

## Mexico: My Adventure, My Testimony by Marissa Phelps

My pre-conceived ideas of a country never play themselves out in real life. In this case, Juarez -- a city in Mexico on the U.S. border -- was everything that I had ever hoped and imagined it would be. True to what I had seen in the videos and books in my pre-trip studies, Juarez was a swirling mixture of color, sights, and sounds quite different from those of the American culture.

Thursday morning came and our team set out for the Central Iglesia de Nazareno. Our old, white school bus drove down dusty roads to a small house that housed the Central Church. Anticipation of the days ahead filled my spirit as our van passed open fields scattered with garbage and scrap metal. Corrugated metal fences lined the dirt road to the church. We passed our future ministry neighborhood near the church. The houses were small side-by-side concrete and stucco buildings half-finished and seemingly in desperate need of refurbishing.

I remember feeling a sense of inadequacy. How could I, a person with so little to offer, possibly minister to a people who suffered every day from sickness, hunger, and inadequate living conditions and who desperately needed love, attention, and care? I felt unworthy to even smile at one of the many small, runny-nosed children. What a sense of inability engulfed my heart. But I remembered that I was there on God's business. I wasn't here to fulfill these people's every needs. I was here to offer a smile, a hug, a word of kindness, a prayer for the people of Juarez. I was here to be Jesus in human form to as many children as possible.

As we canvassed the local neighborhood, children came out from behind mothers to take our buttons and candy. They shyly smiled and gratefully took our gifts. We invited them to the Vacation Bible School and the medical clinic that was to be held at the Central Church. That afternoon at VBS ninety-three children showed up to sing, pray, color, and play games. We donned the puppets and sang along with the children. They smiled broadly as they were taught the motions to the songs being sung. Their smiles told a story. Each special smile taught me how dull the world would be if we didn't smile. I

sometimes think that America has forgotten to smile despite our material blessings. We could all learn a little something from the children of Juarez: smile!

At our team devotions that night, I felt like I should begin to pray for a miracle from God. So, I told our team that I was going to be praying for two hundred children at VBS during our week in Mexico. I knew God could do anything if I was only willing to ask for it. God says in His Word that "we have not because we ask not". Why not ask?

"Two hundred children, Lord! I know You can do it!"

Friday afternoon produced one hundred and twenty VBS children! It wasn't the two hundred number I had asked for, but I wasn't going to give up. God was still able to answer my prayer in amazing ways. I was trusting Him. Again, we mingled with the children and ministered to them, possibly in ways completely unknown to us. In fact, I sat down at one point during the day to rest. I was feeling a bit fatigued due to the lack of sleep I had the night before. As soon as I sat down, four small children came and sat next to me. They didn't say anything; they just sat there. It was as if God was reminding me to forget about myself and focus on what I was here to do: Serve Him by serving people.

Our evening team meeting time came and I again spoke of the two hundred children God would send us during our stay in Mexico. I honestly believed that God would lead two hundred to us for Vacation Bible School.

Saturday came and we canvassed the neighborhood again. Speaking to each child, we invited them to VBS and handed out buttons and smiles in succession. At four o'clock that afternoon the church was going to have a children's time to invite them to a Sunday afternoon rally. Our team had to leave early from our site before the children arrived at four o'clock due to a schedule crunch.

Our team went back to Central for a Saturday evening youth service. Before the service started, the pastor stood and announced that they had had over two hundred and fifty children attend the four o'clock children's time! A chill went up my spine! My team members looked at me and smiled. God had answered my prayer over and abundantly! I found it difficult to concentrate on the service that followed. I

was so excited that I wanted to jump for joy! As the service proceeded, I began to sense that God desired more for our Central ministry team. So, after the service, I pulled the pastor aside along with an interpreter and began to relate my story about our two-hundred-children prayer. The pastor smiled. I then told Central's pastor, Ezequiel, that I knew God was bigger and able to "do far above what we could possibly ask or think". I told him I was going to pray for three hundred children to attend the children's rally Sunday afternoon.

He only smiled and said, "Lots of work!"

I told the team that night I believed we would have three hundred children at the rally the following afternoon.

The Sunday morning service, music, and sermon were inspiring. The small house/church was packed out. There was standing room only as God filled the building. After the glorious service, we cleared the chairs and began to prepare for the children who were quickly arriving outside. Soon there was no more room. Our team had been asked by the pastor to sing a song using our puppets, so we sang "Jesus Loves Me" in Spanish and American Sign Language. The children mimicked us with wonder in their faces. We presented the gospel story through the EvangeCube and then passed out boxes of small toys and household goods to the boys and girls. I asked one man how many children he counted. He informed me that there were more than they could count! I knew then that God had again answered my prayer. I believe that three hundred children attended that rally in the small courtyard at Central that Sunday afternoon!

My stay in Juarez, Mexico, was a wake up call from God. It reminded me to never forget that a friendly smile is worth more than all the material things of this world. If our heart is full of God's presence, then our love for Him should overflow to those around us. We should notify our faces! Let all of the world know that God is a God of joy and smiles! I pray that God never lets me forget how to smile.