. We are close to the Guatemalan border. The terrain and area has changed. We are now 4500 ft up. We arrived at Portezuelo Eco Park. Julio, the owner greeted us. The park is privately owned. There are tents up on platforms where you can stay. We split up into two groups. The majority, meaning everyone but Bob and I, went with Julio. They were taking the tougher hike up the mountain to see the geysers and we were taking the easier hike with Benjamin as our guide. It had rained and the "trail" was difficult, to say the least. Benjamin was very helpful and also pointed out various birds, flowers and butterflies. (El Salvador has many beautiful butterflies, birds and flowers.) It was all very interesting, but we noticed that it seemed to be a very long trip to the geysers. At one point, the "easy" trail and the more difficult trail merged and we thought the other group was ahead of us. We heard voices further down and assumed it was them. We trudged along and finally we made it to the geysers. We did not see the other group. We were so tired that we decided not to go down to the geysers but stay above looking down on them. That was fine with us. Benjamin told us that we would take the "road" back. It would be easier and as we started down it , we realized that to go down, we would also need to go up. There was not as much shade as there was on the trail, so it was very hot. Benjamin asked if I had a hat and I said, "no." He said, "I will let you wear my special hat." He dug into his backpack and pulled out his hat that said Grand Canyon on it. We had been telling him earlier that we were going to the Grand Canyon next year. He said had been there and it was a wonderful trip. We continued to walk and the trail seemed to get longer. Fortunately, Miriam had loaned me her water bottle carrier that fits over your shoulder. That helped with not having to carry a bottle of water. All along, we figured that the other group was back at the lodge enjoying a rest and lunch. However, ahead of us were some people. When we got closer, they were the other part of our group looking very bedraggled and muddy. Then we saw a wonderful sight- Julio was coming with his pickup truck. We were so happy to see him! We hopped in the truck, I was in the front and the rest were in the back of the truck for a very bumpy, but satisfying ride back to the lodge. The others told us of their "adventures" and we shared ours. It was definitely challenging. We enjoyed lunch on the porch of the lodge, rested up a bit , back in the bus and then were on our way down the Route of Flowers.

We stopped at the town of Ataco. Ataco is an "artsy" town with lots of shops where you can buy many handmade items. It was pouring the rain again. The streets were flooded with water, but we went from shop to shop anyway. Bob and I headed for the café for a cup of coffee and dessert. We were the only ones in the restaurant, besides the waiters. They looked happy to see us and we seated ourselves in the courtyard. The waiter brought our menus and I tried to tell him , that we only wanted café (coffee) and a dessert . Finally, he understood and brought us a piece of pie. It was apple and very delicious. We were just about finished and were ready to leave when a group of people came in and one of them looked like someone from the U.S.. We talked to her and found out that she was from the state of Washington and had been in El Salvador with Four-Square Gospel Church.

We left there and ran shop to shop in the rain! We were ready to find the bus and get on when we saw Jorge, the artist who was by the roadway at the lookout earlier in the day. He has a shop there and he recognized us. We bought a couple of things from him. We got back on the bus and while sitting there waiting for the others, we saw a woman selling items across the street. We got back off the bus and I bought a handmade cloth purse.

We left Ataco and were on our way to San Salvador to spend the night and catch our planes tomorrow. It was supposed to be about an hour and a half to the hotel. (we joked about this, because it seems that everything in El Salvador is an hour and a half) While riding, Erin (one of our team) had each of us write a time when we thought we would arrive at our hotel. Whoever was the closest would win a pound of Salvadorian coffee. The trip took almost 2 hours and Doug guessed the right length of time and won the coffee.

The Hotel Mariscal is very nice. We got our rooms and then went to go across the street to eat. It was still raining very hard, so our bus driver took us over in the bus. It seemed a little strange to go across the street in a bus, but it was pouring the rain! Across from the restaurant where we ate is a Wendy's. At the restaurant the waiters met us at the door with umbrellas. We were led to our waiting table and seated. They took our beverage order and then brought the tortillas and all the "fixing" for tacos. The tortillas were very thin and warm. The things we would put on it were in dishes set on the table so that you could fix your own according to what you like. It was very delicious. There were lots of people. One group was having a birthday party. The only negative, was that the music was very loud! They had a woman singer, who was very good and very beautiful, but it was so loud!

After finishing our dinner, we went back to the hotel to have evening reflections together. The questions were: What, if anything, will you do differently when you get home? What are your expectations for returning home? What will be difficult about leaving?

**Sunday, Day 10:** It doesn't seem possible that today is our last day here. It went so fast. A week ago, we were getting ready to go to the Cristo Rey Lutheran Church! After breakfast, we boarded the bus for the trip to the airport, about an hour away. The airport is outside of San Salvador. When we arrived at the airport, there were some tearful goodbyes. Several of us were flying out around noon to Huston on Continental. The seven members of our team from West LaFayette, IN, were flying out on Delta to Atlanta. While at the airport, we went to a little café for one more cup of Salvadorian coffee and Keith and I had a piece of manzana (apple) pie. Keith also bought his mom and dad a gift from one of the artisan shops in the airport. There were a lot of young people from the U.S. leaving at the same time we were. Some were part of a church mission team and another group was an archery team from Maryland that had competed here in El Salvador. Our flight was on time and we arrived in Huston around 3:00PM. Bob and I and Keith were scheduled to fly to Cleveland at 7:00PM, so we had quite a bit of time to spend.

Our flight arrived on time and we arrived in Cleveland around 10:30PM, our time. We went to the Hampton Inn where we stayed overnight and drove home on Monday morning.

**Tuesday, Day 11:** It is a beautiful day. The temperature is only in the 70's and no humidity! We slept well and had a good breakfast of Hampton Inn food—no Frijoles. Actually, I enjoyed the frijoles in El Salvador. They were very good on the scrambled eggs in the morning.

We certainly have a lot to ponder about this trip. My favorite part was meeting the people. What a blessing! It was also great to see what can be accomplished when people work together. We are looking forward to doing this again sometime. I believe I would not be as hesitant as I was this time.

I have added the people of El Salvador to my prayer list, especially those we met and worked with. I will continue to remember them in prayer. We also plan on sharing our trip and the work of Habitat and Thrivent with others through this journal, talking about it and giving presentations. We are already scheduled for a presentation at the Senior Center.