

Are You My Neighbor?

Moving into a new house in a brand-new neighborhood gives many opportunities to meet new people. Unlike our old neighborhood, which was 30 years old and the people who lived there had known each other almost as long, here everyone is in the same boat. We don't know anyone! (Except the Ellers, our friends and teammates, who live six houses away.)

Our prayer has been that God would give us opportunities for conversations and friendships with our neighbors, that His love would be evident in our lives and that if our conversations lead to spiritual things, great!

So, a few weeks ago I was hanging out at the home of my next-door neighbor, when her cousin started asking me very direct questions about my religion. Up until that point, I had successfully avoided that topic, since I knew that my neighbor is Catholic and to say that I am evangelical could affect our getting to know each other. But her cousin was persistent and finally asked, "So, are you evangelical?"

"What do you think of when you hear the word evangelical?" I asked.

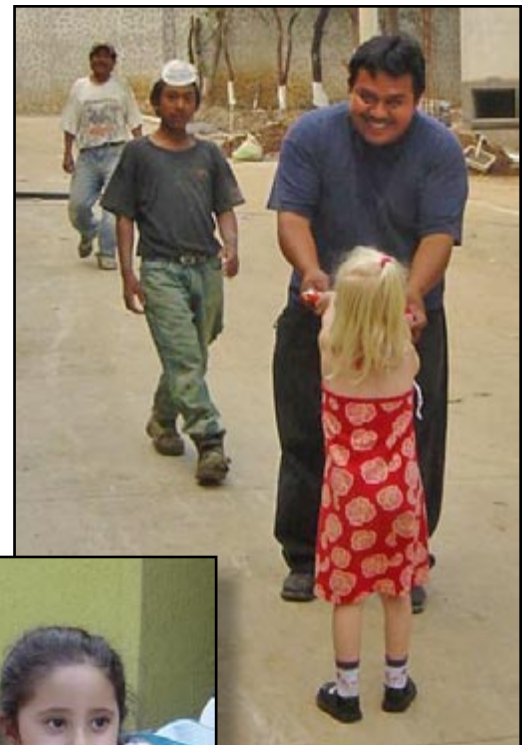
Her cousin replied, "People who don't smoke, don't drink, don't dance, don't eat. . ." To which everyone began to laugh. It is true, Guatemalan evangelicals don't smoke, drink or dance (of course they eat!).

I thought about how to respond to her and finally said, "Well then, I wouldn't call myself an evangelical." To which I received a lot of very confused looks.

"What would you call yourself?" She asked.

"I would call myself a Christian, or a follower of Christ, but if an evangelical is just someone who follows a bunch of rules, I'm not that person. I believe that a religion should transform your life, not just dictate how you live it." To which my neighbor, her cousin, and a guy working in her house started to nod their heads and agree with me.

From there we began what has become an ongoing discussion about our beliefs. At one point the worker, Sergio, piped up and said, "I used to be evangelical." "What changed?" I asked. He said, "I felt like evangelicals follow a bunch of



*Elena and her friend
handing out coke
and chips to the
construction workers.*



Making friends with our neighbors

rules, they don't drink, smoke, or dance, but they are hypocritical, they judge others, they are envious and jealous people."

WOW, I thought, I surely don't want to be in that group!

What happens when our religion gets in the way of developing relationships with others? People were drawn to Christ, they followed Him everywhere. But were people drawn to the Pharisees? I don't think so. What is the difference between Christ and the Pharisees? Wouldn't you say that the Pharisees put up too many rules between people and God? Have we become Pharisees of sorts in our "evangelicalness"? The

Pharisees questioned Jesus about having dinner with tax collectors and "sinners" in Matthew 9:10-13, and His reply was, "It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick.... For I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners."

Two days later I walked over to visit my neighbor. I rang the doorbell and my neighbor and her cousin walked out, both of them smoking. We stood in her garage talking for awhile while they continued working on their cigarettes. What would have happened, I thought, if two days ago I had simply said, yes, I'm evangelical? Would we continue to have deep conversations like we are?

Later that week Kyle told me that he had a conversation with Sergio, the worker, a few weeks earlier. Sergio had said to Kyle, "You and your wife are really different, you guys are actually nice to us (the guys who are building the homes)." From a guy who used to be an evangelical, who left the church because of the rules and hypocrisy. Now that is the kind of "evangelical" I want to be: someone who is more interested in people than upholding the legalistic evangelical culture, someone who follows Jesus and accepts others as He does, someone who hangs out with "sinners."

My prayer is that people would see Jesus' love in us as we seek to know Him and follow Him, that they would be attracted to Him, and not repelled by "religion." May the church be transformed by His Presence, be abundant in His Love, and accepting of others as He is.

Nell

P.S. September brings the close to this fiscal year in OC International. Thank you for your generous gifts throughout the year! We are trusting God that we will end the year in the black. If you would like to send a special gift it would be much appreciated! Also, our budget for next year is higher than it has been this year since Elena will be entering kindergarten and we will need to pay for her school expenses.