

Skagit Valley 2011

Pilgrimage to Mount Vernon, WA
August 7-12, 2011



Stockholder Report and Pilgrim Reflections

Presented on September 18, 2011
St. Thomas Episcopal Church, Medina, WA

Thank You

Dear Stockholders and the St. Thomas Community,

It is with great gratitude that the Pilgrims of the St. Thomas Youth Group present you this report. The generous support of the community in the form of “stock” was an investment in the lives of the St. Thomas youth, the people of la Iglesia de la Resurrección in Mt. Vernon, and countless farmworkers and their families. We hope that you will see some of the returns of your investment in this report: smiles on the faces of children at Vacation Bible Camp, children and teens attending the first day of school with all the necessary supplies, parents provided with diapers and baby food for their infants and toddlers, spiritual growth of Pilgrims, and new understandings of our shared humanity.

On top of stock sales, the Pilgrims brought with us two cars full of items donated to la Iglesia de la Resurrección. These items included over 1000 diapers, several hundred baby wipes, and 15 backpacks full of school supplies. We received a thank you card from the youth group and Priest, Jo Beecher, at Resurrección saying that said:

Together with the teenages and young adults of our church, you have played an important role in helping 85 school children know they are an important part of God’s family. Your support helped to provide each child with new backpacks and all school supplies requested by their teachers! This would not have been possible without your help. We thank you from the bottom of our hearts.

The effect of the Pilgrimage reaches far beyond the tangible items that the St. Thomas Pilgrims were able to bring with us and give to the community in Mt. Vernon, or the few hours we spent in the farm fields. This book will help you to share in the Pilgrimage through our reflections, and to see the ways in which your generous support shared God’s love with others and changed the lives of the Pilgrims

¡Gracias!

The 2011 Skagit Valley Pilgrims



Kyra

Pilgrimage is not what I expected



Having gone on the Skagit Valley Pilgrimage two years ago, I thought this trip would be an easy repeat. I was completely wrong.

I was able to connect with the children a lot better than before. I bonded with four year old Marisol over glitter glue and sidewalk chalk, and Israel over picture books. I learned names better, and felt like I knew the kids, and that they trusted me more. By the last day I was giving out piggy back rides, which was a huge change from Monday, when the kids wouldn't touch me.

The living conditions we saw were a lot better than I was used to. The shacks with tin roofs that I was expecting were a far cry from the nicer subsidized housing that we visited this time. Of course, these were far from perfect, but it was at least a decent living. We also visited one of the migrant camps, which was considered better because it had windows. We were able to peek inside one family's living space. A mother, father, and three young children slept and ate in a room smaller than my own bedroom.

Yes, what I saw shocked and horrified me. But I saw glimpses of hope in all of this: the six year old girl struggling through reading, but thoroughly determined to give it her best shot, two four year old girls in love with princesses and glitter, a bunch of boys who did their best to be boys, and the youth at Resurrección who were so excited about college. And yes, we are worlds apart, but we are more similar than you and I can imagine.



Alex

Pilgrimage is friendship

This was my first big trip with the youth group. I wasn't nervous, but truly curious as to how the trip would go. I wondered about the kind of surroundings we would be staying in and how the people would react to our coming. I was excited to make this pilgrimage and have fun with my friends, but make a difference at the same time.

When we arrived in Skagit, my first reaction was that it was like any other small town I had been to. It had a considerable small town feel and seemed to be quite rural, with all the small farms nearby. What really surprised me first was when we went to work on the farms with Salvador and Ismael. I had thought that weeding the plants would be easy. Well, it's not. I found that it's really important to get the really small weeds right by the plant and that is really hard work. After only an hour, I was tired and wanted to take a nap. But then I realized the workers there at the farm have it much harder. They wake up early in the morning and work until late evening. I'm much more grateful now knowing the work these people go through just to have food on their plates, even if that means endless hours of back-breaking work.

My favorite part of the trip had to be Vacation Bible Camp with the kids. I loved interacting with all the young children and seeing the smiles on their faces when we would give them a book, or make a rain stick or some other craft. One of the girls there, Maria, who is 6 years old, was my little translator when a kid would come up to me and say something in Spanish. I really felt connected with Maria, like we had a shared understanding. She would look at me and smile and I knew what she was thinking. Then there was Pablo, the cutest little boy that always had a smile on his face. It really touched me on the first day when I asked him his name, and he said "Mickey." He came up to me later that day and said to me: "My name is Pablo. That's what my friends call me." To have developed a friendship with this boy in one day was more than I could have ever hoped for.

My view on Skagit really changed when we went to the migrant camps. One woman (who didn't speak English or Spanish) actually allowed us into her small living area. She had three children—if I remember correctly—and two beds. The room was extremely dirty and had a small cooking space that was about three feet wide. This really hit me that living conditions in Skagit, especially in the migrant camps, doesn't seem as nice as I first thought they were.

Then there was little one-year-old Marantha. She found me as soon as we arrived at the migrant camps. I really remember her the most. As soon as I was out of the car, she ran up to me, holding my hand as if she had known me for forever. Sometimes, she would spread her arms wide, grin from ear to ear, and jump up and down asking to be held. She would take my hand and show me around the camp, always smiling. It really hit me how she just chose me out of everyone in the group. I felt special to this little girl. Then, when it was time to leave, I said "adios" with a sad smile on my face and she smiled back and ran off. I knew then that she must be accustomed to visitors coming and going, but I still felt special and knew I would never forget little Marantha.

All in all, I left Skagit Valley with a more wholesome gratefulness for the privileges I have in life and will never truly take anything for granted again.





Pablo is all smiles at Bible Camp!



Alex, finding all of those really small weeds



Maria enjoys a book read to her by Alex



Pablo is great at jumping rope!

Kathryn

A pilgrimage is a chance to connect with others and make lasting bonds that will contribute to how you grow, learn, and act in the future

Before this pilgrimage I knew very little about immigration and how undocumented immigrants are treated. However, while on this trip I got the opportunity to listen in on a meeting with Jo Beecher, the county sheriff, members of the local police force and people who wanted to voice their opinions on the Secure Communities Act. Secure Communities is an act that takes dangerous undocumented immigrants and deports them. However it has had the opposite effect.



In the three years it has been in place, the percentage of low-level offenders and victims of domestic violence deported has risen to 45% and violent has dropped to 20%. I was shocked to learn that the sheriff thought that 70% of the deportations were high-level offenders and 30% were other. But the two things that stuck out to me the most were that if someone calls in for being abused and the offender flees, then it's Washington state law to arrest someone even if they were the one to call in. With this act they will be finger printed straight away and sent through an ICE (Immigration & Customs Enforcement) database. If they come up as undocumented they will face deportation. As a result of this, many victims are afraid to call the police for fear of deportation and may not want to risk their spouse or partner getting deported for they may be the sole providers of their family. So sadly, Secure Communities is having the flip effect, creating a community filled with fear and violence.



The second thing that hit me harder was learning that some kids who have lived in America their whole lives but illegally crossed the border when they were babies or young children don't even know that they are undocumented. They don't even realize that the dreams they have are out of their reach because of their immigration status. When I heard this it made me think about a young boy named Felipe who wants to be a police officer when he grows up and another boy who wants to go to UW and become a lawyer. What if they are undocumented and are unaware of it? That made me feel terrible because all these kids have so much hope and energy, and if they are unable to reach their goals because of something they couldn't control when they were young, it is not fair. Now that I've had a glimpse at the hardships these people have to face I have a whole new perspective on the situation, and I hope others learn something too.

Siena

Pilgrimage is discovering our similarities

In Skagit Valley I met so many new people, and despite the fact that our lives were completely different, we were all inherently similar. The kids my age had the same needs and wants as I do, and they have dreams just like I do. But unfortunately they can't attain these aspirations as easily as I can. Many of them were born in a different country and were brought here before they knew what was happening. Because of this, they are undocumented and therefore it will be incredibly difficult for them to get the documents that will allow them to become citizens. Without these documents they can't get jobs, or even live life with peace of mind knowing they could be sent back to unfamiliar countries at any time. Getting to know these kids, I wanted to do anything I could to enable them to achieve anything they set their minds to. Unfortunately the issue of immigration is anything but black and white. However, if I learned anything in Skagit Valley, it is that every human has the right to be the best person they can possibly be.



The Resurrección youth group joined the Pilgrims for dinner and s'mores

Michaela

Pilgrimage is a journey inspiring personal growth as well as a journey of service to others in need

This was my third pilgrimage with the St. Thomas youth group. Each was unique and special in its own way; changing people, changing places, and changing experiences. Yet a common thread running through each of them was the need of the people we met. Sometimes the need was immediate; assistance to get relief from an unfair employer, a need for clean water or a road, or help tending a crop they actually owned. Always though was a need for recognition of their humanity.

The need for recognition existed for all ages. This desire was easiest to fill for the children. For example, sitting one-on-one with Marisol reading a book together let her know she mattered and that there were people, strangers, who cared about her, her needs, and her dreams. For now, that is all it took to satisfy her simple yearnings.

But for the adults, after years of being beaten down, how could we, a rag tag group of youth with a few adult leaders make a difference? The reality is the relief we provided was momentary. The weeds we pulled will grow back and the smiles we shared will fade from memory. Hopefully though, our willingness to learn about their struggles will stay with them. I know seeing their fight for survival will remain with me always.



Michaela found a snake



So after our brief time in the Skagit Valley, we returned to the comfort of our homes. Our lives picked up from where we left them the week before. But for those we left behind, particularly the adults, life will continue to be a challenge. I pray they will think of us and the knowledge that there are people who care about them, their needs, and especially their humanity provides some comfort in their day-to-day struggle to survive.

Halle

Pilgrimage is giving back to the community, helping people out that need it, building my faith in God, and sharing that faith with others



I have a lot of memories from the trip but one thing that I really remember are the kids. Every night we put on a Bible camp for kids, they were so nice and very playful!! They also adapted easily. When we first arrived all the kids ran away, but once we began setting up and getting out the t-shirts (a project that they could do) and other crafts they started to come back. The first day there was about twenty-five to thirty kids (ages 2-18). I think all the kids had a lot of fun, even the older ones.

I also enjoyed the opportunity to get to know all of the other youth in our group, it was really fun, like Kyra, Alex, Ben, Michaela, Siena, Kathryn, Nathan and Brian! It was a lot of fun to be with all of them. It was wonderful that we did everything together. For example, we would always eat together or we would always do Compline together.

One thing I took with me from this whole experience was the kind of things the migrant workers have to live with. One of the things that just blew my mind was the fact that the workers are required to sign a contract that states they must work 14-16 hour days with only a fifteen minute break. The problem in signing this contract is that most of them don't speak English and they aren't given an opportunity to take a copy of the contract with them to have someone else read it. They must sign it or they don't work. Another thing that will always stay with me is their living conditions. When they are working in the fields during the summer they are given free housing, but the house is only one room, about the size of a kitchen with only a tin roof. They don't even have stoves. They use propane stoves to cook, which they had to buy themselves. In addition, they had to share 2 bathrooms with the whole community, which was about 1-2 acres of houses. I personally thought that was really sad.

Overall, I had really good time and I am glad I went. I learned a lot about the plight of migrant workers and their families. I hope I have an opportunity to go again!



Nathan

Pilgrimage is relationship

Before I went to Skagit Valley, I was uncomfortable about going, thinking that this trip would be far out of my comfort zone. So reluctantly I took the drive over to the campsite where we stayed for that week. Once we got settled in, I found myself relieved when I found out that according to the schedule we had a lot of time by ourselves.

But then that night our pilgrimage had a meal with the people from the church after the service. This meal changed my whole aspect of the pilgrimage. These kids were innocent, kind, and just wanted to mess around. Then the next day the whole “bible camp” routine came around.

Our pilgrimage hosted a Vacation Bible Camp for the kids at Raspberry Ridge (migrant farmer camp). As it turns out, I ended up wanting to come back the next day. At first no one was around the first Bible Camp day, but then all of a sudden everyone just showed up. In addition, the people warmed up pretty quickly. When they saw we had books, food and crafts, they were pretty happy with us. In fact one of the smaller boys, Angel, started crying when I started walking away from him to help other people!

Another small boy, Lolo, came to the Vacation Bible Camp the last few days. Every day he wore a Sponge-Bob outfit. When we realized how much he liked SpongeBob, Tammy drew a picture of SpongeBob on his rain stick (the craft we were creating on the day in question). The warmest of smiles broke out on his face as he saw the picture of SpongeBob. I don't know why, but somehow at that moment I decided these people were not unlike us.

What about the farmers however? I can't really say I can relate to any of them because I don't work in a field, but I can say that I feel for them because they work for more than 12 hours and only get minimum wage, no matter the huge amount of berries they pick, and usually they sign away their work rights and break time in their contracts because they cannot read the contracts.

In conclusion, I came from being uncertain about coming to the pilgrimage to having amazing experiences with people who I discovered aren't really that different from me.



Ben

Pilgrimage is a peaceful trip to build community

My Skagit valley pilgrimage experience this year was a little different than the ones I had been on in the past. Instead of cabins, there were tents. The showers weren't free, and there wasn't a pool. These differences had no overall impact on the experience or the trip at all. Working in the field, playing with children, building new friendships, and strengthening the community. Playing games with the kids had to have been my favorite thing during the trip. I also definitely enjoyed the compline service we had on the coast, watching the sun slowly set. Also, the tour of Sakuma farms was rather interesting too. The ice cream I have to say was quite delicious. This pilgrimage was one of the best one's I've been on so far. I am definitely looking forward to the next trip.



Leslie

Pilgrimage is a journey taken with an open heart

'Hello!'
'Hello!'
'Do you like my hat?'
'I do not like your hat.'



These were the words I heard on Monday afternoon as Yahira, a resident of the Raspberry Ridge Migrant Farmworker apartment complex, read, *Go, Dog. Go!* to me during the organized Vacation Bible Camp. Yahira and I talked about the book and then she told me a little about herself. Yahira was going to turn seven that coming Friday and her mother was baking her a chocolate cake. It was Yahira who made me see that the children of Raspberry Ridge were really no different from my own children.

At the end of the first day of camp, our group told the children we would be back tomorrow and they were so excited. By the third day, the children were running out to meet us as we drove up the driveway at Raspberry Ridge. I remember Israel and his friends running back and forth from our truck helping us to carry and set up tables and chairs for camp. Some of the campers' mothers even started to join us at the craft table and enjoyed learning how to make paper flowers and friendship bracelets. I think that the children enjoyed our visits, but I know that I got just as much, if not more, enjoyment out of the time I spent playing and reading with the children. Certainly Vacation Bible Camp was a highlight of the week in Skagit Valley for me.

Even though the children reminded me of my own children, we learned that the children of migrant farm workers live much different lives. Children as young as seven years old may work in the fields alongside their parents in order to help them meet their picking quota. Parents work in excess of twelve hour days often without breaks or appropriate accommodations which certainly has to have a negative effect on their children. We toured a migrant labor camp and saw first-hand the deplorable living conditions in which many families live during the growing season. Many parents and some children are undocumented citizens, so they live in fear of being deported.

We learned that despite these difficult living conditions there is hope. We visited Viva Farms (www.viva-farms.org) which is a joint venture of Washington State University Extension and GrowFood.org. Viva helps farmers get started with education, training, start-up loans, land, equipment and infrastructure. Salvador Morales, a parishioner of La Iglesia de la Resurrección, farms a 1-acre parcel of land with his brother, Ismael. Programs like Viva Farms help individuals like Salvador become independent farmers and not laborers. We also learned a bit about the DREAM Act (Development, Relief and Education for Alien Minors Act). The bill, if passed, would provide conditional permanent residency to undocumented individuals who meet certain eligibility requirements and would give them a path to citizenship. The passage of this bill would not only benefit undocumented individuals, but it would also benefit the entire United States.

My pilgrimage opened my eyes to the similarities between my life and the migrant farming community and also showed me that with small changes we can begin to eliminate the differences that exist between us.

Tammy

Pilgrimage is venturing to a new place to experience the wonders and miracles has God created in a world different than your own



This being my second year going on the Skagit Valley pilgrimage, I already had some

expectations and ideas in my mind about what I was going to experience. Yet once again, I was surprised by what stood out to me this year as I reflect on our trip.

When we arrived on Sunday evening, after setting up our own campsite, we traveled to la Iglesia de la Resurrección. There, we met with Jo and attended the Sunday evening service sitting among the congregation. As with last year, our Mass on the Grass coincides with our trip to Skagit Valley and we are able to provide dinner for the families of Resurrección with grilled hamburgers and hotdogs after the service. This year, we were treated to the freshest salad I've ever eaten as one of the parishioners works his own farm and donated heads of lettuce to our dinner on Sunday night. After dinner, as I sat on the floor by the windows, I witnessed a scene which put a smile on my face. Salvador took a carton of fresh heads of romaine lettuce and "raffled it off" (no money exchanged) to lucky families who were thrilled to receive a head of his freshly harvested lettuce!

The next day, we then went to work on Salvador's farm – relatively small, in comparison to the massive "corporate-sized" farms in Skagit Valley. There we learned of the long hours Salvador's wife and family members spend weeding and caring for their own leased land. We worked for only a few hours and quickly developed an appreciation for the labor involved in the work migrant farm workers do. Salvador is an exception to what we think of when we hear about Latinos working in the Skagit Valley fields. He would like to set an example for others with the possibilities which may be available for them.

Salvador, his farm and the many families we met throughout our stay brought about a new appreciation and hope for me when I consider Skagit Valley. Their lives are so very challenging in so many ways, yet to see the smiles on various family members' faces when they receive a head of lettuce or the pride on Salvador's face when he hands out his produce to his friends, was just the beam of light I will always remember from this pilgrimage to Skagit Valley, Washington.



Salvador tells the Pilgrims about his vegetable plot

Bill

Pilgrimage is awesome!

- Lucy McSherry, Bill's daughter

“They’re here! They’re here!” we heard the kids cry. We were driving into the Raspberry Ridge apartment complex. It was our last day of camp at the farmworker housing complex, and we were 10 minutes late. They had been waiting for us.

What a difference four days can make. It was a much different scene on Monday, when we first arrived – right on time at 3:00 pm. Rev. Jo Beecher, Priest at la Iglesia Episcopal de la Resurrección, took our Spanish-speaking pilgrims, Ben and Lucy, and pounded the pavement. They went from door to door seeing if any kids wanted to come do crafts, hear a story or have a snack.

It was a tough assignment. By 3:30, only a handful of kids had arrived, with some parents rightly keeping a wary eye on them and some teenagers turning up the gangsta rap in one of the apartments closest to our makeshift camp. We had set up on some steel benches installed in the middle of the apartments, and spread out blankets and towels for crafts. However, by the end of the day, 15 or so kids were having fun painting t-shirts and engaging in fellowship with the children and youth of St. Thomas. Our two youngest pilgrims, Jackie and Lucy, were having a great time playing with the kids, and our youth were terrific at helping the younger kids with their crafts and making friends. We were off to a good start.

The rest of the week saw our reception improve each day, as did the sophistication of our camp (card tables and folding chairs!). The fun grew each day too. Brian and Rev. Jo teamed up to tell Bible stories in English and Spanish, and we sang some of the classic Vacation Bible Camps songs with them – some even in Spanish.

By that last day, judging by the enthusiastic reception we received, we had made many friends sharing God’s love. More and more kids joined us each day, as did some of the parents. Even some teenagers joined in, although perhaps not the gangsta rap fans. And while we arrived 10 minutes late, we left over 30 minutes later than normal. Everyone was having too much fun, and we knew we would miss our new friends.



Bill's daughter, Lucy, practices her Spanish



Megan

Pilgrimage is God's work through his children

You may ask yourself: how does a relationship, in just a few days time, turn from being so unfamiliar and questionable, into one that creates a sense of belonging and child-like enthusiasm? After spending a week-long trip in Skagit Valley with the families of migrant farm workers, I came to realize that it can only be the work of God, executed through our very own youth group.

The first day we arrived at the apartment complex at which we set up our vacation bible camp, you could almost feel the tension and skepticism that ran through the area. Children of all ages ran back into their homes, mothers were holding their babies and asking Jo (the bi-lingual pastor at the local church), “What are they here for? What do they want with my children?” At first, we didn’t know what to do except set up our arts and crafts and hope to spark some interest for the kids. The planned activity for the first day was decorating shirts. As soon as we laid the shirts and the snacks we brought out on the benches, we started to see teenagers and their siblings slowly inch their way over to our area. At Compline that night, we came to the conclusion that what attracted these kids the most, was food and clothing: two daily essentials that one may take for granted.

The second day I decided to exercise the Spanish skills I had learned in High School, and read English and Spanish books to the kids. There was one little boy in particular that wanted to read book after book, until my voice got hoarse and I had to suggest a different activity. The Berenstain Bears and Dr. Seuss books ended up being his favorites. When I told him that he could bring them home and keep them, his eyes lit up with a kind of excitement and happiness that was literally contagious. When I reflected on this day, I realized that a couple of simple books that flood our classrooms at home mean the world to those who may have limited access. I also can’t help but be in awe when I think about reading with this boy; could it possibly have provided him with as much joy as any tangible item that, to some of us, could be easily bought at a store?

Later that week I met a teenage boy who expressed his interest in going to the University of Washington. He looked so mature, and I figured that he was around my age (20), looking to transfer there from a nearby school. I found out, however, that he is 15 years old, just barely starting high school. I listened to his long-term plans which involved getting into college and becoming a veterinarian, and was inspired by his incredible motivation and drive. I thought to myself: when I was fifteen, I hadn’t even started to think about college, let alone what I wanted to be when I grew up. Heck, when I was that age I was making short-term decisions like what I was going to do after school that day, or how I was going to spend my babysitting money that weekend. It opened my eyes to how quickly a number of these kids have to grow up. They face real-life obstacles that force them to have a different perspective on life- one that doesn’t necessarily have room for making irrelevant and simple choices.

Cont...

Looking back on this trip as a whole, I have realized how present God was throughout each day of our pilgrimage. He put us in situations where we learned to appreciate the seemingly “little things in life,” and He gave us the relationships we need to show us ways to prioritize others. I have come to understand why God called us on this trip, and am thankful that He did. I believe that our presence in Skagit Valley provided hope to those who needed a light, and a sense of motivation to me and my fellow St. Thomas pilgrims to live life to the fullest.



Farmworker housing at Raspberry Ridge, where Vacation Bible Camp took place (above)



Brian

Pilgrimage is an experience of God's kingdom



The Christian life has often been described as a journey. There is a story of a fourth-century Desert Father who once travelled on a pilgrimage to Rome. He was told of a celebrated recluse there, a woman who lived always in one small room, never going out. As one who spent his life traveling long distances, the Desert Father – skeptical about her way of life – asked her, “Why are you sitting here?” She replied to him, “I am not sitting, I am on a journey.” As Orthodox Bishop Kallistos Ware describes it, the Christian journey is “through the inward spaces of the heart...out of time into eternity.”

In August, a group of sixteen Pilgrims departed from St. Thomas. We embarked on a journey of service and faith. Though our Pilgrimage to the Skagit Valley was not far away, the distance travelled in the hearts of the Pilgrims far exceeded the number of miles we travelled. We caught glimpses of God's kingdom in the friendship of children at Bible Camp. We saw hope growing roots in Salvador's vegetable plot at Viva Farms. And we saw the beginnings of justice taking hold of a community through conversations about immigration and the DREAM Act.

Although the Pilgrimage changed us, it was not a journey about ourselves. The Pilgrims selflessly gave their time and energy to others throughout the trip. From weeding Salvador's vegetable plot, to sharing a book, a craft, or a smile with a child at Bible Camp, the Pilgrims shared the love and hospitality of God with the farming families of the Skagit Valley.

As we continue on this journey of faith, this Pilgrimage will stand as a signpost – pointing all involved to God's kingdom. It will remind us of hope in hard places, of justice in the midst of helplessness, of generosity from those of have little to give, and God's love shared between people created in God's own image.





