

Carlisle UMC: VIM Puerto Rico



Team Journal – June 2-9 2018

Team Members: Kate Anderson, Wes Chandler, Marian Gible, Cheryl Hale, Pastor Mira Hewlett, Bob Kilmer, Eric Sands, Danielle Settlemyer, Bill Toner, Brad Weiser

Sunday, June 3, 2018

I am grateful for the church service this morning. The church and community have been so welcoming. Breaking bread with the people of Patillas was awesome. I have moved several times in my life and each time I/we (wife) have selected a church much like the one we came from because it was comfortable. This experience was great; upbeat, lots of involvement, its okay to walk around, and so welcoming. I couldn't believe it was 2 hours. It flew by. Going to church in Portilla is not something you just do or just check it off the list. They LOVE IT.

– Eric

Yesterday was mostly all travel. It was interesting to see both the similarities and differences between where we were driving and how things are back home. In some places it's hard to tell which things were affected by the hurricane and which things are just run-down or abandoned. I was also interested to hear from our driver, Carlos, that many Puerto Ricans don't necessarily consider themselves Americans. It does make sense to me, though, because the culture is very different.

We went to the beach, where I didn't go in the water (I'm not much of a beach person). Also we went to church. I loved seeing all the children and listening to the praise band.

I also got to experience the pharmacy and clinic. Everyone was so welcoming and kind to both Marian and I. They really seem to appreciate how much you try to communicate with them in Spanish.

While at the clinic I got to watch the news and part of a soap opera, which was neat.

- Kate

One of the reasons I love mission trips is getting out of my routine and finding God again. Sometimes I get so busy with my daily stuff that God is left out. The first day here I rediscovered God in the sight and sounds of our home. To hear the ocean at breakfast is peaceful and allows my mind to stop working and start worshipping God. I'm looking forward to this time by the sea.

– Bill

Monday, June 4, 2018

Today we got a late start because a man from UMCOR spoke to our group about Hurricane Maria and its devastation and what the church is doing to help people. He also briefly discussed what other groups and FEMA are doing and then what our team will be doing for the rest of the week.

Off we went to start our work. We were divided into two groups – 5 headed by Pastor Mira and 5 headed by Brad. Pastor Mira's team worked to add a roof to a home of a lady we met yesterday at church. Brad's team cut cinder blocks to cover up holes adjacent to newly installed windows. In addition, Eric and Brad installed electrical wiring in half of the house.

Lunch was brought along to our sites as well as water. Pastor Mira insisted we drink water every hour because of the heat – which was somewhere between hot and warm. I was instructed by the doctor I visited yesterday not to work today, so my job was to take photos.

We are all tired after the work day, but it is a good tired.

Nice to interact with home owners. – Marian

After a marvelous day of rest, 2 hours of worship, and fun visiting an old lighthouse and swimming at the beach, we made it to our two work sites. Much work was done to obtain materials; all we had to do was follow the instructions of the foreman of the site and work hard. Oh and drink water and more water. At our work site, we met Petra again after meeting her in church on Sunday. She brought us cold fruit drinks and lots of smiles, hugs, dancing and laughter. It is easy to work hard when the people who you are doing it for are so grateful and happy for the help. – Roberto

So many things happened today – we were introduced to several UMCOR staff who oversee teams, direct the work and support the people whose homes we are repairing. It was alarming to hear that these families lost everything and that supplies to rebuild were not shipped to Puerto Rico until February when UMCOR worked with HOME Depot to make it happen. Sept. to Feb. – too long!

Our team's homeowner, Sonya, lives on a hillside not far from our lodging. Her roof had been repaired last week, and we worked on windows – closing in the window frames with cement block as the new windows were smaller. Several of us got to learn new skills. Sonya was very appreciative of our help. As she told us how Maria had damaged her home she began to cry – the memories are still fresh and painful, and I'm sure the road back feels very long. There is essentially nothing in her house. She has an extension cord for power, and water you cannot drink from an outside faucet. She has at least 60 chickens and the roosters crowed all day long.

One task I was assigned was to chip old cement off a window sill. I used a hammer and chisel. As I worked, I thought about the large nails that had been pounded through Christ's hands and feet – probably much like the chisel I was using. But for this act, there would probably be no UMC, no UMCOR, no VIM, and no teams to help people like Sonya. We are blessed to be a blessing. – Cheryl

Tuesday, June 5, 2018

I think the food is great and we are all enjoying our meals. I came on this mission trip to help those who have less than I have. So far this has been a very enjoyable experience. God always says stretch out your hand to help the needy – other individuals.

I experienced the friendship amongst our teams. My team consists of Pastor Mira, Bill, Bob, Kate and myself. We work very well and communicate with each other with the tasks at hand.

We started work Monday on refurbishing a roof. The person's roof we are fixing is a nice gentle elderly lady who was glad to see us and expressed her kindness giving us soda, juice, pineapples and ice cream.

I always look forward to going on mission trips because I believe God knows I like to help out individuals in need. During the course of today while working we ran out of materials. I believe on Wednesday we will complete the roof on the house. It is always good working with Pastor Mira because she always points everyone in the right direction. – Wes

Oh, the work! So far most of the tasks have been a new ordeal and new skills taught in a crash course fashion...and don't forget about the gesturing and word guessing to make sure we're doing it right. I know that this is an experience designed to help people here, but the fact that we are working on someone's house while not only the foremen gets to train and watch over you, but also the homeowner, is a little nerve-wracking. Monday's task of framing with cement and cinder blocks was entirely new for me. But finally figuring out the best methods and getting it done was great ...not to mention seeing how excited Louis was that he taught the new skill and it was a successful completion.

Tuesday brought other struggles and some more familiar work. A short-coming that I have been aware of in myself is my lack of patience when teaching new skills. I made a conscious effort so far to try and help other team members or show them how to do what I am doing. Of course, this isn't a guarantee that I do it as much or as patiently as I should, so it is still a work in progress.

I am still surprised at the directions then autonomy that is given, but it seems to be working well so far. And learning these skills "on the job" really is a blessing with the teaching

and practice all rolled into one. And I've really enjoyed the chance to learn whatever comes our way and working with a strong team that has gotten along well so far. – Danielle

I came here (to this idyllic journaling location) to write about Puerto Rico. What I find taking over are thoughts about mission. There is the building of camaraderie with our Christian brothers and sisters. There is experiencing the climate of another location. There is being able to utilize gifts and talents that God has given us that we don't otherwise get to use in our regular course of life. There is the experience of worship that looks and sounds beautifully dissimilar to what we may be used to worship looking and sounding like. There is the exploration of different languages or dialects. There is the experience of cultural variety. There are wonderfully skilled hands preparing food that tastes of the area where you are enjoying it. There is the given opportunity for reflection. There is both the opportunity to teach and to learn. There is the gift of just listening. Really listening. With purpose.

Our work has been satisfying as we can see tangible progress each day and on each project. I am beyond impressed with the teams' desire to just get at it and do whatever it takes (whether they've tried it before or not). I am personally blessed to be able to share pictures and stories of my family with the families that we work with, and creating "sameness" feels like a great way to open doors of sharing and conversation. These families have been very gracious and seem to get the same satisfaction from every new wire-pull and block that is placed as we do because they have been living without wired power and some part of their home for about 10 months which is challenging to fathom. God has been hard at work granting them a sense of peace for these many months and now with hands to help them rebuild. – Brad

Wednesday, June 6, 2018

Today we worked more on Petra's house. I cut about 30 feet of corrugated metal for the roof, which was difficult but rewarding. I talked a lot with Xavier, our foreman. It's great to learn how to interact without having a translator. He is so kind & patient with us and it's great to see.

In the evening we went for a drive through the mountainside. It was beautiful scenery!

Tomorrow we will be working on installing more windows on Petra's house. It will be nice to have the shade from the roof we completed! – Kate

It's hump day and our week continues to go well. Our work has been putting on a new roof and installing new windows. Today we finished the set up and got the tin laid on the entire roof (40 ft. x 10 ft.). It was hot but the breeze was great most of the time and a short afternoon

shower killed the increasing heat. It was a total team effort between cutting the tin, putting it onto the roof to get it into place, and attaching it.

Today we also really got more in-depth conversation with both Nitzsa and Xavier. Xavier told us more about his family, his house that he is rebuilding, and the cruise he went on with his family. Nitzsa told us more about her jobs and hopes/dreams for what is next in her life and job. We are enjoying getting to know them both more and learning about the challenges here. Many families continue to move ahead step by step with their families. Petra's brother, Jose, was at her house today too and has been helping her redo her house while she lives with him.

The team is doing well and all are working together nicely. Four from our team are new to mission trips and are all doing well. Marian is full of energy and has so many stories that keep us all laughing. Eric is willing to do anything and Brad's sidekick at their house learning what Louis directs. Danielle always has a story, some very gross, about food internationally (as I write), and is a hard worker willing to learn. Bill is new to CUMC but has done tons of mission trips and has been a huge asset at our site leading the project. He has tons of experience and helping others learn skills. The veterans are all dedicated and engaged in the project and this area.

Dinner is soon – always wonderful! – Mira

As I write this, we are gathering in the gazebo for devotions. We are nearly in the dark, save for 1 solar light and cell phones. The power has been out for several hours—a 4-hour planned outage that has not ended, is not into 8 hours. There seem to be 1 or 2 small lights in nearby homes, perhaps from solar lights or generators. It gives us a taste of what people here have been living with. Our homeowner bought groceries today—we pray her generator fuel will be enough to preserve the food.

More solar lights have now arrived and now it seems like Times Square! We will be leaving 140 of these lights with people who will greatly benefit from them.

-Cheryl

Thursday, June 7, 2018

Today at Petra's house we installed two windows and made cement and used it to frame the sides and bottom of the windows. For the most part we were out of the sun thanks to the new roof we installed the previous days. We traveled to a place about 30 minutes away, where we were able to buy souvenirs. Another marvelous day in a very beautiful country. The

power was off yesterday for about 12 hours—9am-8pm or so. It was off for a short while today. We do take power for granted in the States.

-Bob

Power was off yesterday from mid-morning till early evening. Today power went off in the morning while I was mixing sand and mortar to make concrete. The rest of the team installed six windows using the concrete that I mixed and mixed and mixed and mixed. Our team worked very hard, and we accomplished the task doing a really good job.

I appreciated the team I was on and we accomplished our tasks together. Couldn't have worked with a better team. I got my picture taken with the homeowner, Petra, who brought us refreshments the same as other days. We are the same age. Her birthday is September 6, and I told her I would send her a birthday card on that day.

A good time was had by all.

-Wes

We are glad to get the electricity back after being off for 8+ hrs. yesterday. However, it was off again for a few hours today. This on again-off again of electricity has been common since Hurricane Maria.

My team (Brad Weiser, Eric, Cheryl, Danielle and Marian) arrived at our work site only to find they had no electricity. There was a problem with the wiring our team installed yesterday. After that was completed, we mixed cement and poured concrete on the kitchen floor at Lalesta's home. Then we walked back to Sonia's house about 11:00am to continue work that we had started earlier in the week. Brad, Eric, & Danielle continued installing electrical outlets while the rest of us acted as runners for them.

We all noticed that today we were much more tired than other days. Not sure if it was the sun.

Team 2 almost finished the work on Petra's house.

Both teams are permitted to go together in the Mission House van to do souvenir shopping if needed.

I enjoy seeing the appreciation of our work on their houses. That makes the effort worthwhile and puts a song on my heart. As we walk down the road, people wave at us, smile, & yell words of greetings to us. They apparently know who we are.

Our moments of reflection at the end of the day are very meaningful. They help me to reflect on God's goodness and greatness. Thanks, Pastor Mira

-Marian

Today we arrived on site to discover the wiring we did yesterday wasn't working. After testing, by touching live wires together & sparking, (OY!!)(voltmeter!!) we discovered our ground wire came out. Problem fixed & house is good until inspectors come in a week or two. We then concreted the kitchen floor before moving onto Sonia's house at lunch. I am especially thankful for the 3 ladies we have on our team. They were awesome at mixing up 3 loads of cement. This was grueling work and they laughed the whole time.

At Sonia's house, Brad gave the grandson the soccer ball today and played with him on the porch. This was a fantastic highlight for our team as he smiled (ear to ear), laughed, & giggled the whole time. We continued to struggle with the wiring & putting boxes into existing concrete walls, but it was all worth it to see Sonia's face and see how appreciative she is.

Finally, we went to the store. I drove again, even with the "loving harassment". I love driving around Puerto Rico. For two nights I have been blessed to drive through the towns and beautiful country. I see so much that I would miss from the back. (The animals, people on the street and/or the cars, buildings, scenery, etc.) I absolutely love the nine other folks on this trip and feel so blessed to be here with them. Louis gets a bad rap at times but he is a loving, caring individual whose friendship I value.

As this week comes to an end, I know there will never be another mission trip like this as it is my first but I hope to have others in my future. I treasure our family meals and nightly discussions in the gazebo. Bob (I mean Roberto) and Mira have done a great job getting us to think, reflect, and share.

-Eric

Friday June 8, 2018

The day to day life in Puerto Rico for those that we are working with is pretty subsistence-based. Neither of the homes our team worked on had power of their own when we started the week. They were running a minimum of devices off of an extension cord from the neighbors or a couple small solar panels on the roof. Running a small refrigerator for food storage is a risk because the power is not guaranteed to be consistent and a loss of power for any extended time means a loss of food and the resources to replace the food. Cooking happens on a small stove with the propane tank sitting right in the kitchen with dirt and construction debris ever present. In many homes still affected, two to six people have been cohabitating in whatever rooms may have been the least damaged. Laundry is piled or hung to

the ceiling, beds are pressed together and personal space is a far away after-thought. As is safety and privacy with sparing damaged or sometimes no windows or doors. Refuse and storm debris persist everywhere (likely a carryover from before the storm in lower income areas but exacerbated by a broken infrastructure) and yet through all of that everyone we encountered carries on with a dogged sense of contentment, acknowledging that they know someone who lost more than they did. Despite that sense of contentment, one could not suppress the tears of pure joy and gratitude from our hostess, Sonia, when we flipped her main breaker on Friday and every single one of her lights came on. She trembled with excitement and hugged everyone with gusto; the pent up release of nearly 10 months living in an abbreviated and broken physical place. Every single person on our team had a hand in that. From pulling wire, to running tools, to holding ladders, to being flexible when our foreman “mis-remembered” the wiring sequence, to ultimately wiring in switches, outlets, and light fixtures. If no one remembers anything else from this trip, I hope they can hold onto the fact that they used the individual gifts and talents that God gave them to help pass on a message of hope to Sonia and her family through our work here. My prayer would be that they are lifted up by that thought and that mental picture of a home owner in whose life we made a difference.

-Brad

Saturday June 9, 2018

It is hard to believe it is Saturday morning, I'm packing to leave P.R. This week has been special in many ways. Last Saturday I left PA with 9 individuals who I did not know. Later today I will leave my friends to go home. One week and 9 brothers and sisters in Christ.

As with any VIM trip, I always wish I would have gotten more done than we did. There is so much to do and not enough time. During devotions one evening, Bob's question was “Have you seen Jesus?” I do each day in the faces/bodies of the “Team”. Everyone who gives up time from home, family, and work and travels to help others is showing the world Jesus' hands/feet/heart. I have thanked God for allowing me the opportunity to serve Him with a great team and a team in P.R. who want to serve Him.

-Bill

I wouldn't go so far as to say that I experienced culture shock, but the welcome we received from every person we encountered was above and beyond the joy and hospitality I found in Patillas. The church service was an incredible way to start the trip and be introduced to the community. Even though we weren't able to understand most of the service, the joy in the congregation didn't need translation. It was wonderful to just take in the experience from the music to the spirit of the service and the people of the church. It was above and beyond

any welcome I've experienced in a lot of other cultures.....or at least this was much more demonstrative in the greeting. I didn't realize how this would set the tone for the entire week.

The welcome in the homes was just as gracious, if not more so. The families may have lasted this long borrowing power from neighbors, dealing with the lack of potable water, and continued power and water outages to complicate their lives. In spite of the difficulties and their resources, our hosts and homeowners were overjoyed with our presence and so happy to share what they do have. It was heartwarming to see the willingness and generosity in the small tokens like fresh mangoes and local breads. We talked this week about seeing Jesus in the world around us. This experience was a lesson in so many things from humility and kindness to generosity and giving. It was learning to be thankful for whatever the blessings we have and those who come into our lives to offer aid, to teach lessons, to guide us, and to help us grow on our journey.

I am so thankful that I pushed past my doubts and reservations on doing a trip like this. The things I've gained and the people I have met have been so far beyond my fears that I stop and wonder why it took me a week to decide. I am not one to hesitate when travel opportunity presents itself and I can now recommend a trip in service to others with the advantage of firsthand experience now.

-Danielle

We are packed and ready to go-waiting on air port transportation to arrive to head back to San Juan. Our week has flown by and we said one last goodbye to our home owners who arrived to say thank you one more time at the guest house. Some of us are playing Uno, some journaling, others sitting watching the waves one last time.

This week Puerto Rico has blessed us more than we have the homes we helped. We have seen God's love and care as we were fed with large portions and many snacks; constant presence and guidance by Nidstza; love, prayers and patience by our foreman, homeowners, and IMPR staff behind the scenes who make our week possible.

The team has jelled very well-with a great balance of veteran and newbies-both in construction but also on mission trips. Nightly reflections have given us reminders of our thankfulness and joys each day-plus moments to be in prayer for new friends here and family back home. As we leave, my prayer, as all trips, is that we would each continually find ways to serve back home with God's love-until we can again go beyond Carlisle to be God's hands and feet to those recovering disasters. Thanks for going – you were an awesome team!

-Mira