

Stretching – A Report of the 2012 Mission Trip to West Virginia

God challenges us to leave our comfort zone and strike out into unfamiliar territory. Some of us would call that “being stretched.” The mission team was stretched in many ways as they worked in Fayette County, West Virginia, a few weeks ago.

Most were stretched by simply making the decision to go. Family and work issues prevail, and it’s hard to put them aside. Vacation time is limited, and, “Do I really want to spend my precious vacation days *WORKING?*” Self-doubts arise, and we wonder if we have any really valuable skills to offer. And there is the fear of the unknown – unknown working conditions and unknown living conditions.

Severe storms one week before our trip left the area without power, and threatened to cancel our plans. Power was restored just two days before our scheduled arrival, but we were cautioned that the water may not be safe and that our worksites may still be without electricity. We added generators, chain saws, and bottled water to our gear, and left on a sunny, 104 degree, afternoon.

We already knew we were going to be stretched by not having Internet in our living quarters (Summerlee Presbyterian Church), but we were further stretched when we arrived and found no air conditioning. In His wisdom, God quickly provided us with more important things to think about (our work) as well as cooler temps, and what had seemed such a priority was suddenly no longer an issue.

Job 1 was painting the outside of Kathryn’s house. The “women’s crew” of Jacquelyn McAbee, Jennifer Miller, Julianna Berry, and Kim Albert, with their mascot, Dylan Berry, quickly volunteered to take on this project. For 2-1/2 days they were stretched by extension ladders and wasps, but they felt kind of proud as the neighbors kept yelling over asking if they were “church people” and saying what a great thing they were doing. Kathryn’s only thanks, a modest, “I didn’t recognize my own house,” was God’s way of humbling them – no, they weren’t great, but God was doing great things through them.

Job 2 was at Sherman’s house. Kelly Chappell, Matthew Lee, Mike Freshour, Russell Lee, and Teresa Davis, along with youth Lance Chappell, Matthew Bain, and Michael Berry, tore off an unsafe roofed deck and replaced it. This was the largest job of the week, and Gene Haugh joined them on Wednesday. The crew had several opportunities to chat with Sherman and get to know him. (Hopefully, you will see a story in an upcoming newsletter with more insights on the relationship established with Sherman throughout the week.)

Job 3 came to us as a result of the previous week’s storm, and we quickly came to recognize that opportunity as direct evidence that good can come from bad. Manny’s trailer had a large hole in the roof over the dining room where a tree had fallen during the storm. Jeff Miller, Jim Luedtke, John Mele, and Robert Guthrie worked not only to repair the roof, but also to replace the ceiling inside. Manny suffers from cerebral palsy, and lives alone, and the opportunities to witness to him of God’s grace were abundant. Justice Mele was support for this group, and as she cleaned and straightened Manny’s home and ran errands for him, she seemed to become the door through which numerous family members and neighbors felt welcome to enter into conversations with the team. Tears of joy from Manny’s parents at the end of the week were all the thanks needed.

Jacquelyn, John, Julianna, Kim, and Mike also had the opportunity to work a couple of days at the home of Bill and Pauline. Some of the siding was in bad shape and needed replacing. As the crew pulled off the old siding they often found nothing but rotting wood underneath. They were stretched as they knew the proper way to repair this damage was far beyond their time and budget restraints, and were limited to a sort of “patch job.” Pauline gave them samples of her tomato and herb bread, Bill sold them some of his hand-tied fishing lures, and he also sent hand-made necklaces for each of the youth who he never even met. The crew was frustrated at not being able to do more for this sweet older couple, but they know that God’s plan was at work through the relationships made there.

Our home support crew, Loretta Brown and Marilyn Lee, became our ambassadors of good will. They met countless folks in their quest for ice every day (which was in short supply due to the power outages), each time leaving a little impression that God’s work was happening in their community. One day they were asked to help the Red Cross dispense water and food to those who were still without power, and they took several of the youth to the local fire station to help in that endeavor. Toward the end of the week, they gathered ideas from the other team members, then purchased and delivered personal gifts to each of our homeowners, hopefully as remembrances of our time spent in their homes.

Yes, we were stretched, but God used this stretching time to His glory. He used this time to show some of us new skills. He used this time to give our youth experience not only in working with their hands, but in witnessing to strangers, sharing devotions, and praying aloud. He used this time for one team member to have a long-overdue reunion with family members. He used this time for some to come to grips with poor communications and bad attitudes.

Yes, we were stretched, but the fellowship in God’s spirit far outweighed the wasp stings, the sore muscles, the smashed fingers, and the lack of the usual comforts of home. We give thanks for this opportunity and the many facets of the experience, and for our congregation which made it possible. And we pray that we have each become better servants for our church and for God.

“This service that you perform is not only supplying the needs of the Lord’s people but is also overflowing in many expressions of thanks to God.” 2 Corinthians 9:12 (NIV)