

Report of 2014 Summer Mission Trip to Chatham, NJ and Staten Island, NY

If I had to pick one phrase that reminded me of the mission trip, it would be E-Z Pass.

When the mission team travels each summer to do disaster or poverty relief work, one of the things they bring back is a sense of the differing cultures that exist within our country. We are always advised to be sensitive to the lifestyles of the people we serve, to learn a little about their way of life, and to work with or for them within that context. These insights are one of the many blessings that the team members gain each time we travel.



While living at Presbyterian Church of Chatham Township (PCCT), NJ, and driving to Staten Island, NY, and back each day for work, everything revolved around the E-Z Pass. This is an electronic device that is mounted in your vehicle that expedites the paying of tolls as you travel. At the last moment before we left, we were advised to have them for each of our vehicles, and most of the drivers scrambled to get one. Each of the trailers required a second one. Every time we asked advice on traveling to a specific location, the first question that was asked was, "Do you have an E-Z Pass?" The route you chose to drive depended on whether or not you had an E-Z Pass. Mostly, if the vehicle didn't have an E-Z Pass we didn't drive it.

The E-Z Pass story reminds me of the different way of life of people living in the large metropolitan areas of our country. Other summers we have traveled to areas so rural that our GPS was useless. This trip we couldn't find our way out of the church without it. We drive along our Halifax County highways and enjoy the beautiful rolling green fields. At Sonshine Cottage's new home, New Hope Community Church ([see related article](#)), the little garden in the corner of the church yard was the only green space in sight. New Hope's mission is to serve the children from the "projects." Most of our children think "projects" are something the teacher assigns you to do for school.

In spite of the cultural differences, one thing is always an amazing constant. The people we encounter are kind, generous, and grateful, and the power of God's work always shines through. This was evident on our sightseeing trip to Ellis Island and Liberty Island, as strangers showed common courtesies in the crowds, and happily agreed to take our picture.

The folks at PCCT did so much more than just hand us the key to the back door, as they fed us a delicious welcome dinner, checked on our traveling directions, and sent inspirational messages and scripture each morning as we left for work. They even joined in the search for a home for Sonshine Cottage by posting a story on their Facebook page.

The owner of Marie's Italian Specialties restaurant didn't know we were a church/mission group when he sent free appetizers and dessert to our tables. When our waiter found out why we were there, he thanked us profusely for coming to work on Staten Island, and cooperated cheerfully while we rearranged all the furniture so he could take our picture.



The Episcopal Recovery Team of Staten Island directed our work, and we found ourselves being managed by a group of young interns, under the direction of Project Manager, Darrell Hayes. We quickly found that our interns were well trained and quite capable, and we enjoyed learning from each other as we worked side by side. God provided several opportunities for witness in our relationships with these young men and women.

We began Monday morning working in five different locations, but by mid-day Darrell had made a quick assessment of our skill level and was out looking for more work for us. He opened up a framing job that he had been saving for just such a group, ramped up the pace on a large sheetrock job so we could get to work on it, and was so pleased with our first cabinet installation that he lined up another cabinet job that we could knock out.



When all the dust settled (literally and figuratively!) we had worked on nine homes, from one end of Staten Island to the other. We went to Cuba, Guam, Olympia, Richmond, Mayberry, and Alaska! We leveled and rebuilt a subfloor, did insulation, sheetrock, mudding, priming, painting, tiling, and cabinet installation. Between all the jobs, we figure we essentially rebuilt an entire house, except for the roof!

In almost every instance, the homeowners were living in the houses we worked on. Their stories were very similar. Not only did the storm surge flood the basements and lower levels, but the wind damaged roofs which allowed the rain to ravage the upper levels. Most of them had been waiting for a rebuilding program from the city of New York that had been promised but has not been very effective. After two years they have elected to move back into their damaged homes and do what they can to help themselves. The Episcopal Recovery Team has patiently worked to connect with homeowners who are losing faith in finding help from other agencies, and their program is a strong one. PCCT sends a group one Saturday each month to work with them. The week after we left there was a group of 40 youth coming from Colorado to help.

One of the homeowners worked right alongside us. He was working before we arrived each morning and continued working after we left each afternoon. He told us, "I'm battered; I'm just battered." There is no kitchen in his house, and nothing but a tub and toilet in the bathroom. Only one bedroom has walls. But he is living there with his disabled adult son, and has hope. We were able to get his kitchen nearly ready for cabinets, sink, and appliances. Mudding, priming, and painting helped to complete the kitchen at another location, and the homeowner was thrilled to have everything back together again. Cabinets and a sink completed yet another kitchen, and a fourth kitchen got cabinets and was ready for the sink.



Lives are slowly being put back together. Most homeowners showed their thanks with a local custom – New York style pizza! One made empanadas, a food native to her heritage. We left with a renewed sense of gratitude for our many blessings, thankfulness for a God-given week full of work well done, and as always with wonder and amazement at what God can do through His people when we step out in faith and love.

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