



LETTER FROM THE ASSISTANT RECTOR

What happened to the summer? I found it to have simply flown by in one blink of my eyes. I hope each and every member of St. Thomas' community found some time to relax, unwind, visit loved ones, take some time away from the usual and common, and found God infusing their life in surprising and wonderful ways.

We kick off the new program year on Sunday the 7th with a return to our "normal" Sunday schedule of services (9, 11 and 5). Godly Play returns, committee meetings pick up again, Foyer Dinners start up, adult formation and education will be returning to name just a few of the things going on here!

Over the summer the Discernment Committee and all the sub-committees did very hard and diligent work drafting up a report that will be presented to the Vestry for review and consideration. The determination and diligence of all these people who met regularly to discuss St. Thomas and the shape of our future together was remarkable to witness and is a blessing and a testament to the love that imbues this holy place. My thanks and gratitude to all who have participated.

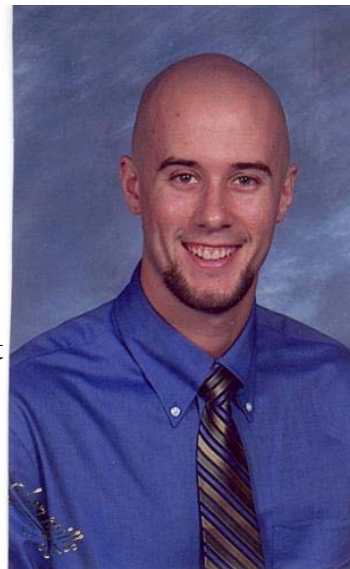
I am so excited about this coming year!

God's Blessings and Peace,

John+

Welcome to Ben Shelton!

The Seminarian's Lay Committee wishes to extend a warm welcome to Ben Shelton, a middler at Virginia Theological Seminary, as he begins his field education component with us on Sunday, September 7th! He continues in the long line of superb VTS seminarians who have done their field ed at St. T's. And Ben comes to us as our second participant in St. Thomas' priest formation program!



Over the next two academic years, Ben will be spending 12 hours each week at St. T's. Our committee's role during his middler and senior years is to listen, give feedback, facilitate reflection, empathize, support and challenge. It is an absolutely wonderful and rewarding experience to be able to assist seminarians in their development as a Christian minister and share our own life and faith journeys with them and each other on our committee. We will meet monthly and stay connected with him between those meetings.

We encourage all of you to welcome Ben and keep him and our Lay Committee in your prayers.

Pax,

Jerry Donahoe (Convener)

Kristin Queen Shaffer

Dave Kucharski

Ryan Winfield

Sarah Stewart

David Swanson

Reflections on Honduras

St. Thomas' Parishioner Brad Latham shares his thoughts on the recent diocesan mission trip to Honduras



Washington D.C. group and San Mateo parishioners on their new grain-drying patio.

August 31, 2008

In late July, fellow St. Thomas' parishioner Melissa Barrett and I joined seventeen other Episcopalians from throughout the Diocese of Washington on a mission trip to Honduras.

I arrived in Honduras with the vague notion of "doing good" for the less fortunate. I expected it to be all about giving -- giving my time and, ultimately, the resources of my parish and our diocese.

Yet, having spent a week in Haiti earlier this year, I knew there was the possibility of experiencing something so much more enriching and transformative. My very brief time in Haiti gave me a glimpse of the richness of a simpler life -- a life that's much less consumed with material possessions and lofty career ambitions, but much more focused on family, faith, and community relationships.

Haiti completely transformed my perspective. It planted a seed in my heart that I hoped Honduras would continue to nurture.

Our delegation arrived on Saturday afternoon, July 26, and we split up into smaller groups of five or six people to embark specific missions to villages and towns throughout the country.

Melissa and I were assigned to a group that was to visit a tiny Episcopal parish in the village of El Cerron to help build some improvements to their grain cooperative project. Then we would explore a sustainable agriculture and reforestation project near the city of Trinidad with a dedicated Episcopalian named Roy Lara. Finally, we would end our trip by rejoining the larger group to tour the Mayan ruins near Copan before returning to the States on August 2.

EL CERRON

After a long drive up a dusty, winding gravel road, we arrived in the tiny, picturesque village of El Cerron high in the hills of Western Honduras. Our home was the little Iglesia Episcopal San Mateo -- a small compound with a simple, bright-blue chapel, a matching parish hall that was full of grain silos instead of the usual tables and chairs, and a small white stucco rectory house, all on a hill that overlooked the lovely village and mountains beyond.

Yet, we were there to work, and our goal was to help build a grain-drying patio in two days. Once completed, the patio would provide a permanent way for the parish to dry corn and beans for storage in fourteen zinc silos that were installed in their former parish hall. The operation generates a profit for the parish as they purchase grains at harvest time and store them for several months to wait for prices to rise. Then, if all goes well, they sell them for a profit and raise valuable funds to help cover parish operating expenses.

Additionally, our group was to help teach children's bible-study lessons in the time left over. It seemed like a lot to accomplish in such a short time frame, and I was a little concerned at first that the trip would be more stressful than my life back in D.C.

Miraculously, the patio was completed in less than two days, thanks to lots of extra hands from throughout the village (our project was the biggest show in town, so nobody wanted to miss out!). With so much competition for a piece of the action, our mission group was able to spend more time on the sidelines with scores of children watching the spectacle.

Our time with these kids turned out to be one of the highlights of my trip. We read stories, took photos of one another, played games, and laughed together. After the day's work, we all gathered with the children in the chapel for an hour-long bible-study and art project each day.

Father John Graham, rector of Grace Episcopal Georgetown who is as talented a preacher as he is fluent in Spanish, would lead the bible lesson. Then, we would guide the kids in simple art projects to express what they had learned.

It's always amazing to witness children's immense creativity, even with limited art supplies. Yet, these kids were overflowing with an enthusiasm and excitement that made these bible-study sessions all the more magical for the rest of us.

In El Cerron, I discovered that simply working and being together, two groups of people with huge language barriers and completely different cultural and economic backgrounds -- our leap of faith provided the ingredients for God to work his way into our hearts and bring us so much closer to him and to each other. Our faith and willingness transformed each of us, I believe.

TRINIDAD CONSERVATION PROJECT

The second phase of our trip took us to the beautiful, historic town of Trinidad where we toured several environmental projects started by a dynamic local agronomist named Roy Lara.

Roy, who is senior warden of the local Episcopal Church in Trinidad, has a rare combination of energy, passion, leadership talent and charisma -- all focused on reversing the rapid deforestation of Honduras while helping local farmers to overcome poverty. He has inspired families, students, teachers and local political leaders to support his causes for years.

Honduras, in addition to being the second poorest country in the Western Hemisphere, has also lost 37 percent of its forest cover in the last 15 years -- more than any other Latin American country. These two problems feed off one

another, so forest preservation and reforestation are critical to improving the watershed, soil quality, and ultimately reducing poverty in this country. This is why Roy's programs are so important.

In 2007, The Episcopal Diocese of Honduras, with the help of St. Mark's Episcopal Church and St. Columba's Episcopal Church here in Washington, founded the Trinidad Conservation Project (TCP) to support Roy Lara's efforts.

When our group arrived in Trinidad on Tuesday, Roy was standing in front of his truck by our hotel to greet us and take us on our first project. We dropped off our bags, jumped in his truck, and took off up into the hills to a tiny little two-room school house full of students playing in the yard.

After greeting the teachers and meeting the students, Roy immediately started mixing a chalk-white elixir of lime and other ingredients that we were to paint on the trunks of all the trees in the school yard. This mixture was designed to prevent bugs and other pests from destroying the trees. Roy leads students and families in the region in these painting projects regularly as part of his tree preservation programs. He also leads the students in tree-planting projects up on the hillsides.

Melissa, I and the other group members started painting the trees, but the students quickly took over our paint brushes and proceeded to coat all the trees on the property as well as their school uniforms.

The next day, Roy took us up into the nearby mountains to the little village of El Tule where he introduced us to his Sustainable Agriculture Development initiative.

Through this initiative, poor farming families are taught skills and practices that permit them to change from slash-and-burn agriculture that destroys forests to planting

crops on a single plot of land, year after year. They learn soil improvement practices, contour planting, terracing, and reliance on organic fertilization and pest control. As families demonstrate their use of these practices, they are given choices of other sustainable practices including wood-conserving stoves, moveable chicken coops, and improved vegetable gardens. Other popular projects include small fish ponds, compost projects, small-scale irrigation, and help in growing marketable, non-traditional crops.

The sustainable, organic farming techniques these families learn will improve family health and nutrition and lead to measurable increases in family income.

Currently Roy's programs receive funding from parishioners at St. Mark's and St. Columba's and from a few other non-governmental organizations such as Sustainable Harvest International and American Forests. There is still a great need for more sources of funding in order for Roy and his colleagues to expand their programs.

Working side-by-side with Roy and the young students, witnessing the pride and success of his Sustainable Agricultural projects, and just feeling Roy's energy and passion, I was quite inspired. I left with a deep desire to see Roy continue to expand his program to more and more families throughout the country.

Having returned to Washington, I'll have to say that a part of me remains in Honduras. I've been trying to figure out what has drawn me as deeply to Honduras as I was to Haiti.

Perhaps it's that certain sincerity I noticed in everyone we met on our journey -- whether working or worshipping with our new friends in El Cerron or painting trees and visiting farmers with Roy Lara in Trinidad. Everyone seems genuinely happy to simply *be* with you, share some time with you, and bring you into their lives. Even when you glance at someone, they

instinctively return a quick smile that has a deep sincerity and warmth that you don't find so often back home.

Maybe it all had to do with the simplicity of their lives and the more meaningful priorities that I discovered in Haiti and found again in Honduras. It seems that both Haiti and Honduras, in spite of their economic struggles, share the same little secret -- how joyful and fulfilling life can be living closer to the land, family, community and God, without all of our technological trappings. They seem to understand more clearly how much more valuable human relationships and faith are than anything we can possess or achieve on this earth.

I now feel like I'm in on their little secret, and I've returned with a truly different perspective than when I left.

I'd say that this mission trip has been a major milestone in my faith journey -- a major turning point in coming to "know" and "experience" God through the lives and hearts of other human beings who live in a world far different from my own. These wonderful people have given me so much more than I gave them. They took the seed that was planted in Haiti, and they have nurtured it into a thriving seedling that I hope will continue to grow and prosper.

— Brad Latham

NOTE: If you would like to learn more about any of these projects in Honduras, how you can help, or if you would like to join a future mission trip, please contact Brad Latham at bradlatham@verizon.net or Melissa Barrett at mlb707@gmail.com. Foyer Dinners: Building Community One Meal at a Time

Foyer Dinners: Building Community One Meal at a Time

Sign up for this autumn's Foyer Dinner program! This program has been a long standing tradition that brings small groups of parishioners together every month to share a meal in each other's homes. These casual, agenda-free get-togethers are loads of fun and give us a chance to be introduced to a wide array of fellow parishioners - including those beyond our current social circles. There's not a better way to get to know each other and build community!



More than seventy parishioners participated in the last series earlier this year. Please join us! The dinner groups will be assigned after the completion of the sign up period. Each group is limited to about six or seven parishioners - a number which allows for great conversation and community building in even the smallest of apartments. Participants gather for four meals during the four month September to January period. The dates and times of the gatherings are flexible and decided the month before by the consensus of the group. Your active participation in this program helps extend our radical hospitality beyond our Sunday services.

Please make your participation in our program a priority. Come share your presence! Gain an understanding of others! Perhaps even make a new friend! Joining others in this breaking of

the bread shows your commitment to building community one meal at a time. Sign up on the doors to the Guild Room (where we have our coffee hours!) through Sunday, September 14th.

For further information, see or e-mail Jerry Donahoe at maineescape@aol.com.

Godly Play Is Set to Begin This Sunday!

This Sunday, September 7, will be an open-house in the Godly Play room for parents and children new to the program. The first class will be Sunday, September 14! This year we are blessed to have two new teachers join the program. Please stop by the room to welcome Mike Bell and Sarah Stewart!

For those of you who are curious about Godly Play, click on the link below, then on the video link for a short introduction to the Godly Play curriculum.

<http://www.stjohns-stamford.org/education/child/>

Brett and I are very excited about this year! If you have any questions, feel free to contact us!

-Brock Thompson

Calling all Future Meal Program Table Volunteers!!



What: Training for meal program volunteers

- Hear about the partnership between Samaritan Ministry and several meal programs located in DC Episcopal Churches
- Learn about the role that you will play as a meal program table volunteer
- Obtain general information on issues relating to homelessness
- Use role plays to practice what you learned in training
- Find out basic information about community resources
- Eat lunch with meal program guests to practice new skills at Loaves and Fishes

When: Saturday, September 13, 2008 from 9:30am-2:00pm

Where: St. Stephen's and the Incarnation Choir Room and

Loaves and Fishes Dining Room

1525 Newton Street NW

Washington, DC 20010

For more information or to R.S.V.P. contact:

Catherine Rodman, Samaritan Ministry's
Assistant Program Director, at
crozman@samaritanministry.org or 202-722-
2280 x324

Focal Things and Practices

From Ron Wilson

Albert Borgmann's Technology and the Character of Contemporary Life (1984) contributed immensely to the emerging philosophical discussions of issues surrounding modern technology. He is a professor of philosophy at the University of Montana, specializing in the philosophy of technology. According to Borgmann technology is the key mediating factor in our interaction with the world, and commodification has become the central driving force, accompanied by ever new forms of technology. Neither of these factors is morally neutral. We shape technology and then technology shapes us by delivering commodities that promise us pleasure, comfort, leisure and convenience, but paradoxically often leave us bored and distracted, alienated from what is real--other humans and the earth. Instead of engaging what is real, we commodify things, taking them out of their time, place and community and putting them in the decontextualized market where they are available for consumption, free of any moral claims they might make on us. Hence according to Borgmann the latest iPod becomes more important than health care for the uninsured, spending on home theaters more important than providing for public parks, fast food more desirable than the labor of preparing the evening meal.

Borgmann's book introduced the notion of what he called focal things and practices. Borgmann's antidote for losing our personality to modern technology is to return to focal activities. Focal activities are practices which center our attention on the richness of life. For example, the preparation of a well cooked meal calls upon our skill, focuses our attention on the necessities of life, and can be an aesthetic or sacramental communal activity, where as frozen dinners commodify the process of eating. Technology can assist in the performance of focal activities - witness the wide array of kitchen implements available - as long as the technology does not become the focus instead of the activity. It takes commitment on our part to engage in focal activities, but the effort affords us a chance to maintain some sense of self in the technological world. Crucial feature of a technological device is that it makes something available to us in a comfortable way. You don't have to work for it. It's there at our beck and call.

According to Borgmann a focal thing is something that has a commanding presence, engages your body and mind, and engages you with others. Focal things and the kinds of engagements they foster have the power to center your life, and to arrange all other things around this center in an orderly way because you know what's important and what's not. A focal practice results from committed engagement with the focal thing.

In his book he provides examples of focal things. For Borgmann, a guitar is a focal thing -- it commands a certain kind of engagement of my body and mind. As you learn to play it (a focal practice), it engages one with the larger tradition of music and the community of musicians. "The meal is a focal thing and its preparation is a focal practice. The wilderness is a focal thing and hiking a focal practice. The stream, or the trout, is a focal thing -- fly fishing the focal practice. In the life of the Christian community, the bread and the cup are focal things and the Eucharist the focal practice. Focal things and our engagement with them orient us

and center us in time and space in ways that technological devices do not. A focal thing is not at the mercy of how you feel at the moment, whether the time is convenient or whatever; you commit yourself to it. Preparing and sharing a meal together constitutes a focal practice that has the power to reorient the life of a family.”

For me St. Thomas is a wealth of focal things and practices. The Church offers a lot of focal things and practices. People serve together on committees to help the needy, participate in the Eucharist together, enjoy annual hikes together, preparing meals together, etc. Regarding my personal life I try to incorporate focal things on a daily basis as reading a book or just taking walk around the Dupont area. Also I try to incorporate focal things and practices with people who I have relationships with or trying to establish relationships. Usually in planning activities together I try to intersperse the use of restaurants, television and movies with focal things as the theatre, baseball games, or preparing a meal together. Focal things and practices have become a very important part of my life.

Transfigurations

A few St. Thomas' parishioners got together August 26th at the HRC Center to watch a brilliant performance by Peterson Toscano in a one-person play about certain characters in the Bible that have very non-traditional gender roles. Now I was pretty skeptical right off the bat because I'm thinking, "I don't recall any transsexuals in my King James Bible, and I'm pretty sure that would've caught my attention!" The play really had less to do with the physical aspects of being transgendered, but rather the unconventional roles of some of these biblical characters.

Peterson uses the Gospel of St. Thomas to tie several tales together, which I found very interesting in that I've never really heard much

about it. Apparently there are many unexpected gender references in that gospel and, throughout the play, I was thinking that the male narrator, who had a rather effeminate demeanor, had been St. Thomas' partner or they had had a relationship of that nature. I don't want to ruin the ending, in case you all might have a chance to catch Toscano's performance in the future, but the ending was very cleverly done.

The stories he very entertainingly tells include those about Deborah, a matriarchal leader who fought side by side with the male soldiers; Joseph, who's brothers sold him into slavery because he dared to be different but then ended up saving his entire family because of it, and the funniest tale (I mean it was hysterical) about how Queen Esther met Xerxes as told by one of the palace eunuchs, demonstrating how much power the eunuchs actually had.

The performance was free to the public and HRC provided a marvelous spread of hors d'oeuvres and soft drinks. I really had a wonderful time and if you ever get a chance to see Toscano perform it's a great evening.

For more information on this and Peterson's other work go to: www.petersonstoscano.com

That's all for this month's Phoenix. It's been such a memorable Summer, perhaps the most fun I've had yet in my 37 years. I know it's had a lot to do with the new friends I've made at St. Thomas and how much I've enjoyed myself there. GM

Updated Parish news can always be found online at www.stthomasdc.org/news/index.html

Send Phoenix articles to
phoenix@stthomasdc.org
Send Parish announcements to
announcements@stthomasdc.org