

# EL SALVADOR

July 8-15, 2010



A group of pilgrims from  
St. Thomas, Medina  
presents a Salvadoran dinner  
and multimedia presentation  
September 19, 2010  
6:00 pm

## Rachel



**“Going to El Salvador for the second time was a fantastic experience.** I love to travel, but going on a mission-focused trip takes traveling to a whole new level. It changes your whole experience when you are truly immersed in the culture and have direct contact and relationships with the people of the country. On this trip, I found myself skipping over the worries of travel because I already had a pretty good idea of what to expect. As a result, I felt like I was more present in the places we visited and with the people we helped.

“The physical labor was the most rewarding part of the trip: we worked side by side with the people of the village in the exhausting heat. But they did not seem to be fazed by the heat, whereas I got frustrated because I had to take so many breaks. This time we did more work, including digging trenches for a water system that would allow the people to have running water in their houses. I was overwhelmed that we got to be part of such a life-changing event for the thirty houses and families of the San Marcos village.

“The language barrier was also a very challenging part this year because we were helping with a somewhat complicated project. But I was amazed that somehow, with broken Spanish and hand gestures, we were able to communicate.

“So these were my favorite parts of the trip: we helped with physical labor, we had direct communication with the people, and we were able to show God’s love and grace to people who are ready to receive it with open arms.

“In addition to the work, it was great to go back to the church where Archbishop Oscar Romero was killed. This time I realized the true magnitude of the war and what it meant that someone like Romero was brave enough to do the controversial and dangerous things he did out of true love for his people.

“Experiencing El Salvador was yet again a wake-up call for me. I am blessed by all that God has given me, so not only should I be thankful for all of it, but I should also learn to share my time, talent, money, and faith with the less fortunate of this world. After this trip, that concept is truly more important than ever, because I realize that there are so many people in this world who need to be shown God’s love, compassion, and grace. That is something I hope to keep at the center of my whole life. Lastly, I want to thank everyone at St. Thomas who made this trip possible for the whole team!”





## Thursday: arrival

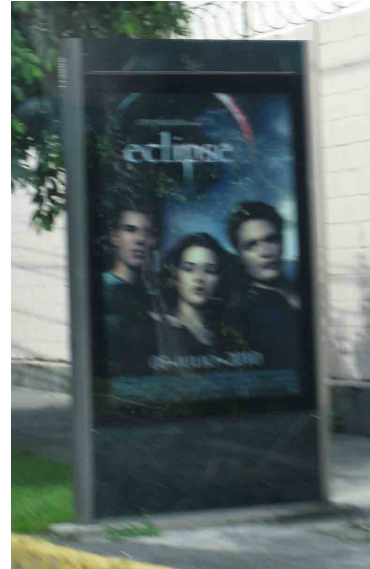
Will



**“While preparing for the trip, I had little knowledge of what to expect in El Salvador.** I read an article about the country’s history. I was surprised to hear about the poverty in the majority of the population, as well as the intensity of the civil war. Furthermore, I hadn’t been outside of the U.S. and Canada, so I didn’t know what to expect in any foreign country.

“At the San Salvador airport, I immediately saw signs of the wealthy part of the country. Most of the booths and stores were jewelry, technology or fashion-oriented.

“I realized the huge contrast in the economics when we drove hours away from the city to Izalco. We met the priest who was working on the water project. He explained that the people in Izalco had limited access to water, only for a few hours at a time. The project he organized brought water every day to the people’s homes. In order to do this, they needed trenches dug to install pipeline. We helped with this part, and it was a lot of hard work digging. Our presence supported them as much as our physical labor did. I really felt it was worthwhile helping out. Daily access to water is a very basic and important thing that everyone needs.



“I also want to thank all the stockholders for their donations. I’m glad I was part of the group and it felt very worthwhile to be there to support the people of El Salvador. I feel that I benefited from and got out of the pilgrimage much more than I expected.”

## Friday: learning about Archbishop Romero ...



**To the left is a painting depicting a theological take on Archbishop Romero’s assassination. Above, from left to right, are the Chapel of Divine Providence where Romero was shot; Romero’s bloodstained vestments hanging in his cottage; and the grotto outside his home.**

## ... and meeting Bishop Barahona



### Matt

“As St. Thomas increases its efforts to appeal to youth and young adults, the Diocese of El Salvador faces a very different problem: gangs. Fueled by widespread disenfranchisement and lack of opportunity, Salvadoran youth and young adults turn to theft and violence for protection, camaraderie, and a decent lifestyle.

“On the road to Santísima Trinidad, we saw several pairs of shoes draped over the power lines, where it means much the same thing as in the barrios of L.A.: *This territory is taken*. The civil war is a deep memory, but its aftermath is a daily reality.

“In our meeting with Bishop Barahona, he discussed at length the difficulties faced by the youth of El Salvador. Through outreach efforts such as the Bishop’s Cup, the church is working diligently to offer youth an alternative to gangs. This can place the church at odds with secular efforts to crack down on gang violence. A law currently being debated would make it a crime to associate with or assist gang members, even if the contact was aimed at helping people get out of gangs. Offering a way out is much more effective than arresting everyone suspected of gang activity.

“It was a great experience to interact with the youth of El Salvador and to see firsthand the positive impact the church, and our visit, had on their lives. I feel blessed that the youth of St. Thomas can grow up without fear of gang violence. But there is more we can do to provide a positive environment for youth both in El Salvador and in our own communities. We just need to be there.”





# Brigitte

**“The spirit of the Salvadoran people is infectious and humbling.** They taught me so much about compassion, hope and faith. They taught me it is possible for people to overcome pain and suffering and to love one another fearlessly, knowing that each one of us matters.



“Reflecting on this dynamic, spiritual, emotional, and physical journey, I have come to realize that it is the spirit of the Salvadoran people that touched me the most and will live with me forever. Despite the horror and pain these people have experienced, they face every day with fearless courage and determination.

“Before we embarked on our journey we were given a basic itinerary of the trip. I noticed we would be participating in the 12th annual Bishop’s Cup soccer tournament. My first reaction was, ‘Soccer? That’s the one with the round ball, right? Um, *como se dice* “cheerleader”?’ I had no idea what to expect, but I was up for anything.

“When we met with Bishop Barahona in San Salvador, he told us about the tournament and the youth who participate every year. It sounded like a great community event, and our whole group became excited. He asked how many of us planned to play; I reluctantly said I would. I could still sit on the sidelines, right?

“When we arrived in the small village of El Maizal the next day, it was hot and humid, but the people were bouncing with excitement. In El Salvador, soccer is a big deal! I quickly realized I was not going to be able to stand on the side and simply cheer my team on. I was going to have to play. Even though I took seven years of Spanish, my vocabulary is very limited. I can expertly talk about clothes and food, but that is not very helpful when you are trying to learn how to play soccer and communicate with the other players.

(cont.) ...





## Saturday: soccer in El Maizal

### Brigitte (cont.) ...

“We didn’t win. In fact, I don’t think we even made a goal. But the other girls on our team didn’t care. They were just happy to have us there to participate in the tournament. Everyone involved in the tournament wanted to make us feel welcome and part of the celebration.

“We were all an important part of their community that day, marching in their parade, playing as part of a team, competing in the Bishop’s Cup, dancing and sharing in the fun and excitement of making new friends (yay for Facebook!). We were even presented with uniforms from our team, which they gave to us afterward as a show of their gratitude. I was touched by this gift, not because I wanted a fabulous, mud-covered, orange and blue soccer uniform, but because of the compassion and appreciation it represented.

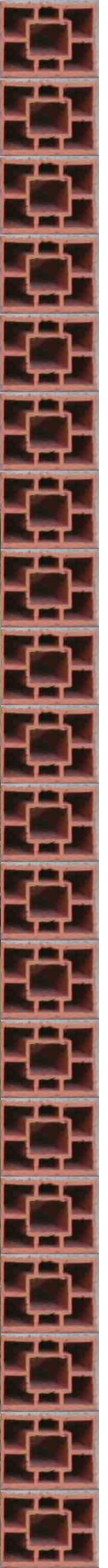


“The people of El Salvador have been through so much anguish, turmoil and oppression at the hands of their own people, as well as exploitation by others. El Salvador has been ravaged by violence, hate, and terror. Families were ripped apart by a twelve-year war that left an entire generation—my generation— orphaned and traumatized. These very poor communities could easily be filled with disdain, hate, and vengeance. Instead, they are hopeful, determined people with beautiful spirits. They welcomed us with open hearts and big smiles and gave us the richest gift of all: fearless love and acceptance in a community where each and every one of us really matters.

“This is God’s grace and the spirit of El Salvador. I will never forget it.”

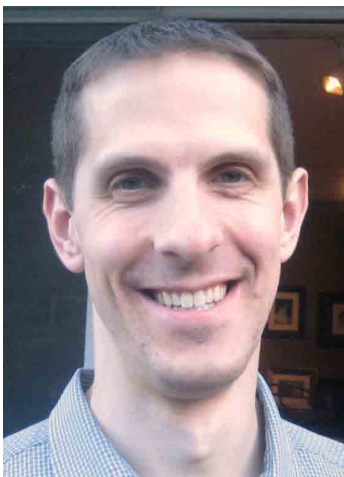








## Sunday: two church services



Adam R.

**“We had the honor of being invited to experience two Episcopal church services during our visit to El Salvador, allowing us to witness similar but culturally different congregations worshipping together, while we enjoyed a fresh perspective on Holy Communion.**

“The first service was during the morning of July 10, at the chapel adjacent our guest house in San Salvador. Padre Luis (originally from Spain) celebrated Mass with a slightly different Spanish accent than we were accustomed to, and he added courtesy English references for us to follow the flow of the Eucharist. The liturgy itself varied in sequence from our familiar flow and it was enlightening to experience our shared

heritage. The people of the congregation were mostly bilingual, middle-class residents of the capital city, and we found many welcoming smiles during the coffee hour afterward.

“When we arrived at Santa Maria Virgín later that day, Padre Roberto warned us that the rain might make it ‘a little difficult to hear’ if the typical afternoon shower materialized. That proved to be an understatement, as a deafening downpour began to pound the corrugated metal church roof just minutes before the service was scheduled to begin. Padre Roberto waited briefly, and after a few more minutes proceeded with the Mass, demonstrating the resolve of a recently ordained priest set on leading his congregation in worship despite a deluge flooding the streets. After the Eucharist concluded, we moved to the church kitchen and enjoyed breads baked onsite, thanks to a project that is raising funds for the community. Served with coffee grown within 100 kilometers, we enjoyed common fellowship with a congregation substantially more disadvantaged than their urban counterparts, but equally welcoming.”







**“The most striking part of my second experience in El Salvador came not from culture shock, the surprising lack of digestive problems, or even our detention, but from the realization that a mere two years’ difference in perspective could change my experience of the country in such an intense way.**

“A rising senior in high school, I feel myself suddenly faced with the breathtaking prospect of opportunity. With college applications in my immediate future, adults are perpetually telling me that I’m entering the prime of my life. Left and right

people ask me what I aspire to be, assuring me that I’m allowed to change my mind, telling me this is what youth is all about ... except not everybody is given that luxury.”

“While I face an array of choices and exciting experiences, the youth I’ve met and become friends with in El Salvador live in a different, more daunting reality. With ridiculous living costs and wages that don’t match them, it is nearly impossible for anyone to battle poverty without getting involved with the rising gang presence and, in turn, drugs, violence and danger. For them, this is not a desire or even a choice, but an inescapable trap.

“Bishop Barahona talked to us about the church’s approach to the situation, trying to offer youth a way out, even when the prospective laws make any association illegal. It was hard to imagine, as I kicked the soccer ball around with new friends from Santa Maria Virgín, or exchanged email addresses with a boy named Francisco, or played with Jennifer and Abél, our cook Mercedes’ kids, that while they have the same passion, energy, excitement, drive, insecurities, faith, and love that I do, they could be facing such a different, scarier future. To me, the difference in our futures was ten times as disturbing as the differences in our material situations and lifestyles that had hit me so hard last time I visited the country.

“This trip, however, was not about comparing what they have to what I have and feeling bad about it. Too often, I see something horrible and I stuff my guilt away to deal with later. There’s a lot more that I can learn from the people I’ve met than what I get from merely comparing our situations. I will undoubtedly go about my future questioning who I am to take the opportunities given to me, but I plan to do so using what I’ve learned from the people I met in El Salvador.

“The tour guide at the Romero museum brought up a point that resonated with me through the rest of the trip. She affirmed that our ability to stop the injustices in El Salvador are limited, just as much injustice and need exist at home in our community. But by simply respecting the people around us—be it the people who pick up our trash or immigrants who come to our country—we are helping move toward the justice craved by those who are denied it.

“I plan to take this advice, along with the patience I learned from a man willing to talk to me in Spanish for an hour despite my difficulty in communicating, the kindness I learned from Mercedes and the other people who welcomed us into their communities, and the strength I learned from the youth of El Salvador as I face whatever comes next. All the while, I will pray that they are given the chance to follow their own dreams.”



## Monday & Tuesday: San Marcos in Izalco



Adam B.

**“Some things change, and others just age.** This is the main thing that I learned from going to El Salvador for the second time.

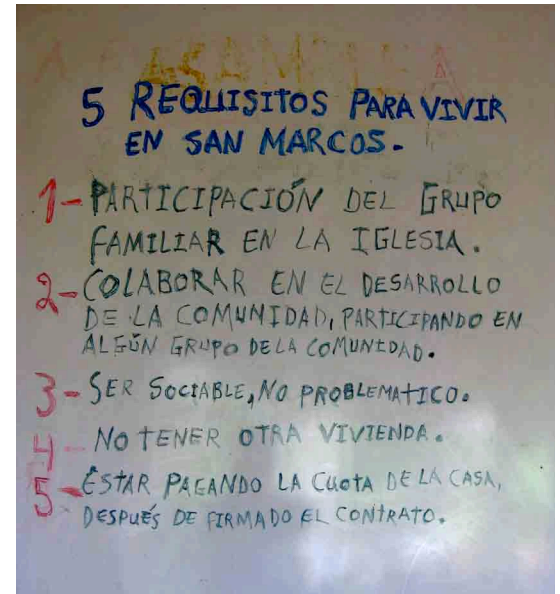
“During my first stay, I saw a country that was recovering from its civil war and other natural disasters. I saw a glimpse of that country’s elections and the fight to put a new government in power. I saw a people who were in need of help but who also had so much hope for a bright future.

“This time, there were some differences. There

was much less political tension in the country. The people seemed happy with the government and were giving it a chance to get on its feet. Some things were also the same. We stayed in the same location. We were protected by an armed guard. We saw the same people, but just as I had changed over the past two years, so had those I recognized. I saw the same boy who was blind in one eye. I recognized many others as well, especially in Izalco.

“As we got to the top of the ungraded hill in the blue van that sorely needed new shocks, we saw the same set of buildings. The church, the community shelter, the public bathroom, and the houses were all the same. I saw two boys playing with machetes, and though I did not remember their names, I recognized their faces. They were cutting the grass outside the community shelter with their machetes. It was odd to see them older, just as you don’t notice yourself or your friends aging on a day-to-day basis, but if you look at your school pictures you realize how much you really have changed.

“I wish I could make a blanket comparison between the two trips, like ‘El Salvador was very different this time,’ or ‘The country is moving forward,’ or ‘The country really likes the new government.’ The problem is that it is a country: there is no way to make a blanket comparison. I could compare two specific similar experiences, but beyond that, I think that the country is very similar, but it is also aging and changing.”





## Kathryn



**“When I first heard we were installing a water system, I thought, ‘Cool—this should be an adventure!’** But once I had gotten there I realized how big an impact this pipe system would be, and that ‘cool’ was hardly the right word to describe what we were taking part in. When the priest told us that their village only has running water for three to four hours every other day, I was shocked. I began thinking about the countless times a day I wash my hands or get a drink of water and how we take it for granted.

“Our work consisted of shoveling and hacking away at the soil in order to dig ditches for water to travel to every home in the village. This made me feel like I was contributing to something that was long-lasting and would change the lives of the people of San Marcos. Even though the work was extremely strenuous and the climate very hot, the sheer excitement of the villagers made it all the more satisfying, and I found myself not wanting to leave the ditches to take a break because I wanted to help out as much as possible.

“The people there have such positive attitudes and are some of the most kind, giving people I know. That made me think about all the times I complain about school or something when I’m feeling lazy. I couldn’t believe how they were all so willing to help out, even when they were not obligated to. One little 8-year-old, Elmar, practically begged for my shovel so he could help his community. We formed a kind of team, Elmar and I: he would hack, and I would shovel away the dirt. I felt so bonded with him: even though we had a language barrier, it didn’t matter. I will always remember him and his friends and how eager and kind-hearted they all were.”

## Siena

**“One of the things I was anxious about before going to El Salvador was the language barrier.** I knew next to no Spanish, and I was worried that there would be a lot of confusion because of this. But it really wasn’t a problem, and to me this showed the most when we were working in Izalco to build the water system. We were able to figure out our tasks with attempts at speaking Spanish (some people better than others) and laughs.



“While taking a break, I joined Brigitte in playing jump rope with two little girls. It didn’t require any talking, and while I wasn’t very good at it, they seemed so happy that we were just there playing with them. And really, I think that was what the whole pilgrimage was about. We weren’t able to dig a whole trench in one day, but the fact that we cared about these people enough to come was all it took to help a community.

“Even though we didn’t accomplish a whole lot, I still felt like we contributed. Over two days we dug a strip of the water system and laid the pipes in what we had dug. Before this project, the people of Izalco only had access to water every other day for three hours. It’s amazing that water is so limited there, while we can turn on the faucet whenever we need some. It really felt good to be able to help these people get what they need to live.”





# Michaela



**“El Salvador is a violent country ... at least that is what I was told.** The barbed wire surrounding the buildings supports that concept, but the people we met do not. They were happy, kind and friendly. Everyone knew their neighbors and worked together on projects such as building roads or water systems to improve their lives.

“The Salvadorans do not need money or technology to live richly, because their lives are filled with joy and love. Two little girls Rachel and I met while taking a work break in the van were especially memorable. We did not share the same language, but we were able to communicate by pointing, gesturing and

laughing. Their happiness in the simple things of life will stay with me always.

“Unfortunately the plight of the animals of El Salvador will also stay with me. As in other poor countries, there are hundreds of thousands of starving, diseased animals. I saw horses, cows, dogs and cats in need everywhere we went. The streets were filled with stray puppies and dogs sniffing for food or too weak to move. One day I even saw a couple puppies being harassed and pecked by an ornery rooster. I immediately wanted to help the animals, but I understand a handful of food for a couple of them is not going to solve the problems.



“I realize that in order to make a long-term impact on the quality of life for the animals, the quality of life for the people needs to improve. Only then will there be resources available to sustain efforts on behalf of the animals. Improving the quality of life for all those who have been neglected far too long is one of my personal goals.”



## Wednesday: safeguarding the bridge into El Carmen



The only way to get into El Carmen was in a 4x4 pickup ... with weight in the back.



Our group prepares to fill bags with rock to be carried to fill in washed away places on both sides of the bridge.



Community members remove debris that has washed up against the bridge.



"El Carmen Bridge, built by the El Carmen community and brothers and sisters in solidarity with the Episcopal Church 2007-2008 – Together we will advance."



Fresh rattlesnake for sale!





**“El Salvador is a wonderful place.** There’s plenty of wildlife, and the people we met there are all so friendly and polite. The vegetation there is so green and alive—it’s really a sight to see. Oh, and there were guards with shotguns at every lot or corporation or store you could find. The food is delicious (with the exception of rice and beans) and well prepared, ranging from simple sandwiches to complex dishes of fish, chicken, or anything else.

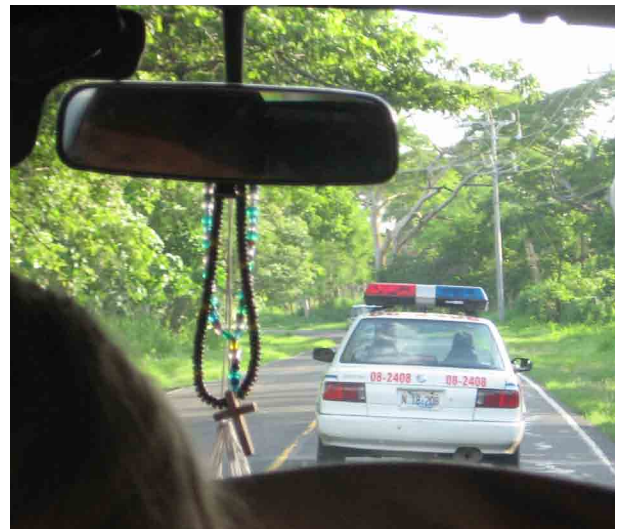
“We worked on laying pipes and digging trenches with a community, and apparently, everyone eventually gets a turn to work on the project. This is a very interesting concept. If only Americans could do the same all the time, and not just every once in a while. While working on the trenches on the first day of hard work, I



was attacked by a dog. Fortunately, the dog only bit through my pants, and not my skin (that would be a very unpleasant trip to the hospital). Overall, the trip was a ton of fun. We played in a soccer tournament (the team Adam, Will and I played on got 2nd place!), and went swimming in a river.



“The second to last day of the trip was probably the most eventful. We didn’t expect to be detained by the police for a few hours because we looked like human traffickers, and just so happened not to have our passports (that only added to the suspicion). In the process of trying to get the passports, the police found out we were with the bishop. After escorting us to the national police compound at the airport, the guys who stopped us left looking a little shaken, like they were thinking, ‘Uh-oh, we might lose our jobs over this—these guys are with the bishop!’ But everything turned out all right: we got our passports, showed them to the police, and got sent on our way just in time to be back for dinner. Boy, what a night!”







Jo

**“This is the fourth trip I have taken with a group of pilgrims from St. Thomas to my beloved El Salvador. I felt a little superfluous because ‘Santo Tomas’ has become well known in the Diocese of El Salvador in its own right on previous trips (particularly thanks to Sarah Hosler).**

**“However, when we were detained by the police and immigration agents on suspicion of being illegal aliens, I was glad I was there to help get us out of that mess!**

“Every time we go to El Salvador, I emphasize the importance of ‘accompaniment’: simply being with the people, sharing a day of their lives, getting to know them as brothers and sisters in Christ. We certainly did that in El Carmen as the pilgrims carried rocks in the scorching sun to try to make the road passable into the community. We accompanied the congregation of Santísima Trinidad as their new priest tried to figure out how to carry on with the mass when the rain was beating down so hard on the church’s tin roof that you couldn’t hear a word that was being said.



“And we sweated alongside the community of Izalco as they worked to install their new water system. But this year was a little different because we were able to help that community complete its water project. Thanks to the generosity of St. Thomas stockholders and the hard work of St. Thomas youth, the people of San Marcos, Izalco, will no longer have puddles of standing water breeding mosquitoes in front of their houses. The number of waterborne illnesses will decrease. There will be

sufficient water at each house for washing hands and dishes. And there will be water every day—not just for a few hours every other day as they have had, but every day.

“Jesus stood and said in a loud voice, ‘If anyone is thirsty, let him come to me and drink. Whoever believes in me, as the Scripture has said, streams of living water will flow from within him.’

- John 7:37-39

“Amen. Thanks be to God.”





# Sam

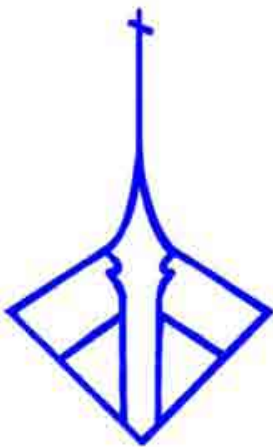
**“Taking this trip a second time was something I never really expected to do.** I thought my past experiences would satisfy me forever. I am loath to admit that I was wrong, but I must say that I think going again was definitely worth it. The group was larger and more diverse this time around, but I think everyone ‘got something’ out of the journey—which is what really matters, I guess.



“I saw many of the same things I saw the last time I went, from the shocking wealth distribution (or lack thereof) to the incredible hospitality of the people in El Salvador. I also saw many new things, such as a muddy road flying by at 50 mph from the back of a pickup truck, and a very large machete. Not once did I feel that any of my past experiences ‘overshadowed’ any of my new experiences. Rather, I felt that this second trip gave me the opportunity to observe El Salvador in a more detailed manner. I suppose one could say I was not burdened by the ‘traveler’s shock’ that afflicted me the first time I went.

“I was able to use my past visit as a foundation from which I could appreciate some of the more nuanced changes to the country since the last time I was there. A road here, a building there—even the billboards had changed significantly. These are details I would not have noticed on my first visit.

“Admittedly, I cannot say that my past trip did not affect me the second time around (I am talking about it in this reflection after all), but I did my best to keep these experiences from hindering my ability to be flexible while on the trip. Overall, I would say that it was very worthwhile to go a second time, especially because I was a bit older. If anyone is considering joining this pilgrimage (or any other for that matter) in the future, I would strongly recommend taking the time to make the pilgrimage a second time.”



**The 2010 El Salvador souvenir booklet was written by all the pilgrims and was compiled by Brigitte Ashley, Will Bush, Josh Hosler, Kathryn Jones, Lily Moodey, and Ben Reed.**