

MEADVILLE LOMBARD

theological school

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Religious and Social Struggle: An opportunity for intercultural conversation

Last July, Meadville Lombard Theological School introduced a new cultural immersion course, *Religious and Social Struggle in Mexico*, which took place in Mexico City and the state of Chiapas, Mexico. The course was co-led by Colin Bossen, Meadville student and co-founder of the Chiapas Peace House Project, and Susann Pangerl, Academic Dean at Meadville. The class participants included Meadville faculty, residential and modified residency program students, as well as Unitarian Universalist ministers and religious education leaders.

“It was an opportunity for our students—and others—to have an experience of cultural immersion,” said Pangerl. “It was a chance for them to meet people who are actively and front-line engaged in social struggle, and to have face-to-face, person-to-person conversations.” The course provided multiple opportunities for sustained conversation with religious and intellectual leaders and activists who shared their understandings and experiences of the interplay of religious belief in the ongoing economic and social struggles in Mexico City and Chiapas.

The two educational centers of the course were in Mexico City and in San Cristobal. Over the course of two weeks, class participants took a variety of excursions, meeting with a squatter’s community in Mexico City and visiting the Zapatista community of Oventic. While in Chiapas, the participants took a several-day trip to the community of Pakayal, sponsored by the Instituto de Estudios Investigacion Intercultural (INESIN). INESIN is an ecumenical institute whose work directly addresses identified areas of concern by local indigenous populations, including the construction of a medical clinic in the community of Pakayal.

The time in Pakayal greatly affected India McCance, Chief Executive Officer of the Big Brothers Big Sisters of Metro Milwaukee and a student in the Meadville Lombard Modified Residency Program. “One of our first experiences was having a meal,” said McCance. “The first night, Susi (Pangerl) and I sat at a small wooden table while our hosts brought beans, chicken, and—always—hand-made tortillas. The hosts were not to eat with the visitors and that bugged us every time we sat down,” said McCance. Pangerl adds that it was very discomforting to know that they were taking food from these hosts, off their tables and out of their mouths.

“While they treated us like royalty,” said McCance, “Pakayal was a humbling experience. The leaders of the village took us up the mountain to see the foundation of their clinic which they stopped erecting because they ran out of money.”

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Pangerl adds that the amount of money needed to finish the clinic (\$20,000) seems quite small when we think of healthcare costs in America. They've started the clinic, said Pangerl, because the closest form of healthcare is about three hours away, but they have no way to raise the money to finish it. "People die there," she said, "from things that Americans would routinely take a shot of penicillin to cure."

Rev. LoraKim Joyner, parish minister at the UU Community of El Paso, took the course because she wanted to share and reflect with others a concept of UU Liberation Theology, "and to do it as praxis--embodied action and reflection."

Joyner has a rich history with Latin America and found going to Mexico only deepened her joy and interconnection with Latin America. "I was so alive in Mexico and didn't want to return to the U.S.," said Joyner.

Joyner says she also learned, after two weeks in Mexico, that "I love saying 'I am in resistance' and I have a deep respect for those who say so regularly, such as the Zapatistas. I learned to speak more boldly of my own resistance to economic oppression."

Joyner brought this experience home to her congregation, noting that her own theology did not change, but was "clarified and I learned some ways to speak more clearly of liberation theology. As a result, I am ever more committed to UU Liberation Theology, seeking to share this at the district and cluster level, as well as forming a women's 'in resistance' group at our UU congregation."

For information on the clinic in Pakayal, contact the [Peace House](#).

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