

2012 Ecuador Fellowship and Learning Tour

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Ecuador Partnership website Article
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1 Corinthians 3: 7-11; 16-17 7 So neither the one who plants nor the one who waters is anything, but only God, who makes things grow. 8 The one who plants and the one who waters have one purpose, and they will each be rewarded according to their own labor. 9 For we are co-workers in God's service; you are God's field, God's building. 10 By the grace God has given me, I laid a foundation as a wise builder, and someone else is building on it. But each one should build with care. 11 For no one can lay any foundation other than the one already laid, which is Jesus Christ....16 Don't you know that you yourselves are God's temple and that God's Spirit dwells in your midst? 17 If anyone destroys God's temple, God will destroy that person; for God's temple is sacred, and you together are that temple.

As our plane descended into the Cedar Rapids, IA airport on Tuesday, so did my enthusiasm. It was an enthusiasm that was sparked by 12 days in Ecuador, living with 2 very polar opposite host families, singing to and praising the Lord in 3 different worship services at 3 church locations—all this sandwiched by 2 hectic experiences in the Miami International Airport. Needless to say, I was not ready to return home.

Back in November, my sails felt a nudge. It was the same kind of nudge I had heard about in a recent sermon on mission--about God's love compelling us in 2 Corinthians 5: 14-19 (propelling us like sails propelled by the wind). My sails were propelled toward the Equator; a place where one can find his or herself straddling two hemispheres simultaneously. I wanted to go to Ecuador because fellow church members and friends working abroad have inspired me to consider what that might be like. I had such a transformative experience already serving in the U.S. (San Antonio, Texas Mennonite Voluntary Service) – might I be ready to do so, *further away*? I decided to commit to the Fellowship and Learning Tour to begin to discern all of this.

With the support of my First Mennonite Church congregation, I was able to go, along with 6 other people representing Central Plains Mennonite Conference. I had never met these 6 people before. Identifying them at the airport before we set off for Quito required a round of “the Mennonite Game”. At the end of that day, we arrived in Quito, and played “the Mennonite Game” again. Playing it miles away truly indicated to me the unity of God's great Kingdom.

The Ecuador Partnership consists of Central Plains Mennonite Conference, Colombia Mennonite Church, Mennonite Mission Network and two Ecuadorian Mennonite Churches. Its roots were planted even before Cesar Moya and Patricia Uruena's arrival in 2001 and have been growing to diminish the actual distance between these partners; all located on different parts of the globe. At the three worship services our group participated in (two Mennonite ones and 1 indigenous), the theme was, “*Donde Buscamos el Señor?*” (*Where do we Find the Lord?*). I went to Ecuador because of the nudge that is more present some times than others for me, to seek out the Lord. Similarly, the “co-workers” of the Ecuador partnership went to Ecuador initially to teach others how to know and seek Him out.

What I learned quickly on this “tour” was that it should not be treated much like a “tour” at all. Entering a new world requires openness and adaptability. It doesn't mean straddling the world you came from and the world you entered; rather, immersing yourself fully into this new world so you can get the most out of it. It means being okay with ascending a steep mountain every morning with your host mom, in an unfamiliar altitude, just to make it to and from home each day. “Not everybody could have stayed at that house,” our group leader told me.

It also means, joining your host mom on the back of a truck with strangers, to get a ride up that same steep mountain after a late-night church meeting. It means that, if your group's van breaks down while rollercoasting one of the many mountainous areas Ecuador has to offer, you trust in the driver and the ability of the van's breaks to coast down to the next house so you can then hop on a bus back to town. Also, if you are offered the local delicacy of guinea pig (*cuy*), you eat it. Many of us praised God because we never found ourselves in such a predicament.

I sought out the Lord, but I didn't meet him on the mountaintop like Elijah did in 1 Kings 19, or inside the two Ecuadorian Mennonite churches; rather, in the builders and "co-workers" of these churches. It was the people themselves who helped me to see the Lord's work. When you open your heart and mind – you make room for God and His love to dwell in your midst.

On the "tour", I learned that many things can transcend language barriers. For one, smiles and laughter exchanged between the children of your host family and yourself. Secondly, music. Also, the hugs and kisses we were greeted with each day by *every* church person we encountered; and finally– tears.

We wept for our new-found Colombian "co-workers", displaced from Colombia for the safety of their families. The Colombian Refugee Project – a project of the Quito Mennonite Church serves over 60 individuals who are forcibly removed from their nation of origin – mostly due to threats against their lives and the lives of their family members. The project consists of a house where families are able to live securely and peacefully and a farm which helps to generate income for these and other families and also provides some nutritious food for them at a low cost. Two families currently occupy the Refugee House. Guerilla groups threatened the mothers of these families for being related to individuals who had publicly denounced their groups. One of the families came to Ecuador under a witness protection program and even after they arrived, they suffered the risk of encountering guerilla members who can easily enter Ecuador and lie to locate these refugees and continue threatening them. One of the lady's brothers was kidnapped and murdered by these guerillas which caused her mother and sister to seek refuge in Canada shortly after. The lady, Maria*, was never able to see her mother again, as she died shortly after making it to Canada.

Upon entering Ecuador, life is not immediately better. Typically, these refugees enter with just one packed bag and no sense of what is to come. Decisions to leave Colombia are made in the spur of a moment because one's options to overcoming the threats are few. Once in Ecuador, discrimination is also typical. Much like the undocumented of our country, some of these Colombians find themselves in Ecuador with little and on top of that, increased difficulties to find a job and sometimes even get their children in to school. It's who you know, and it can be dependent on how the deciding individual is feeling on any given day.

Maria's three children were able to find a school that would take them, unlike the other Colombian mother. Even still, her children cry and dread going to school because of the bullying they experience solely for being Colombian. A day after I got back to the states, I was informed that one of the families did not receive "refugee" status which they recently tried applying for again. Their future remains uncertain.

It was in the love for the Lord that I could easily sense in the young refugee families where I found the Lord the most. Despite an uncertain future, the couple who has yet to be given official "Refugee" status serves the Lord and leans on Him to get through. They put their hardships into His hands and remain unquestionably faithful.

So, even though it seemed our hosts and new-found "co-workers" felt honored for *us* to be visiting *them*; it could have easily been the other way around. Witnessing their faith was an honor.

Had I not been nudged to journey to another part of the world, I would have remained oblivious to the constant destruction of God's foundation that was laid long ago; and the possibility to praise Him nonetheless. We Americans owe it to our maker to remember that our brothers and sisters across the world are as much His temple as we are. When we truly embrace our roles as "co-workers", everybody is enriched for it.

Part of not treating this "tour" like a tour is to not amount it to photographs and fleeting memories. I felt conflicted, leaving a country that caught my heart within just two weeks' time. I would be returning to the comfort of my American customs which are largely the reasons for the struggles in Ecuador, Colombia and beyond. My plot on the reflection continuum for the past few days that I have been back remains at the "What Now?" phase.

To do nothing with what this "tour" has given me would be a disservice to the Lord, His foundation, And His temple.

*Name changed to protect her identity.