

April 2013

INTERVIEW WITH STEPHANIE SIEMENS



While in her very early 20s, Stephanie Siemens, Osler, Sask, sat on the Council of Mennonite Church Sask. for a term. She is now a volunteer teacher in Bolivia. Stephanie has a strong commitment to her family, her church and her friends. She says, "I make my focus *how* I do what I do rather than *what* I do." This interview was conducted in late 2012.

1. (a) How did you come to be nominated for the Council of Mennonite Church Saskatchewan?

I received a phone call from Renata Klassen (the MC Sask moderator at the time) asking if I'd be interested in sitting on Council. Apparently some people thought I would be a good person to fill the opening. I thought about it for a few days, but honestly, I didn't think about it that hard. I had the sort of job where it shouldn't be too difficult to attend meetings, and I like knowing what is going on in the larger church, so I said yes.

(b) What were some highlights and challenges of sitting on the leadership council?

Highlights... The people I got to know are great! I always felt very supported and appreciated as a council member and as a young adult who is involved in the broader church. The building of those relationships make the church feel like a community for me.

Challenges...

I've found it difficult to keep up with all the different commissions and groups that are associated with MCSask. Everyone has so much going on!

It's hard that no matter what council does, we can't please everyone. Some person or group will always be unhappy about something we've done or not done, especially the budgeting or how the area church communicates. For a people pleaser like myself, this feeling wears on me quite quickly.

Occasionally it was difficult being the youngest adult on council. Sometimes the council looked to me for the "young adult perspective" on an issue, and that can feel like a lot of pressure. I don't really see myself as the "average" (if there is such a thing) young adult in MC Sask. Most of my peers are going to school so they have less time to be involved in congregational activities. Therefore I feel my opinion might not be an accurate reflection of many other young adults in our church.

2. Share some of your other faith-related involvements over the years. What was the path that led you to those involvements? What were the results?

I was raised in the church and can't think of a time when I wasn't involved. In high school I was a part of the SMYO Committee, through which I gained valuable leadership skills. After high school I worked for a summer on the SK VBS Troupe and learned more about MCSask and people in other congregations. I spent a year nannying in The Netherlands through the Inter-Menno program.

I'm an active member of my home congregation, Osler Mennonite Church, teaching the Youth Sunday School class and taking my turn to lead worship and do the children's story on Sunday mornings. As a youth I always appreciated having a young adult as my youth leader, so when my church needed a youth Sunday School teacher, I figured it was my turn to give back. Lots of work goes into

being a church family, and Sunday morning services are a big part of keeping the family together. Therefore I think it is important for me to do what I can to help all of it happen.

The results of my involvements? How can one measure the skills learned from living abroad for a year? How can one measure the significance of relationships built with the church youth on Sunday mornings and during weekend youth retreats? And who can say what the results are of telling a personal story to children during the time set aside just for them during the weekly service? I can confidently say that the church, and the ways I've been involved with it, have definitely shaped me into the person I am today. But to list all those ways would be nearly impossible.

3. (a) Describe how your volunteering to teach in Bolivia came about.

I've done a fair amount of traveling. I've spent short amounts time in Malaysia, France, Burkina Faso, the United States, as well as a year in The Netherlands (and several surrounding European countries). All my travel experiences have been very enriching and irreplaceable, and so with no commitments and still nothing compelling me to go to school, I decided I'd like to do another trip. I much prefer to stay in one place a long enough to not be a tourist anymore. In order to do that and support myself while there, I decided that going abroad as an English teacher would be good to do.

So last summer I took a several courses at the University of Saskatchewan for Teaching English as a Foreign Language. My options for going abroad would be slightly limited by the fact that I have no degree. Although I didn't have any ideas for a destination, I was sure I'd find something that I'd enjoy.

The TEFL course was full time for one month, so I had to quit my job to attend. After the course was finished, I volunteered in the kitchen at the Youth Farm Bible Camp. There I told Jon Epp, a staff person, that I wasn't sure where I wanted to go with my new teaching skills. He said, "Bolivia." It didn't even seem like a suggestion, but an obvious answer. Jon had visited a small school just outside of Santa Cruz on a missions trip through Steinbach Bible College. He said they might be interested in having me teach English there. Jon gave me the contact info for the director of the school and the Evangelical Mennonite Missions Conference, which began the school. In the following months, I contacted Arlie Peters, the director, for information and an application form.

I didn't have any particular desire to go to Bolivia, but rather a desire to do what I felt God was calling me to do. Before this, the only thing I knew about Bolivia was that it was in South America somewhere. Suddenly Bolivia was making its way into my life. At Starbucks, one of our regular customers mentioned that he had just recently been in Bolivia with his youth group. I volunteered at a local MCC thrift shop and one of my coworkers was from Bolivia. Several people in my church have travelled to Bolivia; one couple were MCCers there. On the Sunday that I announced that I would be working in Bolivia for a year, there was a couple in church from Manitoba who had strong connections to the EMMC school in Santa Cruz. Maybe all these things are just coincidence, but I feel as if they are a sign from God.

I will be teaching English to grades two to twelve, starting February 4, 2013. It is a one year full time volunteer position. The school year finishes at the end of November, so I hope to be home by Christmas. The school is meant for Low-German-speaking children, although some of the children are Spanish speaking. Many of the children come from homes where the father is (or was) addicted to alcohol, coca, and/or sexual perversions, or is recovering from these addictions. As a result, the families are poor and many of the children have been physically, emotionally, and/or sexually abused.

(b) What is/will be the role of your Christian faith in this new setting?

I feel that God is leading me into this year, so my faith is going to play a huge role. I've never taught before (it's new ground for me), so I pray that God will guide my words and actions daily. I tend to be quite hard on myself and so remembering that this is my first time and that it's okay to make mistakes will be a difficult for me. South American culture is going to be a big adjustment. I see myself as fairly introverted, so going to a culture where my idea of personal space may clash with the ideas of

those around me will take some getting used to. I'm very excited to learn Spanish! I look forward to learning a new language with anticipation rather than dread, even though it will take time.

I am giving this year of my life to God. I don't feel as if I choose to go to Bolivia, I feel like God asked me, and I'm saying yes to His plan. I really don't know where it will lead, or what impact I will have, but I'm comforted by the knowledge that that is not my concern. My concern is that I will not forget that it is God who brought me there, and that for His plan to happen in it's most perfect way, I need to be 100% committed to following Him throughout the year. I need to make sure that I'm always focused on Him and the work He's laid ahead of me, so that I do not get distracted by my own wants and desires. It scares me slightly to think of what those words really mean. Setting myself aside? Have I ever truly and wholly set myself side and put God, and His plan for me first? I don't know. Perhaps at times and moments I have, but constantly? For an entire year?

Your prayers for any and all of the above would not only be welcome, but also quite necessary. It will be by God's grace that I will continue to say yes, and say it with a smile.

By Naomi Unger