

*Rebuilding after Hurricane Mitch:*  
A ministry of love, not construction

I didn't know what to expect. Sure, they told us what they knew: we would live in a tarped shelter, there would be an outhouse, we would bathe in a creek or use buckets, a kitchen would be connected to our living quarters. I imagined something like the set of MASH: sturdy buildings, tables to sit at, a place for our things. But when we arrived at the village, I didn't even realize we were there. Some boys were kicking a ball around a muddy field, and there appeared to be some work going on. But I didn't see the lean-to tarp and tin shacks as shelters; I didn't see the littered, rocky hillside as a community. Perhaps this was a work site. Where was the village?

As our guides drove back out a half an hour to pick up the rest of our group, we were left with our limited Spanish and our senses. We could hear the "pat-pat" of the women making tortillas, the laughter of children playing soccer in the mud, a slow trickle of water somewhere, and a radio with very bad receptions playing Spanish rock music. We could see barefoot, young children carrying younger children; women scrubbing clothes against washboards; men pushing wheelbarrows of rock and mud; and curious children beginning to gather around us. This was indeed a village. The village where we would spend the next week working alongside Honduran families who, one year ago, lost everything to Hurricane Mitch.

Eighteen of my communication colleagues and I travelled and worked in two of the poorest villages in Honduras. We worked alongside the villagers of Corralitos making stand by hurling shovels of gravel into a screen; mixing that sand with cement

and beating the mixture into blocks; moving the blocks to palettes in the field to dry; and carrying dry blocks up the ~~m~~ rocky hillside to be placed, one by one, on the row of partial houses in the backdrop. With the villagers of Nuevo Porvenir, we dug a trench to help control the flooding of the ~~main road~~ into their community. But progress was slow, and something still didn't make sense to me. What was the point of spending hundreds of dollars to get there, when ~~[delete hard return]~~ the money could have built houses exponentially faster than our feeble, gringo bodies? Wouldn't it have been better to give them the money? We weren't trained in construction. Compared to them, we weren't even strong.

One of our guides told us it was a ministry of love, not construction. They didn't need us to build the houses -- they had a perfectly good start before we arrived and will finish their projects long after we have returned home. He said nobody knows how many lives were lost in Hurricane Mitch and that it's hard to ~~to~~ count people who never counted in the first place. We were there to show them that they counted. We were there to show our love for God and our love for them, through God. Maybe I didn't get it at first, but the Hondurans did. They said, "It gives us dignity." In the end, it turned out that it was their love that was the most powerful.

I was in survival mode all week and didn't realize how much the experience had affected me. I was using most of my energy to try to stay healthy and not be so homesick for ~~t~~ my family. I cried with the Hondurans many times: at the worship service one year from the storm that ripped their lives apart, when men from the village who were leading the service knelt behind the altar, covering their lowered eyes with handkerchiefs; when others from the congregation stepped outside the tin shack that was their church to ~~do~~ the same; when saying good-bye and embracing Tula, our cook, and her assistants who had all taken such good care of us; while shaking hands with the men and saying merely, "Adios, gracias," because it's all I could think of; while climbing into the Toyota four-wheeler one last time, and driving away. But I didn't know where

these tears were coming from, and they felt contrived because I wasn't really feeling anything. Now I know, I wasn't letting myself.

When I got home, I felt very alone This was the hardest part of my journey. Because my colleagues and I all went our separate ways, there was no one with whom to struggle to make sense of this. And I missed the villagers. I knew I would, but the language barrier kept me from telling them so. When I first came home and was pulling muddy clothing piece by piece from my suitcase, it hit me: "We left them there." I mean, of course we did. They wouldn't want to be taken from their home. But still, they should have what I have. Had I really done all that I could?

Sometimes I feel pretty tough: I survived a week with not electricity or running water, of watching out for tarantulas in a makeshift latrine, of eating beans and tortillas for almost every meal, of working in ankle-deep mud in the mountains of a third-world country. But mostly, I feel humble and ashamed. There is so much in my life I take for granted.

We gathered in a hotel in San Pedro Sula, two hours away from the villages where we worked, for our final worship service together. For communion, we purchased a small bottle of wine to go with a hand-made tortilla we brought from our last meal at the village. And before he broke the [delete hard return] bread, our pastor said, "There are only two things I know for sure: God loves you. And God loves these people." That's all I know for sure, too.