

WMI TRIPS ALLOW STUDENTS TO SEE WHAT GOD IS DOING IN THE WORLD

At Pittsburgh Theological Seminary, students can broaden their awareness of what God is doing in the world through **World Mission Initiative** international trips. The majority of students go on at least one trip. Senior M.Div. student Alan Olson will be going on his fourth trip this summer. To him, getting out of one's context is an essential aid in ministry.

"When you are in your own context, you see what you expect to see. What these trips do is to first allow you to see what God is doing in the world, and second, to give you a fresh set of eyes with which to see what is happening, what God is doing, where you are at."

Alan's first trip, led by PTS professors, was to Israel and Palestine in 2012. There the group created and built relationships with Palestinian Christians, learned and experienced firsthand what our brothers and sisters in Christ deal with on a daily basis. This is what interested Alan, because being a tourist wouldn't have been enough. He craved to put his feet on the ground and meet fellow Christians in their reality.



"It was extremely difficult. We were invited into a place where we could walk with them and understand what their lives were like, in their messiness. It gets to the heart."

In 2013, Alan traveled with another group to the U.S./Mexico border to learn more about the issues there and the conflict of welcoming the foreigner, experiencing less black and white and more shades of gray. This trip was led by the Rev. John Welch '02, VP for student services, and the Rev. Sarah Ott, pastor at First UPC in Dubois, Pa. An influential moment for Alan was at a men's shelter for those who have been repatriated to Mexico from the U.S. While sitting and having a meal together, all were there as equals. One particular man across from him had last worked at a Chili's restaurant near the home of Alan's mother in suburban Philadelphia.

"In that moment, the distance between us was not thousands of miles but just across the table."

The third trip was in the summer of that year, and Alan partnered with East Liberty Presbyterian Church and the UMAVIDA Network to Bolivia, to learn and address social and environmental problems. Though this trip was the most physically demanding, it allowed him to see where the church was engaging directly with the needs of the people, especially those in oppressive working situations.

Now, Alan is eagerly awaiting this summer's trip to South Africa and the growing moments God has for him next, for it was in these moments that he learned the most about God.

"And you can't have these moments if you never leave Pittsburgh."

Three groups of students are abroad with the World Mission Initiative during Spring break. They are learning more about what God is doing in Brazil, Haiti, and Southeast Asia.

Written March 2014

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Pittsburgh Theological Seminary
616 North Highland Avenue
Pittsburgh, PA 15206
Phone: 412-362-5610



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