



Alliance Against Leprosy
INSTITUTE

Mission of the Youth Group from St. Thomas Aquinas Parish – Palo Alto, CA to Recife, Brazil

From June 8 to 16, 2025

a special partnership with



St. Thomas Aquinas Parish

Palo Alto, CA - Diocese of San José

Volunteer Mission Report

Introduction

This report was prepared by the team of the Alliance Against Leprosy Institute (AAL) **to document and share the journey of the Volunteer Mission carried out by the youth and leadership team of St. Thomas Aquinas Parish, Palo Alto, California, during their time in Pernambuco, Brazil, from June 8 to June 16, 2025.**

More than just a record of scheduled activities, **this document invites reflection.** It offers a space **for the young participants, their families, and the broader parish community to revisit the moments they lived,** the realities they witnessed, and the lessons they learned along the way.

Throughout the week, the group engaged in service activities, cultural exchanges, moments of prayer, and deep human connection. They were exposed to the social and health challenges faced by people affected by Hansen's disease (leprosy) in Brazil, while also experiencing the richness of Brazilian culture, history, and hospitality.

This report aims to inspire conversations, reflections, and renewed commitments—both individually and collectively—to service, solidarity, and global citizenship.

We extend our sincere thanks to each volunteer, every partner institution, and all the professionals and community members in Pernambuco who opened their doors, shared their stories, and made this mission a truly transformative experience.

Team Alliance Against Leprosy Institute (AAL)



Volunteer Mission Report

Sunday, June 8 – Arrival and First Impressions

Morning / Afternoon: The long-awaited arrival! Seventeen volunteers landed in Recife early in the morning, followed a final group in the afternoon. The warm Recife sun welcomed them as did the smiles of the local team waiting at the airport.

Afternoon: Their first cultural immersion took place in the heart of Recife Antigo. Between colorful market stalls and the iconic Marco Zero, volunteers began to feel the vibrant energy of Pernambuco.

Evening: Dinner at Boi e Brasa Churrascaria was more than just a meal—it was a first taste of Brazilian hospitality and flavors. The evening closed with group prayer, bringing everyone together in gratitude and anticipation for the days ahead.



Volunteer Mission Report

Monday, June 9 – Health and Solidarity

Morning: A powerful morning at the Professora Nilda Buarque Secondary Reference Center. Volunteers observed the care provided to people affected by leprosy. The highlight was delivering self-care kits to patients—an emotional encounter that revealed the reality of stigma and the beauty of human connection.

Afternoon: In the auditorium of the Pernambuco State Health Secretariat (SES/PE), the group witnessed a milestone: the signing of a Partnership Intent Term between the AAL and the Shoe Repair Workshop at Mirueira Hospital. Talks followed, including an inspiring presentation by Dr. Laila de Laguiche on the AAL's International Volunteer Program. The volunteers also learned about the epidemiological situation of leprosy in the state and the research and outreach work led by Professor Raphaela Delmondes. Knowledge was shared. Bridges were built.

Evening: Back at the inn, the group reflected on the day's learnings during an interactive cultural session, blending stories and prayers.



Volunteer Mission Report

Tuesday, June 10 – Hands in Action

Morning: The mission took on color—literally. At Mirueira General Hospital, volunteers grabbed brushes and paint cans for a beautification campaign. Laughter, teamwork, and sweat filled the air as the group worked side by side with hospital staff.

Afternoon: More than just painting, the group engaged in a discussion circle with healthcare professionals, listening to their daily challenges and sharing words of encouragement.

Evening: Dinner at the inn followed by another moment of collective reflection through prayer.



Volunteer Mission Report

Wednesday, June 11 – Deepening Connections

Morning / Afternoon: The second day at Mirueira Hospital reinforced the power of small actions. Cleaning, painting, and helping with maintenance weren't just practical tasks—they became symbolic gestures of care and solidarity. The young people were able to visit the patients and get to know the reality of the hospital up close. The priests offered the anointing of the sick to the patients, in a very sacred and moving moment.

After, the young people received a beautiful tribute and thanks from the management team at Mirueira Hospital, with medals and applause.

Evening: Another peaceful dinner, another shared prayer. The sense of community grew stronger.



Volunteer Mission Report

Thursday, June 12 – Reflections and Spiritual Encounters

Morning: It was a time filled with meaningful reflection and content creation. The young participants worked on producing three impactful videos, each with a specific purpose:

1. To the leprosy community: They shared personal stories, reflecting on their experiences and how these moments enriched their lives.
2. To the general public: They raised awareness, reminding everyone that leprosy is still a reality and that collective action is needed to find solutions.
3. To potential volunteers: They recorded a heartfelt invitation, encouraging others to join the cause and become volunteers.

Afternoon: A very special audience with Dom Paulo Jackson, Archbishop of Olinda and Recife. The conversation centered on faith, service, and social responsibility. Volunteers left inspired by the Archbishop's words on compassion and action.

Evening: Back at the inn, culture and reflection continued with another joyful evening gathering.



Volunteer Mission Report

Friday, June 13 – Stories and Culture

Morning: A heartfelt breakfast with patients at the Policlínica Clementino Fraga. Sharing food and conversations, volunteers heard life stories of resilience and faith from people living with leprosy.

Afternoon: A day of culture: tours through Recife's historic sites—Marco Zero, Cais do Sertão, Paço do Frevo—and a visit to the Government Palace. History, art, and Pernambuco's rich traditions came alive, sparking many reflections on identity and community.

Evening: The night closed in Olinda, where the cobblestone streets seemed to echo the day's emotions.



Volunteer Mission Report

Saturday, June 14 – Walking Through History

Morning / Afternoon: We had a historic moment. Father Stasys celebrated the first mass in English at the Sé Cathedral in Olinda, a sacred and historic space recognized as a World Cultural Heritage Site by UNESCO. After, a special partnership with the City of Olinda made this day unforgettable. Riding through town in an open-air trolley, volunteers explored Olinda's colonial past, guided by local gardeners and historians.

Evening: A lively dinner brought laughter and stories from the day.

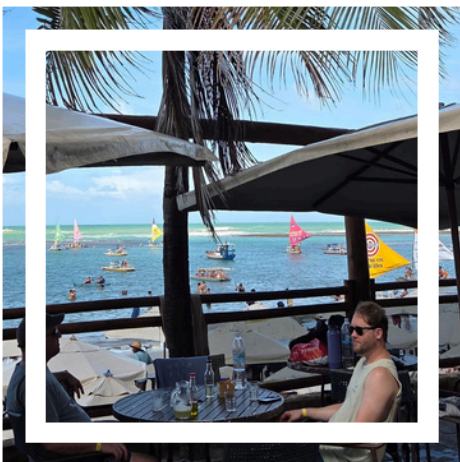


Volunteer Mission Report

Sunday, June 15 – Nature and Farewell Moments

Morning / Afternoon: A well-deserved day of rest and beauty at Porto de Galinhas Beach. The ocean became a place for contemplation, friendship, and gratitude.

Evening: Dinner and evening prayer were tinged with emotion as everyone realized the mission was nearing its end.



Volunteer Mission Report

Monday, June 16 – Departure

Morning: Hugs, tears, and promises to return. The group left for Recife Airport, carrying with them memories of service, learning, and human connection that will last a lifetime.



Volunteer Mission Report

Reflections and Legacy: Main Lessons Learned from the Mission Experience

This mission was more than just a program; it was a bridge between two very different realities. We learned about privilege and vulnerability, science, medicine, and faith. The volunteers didn't just give—they also received. They witnessed resilience, learned about public health challenges, and forged human connections that transcended both language and culture.

As they return to Palo Alto, one hope remains: that these seeds of solidarity will continue to grow.

What We Share/Teach

Leprosy Awareness:

- This is an active and neglected tropical disease that still affects thousands of people around the world.

Global Perspective:

- Brazil ranks 2nd in the world in new cases of leprosy, behind only India.

Brazilian Reality:

- The country is experiencing a hidden epidemic, with approximately 1.5 million people currently affected by the disease.
- In Pernambuco, more than 1,700 new cases of leprosy were reported last year, making it one of the most endemic states.
- Social Challenges: Stigma and prejudice are daily problems that all people affected by the disease face.
- We should never refer to the disease as a joke or insult.
- The Power of Inclusion: Through service activities, we can promote dignity, inclusion and respect for people affected by neglected diseases.
- Human Connection: Beyond statistics, we must bring smiles, conversations and hope to patients and healthcare professionals.

Volunteer Mission Report

What We Share/Teach about the AAL Institute

- **Fighting for a world without leprosy:** We work to eliminate leprosy as a public health problem.
- **Promoting early diagnosis and treatment:** Ensuring timely care to prevent disabilities and stop transmission.
- **Empowering people affected by leprosy:** Restoring dignity, rights, and opportunities.
- **Training health professionals:** Building capacity through education and mentoring across Brazil.
- **Delivering assistive technologies:** Providing 3D-printed orthopedic devices and adapted footwear.
- **The Institute does not receive any government funding:** preserving its autonomy
- **Supporting public health policies:** Working alongside governments to strengthen leprosy programs.
- **Reducing stigma and discrimination:** Advocating for social inclusion and fighting prejudice.
- **Connecting science, care, and human rights:** Bridging research, healthcare, and advocacy.
- **Leading in telemedicine:** Expanding access to specialized care in remote areas.
- **Building strategic partnerships:** Collaborating nationally and internationally.
- **Promoting education and awareness:** Raising public understanding about leprosy and its impact.
- **Listening to patient voices:** Guiding actions based on the real needs of affected communities.
- **Driving research and innovation:** Investing in new solutions for better diagnosis, treatment, and care.
- **Bringing hope to vulnerable communities:** Delivering care and information where it's needed most.
- **Supporting rehabilitation and inclusion:** Promoting social and economic reintegration.
- **Mobilizing resources for impact:** Combining expertise, funding, and technology to scale solutions.
- **Ensuring high governance standards:** Audited by an international firm, with strong compliance and anti-corruption policies.
- **Awarded as one of Brazil's Best NGOs:** Nationally recognized for excellence, transparency, and social impact.

Volunteer Mission Report

What We Learned

- **Cultural Diversity:** Experiencing a new country opened our eyes to Brazil's vibrant culture, history, and traditions.
- **Social Realities:** We witnessed the challenges of health systems in vulnerable communities and how faith and resilience overcome adversity.
- **Language of the Heart:** Despite language barriers, empathy and kindness became universal tools of communication.
- **Brazilian Hospitality:** From Recife to Olinda, and through every handshake and smile, we felt warmly welcomed.
- **Faith in Action:** We learned that service can be an extension of prayer—and that solidarity is a global responsibility.

Points for Reflection

- How can we continue serving to leprosy community back home?
- How do we break the stigma around diseases like leprosy in our own communities?
- How did this experience shape our understanding of global health and human dignity?
- How can faith guide us toward building a more just and compassionate world?
- What does privilege mean when viewed from the eyes of those with less?

Volunteer Mission Report

Conclusion

This mission was more than just a trip. It became a living classroom where service, faith, culture, and human connection blended in powerful and often unexpected ways. Over the span of one week, the youth from St. Thomas Aquinas Parish were invited to step out of their comfort zones and immerse themselves in the daily realities of people facing health, social, and economic challenges in Brazil. They witnessed firsthand the impact of neglected diseases like leprosy and discovered how dignity, compassion, and solidarity can truly transform lives.

Throughout the journey, the group learned that service is not only about giving but also about listening, learning, and growing together. They experienced the power of advocacy, the beauty of cross-cultural friendships, and the deep responsibility that comes with being global citizens rooted in faith and action.

This mission was the result of many hands and hearts working together. We offer our deepest gratitude to Florence de Bretagne, whose tireless dedication, leadership, and kindness shaped every detail of this experience. Her love and vision were present in every step of the journey. We also extend our heartfelt thanks to the parents, who entrusted their children to us and believed in the value of this transformative adventure, far from home.

To Father Stasys, we are deeply grateful for his spiritual guidance, his presence, and his support in every activity, prayer, and conversation. Our thanks also go to the entire AAL team, who took care of every logistical, educational, and emotional detail, ensuring that each day was meaningful, safe, and inspiring.

A special thank you goes to Erani, our local guide, and to Ticiane, inn owner, and bridge to the heart of Pernambuco. Their dedication, knowledge, and care enriched every encounter and made the group feel at home in a new and unfamiliar land. We also thank all the Brazilian partners, SES-PE, health professionals, patients, and community members who welcomed us with open arms and open hearts.

As the group returns to California, they do not leave empty-handed. They carry with them stories, friendships, lessons, and above all, a renewed sense of purpose. The seeds planted during this mission will continue to grow—within each participant, within their families, and across our communities on both sides of the hemisphere.

We close this report with gratitude, hope, and the certainty that the legacy of this mission will continue far beyond these pages.

Thank you. Muito obrigada.



Alliance Against Leprosy

I N S T I T U T E



<https://www.aal.org.br>



aal@aal.org.br



+55 41 99247-8873



Rua Deputado Heitor Alencar Furtado, nº 3350
sala 103, Condomínio Opus One Ecoville
Bairro Campo Comprido
CEP: 81200-528, Curitiba - PR.
Brazil