

Across the Border

Living community

by *Connie Bentson Byler*

Loneliness in community sounds like an oxymoron to me! But every Christmas season a wave of loneliness, a deep yearning to be back with my parents and three siblings, finds its way into my thoughts and emotions. Both my husband, Dennis, and I were born into missionary families, and although we deliberately set out not to be missionaries, it turned out that God called us in a wonderful way to Spain. It's been 36 years since I last had a Christmas with my own family.

God has a place for the lonely in community. It isn't too hard to figure out what makes Jesus happy at his birthday celebration. We began to reach out to other lonely members from our church family inviting them to spend the traditional late Christmas Eve dinner along with us.

People in Spain get an extra paycheck in December, and they splurge on seafood and delicacies of all sorts for their three big family celebrations: Christmas Eve, New Year's Eve and Three King's Day. You start with different meat entrées, continue with seafood, go on with a baked fish, and finish with more meat, usually lamb or beef. No vegetables or salad in between. It was always fascinating to me! Our table has always been a spread of a wonderful turkey dinner, simple and so economical. And the Spanish people who have sat at our table have never forgotten the different touch, and especially Dennis' dinner rolls!

In the mid 90's we were expecting some Christmas regulars, when we got a call asking if we would also host a man who was going to be released from prison on the day of Christmas Eve. Since our church was involved in a ministry with people with addictions and prison visitation, it wasn't a strange petition. But little did I know that that Christmas was going to become the most special Christmas of my life.

timbrel connects today's Mennonite women in all our diversity by sharing our stories and perspectives. Through our conversations with each other, we seek to walk more closely with God and to show greater love for self and neighbors near and far.

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Manuel Villar had been in prison many times, and this last time for 13 years for drug-related felonies. You can imagine how he felt to get out of prison and find himself celebrating Christmas with such strangers as ourselves, eating turkey and vegetables! As we got into the night he began to share his story, and it was 3 a.m. when we went to bed.

His wife, Asun, divorced him because of his drug addiction when she was expecting their second child. But soon someone shared the gospel with her and she became an “Evangelical,” as we are called in Spanish-speaking countries. In the few letters he had received from his ex-wife, she always wrote about God and urged him to start a new life. But he could never understand her. He told me that on one occasion in the past, when he was doing the streets and his children were young, he bumped into her. She asked him for help to carry her bags of groceries to her new apartment, which he did, although feeling very uncomfortable, because he was on drugs. Asun had been praying for her stray ex-husband since she had become a Christian, although he had kept no ties with his family. He used to go to the school at closing hours to watch his children from afar. He didn’t want his children to know him as an addict.

Asun’s last letter had urged him to go to a Christian rehab community in Burgos when he left prison. He followed her advice because he had nowhere else to go, but he knew he wouldn’t last long, since he wasn’t interested in God. But now he was around a Christmas table with a Christian family and he saw the light! At some point that night Manuel started to dream that he, too, could one day have a family like this one and that God could give him a fresh start in life! His heart was so softened that he accepted Jesus as his Lord and Savior in the following week, and a new life began. His rehabilitation went on for three years, during which his ex-wife would occasionally visit him with their children. They were remarried in our church and Asun moved to Burgos. Both are active and very faithful in the church after these many years, facing many problems together, yet trusting God for even more miracles.

Every time I feel lonely at Christmas I remind myself that my whole life is about sharing myself, especially with the lonely around us, and that this is what brings joy to my life! 📖