

Sabbatical Stories: Part 3

Rev. Patrick Notley, Barrington Presbyterian Church, August 2016

New Week New Projects

Today started with a meeting with our project leaders - Cab Welford, the Pastor of the Freedom Full Gospel Assembly House of Prayer, and Ron Stacy, a member of the church and an active project leader for all of the groups who visit. It was decided that Ron would take two of the group members from Lake View Presbyterian Church to attempt to finish up all of the necessary plumbing in the handicap bathroom and that Cab would take the rest of us up one of the nearby "hollers" to begin work on a front porch for an elderly woman who had lost her husband to cancer over the winter.

The porch project was a blank slate for us. No tear out required since the previous porch had collapsed over the winter and had been already hauled away. The morning was spent getting a plan and making sure we had all of the required lumber and then framing up the decking structure and attaching it to the mobile home. The deck is up and both level and square and about a third of the flooring is already laid and secured - not a bad first day... Tomorrow will be a little slower given the need to cut flooring around posts that both support the porch itself and the coming roof that we will add later in the week. We hope to have stairs and railings up and secured by Wednesday at the latest.

The ongoing challenge in all of these projects is to limit the scope of the refurbishing. Each place I have been to is really an exercise in triage; figuring out which of the many, many issues that we find are the most important out all of the needed repairs and focusing on them first.

The current porch project is a prime example. It is an old single wide mobile home which is about sixteen feet wide and sixty-four feet long manufactured somewhere in the mid 1960's. Most experts would say that this mobile home is well past its useful life and should be demolished and replaced. This is true, but for the fact that the elderly woman who lives there has no means to replace her home since she survives mainly on the meager retirement and disability income that her now deceased husband still gets from the former mine job he had. Along with the need for a porch so that she can get in and out of her home with some level of ease, this mobile home also needs a new roof, new siding, new plumbing and on and on and on. The porch was chosen for this particular project mainly because the roof doesn't leak - yet - nor does the plumbing, and the siding, while old and cracked in places, is still more attached than not, but not being able to get in and out of your home is particularly problematic and thus became the number one priority for this time.

But even with such constraints, there is the desire to do just a little more than the bare necessity - a decent set of stairs would suffice for coming and going. Building a sixteen by eight-foot porch complete with railing, stairs and a roof will allow the resident of this mobile home to have a place to sit outside and visit with neighbors. It will allow her to have just a little normalcy in a life that is often measured in numbers of tragedies; and it will allow her the opportunity to offer hospitality to others that she has long not been able to do, for she will once again be part of the neighborhood in an active and present way rather than just the elderly widow who lost her husband and has not been able to get out much.

To many it is simply a porch, a structural necessity for getting in and out of a mobile home; to her it is an increase in dignity as she is once again able to be a more connected and active part of her community.

And so we build a porch to physically assist her in her daily needs and to recognize that regardless on anything else she is still and always a child of God worthy of all the dignity and respect due any other child of God.



At left, Sister Mary's porch, Tuesday morning, August 23. At right, Sister Mary's porch, Wednesday morning, August 24.



Sister Mary's Porch Friday Afternoon, August 26. Last day for us. Stairs and hand rails up and main roofing panels are up. Work remaining will be to put a top rail on porch railing to make it look just a little more finished, complete the roofing with ridge cap and vents, and add fascia trim and gutters. Pastor Cab (pictured on the roof) called it the best and fastest porch ever built by any of the groups he has hosted. He said it was the sturdiest porch he has seen in a long time and one with the nicest detail work on railings and skirting in the area. His worry is that now other clients will want the same thing and hopes I will bring groups around to fulfill that desire in the future... Hint, hint, hint.

WV Work Complete

As I write this I am relaxing at my parent's home in Bethesda, MD. It is a seven hour drive from the Hampden-Gilbert area of West Virginia and more than a world away. In Bethesda it is relatively quiet with tree lined roads that insulate the neighborhood residents from the hustle and bustle of the metro area that is mere blocks away. No trains run through the middle of town; no coal trucks rumble their way along winding roads slowing only for sharp curves and the occasional speed trap; "Trump for President" yard signs have been replaced almost universally by "Hillary for President" signs; ever present side yard garbage fires have been replaced by the almost as ubiquitous chiminea or back yard fire pit; and a Starbucks almost every block has replaced Wally's Diner famous in South Western West Virginia for fried chicken and real mashed potatoes.

Three weeks went by more rapidly than expected and I leave richer than I came. I was greeted with genuine welcome and treated to the best; I was invited into the homes and lives of folks who live far different than do I and whose life experience is light years apart from anything I experienced and yet was treated as just another regular person.

Life moves at a different pace in Hampden and Gilbert, a pace that is orchestrated at times by the rhythms of coal mining, even though most of the local mining operations have been shut down for years. There are harsh realities that residents contend with daily - lack of good paying jobs, an overabundance of prescription drug abuse, an under abundance of local business, high unemployment and higher health challenges - and there are even harsher reminders of the significant losses that have occurred - loss of loved ones to mine accidents, cancer, black lung

or drug overdose, loss of income because of the “restructuring” of death and disability benefits awarded to injured miners or their families, loss of local education for the young people some of whom spend almost four hours a day “commuting by bus” to the nearest high school and back home.

And yet for it all there is a genuine and deeply embedded care for one another that comes through time and again. More than once local folk would come and lend a hand for an hour or two on one of the projects we worked at when they saw us out building a porch or a handicap ramp as they arrived home from their overnight shift at one of the few operating mines in the area or they would drop off some cold tea and snacks in the afternoon because they knew how hot it was getting.

So I come away from this time in West Virginia deeply aware of the resiliency of the human spirit and deeply moved by the generosity of those whom I came to serve.