

Ruined for Ordinary Life

by Lois and Abbie Mitchell

We were having a team meeting in the airport in Miami, en route to Bolivia. We were a team of nine: parents and teens, and team leader, Dale Stairs - excited to be going off on a short term mission trip to Bolivia where we would spend most of our time in Cochabamba working with prison kids at Casa de la Amistad (House of Friendship). Dale called us together for a team session, the first of many over the next few weeks.

As a prelude to our prayer time in the Miami airport, Dale recounted the words of someone who had prayed for a previous short term mission trip, that the team members, as a result of their experience, would be *ruined for ordinary life*. This was Dale's prayer for our team as we set out. There were, of course, also prayers for safety, for open hearts and minds, for the ability to see God in a fresh way, for our families who had remained behind, etc. But the prayer that we might be "ruined for ordinary life" stands out in my mind as the most profound request. And, I'm convinced that his prayer is being answered.

But let me back up a bit and tell you about our team and our mission. The idea for a parent/teen trip came from the Youth and Family Department of the Convention of Atlantic Baptist Churches. They believed that a parent/teen mission experience would give families an opportunity to be involved in cross-cultural ministry together and the hope was that this experience would challenge and strengthen team members individually and as families. Our team was the pilot group for this concept. We had three family groups: Doug and Bonny Muir and their son, Amos (from Saint John, NB), Larry Knowles and his daughter Sarah, from Canning, NS and myself (Lois Mitchell) and my daughter Abbie from Deer Island, NB and Abbie's friend Sarah Dewar from St. George, NB. I was Sarah's surrogate mom for the trip. Finally, team leader Dale Stairs brought our group to nine members.

Many people see a short term mission trip as a chance for us to go to a developing country and help them out in some way. There's an expectation that in addition to "sharing the gospel" (through music, Bible studies, puppets, skits, etc.), we might be involved in some practical ministry: construction projects for churches or schools, help with water issues or agricultural projects, health care or education issues, etc. In short, there's often an assumption that we will be the ones **giving** and they will be **receiving**. In some small ways this is perhaps true, but most people who return from a Short Term Mission experience will be quick to tell you that we receive far more than we give. It's a humbling but exhilarating realization! So often our North American culture encourages us to measure blessing in material terms. Even a very short exposure to



Team Members: front row, L-R: Bonny, Abbie, Sarah D. and Sarah K. Back row: Doug, Amos, Dale, Lois, Larry.

Christians living in countries where prayers for daily bread are quite literal, challenges many of our core assumptions about ourselves and about God and His provision.

Dr. Gary Nelson (General Secretary of Canadian Baptist Ministries) speaks of a "ministry of presence" – simply the encouragement we can be as we come alongside Christians in foreign lands as they seek to serve God in their context and in the midst of great need. CBM is very committed to working **with** our partners in developing countries, learning with and from one another. So, it was with this in mind that we arrived at Casa de la Amistad to be a ministry of presence to the prison kids.

Casa de la Amistad is funded by The Sharing Way but is staffed entirely by Bolivians. It is a ministry to kids who are living in a variety of Cochabamba prisons with one or both parents. The justice system in Bolivia is very different from the justice system in Canada. First of all, there is no presumption of innocence so if someone is accused of a crime, they are imprisoned. They may wait years in prison before they have a hearing or trial. Poverty is a huge issue in Bolivia with almost 70% of the population living on less than \$2/day. Most of the parents of the children at Casa are in prison because they have been accused of drug related offenses. They are not the drug lords but, desperate for money, become involved in the front lines of the drug trafficking rings.

The government does not provide cells or food for the prisoners. As a result, the prison is very much a society within a society. We visited one of the men's prisons in Cochabamba and it reminded me of the shanty towns I had visited in Nairobi, except in the case of the prison, it was all enclosed and the atmosphere was very oppressive. However, like the Nairobi slums, there was lots of commerce taking place with small shops and restaurants owned and run by inmates for inmates. In this particular prison there were paying jobs for about 20% of the inmates, making shoes and assorted items from cast iron. Otherwise, prisoners depend on family members or outside agencies to provide food or money. This prison was home to about 170 male inmates, 60 wives and about 70 children.

Some of these children leave the prison each week day to attend school for half a day and/or to go to Casa de la Amistad for a half day. At the Casa, they receive one large nutritious meal as well as healthy snacks, medical and dental care, tutoring, spiritual direction and instruction, music, games, encouragement and especially hope. Older youth are taught skills like carpentry and sewing so that they have a marketable skill when they leave the prison. The walls of the Casa – both inside and out - are painted brightly and there is an atmosphere of energy and excitement. Daniel, the administrator, is 27 years old and was an inspiration to all of us. The oldest of seven sons, his father died when Daniel was quite young and now Daniel is supporting his family and putting his brothers through university. Daniel, it seemed to me, is a model of what it means to be the incarnational presence of Christ.



Abbie with two Bolivian girls

Not only did this trip open my eyes to a new culture and way of life; it let me see God for who He is without all of the political or social issues that get in the way in North America. When I think back, one word comes to mind: love. The Bolivians had an amazing capacity for love and it shone through as we watched them interact with each other, the children and the land. They are proud of who they are and wanted to share this love they had with us in every chance possible. When we walked into a church, it wasn't a simple "hello" and a handshake but a presentation of who we were, where we were from, and what we were doing. They didn't care about the schedule; they could stop mid-sentence so that everyone could do the traditional handshake, kiss, hug routine. Now that is love without letting anything get in the way.



There were lots of hugs.

We spent a week at the Casa and, despite the fact that we couldn't speak much Spanish and the kids couldn't speak much English, we played with them, hugged them and grew very close. The day we visited the men's prison was the day we were leaving Cochabamba. After a 45 minute tour of the prison, we went to the Casa to say goodbye to the kids. It was an emotionally wrenching experience for all of us, having seen the living conditions that these kids go back to each day.

Saying goodbye took about two hours as they had a program for us, presented us with gifts (handmade items produced by "Free Hands", an associated ministry to women prisoners), and, of course, lots of hugs and kisses for all.

We said goodbye because we were leaving, but we will never forget these kids. We have been *ruined for ordinary life* because we have had to think about so many things that we take for granted here in Canada.

The following are some **reflections from Abbie** concerning the way this trip ruined her for ordinary life...

"It is always easy to accept yourself as who you are, stay in your comfort zone and never challenge yourself. All this changed on our mission trip to Bolivia. It was miles away from my comfort zone and challenged me in ways I never thought possible on both spiritual and personal aspects. It was not out of the ordinary to be asked (as we were) to speak on live radio on the third most listened to radio station in Bolivia or to be handed 20 kids while the teacher runs out to get a much needed break assuming you can hold all responsibility gracefully.

We learned how to be flexible, which was crucial, and we truly learned and saw first-hand, the work of the Lord in the



Piggy back rides - popular in every culture!

land, the schools, the playgrounds, soccer fields, etc. It was an experience that I will never forget and will definitely be doing again in the near future. When we left, I kept wondering if this mission trip was right for me as all my friends flew off to go bake in the sun at fancy resorts, but the second I got on the plane I knew it was where God wanted me to be. This feeling never changed and it was much easier to sleep at night knowing that you helped and encouraged someone that day – even though they helped me just as much if not more than I helped them!"

Abbie and Sarah are hoping to return to Cochabamba to work with the prison kids next May after they finish their first year at Saint Thomas University in Fredericton. If everything works out, they will stay at the Baptist Centre (within walking distance of the Casa) and will stay in Bolivia for a month as Canadian Baptist Volunteers. The Short Term Mission Department will make all of their arrangements and Daniel and the staff at the Casa will decide how to make the best use of their time and talents. Please pray for them. ■