



The faces of Philadelphia and Ciudad Mante. Photos: Linda Jaymes

Community across the Border Churches Bridge Culture with Friendship in Mexico

by Barbara A. Chaapel

Getting into Mexico at the Texas border was hard. The first border crossing we were directed to had closed for the day. Dusk turned to darkness as we waited at the second crossing forty-five minutes away, only to discover that the paperwork we had been given for our rental van was incomplete. We dug in to wait for new papers.

Dinner was vending machine sandwiches we ate while sitting on the floor or in cracked orange plastic chairs fastened to the floor of the immigration office. Finally we were waved through and began the long, dark seven-hour drive to Ciudad Mante, in the state of Tamaulipas in the interior of Mexico, arriving at our hotel at 3:00 a.m.

Still, we were not shot at, did not have to slither under barbed wire, were not sent back as aliens.

You shall love the stranger, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt.

Sunday morning brought the bright colors and church bells of Ciudad Mante. Our little band of eleven—members of the First Presbyterian Church in Philadelphia (where I am a parish associate), our pastor Jesse Garner, and neighboring pastor Linda Jaymes (PTS Class of 1994) of Olivet Covenant Presbyterian Church—walked the four blocks to El Divino Redentor, a cinderblock church painted yellow where members met us with huge smiles, coffee, and fresh fruit. Some were already familiar faces from our congregation's earlier mission trip to Ciudad Mante (this 2007 trip was the fourth to Mexico with Puentes de Cristo, one of seven Presbyterian Border Ministry projects).

I was a stranger and you welcomed me.

Worship is the lifeblood of El Divino Redentor. As in many sanctuaries in the United States with small congregations, there were empty places in the pews, but the zeal for praising God was palpable. Many of the worshippers were women and children. We began the Lord's Day with children from the Vacation Bible School telling Bible stories and singing songs with puppets and a Punch and Judy stage they had made. The theme was *Hecho in Mano* (Handmade by God). The church was bedecked in colorful flowers, and fans moved air but just rearranged the heat. We recited Psalm 150 in Spanish and English. We sang with energy to the beat of a boom box, and Luis, the young pastor, preached on what it meant to be made in the image of God, as Linda translated. In contrast to our worship in Philadelphia, there was no paid choir, no granite pillars, no stained glass windows, no organ or robes. But we worshipped in spirit and in truth.

God is Spirit, and those who worship must worship in spirit and in truth.

We came to help build an apartment above a small courtyard behind the church for the young pastor. It was assembly-line work: carrying sand and dry cement in wheelbarrows with uneven wheels from piles where trucks had dumped the material in the street in front of the church, and dumping it in other piles in the back. Hauling buckets of sand and cement bags up to the roof with a rope to dump them again and mix with water for mortar. Carrying cinder blocks one by one from the street to the courtyard, stacking them, lifting them from hand to hand to the roof, where some of us climbed to set rebar and to mortar the blocks into walls. Shovel, wheel, dump, lift, mortar. We worked hard but were far from



professionals. Bernardo, the job supervisor, who really knew what he was doing, gave us repeated instructions with kindness and patience. He and his crew could have done the job faster and more efficiently, but it was friendships we were building as much as the apartment.

On this rock I will build my church.

Even before we reached Mante we were a diverse crew. Mary had lived with her grandmother in Mexico City after her mother died, as a child of four until she was thirteen. She delighted in being “home,” her eyes lighting up as she spoke Spanish with the churchwomen and took on a new authority with our group. It was her country! Hardy is German, named for Eberhard Bethge, friend and biographer of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, himself a Nazi resister, and a friend of Hardy’s father. Hardy offered his own moving testimony about growing up in Germany at one of the evening worship services. Paul is a retired geography professor and avid birder, with a dry wit and a ready twinkle in his eye. Tommy, now a college freshman, worked harder than us all during the day and headed out each night with the Mexican teens to do whatever teens do at night in cities around the globe.

The members of El Divino Redentor were as varied as we. Marco, a Mexican youth who lives in Brownsville, Texas, was spending the summer with his relatives in Mante and wanted to be a lawyer. He spoke English better than most of us would ever speak Spanish and delighted in taking us women shopping in the market, and telling us the life stories of each church member. Angelita, Elizabeth, and Yolanda, who shared in a worship service the sadness of her mother’s cancer, were the “earth mothers” of the congregation, always caring for everyone, organizing the cooking, and making sure everything got done. Luis, the young pastor, full of faith, proud of his people, effortlessly wove our two groups together with his warm smile and wise words during the week of worship and work.

*For in the one Spirit we were
all baptized into one body.*

Like the communities of Paul’s first churches, this church reflected the imperfections of its humanity. They did not understand or in some cases respect the Catholic church a few blocks away on the plaza, and some felt the Catholics were not even Christian. Some women in El Divino Redentor were angry and hurt that husbands would not come to church, and that some

forbad their wives from attending. Gender roles were so much different in Mante. Learning that I was single, Angelita warned that I should hurry to marry or “the train would leave the station.” When I replied that I had no worries, since I was driving the train, the women laughed and shook their heads “No,” though I detected a hint of respect and envy. And our Philadelphia group had our “high maintenance” moments as we talked too much or worried over the structure of a daily agenda.

We have this treasure in earthen vessels.

There were so many gifts given and received. Food. Songs. Labor. Prayer. Stories. The Mexican women gave the Philadelphia women earrings and colorful net shopping bags. They cooked delicious *gorditas* for breakfast, and led us on trips to their favorite butcher shops and chili vendors. We shared stories and hugs each day, and worshipped together each evening. On our free afternoon they took us to Nacimiento, a river swimming hole, for a shady picnic in a luxuriant agricultural area that grows and processes the sugarcane Mante is known for. We worked on their pastor’s house, and Jesse preached for them, with Linda translating into Spanish and playing a small Mexican guitar she had bought in the market.

Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit.

Our last night in Mante everyone cleaned up, dressed up, and came to the church for a party. The church members had gone out into the neighborhood to invite others who were not church members to come to meet their American friends, and there was a big crowd. Luis led us in games where we were assigned animal names and had to find our matching animals. We danced and played a circle game akin to musical chairs, where pairs of people made “nests” with their arms to catch human “birds,” and the “birds” flew around to the music and tried not to be the bird left without a nest. There were prizes, and chicken and chilies and special cakes and fruit punch. The women had been cooking all day. And in that small courtyard behind the church, with tears and laughter, we told each other in halting English and halting Spanish how much we had come to mean to each other.

Puentes de Cristo. Bridges of Christ. Not bridges to Christ. Bridges of Christ.

*You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart,
and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and
with all your mind; and your neighbor as yourself. ■*