

Building a House, Making a Home

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“And let us not grow weary in well-doing, for in due season we shall reap, if we do not lose heart.” Galatians 6.9

More than a decade has passed since the Religious Youth Service (RYS) did an overly ambitious service project in the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago. The 70 youths who had gathered from seven nations slept in tents and struggled with water shortages, adolescent angst, tropical heat and a host of challenges during this cross-cultural experience.

Fortunately, we were blessed to have good working partners in the Rose Foundation and in Habitat for Humanity. These outstanding organizations helped us find ways to make our three weeks’ investment a worthwhile experience for the volunteers and the families and communities we worked with.

Trinidad and Tobago—a Blended, Multiracial Society

Since the early days of its settlement, Trinidad and Tobago has been a multiracial society. People from

various backgrounds have worked, shared and created families together. With the passing of generations, lineages have mixed and melted, creating within the country faces of many hues.

Unlike many societies whose various ethnic groups live parallel but separate lives, those in Trinidad and Tobago digest aspects of each other’s culture and find a way to add their own unique touch. The national foods offer a good example since dishes that originally came from India and Africa have assimilated “Trini” flavoring, featuring their own unique taste.



Although the islands of Trinidad and Tobago are not large, they do contain an unusually broad diversity of religious expression. Christianity holds the allegiance of the largest segment of the population and is expressed in various forms. The established Roman Catholic and Anglican churches stand side by side with Evangelical and Pentecostal churches, together with the Spiritual Baptists, a sect that blends aspects of African culture and spirituality into the worship service.

Half the islands’ population has roots in the Indian subcontinent, so Hinduism and Islam play a large role

in shaping the spirit of the people. Chinese religions, Rastafarians and other groups have adherents while remnants of Native American spirituality persist.

Warm and friendly, Trinidad and Tobago was an attractive host for the Religious Youth Service (RYS), offering participants an opportunity to explore various religions in a respectful and informative way. As young ambassadors representing their respective religions and nations, the volunteers worked and lived side by side. Volunteers shared and developed friendships with the local community and each other.

When this dynamic group joins other congregations in their houses of worship, it is an enriching experience for all involved. Congregations inevitably are moved by participants’ strong commitment to service, while the participants themselves are inspired by the active spirituality that emanates from the communities of faith.

Working With Habitat for Humanity

In our project planning for the RYS in Trinidad and Tobago, we scheduled our arrival to coincide with the launch of a project hosted by Habitat for Humanity— The National Leaders Build. The Build was designed to bring to the public’s awareness the shortage of suitable housing for low-income families. The opening day of The Build offered a unique picture of solidarity as political, social, religious and civic leaders joined together with hammers and shovels to share words, labor and a common meal.

People are motivated in many different ways to participate in service projects. For some, The National

Leaders Build was merely a symbolic project rendered to generate good pictures and useful public relations. For others, the work was a visible expression of deeply held principles. For many in the gathered crowd, this turning of the soil spoke of solidarity in a more potent way than mere rhetoric.

On the opening day of The Build, media and spectators crowded around a makeshift stage under a protective canopy that shielded us from both rain and direct sun. Preceding the start of the work were several addresses including remarks from the nation's president. When the speeches and snacks were finished, the building commenced under the supervision of skilled professionals working as volunteers with Habitat for Humanity.

We, the rather unskilled RYS volunteers, were excited to be part of this national event and were positively impressed by the turnout of so many of the nation's leaders. It was a good beginning.



Habitat for Humanity is an international organization built on Christian principles that takes to heart Jesus's mandate "to care for the least of my children." The organization carries out this mandate by building homes for poor families in need of proper shelter. Prescreened families are selected to receive a newly constructed home and they help repay the cost, in part, by putting "sweat equity" into building a home for another family.

The homes are simple but comfortable and come with a very low-cost interest rate. For most, it is the first home they have ever

owned, and it comes with the pride of ownership and the sense of settling into a community.

Building homes for families trying to get a step ahead in life was a challenge that drew the best out of us. Despite the heat and lack of professional building skills, we poured ourselves into all aspects of the work during our work week. We did various jobs such as carrying bricks, moving soil and lumber, mixing cement and landscaping the grounds.

On our breaks we walked around and talked with neighbors, learning much about the people who lived in the community and especially about the three families that would be moving into the houses we were constructing.

One RYS volunteer from Long Island, Simone Doroski, shared with me how happy she was to be a part of the building efforts. She met the parents of one of the families slated to move into a new house and spent time playing with their two young children. She mentioned that, as the visible progress of the house moved forward, the children became more and more excited—a clear sign to her of how valuable this project was to the family.

Poverty as a Gravitational Force

For many of the RYS participants, walking through the poor community near the worksite was their closest experience with poverty. The dilapidated state of many of the houses, the barely clothed, unattended children, the empty pockets of unemployed men hanging around—this run-down, neglected environment stood in stark contrast to the hopeful work being done to construct the Habitat homes.



This was a poor neighborhood. Yet, it was not in the same league of misery as the sidewalk "homes" of Mumbai, India or the sprawling encampments of refugees prevalent in too many areas of the world—situations that otherwise seemed to conspire ruthlessly to prevent escape. In our Trinidad/Tobago community, the fate of the children did not seem so absolutely predetermined. They did not seem hopelessly mired in poverty but, instead, with some special energy, or a helping hand, a breakthrough was conceivable.

Having worked on service projects throughout the world, there are certain raw impressions of poverty that linger indelibly in my mind—the skinny, untouchable children living off the proceeds from the garbage they collect; the helpless eyes of a mother in a refugee camp who has lost her family, friends

and home; the sight and smells of a Punjabi railroad station late at night with hundreds of families sleeping on a crowded cement floor. Traveling along the rails in India, you can still see tens of thousands who have laid out cardboard alongside the tracks, staking a claim to residency.

There is an unrelenting force in poverty that is much like a gravitational pull. Imagine trying to walk on Jupiter or someplace where the gravity is five times, ten times, or a hundred times stronger than on our home planet. That is what it must be like for a child trying to escape the gravity of poverty in certain parts of our world.

The irresistible force of such overwhelming gravity is simply too strong for many human beings. It is my sense that this gravitational burden will only shift, or be overcome; in proportion to the degree we remember that we are our brothers' and sisters' keepers. The young volunteers in Trinidad and Tobago were working to mitigate the gravity of poverty for those in their community.

The Morning-After Experience

Working in our community, we realized what a difference a day can make! On the second day of The Build, the President, the Opposition Party leader, and the religious and civic leaders who had gathered the day before were gone. The press and TV crews that had snapped pictures and filmed interviews had left as well.



It would have been easy to understand if the morning-after blues had taken over the spirit of the community. Yet, this was not the case for neighbors who were scurrying around finding ways to be useful, or for a tight core of volunteers who were already at work when we arrived. Our team simply joined in and received directions on how we could best be of service.

This became a time when our sense of personal responsibility grew since there were no longer crowds of supporters. Even though we were not the most capable people, we set

our sights on getting the job done.

So, our sense of personal responsibility helped us work through differences in cultural perspectives as well as weather the heat and rain typical on a tropical isle. Our teams moved tons of earth, landscaped the terrain, mixed cement and did some of the simpler carpentry tasks. We were eager to learn and were connected to some of the experienced volunteers who willingly took the time to teach.

The environment at the worksite and in the community took on the comfortable feeling of our belonging to an extended family with each member having a unique value and role.

The Message is Love

In the joint effort to realize our common purpose, time passed quickly. We officially took part in the closing of The Build on a Thursday but, after the ceremony, we felt we had some finishing touches that needed to be done, so we returned the following day. Our unexpected visit surprised the neighbors and, casually, parents and children approached members of the team and shared their feelings about the labors the young volunteers had invested.



One mother shared, "We can believe that God has a plan for us because we felt God's love and care with the way you cared for and played with our children. We don't feel abandoned because you have shown that people really do care."

We visited the new homes in order to present the new homeowners with flowers and a small housewarming gift. After presenting the gifts, we realized that it was not what was given but how it was given that moved the new homeowners. This small offering opened the heart of one father and he pulled me aside to share his

feelings.

"When you arrived, my wife and I were at a point of giving up on our marriage. I did not think it was

worth trying anymore. No one outside our family really cared if we made it or not. We were told they were going to build a house for us and that was hard to believe. When we saw all the people coming to help, it moved us. You came from different nations and returned each day to give and give. This changed something in my heart.

People wanted our house to be filled with a family; they wanted it to be a home. My wife and I talked at night when people left and we began to share some dreams together. This was the first time in a long time that we could really begin to imagine things being better together. Last night we talked together and made a joke that now that the house was built, no one would care anymore. But today you came with the flowers and that really convinced us that people do care. My wife and I care, we care about our child and we are going to use this house so it can become a home.“

This father shared with us the deepest meaning of service. We had thought our service work was to help build a house but that was only a small part of what we were doing. ***We were building a home for love.***