

# Thrivent Builds Worldwide

El Salvador Community

January 15–24, 2010

## Friday, January 15, 2010

Fifteen team members—nine women and six men ranging in age from 22 to 67—led by Jenny Michaelson, working on her third Habitat build in El Salvador, assembled outside the San Salvador airport. There we were met by a representative of Habitat for Humanity El Salvador, our guide for the two-hour trip to Santa Ana.

Tired from our early-morning flight, we were grateful for the comfortable air-conditioned tour bus we rode in and for the short stop for a snack: a Salvadoran staple called pupusas, thick tortillas filled with cheese, beans, pork, or chicken. Our treat was prepared at an open-air café run by a Habitat family.

Soon we arrived at our home for the week, the Hotel Sahara in the heart of Santa Ana, quickly unpacked, and gathered for greetings and orientation from local staff. Other staff members joined us for dinner at Pollo Campero, a favorite Salvadoran fast-food chain. We returned to the hotel for a short team meeting—and bed!

## Saturday, January 16

After breakfast at the hotel, we piled into two vans for our half-hour trip to the work site, Villa Esperanza, a Thrivent-supported Habitat community next to an older Habitat community, Charlotte, which includes a daycare center and community center. When completed in June, the combined community will have about 130 homes.

**Bob:** “Habitat is helping to address the immigration problem by providing the thing people most need—a stable, secure home—so they don’t feel such a need to leave their home country.”

At the site, we met in the community center and were introduced to the masons and their helpers as well as the owners of the homes we’d help build and friends who are putting in sweat-equity hours for them.

After devotions, we were organized into teams to work on four houses (two duplexes, each about 450 square feet). We helped finish digging trenches for the foundations, compact the dirt in the bottom of the trenches, tie rebar reinforcement frames for the foundations and walls, and dig holes for the septic tanks. One of our team members even worked on curbs and gutters for a day. Throughout the week, team members switched jobs as needed to match their strength and energy level.

Even the Habitat staff commented about how hot it was (in the 90s), and they kept a close eye on us, making sure we drank plenty of water, stopped for breaks mid-morning and mid-afternoon, and took advantage of a full

hour for lunch and conversation with the Salvadoran workers and volunteers. (We took breaks and lunches in the much-appreciated shade next to the daycare center.)

That evening, we enjoyed the first of several fine dinners at the hotel, followed by a team meeting—and a wedding reception with lots of *loud* music that went on until after midnight. Many in our group, still short on sleep from traveling and adjusting to a new environment and tired after a full day’s work, thought the night was rather short.

## Sunday, January 17

We worshiped in San Salvador at Lutheran Church of the Resurrection, where Medardo Gomez, bishop of the Lutheran Church of El Salvador, serves as pastor. Some participants in previous trips to El Salvador reunited with friends or got acquainted with folks they’d met through e-mail.

After worship, we headed to Lake Coatepeque, a large, gorgeous lake surrounded by a volcanic caldera. We lunched on a cruise boat, chatted with group members and Habitat staff, swam, and relaxed. The day ended with dinner and a team meeting at the hotel—and an early bedtime!

## Monday, January 18

Our day began with the disappointing news that one of our group members was experiencing “intestinal distress.” By the end of the week, five people had missed at least one day of work because they weren’t feeling well, and some missed as many as three days. Fortunately, the Habitat staff kept a close eye on the patients, made sure those who wanted medical care got to a doctor, and kept everyone well supplied with ice, Pedialyte, and other necessities.

The rest of the team headed to the worksite and enjoyed a full day similar to Saturday, once again ending with dinner and a team meeting at the hotel.

**Chris:** The antidote to many problems is to “take 500 milligrams of Suck It Up.”

## Tuesday, January 19

The work portion of our day was “the usual,” but we left about 2:00 to visit Tazumal, a Mayan ruin a few miles west of Esperanza. After poking around at some nearby shops, we returned to the hotel, so those who wished to could walk together to the Santa Ana cathedral and visit a square filled with artisans’ shops.

Dinner was at a lovely country club—a restful environment that provided both a relaxing break and a

somewhat disturbing counterpoint to the village where we were working.

### Wednesday, January 20

Work ended at noon for an intercultural exchange with the masons and volunteers. We visited the 7000th Habitat house built in El Salvador and then watched some of the masons and others ambitious folks play a pick-up soccer game at a local field. (The heat-tolerant in our volunteer group even joined in.)

When we got back to the worksite, we were treated to a trio (flutes, guitar, drum) that performed Mayan and other music for us. Our group sang “This Land Is Your Land” and did the Hokey Pokey for them. (Note: none of us died of embarrassment, as we had feared we might.)

Everyone then sampled a variety of Salvadoran treats some women from the village made for us. Several members of our group helped neighborhood children break a piñata, and just to keep things interesting, one woman in our group broke her ankle, thanks to her enthusiastic participation in the festivities! She received excellent care at a San Salvador hospital and managed to get through the week with crutches and some pain meds.

### Thursday, January 21

During the previous few days, the local workers had set up the rebar framework in the foundation trenches. “So, today,” the site supervisor told us, “we make concrete!”

Many of us shoveled sand and gravel into five-gallon buckets. One of the masons was in charge of the diesel-powered mixer—adding the correct amounts of sand, gravel, cement, and water at the right time and filling wheelbarrows with the wet concrete. Stronger members of our group helped push the wheelbarrows to the foundation trenches, where other masons helped tip the loads and distribute the concrete. This is certainly the hardest step of building a house!

We worked a full day again today, which felt very satisfying, although we certainly appreciated the chance we’d had to learn a little bit about El Salvador the previous afternoons. Dinner was at a pleasant local restaurant with an unlikely name: “Lover’s Steakhouse.”

### Friday, January 22

Today we moved block for the masons. It had been delivered and stacked next to the street, and we moved it into smaller piles within the rooms and around the perimeters of the future duplexes. The masons began to lay the walls but didn’t get far enough with that step that we could help. That first layer has to be set just so!

Throughout the week, a continuously changing mix of people from our group tried to finish digging the last septic tank hole. Because the hole was in the shade of a tree much of the day, the task initially seemed easy. But it turned out that beginning about two-thirds of the way

down, the area was full of watermelon-size volcanic rocks. What we expected would be an easy day’s work took nearly three days to finish!

Work ended at noon, and we gathered for lunch and a closing ceremony. Somehow, the masons had managed to get all cleaned up, and looking much spiffier than they had an hour earlier, they took turns giving each of us a certificate with a photo of our volunteer group and a tiny metal bucket as a reminder of our work.

Then, as if we hadn’t been surprised often enough this week, a five-member mariachi band appeared around the corner of the daycare center and played for us until we simply *had* to leave.

One last time, we piled into the vans and headed back to the hotel. After quick showers, we settled into a tour bus and headed for Costa del Sol, a popular beach area south-southeast of San Salvador. By the end of the three-hour trip, we were glad to drop off our luggage in our rooms and meet for dinner and a team meeting.

### Saturday, January 23

Ah! A day with no responsibilities and (almost) no schedule! Group members got up when they felt like it, ate, ran or walked on the beach, swam in the pool, napped, chatted, and reorganized luggage for the trip home. At the end of a peaceful, relaxing day, we held one last team meeting before our final dinner together.

### Sunday, January 24

About half the group rose early for a 5:00 a.m. departure, while others left for the airport later in the morning. As far as we know, though, everyone arrived home without incident. Clearly, the week was a powerful experience for many in our group. Team members commented both during and after our week together:

*Sue:* “I know it is an amazing team that was put together for a reason. . . . I will go back to El Salvador.”

*Lisa:* “This week I have been reflecting how much spending time in a country where so people struggle with basic needs daily puts my challenges in perspective.”

*John:* “We want to believe the main reason we volunteer is to give a decent place for a family to live. But I think we do it for ourselves. We love discovering that the reason we volunteer is the great feelings it gives us.”

*Beth:* “When we volunteer for Habitat, we work for justice. We become part of God’s work to reconcile all things (recalling 2 Cor. 5:17–19). Because of El Salvador, I can never forget: God is a God of justice, and one day, all things will be made right.”

Mark: “I am going home not as a historian or a reporter but as a witness.”