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As you go...



Author Don Clymer (center front) with his wife and students from Eastern Mennonite University, Harrisonburg, Va., in Mexico.

Photo provided

are you preaching or walking?

by Don Clymer

The faces of the flight attendants tensed up as we entered the plane. We were on the last leg of a semester-abroad sojourn through Guatemala and Mexico—18 college students and their two leaders. We must have presented an interesting spectacle. ►

*Although I use “Eastern Mennonite University” and “Mennonite” frequently in this story to be true to the context, I hope the same can be said of any Christian traveling group or community of faith. Not all our students were Mennonite; their individual Christian commitments varied greatly.—dc

Knowing that at the end of the flight many friends and loved ones were waiting to receive us after a four-month absence, the students were especially keyed up. Added to their enthusiasm, many wore splashy tourist T-shirts, and some tried to fit oversized Mexican sombreros and colorful Guatemalan hammocks into the overhead compartments. We were all sporting golden tans from our days in the tropics. No doubt the attendants were thinking, More loud, obnoxious college students returning from their spring break debauchery in Cancún. Why were we assigned to this flight?

As we were deplaning, one of those previously anxious flight attendants remarked to one of my students: “This was the best-behaved group of college students I have ever served on a plane. Where are you from?”

“Eastern Mennonite University*,” the student said.

with my student group—our temporary community of faith for a semester.

When we had orientation with the students accompanying us, I did not tell them they were going to be missionaries. As they prepared to go, they did not think they were going to be testifying to their faith explicitly as explained above. I did tell them that wherever they went their behavior would reflect the image others had of their country, their families, their church and their school. I emphasized that they should be good ambassadors of all the “cultural spaces” they represent. It’s not that we didn’t take our Christian commitment seriously. We met weekly for worship. As part of their weekly journal assignments they were to reflect on where they experienced God and what had drawn them away from God. The idea was to confirm that in spite of all the poverty and oppression we were learning about and seeing in person, God is still present and active.

We also reflected regularly on David Smith’s book *Learning from the Stranger: Christian Faith and Cultural Diversity* (Eerdmans, 2009), learning how to respect other people who had strange customs, a strange language and strange foods. Smith does a great job of showing how this respect for the stranger is part of Christian discipleship. But being missionaries? I’m sorry to say, the thought rarely entered my head until we heard the stories that followed us.

For five weeks our group studied at the University of the Americas Puebla (UDLAP), a secular university in Puebla, Mexico. As we went about our activities we were constantly asked, “Who are the Mennonites?” Most Mexicans think of Mennonites as men with straw hats and overalls selling cheese on street corners, referring to the 60,000 Old Colony Mennonites living in their country. We had ample opportunity to express our faith with our colleagues, host families and Mexican friends. We discovered many people who shared our faith and commitment to seeking God’s presence in our lives among both Catholics and Evangelicals, in spite of the preponderantly secularized university world in which we studied. However, it was not these individual encounters, as meaningful as they were, that became the earmark of our stay. Instead it was the proclamation of the gospel given by the group, this temporary community of faith, as we went about our business along the way, evidenced in the story of the airline attendant.

We took two courses and did community service while staying at the university. Two Mexican

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The Great Commission from Matthew 28:19 tells us: “Go therefore and make disciples of all nations.” The Greek word translated here “go,” in the command form, could just as easily be translated, “as you go” (see *As You Go: The Old Mission in a New Day* by John Howard Yoder, Herald Press, 1961). This commission has been used over the centuries to define the missionary task of the church and of each individual. Most often it is viewed as proclamation, the preaching of the Word, or direct one-on-one sharing of the story of salvation. The stereotype of this proclamation is an individual approaching another with the question, “Are you saved?”

Too seldom is there an emphasis on our individual Christian lives as proclamation “as we go” about our daily activities. But individuals are not the only ones to give such proclamation. The church is a “city on the hill.” The church is assumed to be a community on the go, a pilgrim people passing through this life making disciples along the way. As it goes about its activities, the community of faith is being carefully observed. So it was



professors taught our students, one on Mexican history and culture and the other a Spanish conversation course. The history course was a three-hour course, four days a week, completely in Spanish. Because of varied levels of Spanish and interest and the amount of time spent in the classroom, many students became overtly restless and disengaged. I chided them several times, reminding them about being good ambassadors, and asked them to be more respectful of the professor. Maybe because of the Spanish overload, many suffered acute homesickness.

While studying at UDLAP, our students stayed with host families. Many of the homes had kept hundreds of U.S. students before ours. Because of this, and because of the socioeconomic situation of most of the families, with a few exceptions, our students felt like guests rather than part of the family, as they had hoped. This caused some murmuring and restlessness among them, leading to more homesickness. Once again I had to remind them of their responsibility to be good representatives of the “cultural spaces” they came from.

At the end of our stay, the university held a special ceremony for us. The host families, professors and others who had helped facilitate our stay were all invited. After the perfunctory speeches were over and certificates handed out, one after another of the host parents came to me. “Your students were the best we ever hosted,” they said. “We never had to worry what time they would come home or if they would come home at all.”

After most of the host families had gone, the two professors approached me. “It was a pleasure to teach your students,” one said. “They were so respectful and attentive,” said the other. I couldn’t believe my ears. “Probably the best group of U.S. students we have ever taught,” they both chimed in. By now I am reeling. What I thought needed rectification was experienced as superior respect. As we were going about our activities at the university and with our families, we were silently proclaiming the gospel.

The testimony of the group didn’t stop with our presence in secular settings. A Mennonite church in Mexico City hosted us for the week leading up to Easter. We lived with them, shared meals with them, attended six worship services with them, including a baptism, worked with them painting their church and had fun with them visiting interesting parts of Mexico City. As our visit neared its end, the pastor, a longtime friend of mine, confided in me that the members of his church were reluctant to host us. Many felt that their homes

would not live up to the standards that coddled U.S. teenagers expected. Some had been burned by hosting U.S. teenagers who spent more time dancing in discos than worshiping with them in church. Some had experienced U.S. visitors arrogantly pushing their view of faith onto them.

The relationships we developed during that week profoundly changed people on both sides of the cultural divide. When my group left Mexico, a full three weeks after our visit with this church, a whole entourage of former skeptics, including all the hosting families, came to see us off at the airport, showering us with departure gifts and love. “Thank you for living with us, for eating and praying with us,” they said. “For wanting to get to know us and how we practice our faith in Mexico, for encouraging us.” There were few dry eyes at this farewell.

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As we went about our pilgrimage through Mexico, our temporary community of faith proclaimed the gospel with its actions. Who are the Mennonites? They are those lovely young adults whom we met as they sojourned among us. Who were those young adults who were different from any others we encountered? They are those Mennonite students who respect us and want to learn from us.

“Preach the gospel at all times. When necessary, use words.” This familiar quote is attributed to St. Francis of Assisi. More likely this is what he said: “It is no use walking anywhere to preach unless our walking is our preaching.” Our temporary community of faith left its mark on those it encountered. In its own special way, it bore witness to the gospel as it walked along. How is your community of faith proclaiming the gospel as it goes? Is it preaching or is it walking?



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