



Many words to describe the experience in El Salvador

by Elaine Edge, team member of an August/Sept. 2009 *Thrivent Builds Worldwide* team led by Linda Hill to the El Salvador Community

No doubt the first question most of us were asked upon returning home was "How was El Salvador?" I asked the participants of our Thrivent Builds team to answer that question with **one word**. I will integrate those bolded answers in this journal—my perceptions of ten very good days.

Friday, August 28



Sally and I had driven to my niece's home close to the Minneapolis St. Paul airport on Thursday night, August 27. She and her husband took us to the Super8 to sleep, and the hotel's van drove us to the airport at 4:30 A.M. on Friday. Of course, we were too excited to have had a good night's sleep, so it's no wonder that when we arrived in Houston, an attendant asked if I wanted a wheel chair. And I'm going to help build a house! What did he know?

Our short layover led us to the gate where Linda, Len and Gloria were waiting for us. I had known all three of them before, so after Sally was introduced, we were on our way.

After we landed in San Salvador, we waited for Virgil, Sue and Cheryl to arrive from their connections in Atlanta, and then for Carole and Jeanne to come in from Chicago. It immediately became evident that El Salvador is **hot!** We also quickly learned it was **welcoming**. I was a bit confused that we were so warmly welcomed by Jose, a Salvadorian who lives in Chicago, who had arrived to visit his family. He was very excited that we were there, and finally I figured out that he was a member of the same church as our companion team which soon also arrived from Chicago. Luis Fernando welcomed us and ushered us to our bus, and introduced us to Ramon, the capable driver who was also the owner of the vans, who skillfully loaded our luggage. The airport is twenty miles outside of the city, so Luis arranged for us to stop along the way at the very modern mall (one of the two largest malls in Central America) for something to eat. It was perhaps the only time on the entire trip that we were hungry, so McDonald's hamburgers tasted really good.

We passed the president's house, and an impressive monument of peace, a statue of Christ, made from the guns at the close of their civil war. Guns were still abundant, however, as each guard and policeman appeared to be armed.

The ride to Santa Ana was **beautiful!** I was surprised by the well maintained roads. El Salvador is more **progressive** than I had expected. The countryside showcased palms, loaded with coconuts, eucalyptus, teak, and coffee trees, large bushes of hibiscus, bird of paradise and other flowers, sugar cane fields and a patchwork of corn in various stages of maturity. Imagining those who had planted those mountain side corn patches was a testimony to the **ambitious** people who live there. People were marketing their produce and wares along the road, sitting in lawn chairs between customers.

After we had checked into the Hotel Sahara, Luis



introduced us to Habitat El Salvador via a PowerPoint presentation. 5.7 million people live in the country while two million Salvadorians live in the U.S, sending money home to relatives which helps supply 80% of the income which comes from outside the country. Average income in the progressive areas is \$257 per month while in the poorer areas, it is only \$97. Literacy is at 84% with 97% of the children attending elementary school while the rate declines in secondary school, and only about 4% have college educations. The country is recovering from the twelve year civil war which began in 1982. The frequent earthquakes have destroyed 360,000 homes throughout time. Because of that threat, the new homes would be built with rebar reinforced cement blocks. Habitat El Salvador has been active since 1992, and 35,000 people now live in the 7,000 homes built under that sponsorship. Thrivent Financial has dedicated \$1.3 million for the entire community which will build both houses and roads. The average cost of the 450 sq. ft. home is \$11,500. That amount will be paid back by the home owners, interest free, at the rate of \$85.00 per month.

Saturday, August 29

The abundant breakfast consisted of scrambled eggs, beans, cheese, cream, pancakes, rolls, pineapple, water melon and papaya chunks. One of our group called El Salvador **delicious**, and the cook at the hotel was among those who lived up to that reputation. Gathering after we had eaten, we were ready to go to work!



During the 20-30 minute ride to the work site, the road was shared with bicycles toting carts in front of them, open ended trucks filled with people on their way to work, cars and busses. The air was heavy and full of exhaust until we left the outskirts of the city. Most of the businesses were within walls topped with concertina wire. Soccer fields lined with rubber tire borders which served as seating were a common site, so we knew El Salvadorans are **fun loving**.

Upon arriving in the Habitat village, we noticed that the completed habitat homes were painted in pastel colors, set on lots manicured with machetes featuring patches of grass and beautiful flowers and bordered by sidewalks. We arrived at the site gathering in front of a day care center decorated with painted Winnie the Pooh

characters.

Architect Cristine greeted us, and began the day with devotions. She explained the colors of the hard hats, and that the masons would wear yellow, helpers - orange, supervisor (Cristina) - blue and the storage room boss - white. We progressed to the work site, and found "our" duplex and a single home was only staked out with tree branch stakes, and strings to mark the walls, etc. Shovels and rakes were distributed, and I was thankful to get a rake. While raking the debris consisting of cut Napier grass and corn stalks amid tree stumps was not exactly easy, it was better than digging trenches for the footings. The sun was close to us, and hot. The eagerness of the group encouraged us to work hard, so a pace with water breaks had to be discovered.



We were joined by members of the Lutheran Church in that area, so with those extra people, our team of ten, the Chicago team of ten, and the twenty or so Salvadorans, I was amazed how much work was accomplished that first

day. A young American woman, Gail, married to a Salvadorian, interpreted for us. She works with Habitat, recruiting college groups to work on site. We were served a hot meal each day, catered by a nearby concern who really knew how to cook!

Back in the hotel, the shower was most welcome. Since the drain emptied slowly, we invented a way to soak the dirty T-shirts and underwear, letting them create a padded floor, scrubbing the first dirt off with our feet as we showered. Somewhat refreshed, we were served another good meal complete with dessert. After our team meeting on the roof, I fell into a deep sleep in the comfortable bed at 9:00 P.M. One hour later, I jumped as I was awakened, thinking we had been bombed. The **noise** was a very loud bang; however, I soon realized it was drumming. The 15 year old birthday party quinceañera in the dining hall was a gala affair, and the drummers serenaded the night's sleep!



Sunday,
August 30

Ramon drove abundant early so he

mission of his congregation. His mother's influence had shaped his faith and led him to be a pastor. The church had begun 17 years ago under the auspices of the LCMS. They had split with that group because of the differences in accepting women as pastors, allowing pulpit exchange, lecture of the Bible, and not being allowed to enter into conflicting situations. They are now associated with the Lutheran Church of El Salvador. He explained that this congregation strives



to meet the physical as well as the spiritual needs of both the immediate and broader community. He was grateful for the partnership with Habitat and other NGOs. As he explained the church's involvement in helping single moms with day care, etc., providing school supplies for children, advocating for safe water and human justice, it became clear that they were truly missionaries and had appropriately named their congregation St. Paul's after St. Paul, the missionary.

As time for the worship approached, flowers began to appear on the altar, and people began to fill the benches. The female assistant pastor was introduced, and the lectors were both male and female. The pastor led the singing with a rich baritone voice. His message was from the book of James, challenging us as well as his congregation to believe in the Lord and do what is good. He said doing wrong was like walking in dirty clothes. (I took issue with that statement later in the week as we even began our days in dirty jeans). He reminded us of the universal language of love which breaks barriers of

people speaking different languages, and cited Ted Kennedy's legacy, not knowing his religious faith, but believed the language of love for people had shaped his beliefs and actions.

As the service closed, Len and Linda presented our gifts of school supplies and clothing for the children. Each of us was given a cross which had been fashioned from the wood of the earthquake destroyed church back in 2001.

We were then driven to a beautiful area featuring Lago De Coatepeque, a large volcanic lake, bordered by the homes of the upper class which were nestled in the lush growth of the

surrounding area. The abundant lunch was served to us in an outdoor restaurant which sat high above the lake on stilts. Viewing it from the lake, we were amazed that it had supported the weight of our group as well as many other diners.



Back in the Hotel Sahara, we entered just as another 15 year old, her family and friends, were arriving in their finest. While it was fun to watch them celebrate, my first thought was, "Oh, no, not drumming into the night again." Fortunately, it was a school night, and that party ended at 10:00 P.M. Gloria and I did not have an alarm clock, but Virgil and Sue had two, so as usual, this good hearted couple came to our rescue.

Monday, August 31

As we drove past the bank on the way to the build site, a very long line was waiting for it to open. I wondered how many of them were there to cash the checks their relatives in the U.S. had sent to them. The roadside was typical of a Monday when people were preparing for work—riding the bus or in the back of the pickup which had been framed with high bars to brace any jolt, showing their **ingenious** spirit of creating inexpensive transportation. One woman was sweeping the dirt pathway into her home. There is a need for garbage disposal, as an occasional pile lined the street. One business sported the sign, "Auto Hotel." Cheryl and I weren't sure if it was to label a motel or the junk yard within the wall next to it. A tree was loaded with baby green bananas, and one owner had planted cacti between the branched fence posts.



Architect Cristina met us at the work site, and began the day with devotions from Luke 7: 11-17. The story of the woman with a sick son reminded us that Jesus knows our needs, even before we ask, because God knows what is in our hearts. Then, she counted us off by 8s. This time, I was handed a shovel. After about 30 minutes when I had deepened about 10 inches of the ditch by 3 more inches, I began to feel dizzy, and told Linda I needed a different job. I exchanged with someone on the sand bucket brigade, passing sand from one to another to be tamped in as a base in the trenches which had been dug on Saturday. However, at snack time, Carole and Cheryl insisted that they were better suited to the bucket brigade, and that three of us who were over seventy should go to the shaded stations where the rebar frames were being wired together. I wasn't too efficient for the first couple of hours, but learned to twist off the excess wires fast enough so I could almost keep up with Antonio, the young man who would move with his family into half of the duplex that we were helping to build. After the shower, a few of us including Gloria, visited the shop across the street called Gloria's, and then the dollar store on the corner of our street. It was **eye opening** to observe their dollar store being very much like those in our home communities, but surprising when we crossed the

street into a department store, to be met by an armed guard who took Cheryl's package from Gloria's and placed it in a numbered cubby where it would be kept until we were ready to leave the store.

Tuesday, September 1

That morning, a phone call to the leaders told us that the Habitat staff was in a meeting, so we should begin and continue the same tasks we had done the day before. YEAH!! However, one **spiritual** mason was not going to let us begin without devotion, and read from I John: 3-17, thanking us for caring for our brother in need. We continued to build the rebar reinforcements for the cement blocks. At my station, Jeanne, Carole and Joan (Chicago teammate) traded off hand cutting the small wires, two yellow helmeted men twisted the tough steel into rectangular pieces, Antonio wiring the long pieces to the rectangular ones, and me tightening and twisting off the excess wire. The pliers like tools worked much better when newly sharpened, so the file became a popular item. Three stations were set up to do that particular work, so we could be ready when the block would begin to be put into place for the walls and fence. Gloria and Sally worked at similar jobs at another station.



That day, Jose', the man we had met at the airport, took time away from his family visit to come and work with us. He brought his brother and a friend who also worked. At break time that afternoon, he became emotional as he thanked us for coming to help his country. He said, "I know what you people left behind, and here you are working in these conditions."

That afternoon, we left early to visit the Ruinas De San Andre's, an archaeological site which had been unearthed in 1977. We were awed by the **intelligence** and ambition of the 12,000 Maya people who had built this city during the time frame between AD 600-900. The guide in the small museum was rightly proud of the site, and we browsed the peaceful, **impressive** ruins and the **beautiful** park around them. We visited a few of the shops across the street, and I purchased my first souvenir, a jade ring. Cheryl and I tried to bargain with a dealer on two pair of matching earrings, but she was too savvy for us, actually going up in price, so we passed. As we came back into Santa Ana, we stopped at a grocery store to shop for wine, etc. I was embarrassed by our dirty shabby appearances, as the Salvadorans pride themselves in being a **clean** people, and the fellow shoppers demonstrated that trait.

Dinner that night was at a local eatery. We were given the choice of fried plantains, quesadillas, cheeseburgers or pizza. My quesadilla was **delicious**, as were Sally's fried plantains'. Back on the hotel's roof, we had our daily debriefing meeting before getting wet from the regular evening rain shower.

Wednesday, September 2

It seemed that each morning, I became conscious of something I hadn't noticed before. One morning, Metoso, the head mason, had explained the **ingenious** approach to drying the corn while still on the stalk. The upper part of the stalk, including the tassel was cut off and fed to cattle while still green, causing the ears to turn downward, protecting them from the nightly rains and keeping them dry until time to harvest. Beans were then planted in the same field, alongside the corn stalk. The rich, **fertile**, black soil was able to support both crops. That morning was the first I had seen the bean plants actually becoming several inches high alongside the corn stalk.

Architect Cristina's morning devotion compared us to "good trees" that were bearing good fruit. Wow, El Salvador is really **encouraging** and **appreciative**. As she was ready to count us off, Cheryl approached her and explained that it was better to leave us the jobs we had begun to master according to our endurance. Thanks, Cheryl!!! She agreed, so I spent the morning "doing the twist" at one of the rebar stations, where the corner rebar reinforcements were completed. Lunch that day was accompanied by three little girls, one of them whom went from one of us to



another giving neck massages (another example of the **welcoming** spirit). After we had eaten, we visited her home, the 7000th Habitat home that had been built in El Salvador. In those four rooms, her mother ran a beauty shop, slept and cared for her two daughters. Her laundry and cooking was done on the back patio. The small bathroom and sink had running water, and even though crowded, we could see that it was a comfortable home.

Later, we walked to the nearby soccer field, and noticed a mother hen with her brood of newly hatched chicks finding food along the road and in the corn fields. The guys paired off and had a fast paced soccer (football) game. One of the workers donned his uniform he definitely knew the game. Us gals marveled at the energy displayed after spending a half day working very hard in the hot sun.

Before going back to the hotel that afternoon, we again gathered in front of the day care center. A group of policemen who sang and played Salvadoran

instruments entertained us, again highlighting the creative spirit of the county. Matoso's mother, Naomi, who was in a wheel chair brought handmade crafts and bags of coffee she had purchased wholesale and bagged into pound bags (for three dollars) for us to purchase and take home for gifts. It seemed like a wonderful idea at the time, but my one small suitcase became filled to the point that I had to leave my work clothes behind, however, that was really my plan anyway.

Thursday, September 3

Philippe, a Habitat volunteer, joined us on Thursday, and he was a special treat. He had been born in Canada to Egyptian parents who had fled Egypt to Canada separately, married there, and live in Montreal yet today. His first language had been Arabic, then French, then English. His sister was married to an Italian, so his multi-lingual ability served him well with his family as well as an interpreter for us, since he had studied Spanish as well. He spent two days with us, and we felt he was really part of our group.

On the way to the site that morning, Jeanne inscribed our names on our hats, so it was easier for the Salvadorians to call us by name. Because she spoke Spanish, we often called on her to translate. Therefore, she worked manually and mentally the entire week with a willing spirit. Her one word answer to my question was ---- El Salvador is **fantisimo**!!! We all agreed, thinking we knew what that meant.

That morning, Philippe translated the devotion led by one of the masons who read from Psalm: 127, as he reminded us that unless the Lord is involved in building a house it is built in vain. That day, Jose's Salvadoran friend came again to help. It seemed he had found the effort **self**



satisfying, and left saying, “Mucho gusto!! (For him being allowed to help, or for us coming to help--I wasn’t sure which—perhaps both.)

On the way back to the hotel, a woman walking along the road caught our eyes. Could we be seeing correctly? She was carrying flats of eggs such as divide layers in a large egg case on her head—five layers high!!! **Fantisimo, inspirational, ambitious, ingenious, eye opening**, she fit most of our adjectives.

After showering and putting on clean clothes, Ramon drove us to the large theater which had been built in 1908, and was quite well preserved in spite of civil war and earthquakes. As we climbed the stairs, Cheryl, Sally and I tried out the acoustics with a chorus of “Glory in Excelsis Deo”! We also toured the Cathedral de Santa Ana, which was completed in 1913. It showed signs of wear, but it’s high arches drew our gaze upward, and there was an feeling of peace. We had dinner at a nice steak house that night. As usual, it was very good. Anna Maria, from Habitat, and her daughter, Carmen, joined us. A guitar player and talented singer entertained and Virgil took to dancing with Anna Maria.



Friday, September 4

This was our final day at the build. Where had that week gone?? Cristina began the day by telling us a story of a woman who had dreamed that she had a house of her own. She could work—selling her meager goods at the market for only two hours a day, but she had faith that God would send her work, so she could earn enough to qualify for a Habitat house which turned out to be the exact house of her dream. Cristina’s interpretation was that faith can not only move mountains, it can build houses.

That morning, since the rebar building was completed in my station, I joined Virgil, Philip and Joan as we sifted sand through a screened frame which would separate the larger pieces which would not be useful in the mortar. It had been a while since I’d actually seen the progress of the homes, and I was amazed at how much work had been done. Len, Virgil, and Sue had spent their days digging, and now cementing block—Wow! Linda and Cheryl had also worked hard doing whatever needed to be done.



The back wall was well on its way to being finished. Tall rebar was in place (being held in place by Carole) for the walls and divisions of the homes, and the latrine was nearly complete.



Cristina visited the work site to check on things. She noted that our screen was letting too many bigger pieces of gravel through it, so as we waited for a better one, she, Joan and I took a wheel barrow to a pile of lava rocks and filled it for some purpose I did not know. When it was full, she said, “Now, just wheel it over to the workmen.” Joan and I looked at each other, knowing from previous tries that we were not strong enough to do that, and told her we couldn’t do it. “Well, I’ll do it then,” she said, but after trying to pick it up, she immediately caught Matoso who happened to be nearby and asked him to push it. I thought it was a valuable experience, so she would understand that numbering off for

tasks to be done was NOT a good idea.

Because it was our last day, we stopped work at noon. On the way to lunch, we visited a completed home, not yet occupied. It was NICE!! I think a sense of pride was felt by all as we realized the three homes we were building would be equally as nice.

After lunch, the good-bye ceremony was held, which is always an emotional time for me. Those few days working alongside one another brought a kinship that exceeded language and cultural differences. We were given certificates of thanks and hugs by individual builders, entertained by a very lively trio of musicians and danced with our new brothers.

On the way back to the hotel, Ramon and Philip stopped to buy and share leech nuts, whose thorny red skin covered a delicious, sweet fruit that surrounded a big pit. Somewhere in my travels, I had tasted them before, but this one was especially delicious.

Back at the hotel, we were instructed to take quick showers, pick up all our belongings, and leave the rooms so the next group of volunteers could come in right behind us. It was then that we said good-bye to Ramon' and met Alfredo who would be our guide for that evening and the following day. He took us back to San Salvador in a very modern air conditioned mini bus, capably driven by a man named Jose'. On the way to dinner, we passed the Guardian Angel of the city—a statue of Jesus Christ on top of a globe—San Salvador, Our Savior of the World. We then checked into a nice hotel which featured suites rather than rooms.

That evening, both Alfredo and Philippe accompanied us to a Mexican restaurant. It was the first food that I would have considered typical Mexican food, which is what I'd expected, but the food overall was a wonderful **surprise**. Just too much of it! Back at the hotel, Gloria and I bleached and scrubbed my grubby walking shoes in our kitchen sink because I knew my feet would not stand the next day in the flats I'd brought. We dried the shoes with the hairdryer, then hung them on a hanger above the air conditioner, and presto!, they were clean and dry in the morning.

Saturday, September 5

When we opened the blinds in the morning, we were greeted by abundant and beautiful wisteria hanging from the trees, freshly washed by last night's rain shower. Breakfast at Hotel Mariscal was lighter than at the Sahara, but still served the wonderful fresh tropical fruit, along with cereal and toast.

Alfredo and Jose' arrived on time and we set out for La Palma. Alfredo was a very thorough and informative guide. He pointed out the teak wood trees with their smoke like blooms; the fire tree with its bright red blossoms; the tall thin pines called autokollia trees, and coconut loaded palms. All were nestled on the mountain sides with patches of corn, bouganvillea and antheriom. We saw a man tending his corn patch which had to be at least a 45 degree angle incline. Large fields of sugar cane grew on the flatter parcels of land. Occasionally, cows or goats were grazing at the roadside. Advertising signs were painted on the retaining walls along the road which twisted and turned up the north-south mountain range. That range extends into



the U.S. and is the tail end of the Rockies. An unusual site was the mountain site that appeared to be a woman lying on top of a big hill. Her knees were bent, and some wise woman in our group suggested she must have suffered from restless leg syndrome.

We continued upward as Alfredo pointed out the volcano which had "burped" a few years ago, causing the soil to be damaged for 5 years. During a single week in 2005,



El Salvador had endured the volcano's burp, an earthquake, and Hurricane Stan, which killed two coffee pickers. We passed a fort which had been a strong hold for the gorilla forces during the civil war. The bullet holes were scattered throughout the cement. We began to notice a certain style of art work on every light pole, as well as an occasional mural. Fernando Llort, El Salvador's most famous artist, had made La Palma his palate, and we were about to experience his beautiful work in paint and iron work.

Our first visit in LaPalma was to the church where the first peace agreements had taken place at the close of the civil war. Shopping was good in La Palma, but the treat was really the visit to the studio where single mothers had formed a sort of coop, taking turns painting in the Llort style and caring for each other's children. They were anxious to sell, and of course, we were anxious to buy. The studio owner's daughter, Roxana, spoke English as well as we did. They treated each of us to a tiny wooden piece which we were to paint. Mine sits on my kitchen counter, but is not nearly as nice as those in the shop. While waiting for everyone to finish, I asked Roxana where she had learned to speak English so well. "Oh," she said, "I had a scholarship to John Brown University, and studied graphic design there for four years." I asked, "John Brown in Arkansas?" What a small world! I had lived in Arkansas for sixteen years, and Linda, Len, Cheryl and Gloria currently live there.

When we had all gathered, we drove a short way to the small mountain town of Suchitoto for lunch. The outdoor restaurant was off the cobblestone street, and the staff was waiting for us with a table set with cloth napkins, etc. We sat beneath a latticed roof covered with wisteria vines and were served an appetizer of a wine made from flowers. The food was less tasty than previous meals, but the setting made up for it. Following lunch, Alfredo offered the choice of shopping more, or taking a boat ride on Lago de Suchitan, which we chose, and Cheryl treated us to the



additional cost. We rode across the lake passing several fishermen. When asked if the fishing was good, Alfredo replied that it was loaded with tilapia but he would not eat fish caught there since the lake was polluted. "What," someone asked, do they do with the fish that are caught there?"—"Sell them!" Thank goodness we had not had fish for lunch. We stopped at a large island and explored the cave which had housed a hermit for years until he became commercial, boating to land, purchasing beer and selling it to the tourists who stopped to see his living quarters. Yes, Salvadorans are **creative!**

Riding in the boat back to shore, we were close to cows grazing alongside the lake, and an occasional egret or hawk. Alfredo explained that one of the islands housed a wide variety of tropical birds, but because another group was there, that island was not on our lake ride path. Yet another roadside activity caught our eyes on the way back into the capitol city. It looked as if shelled corn had been thrown on the shoulder of the highway. After we studied it a while, we decided that is exactly what had happened. It was the Salvadoran corn dryers. Further down the road, other workers were scooping it up and putting it into bags, and then loaded into trucks. Driving back into the city, we passed the barrio built on a garbage dump. It was typical of those in other large cities with shelters built out of whatever was available—cardboard, dirty tin, etc. It is sad that those folks don't qualify for Habitat homes, because they do not have the income to eventually pay for the house--if those folks had that kind of money, they would not be living there. There lies the uncomfortable challenge for those of us who dare to compare the lives of those children's lives with the lives of our beloved grandchildren.

Our last stop that afternoon was one that impressed me the most. The National Cathedral in San Salvador resembled a used airplane hangar from the outside, but what a surprise when we entered. Tiers of stained glass gave the impression of colored rainbows. One large blocked wall had been installed in such a way so tiny spaces sprinkled throughout with a "star like" effect around a large circular window representing the eye of God. The altar, pulpit, etc. were all done in cast iron with a modern design. The Seven Stations of the Cross were worthy of our awe as we studied each one, my favorite being the one depicting the resurrection. That evening, Alfredo and Jose' drove us to the highest point in San Salvador to a beautiful restaurant where we viewed the city lights from an outdoor balcony. From that vantage point, it seemed each of the 1.8 million people in the city and the neighboring hillsides must have been holding a light bulb! Fantisimo!!!