A Summer of Learning

I never would have imagined that a summer working with teenagers could stretch, exhaust, and challenge me as it did. During my high school years, I participated in the same church youth program. So, I thought I had a good idea of everything that might be thrown at me. Yet, it proved to be a summer of twists and turns, often providing more questions than answers, challenging me in ways I never imagined, resulting in situations that solidified my call to serve. Through the summer's work, I experienced in new ways the importance of communication, the challenge of accepting flawed people in love, and the importance of focusing on service rather than accomplishing tasks.

I've participated on a lot of mission trips prior to this summer. From these earlier experiences, I've learned that God presents himself in unexpected ways to those who are looking. I know better than to go on a mission trip simply for the work, or the feeling of empowerment that comes with helping people. Instead, I've learned through past experiences that trip participants' get much more out of the experience that those we go to help. God has a way of providing powerful, meaningful, unique, and fulfilling personal experiences for each person on each trip.

The very first week of my internship, I headed to Costa Rica for my tenth mission-serviced trip, this time with a group of young adults. Although I knew God always provides a unique experience, I had many doubts as we left. This was due to the fact that communicating with the church members we were serving was very difficult because of the language barrier. Consequently, before leaving, we didn't know what we would be doing and couldn't bring the necessary tools and supplies. I

feared that we'd just be wasting time. Sure enough, God provided all that we needed. In fact, we had so much work to do, that we worked really hard.

On the last day, just before we were ready to leave, the Costa Rican people presented us with a plaque. The presentation was a significant experience. From the first time we set foot on the grounds of the church, the congregation there welcomed us as family, with open arms. At the presentation ceremony as we were preparing to leave, we formed a circle and the pastor of the small church read a Bible verse about how we are all one church body and one family, no matter the physical distance between us. Somehow this simple Bible verse made me question my actions during the previous week. Had I welcomed everyone with open arms? Had I loved the people around me? It opened my eyes to the bad tendency I have to welcome and embrace people only when it is convenient for me to do so. In the pastor's presentation, God clarified the image of His people as one united family, working together in His name, regardless of race, gender, or background. I strongly believe that during the presentation, God was calling me to recognize once again that my life's work is about building personal relationships and serving people, not about the physical labor. I am very grateful that I had this experience at the beginning of the summer because it changed the way I interacted with the people, especially the kids, throughout the rest of the summer. This experience prepared me to better accept and love each person in the youth group, which really allowed them to open up to me.

Although this was a significant experience, it was not the only one. On the second mission trip of the summer, I traveled with younger students to the rural

Appalachian area near Hayesville, NC in the tri-state area of Tennessee, North Carolina, and Georgia. On this trip, we teamed up with the Hinton Rural Life Center, which organizes and supervises work projects on houses in the area. Our youth group was divided into three different teams, and I was in charge of one of them, along with my supervisor Danny Pearcy. I was very excited about spending time with Danny because he has always been my faith mentor. Although I was very excited to begin, the excitement quickly subsided as we met frustration on the first day. We were running late, the AC on our bus broke, and Danny and I were very irritated. However, on the second day, within the first hour at the work site, the homeowner we were working for shared his testimony. His powerful story was absolutely amazing and instantly changed our attitudes. This was the start of a week filled with the Holy Spirit. During every devotion, the presence of the Holy Spirit was evident. At one in particular, one of the students opened up to me about how he has never had a father figure, and so we prayed for God to fill this very important role in his life.

The most powerful experience occurred on the last workday, and it was not all positive. After a very successful, moving, and hard-working week, the last day at our site we were paired with another team. When we arrived at the worksite, they were already there. Their presence was totally unexpected and the tension between our group and theirs was evident. Right after we prayed with the homeowners for a safe and fulfilling workday, the other group jumped right in and took over. It was as if the rug was pulled out from under us. Our students were being bossed around by a very task-oriented adult from the other group. The woman cared little about the

kids and the family we were serving. She was all about the work, doing good so that she could feel a sense of accomplishment. Danny and I were enraged and stepped away to gather our thoughts about how to handle the situation. It was clear that our perfect week could be ruined by the experience of this last day. We knew that making a scene in front of the family and the students would not help the situation. We all wanted to see the work completed.

Although this experience wasn't positive, God was very much present. He helped me learn several important life lessons from the experience. I learned that all of God's people have issues to work on; no Christian is perfect. All you can do is pray for patience and love. In addition, I learned that in dealing with uncomfortable situations, communication is key. Finally, this uncomfortable experience made me look inside myself. I found that I had built up pride in the work we had accomplished that week. It is so easy to pride ourselves on the work accomplished, instead of being thankful for what God has enabled us to do and learn.

The experience further emphasized the fact that my future work is to build relationships through love and service. The work we accomplish is secondary. It also prepared me to see that in the road ahead, I will often butt heads with prideful, sinful Christians, who do what they know is good, not for God, but for self-satisfaction. This will be particularly challenging. Just like the Pharisees, Christians often try to take away from your experience in order to reinforce their own. The bad experience did not alter my image of God, but reinforced it. Thankfully, the members of our team remembered the good parts of the week, especially how the

family we worked for was so filled with the Holy Spirit, and how they touched each of us individually.

Unfortunately this summer had to come to an end. I feel extremely blessed for the opportunity that the internship provided. God taught me some important lessons: the importance of better communication, how to love even if it is not convenient, and not to focus on people's flaws, but instead focus on serving and building loving relationships. In my experiences, I realized that I must grow in many areas. Making everyone feel welcomed, opening up to listen and share, and asking for help are a few of the areas God highlighted this summer. As a result of my work, my sense of vocation is clearer. I am certain that God is calling me to work in an area where I can build loving relationships through service. After I complete my undergraduate work, I plan to move on to seminary. I feel God wants me to continue exploring my faith, so that I may become more comfortable and confident in sharing it with others. It has truly been a summer of learning.