

Joyful Meanderings of a HOPEFUL Pastor: Hills Church Led2Serve in Costa Rica!

A Glimpse into our Journey: Service Trip 2023

It is hard to imagine that only a week ago we were waking up in San Jose, preparing in anticipation, for a week of service and adventure together!

Seven **AMAZING chaperones** (Vickie Batka, Dana Brennan, PO Davidsson, Maria Davidsson, Clint Liebenberg, Eric Hoffman, Andy Wilson) and **seventeen SPIRIT FILLED youth** (Marie Liebenberg, Max/James/Ben Hoffman, Robert/Blake Foster, Faith/Liam Holloway, Sloan Batka, Viktor Davidsson, John Brennan, Kevin Handal, Michael Hunter, Noele Roalsen, Olivia Marsolais, Alex Bonnette, Simon Soderval) faithfully gathered monthly (sometimes more) from October through April to plan and prepare for this extraordinary adventure!

In my 20 years of walking with, and serving as pastor for many middle and high school aged youth, I have learned how God works through the experience of traveling and serving together – there is always a powerful transformation! I believe this to be true for our Journey Crew! My heart overflows with gratitude and joy!

Our trip was filled with learning, service and adventure! Early in the trip, our group formed a bond of friendship that I am certain will last for years to come. Friendship between the youth, the chaperones and the beautiful people we encountered in Costa Rica. After a time, where our youth have been faced with so many challenges, it was a blessing to hear their laughter and watch their friendships bloom! (I can say that it was also a gift to watch our chaperones bond with one another and our teens as well!!) God is good.

After landing in San Jose, the capital of Costa Rica, our journey led us on a long and winding journey in two buses, to a morning filled with team building excursion of White-Water Rafting on the Sarapiquí River, which was surrounded by lowlands tropical rainforest! We experienced the beauty of the river and the jungle. We were fed fresh pineapple, watermelon, and oranges, we were taught facts about this new country and laughed A LOT! We were encouraged to speak in Spanish and listened to the life stories of our River Guides, all Costa Rican.

We would journey from rafting to where we would set up “camp” for the week at Cabanas Koi. We had 5 cabins and a huge “Ranchito” with a large sitting area and full service kitchen, where local chef prepared meals for us every day. We began each morning with a full breakfast and a time of prayer and ended each night with team building, reflection, and prayer in this space. Our cabins were newly built and were comfortable and clean. We learned quickly that toilet paper is not to be flushed in Costa Rica (YES!!) and that everywhere you travel in Costa Rica, this is to be considered.

We swam in Lake Arenal, which sits at the foot of one of FIVE active volcanoes (The Arenal Volcano). We participated in a permaculture food forest tour. We learned about sustainable farming and permaculture and were welcomed by farmers who shared their home and harvest with us all. We were invited to think about waste and abundance. We were shown ways in which all of life can be respected and sustained in gentle and generous ways.

We journeyed through the Children's Eternal Rainforest and learned about the creative and courageous efforts being made to save these beautiful sacred spaces of God's creation from destruction. While at the Children's Eternal Rainforest we repaired trail fences, cleared miles of hiking paths and painted a children's learning center.

We spent two beautiful days hosting "field days" for a local elementary school El Roble Escuela (The Oak School), in Tronadora, Guanacaste Province (there are 7 provinces), Northern Region of Costa Rica. This two classroom school house was less than a mile from where we were staying and served the community surround. The school house was led by one lead teacher. The children all gather in one classroom – ages prek-5/6th grade. There is one part time special educator who teaches two half days a week. The school was bright and beautiful and warm and welcoming. The 30 children who attend the school were enthusiastic, playful and WONDERFUL! One of the older children who spoke both Spanish and English offered to serve as a translator and teacher to many of us who did not speak the language so fluently (or at all)! It was humbling and beautiful. Our Youth also stepped up and used ALL their gifts to create such beautiful bonds with the children. We made homemade jump ropes out of brightly colored recycled t shirts, we brought brightly colored arts and craft projects and supplies, we provided new equipment and physical education activities, we partnered together with the children to learn each other's language through bingo and language games! A major mural project was part of our work during those two days. Our resident artists joined one of our Led2Serve leaders in creating a GORGEOUS mural that lifted up all the beauty of the community. I will include photos below.

We enjoyed making homemade empanadas, ate lots and lots of beans and rice and fresh fruit! We were fully immersed in learning about the ways in which communities in Costa Rica support one another – including the work of Led2Serve and Vanessa Puleo (founding director). This Led2Serve employs local Costa Ricans, supports the work of other area nonprofits, and provides places for students and wayward travelers to learn, sustain, and grow! Led2Serve shared how we can use our gifts, our abundance to help others, to care for each other and our world.

Our last night together at Cabanas Koi was filled with reflection and an opportunity to write letters of encouragement to one another. A gift, I am hopeful that each of us will treasure in the year ahead.

We ended the journey with one last adventure, ziplining through the forests of Costa Rica, enjoying a local lunch, pools and hot springs heated by the Arenal Volcano.

We will be sharing some reflections in worship on May 7th and will host an informational time following worship in the reception room. We hope all will join us.

Please enjoy the photos attached to the bottom of this report.

Joyfully Submitted,

Rev. Anne Marie Holloway



























