

Philly Witness

10/6/24

Grace Canella

For me, this trip was so much more than just this one thing I am going to talk about today. It would take a bazillion church services to debrief all the things that happened and how they impacted us all.

Every minute could be broken down into an hour long conversation. There are so so SO many stories that I can tell you about, laughs, food, conversations, joy, anger, hugs, hope, and fun!!! Being immersed in many new situations, was so awesome and also heart breaking.

Philly with this group connected me more with every person in the youth group, but also with the people we were around throughout the trip. This trip was so impactful to me in so many ways, that I don't have big enough words to describe the hugeness of it all. But I will try to describe one thing this morning.

Lets set the scene. It was the first full day of being in Philadelphia with Salt and Light. Thursday July 11th. We were at this garden that Jaes partner Cam planted. It was planted earlier in the summer, 6 raised beds overflowing with life. The garden was in the greenest place I saw the whole trip. It was a space surrounded by concrete buildings, telephone poles, churches, and cars. There were a couple trees giving shade to the area, but the sun warming our bodies. We all split up in groups to take on various tasks, such as cleaning out the shed with rusty tools and a scared possum, or harvesting cucumbers hiding in between the vines.

Somehow I ended up helping Joey prune the tomato plants. I grabbed a pair of clippers, red twine, and sticks. The plants were very abundant and overgrown, each vine curling every which way. The fruit was not yet red, but there were plenty of green ones.

He walked me through the process of pruning. Basically, there were these vines that are "suckers". A sucker is born when there is a vine and then another vine coming off, the sucker will grow in the middle of those two. Once the suckers were cut, I got the red twine and tied the plant loosely, to the wooden supports we stuck strategically in the soil.

Reasons why suckers get chopped:

The sucker takes all the nutrients that the plant brings in from the sunlight, the energy is getting sent to the sucker instead of the other parts of the plant. If it is not cut, it will eventually produce fruit. But this fruit will not be as sweet as fruit from non-suckers.

Also a tomato plant needs to breathe. Taking away the unneeded helps it grow even more. And leaving room to grow helps it use that room to go further.

To be honest, I didn't think much about this tomato plant experience until later. And then I realized that: We are all tomato plants.

And we are all trying to reach towards the sun, the best we can possibly be. The highest we can grow is our maximum potential. And we are all trying to produce the sweetest fruit that we can.

And sometimes, things get in the way. In this case this would be the suckers. In my life, I have people that don't bring anything positive to the table. This is not helping my tomato plant grow. To cut off the suckers in my life, is to let myself flourish. For me, sometimes I can be my own sucker. When I get negative about something, this is sucking my energy into the negativity. I have to cut out this hate and replace it with love. When I get stressed I cut that off and replace it with some peace. What I do with my life, It's up to me.

I realized I am so incredibly lucky to be a tomato plant. Like to be alive, and getting opportunities to push myself towards that sun. If something gets in the way there's 2 options, I can either let it get the best of me, let it take my energy from my sunlight, or I can chainsaw it off and breathe freely. The second option helps me grow the sweetest fruits, the sweetest moments in my life. And I have to water myself with goodness to grow more.

I wrote in my journal later about how grateful I am, for everything and everyone and every moment that has made me the way I am. Things that have taught me lessons, laughing so hard on the floor holding my stomach, climbing literal and metaphorical mountains, hugs, hard conversations, pure joy, really delicious food. Taking out suckers is healthy and needed for me to feel good.

When we all come together as a whole tomato plant family, we have so many more fruits. After all, we are all connected. Like the tomato roots underground that raised bed in Philly we are all woven in an intricate pattern of closeness.

We have got to love each other and treat each other with the same love and grace that God taught us and breathe together. Because LIFE IS GOOD!!!!!!!!!!!!!!

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Emily Tringe

I am going to be completely honest in this, and I am going to speak my truth to the best of my ability. My experience in Philly was absolutely wonderful, but I did experience some really hard and frustrating things that made me really angry they even happened. The theme of my witness today is value. Everyone has a familiar notion of what this word may mean to them, and I had an idea of what it was before I left, but I came back with an entirely new understanding. To be honest with you, I knew I loved church and that I loved being a member of our community at OMH but I never really knew what it meant to be connected with God in this way. I knew god loved me, supported me and would lead me in the right direction, but I didn't know to what extent. And I didn't really learn until this trip, my value not only to God but to those around me who love me just like god does. As many parts of this trip were beautiful, other parts were hard, sad, and honestly kinda heart wrenching. At one point during the trip, he pulled me aside, not just once, but multiple times. He wanted to talk to me, he wanted to ask me more questions than the others, the biggest thing, he wanted to tell me that I was better than the others, that I was a superstar. He wanted to tell me things about myself that I did not want to hear. I have been taught since the beginning by my parents and support system, that we love everyone regardless of how they treat us, or what they are going through. People hurt us. Period. But the only response back is love, as hard as that is. But, when you are hurt by someone you trust, that had earned my trust over many years, is lost, that's a whole new level of overcoming your eternal rage and putting on a face to keep moving forward. It didn't mean I got over it, I was just getting through it. I don't have many connections like I do with the people in the youth group, and every person in the group has their own beautiful ways of being, we all share many similarities or similar interests, but we are all unique in different ways and have strengths and weaknesses in different moments. One thing I'll never do is point out our weakness or apparent strengths in order to make someone feel better than another. God loves us for who we are, and we get to experience gods love equally, he also values us just the same. I struggled a lot the last 24 hours of the trip not only because I was physically exhausted from staying up

late giggling with the other youth, waking up early, and working all day, but I was mentally exhausted from dealing with my own issues, and the thoughts running through my head from the community we were in. One of the most meaningful feelings I felt the entire trip was walking into the sanctuary on Sunday morning and literally feeling god surround me with his unconditional, beautiful love. Grace, Dave, Hannah and I sat in a row together at the back of the church, we took in the beginning of the service letting the gospel music surround us. I don't entirely remember the beginning of the service before pastor sean began to speak, but I think that's because when he spoke I literally could not get his words out of my head. Every word he spoke during the service was exactly what I needed to hear. Dave had been my shoulder to lean on when I was experiencing some of the tough things during the trip and so during the service when pastor Sean would say something we would kinda just look at each other and know, wow, this is crazy, this is exactly what I needed to hear. One of those moments was when he brought up value.

"The reason we have a shepherd watching over us is because we are valuable to god. I don't know who you allow to tell you differently. I don't know who you allow in life to decrease your value and tell you that you are less than you are. You need to know that you are valuable to the shepherd. You belong to god and god belongs to you. You are valuable to god. He loves you, he poured his heart into you, he breathed his breath into you, you need to know just how valuable you are. Stop letting low value people decide your value. Stop letting people who don't know their value decide yours."

I am a child of god, and I lack nothing. Never ever again will I let my value or the value of the people I love be decided by someone who doesn't know their value. I will be taking so many things away from this experience, and one of those biggest things is me being the decider of my own truth. Trust is earned, and grace is given. And my relationship with God is not defined by others. It is decided by myself, and my truth. It is carried on by those around me, who treat me as I deserve to be treated. Because I could not imagine a world where I did not have these people. They build me up, they keep me going, they continue to keep me strong regardless of peoples careless actions. God's love is unconditional, and God's unconditional love surrounds me with this youth group.

Philly Witness

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Adeline Cannella

I wasn't even supposed to go on the Philadelphia trip. I was planning to be in the Cayman Islands on a trip for a marine biology class I took. I'd put in so many hours of work for the class that I had been taking since January. So much time, preparing for the Cayman islands. Every stupid assignment I had to complete. I told myself, Do it for the trip.

The week leading up to the planned trip date, our teacher broke his foot and a hurricane went through the islands. But this didn't stop us. We went through security, boarded the plane, and then sat there on the ground for 3 hours. Long story short, we got off the flight because of a weight balance issue. The group leader called off the trip. I was so upset. I didn't deserve this.

On the drive home, I asked if I could go on the Philly trip. Hannah and Joey said yes. Grumpy from the 3 am wake up, I remember thinking "This better be worth it."

It was. I'm not sure how to explain the feelings I felt and what I experienced during the trip. So many memories blended into one ball in my brain. There wasn't one big, life altering event that happened. To me, the trip was a bunch of little bits stuck together to create the whole. In these moments, I felt the most love and enjoyment.

The hugs we comforted each other with after a long day. Playing games to pass our free time, screaming and laughing a bit too loud. Staying up late at night, talking while everyone else went to bed. The jokes that brightened up our groggy faces in the early mornings. Singing the peaches song and finding a possum in a shed. The thank yous and big smiles from the people we gave food to. Getting to know each person better, and myself. The often uncontrollable laughter. The wholehearted love we were welcomed with at Salt and Light. Phones put away. Connection. Every conversation, holding each other up. The frantic spraying of de-wrinkle spray, 10 minutes before the Sunday service. The sound of the music in the church, filling my ears with hope. The group around me, a family, a feeling of home.

These may seem like small, mundane moments to a lot of you. And the truth is they are small. But all of these little things added up to be part of something much bigger to me. This group is a home.

Every night, Natalie and I would run down the 3 flights of stairs to the basement. We usually met Duncan and Braden there, but it was always so much fun with all of the kids. It wasn't a scary basement, except for the time we thought we saw an owl watching us. The tall ceilings and large open space allowed lots of room to move around. We always played games. Running around, pushing and shoving to

get the ball or we sat at the small table on cold metal chairs, playing countless rounds of spoons, Uno or BS. Sometimes we would blast music, other times all you could hear were the echoes of laughter and screeches. One night, we were playing a game we made up. A hybrid of 4 square mixed with Monkey in the middle mixed with keepaway. It was so much fun. To let all of my pent up energy out after the long days, just to laugh and sweat and feel alive. We were all having such a good time, and then I stepped in a puddle of water on the floor. A big one. I looked up to the ceiling and a pipe was leaking water all over. Oh shoot. We'd probably knocked it out of place when Braden was practicing his corner kick across the basement. We ran to the closet doors, and rummaged around it for a ladder. I climbed up, and fixed the pipe. We mopped up the water and then continued to play our game.

In this moment, I realized all of the little memories I had been collecting throughout the trip, were part of something bigger. It all felt like a dream that I never wanted to wake up from. Being surrounded with people I love, having fun and getting into a little trouble. All we needed to have a good time was each other. I never wanted it to end. A lot of us wish for time to move quicker, for Friday, for Christmas. But the trip made me want to stop time. To stay this close forever. The trip came to an end, but the connections we formed will stay.

The little things, the little moments, aren't little. They all had meaning. The hurricane, the broken foot, the canceled flight was the universe's way of telling me I needed to go to the Philadelphia trip. I didn't deserve the Cayman trip to be canceled. It was canceled because I deserved so much more. To go on the Philly trip. Plans are not guaranteed. You can do everything in your power to make what you want to happen happen, but there will always be another path. Another trip your road of life will take you on.

It was all part of the plan, and all happened for a reason. How lucky was I to have this experience. How lucky was I to live this trip, with all these people I love deeply.

The best things on the trip were the people and the places. The feelings felt. The laughter and the love. The moments we lived together, and the memories to keep. In the end, every little thing made it all worth it.

10/6/24

Philly Witness

Hannah Conner

He reached out and grabbed my hand
He gave me love with no words, only action
God brought his spirit though me
Different perspectives connected
Different worlds intersected
One God, many worlds
Abundance of love from a small vessel

One of the activities I ... encouraged... the group to do, late at night, after a day filled with service, activities, meals, conversations, and emotions, was to sit down around a table with a blank piece of paper and write one poetic verse, and then pass the paper. What we ended up with was 11 poems, with 11 verses, some of which were actually pretty good.

You'll notice I didn't read you 11 verses of my poem, and that's because it went on to talk about opossums and god balloons filled with love, not helium, and I kind of feel like it ruins the vibe.

But, I guess that it also illustrates the point I am trying to make in this witness, which is contrast.

Throughout this trip, we were asked on multiple occasions what Salt + Light was like compared to the OMH. What Vermont is like compared to Southwest Philly.

It was hard not to make comparisons like those throughout the trip. Rural, green, mountainous Vermont vs. the bleak, run down, "blighted area" of Southwest Philly. A garden steps out my front door vs. driving blocks away to find a backyard oasis behind a shuttered church.

It was hard not to feel my incredible privilege, and guilt at still feeling like I don't quite have enough to make ends meet, while immersed in a community that actually has no easy access to fresh food.

There were also extreme contrasts from one service project to another. At Chosen 300, a church that operates as a soup kitchen, for lack of a better term, combined with a worship service, I was appalled at

the lack of respect and welcome given to the population we were there to serve. It felt like the senior Pastor was there to promote himself, and why he chose to open this organization. More than once he asked us to donate money to the cause. He was pushy, didn't stop and listen, and was literally pushing people out the door as soon as they finished eating. Tables were tipped over and rolled away, and chairs were stacked while folks were still eating their first plate. He was dismissive, and seemed completely uncaring, and was also extremely misogynistic. More than once he directed women to the kitchen, men to do the lifting. At the end of the night, after pushing people out the door, he gathered us in a circle and asked us to give ourselves a round of applause. For what? Nothing during this project was about us - so why were clapping for ourselves? We deserve NO praise for this work, this is God working through us to help those in need. I wish that we had been able to have conversations, allowed people a few moments of respite from the heat outdoors, taken 15 more minutes to spread some joy and love.

The very next morning at the Salt + Light food pantry, we were part of a completely opposite experience. We were given clear direction, we worked to set up, and we worked to break down, but only AFTER all patrons were served. There was abundance, there was conversation, there was gratitude, there was human connection, smiles, light, time to have a brief conversation with each person, and a general sense of gratitude and happiness. One of the most notable things for me about the experience was that the people who had given us such clear direction at the beginning, and helped with the set up, those people were also patrons in line for food. There was no difference between those serving and those being served. Everyone was joyful and grateful and respectful. At one point during the morning, my hand was gently grabbed by a non-verbal young man, who held my hand and gazed at me. His grandmother then told me that he couldn't speak, but because he was holding my hand, it meant he was praying for me.

There were highs and lows each day. The differences in congregation size, church activities, the service itself, the exuberant welcome we received. All of these things felt contrasting to me compared to the OMH. The incredible sermons of Pastor Cean, the music from the praise and worship team, and order of worship was quite different than what we do here. All of these contrasts were exactly the reason we went on this trip! We were immersed in an area, with a population that is completely different than ours, on purpose.

But, here is what was the same:

Love. The love and trust from gazing into a baby's eyes. The love from one congregant to another as they say good morning. The love we have for one another. The love of God, and of Jesus.

Trust. Our trust in one another. Our trust in God. Our trust in ourselves to make good decisions and act faithfully, respectfully, and with grace.

Light. The light we can bring one another by simply showing up. The light we bring by singing joyful music. By praising God together. By our youth participating more in our church and having a voice. By listening to our youth and honoring their voice.

Joy. The joy of coming together to lift our whole selves up to the Lord. The joy of singing together. Of laughing together. Of exuberant welcome as you enter the church. Of cooking a simple meal and eating together.

Hope. The hope that comes from blending the lines between two seemingly contrasting communities. The hope of a future that feels a little less bleak. The hope of filling bellies until they are full, providing access to healthy food, and access to a community full of support and love. The hope that grows a little more each day as I see these teenagers connect more with each other, with their faith, and with their community.

There were certainly extremely challenging parts of this trip. But as time passes, the challenges fade away and what I'm left with are the inspirational parts.

The wisdom and compassion overflowing from Dave.

The meaningful connection Joey can effortlessly make.

Braden's incredible sense of humor and all of his firsts.

Duncan's motivating natural leadership abilities and his openness and politeness.

Joseph's caring and compassion and depth of faith.

Emily's quick thinking, leadership, joy, and practicality.

Natalie's humor, laughter, and ability to be vulnerable and acknowledge that it is hard.

Adeline's giggling, energy, smiles and group contributions that lift everyone around her up.

Grace's wisdom, perspective, and bravery in her ability to say it like it is and stand up for herself.

And everyone's open welcoming of Owen to our group.

There were challenging parts of the trip, yes. But I feel so extremely blessed to have been able to spend time with this incredible group of people, to learn from them, to grow with them, and to have found a deeper well of faith within myself than I ever knew I had. Thank you, God, for allowing me the opportunity to fully embrace the blessing you have bestowed on me. For the grace to see others through your eyes with dignity and to care for them as you do. For helping me to find strength in spirit and in

faith. For giving me the determination to continue moving forward even when the path was difficult and the obstacles great. Thank you God, for immersing us in those who are the salt of the earth, and for showing us how to be the light of the world.

The Joy of the Trip

Philadelphia Witness

10/6/24

Joseph McLain

The end-of-trip Sunday service in southwest Philadelphia was an experience that changed my perception of faith. I was transformed by the hardships of people around us that we had seen that week, and the resilience of the community we had witnessed. We appreciated a beautiful service that provided pathways to make it more accessible to the community. Making new music to be sung throughout the service because of higher illiteracy rates caused by the lack of school funding from the local and federal government, taking away the moral obligation and pressure of having to dress super fancy for Sunday service and giving grace to the people in the community who may not have financial privilege to be able to afford those clothes. The Church brings people together under the lord's love and helps them through hardship under the lord's guidance. Paul explains this in the book of Corinthians.

“Now I beseech you, brethren, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that ye all speak the same thing, and that there be no divisions among you; but that ye be perfectly joined together in the same mind and in the same judgment.” - Corinthians 1:10

What Paul wrote in this passage drives home the idea that not only do churches need to provide services to help the less privileged, but also helps us understand that Christianity is love and joy, given and received under the guidance of Jesus. In the end, it doesn't matter if you are Catholic, Presbyterian, Orthodox, or Non-Denominational. When I walked into that Wednesday Bible study I was encompassed by the love and passion of Jesus.. It might have been the music that I could hear from the second floor across the building, it could have been all the extremely welcoming and nice people that I talked to, and it was probably also the amazing Bible study about three big words of our trip: Justice, Mercy, and Grace. Throughout our trip and beyond, these words have allowed me to think about the situations I'm in with a much deeper understanding.

The Joy I experienced on our trip encompassed us every day in most of our activities, for example: How we found an Opossum in a shed that we were cleaning and took a video of it scurrying away from our group after Joey was able to get it out from under the shelf, or waking up at 6:30 to go help with the food shelf in the morning before breakfast. It was again very noticeable to me what I was feeling.

Joy.

Now it wasn't all amazing and I don't want to dwell on our negative experience at Chosen 300 too much, but it happened. This helps me prove that not everything can be happy, as Jae the person who guided us throughout our trip said when she was teaching us about the MOVE bombing that happened in 1985.

**“You turned my wailing into dancing;
you removed my sackcloth and clothed me with joy,
that my heart may sing your praises and not be silent.
LORD my God, I will praise you forever.” - Psalm 30: 11-12**

This trip changed and helped my outlook on my faith, my sense of privilege, and my joy.

It has helped me understand that what I do can have an extremely positive impact on other people's lives, and it feels so amazing to help other people's lives.

So when we got home from the trip I was personally very tired but when I got home all the emotions just poured out. The Joy I had been feeling and the anguish for others both turned into tears and I cried for a good half an hour before I got too tired to keep my eyes open.

Reflecting on this I can say one thing. The youth trip to Philadelphia was an emotional experience on all different sides of the spectrum and I think it is almost impossible for everyone to have had the same experience as you have seen throughout this service, The trip was an ability for me to connect to a new community and a family that I wasn't quite sure I fully had yet.

This Family within the church has allowed me to understand what Joy through Christ is. As Isaiah wrote:

“I will greatly rejoice in the LORD, my soul shall be joyful in my God;” - Isaiah 61:10

Braden Witness

Going into the Philly trip I was expecting to work all day, spend a lot of time in church, and have to go through a lot of deep talks. But the thing that worried me the most was that I was going to a big city that I knew nothing about, I didn't know if it would be a dangerous community with gun violence and sirens all night long or if it would be a community of majority black people that wouldn't accept our Youth Group. I had very low expectations for this trip and I was not excited. When we got into Philly I realized that this city was like nothing I had ever seen before. I still didn't know exactly what we were going to be doing but I knew this city needed a lot of work.

As soon as we got into the church we got greeted by many different people all excited to have us stay with them. The church was beautiful and lively, but I was still skeptical of how enjoyable this trip would be when they told us the air conditioning was getting worked on.

That night we met Jae. I immediately liked her vibe when she got us pizza and spent time getting to know what our lives were like.

Throughout the next few days we did a lot of work like I expected, what I thought we were doing was just humbling ourselves and doing hard work, but when we did it Jae and her husband Cam explained how the things we were doing would help the community. When someone tried to give Salt and Light credit for the work Jae reminded us that we were actually doing God's work and that we didn't want any recognition. Once my perspective changed, my mindset changed and I enjoyed doing the work knowing that it would help someone out.

Later we met the Salt and Light Youth Group, they were a small group of kids that were all super unique. I learned that they spent a lot of time at the church, not just once a week on Sunday mornings. In the Youth Group room there was a little five year old boy too young to participate in the activities, so he just sat on his moms phone in the corner. I learned that this boy's name was Sankiest. He had an incredible personality and once we got to know each other we became best friends.

One of my favorite memories with Sankiest was when we were at Pastor Ceans house and I went up to Sankiest on the trampoline and he instantly wanted to show me all his toys and games and his “secret tunnel”, and I ended up spending the rest of the night with him.

Overall the trip was amazing and it was way better than my expectations could have ever been. The community was so welcoming to us, and the people we met made it even better.

Philly Witness

10/6/24

Duncan Schrader

The Philly Trip was amazing, it was a super eye opening experience to see not just how people live there but also for seeing different ways of worship, learning of injustice I never knew about and getting to know people, whether they were people we met in Philly or people from the youth group. I learned and grew a lot on the trip and had very cool experiences that have changed the way I view the world.

Beginning the Philly trip we met here in the parking lot of the OMH early in the morning for the long ride ahead. We arrived in Philly late in the day after some long hours of driving and a few hours of hanging out at a Funplex after our rental van got a flat. We came in with our luggage and met some very friendly people who showed us to our room where we dropped our stuff before having to rush to bible study.

Bible study was one of the most enjoyable things I've been to in a long time. It was so loud and loving and happy and there was an awesome lesson from pastor Cean who was so caring and loving of what he does that it was easy to want to learn and know more about whatever he was talking about. The lesson was about mercy, grace and unconditional love from god. During the service he explained what these meant and how they are shown by god. Also during the service the band played throughout the entire thing adding to moments in the service. The service ended and we met a few people and introduced ourselves as "the people from Vermont" before leaving the sanctuary. We went to our rooms to finish settling in and discuss shower arrangements before bed.

The next days were a pattern of us getting up, meditating and reading our daily bible verse in the dark of the sanctuary and then starting our daily activities. Our activities each day were always different.

Sometimes they were really fun and enjoyable, but sometimes they were really hard, mentally, to experience. One of the days we spent there we helped the drummer of Salt and Light, Cam, in the garden that the church cares for. Cam is super friendly and was very welcoming to our group and happened to love plants and gardening. He brought us to the garden owned by the church, which he cared for alone for the most part, and assigned us jobs to do. These jobs were cleaning out the shed and harvesting vegetables from the garden. We ended up finishing after a few hours of work with the shed fully cleaned out and buckets full of freshly harvested vegetables. Afterwards Jae, our guide for the week, told us we saved Cam roughly 2-3 weeks of work.

Later, during this same day we went to a street named Osage avenue where we were taught by Jae of the satchel bomb that was dropped on a house in a strip of row homes that ended up demolishing the whole row and most of the surrounding two rows at a total of 65 houses displacing many people in an attack targeted at a racial activist group, Move 9. Jae told us a lot more about Move 9 and what they did and stood for. We also took some time to walk the block of the new row homes put up in place of the destroyed ones.

Both of these activities and one other one were on the same day and had such a positive lesson for our group, even though one was super fun and the other very sad and hard to learn about.

Throughout the entire youth group trip, we had moments similar to this where we would go through fun activities and also hard activities that were often uncomfortable. At the end of each day we reflected back and saw how we learned and grew from each thing we did, whether or not it was difficult at the time.

Natalie Witness

10/6/24

Our youth group has come back from Philly and hung out multiple times outside of just being a youth group. We all went out to dinner, and went around the table and talked about our favorite part of the week. One night after dinner we sat and just watched the stars over our heads. That was when I fully thought about what my life would be without youth group and what it would be like if we never went to

Philly . In Philly we shared some rough unpredictable moment the one thing that I could always rely on was having a good laugh playing games or even opening up with the group at the end of a hard day. I am not the kind of person who talks about my deeper opinions but one night in Philly me Adeline and Dukin were sitting on the stairs and it felt so easy to talk to them about how I was feeling this trip allowed me to see that being vulnerable in front of people is ok they will not judge u they will lift u up. Since iv got back I've thought to myself how much these people mean to me, and how this trip brought us together before this trip I didn't know no many of these people now I can't imagine a world where our inside jokes didn't exist. The connection we formed on the Philly trip was unique to any other connection I have. We were all going there because we shared a similar belief. This church brought us together and I'm so grateful for that.

Dave Schilling

Nobody actually wants to go there. They look at the pictures and smile politely. Your group is the first to ask.

In 2023, 25 million 800 thousand people visited Philadelphia, spending \$4.4 billion dollars total, including \$387 million in state and local taxes.

Approximately 1 million of them visited the Liberty Bell, bearing witness to a cracked symbol of American Independence.

3 million, 42 thousand, 598 of them visited Independence Hall, bearing witness to the signing of the founding documents of our country.

About 6 million visit Reading Terminal Market, a 78,000 square foot indoor culinary temple, bearing witness to decadence.

There are no visitor statistics for 6221 Osage Avenue, in the Cobbs Creek neighborhood of Philadelphia, but if someone were to keep track, it might be in the low dozens. And since service trips are known for pushing us out of our comfort zones, it is incredibly fitting that this was the first site we visited in Philadelphia, bearing witness to the day Philadelphia bombed its own people.

Nobody actually takes me up on the offer to go there, Jae told us. You're the first to ask.

The entire story is a sermon series unto itself, but to summarize, on May 13, 1985, in response to escalating tensions between the City of Philadelphia and MOVE, a Black liberation group, the City of Philadelphia dropped a satchel bomb laced with Tovex and C4 explosives on a West Philadelphia rowhome, known to be occupied. Eleven people were killed, including five children.

Sixty-one surrounding homes were destroyed, and more than 250 citizens were left homeless.

When asked what the fire department's response should be, Police Commissioner Gregore Sambor's direction was "let it burn".

The houses were rebuilt a year later, but it was soon evident that the construction was beyond poor. The electrical wiring was faulty. The plumbing was bad. The ceilings drooped. One resident reported over 20 roof leaks in the first year of ownership. In the early 2000s, the city offered to buy back the houses for \$150,000, and nearly two-thirds of the neighborhood took the deal. 16 years later, the houses were sold to a developer for a dollar, rebuilt, and resold well above the median value of the surrounding neighborhood. The residents of the new neighborhood are adamant that they do not want reminders of the bombing reflected on the block. Some are hopeful that the neighborhood moves on, revitalized, others view the current arrangement as sweeping the memory of the 11 murdered people under the carpet of gentrification and urban renewal.

Returning back to the church after our visit, we engaged in an activity led by Jae designed to bring us to a better understanding of our own privilege and the role of systemic inequity. What started as a simple competition to build block towers grew into an extremely uncomfortable journey through how privilege affected the decisions we make, placing our group in a vicious competition in which nobody was in control of their own destiny. At one particularly contentious point, Rameen tapped me on the shoulder and quietly said "we have to step in...look at Emily and Natalie's faces... what are we going to do about it?" "Nothing", was my response, and I turned back to bearing witness to our group's discomfort.

“This is about to turn bad”, said Rameen again, and I responded, a little curtly, “let it.”

While we expect that these trips will push us far beyond our comfort zone, it feels awful to watch someone you care deeply about be in any sort of pain, and not do a thing about it. Had I just committed the youth group equivalent of “let it burn”? Had I allowed people to be unjustly hurt? Had I knowingly permitted an out of control fire that would burn through the remainder of our experience? I had not. The activity was overwhelming, uncomfortable, but not catastrophic. We all eventually moved past it and walked away with a new perspective.

Ultimately, one of the greatest gifts God gives us on these trips is the ability to be placed in uncomfortable situations, and let them happen just enough to make sure the experience we gain guarantees we will never become the people who say “let it burn”.

The righteous know the rights of the poor; the wicked have no such understanding. May we lean toward righteousness through education, understanding and growth.