Our experience began when we arrived at Canaan Community Church on Sunday morning. There we were able to participate in a great worship service different from what we are accustomed to. It involved lots of singing, several announcements involving both church and community, and a message giving us a new perspective on the story of the Good Samaritan. In total, it lasted about 2.5 hours, but it was well worth it. That night a group from Oklahoma State University joined us and throughout the week we worked with them and got to be great friends.

Beginning on Monday, our second day in Chicago, we split into three groups with one going to Wadsworth Elementary, another group going to Masters Academy, and my group doing construction work at Sunshine. Wadsworth is an overpopulated elementary school where several in our group were able to assist the teachers. It was very loud and chaotic, with fights a daily occurrence. In contrast, Masters Academy is a small, Christian elementary school with several grades being taught in the same classroom at once. Although not perfectly behaved, the children at Masters are much easier to control thanks in large part to the smaller class sizes. Lastly, my group was in charge of further developing the newly bought buildings across the street from Sunshine as well as the area directly behind the buildings. While these three projects were what we did every morning and parts of the afternoon, we really learned about the community and Chicago during our afternoon trips.

Most afternoons we were able to experience something different in the community whether it was visiting Pacific Garden Mission (PGM), being guests at a local concert put on by our hosts. On Monday afternoon we went to PGM where we were able to learn about one of the largest homeless shelters in the country. It was thought-provoking to learn about how many homeless there are in only Chicago and how complex a place PGM is.

On Wednesday after lunch we all drove downtown with an extra sack lunch with the purpose of finding a homeless person to talk to. Once we parked, we split into groups of two and set off to learn. Later, we all came together again and talked about our experiences. It was very interesting to hear the conversations that others had with the homeless.

On Thursday afternoon we all rode the El with the goal of talking to people and learning more about others. Everyone spread out among the train cars and we rode for about two hours. The people we talked to were from all over, even including Nigeria! Altogether, it was an interesting experience noticing the different types of people and how most people stayed closed off to the world with their headphones.

Friday night we were part of the audience for a concert put on by Sunshine. The concert included spoken word by Lamar Simms, hip hop by Pastor J and his group, krump dancing by Mike Avery, and rapping by CW Allen. Spoken word is a type of poetry and Lamar used it to tell us about his life, his troubles, and how he came to know Christ. It provided a window with which to better understand the typical life of a young man in that part of Chicago. Following the spoken word, Pastor J and his hip hop group performed. In keeping with the theme, they sang and rapped about the struggles and joys of what happens in their community. After Pastor J, Mike Avery performed two songs by Lecrae in the style of krump dancing. Krumping is characterized by exaggerated and highly energetic movements and Mike was absolutely amazing. I had never seen someone else move his body like he did and he choreographed so perfectly that it emphasized the words in the songs. Lastly, I was able to experience the rapping of CW. He had thought-provoking lyrics and was very good at free styling. Overall, it was a great experience and I learned a lot about a culture different from the one that I grew up in.

Saturday was our last day in Chicago. Our group from Calvin explored several spots of downtown Chicago before having lunch and heading back to Grand Rapids. As a whole, I think we really enjoyed our trip to Chicago and appreciated the experiences and knowledge we gained from it.
As a group I think we learned the most from our experiences with the homeless and our nightly lessons from Pastor J and Joel Hamer Nick.

Halfway through our time in Chicago we got the chance to go downtown and interact with the homeless. We split into groups of two and carrying three sack lunches total, looked for any homeless people we could find. Our intention was share a lunch with anyone we found and see what we could learn from them. After everyone reconvened at the end, we discussed our experiences. Specifically, one conversation reminded us of how much the homeless are preached at. After introducing themselves, the group was asked by the homeless man if they were suffering from racial or socioeconomic prejudice, and encourage solutions that focused most on forming relationships and building bridges between our communities. But these things became more real to me as I returned to the same community a second time.

Returning to Woodlawn allowed me to join in the work that is already happening in this broken community--all the while keeping in mind that we need to save them. Conversely, there are some homeless people with a faith in Christ stronger than our own because of the many troubles they have endured.

...In verses 4-7 of Jeremiah 29 it has several instructions for the Israelites who have just been exiled to Babylon. Pastor J explained to us how he followed these instructions once he had become pastor at Canaan. First, the verses say to build houses and settle down, which he did when he became pastor at Canaan. Second, the verses were told to plant gardens and eat what they produce. Pastor J said this is being carried out by trying to find healthier food alternatives. Currently Canaan is trying to convince Trader Joes to put a store in Englewood and Canaan has already begun a food co-op to help bring fruits and vegetables into the neighborhood. Third, the verses say to marry and have children. Pastor J married a few months before he accepted the pastor position and he now has two daughters, so he has fulfilled this command. Fourth, the verses say to marry off their children in the community. Pastor J said this was the most difficult part of the commands to follow. It involved him raising his children in an area that he had tried to escape for most of his life. In order to make this command possible once his daughters are old enough, he has made developing young men in the community a priority. He feels like he can help provide direction for young men, give them opportunities to advance themselves, and eventually be men worth giving his daughters to. Lastly, the verses are told to “Pray to the Lord for [the city], for if it prospers, you too will prosper.”

This goes against conventional wisdom because it is not common to pray for your captors. In summary, Pastor J uses this verse to detail his plan to help Englewood become a better community. In his words, “you can’t tell people to turn off the darkness (guns, violence, etc.), instead find ways to spread the light.”

These two experiences allowed me personally to grow the most. I learned a lot more about poverty and the possibilities for community development and I hope to be able to effectively apply this knowledge and experience to my life both now and in the future.