

A New Face by Owen Clifton

As I sit in the pews of Rideau Park United Church Sunday morning, I see the faces of my church pass by. The minister standing at the pulpit, the lay readers at the lectern, the musicians and the choir, the bustling children moving from choir to Sunday school, the person seated next to me ready to greet me with a warm hello and a smile; they are the faces of my church. When we think of the church, we tend to think of our local parish. We jump back to their faces and the familiar.



During March break of 2010, I was given the opportunity to look past the familiar and into a new set of faces. I set off on my trip to El Salvador. The trip was introduced to me last summer while working as a counsellor for Camp Awesome, a children's Bible camp run by the United Church. I learned of the opportunity while working at Emmanuel United Church, a neighbouring United Church on Smyth Road. For almost 20 years, Emmanuel United has been in partnership with the fiercely passionate Emmanuel Baptist Church in San Salvador, El Salvador. As a part of their partnership, Emmanuel United shares money and resources with Emmanuel Baptist and visits their parish partner frequently in San Salvador. This past year, the youth of Emmanuel United were preparing for another trip and I was blessed enough to be invited along.

My home church of Rideau Park was more than generous in their support. Fundraising went quickly and soon enough my trip was paid for. We left for El Salvador on March 11; nine youth and seven adults. We arrived late that evening to considerably warmer weather than the blustering, overcast cold of Ottawa.

The trip was divided into two parts. On the weekends, our group was shown the city and various projects that Emmanuel Baptist was running with Emmanuel United's support. The projects ranged from water and agricultural projects to schooling and homes. We heard stories of the civil war and its immense devastation. We visited the home and parish of Archbishop Oscar Romero, who was killed for his advocacy for the poor during a time when the rich struggled to rule. Immediately, the face of the church I thought I knew began to change.

During the week we built. It was an unusual build. We weren't building houses or wells with Habitat for Humanity or another common organization. Instead, with the limited resources of Emanuel Baptist, we built irrigation systems. We built a total of ten systems in two communities.

This entailed clearing the burnt ground, digging it up to a depth where the earth was healthy, raking the earth and making columns for planting. Atop this, we built the water system from pipes and water basins. It was arduous, rewarding work.

The trip lasted twelve days. I returned having seen a new face; many new faces. For me, the church had grown; its limitations stretched past the familiar I have known in Ottawa. The faces of the choir were replaced with the faces of the Baptist congregation which welcomed us so generously that it brought me to tears. The faces of the ministers stood next to the faces of the volunteers who drive hours to barren communities to visit and share the Good News. The faces of Rideau Park's congregation were replaced with the faces of the thousands of Salvadorans who, despite their bare feet and broken homes, despite their hunger, thirst, and fatigue, welcomed me with more gratitude and love than I have ever known. Amidst the familiarity and prosperity, I pray not to forget the face of Christ.