



Lessons from unexpected
Christian hospitality
at a small struggling
Mennonite congregation
in Mexico City

Entertaining angels

by Don Clymer

"We don't have any money to give you," the pastor said to the strange man who approached him in a busy bus station in the northern part of Mexico City.

"But we can provide you with lodging at our church and invite you to present your case to the members to see how they respond." ►

My wife and I were meeting Victor, the pastor of a small Mennonite congregation dwarfed among some 22 million people inhabiting Mexico City. We were with a group of 18 students from Eastern Mennonite University (EMU), Harrisonburg, Va. Victor's church was hosting us for a week of working, worshiping and playing together.

The stranger spotted a Christian fish symbol on Victor's T-shirt and figured he would be more approachable than others in the crowded bus station. Slowly his story unfolded. His name was Abram, and he was on the way back to his family in Guatemala from the United States. He was completely broke when he arrived in Mexico City and was asking for money to buy a ticket home and for a meal to eat on the way.

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Abram had been working in Charlottesville, Va., as a painter. He had entered the United States without papers and had numerous jobs in various cities until he finally settled in Charlottesville. He was doing well at his job but got into a bad crowd and spent most of his money partying and in general misbehavior. In desperation, he returned to the faith of his childhood, began attending a Latino church and recommitted his life to Jesus.

Just as he was beginning to turn his life around and make some economic strides, he received a call from his family in Guatemala. He was urgently needed back home to help resolve some family issues. He was really torn between family obligations and his newfound hope with steady employment and a changed lifestyle. Going back to Guatemala would probably mean never being able to return to the United States again; the risks of crossing the border without papers were too high. To ignore the pleas of his family went completely against his cultural sensibilities, so he decided to return to Guatemala, throwing away all his dreams of a better life.

He returned over land, mostly by bus.

Somewhere along the way, all his money was

stolen, and he ended up in a church-run refugee shelter in a U.S.-Mexico border town. By helping out around the shelter and with some donations from good people along the way, he was able to scrape together enough to buy a bus ticket to Mexico City. This is where his story coincided with ours.

To a person, our group had a great deal of trouble believing Abram's story. We figured he was pulling a major con job and was using the benevolence of a Christian brother with a fish symbol on his T-shirt to beg for money. Victor, on the other hand, did not bat an eyelash. He extended his invitation and promised to take up an offering for him with no guarantees on how much it would be. So Abram climbed on board the back of a pickup with a half-dozen students from our group to ride with us to the church of our destination.

It was remarkable enough that Victor offered this stranger hospitality at all. But his church was in the process of hosting 18 students and their two leaders for a week and was struggling financially to make their church budget reach. Didn't they have enough to do? Wouldn't the money raised to give to Abram be better used for the needs of the church? Weren't there other churches that could see to Abram's needs? These seem to be questions that were going through our American minds. I doubt any of them occurred to Victor, who lovingly invited Abram to accompany us on our adventure.

"Share with the Lord's people who are in need," says Romans 12:13, then continues, "Practice hospitality." In 1 Peter 4:9 we are admonished to "offer hospitality to one another without grumbling." Victor embodied the essence of both these verses. Our troop of American sojourners was the ones doing the grumbling. What is it about our culture that makes us so suspicious? Why is it so difficult for most of us to extend the biblically mandated hospitality to strangers?

"Scripture is replete with references to ... the stranger," writes W. David Buschart in his book *Exploring Protestant Traditions: An Invitation to Theological Hospitality* (IVP Academic, 2006). These references include a clear call to offer hospitality to the stranger. "Hospitality extends the embrace of welcome," he writes. "Christian hospitality extends the embrace of Christ's welcome." We are called to offer hospitality to the stranger because of what God has done for us. In turn, the hospitality we offer is from God.

"When faced by a stranger, those who extend

the embrace of hospitality have a keen awareness of God's hospitality toward them," writes Buschart. "Furthermore, this hospitality includes not only a sense of who they are (namely strangers) and what God has done (embraced them) but also an awareness that what they have to offer in hospitality is ultimately from God." Hospitality reaffirms our relationship to others and to God.

In spite of our initial skepticism, Abram soon endeared himself to our group. He ate meals with us at the church, worshiped with the congregation during several services and helped with the church's painting project. The coincidences were many. We had just been in Guatemala, the country to which he wanted to return. He had lived in Charlottesville, just over the mountains from where our students studied at EMU. He was a painter whose skills were needed at that particular time in the church. The better we got to know him, the more our skeptical attitudes faded away. When the special offering for Abram was received during the Wednesday evening service, most of our group walked forward to add their pesos to the love gift.

Although there was much less distrust among the Mexican Mennonites at the church than in our group as a whole, they, too, raised some questions when the special offering for Abram was announced. Victor, whose only motivation was Christian love, had a ready answer for the skeptics: "What he does with the money is on his conscience," he said. "We were asked to extend Christian hospitality to a stranger, so we did what Jesus would have done." Human motives are seldom completely pure. Extending hospitality in Jesus' name is.

A small offering basket for Abram was placed at the front of the church along with the normal offering basket during the Wednesday evening service. The money received for him was placed in an envelope and given to him after the service, no questions asked, no conditions imposed. According to the pastor who saw that he got to the bus station the next morning, the money Abram received was just enough to cover his bus trip and a meal along the way—exactly what he had asked for, no more, no less. He disappeared on to the bus in the early hours of the day, never to be heard from again.

Our group learned a valuable lesson in Christian hospitality during our time with pastor Victor's church in Prensa Nacional, a working-class neighborhood in northwestern Mexico City.

The church almost unquestioningly took Abram in and offered him what they had in spite of few resources of their own. Through the church's acceptance of Abram, and through exposing us to Christian hospitality at its best, our group learned

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to love a suspicious stranger and learned to respond to that love without expecting anything in return. We also experienced God's love in action. Abram responded to our hospitality, and new friendships were forged through this encounter that will be forever etched in the minds of those of us who were there to experience it.

"Do not forget to show hospitality to strangers," states Hebrews 13:2, "for by so doing some people have shown hospitality to angels without knowing it." For all we know, Abram was an angel.



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