

DOING OUR PART

What then is Apollos? What is Paul? Servants through whom you came to believe, as the Lord assigned to each. I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the growth. So neither the one who plants nor the one who waters is anything, but only God who gives the growth. The one who plants and the one who waters have a common purpose, and each will receive wages according to the labor of each. For we are God's servants, working together; you are God's field, God's building. (1 Corinthians 3:5-9, NRSV)

This year's PF mission trip was to Wheeling, West Virginia, a city that is an amazing study in the economic and cultural forces shaping our nation. While there, I was amazed to learn about this once thriving city on the banks of the Ohio River. Like many cities in the region, it is a place hit hard by the closures of plants and companies. The downsizing and outsourcing we read about in the papers has devastated communities like this one. I was told that in the last fifteen years the population of Wheeling had dropped almost in half because families have packed up and moved away in search of jobs elsewhere. A drive through downtown revealed empty shops and vacant office buildings. The population that remains is largely elderly and/or low-income, the sort of people either unable to go somewhere else or without the necessary skills to get jobs somewhere else. In some ways, this city has been left behind by the world around it, a ghost of its former self.

We worked in an area of town called Wheeling Island, literally an island in the Ohio River. It is filled with beautiful Victorian style homes, the kind of places that

would be fixer-uppers for yuppies if there were jobs to lure them there. The homes generally looked in disrepair. Their residents were older folks who had lived there for years or younger folks who came for the low rent. There on the island is a place called The House of the Carpenter.

The HOTC is a vibrant ministry of the United Methodist Church that gets by with the support of the denomination, donations and occasional grant money. It relies heavily on volunteer labor and has become a site for young people in the Americorps program to come and work every summer. Our own Anne Sacks suggested we go there, because she had such a great experience working at the HOTC when she was in Americorps.

The HOTC offers a variety of ministries that they have started over the years: a summer camp program for low-income children, medical clinics, after-school programs, rehabilitation and construction of homes, a food pantry and a clothes closet, to name just a few. We were shocked to hear of the thousands of pounds of food given out on a weekly basis and the daily pick-up loads of donated clothing that are sorted and distributed to all-comers. In a cash-strapped community where social services have been cut by the declining tax base, the HOTC has become one of the main (if not *the* main) provider of services to people in need.

With these needs in mind, I am proud to inform you of what a great job our youth did while we were there. We worked primarily with their construction ministry. Our job for the week was to construct a wheelchair ramp for an elderly woman called Miss Maggie who has multiple health problems. Although she was walking when we met her, Miss Maggie told us that she would soon be in a wheelchair full-time and would be unable to make it down her front steps. We're not talking about just a few steps. Like every house on the island, her house was built up about ten feet,

because the entire island is a flood zone. Due to code requirements, that ramp would need to be around 100 feet long!

The ramp proved to be quite a challenge. The local zoning made some difficult demands upon the job. We had to dig five foot deep holes for every post, and instead of putting the posts into the holes and surrounding them with concrete, we had to fill the holes with concrete, wait for them to dry and then anchor them to the top of the concrete foundations. Measuring the placement of the holes, digging the holes, mixing the concrete and bolting them down amounted to a slow and laborious job.

It was such slow work that often there was not enough work for everyone at all times. One of the reasons I am most proud of our young people is that it is a difficult thing to get psyched up about hard work—the kind of work that none of us was used to—and then to wait your turn to do it. “Hurry up and wait” became our motto. I talked with the group about being flexible when we first arrived, little did I know how flexible we needed to be. “Idle hands are the devil’s work” or so the saying goes, but I rarely saw our youth sitting and being idle. I had to be creative in finding work for the eager teenagers (and they were creative too). Those waiting their turn to dig holes, mix concrete or haul away dirt, found other work to do. They trimmed shrubs, cut vines, weeded flowerbeds, picked up trash, planted new flowers, and made a new brick pathway. If something needed to be done in this woman’s yard, our youth did it gladly.

Some in our group went each day over to the HOTC building to do other work. Anne Sacks took a few and worked to install a drop ceiling. Other youth sorted donations of clothing and food. There they were able to see and meet the many people coming to the HOTC for help.

I need to mention here what a great job the other two chaperones did on this trip. Anne Sacks, who has been a youth mission trip chaperone since she graduated out of the youth program, was essential not only because of her own considerable construction skills but also because of her quick mind and organizational abilities. Also, John Catuogno, not too far removed from the youth group, proved not only to be a good role model for the youth but also a responsible leader and constant initiator of touch football games. The two of them were great and I just can't thank them enough. As a church, we should feel proud that these two young people are graduates from our youth program.

As it turned out, at the end of our week, we did not finish the wheelchair ramp or the drop ceiling and of course, the stream of donated food and clothing kept coming. We left without that warm fuzzy feeling that comes from completing a job. We labored at tasks that we did not get to see finished. Delayed gratification can be a difficult pill to swallow. The jobs we started would have to be completed by another youth group coming the week after us. We made jokes about the next group getting the easy jobs of nailing down decking and putting up a few ceiling tiles, but we wanted to be the ones to finish what we had started. The good news is that the ramp did get completed (a picture of it arrived this week), and the ceiling also got finished. We can feel good about the part we played in getting the jobs done.

Our part in the overall work of God done through the HOTC reminded me of today's scripture passage in 1 Corinthians. There Paul addresses divisions in the church. Some were claiming special status because Paul had led them to Christ, while others were claiming their own superiority because they were discipled by another Christian leader, Apollos. Each claimed that they were better than the others because of who they followed.

Paul reminds them that each person plays an important part in the work of God. One may have planted the seeds, and another may have watered them, but it is God who helps the crops to grow. In the same way, our group may have dug the holes and began the structure of the ramp, while another group laid the decking and put up the railing, but it is God who worked through us all to change a woman's life.

In a world filled with so much suffering, violence and calamity, it is easy to feel overwhelmed by the problems that exist in our world. Just this week, we have watched the death toll rise in Iraq of not just our soldiers but also Iraqi civilians, the incredible fury of a hurricane and heard of an arson attack against a church in our community. In the face of such forces, it is natural to ask, "What, if anything, can I do about it?" In the same way, it is natural to look at a city like Wheeling, buffeted by the winds of so many different complex problems, and ask the same question. The good news is that we do not have to do it all. That is up to God. One person plants, another waters, but it is God who gives the growth. We just have to do our part.

This knowledge of how each of us is but a part in the larger work of God is liberating and humbling at the same time. We are liberated from feeling overwhelmed by the needs we see. We can trust God to do all that we cannot accomplish. Yet, we are also humbled, because we are freed of the excuse that the problem is too big to solve. We still have to do our part. We form a vital link in the chain that God uses to pull all of us along. The question lies before us: "Are we doing our part?"

I hope you will take up the challenge that our young people have given us. They learned a lesson about doing all they could with the tools, time and conditions given to them in Wheeling, even if they did not get the emotional goodies of seeing the jobs finished. As we as a church look around our

community and even look beyond it to our world, we must ask ourselves if we are willing to set aside excuses, trust God with the ultimate completion of the work and do our part. Amen.

Rev. Chase Peebles
The Congregational Church of Manhasset, New York (UCC)
The Sixteenth Sunday after Pentecost, September 19, 2004

PASTORAL PRAYER

Creator of heaven and earth, redeemer of our bodies and souls, we are aware of the needs in our world. We pray for peace in Iraq and other places consumed by the fires of war. We pray for the victims of hurricane Ivan who have lost loved ones and homes. We pray for the people of our sister church, Long Island Christian Fellowship, who were victims of an arson attack. We pray for so many more people who hurt and are in need. Help us to not be overwhelmed by the scale of these needs. Help us to set aside the excuses of not knowing where to start or not having enough time to give. Help us to trust that you are at work in our world, and all we have to do is simply do our own part in your work. Open our eyes to see how we can connect with the work you are already doing. Open our ears to hear how we can join in. Open our hearts so that we can be your tools as you seek to mend what is broken. In the name of Christ, we pray. Amen.

P.F. Mission Trip Presentations

Dana DeFilippo

What was meaningful to me on the church mission trip?

I thought for a long time about this question. But then it came to me, everything was meaningful. It was meaningful to build a wheelchair ramp for an elderly woman who was losing the use of her legs. I feel having fun was an important part of the trip too. I'm sure without having fun, we wouldn't have been as focused while working.

One of the most meaningful parts of the trip was the Bible studies and discussions with Chase. Every night we would read a passage from the Bible and have a discussion about it. My favorite topic was TRUST. That night, in the middle of our discussion Chase told us to get up. We were then instructed to line up in a certain way, where half of us went on one side and the other half went on the other, we faced each other and put our arms out.

We found out one of us was going to stand on top of the desk and fall into the waiting arms of the rest of us. This showed that the person falling had trust in the rest of the group. Almost everyone got a chance to try this, even Chase! We even caught him!

This trip meant a lot to me, and it made me realize how lucky I am.

Jackie Gemino

As you all have heard, this year our PF group headed to Wheeling, West Virginia. When we first arrived, there was a man waiting outside of the house where we were going to be staying. His name was Gary. Gary explained what we were going to be doing throughout the course of the week. He said that some of us would be working at the actual House of the Carpenter in the clothes room, and others would be working at a local woman's house named Miss Maggie. Miss Maggie was an elderly woman that was having a very hard time getting out of her house because she was in a wheelchair a lot of the time. We would be building her a wheelchair ramp. After all was said and done we had to unpack our giant vans which was probably when some of us realized that we might have brought too much stuff.

The next morning we headed over to the House of the Carpenter. Gary introduced us to all of the people working there and then took us on a tour to show us what Anne and her group had done when they were there 2 years before. Then our group split up and some of us went over to Miss Maggie's and some of us stayed behind to help with the clothes hanging.

The first day went kind of slow because everything had to be done by basically one person and that was Don. Don was the man who was going to show us how to build the ramp. The day at Miss Maggie's mostly consisted of weeding and cleaning.

The next few days were not slow at all. We dug post-holes which, thanks to Anne and her prior experience with digging post-holes, went very fast. Then there was our next assignment and that was to make cement. The machine was taking a little too long so some of us got a mixing tray and decided to make it the old way, by hand. That helped pick

up the pace and allowed us to fill all of the post-holes so that hopefully the next day we could start doing the wood part of the ramp. Unfortunately we couldn't, so we planted flowers and built a small walking path that allowed Miss Maggie to get to the hose.

On Thursday we headed to Kenny Wood so that would allow another day for the cement to dry. Kenny Wood was a lot of fun for all of us but we had to get back to work. Friday we knew that we could try to finish building the ramp but Don said that it would be tough and he was right. We had only gotten up to putting the posts in when it was time to go so we had to leave our ramp incomplete, which we really didn't like.

The last night we headed down to the riverside park. Chase read us a story from the Bible and then allowed us to think for a few moments about all that we had done during the course of the week. He said that this would allow us to thank God for all the experiences that we had that week and he was right.

Jimmy Haas

When we began the trip down to West Virginia, I knew what to expect. Lack of sleep, long work days, and things like that. I don't remember exactly how long the drive was, but I know it was long and filled with various show tune CDs and 80s music.

The bunk beds we slept in were a step up from the usual sleeping on the floor, and we had a whole little house to roam about, rather than one big room. We woke up the next morning ready to work on whatever they had in store for us.

The first day we cleared out someone's backyard so that we could build a long wheelchair ramp for them. I got to use a scythe, which didn't work very well, but it was still fun to use. We ripped out weeds and roots for many hours until there was nothing left. Then we could start setting up for the ramp to be built.

I don't really know how that went, because for the rest of the week I went with Anne and Sean to put in a bathroom ceiling at the House of the Carpenter. It took a while because we weren't very good at it, and because of one mistake or another, we had to tear it all down and start over. Still, once we figured out what to do, it was a bit easier.

Sometimes we would go downstairs to see what was going on. Another group was usually folding and sorting donated clothes. We could see all the people coming in to pick out clothes they needed. We saw how many people the House of the Carpenter helped, and how the people that worked there had dedicated themselves to helping others. No ending now!

Adam Lampeter

My name is Adam Lampeter. This summer I went on my first mission trip. I was a little nervous about going because I had heard stories of past mission trips, such as working in extreme heat, doing lots of hard work, and having limited showering facilities.

It wasn't like that at all. We had good weather for working outdoors. We did a good share of outdoor work, as well as indoor work, but none of the work was too hard or inappropriate for people our age. It felt good helping out others that were either old, or just in need of our help. It was

a rewarding feeling knowing that we were actually making a difference in someone's life.

The accommodations that were provided for us were also much better than I had imagined. I plan on participating in future mission trips.

This was one of the more memorable experiences of my summer, and perhaps even of my life. It was very rewarding helping people that are less fortunate than I am. An experience such as this one actually makes a person like myself want to do more.

Katherine Morris

Although this year's mission trip to West Virginia was my first, it was packed with unforgettable memories and experiences. During our first morning, the director named Gary gave us a tour of the House of the Carpenter. It was a very nice facility, still being built by the AmeriCorps volunteers. Since there was a lot of flooding in Wheeling, the construction of the house had to meet the requirements for their flood zone. All of the power and heating systems were located above the flood level on the second floor. The first floor had drains and double doors in order to let the water out of the building. It was really weird thinking that the Ohio River could overflow enough to flood the first floor of the building! And the fact that over half of their population moved because of the frequency of floods was strange because I had never heard anything like it!

We were told that each day, the House of the Carpenter receives donations of food from local grocery stores and clothes from generous people. This way, less fortunate people can come into the House and pick up food and clothes for themselves and their families. Many people

come into the House of the Carpenter each day, entering with hunger and exiting with a smile, because of what the volunteers at the HOTC do for them.

For the majority of the trip, we worked on building a wheelchair ramp for Miss Maggie, who is a resident of Wheeling. As soon as we got there, we got straight to work with Don and Gary. Everyone immediately started digging post-holes, which would later be filled with cement. All of us worked together to clear her yard of unwanted plants and weeds, and we even planted a flower garden for her with stepping-stones to get to her garden hose. We used a cement mixer and a tray to mix dry cement mix (which was like a powder) with sand, gravel and water to fill the post-holes. Later, we built the frames for the ramp over the cement-filled post-holes, and before we knew it, we had to go home. Building the ramp showed me many things. I learned how to mix cement, dig post-holes, and frame a wheelchair ramp. But, more importantly, I was happy knowing that I was helping to make someone's life better.

This trip made me realize how lucky I am to lead the life that I do. The people that went into the HOTC every day made me look at all of the things in my life and not take them for granted. The wheelchair ramp could have been a very expensive project for Miss Maggie. But instead, we came in and helped the HOTC build a wheelchair ramp for her, free of cost.