

To paraphrase an unknown woman:

"If I had a thousand tongues... I would not be able to give enough thanks" for the gifts received during this week.

This was one of the most incredible delegation trips I have ever experienced.

**Members:**

Adults: Scott Valentine (8<sup>th</sup> or 9<sup>th</sup> visit), Me (8<sup>th</sup>), Scott Splavec (2<sup>nd</sup>), Graham Giles (1<sup>st</sup>)

Youth: Aubrey Ketcham (2<sup>nd</sup> visit), Kelley Bowermaster (1<sup>st</sup>), Michael Splavec (1<sup>st</sup>)

**Monday, January 8, 2007**

Heartland's delegation consisted of 7 people: 4 adults, 3 youth. 4 returnees... 3 first timers. And 2 of us were not from Heartland. We were a very great mix of people, backgrounds, expectations and viewpoints.

Our flights are pretty uneventful. We took the usual Continental flight with the 8 hour layover in Houston. We left at 6:20 in the morning and arrived in San Salvador a little before 8:45 p.m. Bill was a little late - but we weren't worried - we were just a tad early and we just flew through the customs gates and our luggage all came off quickly and NO one had to have bags inspected. After just a couple of minutes, Bill, Alejandro and another driver (Avil) loaded all our stuff and drove us to the International Guest House for the night. We were all pretty tired and after a brief group meeting with Bill, we headed off to sleep. I shared a room with the girls.

**Tuesday, January 9**

We began in the usual way... a day in San Salvador with a bit of fact, history and perspective to help us to understand some of what we would be seeing and hearing during our journey in the week before us.

We received some basic information from Leslie at C.I.S. - The Center for International Solidarity. We visited the UCA (University of Central America) where the 6 Jesuit priests, their housekeeper and her daughter were murdered - where we also had a fantastically interesting interview with Dean Brackley. We visited the Divina Providencia where Oscar Romero lived and was martyred. We met Bob Cook and had lunch at the Artisan Shops and spent a half hour shopping. We visited a museum which chronicles the lives and elimination of the indigenous peoples of El Salvador. It was a very full day and somewhat overwhelming. Thankfully, the almost two hour drive to Berlin helped us to process what we'd learned.

We arrived at the Pastoral House in Berlin around 5 p.m. where we were welcomed with warm smiles and loving open arms. For those of us returning, it was a homecoming. For our first time visitors, it was a warm greeting from a long lost relative.

The 'boys' were given the dorm space above the chapel... the Team gave me a room to myself - so I did not have to bunk with the teenagers!! Although I wouldn't have minded bunking with them!! They are great girls - although THEY probably preferred their own space!! I slept outside in a hammock anyway... I just used my bedroom as a changing room/holding tank for my stuff. We settled in.

After dinner and reflections of our long and fulfilling day, we took our rest. It was an early night.

### **Wednesday, January 10**

We awoke very early to begin what was to be the first day of an attempt at a REAL walk in solidarity with our brothers and sisters.

The itinerary of our first day in Berlin had us working at a finca... a coffee plantation ... to pick coffee to try to get a bit of a taste of the reality of the work of so many of our brothers and sisters in El Salvador. The coffee harvest provides the income for so many. Harvest time is a 2 1/2 month period which is often the sole source of income which must provide a family with their basic needs for the entire year.

So we are awake by 5:30 to be ready to leave La Casa by 6 a.m. We were waiting for the bread lady who never showed up so didn't leave until about 6:25. We hopped into the back of the pick up for a short 15 minute, very bumpy ride to Blanca and Balmore's home in Alejandria. (To make this a little more authentic we probably should have walked to their finca! We learned that some people walk up to 4 hours to get to the place they work...)

Blanca had found enough baskets for all of us. She and Balmore worked with us to get our baskets to fit properly - tying them with a strap around our waists. We were each given a basket, a bag and a tie off rope for our bags. Then Balmore led us up the mountain to the place we were to pick. Being the end of the season, there weren't too many trees with cherries still on them. But knowing we were coming, they had saved a bunch for us. Balmore set each of us up in our own little space - 10-15 feet apart from each other. Balmore instructed us to pick them all: red, green and anything in between. Normally only the deep red cherries are picked, but at the end of the season, the trees need to be totally stripped.



And so we begin to pick. It isn't hard really. The red ones come off easily enough... the green ones a little harder to pull. But not having to distinguish, it was faster to fill our baskets. The cherries grow in clusters around leaves. Sometimes up to 12-15 cherries per cluster and up to 10-12 clusters per branch. Some trees are 4' tall, others up to 10' tall. But it was easy enough to get to the top branches because the trees are very flexible and you can pull them down to pick and they bounce right back into place. We would pick one tree clean then move on to the next. Full trees were sometimes far apart from each other. Balmore would help us by pointing out full trees. He was trimming the shade trees a bit and pruning some of the larger coffee trees with his machete. Perhaps also keeping a watchful eye on us to make sure we were ok.

Yup... that's me in that picture!

Some of us knew intellectually that coffee grows on a mountainside. A MOUNTAIN-side. That means **steep** terrain. You pick by hand... there are bees, bugs, snakes, loose gravel, tree parts, sand, rocks, VERY steep ground, a basket to balance (trying not spill what you have just picked), a burlap bag to carry your pickings (which IF you are a fast picker can weigh up to 50#), heat, did I mention slippery terrain? And VERY steep... You learn to use the trees for balance and hiking assistance when ascending or descending to other rows.



After about an hour or so of picking, we were called to breakfast. Blanca and Idalia were in a small clearing amidst the coffee trees. They had set down a blanket and were preparing huge plates of food for us. We enjoyed our eggs, bread, beans, platanos and coffee at a relatively relaxed pace.

This is NOT the typical compassion breakfast of tortilla and coffee (which is usually eaten while picking because TIME IS MONEY and when you get paid solely by what you are able to pick you do NOT want to waste time eating). I didn't think I was very hungry, but I nearly licked my plate clean!

Cecelia's sons Elmer (11) and Javier (14) were picking along with us and 5 year old Marvin was watching and just hanging out. I tried to engage Elmer in conversation... asking his age... what grade he was in at school... complimenting his speed of picking. After his initial shyness, he stayed within 10 feet of me for quite some time ... pointing out trees with coffee left to pick... looking back at me (probably inwardly chuckling at my inability - but WAY too polite to criticize)... he became a pleasant companion and a mentor to me.... I watched his techniques and tried (unsuccessfully) to emulate. We smiled often at each other... I think he understood on a certain level why we were there...



Scott S. got stung at least 5 times from the wasp nest he 'found'. Michael learned first hand the sadness of losing the contents of a basket at a miss-step on the mountain.... Kelley about freaked at the greeting of a very large spider on that log she was trying to cross over... all of us struggled at keeping our balance on the loose-gravel/rock/fallen branch terrain.

Elmer (11)

Most of us had dirt on our bottoms from a fall or a bit of a slide down the hill. We created a lot of sweat between us. We learned to balance baskets around our waists while carrying pounds of beans in our bags over our shoulders whilst traversing the steep and very unsteady terrain. I learned to trust that if I on purpose fell into a tree with my hand outstretched, I would be able to grab it and it would support me. Foolhardy maybe, but it worked for me. Trust comes with experience and I've walked and climbed a few unsteady paths in my day.

After about 3 hours of picking... we were called that it was time to be done.

We weren't exhausted... it isn't really hard work... but it wasn't easy. What was exhausting was the thought of doing this work every day for 2 1/2 months and for 6-8 hours a day. And we haven't even talked income yet!

So we trek down the mountain to Blanca's house with our baskets and bags in tow. Out comes Blanca with the scale... our bags are hung one by one on this dratted scale. Michael... 15#... Scotty... 22#... Kathy... 15#... Kelley AND Aubrey... 5# (ok... they were sick... cut them some slack please!!), Graham...28# ... Elmer... 35#... Javier... 45#. Boy did they put us to shame.

So how much did we earn?



The average pay for picking coffee is about \$.80 cents per 25#. Which means that I earned 45 cents for my 15#. Ouch.

A typical day of picking for an adult is about 100#. \$3.20 per day. That's less than \$200 for the entire picking season - figuring 60 days of work.

I'll let that sink in. Go get yourself a cup of coffee and take a few minutes to ponder:

- If you had 2 children... could you afford to send them to school as well as feed them throughout the year? What priorities would you set for your family's needs?

All of us were given a severe reality check.

Baltimore and Javier

So we go back to La Casa Pastoral to clean up. And enjoy some lunch.

The afternoon had us attending two meetings: Scotty and Bill had to go to Santiago de Maria for a Ministry of Education meeting. And Bill sent me, Scott and Graham with a list of questions to meet with the director of Pro Vida regarding updates on the slow-sand filtration water systems that the Pastoral Team, Rotary International and Pro Vida hope to have in every home on the mountain side within the next few years. The youth enjoyed some free time to journal, reflect and rest.

Following the meetings, we enjoyed a walk around town, dinner, evening group reflections and then a well needed rest. What a blessed day.

### **Thursday, January 11**

We're up by 6 - eat breakfast at 7 - load the trucks and then we're on our way to El Tablón and El Tablón Cerna by 9.

Our first meeting of the day is held at the school in El Tablón. In attendance is the Principal, 4 teachers, the president, V.P. and the Treasurer of the ACE and 2 members of El Tablón's Directiva.

After introductions and greetings, our youth were given an opportunity to present their gifts: Aubrey had several soccer balls and pumps and Michael received lots of school supplies from his family in lieu of Christmas gifts.

We asked several questions which I will put in paragraph format (you can infer the questions via the info provided).

School begins Jan 15<sup>th</sup>. There are always a different number of children attending each year. Last year there were 168 students. They anticipate more with the addition of the 9<sup>th</sup> grade section! They anticipate about 20 students from the surrounding communities to attend 9<sup>th</sup> grade as well as 15 from El Tablón. The community is strongly supporting the school by sending their children. They anticipate good attendance this year. Inter Vida provided a building for storage, a small library, kitchen, office and bathrooms. The ACE has written a 'Solicitud' for another 2 classrooms. They don't anticipate that support until next year because of what Inter Vida has already provided.

The school needs 3 more classrooms for the government to begin providing support. They plan to build in the back of the existing school. If Inter Vida cannot supply the additional classrooms, then they will ask the Ministry of Ed for 'provisional' temporary buildings. They have been meeting to try to work out the logistics of the additional classes within their existing space. The Ministry of Ed is creating lots of meetings for them so they have not had the opportunity to take care of that yet, but they feel they can work it out.

They are also in need of one more teacher. The existing teacher agreed to a cut in pay to enable another teacher to work. They are trying to see if the Min of Ed can provide another teacher. They asked if a member of the Pastoral Team could join that meeting to have a stronger voice. They are hoping for a positive answer from that meeting.

The ACE President said he was proud of us (Heartland) because we are such a small church and we have been able to provide so much support - working with them for their children. (Talk about your humbling moment!!)

Bill asked for information prior to their MinEd meeting: numbers of students for each grade - how many from other cantons - who wouldn't go to school if the E.T. school were not there.

The teachers expressed their happiness that their students would be going to high school.

The next meeting was held in the community center of El Tablón with a couple of members of the Directiva. Scotty was able to tell the group that Heartland has been focusing on Education within their community and the importance of their support by having their children attend.

- Bill explained to them the water filtration project

- We were given an update on the sewing academy - it is at a standstill - the director just had a baby and there are no new projects in the works.

Then we piled in the truck and headed to Cerna. We had a quick and "simple" lunch and then the community came out for a little meeting. We had introductions from us as well as the Directiva in attendance. Familiar faces surrounded us and it was a joyful time. We did not talk about anything of substance because later that day the Directiva, Bill, Scotty and Scott were planning to meet. The purpose of this meeting was greetings and expressions of love and to 'explain the rest of the afternoon.

The afternoon was meant for fun for the most part. The Heartland group planned a craft for the children, a story time and games. While the "leaders" had their work meeting, the rest of us went down the hill next door to get to know one another.



While the "leaders" had their work meeting, the rest of us went down the hill next door to get to know one another. Aubrey and Kelley lead the craft, Kathy read stories while Graham and Michael tried to get the kids to play. Well, oddly, the game playing went by the wayside. I don't think they quite understood that it would be an 'organized' game and not just a rough and tumble free for all... so Kathy had 30+ people - kids and their older siblings and parents and the girls had a large group making paper plate snakes... Graham and Michael ended up helping the girls. After a couple of books and a bit of animated

reading (much to the laughter of the adults who haven't had to opportunity to see how much "fun" I have reading (in Spanish of course) Are you My Mother and the Napping House...) we all moved over to the craft area to continue our fun...

After a couple of hours of visiting and playing, and a clothesline full of hanging paper plate snakes (very cute) we had to head back to Berlin. It was not a sad good bye because we knew we were coming back in the morning.

We loaded into the truck to head back to La Casa Pastoral in Berlin. The evening is ours for a walk around town, dinner and group reflections. We have another early night. What a bunch of fuddy-duddies we are!!

## Friday, January 12

We are up again by 6, have breakfast at 7 and load the truck by 8:30 to head out to El Tablón Cerna once again. This is to be a very different day. One greatly anticipated by many of us. No meetings... no real agenda. The Directiva were asked to find us some families who may need help around the house... it's corn shucking time and as you drive past the humble homes, there is usually a pile of corn 4-5 feet tall and 10' around. It is a time consuming chore. The leaders of Heartland had thought about this a bit and had decided to let Aubrey and Kelley pair up - a Spanish speaker and a non Spanish speaker (and good friends), Michael was to pair with his father, and Graham, Scotty and I had planned to venture out on our own. . The Pastoral Team felt it was best to pair one of the youth with an adult... for their 'comfort level' Pretty much someone with some Spanish with someone with little or no Spanish. We had 2 translators who would walk between the homes

and spend some time for real conversation. Well - I was odd man out. But I'm ok with that. My Spanish, though not wonderful can usually get me by for idle chit chat or basic needs. And I did have a translator for about a quarter of my time. I'm not sure where everyone ended up - which home, what specific chore - though I got the impression we ALL shucked corn.

I was the first to be placed in a home. And what great luck (if there is such a thing)!! I ended up with a family with whom I have a 4 year history. I had been to their home when we went door to door in El Tablón with zip lock bags of supplies and photos a few years back. I had presented the bag to this home because my good friend was in the photo in the bag. The next year when we visited and went door to door again, they remembered me, brought out the picture from the year before and we had another picture of the 3 of us taken with the old photo in hand. The following year, they had the original picture as well as our "family" picture. This year when we met and greeted each other yet again, all the pictures came out and I knew I had to stay at this home to work.



They point to the pile of corn... my host literally latches onto my wrist the tool used to shuck corn. They find a plastic chair for me and proceed to show me the method of shucking first, then plucking out the bug eaten or rotten kernels (which fall to the ground onto a plastic tarp for the chickens).

Not a hard job. It was really pretty easy actually. It's just a long process with a pile then never seems to diminish. So I get to work... the rest of the group leaves to find their families. 'Dad' sits with me and starts to shuck. His Compañera, Margo sits with us for a while. I learn this is typically the work for the women. And 2 women can get through the pile in front of us in one week. As the rest of the group is walking down the road, I am teased that I can't go to lunch until my stack is gone. Dad and I talk a little about not much: things about life. Where the water is and how long it takes to fetch it, where their corn grows, the season, a little bit of his health... (He has painful arthritis and kidney problems), his family... Margo leaves to go about other chores... her daughter and granddaughter show up. Dad and I continue to shuck. We fill our basket and Margo comes and empties it into a burlap sack which will ultimately weigh 100 pounds and gain the family 70 cents at market. Dad and I continue to shuck. Every once in a while someone walks down the road, looks up into the yard at us and does a double take... we laugh. Dad says something about me being a "gift" to one... to another person he says (I think...) that I'm his long lost sister come to

visit and help out... one man turns around, walks into the yard and sits under a tree to watch us for a while. And dad and I continue to shuck. We unload 4 baskets into the sack and fill another to overflowing. 3 times Mauricio (one of our translators) came into the yard to sit with us to help us talk more in depth. I asked dad about the war... he was not in the military. He was not with the rebels, but he was one of those who wanted nothing to do with it all. He was forced - with threats of death - to help the rebels. He had to go to town to fetch medicines for someone whose arm was cut badly by a machete... to get food... to carry things for them. They killed his cow... for no real reason. While working his fields, he was once caught in the cross fires of the military and the rebels... he told me the story of how he dropped to the ground and had to wait it out and how scared he was.

Another conversation was about how he has a visa to visit the states but no money to get there. He would like to come to the states to work. We talked about immigration for a while. I apologized for my opinions because how can I truly understand??... but I tried to explain some of the issues that people in the states have to deal with... they can get a 'high' (a relative term) paying job, but there are huge expenses just to live and the fact that in the states there is very little "community" - people can live right next to each other and not know each other's names... that the people who come to the states for work leave behind their families and community... and I told him (again with apologies if I sounded like a gringa) that I thought what Cerna was doing was wonderful - working to provide a school for their children ... and if there is money in the community, it is better spent on organizing themselves, developing a school and sending their children to school than giving it to a coyote to cross a border... I think he heard what I was trying to say... and didn't hate me for saying it... I tried to say it with compassion and love. And I told him again that what the community has done by becoming a government recognized canton was a huge accomplishment to be very proud of... and working together can bring hope for a better live right there in their own community.

Another conversation... he said I must be a millionaire to be able to come to El Salvador so often. Boy... that put me in my place. How to explain that by U.S. standards, I earn so little that I am way below poverty level... that my husband is a teacher and relative to the corporate world, we're pretty low on the income scale... but I chose to visit El Salvador so every day I make choices about how I spend my money... I don't buy a lot of things. I buy what I need and save my money for my trips because I need to be a part of this work. Then I thought but did not verbalize... ok... all the money I have spent on airline tickets, room/board and all (8 trips total) could have built a small school. Ouch. Now I'm second guessing myself. But I CANNOT not go. I have to go to El Salvador. The pull is so hard to explain to others when I cannot always explain it to myself.



I sure hated to see my morning end. When Bill strolled up the road to tell me it was time to go to lunch... and then dad and Margo invited me to stay there for lunch - well , I knew I didn't have a choice, but I was sure tempted to stay put with my new family.

So we go down the road to join the rest of the group for our 'simple' lunch. The next few hours we split into groups again. Some of us continued to shuck with another family, some of us just spent time talking and getting to know other families.

We talked about a variety of things: land ownership, where the work is, where the water is, what is involved in making a tortilla, life on the mountain...

After a couple of hours, it was time to head back to town. This is a harder time - leaving with the knowing that it'll be at least 6 months till we return for some of us, a year for others, and maybe never for others. A sad time indeed.

But we pile into the pick up and head out. Children running after us for a short while...

We arrive in Berlin with time to clean up before dinner and take a little stroll through town.

### **Saturday, January 13**

This is to be a new experience for all of us... first timers and returnees. Whereas we always visit a massacre site - to hear the story of a massacre during the war ideally from someone who experienced it first hand - this was a new location for us. This is another way we try to understand the history of the people - because that very recent history has shaped the everyday lives of almost everyone we encounter in our journeys.

This particular massacre site is a little closer to Berlin - only about an hour pick up truck ride away. We take the two trucks - we had the 7 of us, a man from Talpitates who lived in La Quiserra at the time, 2 of the health promoters from Pro Vida as well as our translator for the day and Blanca and Cecilia. We arrive at a site very close to the river that has been built up into a gathering space for celebrations and worship. There is a large cement wall with a mural depicting the story...



It all is roofed by a large metal dome. There is a small pulpit to the side which faces very crudely made benches - basically thick cane branches propped in long rows. This is where we heard the story. This was yet another village targeted by the military as a hot spot for rebels. So the entire town was herded and moved down to the edge of the river where they were then shot and executed. The river turned red. A few escaped in the chaos. Men, women - young and old and children wiped out. To be set an example of... It was a short story... but very moving. Blanca added to the story and we were given an opportunity to ask questions. I have done a lot of reading about life during the civil war; both fiction and non-fiction. I told him of my readings and asked if the horrors I had read about were true ... families separated... men never able to stay with their families overnight for fear of raids upon their families... men having to sleep in the hills and caves to protect their families... random killings by the military... He said it was all true. He recalled one incident where a young woman was nursing her child and a helicopter flew overhead and shot her baby through the head as he was nursing. Uck. I hated to think all those horrors were true. Not that I doubted the stories... but a small part of me hoped that they were exaggerated.

Like every massacre site we visit - the horrors are made even worse by the fact that there were massacres all throughout El Salvador - and not just a few. Many of the events never made the news. We only heard what the people in charge wanted us to hear. (Which was - and is - true both here in the States as well as in El Salvador!)

This was a very educational and emotional visit. Our 'hosts' were grateful for our listening as well as our efforts of the re-telling when we end up back in the States. The idea is to forgive but never forget.

One of the things I asked was if there was fear of another war. We had been hearing of the conditions which led to the war... the conditions during the war and the current conditions of life. Things have not really changed and in some respects, the conditions are worse. We were told that people do not want to fight... but sometimes it is the only course. There are no other options. When your families and communities are starving and there is no hope of work or reform, there is no other choice but to raise up arms. It was a difficult thing to hear. But again... I'm reminded of the reality of their situation.

Time to go.

We're all a little somber on the return trip.

Our trip home sends us in a different direction. We end up in a small town to stop for lunch. A short way into town, Blanca hits the cab of the pick up signaling for Dimas to stop. She and Cecilia hop out and talk to someone in a little roadside eating place... the term 'restaurant' paints a different picture in small town El Salvador. They walk away from this place and into another one next door. After some conferring, we are waved to join. This is a place where there are limited choices, but we are able to point at what we would like and therefore limit the quantities that end up on our plate. Most of us chose much smaller portions than what we had become accustomed to all week. The choices were delicious however... chicken, rice, an indigenous squash with a layer of cheese, avocado, platanos... and of course, Fanta of many flavors.

We spend a relaxing meal and hop back into the trucks, this time going home via the highway. I think we liked the dusty bumpy roads a tad better. The high speed wind whipping our faces was not really pleasant... Finally turning up the mountain on a road leading us up to Berlin, we were a little less wind whipped. Although Aubrey and Kelley - our two teenaged girls - were the source of much amusement of 3 truckloads of young men in front of us until they finally turned off about mid way up.

We arrive home mid afternoon with some free time to wander town, get a little shopping done and have an ice cream cone before dinner.

Reflections with the group after supper and another early night.

### **Sunday, January 14**

We rise for an early breakfast so we can go to the 7:30 mass at the Catholic Church up the street.

Scott and Michael are leading us into the church and begin to sit towards the back... I'm a little pushy and keep going forward - more towards the middle of the church and off to the side pews. After about 10 minutes of sitting... listening to the music, watching people...trying to remember my Catholic days and beginning to recognizing some of the litanies...I happen to look more closely at the family in front of me. Vaguely familiar! It's two old friends! The principal of the high school and his wife Kathy! Kathy was a part of my son's English class the past two summers. They don't notice me until it's time to pass La Paz. Then smiles and joy abound! The service continues and lasts for over an hour - in Spanish of course. I caught a little of the sermon. It was about how we may look different (we - generically speaking - not specifically us), and we may have different religions, different languages, economic standings, political beliefs, etc., but we are still all children of God and therefore brothers and sisters. It was pretty cool to hear those words. I wish I understood more of what he continued to say.

After the service, we milled around the front of the church and visited with the few people from town we knew and then we walked to the market. Sundays are the time to shop! Especially the



Sunday before the first day of school for the year! It was so crowded and fun. People everywhere. We ran into people from the cantons... several members of the Cerna Directiva came up to us to say hello. It's very fun to be so far from our homes and be recognized and greeted by friends!

After a little wandering, we hopped in the truck to go to Santiago de Maria for some market time there. It is a larger town and has an indoor area with stall upon stall of a huge variety of goods. Foods, clothing, kitchen goods, things people use in their everyday work, as well as blankets and hammocks. Several of our group needed blankets for family and friends. We took

care of all that - marveling at the variety and quantity of stuff in such a relatively small enclosed space!

After about an hour, we met back at the truck and had a very miss-able lunch in Alegria - a town about halfway between Santiago de Maria and Berlin. The view was lovely though.

We ended up back in Berlin by 1. I had a meeting with Stella and Vidal and their son Emilio about the coffee project. It was a good meeting. We talked about our shipping problems and options. And touched base on things they needed like flavor oils and label templates.

When we were done, the plan was to 'walk to the cross'.

This is something I have never done - as it turns out, none of us had made this trek before. It had been on several itineraries, but for whatever reasons, we were never able to go. Mostly time constraints... it is a one hour trip up, then about the same to come down and there is time needed up top to marvel at the view.

The cross on the top of the mountain can be seen from the streets of Berlin. It doesn't look huge from down below, but we know it must be.... it sets right on top of the world.

Milagro and Cecilia were going to walk with us. Scotty, Scott, Michael, Aubrey, Kelley and me. Graham needed to recuperate from his bout with the flu and held back. Smart lad.

I looked at the shoes of Milagro and Cecilia... they were wearing their every day sandals. So I'm thinking it can't be too bad of a hike! (ha!). We begin from the house - walking up the street and turning left at the high school. Up the road past the school and the hospital/clinic and then we turn right at El Jardin. This is where Dimas and his dog join us. The delegation is already winded. And we've only walked on paved road so far. Now we are on a dirt road. You can see the ruts where trucks have traveled. And we walk and walk. Always up. I try not to look ahead - only at my feet and 3 or 4 feet in front of me. But, fool that I am, every time we turn a corner, I look ahead and it's another 200 yards ahead before the road turns again - and always uphill. Scotty called this type of road a switchback. We are on a road of sorts... very dusty, rocky, gravelly, grassy in places... definitely uneven terrain and steadily uphill. I'm trying not to look at my watch... because we were told it would take about an hour to get there. I try not to look ahead... Milagro and Cecelia haven't broken a sweat and Dimas is singing and joking and talking. Aubrey is a very fit young lady but has a wee bit of asthma... Kelley is very thin, not overly athletic and hasn't been overly healthy this week. The walk is taking its toll on them. I thank them for being so considerate of me... because when they needed stop to take a breather, the mama in me had to hang out with them to make sure they were ok - therefore allowing ME to catch my breath. I can usually keep up on hikes and walks but this was killing me. Every step my mantra was... 'please God, don't let me pass out...' I used all my tricks to convince my body that I could do this. And at every stop for the girls I was thankful for the time to gather a little more willpower to continue on...

About  $\frac{3}{4}$  of the way up we left the road and wound up on a path through some coffee trees. It was a definite path. Very narrow, sandy and rocky and we had to maneuver around trees and boulders at times, but in some ways this was a little easier. Then we ended up on the road again for a bit. More up hill walking... then off the road onto another path. Very steep this time. We needed to

use our hands to pull ourselves up the rocky/steep path in many places. My thighs are screaming at this point; my lungs about ready to burst. Dimas says we're almost there... I'd heard that before. We hear music and think ... who the HELL would be carrying a boom box on this path??? Aubrey wasn't sure she would make it. Kelley about gave up... sat down and wept a little. Scotty was thankful she was so slim because he was debating carrying her the rest of the way up... I plod on... and truly - we were less than 4-5 minutes from the top... I called down and told them so. And shortly, here they come.

At the top there are 4 or 5 pick up trucks.

Wait a minute.... We could have DRIVEN up???



And there is the cross. It's huge. It's mounted on a large cement platform with 'steps' for us to sit on. And we sit. And look. It was breathtaking. Berlin is down below us. So far away you couldn't see cars... The San Vicente volcano is beyond Berlin. The ocean is to the left... to the right? Who knows. It could be Honduras! It is absolutely breathtaking. And the consensus was that no... we could NOT drive up. We had to walk.

There was a BBQ in progress. A bunch of men were cooking out and hanging out. They were very considerate - when we showed up on the verge of passing out, one of them - he said he was a doctor, reached into his van and brought out a bunch of water bottles for those who had run out. And they turned down their music.

I think we spent about an hour just looking. It was about 4 or so when we began to walk down. Milagro suggested we skip the path and just take the road the whole way. It was longer she said, but easier. We didn't argue. Going down hill was MUCH easier and a bit faster. Probably only took about 45 minutes or so.

Dimas found a great log for wood burning at the top and he CARRIED it down on his shoulder. I made the joke that when we got close to his house, I would take over and deliver it to his mom... but when we got to the entry of his neighborhood, I tried... it was probably 80 pounds... my respect for him jumped a few notches!! I let him carry it the rest of the way to his mom's house...

So we say last goodbye to Dimas and his mom and dad and continue our walk back to La Casa Pastoral. We are pooped. Bill is sitting at the table reading the paper. We come in and give him major grief. And Bill with his innocent face just laughs at us! HE knew the walk.

(Side note: while talking to Joie - Bill's wife back in the States... she commented that she found the 'walk to the cross' is usually a difficult one ...but worth the effort!) hmmm. She is right on many levels. On the strictly physical level of our trek up the mountain - it would NOT have been the same had we driven up. There was a certain sense of accomplishment - victory if you will. There was much satisfaction and peace at the top. (At least, after our breathing finally resumed to a near normal rate).

Dinner time. We had our final time with the Pastoral Team for a week-ending wrap up meeting... then our own group reflection time.

It was a sad night.  
The week had gone by so quickly.

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It was such a good week. We were able to do things as never before. We got down and dirty and up close and personal on the mountain and at people's homes. We were able to talk one on one with real people at a leisurely pace. We played... we listened... we worked... we began to understand a little better...

We have hopes for continued relationships and continued growth in the communities. We have hopes for the continued growing of the school in El Tablón Arriba and joy at the prospect of a brand new school for the smallest ones in El Tablón Cerna. We are excited that next year - 9<sup>th</sup> grade students from El Tablón will be able to go to high school for the first time! How awesome is that?! We are overjoyed at the progress the communities have made and the hard work of the Directiva of both Arriba and Cerna and the Pastoral Team to gain governmental and NGO support. We feel we are working together to build hope. This has never been a one-sided effort on our part, but this trip especially showed us the need for ALL groups to do their part to make progress; Heartland, the communities and the Pastoral Team - all working together to bring success. It's been a long journey - and not always an easy one - but the fruits are sweet.

I personally look forward to our continued friendship and fraternity.

Little things that happened that have come to mind that I didn't want to squeeze into the above:

**Sad:**

We did not get to visit any of the school in session because school wouldn't begin till Jan. 15<sup>th</sup>. So we visited no marginalized schools... no high school... no canton schools.

We were unable to visit the women in the prison. A couple days prior to our arrival, the women were all transferred to another location. So the prison was empty. I missed my visit with Skynny and Casper and Sonia and the other ladies.



Cecelia and Kathy



Scotty and friends



Kelley and friends making snakes



Graham getting his friend "drunk"



Aubrey and friends



Scott and friend. Notice the PINK paper airplane



Michael hard at work



Dimas (on the right) and friend