

Mission Trip to Tyronza, Arkansas, April 16 to 21, 2011

(This year our mission work team was asked to include members of our church youth, which all agreed would be a good idea. However, the only time the youth were available was during Holy Week in April which conflicted with the schedules of some of our regular team members. After much discussion and review of various opportunities, our youth suggested we work with Hosanna Industries-- a group out of Pennsylvania which is a faith-rooted, 501 (c)3 non-profit organization that delivers housing services for low and very low income homeowners in the form of new construction and repair/rehabilitation services. After contacting Hosanna, we found their planned project during this week provided a good opportunity for us all. So, with much prayer and coordinated planning efforts we were able to put together a team consisting of four men, five youth and one youth chaperone--a total of nine workers willing to support this mission effort. Our team members consisted of Toby Fitzkee, Joe Moss, Peter McClintock, Frank Van Fleet, Hillary Nebhut, Lindsay Nebhut, Angela Roberts, Derek Knorr and Eddie Kavjian.)

Saturday, DAY 1 (4-16-2011)

Our team members and their parents gathered at church at 7:30 am to load the church van. Our initial plan was to use a cargo carrier borrowed from Jane Millward to help stow our luggage and tools and leave sufficient seating in the van for our team of nine. However, we soon found that even with the cargo carrier we did not have enough room to stow everything. So, using Toby's back up plan "B", we decided to take two vehicles – his van along with the church van. After removing the cargo carrier and doing some coordinated shifting of luggage, tools and people, we had plenty of room in each vehicle for everything.



The team loads up for the trip to Arkansas.

After the usual group photo, prayer by Toby, and goodbyes to parents and friends, we boarded the two vans with Joe, Pete and Hillary, Lindsay and Angela in the church van; Toby, Frank and Derek and Eddie in Toby's van. Knowing that Toby has Satellite radio in his van, Frank offered to leave his CD's with the church van, believing that they would all enjoy his deemed beautiful music from the 30s, 40s and 50s. (More on this later).

We departed around 8:15am and headed west on Interstate 66, eagerly anticipating our week together in support of this mission of service. With faith that we would have a safe and enjoyable drive we cautiously braved the stormy weather and looked forward to our adventure together. Rain poured down on us most all of the way today with strong winds that made us appreciate removing the cargo carrier from the van. Initially Pete drove the church van and Toby his own van. We had two-way radios so that we could maintain contact and coordinate stops along the way. Our plan was to switch drivers as necessary to ensure against fatigue.



Catching 40 (or 50) winks as we move on down the highway.



Contemplating the week ahead.

As usual we experienced heavy truck traffic after leaving 66 and heading south on I81. Our first stop was at a rest area just north of Lexington, VA, then on south to our next stop for fuel and lunch. We stopped for lunch near Natural Bridge, VA, where we saw a sign for the "Pink Cadillac" Diner, and we knew that was the place to eat! The food was great and the atmosphere was pure 1950s, with posters and photos of Roy Rogers, Elvis, Marilyn Monroe, James Dean, John Wayne, Clark Gable and many others. We older folk knew all of the stars displayed and passed on our valuable knowledge of days gone by to the younger ones. (I'm sure they will remember all that we passed on to them.) We did enjoy talking about how things were in those days and our experiences at Saturday matinees. The young folk did listen, look and laugh!



Our lunch stop on the 16th.



And the rain continued.

After refueling, by 12:30 we were back on the road. Rain continued and the winds were quite heavy for some time, but as we neared Bristol the sky opened up – clouds parted and the welcome sun appeared. We continued on with strong winds the rest of the way to our overnight stop in Knoxville, but after entering Tennessee we did not have any more rain.

We arrived at our hotel around 4:30 pm, checked in, then freshened up for dinner. The night clerk recommended a nice restaurant nearby that she thought we would really enjoy. Unfortunately so did

everyone else! When we arrived the place was packed and the wait was too long, so we decided to go across the street to the Cracker Barrel. Interestingly we found that none of the youth had ever eaten in a Cracker Barrel and were much taken with it, particularly the shopping. We all did enjoy the meal also as well as the conversation. By now we were becoming more acquainted with one another and were more comfortable in our conversations.

We finished our meal and were back at the hotel by 8 pm, tired but comfortably full and looking forward to a good night's sleep. Tomorrow is another long day's drive, and with the time change we lose an hour.

We had booked four rooms so that we could team up with two individuals per room, except for the young ladies who had earlier opted for all three to share one room, thus saving the expense of another room.

Sunday, Day 2 (4-17-2011)

Up early this morning and down to a good breakfast in the hotel dining area. Frank was up first, then others began to wander in – in sufficient time to have a nice meal before our planned 8 am departure.

This morning we switched off on riders, with Pete moving into the van with Toby and Frank riding with Joe. Joe has asked for the change so we could trade conversations. We were off on time heading across Tennessee on I-40, again with the heavy truck traffic, but beautiful weather. In the church van we engaged in conversation ranging from college options for the young folks, to family, work, military service and church. Frank played a number of the old songs from CDs he had brought along and surprisingly, some of them were known by the girls who sang along with Joe and Frank. Joe and Frank identified the singers of the various songs, which era included the 30s, 40s and up.--mostly big band and classic pop vocals. When Frank asked the young folks for their comments on the trip, one item they reflected on was the tunes we had played – they're favorite was "God didn't make [no] green apples" and "It don't rain in Indianapolis." So much for the big band era!!

We made our first rest stop around 10 am east of Nashville. Then back on the road again until our next stop for lunch around 11:40 near Hurricane Mills, TN where we found the Loretta Lyn Restaurant. Everyone seemed to enjoy the great country buffet. Of course there was the necessary discussion of who Loretta Lynn is – Hillary guessed right away that she was the "Coal Miner's Daughter" lady. Outside the restaurant was a statue of a huge Buffalo – we never learned the significance of that, but did take the obligatory photos of our group in front of it.



Back on the road again we enjoyed a relaxed drive in continued beautiful weather on toward Memphis and then to Tyronza.

Our work objective was the St. Mark's Baptist Church located outside of Tyronza. This Church, the original building of which was burned to the ground during racial problems in the 1990s, had been completely rebuilt by Hosanna and 600 volunteers from across the country in 1995. Now the Church was in need of much repair due to storm damage as well as age.

We arrived at St. Mark's Baptist Church outside of Tyronza around 4 pm and saw that many of the team that we would be working with were already there. We met with the Hosanna group and a team from Maryland, a father-son team from Kentucky and others from Pennsylvania – 30 individuals in all, counting us, would work together to repair and restore this church which had experience roof and siding damage as well as cracked exterior and interior walls and floors due to damage from settling in the soft, sandy, but fertile soil of the Arkansas Mississippi Delta region. This primarily agricultural area has grown cotton and wheat crops for many years. Currently the primary crops are wheat, alternated with soy beans, though some also grow corn. Ancestors of congregational members were formerly slaves who had worked this land and remained in the area after receiving their freedom.

After greeting our fellow workers and the leadership team from Hosanna, we were briefed by Brian Hetzer, the Hosanna project supervisor. Bryan gave us general instructions on what we would be working on and then we were given short safety brief by Amy Ed, a Hosanna team member/volunteer coordinator. We then assembled for prayer and began our first task.

There is a strong feeling among the congregation at this church that no one should work on Sunday, for that reason we were told that anything we do would only be preparation for work to begin on Monday morning. So, our first task was to unload the Hosanna trucks and place equipment and construction materials in a place complimentary to our effort the next day. Thus, one of the major tasks was to place the roofing shingles on the roof. Happily we learned that Hosanna had a motorized lift that carried the shingles up to the roof and we only had to take them from the lift and place them strategically along the sides of the roof.



Preparing the lift and gathering shingles to move to the roof.



The lift saved a lot of work and time.

We were able to accomplish all of this in just a little over an hour, then began to unload our personal items and locate them in the Church Sanctuary, which would be our home for the next few days.

We all then wandered into the sanctuary and began to rearrange pews in order to locate spots on the floor for placing our mattresses and sleeping bags. Frank determined that since the pews were padded, why sleep on the floor, so he located a spot in the choir loft that, for him, became the perfect spot.

Everyone was able to find their spot and cooperate in locating their things, although some determined to sleep in their vehicles, and one small team from Pennsylvania opted to drive 10 miles away to a small hotel, where they stayed.

Shower facilities were located eight miles distance in a high school that we were allowed to use, but we did not yet have the key, so no showers were available this first night.



Getting to know new team members over dinner in the fellowship hall.

Our dinner consisted of leftovers in the church kitchen (including chicken, cole slaw and potato salad) which was fine for most. Since our next event would be an 8 pm meeting with the Director of Hosanna Industries, the Rev. Donn Ed, who had not yet arrived, we decided to make a run to the community of Oceola about 10 miles away, where there was a Wal Mart. Joe, Frank and Pete took the van and stopping at the Wal Mart and a small grocery, purchased cereals, bagels, milk, fruit and fruit drinks so that we would have better options for our breakfast meals while there. The congregation ladies would prepare sandwiches each day for lunch and a hot meal each evening, but would not prepare anything for breakfast.

Rev. Ed arrived around 8:30 and gave an overview of our planned week and introduced the church minister and some of the congregation members who were also present. St. Mark's minister, Rev. Campbell welcomed us all and thanked us for coming to help them in their need, then closed the meeting with prayer.



Sanctuary view from the Choir Loft, note the bedding of individuals on the pews but not yet placed for sleeping.

After the meeting everyone finished setting up their beds and tucked in for the night. Next morning would come early with work scheduled to begin at 7 am!

Monday, Day 3 (4-18-2011) One of the team from PA arose around 5:00 am and made coffee in the church kitchen. Frank was up early also and had breakfast before all of our team arose. However, everyone was able to get in a good breakfast of cereal, fruit, bagels, juice and/or coffee in time to meet our scheduled work time.

When all were finished with breakfast we gathered outside the church in a circle for prayer prior to starting work. Our team was tasked to assist in the roof repair, so we gathered the necessary tools and made our way onto the roof. Brian split us in to different team functions to expedite the laying of shingles, some opened and distributed the shingles others helped align them while others were responsible for nailing them in place. We had pneumatic nailers which greatly expedited that effort. Each alignment team had a shingle “feeder” who passed the shingles to them for placing them correctly then calling for the nailer. Over the two days we worked on the roof we came up with nick names for our young team – Eddie became “fast Eddie” for his rapid response to moving shingles and pneumatic hose as well as coils of nails as needed; Hillary and Lindsay became the “Alignment sisters” as they worked together in aligning and holding the shingles while they were nailed; Derek became “Gunner” and his task was nailer; Angela was a “feeder” of the shingles to Hillary and Lindsay, however, she we nicknamed “Angie” – somehow it seemed more appropriate than “feeder.” Toby and Frank assisted on the roof in moving shingle bundles, nail coils and maintaining the pneumatic hoses. Pete and Joe assisted on the ground and periodically on the roof.



Newly-trained roofers installing the new shingles

Although we were confronted with strong winds every day, it was very windy today as a cold front was moving in and we were expecting rain in the evening. Everyone worked especially fast and efficiently in order to get the roof covered before the rains came. We had to be extra careful not to let the shingles or other materials blow away and perhaps into those working on the ground, however, it was difficult to keep the wrapping from the shingles from flying away. So some folks were positioned on the ground to pick up this trash before it all blew away.

Hosanna’s goal was to complete half the roof the first day and the other half the next. However, because of the tremendous effort on the part of everyone, we were able to complete all of one side and about a third of the other. While we were working the roof, other teams were actively engaged in repairing cracks in the walls; adding eaves to the rear of the church to help protect from water damage;

addressing plumbing problems; and replacing siding and adding metal capping over all exterior wood. During the work on the plumbing they discovered that the septic tank had risen and was leaking, so Brian ordered a new septic tank. Then they proceeded to dig out the old tank and place the new one in a different spot nearby. Work inside included installing a new vinyl floor covering in the kitchen and repairing lights. Exterior lights were also repaired. While working in the kitchen it was observed that the gas stove was in need of repair, however, Brian decided it would be best to purchase a new one, which was done this day and installed the next.



Roofing team installing shingles while the ground crew works on installation of the new septic tank.

We broke for lunch at noon and enjoyed the sandwiches that the congregation had prepared for us, then continued our work halting around 5 pm. We were pleased with what had been accomplished so far. Amy advised that we were now in possession of the key to the high school where we would be able to take showers, so everyone gathered their toiletries and a change of clothes and we drove the 10 miles to the high school. We were provided the visiting team locker rooms and showers for our use with male and female separate accommodations. All of us were happy for the chance to clean up and were looking forward to a nice home cooked meal and a good night's rest. Joe took Toby's van and drove on in to Oceola where he could use wi fi to make his contact with Rev. Burns. It is located at the McDonalds restaurant, so Joe had his dinner meal there.

We returned to the church by 7 pm, gathered for prayer and then into the fellowship hall to enjoy the good food, relax and prepare for bed. Our young folk entertained themselves by playing card games of Nerts (sometimes called Newts or Snorts). Speaking of which, there were plenty of snorts during the night with our room full of folks sleeping, grunting, snoring and etc. Frank awoke around 1:00 am this night and observed that the different sounds were like a choir tuning up – some snoring deeply like bases, while others reached higher notes – he found the different sounds coming from all areas of the sanctuary quite comical. Some were critical of the loudness of a few of the louder snorers, but were able to joke about it the next morning. Toby and another team member from Maryland both use a

CPAP machine for sleep apnea so they were bedded near an electrical outlet near the wall on either side of the sanctuary.

It had been a good day – with everyone working well together and accomplishing their tasks without incident. No one had been injured and much good work had been done. We were particularly proud of our young folk who were real troopers!

Tuesday, Day 4 (4-19-2011)

We got a 30 minute break this morning as work was to begin at 7:30 – all because we had worked so hard the day before and were ahead of schedule. Our team was back on the roof again today except for Pete and Joe who helped with back filling the dirt at both the side of the Church and the newly installed septic tank.



“Gunner” Derek nails the shingles while the “Alignment Sisters” make sure they are properly placed.



“Fast Eddie” moves the pneumatic hose out of the way while others continue placing shingles.

We finished the roof prior to noon and then began cleaning and helping to move the pews and all of our bedding to allow for installation of new carpet in the sanctuary. We began by assisting in the installation of a laminate floor down the center aisle while others were outside assisting in the measuring and cutting of the carpet – one large roll 15 feet wide and large enough to reach from the front of the sanctuary to the altar without a seam. The carpet had been unloaded from the truck and placed in the driveway allowing space to unroll it for measuring and cutting. When the carpet was brought in we assisted in laying it out while Brian stretched it then tacked it to the tack boards placed around the walls then to the carpet gripper bar adjoining the laminated flooring.

Outside Toby and Joe did some exterior painting including a huge bell that sits beside the front porch of the church. Then moved inside to clean and wax the fellowship hall.



Painters pose with the bell prior to painting it.

The history of the bell goes back to pre civil war when it was part of a plantation near here. The bell was used to call the slaves in from the fields. The grandmother of one of the members of the church, a former slave on that plantation, had been given the bell and had kept it in the family. She donated it when the church was rebuilt in 199, and Hosanna made repairs to the frame and installed it at this site. The bell sits as a fitting piece of history for this African American church, most of whose members are descendents of slaves. Now the bell may be used to call the congregation to worship as a free people of God.

Work ceased at 5 pm and everyone began to relax and plan for a run back to the high school for showers, and return for another welcome meal. We had completed the roof, completed installation of carpet on one side of the sanctuary, others had finished installation of the septic tank, completed installation of the siding and trim outside, repaired cracks in the brick outside and the floor inside, finished some exterior painting, re-set the doors that were askew from settling of the building and repaired the exterior lighting. It has been a good day.

We made the shower run and Joe again drove in to Oceola to be near the wi fi sight for his daily check in with Rev. Burns. The rest of us returned to enjoy a great meal presented by the congregation. Off to bed again, this time we were concerned about the incoming weather, but were able to get to sleep before it hit.

The storm came in around midnight with howling winds and strong rain blowing sideways. There was a tornado warning, so all that were sleeping outside in their vehicles were awakened and recommended to relocate inside the church building. Some slept through the whole thing, Frank, Joe and a few others were awake during most of the hard storm and listened for the feared sound that a tornado would bring, but thankfully it never occurred. Joe had been sleeping in the van so he was one of those awakened and warned to move into the church.

The power went off around 2 am, and Donn, Brian and some others were up with flashlights checking on everyone. When the power went off, Toby and Steve (the team from Maryland) lost power to their CPAP machines, so they too were awakened and it became difficult to sleep comfortably. However, they were able to cope and most of us were able to go back to sleep as the storm died down. The wind blew the front door of the church back enough to slightly damage the hinges which had to be re-set the next day.

Power came back on around 4:30 am just in time to make the coffee.

Wednesday, Day 5 (4-20-2011)

Today we were again up early, thankful that we had gotten through the night without any injuries nor additional damage to the church. We learned that a tornado had touched down some three miles from our location, but had not done much damage.

Our goal today is to complete everything prior to 2 pm when we will hold a dedication ceremony and prepare for our return trip. Originally our plan was to begin our return on Thursday morning, driving to Wytheville, VA for an overnight stay then on to home. However, we talked it over among ourselves and decided that if we get finished by 2 as planned, why not immediately head homeward and change our overnight stay to somewhere nearer. After a couple of attempts to call ahead to change our hotel reservations failed due to poor cell phone reception, we decided to make the calls on the road.

With the change in plans we had an early breakfast and began to pack up our bedding and personal items and place them in the vans as we would not need them this evening. This allowed for us to move the pews around so we could get to the other side of the sanctuary for laying of carpet there. We completed laying the carpet by noon while others worked outside and in other locations in the church doing finish work on the painting, electrical and clean up. The stove was installed; the fellowship hall was cleaned, waxed and polished; the toilets were cleaned; and a general spruce up of the church was accomplished all prior to 1:30 pm-- 30 minutes earlier than scheduled.



The completed Sanctuary after laying of the carpet and laminate floor.

We then moved outside to help with the loading of trash to be taken to a dump and did a final police of the area.



:Loading trash into the truck for a trip to the dump.

We then loaded the unused construction materials, ladders, tools and equipment on the Hosanna truck to be lashed down for their long trip back to Pennsylvania. The rain last night left the area wet and muddy, so it was difficult to stay clean as we worked. Frank and Eddie were up inside the back of the truck placing items as they were lifted up and handed to us. When we were nearly complete the truck bed sides and back gate were closed which meant Eddie and Frank had to climb over the side and drop to the ground. Eddie made it fine, but when Frank dropped to the ground his feet in the mud, slipped out from under him and splat!-- he hit the ground – seat first – right in the mud. Needless to say Toby

told him “You can’t ride in my van with that mud on your seat.” Luckily Frank had a change of pants. It was a humbling experience.

After lunch we gathered in front of the church by 2:10 with members of the congregation present. Rev. Ed thanked everyone for their good work and dedication then asked Rev. Campbell to speak. Rev. Campbell also thanked everyone and offered a prayer of dedication. Afterwards the ladies of the congregation joined us all in a circle and began to sing a joyous song of praise. It was a moving moment when all could feel the love of God and for one another.

We gathered for a final photo then said our goodbyes with much hugging and heartwarming handshakes.



Group photo with some members of the Congregation in front of the finished Church repairs.

Shortly after 2:30 we were on the road again headed for home. As we neared Memphis, Frank made the call to change our hotel reservations finding one near Cookeville, TN about 4 hours distance from Tyrone. We had cell phone connection problems along the way with the central reservations contact we had, so Frank finally contacted Erma who was able to provide hotel information allowing us to make the call directly to the hotel.

We arrived at our hotel around 6:30PM, checked in, freshened up and gathered for dinner. We went to an O'Charley's restaurant just down the road from the hotel. On Toby's good suggestion, Toby, Pete, Joe and Frank agreed beforehand that the four of us would treat the young folks in appreciation for the outstanding work they did. It was a great experience for us all – very meaningful as well as fun.

We returned to the hotel around 8:30 and everyone was ready for a good night's sleep prior to the final leg of our journey back home.

Thursday, Day 6 (4-21-2011)

After a pleasant night's sleep and a good breakfast at the hotel, we were on our way home, departing the hotel around 8 am and hoping to be home by around 6:30 pm. We again loaded as we did on our initial drive down with Toby, Frank, Eddie and Derek in Toby's Van and Joe, Pete, Hillary, Lindsay and Angela in the church van.

We were please that the weather was favorable all the way home. There was threat of a storm, however, it trailed us and veered south staying out of our pathway. We stopped to refuel just west of Knoxville and were hurriedly on our way again. Except for some construction slow downs, traffic moved along quite well.

We stopped for lunch at a Subway around 1 pm inside Virginia then on again. Conversation on the return trip varied somewhat as we now had the mission behind us and talked of that experience and discussed with Derek and Eddie whether they had decided on summer jobs before starting to school next fall. Several ideas were discussed and, of course, naps were taken and more of "golden oldies" CDs were played.

On the way home the ladies took up the time by counting 46 signs for Cracker Barrels, 35 different state license plates and 26+ rivers that we crossed. Their favorite river names include the Loosahatchie and the Nolichucky Rivers. They all were appreciative of the southern cooking they savored including fried apples, Tennessee barbecue and the best potato salad Lindsay ever had!

After our last rest stop Frank took over the wheel and drove the rest of the way home arriving at church around our planned time of 6:30 pm into the waiting arms and happy smiles of family and friends. We unloaded and took one last group photo before going our separate ways.



Our team on arrival home 4-21-2011

It was a great experience that all of us will happily remember. As Hillary noted, “The combined youth and adult mission trip was a wonderful way to get to know others in the church who we otherwise don’t usually spend time with. It was great to work alongside each other, share this experience and build relationships with each other. Most importantly, we enjoyed a week of service to Christ and of fellowship with each other. What a way to spend Holy Week.”

That about sums it up. Thanks be to God.