

## SEMILLA - An Emmaus Journey

“Why haven’t we been doing this long ago?” “I’ve just discovered I can think for myself. . .my faith takes on much more meaning to me now.” “It’s urgent that our own people (the Anabaptist-Mennonite churches) really know our faith. . .it’s so biblical. . .why many of the basic teachings of the evangelical churches arose in the radical reformation of our Anabaptist forefathers!” “Please get more of our own history and theology into Spanish. We’re reading everyone else’s theology but the Anabaptist approach to life and the Scriptures make so much more sense in Central America today!” “The social situations we face today and those confronted by the sixteenth century Anabaptists are incredible similar!”

These are typical questions and comments that are heard at the SEMILLA study encounters.

In SEMILLA we are on an Emmaus journey. Central American Anabaptist pastors and leaders, men and women, are asking many questions . . .they are cautiously lifting the wrappings from their carefully pre-packaged Christian faith. Obedience to Jesus’ example and teaching is pushing leaders to risk leaving safe ground. Conviction is growing that our living God is concerned for the whole of life in creation and for the whole movement of humanity in history. The answers to painful and perplexing questions are not always clearly understood. But we are confident that Christ, the Truth walks with us and want his Spirit to penetrate us and the whole church. We have a deep concern that the church have a truly biblical message that is indeed “good news” in the chaotic circumstances in the Central American region today. A feeling of hope and excitement is rising as brothers and sisters, nationals and missionaries share and walk together with Christ in this learning process.

There is a growing awareness that too often Anabaptist-Mennonite churches have simply been following after other evangelicals. Most everyone has been tied up exclusively with salvation and damnation questions neatly separated from the realities of the daily struggles of living. At times it seems as if the evangelical patterns of ministry as well as leadership training programs have unwittingly conspired with cultural, political and economic factors to perpetuate the status quo. For many decades most area countries have had strong-handed military or dictatorial-type governments. These leadership patterns seem to have influenced the church structures unduly and many evangelical pastors see themselves as having exclusive rights to congregational ministry and administration. Since there is not much feeling of community or commitment to one another, witness and service are felt to be competitive and lose vitality. Worship is performed by the “experts” and soon becomes just another routine that is endured or abandoned by most. Faith seems irrelevant to life or becomes practically non-existent for many second and third generation believers.

But, what about the dramatic regenerating conversion experiences many recall? Discerning leaders, ministers and lay-persons (now involved in SEMILLA) strongly affirm regeneration as a result of personal faith in Christ. They are also diligently seeking to have a relevant and meaningful biblical witness. There is a firm conviction in the inspiration and authority of the Scriptures. Disciplined Bible study is combined with serious reflection on everyday happenings. A response to this concern for an on-going Christian faith that is relevant is the Anabaptist oriented leadership training program known as SEMILLA.

“SEMILLA,” an acronym meaning seed, is derived from “Seminario Ministerial de Liderazgo Anabautista-Menonita” (Ministerial Seminary for Anabaptist-Mennonite Leaders). It is a unified leadership training effort of ten Mennonite and Brethren in Christ national church organizations in the Central American area. . .an area that stretches from Mexico to Panama with approximately ten thousand Mennonites. There are six Conferences - Mission Boards who relate to these national churches that provide the major subsidy for the program in the form of scholarships. They are Brethren In Christ Mission, Eastern Mennonite Board of Missions, Evangelical Mennonite Conference of Canada, Franconia Mennonite Conference, Mennonite Brethren Missions & Services and Rosedale Mennonite Missions. These sponsoring groups are linked to SEMILLA through its board of directors which consists of a delegate from each country representing its participating church(es). This board determines the overall policies and procedures to follow and names a director to coordinate the total study program. It has now also selected a part-time dean to begin late this year.

The SEMILLA project is a decentralized program of study and disciplined reflection that attempts to combine the best elements of a residential study program and theological education by extension. (TEE) The program consists of assigned investigation and three or four intensive seminars annually that are repeated in four to six countries. The curriculum includes 36 courses for the “bachillerato” level and 18 additional ones for the “licenciatura” level. Reading and writing assignments in preparation for each two-week seminar require 80-100 hours of study. Seminars are held in countries where there are at least 10 qualified students with smaller numbers from neighboring countries joining them. Between seminars, each student is expected to participate in regular encounters of study-dialogue with his country’s group of SEMILLA students. Each participating conference seeks to encourage its academically capable pastors and leaders to participate in the courses. The assumption is that all sectors of the church can participate fully, but the selection of students for scholarships is left to each respective conference.

The persons who teach SEMILLA courses are very crucial to the whole project. These are sought from all Anabaptist-Mennonite groups and are recommended and approved by the board. Professors are selected on the basis of their mature spiritual and ministerial experience and well-defined Anabaptist convictions. They are to have at least a master’s degree academic level, must speak Spanish fluently and be well informed of the complicated, difficult situations confronting the church in Central America. Each professor is asked to prepare the original course syllabus so that corresponding anthologies with assignments can be prepared and distributed in advance to students. Carefully selected student-teachers repeat one of two of these courses annually using the original syllabus and study materials.

To date\* throughout 1984-85, nine different courses have been taken for credit by 151 students from nine L.A. countries. Another 120 students audited courses, primarily the evening ones. Ten of the Canadian and U.S. MCC & Mission personnel also took courses. Among the students were nearly 50 pastors and six Bible institute directors. The number of women students jumped from 33 in 1984 to 61 in 1985. Some of the men have had difficulty in accepting that the women are among the most dedicated and insightful students. Fortunately there have not been any conflictive or competitive attitudes regarding their distinct roles in the churches and communities. Other professions represented among the students are agronomists, business men and women, secretaries, bankers, home-makers,

lawyers, doctors, nurses, accountants, salespersons, engineers and educators, as well as several high school and university students.

The SEMILLA participants themselves have done most of the promoting since they really value these advanced biblical, theological, and historical studies. The clue to their attraction seems to be that they are given conscientiously in and from a Latin American context and perspective. They are relevant not only due to the expertise of the professor but through the realities of the students. The course procedures include disciplined reflection in small groups and the professor serves as a specialist and guide without imposing pre-packaged applications of biblical principles. The students are taking ownership of conclusions that are reached, which gives life and meaning to their faith. The 1984-85 teaching staff included two seminary professors, Hugo Zorrilia, now a missionary in Spain, and Laverne Rutschman; two college professors, Ron Collins at Goshen and C. Arnold Snyder at Conrad Frebel College; two C.A. women, Concepcion Villeda, Guatemala and Anny Blanco de Vargas, Costa Rica; two SEMILLA staff persons, Gilberto Flores and Amzie Yoder in Guatemala City and eight Mexican and Central American SEMILLA student-teachers.

The general response to SEMILLA has been both exciting and demanding. The sharing and interchange by church leaders from these various Anabaptist-Mennonite groups and countries has greatly enriched their learning experience. Strong affirmation is given to this alternative to sending leaders to educational institutions in alienating cultural contexts and life situations. The student-course costs are a mere fraction of what they would be in North American Mennonite Institutions, and there is little risk of indirectly encouraging the "brain drain" from Central to North America. The sharp hierarchical divisions between clergy and laity are diminishing. The churches as a whole are establishing their own identity as biblical Christians who are responsible to their own people in their own culture and time. And this in spite of the risk of being misunderstood both by fellow Christian and nonbelievers. This leadership training has the disadvantage of taking more time. One of the board members, a middle-aged businessman, quipped, "Surely SEMILLA will supply us with walking canes when some of us walk up to receive our diploma!"

\*Three more national seminars are scheduled to be held in three countries yet during the latter months of 1985. The estimates are that about 50 students will participate.

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