

Cross Fire 2005-06 Journal

Date: 9/18/2005

Submitted by: Penny Kelley

Journal Entry:

It's crazy to think that yesterday was the Commissioning Service at Christ the King. It was a great time and really exciting to hear all of the teams perform what they have been working on throughout training. After Commissioning, we had to leave right away to head out to our first booking in Prairie Du Chien, WI. What an adventure!

Our trip was supposed to be about 4 and 1/2 hours long, but we had no idea where we were going. (First time on the road.) Just for fun, picture this:

Somewhere in Wisconsin....

on the highway, passing about 15 motorcycles all at once.

passing about 15-20 more about 5 minutes later.

and more....

yet even more....

pulling into a small town with our 15-passenger van and trailer....

hundreds of bikes lined up against the streets on both sides,

"Umm, Sturgis in Wisconsin?" I think to myself.

"No," I think to myself again.

Van leaves small town, but eventually comes to another small town, packed with--you guessed it--motorcycles.

We are still not sure why, but needless to say, it was fun.

So we continue to drive, and the scenery gets better and better. WI is beautiful. A few hours later, we make it to Prairie Du Chien. We arrive at chapel and do a few songs (yay). Get packed up and head to host homes, wake up in the morning for worship, hang out with the kids at Sunday School, leave the church and go to a host home for a few hours, leave host home, head towards prison.

That leads me to where I would like to share about tonight.

It was our first Family Night Program at a prison. I was extremely nervous to be going into a prison to minister to grown men who have had way harsher lives than I have, with deeper questions than I could ever answer. I was scared I was going to go into the prison and judge the men as prisoners, not men. God definitely proved my fears wrong. The program was absolutely incredible. I looked into the pews and saw about 40 pairs of eyes, 40 individual men...all being molded by God's strong hand. It was clear to me that God was definitely present and working throughout the entire program. At one point, we had some extra space to fill in the program, so we invited the prison's choir to come up (we had heard they had some music they were working on). Six men came up and sang praise to their King. "You are my King...I'm forgiven because you were forsaken...I'm accepted, you were condemned." Those were the sweet prayers sung tonight. Along with a sweet a capella piece they had been working on, "Thank You Jesus...for saving me, for forgiving me"--also words cried out tonight by the men. I don't think I have ever been so incredibly blessed in my life or moved so deeply. They understand the meaning of forgiveness, the meaning of grace, the meaning of the Cross. They taught it to me. Jesus is with them...

It's incredible.

He is incredible.



Penny Kelley

Date: 9/21/2005

Submitted by: A.J. Smith

Journal Entry:

It's good to be on the road after a month of training. Our first booking was in Prairie du Chien, WI. We provided music and a Sunday school hour for a Lutheran church there. We also presented a program Sunday evening at a detention facility for men. I remember feeling apprehensive at the beginning of the program, not knowing what to expect, and I also remember ending the program being drenched in sweat...either because of nerves or because the fans had been turned off in the chapel...I'm still not sure. God was surely with us and those men in the prison. I was moved by the men's choir offering up praise in song. After the service, as we shook hands with the men, we could see in



A.J. Smith

their eyes that our time together was meaningful.

I enjoyed my day off. Did laundry and read a book for a while. While I was reading, the host home's kitten, Cinder, decided to snuggle up to me and take a nap. He slept for most of the day. I went for a walk in the afternoon. Lots of barns, silos, and cornfields. I felt like I was walking through a scene out of the Wizard of Oz (one of my favorite childhood stories). "I have a feeling we're not in Phoenix anymore, Toto."

We arrived in Milwaukee last night and had dinner with one of our homestays...some YE alumni...and kids from their youth group. Nice kids. One of them was from Nigeria. She was sixteen and already applying for college! Her name was Amy (her Nigerian name meant "God's grace"). Her family has been in the United States for about a month. When we dropped Amy off at her home after dinner, her entire family ran out to the car to greet us and thank Keagan, our host, for inviting her to dinner. They were appreciative and sociable. The little ones, in particular, were happy to see us, and practically pressed their noses against the car windows to greet us. During our cross-cultural training, we had been told that in Africa, we would encounter a highly sociable and appreciative community. My brief encounter with Amy's family gave me a quick glimpse into that culture, and it warmed my heart.

Today we are tending to our various team jobs and will embark on our monthly team outing this afternoon. Again, it's good to be on the road. I look forward, each day, to being stretched and molded.

Date: 9/24/2005

Submitted by: Bethany Schwartz

Journal Entry:

I decided on New Year's Eve 2004 to drive three hours to Princeton, Illinois to spend the night with my good friend Emily Heine, who was on Kindred last year. Little did I know that my last minute decision to visit a friend was God starting to plant a seed for my life. I loved Princeton, and I loved getting to know the Kindred team. I had a heart-to-heart that night with Emily, and we talked about what God is doing in our lives and how we see God leading us.



Bethany Schwartz

Nine months later, I have a team of my own, and we were privileged to spend part of our first week on the road in Princeton, Illinois, at the same house I visited on New Year's Eve. I began to realize how incredibly blessed I am as I spent the night in the same bedroom where the heart-to-heart with Emily took place, but this time I was with my new teammates. How incredible it is to see how God has worked in my life over the last nine months!

While we were in Princeton, we visited three nursing homes. We added some hymns to our mini-programs so that some of the people could join with us in some familiar tunes. Growing up, I always wondered why my mom cried as we sang certain hymns in church. Well, now I think I know, and the tears brimmed as we sang "How Great Thou Art" and "Soon and Very Soon." It is so powerful to sing songs with the elderly and remember singing them with my own grandparents as I grew up. So Mom, I understand why you cried, and I admit it--I cry when I sing certain hymns, too!

God is so good, and I am witnessing his magnificent blessings this year. We have only been on the road one week, and I have seen God in the face of a smiling child, in the song of an elderly woman, in the handshake of a generous pastor, in the nod of a prisoner, in the labor of a car repair place fixing our van for free, in the generosity of host home after host home, in the smile of a teammate who understands how I am feeling, and the list goes on and on.

"But when I think that God, His son not sparing, sent Him to die, I scarce can take it in/That on the cross my burden gladly bearing, He bled and died to take away my sin/Then sings my soul, my Savior God to thee, how great thou art, how great thou art/Then sings my soul, my Savior God to thee, how great thou art, how great thou art!"

Date: 10/5/2005

Submitted by: Kelsey Erickson

Journal Entry:

Hello everyone!

I suppose it's about time that I write my first journal. Man, do I have a lot to tell. Right now, we are missing Shauna, who is at home due to a family illness. We hope she gets back soon. It feels like we're not whole without her. Also, she is having paperwork issues, what with being from Canada and all. So, we would appreciate prayers for her speedy return to us. As a team, we've had a slow week, but that's given us lots of time to catch up on rehearsal and business-y things. It's also given us a chance to fill Jacob in on things that we learned at training. So, I think God knew what he was doing, giving us a slow week.



Kelsey Erickson

Today, I just had one of those shocking moments when you think to yourself, "Whoa, I'm actually doing this." I was sitting playing the bass during rehearsal, and I thought, "Wait a minute, Kelsey, you know how to play bass. Whoa." So many things in my life (and in all teamers' lives) have changed in the past month and a half that it's good to just take a minute, breathe, and say, "Whoa, what a ride I'm on." God is good. What an incredible thing that he would choose me to spend a year like this.

One thing I'm learning is that God is faithful when we ask for things. When we ask to become more like Christ, God fulfills our desires, even when it hurts. When we ask for brokenness, God gives it to us. We know that we will come out of trials stronger, and so does God. What an incredible love. God loves us so much that he lets us hurt, though it hurts him. He does it because he knows the outcome will be wonderful. My prayer is that I would remain moldable in God's hands and rest securely in his love, even in, and especially in, rough times. My prayer for you all is the same. Have a wonderful day!

Kelsey <><

Date: 10/5/2005

Submitted by: Penny Kelley

Journal Entry:

Time for bitterness to be gone.
Time to *love* a new song.
Time to think of days that have *passed*.
Time to *dwell* on the things I did last.
Time to pick up my feet and *move on*.
Time to *sing* , sing a new song.
Time to watch my life *spin in circles*.
Time to *appreciate* laughter.
*Time to thank God for *chaos*.*
Time to run, *expecting none*.
Time to *be* strong for the weak.
Time to *scatter* sunshine.
Time to live a life *simplistically*.
Time to *forget* self.
Time to love *passionately*.
Time to *swim* in hope.
Time to love *like never before*.



Penny Kelley

This is a poem I wrote about eight months ago. But as I was going through my old stuff, this popped out at me today. There is so much truth and familiarity (especially in the last few days) to these words poured out from my heart so long ago.

It has been a trying past three days, but I know that there is hope and strength from the Holy One, Jesus Christ, who gives strength to His children.

It's an exciting thing to know that God is working in you and around you through all of the struggles. When I am weak, He is strong. He makes beauty from all of the pain.

Thanks for all of the prayers!

I love you all...

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Thanks for all of the prayers!

I love you all...

Date: 10/10/2005

Submitted by: Bethany Schwartz

Journal Entry:



Bethany Schwartz

One. The power of one.

There is one God. He is the Trinity of the Father, Son and Holy Ghost, yet he is one. The one God used the one man. He created one man, Adam, and through the one man the many were made sinners. God began the nation of Israel with one man, Abraham, who believed and it was credited to him as righteousness. God used one man, Moses, to lead Israel out of Egypt. God used one boy, David, to defeat Goliath and the Philistines when an army could not do it. God used one woman, Esther, to save the Jewish people from destruction. God used his one and only son to save all who would believe. "For as through the one man's disobedience the many were made sinners, even so through the obedience of the One the many will be made righteous." (Romans 5:19)

There are billions of people alive in this world today, but they are not a mass of blurred faces. Rather they are a group of individuals, each having the power through God to make a difference. I am one. I am only one. Yet all it may take is one.

We are encountering the phenomenon of one. Each one person holds much power. One hurtful comment can destroy a shaky self-perception. One kind word can brighten a day, change an outlook, begin a domino effect of smiles. One. One act of hospitality can mean a bed for a night or a home for a week for a person living out of a van. One generosity, one gesture, one memory--each one holds much power.

Lost in a sea of faces. A common feeling. But each face is a window, a window that shows a past, a passion, a hope, a dream, a future, a fingerprint of the one Creator. Each face has a purpose. There is not a lily of the field, a sparrow, a hair on a head, or a face in the crowd that God does not know intimately.

One. One person. One God. What is the purpose? Does the perfect fit need to be skewed so that the group or the one person can recognize the purpose? Is it possible for one person to see the power of another? Can the one person trust the one God to act in such a way as to use his strengths and improve his weaknesses? Can the one person catch a glimpse of the perfect plan? One God. One huge God. One powerful God. One merciful God. One gracious God. One person. One weak person. One blind person. One believing person. One trusting person. One useful person. There is power in one.

One. One person. One unit. One family unit. One unit of friends. One team unit. One unit of believers. There is power in one person, but that power is magnified in the unit. While in the unit, however, the one person still holds great power. The one person can soar and lift the unit up, or the one person can dive and drag the unit down. Yes, the unit is a powerful thing, and yes, the unit can help to overcome any weakness of any one person. But within the unit, there is still the power of one. One person. One unit.

One unit made up of separate parts. Each part contributes to the unit, each part can strengthen the

unit. Without one person, the unit is incomplete. If one person must leave a unit, the unit is changed. Perhaps the unit is strengthened, perhaps it is weakened. The effect depends upon the choices of the one person. How did the one person use his strength? Did the one person lift up or tear down? One. There is power in one. One person. One unit. One God. One world. To underestimate the power is to sacrifice the power.

Date: 10/18/2005

Submitted by: Penny Kelley

Journal Entry:

What do these all have in common?

*French Poodle

*French Fry

*French Toast

They are all said with a French accent, only you couldn't hear it.

Hola!

Today here in Akron, Ohio, we (Cross Fire) are celebrating the start of a new season...

Let's Learn Some French Before We Get to Africa Season!

Today's phrase is:

Je m'appelle (insert name here).

My name is (insert name here).

It's been a fun-filled day already, using our French language skills...and it gets even more interesting with every word that comes out of my mouth. It might be hard to imagine, but please try hard--I am not the best French speaker on the team. In fact, Jacob laughs at me when I attempt speaking any French at all...it's all right, though; if I were in his shoes, I would fall to the ground laughing if someone said "bone-jure" (also said "bonjour") with a Dakotan accent. Ya sure ya betcha.

I'm well aware that this journey of learning a new language, is going to be an interesting/challenging one for me. But I know that God has me on Cross Fire for a reason...whether that be to entertain people in Africa with my French speaking, or whatever else. He has a reason, and I am confident that it's going to be good. He is so incredibly wonderful and knows all. I'm glad He is in control and makes an awesome path for me...even when I try and take control of this life. He is there for me when I am in need of that gentle boost in the butt to get going with life. His grace is there for me when I screw up and land on my face. He is there for me at all times. It's a good thing, too, because without Him I'd be lost.

Merci Seigneur, Merci

"Thank you Lord, thank you."



Penny Kelley

Date: 10/31/2005

Submitted by: Jacob Djondo

Journal Entry:

What a wonderful Christ we have!

In 2003, I have had the privilege to encounter a musical ministry group of extraordinary young people called Cross Fire. Cross Fire was amazingly able to establish a church in a village of my home country that had been closed to the Gospel.

Attracted by their mission, I was willing to do something like that to our Lord. I have therefore decided to give up my job for the seminary to become a minister of God.

Today I am serving on Cross Fire as part of my internship. What amazing grace!

I don't know how Christ our Precious Lord fulfilled it. I had never dreamt of ministering one day somewhere very far from my country. That makes me thinking of this diction of the Reformer



Jacob Djondo

Martin Luther that says, "I don't know what the future holds, but I know who holds the future."

On the way to join my team, I was excited to discover what faith and worship are like in United States. I was also frustrated thinking of the climate and the food. On team, that concern disappeared. The joyful people I see, the kind people I meet, the curious people to whom I share with African culture make me feel very joyful.

I am experiencing another dimension of the faith. I think this mission is strengthening my faith.

Date: 11/1/2005

Submitted by: Bethany Schwartz

Journal Entry:

Upstate New York. Adirondack Mountains. Sunrise Lutheran Camp. Junior High Retreat. After an incredible weekend with a group of exceptional junior highers, we have been privileged to have a day and a half to explore the area and take some time to enjoy the beauty of this place.

Yesterday I set out to jog on the trails in the summer camp part of the camp. There are acres and acres of land and trails that are ours to explore, and I did. My jog turned into more of a jog, walk, slip, jog, walk, slip, as I came across rocks, small creeks, and tricky little acorns that are much more slippery than they appear. After jogging in circles through the woods, I found a trail that led straight up the mountain that I had been warned about. "The trail is rocky, but the view is worth the climb." I tackled it with childlike eagerness. The excited speed soon turned back into an excited jog, walk, slip. The trail was great, just not for jogging. Switchbacks, boulders blocking the path, a fallen tree I had to climb through to continue going up...awesome. As wonderful as the climb was, I knew the view was going to be even more spectacular.

As I came up to the top, through the trees I saw the wooded valleys below. The trees sparkled with autumn colors shining in the sunlight. The blue sky seemed to have been holding the sun in place just so I could make it to the top before it set behind a mountain opposite of mine. As I watched it disappear behind that mountain, I could do nothing but stand in awe of God and sing praises to him. What an awesome God we have. All of creation sings his praise.

Being surrounded by God's beautiful creation is such an amazing experience for me. I really feel connected to God when I am out in nature. It floors me to think that as beautiful as God's earth is, it is just a foggy glimpse of the beauty of God himself. I can't wait to see him in all his glory when I enter heaven. I can't wait to sing praises to him with the angels and saints for all eternity. But for now, it is pretty incredible to sit on the mountaintop and watch the sun shining over the valley. I watch the sun and remember that God is the one who divides the day and night and provides us with the sun's heat and light. I look at the distant trees and think about the immense forest full of vibrant colors that change with the seasons as God paints picture after picture for us with the passing of the months. I look at the trees right next to me and see the shelter they provide for various animals. I see a leaf floating down to the ground without a care, reminding me that God is in control of my life, and he has a plan for me.

I see a symphony before me, God is the conductor, and this beautiful place is one large orchestra following God's slightest cues. The earth seems silent, as if in awe, but as I listen I hear the wind making music through the leaves, the creation around me seems to crescendo and speak to me louder and louder still, praising the name of God, its wonderful creator. "The heavens declare the glory of God; the skies proclaim the work of his hands. Day after day they pour forth speech; night after night they display knowledge. There is no speech or language where their voice is not heard. Their voice goes out into all the earth, their words to the ends of the world." Psalm 19:1-4



Bethany Schwartz

Date: 11/8/2005

Submitted by: Shauna McInerney

Journal Entry:

What a thrill it is to have such an incredible opportunity to serve Christ. Even more of a thrill it is to know that although I am nowhere near being in full equipment for such an endeavor, God is providing me with the strength I need daily in order to

accomplish the little missions along the way.

I've had the chance to see the true value of life throughout this tour. I am so inspired by the wisdom and awesome motivation of those that are sick. I've realized that I can live with this much passion for Christ and this much ambition in life well into my 80's. The idea of drive and motivation doesn't have to disappear when you hit the big "5-0". My father is a fabulous testimony of that, "You just have to load up on the antioxidants, honey. Here, have another tomato." I was afraid to age and thought that I had such a short time to accomplish the things I craved in life. God is showing me that as His child in this life long commitment, He can take me further than I ever dreamed possible.



Shauna McInerney

Trust is the big issue. I've given God this year, I am committed to Cross Fire, Youth Encounter, and the mission involved. I am ready for the challenges that will arise on team. The question is, am I ready for the challenges that will arise away from my life on team?

Mon uncle Tom died of cancer on Saturday. We were very close and his sense of humor knocked me over several times. I took a few days to visit him in Winnipeg at the hospital at the beginning of this month. I needed to see him to say my final goodbyes. I was faced with two obligations: I needed to support my uncle and show him my commitment to him, and I needed to support my team and show them my commitment to them. I said goodbye to mon uncle Tom and prayed with him. He was a testimony to all those on his floor. Wow, could he entertain. Everyone knew his name, and he was constantly making people laugh. I gave him one last hug and kiss and ruffled his hair and tickled his ear; then, I left knowing that I wouldn't see him again until our meeting in Heaven. Now, upon his death I am strengthened. This is my testimony, that God has given me the strength to remain here with my team to support His ministry while the rest of my family attends the funeral and grieves our loss. This strength comes from God alone. It is a miracle to walk into nursing homes and see the opportunity to touch a life and to inspire another with a smile. It is an honor to touch a hand of a stranger whose only response is a twitch of her eyelids. It's a miracle to see an elderly woman stand up and dance and snap her fingers at the beat of our djembe. These are experiences God puts in our path as an opportunity to serve. I am making the most of my life, as God would see it done.

There is a purpose to my calling on team. God is good and He will continue to provide me with the strength to serve Him. I am blessed. My uncle would have wanted it this way. He begged me to make the most of the gifts God has given me. I take his desire to make others smile and his fighting spirit along with me. A chance to serve is a chance to build a stronger foundation in Christ. C'est pour toi mon oncle, je t'aime pour tous mes jour.

Date: 11/12/2005

Submitted by: A.J. Smith

Journal Entry:

"And now I will show you the most excellent way."

Each day on this journey is a blessing. We have encountered numerous families who have gone above and beyond to welcome us into their homes, churches who receive us with enthusiasm and offer encouragement as we embark on ministry, strangers who offer us gas money, people who change our oil and fix our trailer lights and cables for nothing, and people who feed us (and not by simply filling our stomachs).



A.J. Smith

I know that God is using this year to teach me about love...how to perceive love, how to show love, and how to receive love. There's the love shown by spending quality time with a young boy who wants to play tennis and ride bikes at the same time. Or the love received from a host father in the form of an endless supply of pancakes. Love can come in the form of an unexpected letter from a teammate's mother whom you met only once. Or the love of a father who sends simple words of encouragement nearly each day.

I flew home this week to Arizona to join my family as we mourned and also celebrated the death of my grandfather. Over these past few days, love has been a staple. It has been good to experience so much of it, and to sit back and observe people as they exchanged it. All have expressed their love for my grandfather in unique ways...wearing blue, his favorite color, or by honoring his service in the Marines and Air Force by wearing American flags on our lapels and by posting flags outside of our

houses. We have shown love to others through hugs, kisses, quality time, food, etc. My grandmother expressed her love for me tonight by loading me up with sandwiches, muffins, and some spare change for my journey to Pennsylvania tomorrow. I showed love for her by accepting her gifts and by simply flying home to be with her and family. There was a certain peace about things today...despite the funeral...and I owe much of that to the Love that flowed between us.

"...without love I would be no good to anybody."

I have come back to 1 Corinthians 13 often since we started life on the road almost two months ago. Without love, our ministry is ineffective...but with God's love, it is powerful. I feel that God has shown us great love in many forms...so that we may know how to show that same love to others. And when I experience the love of someone who has so little to give...but gives everything...how can I not learn to love others? May God continue to strengthen us all in "the most excellent way," the way of love.

Mawu neh yirami (God bless you all).

Date: 11/15/2005

Submitted by: Penny Kelley

Journal Entry:

"I bet it's got a lot of soul..." I said jokingly as my hosts pointed out an old house, built in the form of a shoe...(a creative thing if you ask me.) This was the beginning of our journey to good ol' Philadelphia for a trip to the Philadelphia Museum of Art. Now being the art lover that I am, I was extremely excited to "ooh and ahhh..." and drool over the fantastic pieces of creativity and beauty only certain minds can gather up. On the ride to the museum, while waiting with anticipation for the museum, Bethany and I chatted with our hosts--a little about the scenery, and then we got to talking about Dick and Gloria's life. They told us stories of their trips, and then about their experiences in Africa...of all places! They had both gone to Liberia to serve as missionaries, Gloria teaching at a school, and Dick working as a handyman. It was super exciting to hear them speak about their adventures and times in Africa. What got me the most was the way that they re-told their stories, they told them with such passion and enthusiasm in their voices, almost as if their mouths were creating a piece of artwork for my ears to indulge in. After listening to the stories Dick and Gloria told, I sat in the backseat of the car, with a ponderous thought process going on. I got to thinking about how God continues to amaze me with surprises everyday. In the form of stories, our hosts, beautiful scenery, His abundant love and so much more...and really, it struck me, all of this is **true** art. God is the *true art*.

Some would say that Picasso was a brilliant mind, and only he could think up such creative paintings, but really, God is the master of all. God is THE artist. No others could even come close to the masterpieces He has already created and will continue to create.

He creates us and knows every tiny thing about us when we are formed in our mothers' wombs. He could name off the exact numbers of hairs on our heads. He splashes color into the sky for a gorgeous sunset.

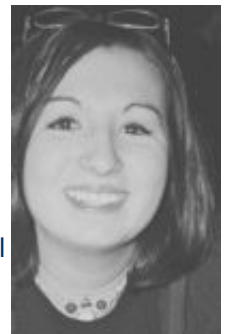
I mean, really, how breath taking is that?

He creates art in me, He creates art in You!

Intricately weaving love, grace, affection, forgiveness, surprises, laughter, etc...into a masterpiece of Love so amazing, we as humans can't even fathom.

So to Him, who creates my heart...I am grateful.

created with special care by *THE Artist* of them all,
Penny



Penny Kelley

Date: 11/16/2005

Submitted by: Kelsey Erickson

Journal Entry:

Hello everyone! Wow! I'm pretty bad at keeping up with journals. I'll try to be more on

top of keeping you all informed. So, the phrase that keeps coming to mind when I think of team is "this is the life." This is the life...perfect strangers open their churches and homes to us and treat us to the best they can offer. Wow! We have been so very blessed by the hospitality of everyone we have met. In some ways, it's a test of our faith--to believe that God counts us worthy to be treated so well by so many.



Kelsey Erickson

Another thing that keeps coming to mind when I think of team is that the church is still alive and well in the United States. It's easy for me to think that God can't work here in the United States anymore--that we're too caught up in our material goods for God to be alive and moving in our churches. I have experienced so many things this fall that speak directly against that thought. God is alive and well in many churches in the United States. This morning, the pastor of the church we're staying in discussed with us the ways to reach kids of today. It's so refreshing to know that the generations of the body of Christ are so concerned for one another.

Along with those thoughts, I've noticed that the churches that are growing aren't necessarily the ones that are the most "relevant" or up to date on the current music trends, etc. The churches that are growing are the ones in which people show a genuine concern for the lives of their neighbors--where the church body is a family. That's good news for many. We don't have to attempt to "keep up," which is a difficult task, as trends change every five minutes, it seems. We need only to show genuine love and compassion in the name of Christ. That takes only the strength which already exists in each of us, through the power of Christ. Amen!

We've been having a great time on the road. One of my highlights was going to Washington, D.C. Not only seeing the city, but watching Jacob enjoy it. He was so excited to see our capital city that it made me excited. And, my mom sent our whole team scarves. That was neat, too. I miss everyone back home, but we're having a great time and looking forward to Midwinter training and Christmas break. Good bye for now!

Date: 12/12/2005

Submitted by: Bethany Schwartz

Journal Entry:

Her name is Maame. She is five years old and she is one of the kids we've met that I will never forget. She is gorgeous and she will try to manipulate things so that she gets her way. I got to play with her in the Bronx at a gathering of church youth for an afternoon of fun activities. As we played various games with balls that we kicked or hit or threw in a circle, she changed from being unable to play with anyone else to being a part of the games. I loved watching her get involved, holding her hand, dancing with her.



Bethany Schwartz

Fast forward to church the next day. Maame's family is from Ghana, and they were all in church on Sunday morning. We had somewhat randomly picked up a new song from Ghana during the previous week. It was the fastest we ever learned and started performing a new song, and it was obvious why God jump-started us on that song when Maame's family recognized the song and her mother got up and danced and sang with us during the service. We praised together, dancing and singing to our Lord. I wished the song would never end.

Then as we moved to the back of the sanctuary to sing communion songs, I witnessed another little miracle. We sing songs that have various languages from around the world in our global Sunday worship service. One communion song is called "Te Quiero", and it translates "I want to love you with all my heart." We weren't supposed to sing this one, but we needed to add a song because there were still a number of people waiting to take communion. As we sang this quiet, reflective song, a man in the back sang the words with us in his native tongue, head bowed, praising God in his own way.

Our next song was in English, a sing-a-long called Cast Your Burdens. As we sang this song I jumped around with the kids singing "lift Jesus higher", "stomp Satan lower", and "cast your burdens onto Jesus for he cares for you." I was definitely crying as we sang, so aware of God working through the diverse congregation, in awe that we could all praise God together,

acknowledging the many cultures in the congregation and praising in our own ways. God is good.

Date: 1/3/2006

Submitted by: A.J. Smith

Journal Entry:

There's nothing like dancing...especially when it's with an 18 month old host brother. Jacob came into the living room a little while ago and put on some of his favorite music called Zouk (zook). It's from the Caribbean and is sung in French, Creole, and English. It sounds like a mix of Tejano and Reggae. The lyrics are very sentimental and the music is very popular in Togo. Jonah, my host brother, began to dance to the music...clapping, twirling, shaking his bottom, falling down to the ground and rolling around. It was quite the sight to see. He was all smiles.



A.J. Smith

The joy I have seen in this young one...along with his parents, Leslie and Scott, and their older son, Tyson, is such a simple reminder to me of how God did not give us life so that we might always constantly worry and fret about how we will acquire our next meal or pay our next bill (though those things are of importance), but to trust that we are in His care and to rejoice in all circumstances. I feel blessed to be staying with this family this week.

It is good to be back on the road after a two-week Christmas break. We are currently staying in Omaha, NE, and will be serving at a church in Elkhorn, NE through Saturday morning. Today, one of the staff members, Barb, led us in a Taize devotional. It was beautiful...the simplicity of the Taize chant and prayer were like a homecooked meal for the spirit...a call to live life simply and to remain healthy and nourished through the Word and prayer (see www.taize.org).

Our travels in Africa are rapidly approaching, and we are rapidly planning and preparing ourselves for what is to come. A couple of random food facts about West Africa for you that we have learned along the way: Many families will eat a meal off of one plate placed in the center of the table, using one spoon per family member (though this tradition is starting to fade away more), and fu-fu, a sweet potato based dish, is a very popular dish, along with sweet potato fries. One of the things I look forward to greatly is sharing meals with people. Hopefully we will have lots of that in Africa.

Until next time.

Bon nuit.

Date: 1/5/2006

Submitted by: Kelsey Erickson

Journal Entry:

Hello!

Merry Christmas and Happy New Year! I had a wonderful break, home with my family and fiance. It was very restful and refreshing. I'll admit, it's taken me a while to get back in to the swing of team life. Fortunately, we've had wonderful experiences so far. We are currently in Elkhorn, Nebraska at the church Penny worked at over the summer. It's a very big church, filled with great people. Everyone has been extremely welcoming and giving. My uncle and aunt came to see our program. It made me feel very loved. We're here for a whole week. My host family is great. I have really enjoyed time with my two host sisters, Amelia and Melissa. Amelia and I went to the playground and went down the curly slide. A word of advice for anyone over five feet wanting to go down the curly slide: go down backwards, you go way faster! Melissa and I have spent lots of time playing with her stuffed animals and reading books. Two nights ago, we were reading about Jesus and she asked me why Jesus had to die, why God would do that, and if we would have to die on a cross, too. I got to explain the Gospel to her. It was such a blessing. God is good.



Kelsey Erickson

Yesterday, my team went to the Omaha zoo. I love the zoo. God is so creative. I love seeing his funniest, most unique, most intricate designs. While we were looking at the jellyfish, the thought

hit me that if these creatures, simple as they are, can be so beautiful, how beautiful must we humans, the prize of creation, must be to God. What an incredible feeling! God is so good. I am so excited to get to Africa. I ask for your prayers of protection and energy as we prepare for the next phase in this year-long adventure.

God bless,

Kelsey <><

Date: 1/6/2006

Submitted by: Penny Kelley

Journal Entry:

"On the road again, I'm so glad we're on the road again..."

You might be humming a familiar Willie Nelson tune to yourself right now, and if you are, I'm glad. Although you may have stumbled through the lyrics, please don't worry, you aren't losing your mind, I changed them.

We are finally on the road again, and it's been an awesome week and a half. We are currently in Elkhorn, NE, at Bethany Lutheran Church. This is a special place for me because I worked here last summer with the Children's Ministry. I absolutely loved working at Bethany; I loved the church, I loved the people, I loved the many times I got to play with kids, I loved the community. God blessed me by placing awesome folks around me constantly and those people have grown to be incredible friends and recently, encouragers on this YE journey.

Shortly after I left I got an email from one particular lady asking me if there were any ways a group of kids could help out our team this year. She then emailed me again telling me they had started a group called "Kidmission". It is a group of about 17 kids who all get together once a week and learn about different ways they can serve God, their community, and the global community. They are there to learn about missions and are excited about it! Well, these fantastic kids have been collecting stickers and making beaded bracelets over the last four months for us to take to Africa for the kids. At our Family Night Program on Wednesday night Kidmission was very much a part of our program--they introduced us, ushered, and then presented us with almost 300 handmade bracelets and about 260 sticker packets during the offering. It was an absolute blessing, and I was in a state of awe with these kids and with God. It was amazing for these kids to witness to our team, to share the love of God with us and kids in Africa by donating so much, and for taking time to care. I know that the team definitely thanks them, and we are looking forward to seeing the reactions of the kids we hand stickers and bracelets out to in Africa.

Tonight we have a lock-in with the junior high kids, we are doing the whole lock-in from 7 pm to 7 am--it should be an absolute blast! There are a lot of activities planned, including sardines, kooky song time, mind games, 11 o'clock worship and many other exciting things. How awesome is it that we can all get together, play, and experience Christ at the same time? I definitely think playing should happen more often when we worship. God is fun, and we should be happy about that and have fun serving Him.

Well, as we finish our time here at Bethany and in Nebraska, we get ready to head to Iowa and South Dakota (my home!) and then Africa! Two weeks from today, we will be heading overseas--what an amazing journey God has for us in store. Please keep Cross Fire and the other teams in your prayers.

I hope you have a fun and playful day!

Playing On His Swingset,

Penny



Penny Kelley

Date: 1/9/2006

Submitted by: Shauna McInerney

Journal Entry:

Faith: the antidote for an anxious spirit.

I feel that God is calling me. He asks that I surrender all of my worldly securities and trust entirely in Him in order to embark whole heartedly on this mission to West Africa. In eleven days I will step out into the unknown, but will be entirely supported by the one aspect of my eccentric life that I do understand--that

God is with me always; there is an absolute plan for me amidst my qualms. I am at peace because I know that I will be fully equipped for the challenges that I will face. God will not lead me to a situation to destroy me or to humiliate me and strip me of all confidence in His powerful will. He is here now. He is here while I prepare my heart. He is guiding my focus and reestablishing my purpose. He is fueling my ambitions and creatively marking my thoughts with goals. He is showing me through others and His word, the very meaning of life. He is working through me. I am not afraid because I have absolute faith in Him alone. I will live as He calls me to live.



Shauna McInerney

"I will not die an un-lived life. I will not go in fear of falling or catching fire. I choose to inhabit my days, to allow my living to open me, to make me less afraid, more accessible, to loosen my heart until it becomes a wing, a torch, a promise. I choose to risk my significance, to live. So that which comes to me as seed, goes to the next as blossom, and that which comes to me as a blossom, goes on as fruit." – Dawn Markova

Date: 1/11/2006

Submitted by: Jacob Djondo

Journal Entry:

Ah que c'est bon d'etre ensemble avec les talents et les dons qu'on a du Tout-Puissant!

Cela fait quatre mois que je suis en tournée d'évangélisation à travers la musique avec "Cross Fire" ce qui veut dire la flamme de la Croix

Nous avons visité pratiquement quinze États dont environ deux villes de chaque. Cela paraît irréel. Mais c'est l'Esprit Saint qui nous donne l'énergie et le courage nécessaire pour ce travail.

Nous avons pour moyen de déplacement un bus de quinze places et une remorque pour nos effets, nous avons aussi pour résidence permanente le bus. Cette vie finit par me passionner. Nous sommes devenues une seule chair. Notre équipe est toujours plus ou moins triste et inexistante quand un membre est absent ou indisposé. Nous parlons d'une même voix et un même langage. Nos goûts et desirs sont devenus communs. Bref le Saint Esprit a fait de nous six une seule personne. C'est vraiment beau.

Ce qui est encore plus excitant c'est ce que nous vivons constamment dans la Parole de Dieu. En la partageant nous la vivons de même. Aussi les personnes que nous rencontrons nous édifient beaucoup par leur générosité, leur gentillesse et leur ardent désir d'aider à accomplir notre mission qui est bien sûr celle de Notre Père Éternel.

Nous avons pratiquement terminé la première étape et nous nous préparons physiquement, moralement, et spirituellement à entamer la seconde phase qui est celle de l'Afrique de l'Ouest. Nous sommes tous très excités à accomplir cette phase.

Je remercie Dieu pour sa bonté si immense qu'Il ne cesse de nous prouver. Servir Dieu est la plus noble fonction.

Dieu soit loué d'éternité en éternité. Amen



Jacob Djondo

Date: 1/11/2006

Submitted by: Jacob Djondo

Journal Entry:

Ah what it is wonderful to be together with the talents and the gifts that we have from God!

I have been in an evangelism tour through music, skit, puppet shows and sharing on Cross Fire for four months now.

We have been so far in fifteen states of US and in at least two towns of each. That



Jacob Djondo

seems to be amazing? Yes it is. For the Holy Spirit gives us strength and the courage for this work.

We have for our tour a van and a trailer. And they are our permanent residence. This is very exciting. You may wonder do we live in that life. We have been often asked that question by kids and youth we have been meeting in our tour.

Definitely we spend most of our day in the van travelling from a place to another. And also in the van we have clothes, picture of dears, reading books, food etc... We are all excited about this life and get sometimes nervous when we remember that it going to stop next August.

We became one body. My team is somehow sad and even weak when one of the members is missing or sick. We speak with one voice and tongue. We thoroughly have the same tastes and desires. Brief the Holy Spirit has made the six of us one person. That's so wonderful and exciting.

More over we live constantly the Word of God through how how we share with each other, we strengthen each other, pray with each other, encourage and love each other. Aren't we children of the same Father!? Our Father called us together to share with His Word. We are so happy and proud to do that work. It's so exciting and keeps us in the Word.

God is so benevolent that people we have been meeting are so generous and kind. I am so impressed about how those people are eager to host us, to feed us, to pray for us, brief to help us accomplish our mission is from our common Lord's.

We have almost completed the first part of our mission. We will leave in January 20th for the second part in West Africa. I am so excited to go back to home. I am missing my ones a lot. But what is amazing is that my teammates seem to be more excited by going to Africa than I do. They are really excited. I am moved looking at them counting always the days.

Any way I think we are spiritually prepared to begin our next part of the mission we have been called to.

I thank Jesus for His abundant goodness He always shows us. Serving Him is the most noble function.

Praise God for ever and ever, Amen

Date: 1/14/2006

Submitted by: Bethany Schwartz

Journal Entry:

The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not be in want. He makes me lie down in green pastures, he leads me beside quiet waters, he restores my soul. Psalm 23:1-3a

My nana passed away last week. As she was dying, I questioned God, couldn't see how he was working in her life. I desperately wanted to know he was there with her, leading her home, and as the time drew near for her to enter heaven, God answered my prayers. I got to play the piano for Nana one last time, and during my song she peacefully entered God's eternal kingdom. That was very meaningful for me, spending the last moments of her life giving her myself and my music. But God wasn't finished yet.

I wanted to use that story as a sharing this morning in church, and it just so happened that a church member, a young man, had passed away last week as well. God gave me the words to say, and my story fell on open hearts, hearts that perhaps needed a reminder of God's goodness and faithfulness even in death. God's love filled the church in Huxley, Iowa this morning, and there was a special unity in the air. What peace and comfort there is in the knowledge that those we worshiped with this morning will again join us to worship God in heaven one day.

Tears have been near quite a bit lately, and it isn't always in sadness over losing Nana, but also in amazement over what God is doing. My host mom had previously wanted to sell her piano, but God wouldn't have that because he was saving it for me to play for Nana. Tonight we had the privilege of singing for a woman who was probably the wisest woman I have ever met. Generosity abounds in



Bethany Schwartz

our host homes and churches. I had the chance to see almost all of the family members that I didn't get to see over Christmas break when I was home for the funeral. God is good. We are blessed. Ministry should be harder than this, but I have never been so blessed as I have been this year.

Surely goodness and love will follow me all the days of my life and I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever. Psalm 23:6

Date: 1/15/2006

Submitted by: Bethany Schwartz

Journal Entry:

Host homes are fun. Of all the adventures we have, I think our host home experiences make the best stories. Penny and I are together this last week before we leave for Africa, and our hosts, the Behnkens, are making it even harder to say goodbye to the United States. I just had a silly songfest with my awesome host siblings, giggling and pretending to be different characters. I never imagined my life could be so different from night to night and yet always so fun.



Bethany Schwartz

We have been fed extremely well and, from the looks of the schedule, that will continue for the rest of the week. We have been given so much by our host church, which is also the first church we visited back in September. We were so nervous, so new, and a little bit awkward back then. The church took us in and accepted us in our newness and encouraged us to grow, and they are encouraging us yet again. They are excited about where we are going and what we will learn and want to make us as relaxed here as possible. What an awesome blessing. God's love overflows here in Woodbury, MN.

Date: 1/16/2006

Submitted by: A.J. Smith

Journal Entry:

There seems to be much to do before leaving for Africa in these next few days, like cleaning out the van, packing our bags (keeping in mind weight requirements), acquiring last minute needs, making last minute phone calls and meetings with loved ones, carving out at least a basic idea of what our own individual jobs will be like overseas, making sure we take all the right resources, and rehearsing our new French music and puppet shows. Seems like madness in only four days. Yet, things will get done with God's help.



A.J. Smith

It is snowing quite heavily here in St. Paul this evening. What was only supposed to be a light dusting has developed into several inches of snow in a very short period of time. The roads are hard to drive on, especially in a 15-passenger van like ours...which only has two-wheel drive. I had my second experience of getting stuck in the snow while driving this evening (the first being a few weeks back in Dalton, MN...when my teammates had to get out and push the van to get it going again). After dropping Jacob off at his host home, I made the turn onto Schaller Dr. and found myself desperately trying to climb uphill on a slippery street. The van fish-tailed several times, and eventually I could budge no further. I stopped the van and ran across the street to a house to ask for help. The younger father that came to my rescue immediately jumped behind the wheel of the van and got me back on the right track. He even gave me directions to my host home that led me on a safer route, getting me back sooner than I expected.

I am continually amazed by how God works in our lives, how He provides for us, and how He sets us in the right direction when we ask for his help.

Au revoir.

Date: 1/18/2006
Submitted by: Penny Kelley
Journal Entry:



Bonjour!

With only one more day of prep left in the week, we are frantically running around trying to finish all of our last minute details. It's true, in less than two days we will be flying out of Minneapolis, on our way to West Africa! That's right, fantastic West Africa (that sounds like a commercial or an enticing magazine ad). The dream that I have been anticipating since August is finally starting to become more of a reality to me. In fact, the reality of it all hadn't really hit me until yesterday while we were in the bank getting our travelers' checks. I stood in line waiting to sign my checks, and I had this crash of reality come down on me like a van. My mind was immediately in shock. I thought to myself, "Oh wow, I'm going to Africa soon, really, really soon!" My mind kept spinning with questions, some of them pretty ridiculous! Here are a few:

How hot is it going to really be?

Will I be able to use the bathroom/hole?

Am I going to be able to understand any of the language?

Does the sun still shine?

Will I fall into a dark abyss and never return?

Looking at those questions you might think I am crazy, but seriously those were just a few of the things running through my head. I think that my mind has been creating a sleeping gas that has slowly been putting my "reality factor" to sleep, kind of like nitrous oxide (the stuff they use in the dentist's office), since August when I started team. So imagine if you will my mind on a sleeping gas; me being in my own little "no reality allowed, la-la land" for the past four and a half months, completely canceling out the thought of reality happening. Ha, what a funny thought. Well, reality hit me yesterday. I'm really going to Africa. It's really happening in a couple of days. When the panic hit, the questions came and still I'm left wondering about some of them, but I think that's the exciting part. It's neat knowing that the answers to most questions come with experiencing life and searching. Living in a completely different culture, seeing life in a completely different way, is going to be an experience that could change my life. One experience I'm looking forward to. I know that God is awesome and I know that there are going to be plenty of times to experience things in West Africa. I will be able to experience a different lifestyle, He will give me opportunities to find ways to communicate other than with language, and He will give me the opportunity to watch Him paint the sky with the sunset. He will give me time to experience in new and completely unfamiliar ways. The reality of it all is: I will have questions, I will have fears, I will have joys, and I will have time to experience with God by my side. That is an amazing sweetness.

Daily Experiencing,
Penny

Penny Kelley

Date: 1/20/2006
Submitted by: Bethany Schwartz
Journal Entry:



37,000 feet above the Atlantic Ocean

Blindly I looked and, in the distance, I saw a mountain range clothed in fog. I smiled and continued on, knowing that God would lead me through. Then I stumbled and looked up to see a mountain already blocking my path. And as I watched, God lifted the mountain as though it were no bigger than an ant and led us on level ground where there had just been a mountain.

Bethany Schwartz

They tell us to expect the unexpected when traveling overseas. I laughed as I found the truth in that beginning already in the Minneapolis airport. As we tried to get through security, Jacob was denied because his name on his ticket was different than the name on his passport. Shauna, our Canadian, went through security, and the rest of us ran back to the ticket counter to get the name on Jacob's ticket changed. It turns out that is not an easy task. Our Team Director and our travel coordinator were still in the airport and came to the rescue. Changing the name would cost thousands of dollars for some reason, and it would take a lot of time. The plane was already scheduled to be boarding. We were very low on both time and money. Amber (our travel coordinator) got on the phone with our travel agent, and though I couldn't hear either side of the conversation, I could see God working by watching Amber's face. The phone call began with a worried, tense, and stressed Amber. Then she started smiling, and there was hope in her eyes.

Her excitement grew, she made happy gestures at us from a distance, and then smiles took over her whole face. Penny and AJ went through security. We found out the plane was delayed at least an hour for various reasons! Wow. I knew God had picked up our mountain. Our awesome travel agency, Intermission, was able to cancel the tickets and immediately book Jacob new tickets. We sent Kelsey through security. Now we just had to get Jacob and me through. As we rechecked Jacob in, we realized his bags were still checked under the wrong name and that would be a problem when we changed airlines in France. And I had just given Kelsey all of the baggage claim tickets! I took off, sprinted across the airport to security, and just barely caught her before she went through. I took the tickets and ran back. At this point, time was still crunched, we had no idea how long the delay actually was, and the estimated time of departure was quickly approaching. We got the baggage changed over because God had led us to be working with the manager of sorts, the person with the most authority, who could do things others couldn't, and thus she was able to change Jacob's luggage while she said the others couldn't have done that. Everything set, we quickly exclaimed how awesome God is for at least the tenth time in 20 minutes, and gave hugs to Heather and Amber, so very thankful that they were there to help. Jacob and I walked as quickly as we could to security, and there we found out that Jacob had been selected by the computer to be screened at security. I told them we were very crunched for time, but airport procedure doesn't really care about that. I wasn't going through security without Jacob, so I told them his English wasn't the greatest and I would act as interpreter. That worked well. Jacob didn't need my services, but again, I wasn't about to leave him. We made it through without a problem and fairly quickly. Praise the Lord for airport employees that were kind and helpful. Then we ran to our gate, and we were met in the corridor by our teammates with hugs of joy. We made it! And just then, before we thought about sitting down, we were called to board.

The excitement didn't end there. Safely on board, we sat and waited as they fixed a part of the plane. The delay took so long that we didn't arrive in Washington until we were supposed to board the plane for Paris. We heard the last call for boarding our flight as we entered the airport on the opposite end of the terminal. We all ran as fast as we could, dodging people, weaving in and out of travelers, and made it red-faced and breathing heavily to the gate. There would be no time to grab a snack or use the restroom, but that didn't matter. We made the plane! I was so thankful for the snacks my host home had sent along. As we've been traveling for about twelve hours now, I have had so many things to thank God for. We had an amazing lesson in faith today, God reminding us of his awesome power and providing for us with little things, small kindnesses along the way. Here we go, God, by your leading.

Today's Bible reading included this:

A voice of one calling:
"In the desert prepare
the way for the Lord;
make straight in the wilderness
a highway for our God.
Every valley shall be raised up,
every mountain and hill made low;
the rough ground shall become level,
the rugged places a plain.
And the glory of the Lord will be revealed,
and all mankind together will see it.
For the mouth of the Lord has spoken."
--Isaiah 40:3-5

Submitted by: Penny Kelley
Journal Entry:

Bonjour

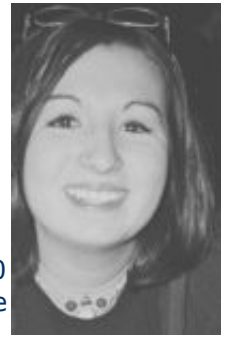
Greetings from Cotonou, Benin! It's been intense, but after months of preparation, numerous airports, and traveling for more than 24 hours, we are in West Africa. I must say--it is so much more than I had expected. Africa is a place you can not explain with words; you have to be here experiencing it to understand.

We stepped off the plane onto African ground around 8 p.m. on Saturday; it was about 90 degrees F in Lome, Togo. Hotter than I would have hoped for; but good in its own! For me there was an immediate shock of that "reality factor" I talked about in my last journal, waking up! I'm constantly having moments where I look out the window and have to remind myself, "I'm in Africa, wooah!" Like right now, some of us are in a Internet Cafe and I've been staring at this screen for a while now, and I just looked around and said to AJ, who is sitting beside me, "AJ, we are in Africa!" With all of the shock of being in a completely different culture and away from every comfort we have known--our safety blankets, I guess you could say--there is a sweet thing that goes along with it all. The sweetness is that it's an opportunity to completely trust God in everything we do. He has provided for us, loved us, and I know He is keeping a close eye on us throughout our journey here. It's time for me to go but more will come soon.

May God bless you--trust in Him

In His Grip,

Penny



Penny Kelley

Date: 1/23/2006
Submitted by: A.J. Smith
Journal Entry:

It's good to finally be in Africa. We arrived Saturday evening in Lomé, Togo. Thanks to God for bringing us here safely and keeping us under his wing. He truly is the God that moves mountains.

My first taste of Togolese culture was shortly after our arrival. Jacob's friend, Rev. Nestor, took me on a motor bike ride from the airport to our home for the night at a Baptist retreat center. From the backseat of the bike, I watched the dream of being in Africa dissolve into reality as the city of Lomé flew by me on all sides. Night clubs, street vendors, women carrying goods in baskets of all sizes on their heads, other cars and motor bikes flying past and honking at us.

Yesterday morning we visited a small village called Djagble, to the north of Lomé. Upon our arrival, we were greeted by the sounds of singing and drumming from a group of men and children at the entrance to the village. We worshiped with the villagers. It was an invigorating experience...and refreshing. The service was in Ewe, a language spoken in the southern parts of Togo. There was much dancing and singing. Afterwards was a meeting in which people stood up and expressed concerns over poor water quality and lack of nearby public schools. The water issue was especially eye opening and humbling, as one man brought forward a bottle of water taken from their water source that looked like chocolate milk....humbling because the people of the village had provided for us bottles of fresh, purified water. After the meeting we gathered together and had soda...and I had my first tasted of malt drink. I can't describe the taste.

On the ride back to Lomé, Nestor pointed out to me the water source...a river that was used for bathing and washing clothes. Along the road back to Lomé he also pointed out to me the various gardens of greens and herbs that people cultivate for a living. I also noticed from the back of the motor bike how some people would stop and stare at me as we whizzed by. A reminder of how we are now a minority in a different land.

After having a hearty lunch of fufu (mashed yams), rice, fish, and pineapple at Jacob's home, we departed for Cotonou, the capital of Benin and spent the night in a hotel. Today will consist of trips to the bank, the market, and the U. S. embassy.



A.J. Smith

Many blessings.

Date: 1/23/2006

Submitted by: Jacob Djondo

Journal Entry:

Here we made it!

Cross Fire is in West Africa since January 21.

We had a very exciting trip. We got St. Paul airport in the 20th at noon. It was as usually very busy. We went straight to the boarding process. We checked our luggages and got the boarding ticket. From there we hung out for few minutes with Amber from the office, Carl, Kelsey's fiance, and Josh, Shauna's fiance. After that we went to say good bye to New Dawn and wish them safe trip as they are travelling to Asia.



Jacob Djondo

Now it is time to get aboard the plane. I went first for the checking. I as well as the officer figured out that my name in the passport wasn't conform with the ticket. My passport shows Ayaba Kpatega Djondo, but the ticket shows Jacob Ayaba.

So I can't get the plane. Wawooh! The cell phone is really necessary. Kelsey quickly called by phone Amber; she came quick. She went to the officer that checked our luggages to figure out what to do. Nothing good. I might have missed my flight because time of taking off is close, but the procedure to have me flying with my team is long, and worstly, we might buy another ticket that could cost more than \$6000. Amber promptly asked us to pray; we did. We were between two options and have to make the right decision. We got to know that the flight delayad about 45 minutes. God is awesome.

Amber made the right decision. I was impressed. She made a phone call. A few minutes later we can see Amber who was smiling. Yes, something good we guessed. And we were right. Amber was able to have just my name changed and I got my flight. God is faithful. He said "Ask and I will give you." We prayed and asked and God made it.

Prayer is really what we can use to accomplish anything. I had a dream three days before the day of our departure, and that was the only one dream I had about my trip. What was that dream? It was that I missed my flight for Togo. When I woke up, I prayed to God to solve any problem that would hinder us to make our trip. And I shared that with my teammates.

It was the day of the flight that I realised that God knew that something is wrong with my ticket and will hinder my flight. So he revealed that to me in order to work on it. What a Father full of love for us! I prayed for that, and when we met the problem the first reaction of Amber was to ask us to pray.

Let's pray constantly.

Date: 1/25/2006

Submitted by: Penny Kelley

Journal Entry:

Cotonou and Womey, Benin

Screams of Joy and Screams of Fear

I can honestly say I've never been known to scare children. Ask anyone and that's the last thing they'll tell you about me and kids. I love them a bunch—they have so much energy, curiosity, and "oomph" for life. It's really inspiring to me. What a blessing to life they bring; the last thing I would want to do is make them cry. Well, today is a monumental day. Today is a day I can no longer say



Penny Kelley

I've never made a kid cry. Not only did I make a child cry, but I didn't know why until I asked.

Today started like this: we woke up, played the oh-so-familiar game of "Waiting," and then played it again until our driver arrived to pick us up. We piled into our sweet ride and were off to a small village outside of Cotonou called Womey. In Womey, we drove up to a preschool. The building was painted a bright color, and my eyes were treated to familiar paintings of our favorite Disney characters: Mickey, Donald, Goofy, etc. I knew it was going to be a fun time, so I eagerly got out of the car, grabbed an instrument, and then skipped into the building. (Maybe I didn't really skip, but I wanted to.) When we were in, the children started piling out of their classrooms. By the time they were all out, there were probably 300 or so preschoolers out waiting for us to play some sweet Jesus music! We started with "Nous Chanton," one of our favorites and a favorite for the people here. We had a blast throughout our entire program, and when we were finished, we were allowed some time to play and hang out with the kids. Some of us chose to take some pictures (one of my favorite things!) and showed them to the kids. It was so fun seeing their reaction! Our fun time was quickly coming to an end, so I tried to greet as many people as possible before we left. This is where it happened...

I greeted a few children and, a little ways into it, I attempted greeting another boy who immediately started screaming! I had no idea why he was screaming, so, panicking, I looked around and saw all the adults were laughing. This made me even more confused. Finally, an adult came to me and said, "It's his first time seeing a white person." I was taken aback. "What? Whoa, I guess I am white, huh? I probably am a little scary looking to him." I never imagined scaring someone because of the color of my skin. The idea of other skin colors has never fazed me.

From that point on, I made it my goal to be as warm and friendly to that child as possible. Slowly trying to ease my skin color to his eyes and let him understand in a small way why I am different looking than he. By the end of our time at the school, he touched my hand while clutching a woman's dress with all his strength at the same time. It was a moment I will never forget. His curious touch will never leave my memory. He taught me a valuable lesson today. It's okay to be curious about our differences—it's the only way to understand them and move on, rejoicing in our similarities!

"May the God who gives endurance and encouragement give you a spirit of unity among yourselves as you follow Christ Jesus, so that with one heart and mouth you may glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. Accept one another, then, just as Christ accepted you, in order to bring praise to God." (Romans 15:5-7)

Date: 1/31/2006

Submitted by: Bethany Schwartz

Journal Entry:

More bread, anyone?

Let's talk about food for...well, for as long as I want because time doesn't mean the same thing here. We found some bread that we really liked here in Benin. We buy bread that is wrapped to protect it from bugs and dust and whatever else it needs to be protected from. It all looks the same on the outside, but sometimes it tastes like marshmallows, sometimes sweet, sometimes it has little seeds in it, sometimes it just tastes like chewy rocks. The fruit is awesome, but it usually requires a knife to get into, and our small knife isn't always available. Turns out coconuts don't taste like much and they especially don't taste like the coconut flavoring I liked in the United States, but it also turns out that pineapples taste more like coconuts than they taste like pineapples. Bread, anyone? We have lots of bread. When we eat with hosts, they are always very kind, and serve us the best meat, the choicest of flavors... Unfortunately, the meat is very different from what we are used to, usually still covered with scales or full of bones, and not so easy for the white people to get through. So...more bread,



Bethany Schwartz

anyone? We have no refrigerator, so we are limited in the things we can buy--foods that won't spoil. More bread, anyone? Oh, and our hotel is within walking distance from a very nice lady who sells, you may have guessed it...bread.

While we chew on our bread, we have time to ponder the concept of time. Does the concept of time even exist in this country of Benin, for example? When our contact says we have a program at 8 the next morning at this place, it means that we may have a program tomorrow but probably not at the place he mentioned, and the driver won't even come until 10 so why did I get up so early? And why, when he was giving us the so-called schedule for the next day, did our contact give us a half hour to get to our supposed destination and an hour and a half to get back? As far as meals go, since time doesn't exist, meals seem to be eaten whenever we are finally full from the bread we have been choking down all day while waiting for our driver and wondering if the meal we had been expecting three hours ago had been forgotten. Then when our stomachs are full from bread and our driver has finally arrived and taken us who knows where to do who knows what, we find out that we didn't actually have the program we were expecting, but we can do this or that for approximately...until they tell us to stop. Then it must be time to call our contact and find out what should happen next, and which of the three places that we thought we were headed to today we will actually go to. When we finally reach our contact after dialing his number at a phone booth over and over, we find out that everything has been rearranged and let's drive around the city a few more times just to use our gas and inhale the blue fumes from the awesome scooters that I wish I could be riding instead of boiling in this station wagon that I can't believe is actually still driving. You know what, guys, maybe we should just go and buy more bread. Bon appetit!

Date: 1/31/2006

Submitted by: Kelsey Erickson

Journal Entry:

Hello all!

First off, you're all in for a treat because today I found the apostrophe on the keyboard. See, the computer keyboards are a bit different here. Most things are the same, but there are just enough different things to make you a little nuts. So, if I type q instead of a, you'll know why. We're very happy to be in Africa. I feel very blessed that we had safe travel. We only lost one piece of luggage (a guitar), but it's been recovered and we'll get it when we go back to Togo. God has truly blessed us. We've had flushing toilets and running water the whole time. Wow! Next week, we'll be venturing out of Cotonou, the capital city, to some smaller villages. Even though we probably won't have those luxuries, I'm very excited to experience another part of Benin culture.

I'd like to tell you a bit about what God has been teaching me so far. He has reminded me that he is the living water every time I have to pump the purifier for drinking water. He reminds me that he is the bread of life when I am hungry. God is asking me, would I give up all my things, my "treasures" back in the United States, if he asked me to? Would I really be willing to share ALL I have with others? I have to admit, I don't know yet. I hope the answer is yes, I know it will be, but for now, I am realizing that God calls us to give our whole lives to him. He asks that we'd be willing to give it all for him. What is your answer? Would you give up everything if he asked? God's blessings on your day.



Kelsey Erickson

Date: 2/1/2006

Submitted by: Penny Kelley

Journal Entry:

Ouihta, Benin

Ouihta is a historical city in the country of Benin. It is where many slaves were shipped out of back in the days of slavery. There are museums, statues, a memorial by the ocean, etc....all in remembrance of the people who were hurt, the family members lost, and an unjust time in history.



Ouihta is also a very diverse place with their beliefs. There are many questioning people, those who worship the python, and other beliefs. So this makes evangelizing a pretty interesting experience. So far, our programming in Africa has been a lot of evangelizing, walking door to door, singing and inviting people to hear the Word of God and then informing them about a nearby church. Today was no exception to the norm. We hit the streets with Christ on our hearts. One of our first stops was at a little shop on the main road. The owners allowed us 20 minutes across the street from their shop to sing. Twenty minutes of jam time, hoping people would stop to listen...a few people stopped and Jacob explained to them our mission and why we were there. The people smiled and walked away. We made a few more stops which were similar to the first, and then we came upon an area where there was some mechanic type work going on. The first thing we heard out of one man's mouth was, "God doesn't have any money, so we don't want him here." I was a little discouraged hearing this, but quickly tucked the comment in the back of my mind, knowing that we had an important message to share and that God is powerful. Within minutes, we were singing at the top of our lungs, praises to God. After a couple of songs, the same man asked questions like, "How do you get to heaven?" and "What does God say about...?" It was so exciting, seeing that he was questioning and wanted to know more. We exchanged thoughts and answered some questions to the best of our knowledge, and then he asked if we would pray for his shop area. We did. It was good. I'm not sure what he thinks now or will believe in the future, but I know he's thinking and God will be working.

Just as we were about to leave, another man who was listening asked if we had a Bible he could have. Amazingly and only because of God's perfect timing, we had our one and only French Bible with. We handed it to him and I watched him crack it open immediately as we walked away. I looked back once and saw him reading with two other men, pointing and discussing. I smiled, knowing that the Word is out. A few more people have it in their hands. That, my friends, is simply amazing.

Date: 2/2/2006

Submitted by: Kelsey Erickson

Journal Entry:

Cotonou, Benin

Happy Groundhog's Day! I don't know what the weather was like in the United States, but winter is certainly over for Cross Fire. Today we visited a village called Akogbato. We had been there before, helping with a church that is just starting. Today, however, we visited schools. Four schools. The first school was very neat. It was just opened last year by a pastor. God gave them the vision to start a school that teaches in English and French and teaches Christianity. They begin every day by singing praises to God. In fact, the students sang those songs for us when we arrived. One of the older students played the drum and everyone sang at the top of their lungs. It made the program we did feel more like we were worshipping together, rather than teaching kids to worship. It was very restorative. Speaking of restorative, we got to have time to rest in the middle of the day! The little blessings from God...

We spent the afternoon going house to house, telling people of another new congregation that was starting up. The day ended with a very satisfying meal at Centre Ayifa (where we're staying). In fact, we were served fried potatoes. It was so wonderful to eat something familiar. More little blessings...



Kelsey Erickson

Date: 2/3/2006

Submitted by: Shauna McInerney

Journal Entry:



Yovo! Bonsoir!

"Yovo, Bonsoir, ca vas bien, merci... Yovo, Bonsoir, ca vas bien, merci..." is what we hear when the children have spotted us. They sing it at the top of their lungs and chase after us waving. The translation is: "White people, good evening, it's going well, thank you." All of the children seem to know this song.

We sing a response in the same tune, "Little children, good evening, it's going well, thank you". They obviously get a good kick out of this. We've also gotten to the point of screaming "Yovo, Yovo!" out the window to white strangers that we pass by. Ah, we are adjusting, and it feels fabulous.

Our driver who speaks little French, Fon being his first language, is also beginning to **Shauna McInerney** warm up to us. Perhaps it is we who are warming up to him. Now, instead of freaking out when it seems like we might squish the motorbike driver, get struck by a merging vehicle, tip over while driving along a steep embankment or be stuck in a stiff of sand, we cheer and clap, "Yay Epiphan, tu es fantastique!" We are currently working on developing a song specifically for him. He is a good man and will be leading us to the North of Benin tomorrow. There we will be given a different mission upon our arrival and we will stay for the week.

I keep thinking of the ways that my dad's eccentric/go against the grain mentality has helped me to adjust to this fabulous culture. We are cramming twelve people in a five passenger vehicle. We jump on to offroads, just for the scenic route. We pile things high on top of our car and tie them down with ropes and bungee cords. We have French Day every day. We drive vehicles that should be outlawed. We walk often, to save money on gas. We are always trying new foods that scare us, but do it with joy. We deal with the temperature and don't complain. We wear clothes that are rugged and don't match. We find ways to use the bare minimum. Duct tape. We make friends with everyone. We are spontaneous, very spontaneous. We are bold. We are brave. We don't fear a thing.

God has been strengthening us. Our mission is to bring the gospel to those who have not heard, and to encourage those who already believe. We are working on establishing a church in Womey, a small village outside of Cotonou, Benin. The people that we have encountered have seemed very receptive. We aren't sure if this will continue into the first service, but are praying for a high attendance. I have been praying specifically that God would show me a greater purpose for my being here. I struggle with the amount of pain and deprivation that I see, and wish that I were better equipped or had more to offer (physical and mental health care, funding, agriculture). To justify this call, I think of the sharper focus that I will have in returning to school. I am viewing this life as a tiny segment of eternity. So short. I am reminded that Christ saw the very same situations and struggles when He was with us on this earth. Although He healed the sick, and tended to the weak and the poor, He viewed eternal life as the greater goal. He saw the souls of the people as the greatest emergency.

Please pray that the Lord will give us peace in His Saving Grace, and strength that can only come from Him.

Date: 2/3/2006

Submitted by: Bethany Schwartz

Journal Entry:

When we heard that a lot of past Cross Fire teams did a lot of walking, I thought that meant they walked between villages with their big packs on, walking mostly because it was a means of transportation. So far, we have walked a ton, but for a much

different purpose. We are mostly doing door to door evangelism when we walk, talking to people in their homes or at the stands where they work. I love to do this, to talk to people (ok, I just smile a lot because I don't speak French or the local language, Fon) and sing them a song or two. We often find small children following after us as we walk. I love to turn around and realize we are being followed. Yes, they may just be following us because we are white and that fact alone makes us highly entertaining, but as they listen, they are hearing the Gospel spoken, and they are learning songs about Jesus.



Bethany Schwartz

I also love to see kids running at us from the distance, running because they have heard there are "yovo" (white people) or because they hear singing they don't recognize... whatever the reason, they run at us, some coming right up to us, others stopping at a corner where they can see us from a safe distance. Can we greet their enthusiasm for our white skin and replace it with an enthusiasm for Christ?

Another thing I love to do as we walk is look at the surroundings. I can almost always find a pair of eyes looking at us from an unsuspected spot. There are people watching from upstairs windows, from behind a wall, from under a table, from rooftops... I love to look for these people as we go, to meet their eyes and give them a smile. I am reminded of how Jesus reached out to Zacchaeus when he climbed the tree to get a better look. Jesus looked up and showed Zacchaeus the love that he had to offer. I want to offer the same love, to look at those people who come, who peek out from their hiding places, who look from any opening they can, and offer them the grace of God, the love that covers all sin and pain.

The people we have met all have a story. I wish I could get to know them, to hear their stories, to understand what a life lived in Benin is really like. We don't get that blessing as we pass from house to house, but God knows them each individually, God hears our prayers for them, God is working in their lives. Even though our presence may just be a quick glimpse at a yovo, I pray that God uses us to share a lasting message of his amazing love and forgiveness.

Date: 2/4/2006

Submitted by: Shauna McInerney

Journal Entry:

Cotonou, Benin

In Matthew 14:14, Jesus has compassion on the sick and healed them. I remember my pastor talking about *splanchnizomai*, which is the Greek word for compassion. Now, *splanchnology* is the study of the gut, basically. When Matthew writes about Jesus having compassion on the people, he's not saying that Jesus had casual pity for them. It has to be far more graphic than that. He had to have felt the hurt of the diseased. He felt the limp of the crippled. He felt the loneliness of the leper. He felt the embarrassment of the sinful.



Shauna McInerney

And, when He felt these hurts, He healed them.

I feel this need to offer more. I haven't any answers.

I was sick for some time and was really struggling with how little I have to offer...I basically felt useless. I am here, offering the GOSPEL, but what about mental/physical health? What about agriculture?

I understand now that God sees the souls of His people as the greatest emergency.

"But thanks be to God! He gives us victory through our Lord Jesus Christ. Therefore my dear brothers, stand firm. Let nothing move you. Always give yourselves fully to the work of the Lord because you know that your labor is not in vain." (1 Corinthians 15:57-58)

Christ is all that we need. He is everything.

Date: 2/7/2006

Submitted by: A.J. Smith

Journal Entry:

Bohicon, Benin

This afternoon we traveled to the village of Doutin. Our experience there was a pleasant surprise, especially since we were being led blindly to our program, not having the slightest idea of where we would be playing. On the way to the village, we picked up our own guide in Bohicon, a lovely young woman dressed elegantly. Doutin was her home village. When we arrived in Doutin, we were greeted by a few men who led us to a building that looked like a meeting house. As we walked towards the meeting house, we saw women and children curiously looking at us and following us—this happens often when we travel to a neighborhood or village. We quickly become the "pied pipers."



A.J. Smith

We were taken into the building and seated in chairs. People began to trickle into the building, and a few women came over to greet us, shaking our hands and bowing slightly. Soon a large crowd of women who had been working outside came in and sat together on benches to our right, while the men and children sat to our left. At that moment, I had to leave to grab some instruments. When I came back, all of the women were singing and clapping. One woman was standing in front of the girls, dancing Benin-style (lots of movement with the hips, shoulders, and elbows). The sight was entrancing. There were two other dancers, as well, who could rotate in every now and then. The singing was also amazing. Sometimes it was singing, sometimes shouting, sometimes call-and-response, but always loud, resonant, and joyful. This was our welcome to Doutin. The room became hot very quickly due to all of the people crammed inside the room and the movement to the music.

When the women finished singing, we then sang for them three songs. They were so pleased to hear us singing in their home language, Fon. One woman was so pleased to hear her language being used by yovos (white people) that she requested a church be built in their village so they could worship. We talked to the villagers about where we were from, what we were each doing last year, and what we left behind to be in Africa. We also sang some songs with the kids. We taught them "Cast Your Burdens," which was a bit chaotic. As the children started jumping, dust flew everywhere and Shauna had to rescue two children from being trampled. Following the song, we taught them "Hello" and "Goodbye."

Following our program, we took a tour of Doutin's palm oil operation. It was outdoors and impressive to see. The women who sang for us were also the women who ran the operation. The men ran their separate operation of producing alcohol called sodavie, also made from palm nuts and said to be very expensive. With both of these operations, Doutin seemed to be better off than most villages we have visited.

As we parted from the villagers, we were practically surrounded, shaking hands and hearing children say "Hello" and "Goodbye" at the same time. We sang to them one more song, "Mau nah donumi," Fon for "God bless you all." People here really appreciate foreigners speaking their home language. Even if it's only a few words, it can make a world of difference.

Date: 2/8/2006

Submitted by: Penny Kelley

Journal Entry:

Bohicon, Benin

Cowboys and Police

You know those old Western movies your parents love? (Well, maybe it's just my parents.) The ones with rugged cowboys, horses, hissing rattlesnakes, and lots of dirt—all the things that make a good Western great. Well, I know my Westerns, and today I felt like the star of one of them. Picture this: you're riding in your stallion of a car, complete with dents, rust, and cracks to let the dirt in, feeling every bump in the road, each one making you feel more and more alive (or sore on the rump). You look around and see the green palm trees, the sun brightly shining through blue skies, and your teammates struggling to find their breath. So, maybe this isn't your typical Western, but we're not in the West anymore. Today on our way to the village of Kinta, I discovered why I like cowboys. Because they're smart! Why, you ask? Well, cowboys wore bandannas, and not just because it was the latest fashion statement, We quickly realized it was because they wanted to breathe without choking down a pound of dirt with every breath. Today, I pretended to be a cowboy; in fact, we all did, and I'm happy to say we all have cleaner lungs because of it. Thank goodness for cowboys! Moving on...



Penny Kelley

Today we had two school programs in the morning. They were both fun. At one of the schools, the children took turns dancing during our songs. In Benin, they have their own special dance—it's kind of a shoulder thrust, birdlike movement. I'm not really sure how to explain it, but it's great to watch and even funnier for them to watch us trying. So the kids danced, we sang—it was a jolly ol' time.

When we finished both programs, it was lunch time. This meant we would get some bread and water to tide us over until we could eat more. We pulled over to get some water from a vendor, and within seconds, the police were at our side, speaking to our driver in French. I don't know very much French, so at this time I was a little spazzed out trying to figure out what was going on in front of me. Well, I tried and failed. All I knew was that the policeman was now in the driver's seat, driving us somewhere. We had no clue where. But we figured it out when we pulled up into the police station. When we got there, we found out we had parked somewhere we weren't supposed to have parked, but there was no sign...someone had stolen it. So we sat, and the police told us to "make ourselves at home." (Ha.) We sat "arrested" for the next hour, trying to figure out what we had to do in order to leave. Our driver figured it out and then we were on our way. The moment of it all was pretty frightful but at the same time funny. As a team, we knew we were in God's hands and hadn't done anything wrong, so we "made ourselves at home," debated having a program for the cops, and then laughed at the situation. It's good to know that in the midst of everything, God has the last call. He's the strong tower, the big man in charge. He's the ultimate cop and smart cowboy. Good thing!

Date: 2/9/2006

Submitted by: Kelsey Erickson

Journal Entry:

Driving, then Materi, Benin

Picture this: one white girl (me), a small army of African children, and their parents watching from the sidelines. White girl takes a few steps forward. So does the army of children. White girl stops. Everyone stops. You can feel the tension rising. White girl slowly turns around to face the children. Everyone is looking intently at the white girl. They stare. She stares back. Then, all of a sudden, she starts running toward the children, who all run away. Everyone laughs and wants to be chased. Repeat this process. That's the game I played today. It was great



Kelsey Erickson

fun. I feel like this is one of the first times I've successfully communicated without using words. From what I can tell, many people here don't speak French very well. Many seem to speak only their dialect, Biali. We are now in Materi, Benin, which is very far in the north. The game actually took place in Tiari, a village about 20 kilometers from Materi. Today, we drove nearly all day and had time only to find a place to stay, meet our contact in Tiair, eat dinner, and sleep. The most exciting part of the drive was seeing monkeys cross the road. I'm really excited for our time in Materi. Our contact seems very excited that we're here.

One other exciting thing for the day—I tried the fruit from a baobab tree. It has the consistency of freeze-dried food (like astronaut ice cream). It's kind of sour-sweet. It was very exciting.

God has been blessing us so much. I'm so thankful for all these new experiences, even ones that I don't enjoy while they're happening. Amen.

Date: 2/10/2006

Submitted by: Bethany Schwartz

Journal Entry:

Materi, Benin

I sometimes feel as though we've gone to a different world, entered our own Narnia of sorts, where I see things with my own eyes that I was sure had been made up by Hollywood. This is a place where the progression of time as the Western world knows it doesn't seem to exist, where elders are respected and children (usually) behave, where baobab trees grow thicker than houses and can even somehow grow back down into the ground.



Bethany Schwartz

Today we met with a village that desperately wants a church, but they have been unable to get a pastor. I have been praying that God would open the hearts of the people we meet, that they would hear the Gospel and respond. These people had heard the message already, and my prayers seemed to fall short. How can it be that there are people in America searching for a good way to use their money to help others, and there are people in Benin trying desperately to get a church established, but they cannot? How can there be churches with three or even more pastors in the United States, and there are large areas in Benin without even one pastor?

With these thoughts swirling through my head and my heart breaking out of love for these people I'd just met, feeling overwhelmed by helplessness, we drove to the market for some lunch. We got out of the car and walked around to find food, and we had quite a parade of followers. I love it when kids follow, but with the kids were men, obviously drunk, who were either not so friendly or else overly friendly, and five men who were quite noticeably trying to steal the instruments out of our car. We found out we were unable to go to our program in the afternoon because the school's headmaster wasn't there. So Kelsey had the idea to get on top of our car and do a program in the market. I loved the idea. We were obviously able to draw quite the crowd, so why not take advantage of that and tell them about Jesus? So we did. With adrenaline pumping, we braved the crowds and climbed on top of the car. And as we sang and told them about Jesus, all of a sudden I didn't see drunkards and thieves. I saw people in need of a Savior, just like me.

God has done powerful things this week. I am in awe of our God.

Date: 2/12/2006

Submitted by: Jacob Djondo
Journal Entry:

Materi, Benin

We all woke up early today a little bit tired. Last night was busy packing and really noisy because there was from 11 p.m. to 4 a.m. a party in the centre we stayed in for three days. The centre is called "Le Refuge." At 5:00 in the morning, we all woke up as it was agreed in the eve. From 5:30, we started loading the car. We are going back to Cotonou, around 372 miles away from Materi where we have been since Thursday night. At exactly 6 a.m., we left Materi. It was still dark. In Benin by this moment, the weather is clear at 7 a.m. Over 125 miles on the way, the car broke down. There was a smoke that came up from the engine. We stopped, Epiphane the driver added oil in the engine. We needed to send the car to a garage to be repaired. But we must be in a town. The next town is Djougou, 46 miles away. We left running slowly, and by God's grace we got to Djougou. It was 12:30 p.m. We have our lunch while the mechanic was working on the car. At 5 p.m. the car was okay and we left. We ran a little bit fast and got to Contonou around 9:30 p.m. and went right away to the downtown to the supermarket to get something we can have as dinner. All the supermarkets were closed because it was too late, and moreover, it's Sunday. We found one on the way back to our hotel Centre Ayifa, where we have been for two weeks before we leave for the north. We got to the Centre Ayifa at 11 p.m. The gate was locked. We knocked for a long time, but we couldn't have the gate opened. What are we going to do?! After a consultation, we decided to pass the night outside by the gate. Epiphane said he is staying with us. So tired, the girls got their mats and sleeping bags and slept, after taking some pictures of the adventure of Sunday night. Epiphane was also tired after the long drive; he found a place to sleep in the car, as well as Cambien and Shauna, who was fearing mosquitoes. AJ and I decided to not sleep, so we were babysitters the whole night. The night was funny and long. We took two toy guns and assured the girls that they are safe. They can sleep as deeply as they can. It was so funny. They took pictures and slept. AJ and I spent the night talking first about astrology, then about the Word of God and also played different kinds of games. The night, brightened up by the moon, was peaceful and inspiring. The gates were opened to us at 7:30 a.m. AJ and I were really tired.

Thank you, God, for your goodness.



Jacob Djondo

Date: 2/14/2006
Submitted by: A.J. Smith
Journal Entry:

I have discovered a wonderful new treat here in Bénin called Fancocktail. It's wonderful, it tastes like pineapples, it's frozen, and it comes in little packages that you can buy from the Fan-man off the street for 100 FCFA (about twenty cents). It is a glorious thing to eat on a hot day (which is every day) and is also great to share with friends. Jacob and I take turns treating one another to this simple and heavenly delight...which he introduced to me one day while standing outside of an internet café. Another great treat that I have been introduced to here is fried plantains...which are similar to bannanas, only bigger and starchier.

We are back in Cotonou this week. Our journey back from the north of Bénin a few days ago was quite the adventure. We left the town of Matéri around 5 a.m. in order to beat the heat and get a super early start on our eight-hour drive all the way south to Cotonou. After about a half hour or so of driving, we were pulled over at a check point and interviewed by the police, which took a while. Political tension is higher than usual right now in Bénin because of the coming elections...therefore law enforcement and security is a little tighter than normal.



A.J. Smith

We eventually were let go and continued on our way to the south. Around noon, our car broke down and so we had to stop for repairs. Autobody shops here in Africa are quite the sight to see. Lots of broken down and gutted cars sitting around outside in the dirt, car parts laying everywhere, chickens scurrying about, etc. To fix our engine, the mechanic had to pull the entire engine block, starter, and carburetor out of the car. Repairs took about four hours...so we entertained ourselves by playing Uno and other various games and eating bread.

With the engine somewhat repaired, we were off once more with slight traces of smoke pouring out of the engine. No biggy, though...the car was running and that was good enough. We stopped once in Bohicon at our driver's house for refreshment (and my first time ever trying coffee flavored soda), and then we headed into Cotonou.

Upon arriving in Cotonou, we went to our hotel...only to find it locked with no one at the gate standing guard. We banged on the gate, yelled, and honked our horn as much as we could...but all was in vain. The girls broke out their sleeping mats and slept on the ground while Jacob and I stood guard over our things and the group through the night and into the morning...plastic pop-guns in hand and a loaf of bread sitting between us as we lounged on the hood of our car. The moon was full and beautiful and the air was cool. We were let into the hotel at 7 a.m. the next day.

God is good.

Date: 2/15/2006

Submitted by: Penny Kelley

Journal Entry:

Cotonou, Benin

Today I thanked my family: I thanked them for not having air conditioning in our home. Never did I imagine it would be preparation for my time spent in sunny Africa.

Today I thanked my grandpa: I thanked him for taking me fishing when I was young and for making me watch him clean the fish. I didn't expect that experience to help me swallow down fish that look at me while I attempt to eat them.

Today I thanked my sister and brother: I thanked them for teaching me how to play. My brother, for nights when we camped outside in our backyard. I never thought I would relate those nights to the night we, Cross Fire, spent under an African moon, sleeping. And my sister, for teaching me that playing is not simply playing, but love in its greatest form.

Today I thanked my friends: I thanked them for being the wild and adventurous people they are, and for encouraging me in this awesome adventure of life in Africa.

Today I thanked my dad: I thanked him for letting me look over his shoulder while he was fixing his or my car. I thanked him for explaining to me what some of the parts are, even though at the time I had no interest in learning. I for sure didn't think that would help relieve some of my nerves when our car was being "repaired"/gutted. (I actually knew what was going on; thanks, Dad!)

Today I thanked God: I thanked Him for all the experiences He's allowed me to have. I thanked Him for all the people He's placed in my life, and I thanked Him for allowing me to see how He's been using the people around me, the experiences I've had, and myself to love life and be a part of building His kingdom!



Penny Kelley

Date: 2/16/2006

Submitted by: Kelsey Erickson

Journal Entry:

Cotonou, Benin

Thursday was quite a day. I had been sick but felt pretty much better, so I joined my team for our morning program. We had some time after that, so we went to an Internet café, then went back to Centre Ayifa for lunch and a rest. I went right to sleep and woke up with a fever. I was so tired of being sick, I just cried. I don't want to be sick. We decided to go to the doctor. I was miserable. The doctor ran some tests and told us to come back in two hours. Then I learned about prayer. God taught me a powerful lesson, I called my mom and she activated our church's prayer chain right away. She also e-mailed everyone she knew and asked for their prayers. I also called Carl (my fiancé), and he sent an e-mail to our college FCA group, asking for prayers. I didn't realize this until later, but I started feeling better before I even got a chance to take medicine. It turns out I just had a stomach infection. My fever was back to normal before I could take a fever reducer.



Kelsey Erickson

I had been asking God where his healing presence is in the world today. I just didn't see it. He showed me that he heals and hears our prayers. Thank you to everyone who prayed. It is amazing what God can do when his children unite in prayer. Our God is amazing. Perhaps we should spend more time, as the body of Christ, praying together, lifting up our requests wholeheartedly with urgency and full belief in our hearts.

Our God is a powerful God!

Date: 2/17/2006

Submitted by: Bethany Schwartz

Journal Entry:

Cotonou, Benin

Once upon a time, there lived an African princess. She spent each night under the protection of her mosquito-netting canopy, for that is the privilege of an African princess. Every morning, she would wake up and thank God that she had a toilet that usually flushed and a shower that was almost cold enough to fight the African heat. After her shower, she went out onto her porch to read her Bible, looking up every so often to watch the progression of an African sunrise. Her friends would gather near to discuss their feelings on a scale of one to ten, and then they all praised God in devotions. Thus begins the spontaneous portion of the day. Regardless of the schedule, the African princess would depart from her palace upon the arrival of the kind but ever late coachman. And he would whisk her and her friends off to make music in all the far corners of the kingdom. It was always a surprise for the princess where she was going and how long she would be there, but she preferred it this way because she found knowing what the day would hold to be incredibly mundane.



Bethany Schwartz

As she rode around the town, she liked to look beyond the busy main street and see where roads, paths, and doorways led, all the while dreaming of Fizzi Cocktails, her new favorite soda. When she sang for children in schools, she loved to smile and find ways to interact with them, for she did not speak their language, but she was learning slowly. And as the African princess adventured through her days in the city, she dreamed of the coming days when she could return to the smaller villages in the countryside, for it was in those villages that she was able to see God's handiwork the most clearly.

As night came and her chef AJ prepared gourmet noodles on her new portable kerosene stove, our African princess would look up at the stars, always hoping to see the stars fill up the sky as they seem to only in her African world. Whether the stars were out or not

that night, she could always see Orion's belt, and as she looked at it, she smiled, as it was a reminder to her of God's constant love for her and for his people. And as she once again climbed under her canopy made especially for African princesses, she felt great comfort in the knowledge that whatever had happened that day, good or bad, rejoicing or persecution, smiles or tears, God had been at work, and in her kingdom, that was enough.

Date: 2/21/2006

Submitted by: A.J. Smith

Journal Entry:

Ganvié...a village built on Lake Nokoué very near Cotonou. It was built by a people called the Tofinu who were fleeing the warring Fon tribe in the north of Danhomey (Bénin) during the early 18th century. The Fon had a religious practice that forbade them from entering the water...hence the reason for putting a village in the middle of a lake. We toured the village yesterday in a long wooden motor boat. The way to the village, which took about an hour, was almost as amazing as the village itself. On both sides we were being passed by people in pirogues (small boats carved out of tree trunks) carrying their goods to and from the port. Even children, big and small, would man the pirogues in pairs or by themselves...and we learned that a man who wants to marry a woman in Ganvié must buy her a pirogue first. Men and boys were out fishing on the lake...casting nets and reaping in small loads of fish. Fishing in Ganvié is done by first planting dead tree branches in the lake floor so that when they begin to decompose, fish will gather around them to feed. While they feed, fishermen cast their nets in hopes of bringing in high yields of fish.



A.J. Smith

Ganvié itself is built on stilts that rise two meters out of the water. Everyone knows how to operate a pirogue there...even little ones. We passed two children who were playing tag between two boats as though they were on land. Pretty amazing. The market was an open area with twenty pirogues or so manned by women selling mostly produce and spices. There were some places in Ganvié where people had actually created land in order to teach their children how to walk and run. The village itself seemed to be overrun by tourists...so some of the natives were skeptical of us and some made it obvious that we were not welcome...especially when they saw when we had cameras. Nevertheless, the sights were amazing, and it felt good to be on the water for a few hours. Loved watching the men fish, casting their nets so elegantly over the water in one swooping motion. I also loved watching people standing in their boats on the way out of Ganvié, pushing themselves along slowly with long poles along the water in the distance, and watching the makeshift sailboats drift lazily across the lake surface...undisturbed and tranquil.

We shared lunch with the director of our hotel, Guillom, yesterday at his house. When we arrived in the afternoon, his son, Méchac, was there with his twelve-voice choir to greet us in song! Their song was joyful and inviting...and they were genuine and good people whom we were honored to share time with. We ate and then learned two new songs...one in French that Méchac had written and one in a language used both in Bénin and Togo. What a blessing to have acquired the treasures of new music and new friends! Our time together was like gold sent from heaven...filled with soul and warmth. We truly were ministered to yesterday...and I was amazed and humbled at Méchac's musicianship and leadership. So young, yet so incredibly talented and free from inhibition, like his father. One could definitely see the correlation between father and son. We were sent off with a song in Fon...the translation roughly being, "Lord I want to thank you; you want us to be happy; you God, you provide."

During our stay at the Centre Ayifa, I have become the king of Bénin...as decreed by Guillom. The position was made "official" on Monday when he brought me the hat of a king that ruled over Bénin at the end of the 18th century. The gift held great meaning because of the symbols on it...one of a cannon firing and one of a pineapple. This was King Agonglo's emblem and it means, "Thunder may break the palm tree, but it will never shake the pineapple (since pineapples grow under ground)." Because we go with the power of God, we will never be shaken or destroyed.

Thanks be to God for keeping us safe like pineapples.

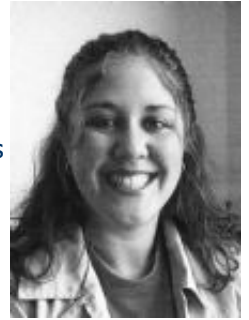
Date: 2/23/2006

Submitted by: Kelsey Erickson

Journal Entry:

Oh, french fries. I don't even like them very much in the United States, but oh, the joys of familiar food. To be honest, I am getting a bit tired of fish, so when we found a western-ish restaurant for lunch today, my heart leapt. Penny stayed home sick today. She has had a bad headache for a few days, so I think her rest today will be extremely helpful to get her back to full strength. We did a bit of house-to-house evangelism today in Akogbato and met a young man named Germain who was struggling with leaving the traditional religion of his family. If you all could pray for him, that would be great. We are leaving Benin tomorrow, so we had a few errands to finish up, which, of course, took much longer than we had planned for. We were late for our next program, which was door-to-door ministry in another part of the city. It was good anyway.

Back at Centre Ayifa, a group of Canadians had arrived, and we played a short program for them at the request of Guillome, the wonderful man who works at Centre Ayifa. It was very nice to be with them and speak English. We all packed our things to prepare for our journey to Togo. I am so excited to be around the people Jacob knows and loves. May God bless you all today.



Kelsey Erickson

Date: 2/25/2006

Submitted by: Bethany Schwartz

Journal Entry:

Mail packets are awesome. This one, our first, was better than Christmas. I love hearing from friends and family, even though most of the news was already a month old. Many of them encouraged me and sent me Bible verses and stories of inspiration. Way to go, guys. You hit the spot like a cold glass of orange juice after a delicious bowl of cereal after four months of having neither (this is my number one food request when we get home).

Then it was time to go to the market. Once Jacob told us about his WalMart--the grand market. They are comparable on some levels, but I would say the market is still way more crazy than the busiest and most crowded malls on the day after Thanksgiving. One important obstacle to look out for as you walk down skinny paths that are way too crowded and are selling way more than you can ever begin to see is the presence of women and children carrying things on their heads. It is very easy to be looking at everything else and knock your head into their load, which would then knock it off their head and onto the thirty-one other people invading your bubble of space. This never actually happened, but there were some close calls and I imagined it happening a few times. Somehow these ladies and children managed to keep their buckets on their heads even though there were pink chickens at their feet and smelly fish flying at their heads and people selling watches, underwear, fabric, butter, flip flops, yams, and more on all sides.

Luckily for me, the grand market is across the street from the beach, and the beaches in Togo are



Bethany Schwartz

nice! People sleep under palm trees, exercise, and fish on the beaches here, and we took off running toward the water for some relief from the heat. Not many Togolese swim in the ocean, though, so we provided a bit of entertainment for some onlookers. The water is cool but not cold, and the sand is different than my California sand; it just disappeared from under our feet when the waves were approaching. I could have stayed all day. I know we have a lot to do in Togo, but do you think we could come back...like maybe every day or so?

Date: 3/1/2006

Submitted by: Penny Kelley

Journal Entry:

**Praise him, sun and moon; praise him, all you shining stars. Praise him you highest heavens and you waters above the skies.*
Psalm 148:3-4*

We're staying in Yobo, Togo; a small village away from any cities. We've been sleeping outside under a thatched roof; there are no walls--only a roof. This allows for a nice breeze to brush over us at night and for a peaceful sleep under God's comforter. After a long day of singing, walking, and lots of awesome fellowship, I crawled under my mosquito netting, truly ready to get some rest, and it wasn't long after I laid my head down on my pillow that I was sleeping peacefully. At about 2 or 3 in the morning, I was woken up by my mosquito netting; it was furiously whipping against my body and running in circles in the air, needless to say I jumped up to figure out what was going on. I rubbed my eyes, attempting to wake up a little bit and saw Jacob scurrying around by our vehicle, he told me, "We must pack our things; it will rain." All of our luggage was either outside with us or outside in the back of our un-covered pick up, so in the midst of the wind, we all started running around trying to gather all of our things and pack it all in the front of the truck. Just as soon as we packed the truck and shut the door, the rain came; the cool, refreshing rain. We were then taken in by the family we were staying with--they gave us all a space to lie in their two bedroomed, thatched home. Four of us stayed on the floor, one on a bed, and Jacob decided to stay up. I am still not sure where the family stayed. The rain fell on the house, but we stayed dry and warm; it was such a blessing and an act of love and kindness I will never forget.

After the rain came, I started thinking about how incredible God really is. The verse above from Psalms really paints an awesome picture of how God is in control over all creation. Everything and everyone gives praise to God by being what it/he/she is, by being what God has made that person or thing be. Everything and everyone is a living testimony to God's greatness; let the earth rejoice!

Alleluia, Amen!



Penny Kelley

Date: 3/2/2006

Submitted by: Kelsey Erickson

Journal Entry:

Hello everyone!

Greetings in the name of Jesus! What an amazing God we have! It is so wonderful to see first hand that God works so powerfully all over the world. Sometimes, it's easy to think that Jesus really spoke English, like it is in our Bibles, and that his message mostly just makes sense to our society. I am learning lately how transcendent the message of Christ is. It transcends time, location, and economic conditions.



Kelsey Erickson

God did wonderful things yesterday; we were extremely blessed. This morning, at around 1 a.m., a storm blew in. That was a problem only because we were sleeping outside. So, we quickly threw our things into the truck and packed into our host's house. Shauna, Bethany, and I slept on the floor next to a bed containing somewhere around seven children. We woke up early, and enjoyed our cold showers (outside showers) and drove. We drove for quite a while, especially since the car kept turning off. I don't think I'd call it breaking down, because it always started again--it just shut off

sometimes. Our destination was Kévé. We arrived and were warmly greeted by the pastor in the area, Bartélémi. He is an incredibly energetic, fun-loving man with an incredible passion for Jesus. It's refreshing to be around someone like that. The only plans for the night were to visit the village chief to let him know our plans for the next few days. He was happy to see us. We also visited the police chief to inform him of our activities. He turned out to be a Christian, and we had a wonderful time chatting with him. Before dinner, I fell asleep due to the lack of sleep last night and could hardly wake up to eat. It feels good to be busy. I pray that God is using us, even in our imperfections. God bless you all!

Date: 3/4/2006

Submitted by: Shauna McInerney

Journal Entry:

Mawu ape nawu de uh oh ame nu veh veh, lo lon, pleh nu blanyi po po ta. Amen.
(Ewe)

God, thank you for your grace, love, and mercy. Amen. (English Translation)

I'm sitting beside an oil lamp in the night. There isn't any electricity or running water here. I've never seen the stars shine so brightly. Our shelter has a grass roof and is propped up by five wooden beams stuck into the earth. There is a seven year old boy looking over my left shoulder. I've decided that he only speaks Ewe and hand gesture.



Shauna McInerney

I just returned from the bathroom. I had to walk a mile and a half to the chief's house, headlamp on, my pull out roll of Charmin in hand, accompanied by two of the village women who wouldn't let me leave alone. Upon my arrival the chief shook my hand and welcomed me. His family and the two women stood outside the door silently as I accomplished what I needed to. The hole had been used moments previous to my arrival, and the waste level was half a meter from the floor's surface. I watched as the termites carried off the toilet paper. I opened the door and there stood my guards smiling at me. They brought a bowl of water and poured it over my hands, then dried them off with a cloth. I started to leave, and the chief's wife stopped me and removed a piece of toilet paper that had stuck to my sandal, and then adjusted my skirt for me. I sheepishly thanked her in Ewe, "Ape na wu." We said goodbye to the chief and his family and returned to our camp.

Now I am caged in my mosquito netting. The children are watching me. I am a member of the zoo. I'm scratching my foot and everyone is pointing at me with their faces pressed up to the netting. They are giggling at me and reaching under the netting to touch my skin. I let them play with my hair; my brush is now stuck in a big matted ball, pressed against my skull. I gave away stickers and the children have run off to their mother with crosses pasted all over their faces.

It's early morning; the sun is rising. I fell asleep in my clothes and glasses; somehow I made a pillow out of dirt and managed to burn out the batteries in my light. The goats kept me awake for most of the night. The rooster started crowing at four. The women came outside to sweep the ground at 4:30 AM. The children are back now at 5:15 AM. Their crosses are still on their faces. Let this day begin all for the glory of God.

I pray that I will not forget the beauty in such simplicity. I pray for a servant heart.

"For who is greater, the one who is at the table or the one who serves? But I am among you as one who serves." Luke 22:27

Mawu neh yirami (Ewe – God bless you all)

Date: 3/5/2006

Submitted by: Bethany Schwartz

Journal Entry:

Fridays are my day for journaling, and in many ways, today that is too bad, for I sit at our temporary home while the team experiences the adventures of Keve, Togo with our fun host Pastor Bartelemi. I'm feeling 'ca va un peu', as they keep saying, which I think means I am starting to feel a little better, after a night spent reacting to some food that didn't like me. So instead of telling of all my great adventures today, I will have to admit that all I have done is sleep, sweat, shave my legs out of a bucket, and do two Sudoku puzzles out of Kelsey's book. I am blessed today in many ways. I am blessed by caring teammates, blessed by kind locals who offer kind words and cool water for a bucket bath, blessed to be in a setting that offers immense beauty to those willing to see it.



Bethany Schwartz

I sit in the doorway to our suffocatingly hot room. There is a woman sleeping on a mat on my right. From my brief moments watching her, she seems a bit eccentric, and I admire her for finding her own niche. Just past her is a large well, the well that somehow houses cool water in the midst of this oven called West Africa. I love this well, streaked with orange and black as a tribute to its building materials and covered by silver and rust tin roofing. Beyond it are banana trees, reminding me of those I played under as a child in my backyard in Texas. The difference is that it never freezes here, so the trees still yield bananas that are far beyond comparison to the bananas we eat in the States. In front of me and to my right is a house that is a masterpiece of beauty. It is red-brown, which is one of the three colors I see everywhere. (The others are green vegetation and blue sky.) The house is made of crusty, dried earth on a framework of small tree trunks. I love how the roof hangs low, made of dried palm fronds, I think. Some would call the house dilapidated, but to me it looks strong despite the crooked corner angles, lopsided door frame, and porch roof that somehow seems to be hanging with little to no support. This house bears a collage of what I would have called trash six weeks ago, but now I see each piece is a tool, each tool lying in and around the house making it a home that allows a family survival, and seemingly happy survival at that. Next to the home is a dirt road where the echoes of children can still be heard, echoes of laughter and happiness. My memory holds waving hands and smiling but shy faces at the sight of a yovo (me), and it is a yovo in shorts no less! Scanning farther left we see evidence of more blessings. Clean laundry hangs on ropes, the gift of service offered all day every day by a beautiful lady we call Mama Frosting. Directly in front of me is a pavillion of sorts made of thin tree trunks and covered by palms. Palm trees are the most useful plants ever--they can make walls, roofs, fans, baskets, two kinds of oils for food, a juice that ferments into some sort of alcohol, shade, fruits, and more. Under the pavillion two small children just sat but didn't care to stay long. Just long enough for us to form impressions of each other in our minds before returning to our own lives. And finally, wandering about the property are chickens, chicks, and roosters. I will never have these animals on my farm. We hear them throughout the night screaming something that really doesn't sound like the English 'cock-a-doodle-doo,' or the French 'coockery-coo,' but more like the screams of something that is being strangled. As I watch this place we will call home for three nights, the wind blows peacefully, the air cools off as the sun goes down, and I hear the evidence of work being done in the home full of personality, there is a drum beat in the distance, and six more boys have just come through a hidden path to watch me, and as I bore them they begin to entertain themselves, scheming some adventure as all little boys should. We exchange waves and smiles as they welcome me into their lives for a brief moment. And as they approach, play time for all of us begins.

Fast forward a bit. The boys have approached and we had so much fun. I never even said a word. We drew pictures for each other and each of them has a silly face drawn on their hand. We played tic tac toe in the dirt and they seemed to catch on. I love the children here.

I have also learned about the family we are with. Two sisters, one a mother of two beautiful girls. The father has died, and two boys have come to stay with the family. The boys are orphans. I didn't know these things as I wrote about the beauty of the home. Now it seems even more beautiful. There is a story to these walls, a history that begs to be embraced. Tears have drenched this dirt, much like the rain of last night. But the tears have somehow increased the love in this place. The four related women have a very cute smile, passed from the first generation of two sisters to the next, and they are so eager to share their smiles even though our languages and cultures are so different. Yes, I have much to learn about life from these people.

Date: 3/7/2006

Submitted by: A.J. Smith

Journal Entry:



A.J. Smith

So, this morning as I pulled out my personal journal (different from my online journal), it became obvious looking at it from a side-view which pages were written in the United States and which were written in Africa. The ones from the U. S are still white around the edges, while the ones written on in Africa are brown from dirt. Dirt, as we have learned, is often unavoidable in Africa, and as Jacob tells me, "If you come to Africa without getting dirty, then you didn't really come to Africa." Dirt has been one of the biggest contributors of culture shock for me here--it's *everywhere*! My freshly scrubbed and cleaned khakis don't stand a chance of staying clean, not even for half a day, but fortunately, we have traveled on enough dirt roads, walked through enough dirt, and even slept on dirt floors enough to not care so much about getting dirty anymore. Besides, people here seem to care more about your heart here than your dirty khakis.

Speaking of dirt, last night while settling into my sleeping bag on the outdoor deck/roof of our house, I rolled over and managed to lodge a piece of dirt in my right eye. I tried to get the dirt out, working diligently at it for an hour, before giving up and going to sleep. It's been over twelve hours since then, and I think the dirt is still there.

Today we paid visits to some of the different church headquarters here in Togo. Our first stop was at the head offices of the Methodist Church, which happens to be the first church founded here in Togo. After introducing ourselves to the president, we explained our intentions while in Togo and prayed together. Following this was a visit to the Presbyterian Church headquarters, where we met with their head council, and later in the day, we visited the Baptist headquarters. I am thankful and appreciative that our contacts are making the effort to make sure our ministry here is not limited only to the Lutheran Church of Togo, which I learned today is only about ten years old and was not founded by missionaries like many other church bodies here, but by Christians here in Togo. We will be working with these various churches during our time here. What a blessing it is to be working towards unity in Christ among believers here in Africa, along with encouraging faith and bringing the Gospel to remote places.

In addition to all of our visits, we stopped by the headquarters of the All African Conference of Churches, an ecumenical organization that puts great emphasis on HIV/AIDS education and awareness in the church, with a particular aim towards the education of church workers in pastoral care of those struggling with HIV/AIDS. We spoke with the president, who became a Methodist pastor when he was 23 and eventually went into "hiding" to work on founding the AACC. Treasures came to us here in the form of books and pamphlets on HIV/AIDS education/pastoral care, all of which were all written from an African point of view, some even written by the founder of the AACC himself. The issue of HIV/AIDS has been somewhat a frustrating mystery here for me because nobody really talks about it, and yet Africa struggles tremendously with the pandemic. Lomé, however, has been the first city we have been in that posts billboards advocating the education and protection against the disease...some more frank and straightforward than others. I was thankful to receive information and hear from the Methodist pastor his perspective and opinions on the disease and its implications here in Africa.

We are blessed each to day to have our minds stretched and challenged here...be it in ways that are great or small. Now...back to removing the dirt from my eye so I can see a little more clearly.

PS: When I wrote about my king's hat from Bénin, I made a mistake. The cannon firing off is actually a palm tree falling down...oops! Sorry about that one!

Date: 3/9/2006

Submitted by: Kelsey Erickson

Journal Entry:

I'm wearing a Curious George Bandaid today. Sometimes little reminders of home can just make my day. I don't even care about the blister on my foot, because it means I get to wear a Curious George Bandaid. Today, I woke up pretty psyched because my

stomach hadn't rebelled from Wednesday night's Al Donald's hamburger. So, great start to the day. We did a school program in the morning. Every school has uniforms. Many are just plain beige-ish ones, but this school had purple-checked uniforms, so already we knew it would be a great program. The kids responded very well to our songs, skit, and puppet show. I don't think we could have asked for more laughs in all the right places, clapping along, singing along, and generally enjoying themselves, without getting too crazy. After that, we visited Jacob's wife, Jeanne's family's home and sang a few songs for them. AJ was feeling sick, so he opted to stay behind. We also got to say hello to Jacob's family. I kind of like the social rules here. It's totally fine to have six people just drop by to say hello whenever they'd like during the day.



Kelsey Erickson

In the afternoon, we had a program scheduled at a high school. We knew that the students had some kind of concert that we'd listen to, then we'd sing for a few minutes. Little did we know that this was not just any concert, it was a full-out celebration of African culture. Some of the students sang, some did traditional dances, some of the boys dressed up like traditional chiefs, and there was a beauty pageant. I'm still not sure how that last one fit in. Anyway, when we arrived, we were told to go back home and change into our African clothes. Well, we're becoming masters of flexibility, so we hurried and came back ready for the African soirée. When it came to our turn, we quickly became an electric team (someone held a microphone up to the guitar, and we shared two vocal mics) and sang some African music and some American music. All in all, it was great fun. We also visited the Togolese Minister of Communication. He taught us lots about the traditional religion in his area. I really would like to know even more about it. Around 8:30, we went to a church member's house for dinner. We had a pleasant meal and good conversation. We got home around 10:30. I am realizing every day how much I need to be aware of every situation I am in and take special care to love every minute of it. Only God knows if I'll ever see Africa again. Mawu na yirra mi. God bless you all.

Date: 3/10/2006

Submitted by: Bethany Schwartz

Journal Entry:

I love bread. I crave bread. Why can't we just eat that bread we had in Benin? I seriously think this every day now as we no longer cook for ourselves. We have a wonderful friend we call Mama Frosting (her name is Faustine), and she cooks for us three times a day and does our laundry whenever we need it. She is such a blessing, and I treasure her. But I have to admit, I miss bread.



Bethany Schwartz

Today I am trying something new. The pagne. We got African clothing tailored especially for us, for that is how you get clothes in West Africa. You buy the fabric, and point at pictures at a tailor's place, and then in a few short days you can go pick up your new dress. (I am not sure that every African does the pointing at pictures part, but that is how I do it because I don't speak enough French to say more than the words pants, which I am not allowed to wear for my African style clothing, skirt, and dress). So today I decided to wear the pagne that was made for me from the extra fabric. A pagne is a rectangle of cloth that you wrap around yourself as a skirt, or you can do it as a dress, but I think that is kind of like wearing a house robe. So I put the pagne on all by myself, adjusted it twice, and then went to our program, which was for the kids who go to school right below our house. There we were, in the climax of the Hug Machine skit, I am blowing kisses all over the place, and I must freeze crouching on the ground because the machine breaks...and my pagne starts falling off! So what could I do? I broke character, smiled real big (especially at the women teachers who knew very well that I had no idea how to wear a pagne), stood up and fixed my pagne.

Seriously, this life is so crazy. Sometimes it is hard, sometimes it is exhilarating, sometimes it is just downright hilarious. Praise God, who is teaching me so much here.

Does anyone have any bread?

Date: 3/14/2006

Submitted by: A.J. Smith
Journal Entry:



A.J. Smith

I equate riding in the back of our truck here in Lomé to two things. First, it's like riding on the back of an angry bull in a rodeo...especially when you are sitting on the tail gate. The roads here in Lomé are not the best...either being unpaved or full of potholes...which makes for a bumpy, bum-bruising ride. Second, riding in the back of the truck reminds me of the Macy's Thanksgiving Day Parade. Wherever you go, you are constantly waving to people...especially small children who jump up and down, frantically calling after you and waving as though their hands would fly off. Yesterday one little guy started to chase after the truck...his eyes looking up at me, being only a foot away from the tailgate. I panicked briefly and shooed him away...he didn't seem too offended.

Speaking of children...they are wonderful. Today there wasn't much to do but lounge around our house in Lomé, and fortunately our house is right next door to a school...I can even watch the classes from the roof outside my room. Several times I would venture outside and would be greeted by the Form 1 kids blowing me kisses from the courtyard and yelling out, "I love you!" a phrase we taught them last Friday. At ciesta time, as they passed by our house to go home for lunch...we played with a large group of children...throwing miniature Frisbees around.

We have befriended two little boys in particular, who are sons of the man who owns our house and the school. Their names are Godwin and Sidoin. It has been fun learning and playing with them. One of our favorite games is "teaching the Yovo how to speak Ewe." They willingly will teach us words in their own language...and now I can name all the parts of my head. Tonight, we paid them a visit at their father's house. They spent most of their time trying to figure out why I had hair on my legs, arms, and face, and nearly pulled or rubbed it all out.

Only one minute left! God bless kids!

AJ

Date: 3/16/2006
Submitted by: Kelsey Erickson
Journal Entry:



Kelsey Erickson

Today is our first full day in Tado, a kingdom within Togo. It is one of only four recognized kingdoms in all of Africa. Today was full of blessings. It's amazing how God blesses us and those around us. I am always humbled by God blessing others through us. In this culture, if something good happens while you have guests, it is thought that the guests have brought the blessing of God. Last night, a lady in the compound we are staying gave birth to a healthy baby boy. What an incredible blessing! Everyone's so excited. They are saying the baby will grow up to be a missionary because he was born while missionaries were here. This morning, we visited mama and new baby in the hospital. Imagine our surprise when we were greeted by a white person! It turns out there's a Peace Corps volunteer in Tado who's working with the hospital. Her name is Megan, and we had a nice chat in good old North American English. Yet another amazing blessing. God always seems to know what we need before we do. We had a busy morning with visits to the palace (there's not actually a king now, the old one died and they're searching for a new one), the prefecture, and a school. The school program was extremely energizing. It was a high school, and the students really got into the program. After we had finished, we danced with them. We returned home for lunch and a short nap, then had another school program, which was also great.

We interviewed on the local radio station at night, followed by a choir sing-off, during which the electricity went out while I was giving a message. Megan the Peace Corps volunteer attended, so that was really exciting for us. As is standard for Africa Time, the program ran late, much later than intended. So, when we got back we all were just exhausted. God is so good to us!

Date: 3/17/2006

Submitted by: Bethany Schwartz
Journal Entry:



Bethany Schwartz

"Lome is not Africa." His words rang in my ears as he pointed to the green vegetation that threatened to devour the dirt path we walked down. Lome, our home base, is only one small part of Africa. Welcome to the interior. Welcome to the Africa that is shaped by God's hands and allowed to run wild. Welcome to the Africa where the mud from the ground and the palms from the trees are used to make homes.

This morning before breakfast, a chief came to our compound to see us. This was a big surprise for me. We are supposed to go before the chief, not have him come visit us! Nevertheless, there he was, half an hour before our official meeting time for the day. Good morning, Cross Fire, welcome to Africa. During breakfast, our main contact Pastor Kodjo tried to explain to us the importance of our presence in a place where Christians were being told by non-Christians that Christianity is only for the elderly. I pray that we are an encouragement for the Christians in these places as they see young people worshipping Christ and hear from us that there are many young Christians in the world.

In our first village of the day, I was surprised to find that we had an hour long program. But before we get into our program, the village will welcome us with drumming and singing and we will all dance together, for that is the African way. Welcome to Africa. Now flap your arms and move your hips and try to make it beautiful like the Togolese rather than looking like a white chicken.

It was my day to share the Gospel message during our programs, and it was a bit different than usual. Even though we've been doing this for weeks, and I've known the story my whole life, I didn't know what to say. OK, take a deep breath and whisper a prayer that God will give me the words. The morning program went all right. God spoke.

Then we went to see the village's water supply. It is a shallow, muddy pond, refilled from a natural source in the forest. The pond supplied water to 10,000 people, they said, and it was dirty brown water that everyone walked through. The lack of clean water is a problem in many of the areas we have been to in Africa. As we walked and also saw the school that was unusable due to the rainy season ripping the roof off, there was suddenly a little boy holding my hand. He didn't let go for at least twenty minutes. He wore dirty sweatpants and an open button-down shirt with sideways roosters on the fabric. His malnourished tummy poked out through his open shirt, and sweat covered his face. A small child, probably just two years old, so eager to show me his village. Yes, welcome to Africa.

The afternoon program at a school in a different village was a different story. We were with high schoolers at a public school, and they didn't seem to care about the message. They talked through the beginning of the story, someone behind me answered his cell phone and talked through a chunk of the story, and then all of a sudden I was describing the hope we have because of Christ, even when our loved ones are sick or dying, the love that Jesus offers us here and now no matter what, and the promises of heaven to come. The noise stopped, the phone conversation ended, and the students listened. God spoke. And it didn't matter that I hadn't known what to say; God called me here and he will do the talking. Welcome to Africa, Bethany. And then we had another dance time, for that is what we do.

There is a Peace Corps volunteer here in the kingdom of Tado. She is from Maryland. She speaks English! We stopped to play soccer with her, but I didn't feel like playing, so I got to run the circumference of the field with our very athletic driver Sylvain. There we were, him in jeans, me in a skirt and flip flops, and we ran almost a mile. It felt awesome. And the spectators, for there are always Africans watching you, were kind enough not to laugh too much, at least not until after I passed.

Tonight we had another program, this one for the youth of the village. I was exhausted. We didn't start until after 9 p.m. I had been up since 5 a.m. because of the two-day-old baby who lives next door. I was a bit grumpy about sharing the Gospel because again I just didn't have any ideas on how to present it. However, God had the words again, and he surprised me again. The story seemed fresh and exciting, the kids got pretty into it, and at the end, Pastor Kodjo asked how many of the wanted to believe in Jesus. I'd say more than twenty kids raised their hands. Wow. God just floors me sometimes. I am humbled. I hadn't even wanted to share the Gospel, and God used it to change

lives and to teach me more about trusting him. Now the village is asking us to start a church there, rather than us asking permission to start one. Welcome to Africa. God is here with us. God is working despite me. May God remain in this small village called Tado.

Date: 3/20/2006

Submitted by: Penny Kelley

Journal Entry:

*Yesterday I climbed a mountain; I trudged through forests, went up hills, climbed over massive rocks and swam in a beautiful waterfall
*Yesterday I wore cultural clothing; the zipper on my back came completely undone in the middle of worship service, no seemed to mind (my face showed otherwise), my zipper got fixed, the people seem to respond to me better when I dress like them
*Yesterday I danced; I shook my behind like no other time, my arms in a trance like a bird flapping its wings, I exchanged many bursts of laughter, while dancing my sweat was wiped off my neck and face by an elderly woman with her very own sweaty-sweat rag
*Yesterday I watched my teammates eat the blood sauce we were served at dinner, I struggled just watching them eat it yet alone eat it myself
*Yesterday our team had a few issues; we had a meeting, and we worked through the tough things
*Yesterday I was bi-polar; I was homesick, and then a minute later I wondered how I could ever feel homesick- "I love Africa!"
*Yesterday I was a rugged chef; I cut an orange with a mini-machetti, I sliced yams with the same machetti and then fried them over a coal stove under a palm tree roof.
*Yesterday I played; I played with children for large amounts of time, and then I wanted those children to understand that I just wanted to take a shower and they should leave me.

but most importantly,

*Yesterday God moved my heart in the midst of it all.



Penny Kelley

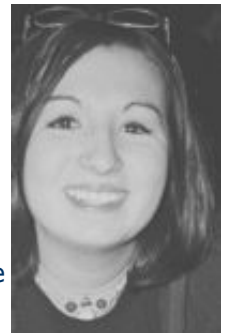
Date: 3/23/2006

Submitted by: Penny Kelley

Journal Entry:

It's not my day to journal, but I forgot once or twice in the U.S., so I thought now I can make up for it!

Today I am wearing pants, and it's a nice feeling. I've only wore them about four days the whole stay in Africa because we wear skirts like trendy African women. Today I am missing my home, I am missing our team van, I am missing pizza and milk. The things that I think are comforts, things I think I need. But I have to remind myself that I am where I need to be, this is home, because God is with me.



Penny Kelley

Date: 3/28/2006

Submitted by: Penny Kelley

Journal Entry:

We've made it to the North of Togo and are now staying at a missionary guest house in Daopong, Togo. The missionaries are from America and have been in Togo for about seven years now; it's been a huge blessing for us as Cross Fire to be in a home we can relax in. We've all been feeling a bit burnt out and ready for a break to re-energize and get fit spiritually, so when we arrived yesterday, we didn't waste any time making ourselves at home in our "mini-America" of West Africa. The home is made complete with two bedrooms, a



Penny Kelley

kitchen (with a stove, fridge, oven, and sink), bathrooms (with running water), and a living room (with a tv and vcr)...you could say we are being pampered a bit. Last night I was privileged to cook. I prepared a soup that my mom makes, or at least I attempted to make it, based on my memory of ingredients and the availability of them here. All in all, it turned out well and we all enjoyed a little taste of my home! Also in the house we've played some Outburst from the 80's and watched "Home Alone 2." Nothing like being back in the 90's; bring it back--old school! Ha.

This morning we said goodbye to the Africans who have been with us our entire stay in Togo. Over a breakfast of hot tea and bread, we said goodbye to the friends God has blessed us with these past five weeks. I have to admit it was pretty sad to see them go, but I'm happy I had the honor of meeting them at all. When they left, we had some time to veg out. I hopped onto the couch to watch a good ol' Steve Martin movie that has to be older than me...but it was entertainment at its greatest. After our veg out time, we had some team discussion time because it's so incredibly hard to get that time in, ever. We're constantly with someone else, always doing something. It was a good time for us to all reconnect and share our joys and struggles of Africa--as there are always great things in a day, sometimes the struggles come along and try and take over, so we need to discuss them so they don't become an issue later.

After our team meeting, we had a one on one, which is a thing we do on team to make sure we all are communicating with each other. Two people get together and talk, play games, or do whatever they feel necessary. Bethany and I played with Legos--talk about childhood memories and good fun. Ha ha. I'm continually surprised by God and His amazing and abundant love. I feel like I witness His love in a new way every day, ways that I would never have thought...like refrigerators and Legos.

Other highlights from the past week or so:

- *visiting Jacob's village with him for the first time.(very important in African culture)
- *swimming in a waterfall
- *dancing the jig with old men, barefoot, under a huge shady tree
- *witnessing God's power in establishing a new church named Cross Fire Lutheran Church
- *staying in a host home with five little lovable girls

P.S.-Tomorrow there is a total eclipse here...we've got sweet 3-D like glasses to wear for the occasion
pics to come

In His Dusty, Dry, and Hot Creation,
Penny

In His Dusty, Dry, and Hot Creation,
Penny

Date: 3/31/2006

Submitted by: Bethany Schwartz

Journal Entry:

Tanwalbougou, Burkina Faso

It was just a sheep, a large sheep with mangy brown and white wool hanging off it like two-inch dreadlocks. It was just a sheep, but it made me stop in my tracks. As the rest of the group walked on ahead, I realized there were tears in my eyes over a simple sheep. There are sheep everywhere, but this one was different. This sheep, we'll call her Sammy, was different because she could barely walk. She had three healthy legs and one wrapped in a dirty rag. She refused to put her weight on this leg unless she had gathered



Bethany Schwartz

enough strength to take just one step. Her friends had long since left her behind, just as my friends had walked on ahead of me. There we were, only a few yards from each other, looking at each other, and I teared up. She reminded me of the story [The Crippled Lamb](#) by Max Lucado (read it—you might cry over a sheep too!), in which a crippled lamb has a tender moment with Jesus. Sammy reminded me that I too am crippled in many ways, that I am crippled by my sins. She reminded me of the countless times Jesus healed physical ailments, and how his healing went so much deeper, to my very core, to heal me of all my sins. Finally, Sammy reminded me of Jesus himself, the Lamb of God, who was crippled on the cross for us. Jesus took on my sin and died the death I deserved so that I could put on his righteousness and live forever with him. Sammy was just a sheep. I, too, am just a sheep in God's flock. God loves his sheep and promises to lead us home.

He tends his flock like a shepherd:

He gathers the lambs in his arms

and carries them close to his heart. Isaiah 40:11

Date: 4/7/2006

Submitted by: Bethany Schwartz

Journal Entry:

Tanwalbougou, Burkina Faso

I have a confession. It isn't something I am proud of. But here it is for all the world to know: I have a bad attitude that shows up way more than I would like. And the worst part is, I often let it come over for extended visits, enter my being, and explode at those I love or those I am ministering to. One of the worst feelings is when I realize how I hurt my teammates because of my bad attitudes. I have been praying about things, asking God to open my eyes so that I can see clearly. Do you know what I saw? Today I saw Jacob translating over and over for us, through meetings and ministries, ever patient, ever kind. I saw Kelsey talking with our contacts and guides, trying to understand what is expected, trying to convey our needs and understand their needs. I saw her talking with a teacher from the local school even though she was tired, learning from him and teaching him about certain American business techniques. I saw Shauna burst ahead of our large parade and take the energetic children with her, dancing and laughing and running and playing. I saw Shauna step out of her normal roles on team and put together our programs for the day as a gift to a tired friend. I saw AJ drawing in the sand with some children, asking questions to get to know our guides better, chasing the children around the neighborhood. I saw Penny teaching one of our guides some English phrases, laughing with children, exploring the world with new African friends. I also noticed times when I didn't see my teammates, but could hear by the delighted screams of children that they were somewhere around a corner playing and interacting. It isn't easy to live with five other people day in and day out. There are sometimes problems. But as I struggled, God opened my eyes. He has offered me grace and forgiveness, and I have been reminded of that many times this year. But how marvellous to also be shown the grace and forgiveness and love that he also offers to my teammates. It can be easy to pick out the things that annoy, but that is not the way God deals with us. I feel an incredible peace today, knowing that God is working through us, knowing that even when I am struggling, God has given me teammates to lift me up, to encourage me, to minister in special ways to those people we are around. To God be the eternal glory.



Bethany Schwartz

Date: 4/25/2006

Submitted by: A.J. Smith

Journal Entry:

Meiganga, Cameroon

We have had the opportunity to visit two hospitals during our time here in Meiganga...and to be honest...seeing the hospitals here in Africa make me nervous to be injured or sick. When I see some of the outdated medical equipment, the dirty and



stained concrete floors and counters, and the lack of sterile environments, I sometimes feel as though I've stepped into a different time era. I imagine the hospitals here sometimes being equivalent to hospitals in the U. S. during the first few decades of the twentieth century. Records are kept in large books in the consultation room, I haven't seen any computers, people wait for consultations either inside or outside on mats, most of the patients are women or women with their children, and only the super rich have medical insurance (and I don't think that they visit the hospitals that we have been visiting). The hospitals we visit are made up of several buildings with different wards being grouped together...such as pediatrics and maternity, or gynecology and surgery. The government hospital we visited today had a separate ward for those with tuberculosis.

A.J. Smith

Today's visit to the government hospital was hard. Normally, when we visit hospitals, we are given a tour by a doctor, and we will pray for patients that allow us to. Today we stopped in on a mother sitting on a bed watching over her sick baby, who was about three months old. The doctor with us told us she had a skin disease. The baby looked tired and emaciated, and there were places around her abdomen and legs where her skin had been eaten away. The mother, a Fulanese woman, appeared to be tired and forlorn. It was a sad sight...to see the mother watching her baby suffer. Both mother and child seemed helpless. At first she refused prayer because of her Muslim faith, but later, Penny was able to see her again, and the woman consented to prayer.

We had a short open-air program at the hospital. We sang songs for anyone who wanted to listen and gave a short sharing. A woman standing near to us did not like what she was hearing or seeing. "You need to be coming here with food and money," was her comment to us. This was a hard thing to hear. I was reminded of some words shared with us in Togo, "You cannot bring the Gospel of love to someone who has an empty stomach." Sometimes, though, it's so hard to tell who is going hungry and who is doing just fine.

Today we also prayed for a girl who had been sick for six or seven years. Her symptoms were those of someone suffering from epilepsy...but there was speculation that perhaps she was possessed. The girl, like the Fulanese woman in the hospital, also looked very tired and forlorn...and her parents also looked as though they were worn down as well. We sat on the ground with the girl and prayed with her...after which her father repeatedly said to us, "Osoko, osoko, osoko, osoko!" (Biya for "thank you").

Our day ended with a to a choir that was rehearsing. They are called Choral Mbe Noo Tok de Meiganga...which means New Alliance Choir. They were one of the ten choirs at the church we were doing programming with for the week. They had many questions for us about finding sponsors to help them tour and doing evangelism outside of Cameroon...and wanted to know how we had come together as a team. The choir had an amazing sound...vibrant and resonant and so alive. I love the singing here in Cameroon...it's bright and piercing...and the rhythms are fun to move to. One of my favorite things today at the rehearsal was watching some of the women sing and dance while they had their babies strapped to their backs.

So many experiences in one day. Thanks be to God.

Date: 5/15/2006

Submitted by: Shauna McInerney

Journal Entry:



Shauna McInerney

Dear Friends in Christ,

I thought it appropriate to share with you, who love me and are supporting me in prayer, the

condition of my spirit. After all, as a Christian, I believe it is honorable to look at a person as God sees them, and attempt to view deeper than human flesh.

For an entire week God awoke me and instilled in my heart a deep longing to seek Him. I rose, walked outside and talked to the sky, imploring that I would be answered. I begged for Him to show me His reason for bringing me there and questioned His reason for silence.

*It's early morning, I can't get out of bed
Keep tossing and turning, awaiting your instruction in my head
Keep coming in and out of daydreams, emotions so strong
You are calling me closer to my purpose,
but why are you taking so long to speak to me?*

*I understand that reason won't do me any good if I don't listen
And so I am bound to this state of availability
Call me, Father, I am ready
I will surrender everything to follow you,*

speak to me

*The moment I see you is when you are standing right beside me
When I know that you had never left my side
The moment I feel you is when you place your hand in mine*

And you're leading me, oh so quietly to our secret place

*I'm standing quietly at the end of our moonlit path
I can see that you've cleared my connection to the heavens
I'm listening now, I'm holding on, I'm breathing softly
I'm attentive, I've dropped it all, I'm listening*

In the middle of the night, I was drawn to Ecclesiastes 5:1-3 which talks about standing in awe of God.

"Guard your steps when you go to the house of God. Go near to listen rather than to offer the sacrifice of fools, who do not know that they do wrong. Do not be quick with your mouth, do not be hasty in your heart to utter anything before God. God is in heaven and you are on earth, so let your words be few. As a dream comes when there are many cares, so the speech of a fool when there are many words."

Yesterday I finished the book Life Together by Dietrich Bonhoeffer. I was inspired his words on silence and solitude.

"Let none expect from silence anything but a direct encounter with the Word of God, for the sake of which he has entered into silence. But this encounter will be given to him. The Christian will not lay down any conditions as to what he expects or hopes to get from this encounter. If he will simply accept it, his silence will be richly rewarded".

I went for a walk last evening. I was romanced and entertained by God as we dance beneath the starlit sky. He held me in His arms. He took me into a peaceful place at the end of a moonlit path, then took my breath away as I stood in awe of Him. He is everything I need. How could it be any better than this?

Silently, I stand in awe of Him.

Date: 6/6/2006

Submitted by: Bethany Schwartz

Journal Entry:

In Jesus (In Jesus) we have (we have) the riches (the riches) the riches of God's grace. (repeat) --dance interlude--, repeat.

I am in the midst of the VBS craze, enjoying searching for the treasures at Treasure Cove. Boy, is my life different than one month ago.

We began the year in our fall tour figuring out how to do Family Night Programs, how to take care of our various duties, how to back up our trailer (NEVER back up!) and how to read a map so we didn't get lost on every drive (it isn't that easy--and getting lost somehow always seemed to mean more backing up!).

Then we went to French-speaking West Africa. French-speaking? We had to learn French real quick (do you know anyone who just picks up a language 'real quick?'), had to figure out how to wash our clothes and our bodies using just water and a bucket, how to reach out to people who were not Christians, how to play with people without sharing language, how to encourage those who were already Christians, how to address chiefs, how to suck the meat off the skeleton of a fish, how to sing our sing-alongs in French, how to dance in church, etc.



Bethany Schwartz

Now here I am three days into my first Vacation Bible School. I attended as a child, but I don't think I ever helped at one, especially not with a team or being in charge, and here I go. Get out the shorts (shorts?! no skirts?!), apply sunscreen liberally, and don the Treasure Cove hat, here we go. It is a new adventure. I was missing all the adventures we had in West Africa, waking up and wondering what the day would hold, going to bed and wondering how so much could happen in a day...but I realize that the adventures here are just different. It is so neat to be able to travel; we're booked all over the country this summer, to see people and places and connect with people. What a cool thing to do! Let's cheer on the Dayton Dragons, pretend to canoe at Camp Lutherhaven, canoe and get stuck at Camp Luther Dell, sing on the Fort Wayne Christian radio, sing in a prison with a group of really encouraging men, eat peach shortcake made by a great cook, hike the woods, slap the mosquitos, watch the moon rise and remember my African friends who see the same moon with a slightly different tilt. I love this opportunity.

But the awesome thing is that it isn't about the adventures themselves, not about the traveling, seeing the world, meeting people, trying different foods, finding all kinds of ways to communicate among a team or amidst an unfamiliar culture. Those things by themselves would be great, but add Jesus, and it's rockin'. Seriously, my job is to talk/sing/dance/go crazy about Jesus. That's what I do. I go to a church or a school or a home or _____ (fill in blank), and I get to share the love of my Savior. And I do it with a group of friends who together do a great job of encouraging each other, trashing the van, singing "Radical God," interpreting French or English to each other, swimming under waterfalls, and through Christ, praising God.

Awesome.

Date: 6/12/2006

Submitted by: A.J. Smith

Journal Entry:

Sutton's Bay, MI

A few of us looked at each other in amazement and disbelief a few days ago when one of our contacts asked us how long we've been back in the U. S., and we said about a month now. We are back into the swing of traveling in our van again and dealing with Mapquest, eating American food, staying in American host homes, and speaking in English. Back to the world of American Idol, Katie Couric, Hallmark Television, and the MTV Movie Awards. I can wash my toothbrush under sink water, take showers where the hot water seems endless, and air-conditioned climates are *everywhere*! Africa sometimes feels like it was a dream...where did it all go? Pictures of our journeys help to remind me of where we were, as well as stories and also emails from friends we made during our travels there. Rain, however, is perhaps one of the greatest reminders, for me, of how God was faithful to us and never left our sides while we were in Africa.



A.J. Smith

As we were preparing to leave for the airport in Lome on May 7, there was a tremendous downpour. It was around seven in the evening or so when the storm hit, and the sky when from day to night

within seconds. The winds kicked up as well as the dust, and the little boys gathered outside of our house whom had been visiting us and playing with us all day scattered away to their homes like leaves. The rain fell *hard*, and after a while, it felt as though Africa was sharing in the tears we were soon to shed once we got on the plane to fly home. But I think that the rain may have served another purpose.

While in Africa, we encountered rain often...and in Togo, we experienced a great deal of unseasonal rain. Because of this, we learned that in Africa, people hold the belief that if it rains when you have a guest, then God's blessings must be with both the guest and the host. Many times, the rain seemed to follow us...and after a while, we began to take it as an affirmation from God that we were meant to be in the places He had us...doing the work we were doing. That final downpour the night we left Africa seemed like one last affirmation to us and our hosts that God had been, is now, and will always be with us.

We experienced a rain storm just before doing a program at Camp Lutherhaven in Fort Wayne, IN. The rain inspired us to share with the counselors in training there (who had supposedly had a rough day, and an equally rough meeting prior to our program) our stories about rain in Africa. We were all blessed that night...and refreshed...as we too were very tired. I was also reminded of our last night in Africa...and was reassured that, indeed, the past three and a half months were very real.

In rural Africa, especially, rain meant life...a means to drink water fresher than the local lakes and streams, to water crops and animals, and to cook meals. It was truly a blessing. Therefore, may the rain always remind you of God's blessings in your life...and how he is with you always.

Date: 6/17/2006

Submitted by: Bethany Schwartz

Journal Entry:

Home is where You are.

I am in a nice living room with a laptop and wireless internet and a movie on in the background. I was just treated to an awesome dinner followed by an ice cream cookie sandwich. My laundry is being washed by a machine as I type. Tonight I have a bed with clean sheets, and in the morning I look forward to a nice shower with temperature options.

This life is becoming normal again. I am not shocked by the conveniences in this country, though there are times I sit in wonder, realizing I am actually in the United States again. And yet, somehow our time in West Africa feels like a far away dream. So many of the experiences I had there are unique to the West African culture, and the farther time drifts from our experiences there, the more dreamlike the experiences seem. Did that really happen? Did I just spend fifteen weeks in West Africa? As the days tick by here in the United States, my thoughts are less and less consumed by trying to figure out where I am and how I got here and more focused on other things, like Vacation Bible School.

We are in Columbia, South Carolina for our third Vacation Bible School. I am really excited to have a Fiesta. It is my first time in South Carolina. It is awesome to be in the South, to hear the accents that used to be so normal to me, growing up in Texas. Now the words are like honey; each "y'all" sends me home in my mind, putting a smile into my thoughts. What a great feeling it is to be in a place I have never been to and be reminded of home with every conversation.

We sing a song with the words "Home is where You [God] are." As we travel and I try to figure out where I am, how I got there, how to become comfortable in someone else's home, etc, I love to remember those words. I am but a stranger here; Heaven is my home. Yes, it's true, but for my time here on earth, there is a sense of home everywhere I go, because I go with God, and where He is, there I am home.



Bethany Schwartz

Date: 6/18/2006
Submitted by: Penny Kelley
Journal Entry:



Penny Kelley

I've learned a lot about God providing this year. Many times I have stopped to think about the crazy situations we were thrown into while in Africa. Like being in Benin, the first country we visited. We were there with few people around us and little knowledge about the culture, but God provided us with a great place to stay with people who came to love us as family. Or there was the time when we were driven off to the police station, but the police told us to make ourselves at home (could be good or bad, I suppose!). I could go on and on, but you didn't come here to read a book, you came for a journal.

So to get to the main reason for writing this journal entry...

While we were in Togo, we met a woman named Afi. (Some up to date readers might remember my journal about the rain and sleeping outside--we were at Afi's home then.) Afi was the wife of Jean a church worker in Yobo, Togo; they together have seven or so children and are busy people. During our visit there, Afi brought her son to me who had fallen and recieved a head injury. She kindly asked if I or anyone else could fix it. As a team, we got him to the hospital and he now has a healed head. Little did we know that Afi was the sick one. Later in the week her husband Jean told us of a goiter in her neck that was causing her breathing problems and told us she needed surgery or it would eventually suffocate her to death. We prayed, and discussed and told them we would do what we could if they would find out how much the surgery would cost, they were sure to tell us before we left Togo.

Tonight at our Family Night Program, we explained Afi's health condition to the congregation, asking them to seriously pray for her and at the end collected a free-will offering for her needs. As we prepared to leave, we counted the money and saw that the Lord does *indeed provide*. He worked through the hearts and souls of the people here to make something so far away possible. I am so excited to say that soon Mama Afi will have surgery and be healthy enough to take care of her family and be with them. The Lord does *provide*, and what an **amazing provider** He is.

Praise Him in all His greatness!

Date: 6/20/2006
Submitted by: A.J. Smith
Journal Entry:



A.J. Smith

Columbia, SC

"You're raising the dead in me."

Today I found myself being wrapped in "grave clothes" and laid on the ground of a narthex, surrounded by eleven- and twelve-year-olds laughing hysterically as they proceeded to prepare me for "burial". What a funny experience.

"We are powerless against death," the story teller told us today. What a frightening thought. Thank God for Christ who raises the dead within us day by day. On days like this...where I feel exhausted...it seems as though there is a whole lot of "dead" to be raised in me.

I'm enjoying the south and the hospitality here. My host family is fun and lively...my host brother and sister (Evan and Audrey) knew who I was and where I was from before I even set foot in Columbia...and have been excitedly introducing me to kids in the neighborhood, and any visitor that comes into their house. I attended Evan's all-star baseball game last night...and the team played so well. Evan caught a straight-shot from the batter while manning the pitcher's mound and the crowd went wild! Last night I taught both Evan and Audrey a mancala-type game I bought in Africa called adito...and they caught onto the rules instantly (which are a little complicated). I was amazed (my host siblings are seven and ten).

Other things keep amazing me too. On Sunday night, after our Family Night Program, we raised

nearly all the money we needed to send to a woman we met in Africa who needed surgery to remove a goiter over her throat. I was nervous about leading a group of fifth and sixth graders all week for VBS...but have found them to be some of the best kids in the group. Today I was thinking about how badly I needed a haircut (after six months of letting it grow)...and just a few moments ago, my host mother asked me if I wanted to go get my hair cut tonight. Things like this never cease to amaze me, and serve as a reminder to my sometimes tired/dead self that God is still in charge and is guiding us and is by our side. I love the way He works.

More to come...but for now, I've got a haircut appointment.

Date: 7/20/2006

Submitted by: Penny Kelley

Journal Entry:

Beautiful People, Beautiful Memories

It's been a while since I have posted an entry, and honestly there isn't really a good excuse. I will say that we have been busy and traveling a lot. Today we had a 10-hour drive through South Dakota, Nebraska and into Kansas. When we arrived in Hays, Kansas, the temperature was 102-107 degrees; when I stepped out of the van I was instantly shot into memory lane. My senses were telling me I was in Burkina Faso, West Africa. The house I was about to walk into looked a lot different from the ones I had seen in Burkina, but the people inside were just as kind.



Penny Kelley

It's been an interesting time here in the United States the last few months for me, adjusting to this culture again, struggling with return culture shock, dealing with the realities of life, wrestling with the idea of team being finished soon, and the like. But there are things that keep my heart all pulled into one piece...for instance:

A few nights ago we were at our host's home in Fremont, NE, and Bethany figured out her video camera for the first time since we have been back. We plugged it into the TV and watched some video footage we took in West Africa. It was a beauty my heart has never experienced before. Tonight as I write this journal entry, I can hear the faint drum beats, singing and chatting hosts coming from downstairs; the video footage is out. What a beautiful thing.

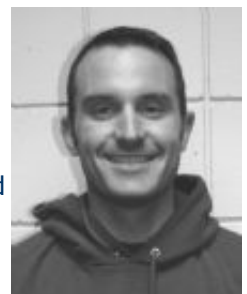
God is working in, moving, and beautifying our world.

Date: 7/23/2006

Submitted by: A.J. Smith

Journal Entry:

I've been feeling homesick for Mexican food and for the scenery (and dry heat) of the Southwest for a few days, and yesterday my homesick pangs were subdued. I can stand out on the driveway of my host home here in Albuquerque, NM and see hills dotted with black volcanic rock and dry shrubbery, we drive down roads lined with yucca plants and cactus, and the early monsoon rains bring the sweet smell of wet desert across the back porch. Today we were taken to an authentic New Mexican restaurant, where I enjoyed a tamale and a honey-filled sopapilla, along with scads of chips and salsa. In addition to all of this, I was reunited with a friend of mine from college yesterday, who made the drive from Flagstaff, AZ to visit the team and me. We sat out on the upstairs balcony last night and talked about a lot things, and reminisced over things that I had nearly forgotten about.



A.J. Smith

There are fewer days ahead than there are behind for us as a team. One lady we spoke with last week at a church reminded us that this was only the beginning. In many ways it is. Yet, despite how this is also ending, God sustains us...although sometimes it feels as though it takes a little more prayer now than ever that God will keep our minds out of the "senioritis" that is easy to slip

into as our mission as Cross Fire draws to a close.

I'm staying with an amazingly creative couple these week. Right now I'm writing this journal from inside of the my host mom's art studio. She's into jewelry making...and later on tonight I'll have to chance to make a ring out of clay...but it will end up looking like silver after it has been fired. Seems a lot like us. Before we are put through the "fire," we start out looking somewhat dull and plain. But after we pass through, we come out much more brilliant. The fire part is hard, though.

Off to dinner. Peace.

Date: 7/31/2006

Submitted by: Penny Kelley

Journal Entry:

The Fringes...

I love being comfortable.

I especially love *comfortable* jeans. In fact, my favorite pair of jeans are a pair that probably shouldn't be worn in public any longer.

My favorite, most comfortable jeans are light blue and are gently faded near the belt loops and thighs. A type of fading that only comes from wearing a pair of jeans you *love*. Look at them a little closer, and you are sure to see holes. Holes above, holes at the center and holes below the actual knee, but be assured I wear these jeans with pride, knowing they were snagged doing some *hard* work. The benefit? My jeans are now more comfortable. My favorite, most comfortable pair of jeans also flaunt a few stains. Stains that come from hobbies and *adventures* in my life, like painting, hiking, and playing at an orphanage in Tijuana, Mexico. Stains are a constant reminder of memories and the blessings God has *blessed* me with in my past.

At the bottom of my favorite, most comfortable pair of jeans, there are *fringes*. Rugged, frayed and *beautiful* they hang, eagerly waiting to be worn, waiting for the day to step out into the world with all they know...*again* and *again*.

There are only 6 1/2 more days left on the road, and the reflection time is starting to happen. It's a bittersweet time for us, knowing we move on to the great things God has in store for us, but we move separately. Knowing we will more than likely stay in contact and continue to love each other, but it will never be the same. God has definitely blessed us with excitement, adventure, challenges, dirty feet, late nights, early mornings, long van rides, different cultures, and so much more. I thank Him daily for everything the last 344 days has held.

What a beautiful, beautiful thing.

Date: 8/4/2006

Submitted by: A.J. Smith

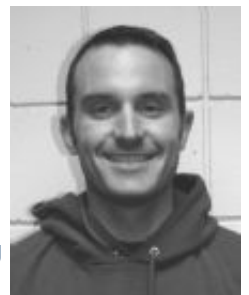
Journal Entry:

I started my morning with a run. Jacob and I are staying with a family that lives out in the country here in Kansas, so, as I ran, there was nothing but trees and pastures as far as I could see. The air was slightly cooler than I expected. Since I have been back from Africa, this was my fourth run of the summer. The first one ended with me getting sick because I ran in the heat and overworked myself. The next two were in Albuquerque through the desert, which smelled so good after the monsoon rains had passed the nights before.

Today's run was a bit of a challenge. I wasn't necessarily running uphill or downhill, but on the way back, I began to get extremely tired. I didn't want to stop, though, so I looked for something in the



Penny Kelley



A.J. Smith

distance to focus on, and found a tree way ahead of me. I kept my eyes on the tree as best as I could, turning every now and then to watch for cars or to glance at a cow that was staring at me as I passed her by. Sometimes my head would drop from being tired...and I'd have to remind myself to keep it up. The tree didn't seem to be getting any closer for a while, but I tried to as best as I could. Eventually, I reached it, and to my surprise, found that I was back at my host home. To my relief, I stopped running and walked down the path, out of breath, towards the house, where there would be a shower, breakfast, and an air conditioned room waiting for me.

Somewhere in the New Testament, Paul writes about running the race before us...I've heard that verse a million times in my life it seems. We're supposed to throw off everything that hinders us and keep our eyes on Jesus. It was fairly easy focusing on that tree, as there wasn't much else to look at as I ran back to the house...but can you imagine if I had been running in a town with lots of people, lights, and noise? How much harder is it to focus on Jesus with all of the distractions in our lives? And what if we get tired? Thank God for grace, eh?

Yet I somehow had strength when I focused on the tree I was running towards today. How much more strength will I have when I keep my eyes on Him?

Off to bed. God's blessings to you all.

Hebrews 12:1-3, 2 Timothy 4:7

Date: 8/5/2006

Submitted by: Bethany Schwartz

Journal Entry:

A little boy called persistently to us over the fence. "Hey!...Hey!" He wanted to come and play with us. And that is what Vacation Bible School is all about, right? A Wal-Mart greeter hugged me. Thanks Brandi, that's never happened to me before. A two year old host sister cuddled up next to me and fell asleep, then greeted me with a huge hug in the morning. Adorable. A pastor's family took us hot air ballooning--not once but twice! What an incredible gift.



Bethany Schwartz

A man named Joe called me over to him as I left a Subway holding my lunch. He just had to sit down and talk to me about this book he had found in an alley the night before. It was called Jesus of Nazareth, and it was an account of the Gospels in more of a storybook form. He had read most of it during the night, and he told me all the details. He had a Bible, but he hadn't read it in months. He had moved to Nashville from Memphis to get away from a pastor who wouldn't stop bothering him about this Jesus guy. And now here he was, telling me the story as if he had never heard anything more exciting and real and full of adventure and passion.

My job is to tell that story of Jesus. That is what I do. Whether I am teaching preschool or working in West Africa or whatever else I might do, my job is to tell the story of Jesus Christ. But I have never heard it told with such passion as on this day outside of Subway. Joe believed everything he'd read in the Bible. He could tell you more details than I could. I asked him if he believed the stories he was telling me, and he said, "It's all right here; how could you not believe it?" But you see, Joe was homeless, and he had been involved in all kinds of things. He didn't specify, but they were big enough that he thought this forgiveness that Jesus offered just couldn't possibly apply to him. He believed every fact in the Bible, the entire account about Jesus' life and resurrection, but he wasn't yet able to grasp that this could all be for him, too.

We talked about the thief on the cross, the Samaritan woman at the well, Jesus' work with those people that the world called "sinners." There is example after example of Jesus going out of his way to show acceptance and forgiveness to these people that society labeled as sinners. And yet, when it comes to applying that to myself, when it came to Joe applying that to himself, it isn't so easy to accept.

You see, I believe it all, too. The stories are there, there is more than enough evidence about the accuracy of the Bible, there is more than enough proof to verify that Jesus was the Son of God, both God and man, and that he did in fact die on a cross and rise from the grave. I have researched, and

I believe it. I believe that it all happened, but when it comes to accepting the fact that it is truly for me, it sometimes becomes a little more difficult. Could Jesus possibly love me, forgive me, think I am worth his death on the cross? Could it all truly apply to me? Sometimes I wonder.

I sat there with Joe, and I thought about how much we had in common. He was homeless, and I lived in the Sheraton Hotel for the weekend. He begged for food, and I was given more than enough money for all the food I would need for the weekend. But we both knew the incredible story of Jesus Christ. And as we talked, I think he started to see how Jesus' forgiveness could in fact apply to him. And I know I was aware of Jesus' forgiveness in my life as well. We talked about prayer, and he wanted to pray for me. When he prayed, his words were full of knowledge of God, of how God works, and what God has done. He had hope when he prayed. I prayed for him as well, and I know God heard our prayers. I know God feels Joe's longing for peace, his longing to be considered one of God's children.

As we parted, Joe said that I had certainly given him a lot to think about. I concur. I was just out to buy lunch, and this man reshaped my day, my week, my purpose in this ministry. Yes, we have to keep telling the story. The story is incredible, and Joe recognized that. But the story didn't end 2000 years ago. It continues. Jesus' forgiveness, love, grace and mercy continue. It is for Joe. It is for me. It is for you.

Date: 8/5/2006

Submitted by: Bethany Schwartz

Journal Entry:

Last night we had a program. I had volunteered to do the main sharing for the night, but as the week passed, I had forgotten all about that. Then as we ate dinner, "Oh no!" I didn't have anything planned, didn't have a usual sharing to fall back on, I was stuck. Shauna told me to talk about one of my host moms in Cameroon, a lady that meant a lot to me. I decided that would be fine, but I wasn't too confident about it. I can talk about that for about two minutes, but what about the rest of the time?



Bethany Schwartz

Our team prayed before the service, and then I went and talked to two women who were already seated. One of them told me that she was the caregiver for the other, her sister, who had Alzheimer's. She was lovely to talk to, but I could tell that caregiving was starting to take its toll on her. And in our chat, I knew what I needed to share about during the program.

I talked about my host mom in Cameroon, Grandma Anne, who pointed me to the importance of prayer and what a powerful influence it can have over your life. Grandma Anne had very little, had recently lost her husband, and was raising four of her young grandchildren. She was very poor in earthly materials, but rich spiritually.

Then I talked about my relationship with my own grandmother, who suffered from cancer, dementia, and shingles. At the end of her life, she couldn't do any farm chores, she couldn't fix dinner, she couldn't even move around anymore. But the hardest thing for me was that she didn't remember who I was. I spent the summer living with her and my grandfather, and she didn't even know me. But as she forgot just about everything in her life, she never lost sight of who God was. She always knew that she was a child of God. And that is what really matters.

Grandma Anne and my own grandmother had one thing in common: they both had their eyes focused on God alone. As we traveled this year, and especially in Africa, God was trying to show me that Jesus is all I need. No matter what I have or what I don't have on this earth, it is Jesus alone that I need.

Thanks Grandma Anne and Grandma Grandt, you have taught me much.

Date: 8/6/2006

Submitted by: Jacob Djondo

Journal Entry:

<For God so loved the world that He gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in shall not perish but have eternal life. For God did not sent his son in the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him. Whoever believes in him is not condemned but whoever does not believe stands condemned already because he has not believed in the name of God's one and only Son>. John 3:16-18



Jacob Djondo

That the sum of the message the evangelist carries.

I am very proud of what Youth Encounter is doing throughout the world. Some of its volunteers may be motivated by discovering the world, fulfilling travelling ambitions. But the love and the willing to save people should motive someone to do team ministry with Youth Encounter.

It's been a year now we are touring to encourage and give Christ the Savior to people. Analysing deeply what I have seen, have heard during my touring, I am wrote this message below to whoever would like to do this ministry and to whoever will read it.

The peace and the grace of the Lord be with you!

The selfishness and the egotism are what lead us to sin and turn away of Christ.

God condemns he who rejects Christ and that condemnation is in two folds:

-the first is pronounced against the flesh since the fall of Adam and Eve. That leads to the physical death,

-the second will be pronounced at the second coming of Christ against the soul and the spirit. Then any evil spirit and soul will be destroyed. That is the eternal death.

We all were condemned and have gone astray because we disobeyed God; we have rejected him as Father, turned away from his will. But Jesus Christ in his love for everybody, it doesn't matter who you are, has come to restore the relationship between God and us. So everybody is to accept Christ as the Savior and Lord and will automatically get his relationship with God reestablished freely. That is what anyone need to told and know.

So rejecting Christ, who cares for us, would be an ingratitude. That is not without consequences.

Let's look in Isaiah 5:2-6<He dug it up and cleared it of stones and planted it with the choicest vines....."What more could have been done for my vineyard than I have done? When looked for good grapes why did it yield only bad?..... I will take away its hedge and it will be destroyed. I will break down its wall and it will be trampled. I will make it wasteland....>

This passage illustrates the consequences of rejecting Christ or turning away from Him. Like the man of the passage, God sending his Son expects us to recognize him as the Lord and the Savior. So what would be God's reaction if we reject his Son?! So in **John 3** we see that the one who rejects his Son stands condemned already. But he who believes has eternal life, which is the participation in the life of Christ, the eternal Son of God. And that participation leads to future life. In **John 1:4** says that Christ is the life and the life in him is the light of men. When we accept Christ, we take part in his life which is the light of men. The light symbolizes here the illumination of men, their prosperity and joy.

Our Creator is a patient God, slow in get angry. He is a God of second chance. He hates sin but loves the sinner by the way he hates doubting his Son but still loves the unbeliever. And that gives a second chance to the one to repent.

John 3 says God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world but to save the world through Him. God wants the entire world to repent and be saved.

So, my brother and sister, if you still denying Christ, God is giving you the opportunity today to repent and believe. Some say "I planning my life right now while I am young and after that in my old age I will repent." No one knows when there will not be any more opportunity to repent.

If you confess already Christ, he urges you the perseverance and prudence.

<As iron sharpens iron, so one man sharpens another>

I thank God this year that has been the best I've ever had. I thank Him for Youth Encounter and pray that he provide all the needs to its staff. May I dedicate this passage to Youth Encounter: **<But we have come to share in Christ if we hold firmly the end the confidence we had at the first> Heb.3:13.**

I thank also God for all His generous people who sponsor and support in any way the ministry of Youth Encounter, especially my sponsors. I pray that God will keep and bless you. May I dedicate this passage to all **<I tell you the truth, anyone who gives you a cup of water because you belong to Christ will certainly not lose his reward> Mark 9:41**

I thank God for my teammates, for all he taught me through them. You are beautiful creatures of God, full of love, talents, and gifts. May I dedicate this passage to you guys. **<If you continue in your faith, established and firm, not moved from the hope held out in the gospel> Col. 1:23**

God is so good!!! Amen!!!

Date: 8/14/2006

Submitted by: Penny Kelley

Journal Entry:

It's officially finished. One year on the road with Youth Encounter.

I would like to thank everyone we have met along the way for blessing us in such a big way. Your kindness, prayers, and support were very much appreciated.

On behalf of Cross Fire, we say thank you and God bless!

We pray that God keeps you in His care and loves you like you have loved us.



Penny Kelley
