Dear Julie,

Thanks so much for your detailed email; it was so much fun to experience the sight, sounds and feelings of your first week through your eyes. I am glad you are settling in and that you like your host family so far. Thanks, too, for some of your comments related to the questions I asked in my last letter. It was obvious that you had reflected on a lot of things over the last few weeks. I especially appreciated your comments related to the discipline of ministry that Nouwen wrote about.

You wrote, “*I never really thought about how I should practice a discipline of ministry or even what this ministry should be. I know that I am convicted to find ways to live justly and to help others (in appropriate ways) but your questions also raised the issue of how to share my faith. I guess I am somewhat convicted by the great commission (found in Matthew 28:16-20) that tells me I need to make disciples of all nations. Yet, to be honest, this also has made me a bit uneasy for several reasons. First, the history of Christianity in places around the world is mixed. There have been missionaries that have done so much good, but there are also examples of Christianity being used to colonize and subvert local cultures in negative ways.*

*Second, culture is so tied to religion (or vice versa), so how do I honor my host culture and be a good guest while also being somewhat confrontational and critical about their faith beliefs and customs? The world has seen so much violence related to religion that I feel we need to try to create spaces where we can learn from each other and work together to build common groups to address our shared problems, without fighting over our various faiths.*

*Thanks for your questions. They made me think; as you can see, I am still processing, This email has been hard to write and I hope you understand. I do want to be true to my faith, but I also want to be a good guest and find ways to accept those I meet and build relationships on equal terms. Am I asking too much*?”

First and foremost, I want to thank you for your honesty and commend you for your thoughtful questioning of what it means to share your faith in appropriate ways in the world today. I also understand your desire to create a “public square” that promotes tolerance and understanding where we can work with others of different faiths toward goals related to the “common good.” From a secular perspective, I think there has been a strong movement toward a religious pluralism that has created space for everyone at the table. While this has promoted more civic discourse, there is still a tension for Christians. For me, this tension involves how to reconcile my desire to share who I am and to share my faith by bearing witness to what God is doing in my life while at the same time not viewing a new friendship as just an opportunity to convert someone to Christianity.

Yet I feel that if we embrace this tension, it can create unique opportunities to deepen one’s faith. I think that off-campus programs often create the space needed for students to think and reflect on their faith and to claim it as their own. As one student recently wrote to me, “seeing something new, meeting new people in a new culture, seeing the wonderful and hard things in Honduras helped me to understand who God is, what He has given us, and what we can do to be a part of what God is doing.”

I like this summary of how this student’s off-campus study experience helped her grow in her faith, and I also think it offers some hints on how one can share his or her faith with others. First, it recognizes that God is control and we are called to be a part of what God is doing in this world by being a witness of God’s faithfulness in our own lives. It also recognizes that we are called to connect to people of other cultures and faith. As we build relationships with others we need to be willing to listen and to learn about who they are, what their faith journey looks like, and how their religious practices manifest and deepen their faith. When we honor the story of others, it also creates opportunities for us to share our own faith stories.

It is hard to say how this openness might play out in your off-campus experience; no doubt it may well be different for each of us. But I think if we are serious about our desire to live out our Christian faith in a complex world, there are certain values or virtues that we need to practice. The experiential nature of an off-campus program provides a unique opportunity to practice these virtues. As you study off-campus, think about how you might develop the following practices by nurturing certain virtues in your life:

* An appreciation of diversity and a curiosity for learning about the stories of others by nurturing the virtues of courage and diligence. Where courage signifies the willingness to take risks to meet others and to share in each other’s lives, being willing to ask hard questions of each other and diligence can be thought of as the willingness to commit and to dig in for the long haul.
* An appreciation for being present with others from different cultures. Taylor (a missionary to Africa) notes this about being present with others: *Africans believe that presence is the debt they owe one another…The Christian, whoever he may be, who stands in that world in the name of Christ, has nothing to offer unless he offers to be present, really and totally present, really and totally in the present.* We must learn to slow down and build relationships that demonstrate such a presence by learning to practice the virtues of humility, empathy, patience, and hope; and
* An appreciation of sharing hospitality with others (giving and receiving), in ways that nurture the virtues of humility, wisdom, charity, and justice.

Taylor, 1963) *The Primal Vision: Christian Presence Amid African Religion*.

The complexity of today’s world demands that we have the knowledge, skills, and virtues to live, work, and worship in a diverse world. We need to acquire and practice the intercultural competence needed to communicate and behave effectively and appropriately in intercultural situations, as well as develop the capacity to be open to learning from each other. This may look different for each of us, and as a result it may be helpful to hear examples of how various students have tried to integrate their faith into all aspects of their lives while off-campus. In my last letter, I included the story of Megan and her Muslim roommate in Ghana. Let me close this letter with another student story from Honduras. This story took place in Honduras during a long weekend as a group of students traveled together to a beach in El Salvador, about an eight-hour trip by bus. While there, the group met up with a number of other international travelers from all over the world and had a great time sharing, surfing, and getting to know one another. On the day they were to return to Honduras, the group got up at 4:45 am to watch the sunrise and to have an impromptu worship service. The student writes: “*God’s creation is truly beautiful, we were on a cliff with the sunrise to our left and a rainbow to our right, we were with fellow Christians as well as those who were not Christians. As we sang God of Wonders, I felt God’s presence in that moment, I absolutely loved it.”*

When the group returned to the hostel, two members of the Calvin group realized that they had left their door open and their passports had been stolen. So while the rest of the group got ready to return to Honduras, these two students had to go file a police report and figure out how to get a new passport. While they were saying good-bye to the group at the bus station and feeling sorry for themselves, they were again reminded that God was in control. The student writes:

 *“As we were at the bus station, I recognized a girl that was standing in line for a bus ticket. I need to say, the girl I recognized wasn’t a white, Dutch girl that would be easy to recognize in el Salvador. This girl was an el Salvadorian. I’m not going to lie, I didn’t think I knew anyone in el Salvador, but here was this girl from a class at Calvin my freshman year. I walked up to her and asked if she had gone to Calvin and been in an interim class entitled “Called to Serve, Called to Lead.” It was amazing to hear her say yes. Is our God amazing or what? Debbie was from el Salvador but was now working in Honduras. Debbie, along with her family, took us in and helped get our passports the next day so we could get back to Honduras and our classes.*

*This crazy, unfortunate experience actually taught me so much more than I could have ever thought. I stand in awe of God’s providence and how he cares for us, but this experience and my time in Honduras has also helped me to see that I want to recognize God not only in the big events of my life but also in the everyday, the normal, not the amazing. I was so blessed by Debbie and her family and God’s providing hand in this situation, but I want to continue to search for God in all His people. I can find God in strangers, atheists, gang members, new friends, in anyone. Some may not know God is working in their lives, although He is. Throughout my time in Honduras I have seen what awesome people God has created and put into my life. I have had the chance to meet such great people from all over the globe and each person has a different story, worth listening and worth taking notes.”*

I hope these thoughts and examples can help you in small ways as you embrace the tensions that you identified in the coming weeks and months. There are definitely no easy answers, yet I would encourage you to pray for wisdom and to also talk about these kind of hard questions with your classmates and others you meet. I also think having an openness to explore these kinds of faith questions reaffirms that your travels are more like a pilgrimage. As you may remember, a pilgrimage moves us from certainty to dependence, discovering God’s involvement in human history while challenging our faith to be more like our Lord in thought word, and deed.

Blessings on the journey,

Don

Questions for you:

1. What do you need to do to create the space you need to think and reflect on your faith and to claim it as your own while you are away?
2. What options exist to nurture your faith while you study off-campus? Are there churches that you could attend? What advantages/disadvantages are there to attending a church very similar to your home church? Or one very different from your home church?
3. Are there opportunities for you to explore and learn about other religious practices while you are away?
4. What concrete things could you do to express your faith in a culturally sensitive way if you had the opportunity while you are away?
5. What resources would be helpful as you explore how to promote interfaith dialogue? Review some of the following websites. Which do think might be the most helpful? Explain your answer.
* The National Council of Churches in the USA – interfaith resources page: [www.ncccusa.org/interfaith/developingresources.htm](http://www.ncccusa.org/interfaith/developingresources.htm)
* The World Council of Churches: Christian Witness in a Multi-Religious World: Recommendations for Conduct: [www.oikoumene.org/fileadmin/files/wcc-main/2011pdfs/ChristianWitness\_recommendations.pdf](http://www.oikoumene.org/fileadmin/files/wcc-main/2011pdfs/ChristianWitness_recommendations.pdf)
* The Canadian Council of Churches interfaith resources kit: [www.councilofchurches.ca/en/Interfaith/interfaith-resources.cfm](http://www.councilofchurches.ca/en/Interfaith/interfaith-resources.cfm)
* Presbyterian Church in the USA interfaith toolkit: gamc.pcusa.org/ministries/interfaith/interfaith-toolkit/
* The World Council of Churches, the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue and the World Evangelical Alliance jointly produced the document *Christian Witness in a Multi-Religious World: Recommendations for Conduct.* This document can be found at [www.oikoumene.org/fileadmin/files/wcc-main/2011pdfs/ChristianWitness\_recommendations.pdf](http://www.oikoumene.org/fileadmin/files/wcc-main/2011pdfs/ChristianWitness_recommendations.pdf)
* The Reformed Church in America maintains a website on Friends and Neighbors: Resources for Christian-Muslim relations [www.rca.org/sslpage.aspx?pid=2629](http://www.rca.org/sslpage.aspx?pid=2629)
* The Christian Reformed Church in North America maintains a website on interfaith engagement: [www.crcna.org/pages/erc\_engagement.cfm](http://www.crcna.org/pages/erc_engagement.cfm)