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# SENIOR THESIS APPROVAL

This Honors thesis entitled

**“Village Saints and a Little Black Magic: The Benefits of a Mission Trip Opportunity for Natural Science Students in Culturally Diverse Southern Mexico”**

written by

**Brooke Sanderford-Bester**

and submitted in partial fulfillment of  
the requirements for completion of  
the Carl Goodson Honors Program  
meets the criteria for acceptance  
and has been approved by the undersigned readers.

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Date

April 27, 2020

"Village Saints and a Little Black Magic:  
The Benefits of a Mission Trip Opportunity for Natural Science Students  
in Culturally Diverse Southern Mexico"

Brooke Sanderford-Bester

Honors Senior Thesis, Ouachita Baptist University

Table of Contents:

	Page
Abstract.....	3
Introduction.....	4
The Importance of Becoming Students with a Global Mindset.....	6
The Culture of Oaxaca: Through Research and Experience.....	12
The Heart Behind Planning a Trip to Oaxaca, Mexico.....	26
Notes on How to Organize a Trip.....	30
APPENDIX A: Harding Interview Permission Form.....	33
References.....	35
Acknowledgements.....	37

## Abstract

My thesis project shares my personal experiences of a Summer 2019 medical mission trip to Oaxaca, Mexico. An Honors travel grant allowed me to walk the dirt roads and streets to learn the fascinating history of these people, to visit their shrines and churches to better understand their religious beliefs, and to travel mountainous, hand paved roads to a remote village that welcomed me with coffee sweetened with cane sugar and fresh bread baked in outdoor ovens. The groundwork has been laid for future Natural Sciences students to serve through an annual medical mission trip to Oaxaca.

## Introduction

Before I delve into describing the rich culture of Oaxaca and the unique blend of traditions, I will begin by explaining how a trip to Oaxaca (pronounced: “wa-HA-ka.”), Mexico in August of 2019 came together for Dr. Hardman and me. Flashback to January of the same year, I was in the office with Dr. Hardman discussing my Honors Program directed study, which involved conducting interviews with the Harding University staff, located in Searcy, Arkansas, concerning their “Harding in Zambia-Speech-Language Pathology” program (HIZ-Path). HIZ-Path is a six-week long mission trip to Zambia in which graduate students and professors spend those six-weeks providing the Zambian people with services related to speech-language pathology (SLP<sup>1</sup>). We were discussing the plans for these interviews when Dr. Hardman mentioned the idea of using the information that I would gather to help plan a possible, similar trip for our own Communication Sciences and Disorders (CMDS) department at Ouachita Baptist University, and possibly even our School of Natural Sciences. My interest was immediately sparked as I had always desired to find a way to use my two majors of CMDS and Spanish with international missions, and what better way to find out than through first-hand experience.

After our discussion, I realized that I had less than twenty-four hours to write and submit a travel grant proposal centered around organizing a mission trip that could potentially result in an annual trip for OBU’s CMDS department. I made phone calls, met with other professors, sent emails, and hit a few dead ends before deciding to reach out to a missionary in Oaxaca, Mexico named Rod Johnson who I knew from a previous mission trip I went on in high school with my home church. Rod lives in Oaxaca, Mexico and serves the Zapotec people, an indigenous people

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1. “Speech-language pathology is the pathology (science) of speech and language (less formally referred to as speech therapy). It falls under the communication sciences and disorders discipline” ([speechpathologygraduateprograms.org](http://speechpathologygraduateprograms.org))

group, through taking medical missions to their outlying villages. From the very beginning of the proposal process, it was evident that the Lord's hand was in the middle of it all because in less than 24 hours, a trip had been planned and proposed for Oaxaca, Mexico. Two weeks later, I received the Carl Goodson travel grant and Dr. Hardman and I were able to start finalizing details of a summer trip with the hopes of leaving a lasting legacy in the school of Natural Sciences through an annual CMDS medical mission trip to Oaxaca.

As mentioned, the long-term goal of this project would be to establish an annual mission trip for CMDS/Natural Science students. Therefore, the primary reasons that Dr. Hardman and I took the trip together in August was for exploratory purposes- to establish relationships with the missionaries there, experience the culture, and discuss the possibility of a future trip. The majority of our time in Oaxaca was spent immersing ourselves in the culture, and also visiting a village where we provided several medical services to the indigenous people. While we were in Oaxaca, Rod stressed the importance of us learning about the culture in order to gain a greater understanding of the people, prior to ministering to them. Throughout this paper, I will discuss in greater detail the benefits of a mission opportunity for the students in Ouachita's CMDS department; the culture of Oaxaca and why it would be a valuable place for a mission trip; and how to organize a trip through a university.

## The Importance of Becoming Students with a Global Mindset

Included in Ouachita Baptist University's mission statement, there is a line that states, "the university prepares individuals for ongoing intellectual and spiritual growth, lives of meaningful work, and reasoned engagement with the world." As one begins to delve deeper, they will also find the Communication Sciences and Disorders mission statement includes a similar remark, "enable all individuals to communicate, read & write, think & learn in order to succeed in a changing world." In 2018, 14 countries were represented by 39 international students enrolled in Ouachita Baptist University. Additionally, 19 study abroad opportunities were available to the OBU students as well as a summer European Study Tour option, or the *Hands On* missions experience offered through the School of Christian Studies (Ouachita 2020). Although Ouachita's campus does embrace a global mindset, considering specific programs, such as Communication Sciences and Disorders or the greater Natural Sciences, additional opportunities would prompt students to engage in mission trips and have life experiences in this "ever changing world." My hope is that my 2019 summer mission trip to Oaxaca, Mexico will be the foundation for future annual medical mission trip opportunities for the students in the Department of Communication Sciences and Disorders, and if possible, extend to the School of Natural Sciences.

I started my search to discover the various ways that other Christian-based universities with a Communication Sciences and Disorders major, including Ouachita Baptist University, were providing opportunities for their majors to engage in international missions. Based on the results, there appeared to be a lack of easily available outlets for CMDS students to put into practice what they were studying on a global scale. In order to choose which universities to search for information regarding mission trips for their CMDS students, I went to Google and



typed “Christian Universities with a Communication Sciences and Disorders major.” The top four results from the Google search were Trinity Christian College, Abilene Christian University, Ouachita Baptist University, and California Baptist University. I also decided to include Harding University’s website in my search for undergraduate mission trip opportunities for their CMDS majors, because they have prominent mission opportunities for their graduate students, as seen with HIZ-Path.

Of the five, both Ouachita Baptist University and California Baptist University had no available information concerning mission opportunities provided through a CMDS department. Trinity Christian College, located in Illinois, had a website link to one Communication Sciences and Disorders major who spent her summer in 2017 serving in Uganda through an organization called Hope Speaks. Included on the university’s website, was an additional link to her blog post where she shared about her mission trip experience while abroad. However, there was no further information available regarding international trips for their program specifically.

The first, of the five universities I explored virtually, that paired a Communication Sciences and Disorders major directly with the world abroad was Abilene Christian University, located in Texas. On the CMDS department home page there were links to the study abroad information page. While not a mission trip opportunity, the department emphasized the connection between a CMDS major and the value of a study abroad experience by highlighting these opportunities; other university department websites did not include this encouragement to engage in international study.

The last university of the five that I searched online was Harding University. As mentioned in the introduction, Harding University’s HIZ-Path program is a six-week mission opportunity designed specifically for their CMDS graduate students. However, after further

review of their website, I was unable to find mission opportunities for their undergraduate students majoring in Communication Sciences and Disorders. Out of the five Christian universities, Abilene Christian was the only University whose website showed a connection to international opportunities. However, this is because of the organization of their website, and there are no international experiences available specifically for a CMDS student.

I am aware that virtually every college campus has options for a variety of travel experiences, if students choose to take them. However, I do believe Ouachita's Natural Sciences, and more specifically the Department of Communication Sciences and Disorders, can have a travel experience that will be unique from other colleges by participating in a medical mission trip to Oaxaca, Mexico. My summer mission experience during the summer of 2019 that was funded by my travel grant, allowed me to see the possibilities and the potential for other students to have this amazing experience of an international medical mission trip.

Initially, I was concerned that the mission trip opportunity we were exploring had little to do with speech-language pathology directly. Speech-Language Pathology is the discipline which provides aid to others who have communication or swallowing disorders. Usually treatment occurs over an extended period of time, after a diagnosis which determines the disorder/s needing treatment. The speech-language pathologist<sup>2</sup> may work with children or adults who need specialized treatment for speech motor production, language, social communication, cognitive-communication, and swallowing. The basis of therapy is communication focused, and the opportunity in Mexico was for a one-week medical mission trip. But after further research into journals and other publications associated with our professional organization, American Speech-

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2 . "The term "speech pathologist" has been used by professionals to describe themselves, but the term most commonly used today is "speech-language pathologist" or "SLP" (speechpathology.com) People outside the profession may refer to speech-language pathologists simply as "speech therapists."

Language-Hearing Association (ASHA), I quickly realized how easily speech-language pathology did indeed have a solid connection to serving those from other cultures and language groups.

A recent article by Vale and Hayley published by ASHA describes the importance of speech-language pathologists being equipped to display cultural competence, which is defined as “one’s ability to function effectively in culturally diverse situations” (ASHA, n.d.a, 2019 p. 1075). The article describes a trial study performed with a small group of CMDS majors in which they were required to interact with international students at their university as language partners. The students met on a regular basis with their international student pairings and as a result, each CMDS student benefited from gaining better cultural competence skills (2019). The article gives insight to the importance of clinicians having culturally diverse life-experiences and discusses areas in which the SLP workforce is lacking in cultural diversity.

With a U.S. population that is 27% non-White and a populous of whom 20% speak one or more languages that are not English (U.S. Census Bureau, 2015, 2016), it is likely that more than 90% of U.S. speech-language pathologists (SLPs) work with culturally and linguistically diverse (CLD) clients (Kohnert, Kennedy, Glaze, Kan, & Carney, 2003). Of all clinicians holding American Speech-Language-Hearing Association (ASHA) certification in 2017, only 8% identified as being non-White, 5% identified as being Hispanic, and 6% reported being bilingual (ASHA, 2018). With the proportions of diversity in ASHA-certified clinicians being less than half of the proportions in U.S. population estimates, the data indicate that U.S. SLPs as a group lack the range of diversity found in the U.S. population, which may help to explain why many SLPs have reported low competence assessing and treating bilingual/multilingual clients (Hammer,

Detwiler, Detwiler, Blood, & Qualls, 2004; Kohnert et al., 2003; Kritikos, 2003; Stewart & Gonzalez, 2002) and the need to learn more about distinguishing differences from disorders in their assessment procedures (Roseberry-McKibbin, Brice, & O'Hanlon, 2005) (p.1074).

It is critical that students studying to be SLPs, or licensed SLPs themselves find ways to engage with cultures outside of their own. Cultural experiences are vital for acquiring cultural competence; students and SLPs can learn best through these types of experiences by working alongside and serving people with diverse backgrounds. The same ASHA article references “the findings of Durant-Jones, coupled with theoretical frameworks and expert recommendations, indicate the importance of hands-on experiences in educating students to work competently with CLD individuals” (Vale & Hayley p. 1075).

Whether CMDS majors or other science majors, a medical mission trip to Mexico would provide every student with the chance to engage with those who hold different religious beliefs, to share meals that consisted of unfamiliar foods, and to walk alongside another person from a different country than them. The benefit would be for the OBU student and those in Mexico as each group would be learning and expanding their cultural knowledge. What better way to gain that cultural knowledge and to experience another culture than by living with and working beside a different people group for a week in their home environment? Understanding culture is a crucial part to gaining cultural competence. Therefore, in the following section I will share my experiences and outline what I learned about the Oaxacan culture and heritage that helped me better understand these amazing people. Experiencing Mexico by walking the streets, tasting the food, and meeting the people gave me a deeper understanding and appreciation for those we would also serve. My one-week in Oaxaca provided me more cultural awareness and

understanding than if I had spent a year just reading or listening to lectures regarding the importance of cultural awareness in the field of speech-language pathology.

## Overview of the Culture: Through Research and Experience

The culture of Oaxaca, Mexico is of course, like any culture; it is full of complexities. However, the result of colonialism, indigenous peoples, and isolation has conserved the culture of Oaxaca in a unique way. Religious beliefs tend to be at the center of any culture, and in Oaxaca this is most definitely true. Throughout Oaxacan history there have been strong influences that have shaped the religious beliefs currently found in Oaxaca City and surrounding villages.



As one can see from this picture which I took in the city of Oaxaca, the city resides in a valley that is surrounded on all sides by mountains. “Isolated on a high plateau 230 miles southeast of Mexico City, old Oaxaca clings to its colorful heritage” (Kraus 1982). The villages

in which the Zapotec people live, lie in these mountainous ranges and are difficult to reach from the city. We spent multiple hours driving through the rugged mountains in order to reach just one of these villages, and the trip that took us hours would have taken only about 45 minutes on a highway because, “valley towns are strikingly rural” (Paddock 1975 p. 219). The roads are difficult to travel on and full of twists and turns to reach the isolated villages. While many of these villages are not far apart in distance and can be separated by as little as 10 to 15 km, due to the terrain they remain isolated from one another.

Because of this isolation, industrialization is relatively nonexistent, and it seems as though each piece of village life is literally touched by someone’s hands. “Oaxaca is one of the most intensely Indian of Mexican states and has remained little affected by the national industrialization since 1940” (Paddock 1975 p. 219). I was able to witness first-hand how “many Valley communities still have a culture formed four centuries ago” (Paddock 1975 p. 219). On our way to the remote village of Atepec, the village where we provided medical services to the residents, the closer we came to the village, the less machinery and industrialization was evident. When we were several miles out from the village, we were required to stop our vehicle and wait while people from the village community were paving the road by hand. Each part of the process was done without machinery to aid the process. Men carried buckets of water to other workers waiting at the hand cranked cement mixer. Other workers, male and female, were laying out large rocks inside wooden frames on which the cement would be poured to become another section of the paved road to their village.

Despite the remoteness of these Zapotec villages, a large component to Oaxaca’s culture is “its dual heritage - that of a colonial culture built alongside an indigenous Indian one” (Kraus

1982). Before colonialism, ancient indigenous Zapotec people lived and worked in southern Mexico, but the Spanish conquistadors began colonizing Oaxaca in the early 16<sup>th</sup> century. This dual heritage permeates every aspect of life, even villagers who live excluded from regular contact with Oaxaca's city center. For example, every village is named after a Catholic priest, but "...people rely on indigenous curing systems since the majority of them lack ready access to modern medical facilities located only in larger towns and urban Oaxaca" (O'Neill 1981 p. 353). The persistence to cling to this dual heritage may be due to the seclusion of many of the Zapotec villages, and it is easy to see how not only medical resources, the spread of ideas, and changes in belief system can be difficult. In fact, even communicating between Zapotec village people is difficult because of the varying dialects found from one village to the next. This was made evident to us as we continued our drive and passed the workers who were paving the road to the village of Atepec. We heard them exchanging whistles and clicks between one another and we quickly realized this was a way they communicated. We learned that the whistles are used as greetings or other verbal interactions unique to Atepec and used exclusively by people from that community.

Besides the isolation making transfer of ideas difficult, in O'Neill's discussion of culture regarding the Zapotec people he states, "If the Zapotec as an individual or group, continues to strive for anything, he strives to keep things in balance" (1981 p 354). Thus, as a group, they are going to choose to do what they have always done because balance is best maintained that way. We were able to see this for ourselves with the historical ways people continue to practice weaving. In a village separate from Atepec, we were honored to visit a native artisan who showed us how his family continues to follow the weaving practices of his ancestors. His family has been hand weaving since the 19th century, and the young nieces and nephews are



now learning the process from the older family members. Each piece of the process is done by hand using natural, organic materials native to their area. Beginning with the yarn, the family will brush the yarn, spin the yarn, and using various plants such as fungus from a cactus, they will dye the wool that will eventually be used to weave beautiful rugs. Pictured below is the family shop from which they sell rugs and other hand-made items to visitors who come to their village or sell in the street markets of Oaxaca City. While the family is aware of equipment that would make the weaving process more efficient, they choose to honor their heritage by preserving their method of creating rugs by hand. I believe the resistance to change stems from this Zapotec desire for balance. Ultimately, this way of thinking will make introducing new religious ideas difficult, in addition to the fact that many villages are isolated which makes simply traveling to one a challenge.



It is important to look to the past in order to gain a clearer understanding of who the Zapotec people are today. The Zapotec empire was vast and "...spanned nearly two millennia and extended across several thousand square kilometers" (O'Brien & Lewarch 1992 p. 277). The people had laws and buildings unique to their governing system. Archeologists have discovered a

building called the “‘Patio of the Tombs’ which was evidently a civic-administrative structure. According to Canseco (1580), ‘it was in the halls fronting this patio that problems of government and republic were dealt with’” (Marcus 1978 p.178) While I cannot say for certain this is a direct carry-over, I know that villages today have similar places of meeting, and we observed a large group of people meeting on the patio outside of their municipal building. Evidently, it is very common for villagers to hold meetings in this way, and in smaller communities, village leaders announce over a loudspeaker when these specific meetings will occur. While we were in Atepec, we heard a few of these announcements booming through the streets from the loud speakers.

In addition to their own system of government, these ancient people also had their own religious beliefs and traditions. Joyce Marcus finds that in ancient Zapotec belief, they recognized a supreme being who created all things and was not created. This being was so great that no mortal could ever come in contact with it and no images were ever made of this being. However, sacrifice played a major role in finding favor with smaller beings that were created by the supreme being, and these smaller beings controlled many of the natural elements. While the ancient Zapotecs did not attempt to interact with the supreme being, the smaller beings were regularly called upon to help meet the needs of the people. The needs were usually based on agriculture needs or needs during war time such as a victory. The god of lightning was the most powerful and revered of these beings, and human sacrifice was often made to this god in order to find favor with him. “...there were two or three occasions when human sacrifices were performed. Prisoners of war were sacrificed... Humans were also sacrificed on the occasion of the harvest; and finally, children (frequently) or adults (occasionally) were sacrificed to *cocijo* (lightning). This offering was seen as paying a debt to *cocijo* for bringing rain” (1978 pp. 174-

175). Human sacrifice was usually performed as a way to pay off a debt to the gods for helping them meet their needs.

While human sacrifice seems morbid to our westernized society, death itself played a vital role in the lives of the ancient Zapotec; death was considered to be more of a continuation of living. “Ancient Oaxacans believed that upon death, their ancestors would ascend to the heavens and become ‘Cloud People’” (Balkansky 1998 p. 454). In fact, “...the Zapotec had great reverence for their ancestors who were thought to take part in community affairs even after death” (Marcus 1978 p. 175). Because ancestors were so important, elaborate funerals were planned to celebrate the life of the person. This celebration of life continues today and I was able to witness this first-hand on a previous mission trip to Oaxaca when I had the opportunity to observe a funeral procession in a Zapotec village. A large crowd walked through the streets of the village holding the deceased person in a casket as they walked. People who walked in the procession could be seen and heard playing instruments and talking loudly. The Zapotec funeral seemed much more celebratory which is in contrast to a funeral in the United States where the people mourn rather than celebrate the life of their loved ones.

Cremation was also a common practice among the ancient people and urns served as the living quarters of the deceased person’s immortal spirit. Later generations would have the opportunity to consult the ancestral spirit held in the urn if desired (Balkansky 1998 pp. 476-477). Similar values regarding death remain a part of the Zapotec culture today. To this day, “. . . a kind of veneration of the ancestors continues among the Zapotec... there are important stories about the old people of the clouds” (Marcus 1978 p. 176). Cremation is no longer the common practice in Oaxaca, but the importance of ancestors continues, and we saw this in our visit to a cemetery in Oaxaca. Depending on the family, the graves of the people they love can be

elaborate and expensive or simple. The family is required to maintain the grave, and they do this during their frequent visits to talk and share with the dead person. Preserving the memory of family members is an important aspect of Oaxaca culture and these frequent visits with the dead help keep the memory of that person alive in their family. Because of this, every grave is more like a shrine of the person, complete with pictures of them and items from their life on earth. The most elaborate of these “shrines” we observed was of a young boy, who had an entire room dedicated for his casket. In this room were pictures, trophies from soccer games, jerseys, candles, and elaborate flowers. We learned so much about the culture of the people by visiting this cemetery and seeing the value they hold in honoring their dead with visits and fresh flowers, which can be purchased at the entrance to the cemetery. Included below are pictures from the cemetery and an example of one grave site with a small room attached for pictures and items.



Returning to the ancient Zapotec beliefs, one of the most crucial concepts of the Zapotec religion was the concept of *pé* (pronounce “be” by Zapotec people today). *Pé* is the force,

sometimes translated as wind or breath, that made up all living things and which made them move. Therefore, anything that moved was considered alive and sacred. An example of this would be, animals, humans, but also lightning and the foam on top of a drink after being stirred. (Marcus 1978 p. 174). Another concept of their beliefs was the role of divination which was important when it came to making decisions on behalf of an individual in ancient Zapotec practice. While divination was revered and specific ancient Zapotec people practiced divination, “The actual decision-maker was, in effect, fate or fortune whose will was determined by casting lots (in this case, counting out beans...) No one could be blamed or thanked, it was all in the beans” (Marcus 1978 p. 175). Fate was important to the ancient people, and to this day Zapotec people are resistant to making decisions or casting blame; this dates back to their heritage of absolute belief in fate. O’Neill describes modern Zapotec people in this way:

“The Zapotec have ingeniously blended an understanding of material and immaterial elements in the universe into a composite worldview that still retains a meaning and vitality for them over 400 years after the Spanish conquest. In this view the material and immaterial have a dynamic relevance for one another which helps people interpret experiences in daily life, but which gives them a perspective on life considerably different from any produced in Western cultures” (1981 p. 354).

I believe this ancient connection with *pé*, paired with ultimate trust in fate is what O’Neill reflects in his discussion of the modern Zapotec understanding of material and immaterial elements.

Understanding these ancient practices provide clarity to outsiders as to why village people cling to and continue to value their dual-heritage that includes Catholicism and Jesuit beliefs brought to them by colonialism, and indigenous practices from their ancestors.

Culture is made up of a variety of elements, but “religion has made the most lasting contribution to the face of Oaxaca. There seems to be an ancient church on every corner” (Kraus 1982). The churches as well as the Catholic and Jesuit practices remain from the Spanish influence in the area. The influence that religion holds in Oaxaca is described by Norget, “Oaxacan popular religion symbolically permeates popular culture, resulting in the appearance of official religious icons or rites in settings where the official does not formally dictate (for example in the context of folk curing, or in many secular fiestas)” (1997 p. 69). While we were in Oaxaca, we had the chance to see examples of both folk curing and a secular festival. The festival was small and in the form of a parade which went through the streets of one particular village close to Oaxaca City. We watched as the group came triumphantly out of the community’s Catholic church and began marching through the streets, the sound of their music following. In the parade, an icon of the Virgin Mary was being held up by the group of people as they chanted, played their instruments, and continued walking through the village. The example we saw of folk curing was in a Jesuit church. In the middle of the church on a side altar lay an egg, a candle, a piece of bread, and a photo of a boy. The picture of these items from the church is included below.



We learned that this is a form of indigenous folk healing where a Zapotec healer would come into the church and perform a ritual healing and the family would also pray to their priest

before leaving the building. The indigenous healing methods which use eggs and candles are a type of black magic. The egg is heated by the candles and then used to heal the physical and spiritual energy of the person who is injured. Black magic is so intertwined with Catholicism, they even share the same building. “The multilayered significance of today’s expression of Mexican popular (or “folk) religion is the cumulative result of many centuries of development, involving mutual borrowings, adaptations, and syntheses with diverse official religious traditions” (Norget 1997 p. 69).

Another striking example I observed of the clash between indigenous and Catholic practice was in the architecture of a cathedral built during the Spanish conquest. The stones used in the walls of the church were taken from old Zapotec temples that Spaniards destroyed, but then used to rebuild a Catholic place of worship. Even the buildings are not void of the mix of religious practices. The pictures of this cathedral are included below.



While some traditional Catholicism is practiced in Oaxaca, in general it is the poor and the oppressed who continue to practice and live out their lives in devotion to more of an indigenous Catholicism. In fact, Norget states, “Popular religiosity in Oaxaca can therefore only be understood as religion lived by people who create, sustain, and reproduce it within a social

and political reality of worsening poverty, disenfranchisement, and marginalization” (1997 p. 71). He claims that it is the people who feel most excluded who cling to religion as their source of identity. Coincidentally, it is the indigenous people who are most likely to be excluded and marginalized, so their form of religion will persist in Oaxacan culture. Because much of popular Catholicism in Oaxaca is practiced outside of the church’s boundaries in villages far from urbanization, the cult practices seep deeper into personal devotion and stray further from traditional Catholicism. For example, many individuals and families “have their own ‘saint of devotion’ a guardian saint from whom they request personal favors” (Norget 1997 p. 71). In the villages this is also evident on a larger scale because each village has their own guardian saint after which the village is named. However, people must be careful because a major aspect of their religion is concerned with the fulfillment of vows or pledges that are made to individual saints. The vows must be upheld to win favor from the saint, or else they risk misfortune. Such vows include, pilgrimages or bringing the saint flowers. (Norget 1997 p. 71). Ultimately it is the saints which are worshipped, even above God.

The Virgin Mary is regularly worshipped alongside the saints in Oaxaca. The Templo de Santo Domingo de Guzmán in Oaxaca City is pictured below.





In this church, whose initial construction was commissioned by Cortés in the 16th century, real gold leaflets are painted into the walls, pillars, and sculptures, and the Virgin Mary is the focal point. A picture of the golden interior and Mary located above the main altar is show below.



During this time of the Spanish conquest, Oaxaca City was the “only city between Mexico City and the port, it was a major way station in a growing international trade” (Murphy & Stepick 1991 p. 103). Cortés wanted to display his wealth in the growing trade city of Oaxaca by building a beautiful Catholic cathedral finished in gold. It is this time period that Spanish Catholicism began to infiltrate indigenous religion, and the mix of cultures began to take place.

Because of the mixing of religion which began in the 16th century, modern popular religion in Oaxaca is now very tangible. “Images of Virgins, saints or Christ, or the cross itself, are frequently kissed or touched with one’s hand or a piece of clothing, flower, or herb branch, in the belief that the person or object is then imbued with some kind of concretized sacred essence” (Norget 1997 p. 72). When thinking back on the ancient Zapotec concept of *pé*, meaning every moving thing is sacred, in the same way all modern tangible objects are also sacred. However,

instead of the sacred being considered *pé*, the sacred is catholic symbolism. The religion in Oaxaca has been affected by both colonialism and indigenous practice, and villages uphold a strict tradition of the community above the individual. As a result, many people hold fast to these religious beliefs as a way to find identity and participate in their community.

Rod Johnson, the missionary in Oaxaca, spends the majority of his days meeting with the people who live in these remote mountain villages and who practice these religious traditions. He knows many of the people and understands their lack of modernization. Because of the distance many villages remain from more modernized society, “subsistence agriculture remains the basic to the economic well-being of most households. Animal and human labor continue to be significant factors in food production” (O’Neill 1981 p. 352). I found this to be true, not only for food production, but for labor as well. Due to their general detachment, the “...communities are overwhelmingly made up of poor peasants and artisans,” and while agriculture makes up much of the economy, “...a large portion of income is derived from crafts and other non-farming work” (Paddock 1975 pp. 222;221) Both the Zapotec people and Rod took great pride in sharing with us these aspects of their culture. The women in the village of Atepec spent their day making fresh food for us, all produced in their village and cooked over an open fire. Other women brought us fresh breads and coffee sweetened with cane sugar to enjoy during our brief visit to their village. People, as well as animals, are the primary source for food production, and it is not unlikely to see a Zapotec man and a donkey walking through the village after a day spent plowing a field.

Every village in which Rod has a connection is considered a Zapotec community. He makes contact with the village leaders and is allowed to come to their villages to provide them with medical services. This is important to the elders because the villages do not have their own

medical resources such as dentists, optometrists, and nurses or doctors. Because valley towns are difficult to reach, and the people have limited or no access to public transportation, most residents rely solely on home remedies and black magic. It is for this reason that the medical resources Rod is able to provide are well received by many villages.

The opportunity to bring medical resources to these remote villages allows Rod to share Christ through his actions first, and then through the gospel after a relationship has been established with the people. However, because of the deeply indigenous practices where “the community seems to be strongly dominant,” Rod must meet with the elders to get permission to enter into a village and provide these services. Many social ties for Zapotec people are “based on family, kinship, and ritually established extensions to these” (O’Neill 1981 p. 353). Establishing trust can be difficult for a person outside of the community, and I know from first-hand experience that Rod develops a genuine relationship with these elders, and works diligently and prayerfully to maintain these relationships through respect and trust. In our time in Atepec, we were welcomed and accepted into the village because of our association with Rod. We were able to witness the relationship between Rod and these people, and how important he is to them as a person. He has a strong relationship with these villagers, and he cares for them deeply. He continues to bring medical services to them, but just as powerful is the respect and trust he and the village have for each other. This one-week Oaxaca experience provided insight about the Zapotec people with whom I hope others will get to share similar experiences.

Our one week in Oaxaca into who the Zapotec people are as a whole, and now I hope to be able to share this experience with others.

## The Heart Behind Planning a Trip to Oaxaca, Mexico

Matthew 28:19-20 states: “Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely, I am with you always, to the very end of the age” (Matthew 28:19-20, the New International Version). For any believing Christian, it is clear that everyone is called to go, and the passage does not give any restrictions as to who or where one should go. Therefore, providing a mission trip would give students an outlet to put into practice the discipline of “making disciples of all nations,” and ultimately, the reason I chose to pursue a mission trip for the Natural Sciences was to provide others with a hands-on opportunity to live out their faith.

While there is a need for people to be sharing the gospel in the United States, the need in Oaxaca, Mexico is also evident. “According to data from the 2010 census conducted by the National Institute of Statistics and Geography of Mexico (Instituto Nacional de Estadística y Geografía, INEGI), 83.9 percent of the population five years of age and over is Catholic, 7.6 percent is Protestant or Evangelical and 4.6 percent does not belong to any religion (Mexico 2010a, 68)” (Responses to Information Requests 2011). While the numbers listed are for Mexico as a whole, I believe that there is an even smaller percentage of evangelical Christians in the state of Oaxaca due to the strong influence of indigenous practices. In addition, as discussed in the cultural section above, the Catholicism practiced by the people of Oaxaca is met with a mix of indigenous traditions and mystic beliefs. It is crucial that believers go into these indigenous areas and share the gospel with words and with love. So I asked: why not a group of CMDS students from the School of Natural Sciences at Ouachita Baptist University?

Establishing a connection with Rod is a great opportunity because he spends the majority of his time in Oaxaca and can provide continued support for the villages after our week is over. Also, new believers in the villages are facing persecution from the village people who practice the “traditional” religion in the communities. One example of this includes an article written about a man named Laro Pérez Núñez and his family, “After facing beatings, imprisonment and eventually exile from his home village, Lauro Pérez Núñez and his family are starting a brand new life. He and his wife Amalia, converted to evangelical Christianity, and were first ordered to leave La Chachalaca, in Oaxaca, southern Mexico, in 2015, together with their four children” (*World Watch Monitor*). The article goes on to describe the persecution in greater detail, as well as elaborate on how they are doing now. Rod has also seen this happen first-hand.

The first year I went to Oaxaca, when I was still in high school, we visited with a family that was experiencing this kind of persecution from their village. Rod explained how the village elders had cut off this family's water and they were no longer able to grow crops or drink clean water. We spent our day with them and provided them with resources to help them continue living in the area. However, at the end of the week, we had to return home to the United States, but Rod did not, and he was able to continue ministering to this family and providing them with support even after we had gone. It is for this reason that I see the value in the trip to Oaxaca. The village elders are more receptive to people coming from the United States because we can help provide them with medical services they could not receive otherwise. And because of this, Rod is able to build and maintain relationships that he would not have been able to without a group helping him provide much needed medical services.

Another article has similar findings of the kind of persecution the evangelical villagers face, “They will try to force them to convert, and if they refuse, they are banned from their

villages, unable to live with or see their families,” Lance said. “When they refuse to recant their faith, they are expelled from the community” (Zaimov). However, it is only the village people who experience this kind of persecution because they are considered as dishonoring the community; it is safe for outside people to come in because we do not have the same kind of village identity. For the amount of time that Rod has lived and worked with the people of Oaxaca he has never felt it unsafe to bring a group with him into a village where he has already made initial contact with the elders.

In addition to all Christians being called to go and make disciples, Mark 12:30 says, “Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength” (Mark 12:30 the New International Version). Therefore, I believe that one of the purposes of attending Ouachita Baptist University is partly based in this piece of scripture, to refine a love of God by sharpening the intellectual abilities of students. The university programs help prepare students to strive for excellence outside of Ouachita’s campus by giving students the opportunity to explore more of the world through research and engagement with others. In addition, Ouachita provides a community of peers who are able to spur on one another academically. Referring back to Ouachita’s mission statement “the university prepares individuals for ongoing intellectual and spiritual growth, lives of meaningful work, and reasoned engagement with the world;” it is evident that the university has a commitment to serving the world. Thus, the heart behind going to Oaxaca is to help prepare students to engage with the world around them by providing a service-based opportunity that can be translated into greater cultural competence in a future academic and career setting. Therefore, in a desire to keep in tandem with the University’s mission, as well as scripture, I pursued a trip to Oaxaca, Mexico as a way to embrace both.

Not only would a mission trip to Oaxaca be a way to serve others, but it would also have an impact on students' spiritual development. Just as "the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve (Matthew 20:28a the New International Version) serving others is an opportunity to be refined into looking more like Christ. When Harding professors, Dr. Weaver and Mr. Chance were reflecting on the impact the Zambian trip makes, they made comments such as, "we bring [the experiences] back and it permeates through us also," and "I see more, and I hear more from the students of how their lives are changed." I am sure that Ouachita students would have similar experiences to these, and I hope that in the future, they will. Based on the previous discussion of culture, paired with this evaluation of the heart behind planning a trip, it is evident that Oaxaca is a place that needs believers being sent there. My hope is that in the very near future, students from the Department of Communication Sciences and Disorders, in the School of Natural Sciences at Ouachita Baptist University, will become a part of Oaxacan history through sharing the love of Christ to the indigenous people of Oaxaca, Mexico.

## Notes on How to Organize a Trip

Unfortunately, I had planned to use the majority of this section to discuss how planning a return trip for the CMDS Department was executed, highlighting student experiences, and how they grew in cultural competence by traveling to Oaxaca, Mexico. Due to the unexpected rise of Corona Virus – 19 (COVID-19), a return trip for the summer of 2020 was unable to be planned due to strict travel restrictions. My hope is that Ouachita Baptist University will use the connection with Rod in Oaxaca for a future trip, and that CMDS students will have the opportunity to explore part of the world by serving others.

However, I do have a few notes to add for any reader who is hoping to plan a trip through a University. The notes are based on findings I have organized over the past year. The interview with Harding University was the initiating conversation to begin organizing a trip through a University, and both Mr. Tim Chance and Dr. Rebeca Weaver provided some important insight into the efforts required to work directly with a university and individuals outside of the United States.

Dr. Weaver described how crucial it is to have more than one faculty on board from the very beginning, as well as asking two important questions up front: “how will it be financed, and will the trip be a program requirement?” If the trip is a program requirement it is possible to build funds into the tuition cost, but if it is additional volunteer work, then funds would have to be raised by some other means. One area that is most difficult about the HIZ-Path program is the fact that the students are traveling abroad for six-weeks which means that a visa is required to stay in a country. However, with the trip to Mexico lasting about a week, students would only be required to have a current passport which reduces the complexity of forms required.



Another aspect that both Dr. Weaver and Mr. Chance emphasized was the importance for a program to stay in open communication with other departments in the University. For example, their trip is for the Communication Sciences and Disorders graduate students, but two other departments are crucial in the execution of the trip. The program works directly with Harding's travel/international department to book and plan the trip as well as stay up-to-date on travel safety measures. The international department plans the travel while using the graduate program's budget to pay for all booking arrangements. In addition, the program has open communication with the financial department to secure additional funds and school credit cards for other costs in Zambia. Again, all of the money comes out of the Communications Sciences and Disorders budget but is still coordinated through other university offices. It is crucial that communication between the three departments remain open and easy in order to clearly plan all aspects of travel and finances their trip requires.

Below, I have included a short list that I compiled after conducting the interview with Harding. The list includes steps that I felt were important to plan a trip to Oaxaca, Mexico with other students. While I am sure there are more things that I would have added during the planning and execution process, I believe that this is a good place to start for any person who is planning a trip abroad with other students.

- Seek out at least two faculty members who have a similar passion for seeing an international trip come to fruition in the near future.
- Establish a connection with an individual or a group that is already living/working in the area you are hoping to travel.
- Discuss with the department head how the trip will be funded, as well as reach out to administration about the regulations for raising money for school sponsored travel.
- Speak with the financial department/specific program department about having a plan to incorporate trip funds into the specific department's budget for the faculty members traveling abroad.

- Establish a plan within the department to determine faculty involved and how students will be selected for the trip. (i.e. application process and/or limit total number of students who will travel).
- Communicate with the international department to inquire about the process for booking flights and sleeping arrangements to ensure everyone on the trip is accounted for
- Decide what forms are required by the department and/or university for students to complete for international travel
- Discuss plans for required classes or seminars about the cultural expectations for the country to which the group is traveling.

As previously stated, my hope is that in the very near future, students from the Department of Communication Sciences and Disorders will be able to travel to and work with the indigenous people of Oaxaca, Mexico.

APPENDIX A: Harding Interview Permission Form

I, Rebecca Weaver give Brooke Sanderford permission to record the following interview to be used for scholarly purposes at Ouachita Baptist University. I also give permission for this information to be shared with Brooke's supervisor, and I understand that my name may be attached to a final research paper.

Signature:

Rebecca Weaver

Date:

3/28/19

I, Tri Crane give Brooke Sanderford permission to record the following interview to be used for scholarly purposes at Ouachita Baptist University. I also give permission for this information to be shared with Brooke's supervisor, and I understand that my name may be attached to a final research paper.

Signature:

Tri Crane

Date:

3-28-19

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