



SPANISH *Homecoming*

After six years at North Park Seminary, Spaniards Eugenio and Amparo Fernandez are returning home as missionaries.

BOB SMJETANA

In 1979, missionaries from the Billy Graham Association of Spain started an evangelistic campaign in the small town of Carba in southern Spain. They got off to a good start, showing movies, running Bible studies, and inviting residents to give their lives to Jesus. But before long, the campaign ran afoul of the local authorities and the Billy Graham folks were escorted out of town.

Soon after the campaign folded, so did the small group of converts they had reached. All except for one—a teenager named Eugenio Fernandez.

Twenty-five years later, Eugenio, who is now a student at North Park Theological Seminary and member of Grace Covenant Church in Chicago, says the campaign in Cabra changed his life.

“If you do the analysis of the numbers,” he says, “it was not a successful campaign because the only person who remained was me.”

“But I am here,” he adds with a smile.

Since there was no one to nurture the then sixteen-year-old Eugenio in his faith, an older missionary couple from Malaga, about two hours away, drove to Cabra once or twice a week in their Bible bus to spend time with him. They taught him about the Bible, how to pray, and “how to stay faithful when everything is going bad,” says Amparo Fernandez, Eugenio’s wife.

He went on to the Instituto Biblico y Seminario Teologico de España (ISBTE) in Barcelona for college and his seminary training, where he met Amparo, who was also a seminary student. They then became pastors of a small church in Puertollano in the province of Ciudad Real. In 1997, after fourteen years in ministry, the Fernandezes began looking for a school in the U.S. where they could further their theological education. During a meeting of pastors, they met Rob Reed, a Covenant missionary in La Coruna, Spain. Reed suggested that the Fernandezes consider North Park and put them in touch with the seminary’s admissions office. So in 1998, Eugenio, Amparo, and their sons, Eugene and Benjamin, moved to Chicago to begin their studies. They soon made North Park their second home, getting involved at Grace Covenant Church and teaching Spanish classes at the university. They both completed master of divinity degrees and then received an invitation to join the faculty of ISBTE back in Spain.

They’ve spent the last year earning

second master’s degrees at North Park, focusing on preparing the course materials they will teach in Spain. Eugenio will teach New Testament and social ethics while Amparo will teach Hebrew and wisdom literature.

Along with their education, the Fernandezes have learned important lessons about living in a diverse community. The Spain they left behind had very little experience with immigrants and people of other cultures. In the U.S., they’ve been thrust into a vibrant, multi-ethnic city.

Meanwhile, Spain has undergone some dramatic changes in the six years they have been gone. A growing economy and a declining population has meant that Spain has opened its doors to a growing number of immigrants from Latin America to fill lower paying jobs. The elpais.es website reports that 700,000 immigrants came to Spain in 2003, bringing the total number to 2.67 million, or 6.7 percent of the population. The majority are from Ecuador, Colombia, the Dominican Republic, and Argentina, and a number of them are evangelical Christians.

In Amparo’s hometown of Ibi, the influx of immigrants from Ecuador has meant that the Spaniards in her parents’ church are now outnumbered two to one. “We [our church] have been twenty people, never more than twenty people for forty years,” she says. “And now there are forty to sixty Ecuadorians in the church. The building is so small that the children have to go to another place, and the congregation is



Left: Eugenio and Amparo Fernandez pose with a traditional Spanish dish called a paella.

Below: Eugenio as a seminary student in the 1980s



God to work and serve in Spain.”

In recent months, the Fernandezes have had some long conversations with Amparo’s parents, and some of their pastor friends in Spain about the challenges of mixing different cultures in the church. In her hometown, the new members

have brought vitality to the church, but have also brought struggles. The new immigrants often come from impoverished countries and have had financial crises, stretching the resources of the small congregation. And, as in North America, Fernandez says, there has been discussion about what kind of worship music is appropriate for church.

“For forty years we have been singing the same hymns,” Amparo says. “And some of the new people say, ‘We want to sing other songs, and we want to clap hands, and we want to move a little bit. Nothing disrespectful—just a little bit.’ And the other people say, ‘This is not a disco—you don’t have respect for the church.’”

“So we have to say to them, it is not about respect, it is about cultural understanding,” she says. “You don’t have to do it, but it is O.K. It is good.”

Jaume Llenas, general secretary of the Spanish Evangelical Alliance, says that the arrival of new immigrants has made churches more aware of the needs around them. Many have responded by getting involved in social

ministry, such as helping immigrants find places to live.

“It is very difficult for them to obtain a flat since nobody wants to rent flats to immigrants,” Llenas says. “The churches have had to involve themselves in this work. This has made churches that were very closed to others open up to the reality of their surroundings.”

On the other hand, Llenas says, some immigrants have brought with them a set of restrictions—against going to movies or the theater, for example. These restrictions “in Spain had disappeared twenty ago years,” he says.

“This shocks many Latin Americans arriving in our country and if they are in the minority they adjust to the mentality of Spain,” he adds. “The problem is when they get to be a majority in the youth group, for example, they impose their restrictions on the Spaniard group.”

At IBTSE, the Fernandezes will also be teaching pastors about how to lead a multicultural church, drawing on the lessons they learned in the U.S. The Fernandezes sometimes feel they have been living between two worlds. In Spain they are white Europeans. In the U.S. they are Latinos. Though they have felt welcomed in the Covenant community, they know what it means to be an outsider in the culture.

“You always know you are different,” Amparo says. “You know that you don’t belong here. You are here but you don’t belong here. They are doing you a favor by letting you stay.”

As they finish their studies, the Fernandezes will also be raising financial support for their work at IBTSE. The evangelical church in Spain is still very small, less than 1 percent of the population, so the faculty at the seminary are all missionaries. “They need us,”

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Bob Smetana is features editor of the *Companion*. Patty Shepherd of the Department of World Mission helped with translation.

desperately looking for another building, because that church is full.”

In November, when the church held a baptismal service, the building was filled to overflowing. “The door was open and people were standing in the street,” she says. “The believers were outside, the invited people were inside, and the street was closed because they were in the way.”

Vida Nueva, the new church planted by Rob and Nancy Reed, has grown in a few years to include more than seventy people, twice the size of an average Protestant church in Spain. The congregation is one third Spanish and two-thirds immigrants, with congregants from Chile, Argentina, Colombia, Ecuador, Uruguay, Venezuela, Puerto Rico, along with people from the continental U.S., Poland, and even a family from Romania.

“I consider the Latin Americans to be a missionary force,” Rob says. “It is a blessing to have them. Many come with faith and expectations to see God work. For many, economic crisis has forced them out of their countries but a few come because they feel called by

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Eugenio says, “but they can’t pay us.”

In some ways, Eugenio has come full circle—he came to faith through the efforts of missionaries, and now is returning from America as a missionary himself. While Spain is officially 99 percent Catholic, less than 18 percent go to Mass each week, according to reports from John Allen, CNN commentator and writer for *The National Catholic Reporter*. And many people view the Catholic Church with suspicion because of its close ties to the regime of former dictator General Francisco Franco, who died in 1975.

“People don’t want the Catholic Church,” Eugenio says, “but they don’t want Protestants either. The religion is money. Now Spain has an economy that is growing and the religion is materialism.”

Before coming to the U.S., Amparo says she and Eugenio, like many Spaniards, had no idea how difficult it can be for people of different cultures to get along. “In Spain, we have seen many movies about the problem of ethnicity and racism in America,” she says. “And when the movie is finished we talk to each other and we say, ‘They are so racist and we are so very good.’ Now we are having the same problems and we can learn from you.”

And in a country that has had an uneasy relationship with immigrants—“We [Spaniards] need them,” says Eugenio, “but we don’t want them”—the Fernandezes, and other pastors like the Reeds, hope the church can be an example of how people of different cultures can live together in peace.

“This is a good problem to have,” Eugenio says. “We need to be open to different people. Some churches are experiencing problems, but also, they are also experiencing blessings.”

And the most important lesson they can bring is this one—though there are cultural barriers to overcome, “the principal fighting is against yourself, your own presuppositions,” says Eugenio. “The difficulty is not the other person—this is only part of it—the harder part is inside yourself.” □