When 22 Rosedale Bible College students landed in Paris on January 24 this year, they had some idea what to expect. They’d just spent half of winter term immersed in two intensive courses: Introduction to Humanities, and Mennonites, Anabaptists and the Radical Reformation (MARR).

They were prepared to see great art; they were ready to visit places where Anabaptists found shelter or a martyr’s death. They were even willing to brave the coldest European winter in decades to do these things.

What did they find?

Spencer Lehman, 21, from Chambersburg, Pa., thought of the tour as a journey “similar to the journey of my ancestors,” he said. “Periodically, I would try to step back and imagine the terrain, the cities, the people. What was it like? Did Conrad Grebel see this church from where my feet are planted? Did Ulrich Zwingli walk down this cobblestone street?”

Lehman wondered how his ancestors from Bern and the Emmental Valley experienced life. Did they know at the time what their influence would be? “And I ask myself, where is my journey taking me?”

In Europe, touching history moves faith deeper for RBC students

By Vicki Sairs

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The teachers who planned and led the tour, Ken Miller (Humanities) and Reuben Sairs (MARR), share the college’s goal of encouraging students to engage the culture around them and to live in a bigger world. “For the MARR class,” said Sairs, “the study tour isn’t about visiting the past, but rather about owning our faith for the future.”

Sairs stressed that those who established our approach to Christian life, faith and practice, were real people, “not wooden actors in a movie or woodcuts in the Martyrs Mirror.” The question, he said, isn’t whether they believed these things. “It is whether we still believe these things.”

Miller hoped that students would appreciate the talent of the artists who created such magnificent works. “Looking at the brush strokes of an original painting or at the grooves cut into the stone of a sculpture, or being dwarfed by the cavernous space of a cathedral, gives students a chance to feel the presence of the artist and think, ‘Someone actually accomplished this.’” It’s a different feeling, said Miller, than looking at a 3x5 plate in the textbook.

This proved true for Fidelia Renne, 17, from Milford Center, Ohio. She was moved by “seeing the cathedrals, being inside them.” People from evangelical and maybe Mennonite backgrounds “tend to think Christianity got started after the Reformation,” she said. “Being there made me realize there are more real believers trying to serve God.” She acknowledges that opinions vary on the “opulence” of the cathedrals, and she’s aware of the problems in the church at the time. “But even if the authorities messed it up,” she said, “God’s presence was there. There were believers, trying to serve God.”

Stephanie Moore, 19, from Hazard, Ky., found that the first three weeks of class study paid off. “I could point out the flying buttresses on Gothic cathedrals and know the story behind the plaque about the drowning of Anabaptist Felix Manz.”

The group visited Trachselwald Castle near Bern, Switzerland, where Anabaptists had been imprisoned. Emily Maust, 20, from Salisbury, Pa., was surprised by her reaction to seeing the names of present-day visitors scrawled on the inside walls of the tower. “I loved it! Seeing all the names of the people on the wall . . . gave me a sense of unity. I’m not the only one who’s interested in our past. There are others who share my beliefs.”

It was much more than that, though. She felt the names were a way of saying, “I was here, I saw this, I recognize this.” It’s an acknowledgement, she said, that the persecution that was going on is still remembered. “They [the Anabaptists] were in that tower, but we’re still going back and visiting this today . . . we’re remembering them.”

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Ben Herr by the sea in Sicily. (Drew Beitzel)
Reformation] focused part of the trip, I was having a really difficult time putting myself back in time and picturing things as they were during the time we studied – because I’m pretty sure there weren’t hand bag stores in the first floor of all the houses early Anabaptists met and lived in. The modernity of the cities/towns was really throwing me off as I tried to understand the setting and context of early Anabaptist leaders.

Then it sank in that maybe this was actually how things should be. After all, we live in a modern world and are trying to live out an Anabaptist faith (whatever degree of liberal or conservative it may be). So yes, seeing the influence of modernity on old architecture and locations makes sense; today’s society and culture is influencing us as well. The study of Anabaptist origins was really beneficial to me, but the application of those beliefs into life today is more important. I found myself reminded of this many times on the trip.

Stephanie Moore, 20 (Hazard, Kentucky): The study tour proved to be one of the best learning experiences I’ve had so far. The first three weeks of intense studying were fueled with the excitement of soon going to see what I was reading about. The next three weeks in Europe reinforced everything I had learned back at Rosedale. I could point out the flying buttresses on Gothic cathedrals and I knew the story behind the plaque about the drowning of Anabaptist Felix Manz. The facts and ideas that usually fade soon after finals became memories that cannot be replaced.

Twila Slaubaugh, 19 (Mylo, N.D.): Twila was excited about being able to see the paintings she’d studied “in person . . . actually seeing them, how they [the artists] painted, . . . the different styles!”

Visiting the concentration camp site at Dachau, Germany made a deep impression on her. “Just thinking of what they went through, and we were there, where it actually happened. Horrible things. . . . Just being there made you realize this actually happened.” She was moved by the stories she read and heard at the museum, and amazed that some people had actually survived.

The display of artifacts taken from the prisoners also made an impression on her. She listed some of the items on display: “photos of boyfriends, girlfriends . . . these were real, normal people who had family and friends.”

Jake Huber, 21 (Au Gres, Mich.): Jake said the RBC European study tour has helped him “realize the vastness and diversity in the world I live in.” The tour also reinforced the fact that God is present everywhere, in all cultures. “He remains the same God, crossing over all cultural and geographical barriers. As big as the world in which we live is, God is bigger still.

“As our study group lived and traveled about Europe I had ample opportunity to meet and observe people from a wide array of ethnic and cultural backgrounds.” As he sat on the underground subways, walked along the cobbled streets, or toured museums and cathedrals, he wondered about the people around him.

“Did they share the same faith that I did? Did they know Jesus and the love that He has for them? Would I someday get to actually know these people, not here on earth, but in Heaven?

“I wished that I had some way of communicating with
the people I saw. We didn’t speak the same language; we were from different backgrounds and cultures.” He was concerned about their salvation, but didn’t see a way to effectively connect with them.

“However, in the midst of my worrying I came to realize that even if I could not effectively communicate with people, God could. He is not bound by languages and cultures. He is the creator of them. He is the God of not only the United States, but of Europe, Africa, and of the whole world. God can reach across cultures to make Himself known. He is neither bound nor limited.

“I left Europe feeling comforted that even if I was not able to communicate God’s love as effectively as I would like, God is not limited by the same cultural barriers as I am. He can and does work in all nations and will make His glory known.”

FATHER’S DAY:
The Start and The Stereotypes

A month before I married Andrew, his pastor came to me and said, “You will never be bored by this man. He’ll surprise you all the time because he is a deep well with great depth. He may not say much, but when he does, you will know it’s been thought through and is worth paying attention to.” In other words, still waters run deep.

Nobody ever described my Dad to me in those exact words, but when I heard them I thought, “Hmm…another way my husband will be like my father.” This is a scary thought to some ladies, but in my case, marrying a man who is like my father has been a blessing. They share a birthday, common interests, a love for the outdoors, are hard-working, quick-witted, content, patient, faithful and faith-filled. They are both astute observers of the world around them (though not always the things in the fridge right in front of them) and pick up on things that I am either too busy or too superficial to notice. My research into the origins of Father’s Day reminded me of one of those observations Dad made about the negative way the media portrays the man of the house.

According to an article by Nicholas K. Geranios, Father’s Day was initiated by Sonora Smart Dodd “because she was upset by the widespread mocking of fathers in popular culture as lazy, sleazy, and drunk.” Dodd, the eldest of six children who were raised by a single father after the death of their mother during childbirth in 1898, recognized the sacrifice of her father. In a day when it was customary for single fathers to send children off to be raised by relatives, William Smart took a counter-cultural approach and determined to keep his family together.

Mother’s Day, though not yet an official holiday, began to gain popularity in the U.S. in 1908. That was the year Dodd confronted her priest after a Mother’s Day message he preached saying to him, “I liked everything you said about motherhood. However, don’t you think fathers deserve a place in the sun too?” From then on, she made it her mission to get Father’s Day instituted as a national holiday. In June of 1910 the church held a special service honoring fathers with roses, which is commonly recognized as the first Father’s Day celebration.

In 1914, President Woodrow Wilson declared Mother’s Day a national holiday to be held the second Sunday in May. It wasn’t until 1966, however, that President Johnson issued a proclamation honoring fathers on the third Sunday of June. Father’s Day was then signed into law by President Nixon in 1972. Scholars think this may be indicative of society’s divergent views of mothers and fathers, and the roles they have traditionally held in the household.

As I followed up on my Dad’s observation and began to notice popular portrayals of men today, I saw men as bumbling idiots who fail to accomplish even the simplest of household tasks, making ridiculous and ignorant decisions, giving bad advice to their children, and making a mess of everything they touch; and then sitting down to consume a plate of humble pie and a beer as their ever-efficient wives swoop in and make everything all better, while teaching him a lesson just as she would a child. This depiction is not too far off from what Sonora Dodd may have observed in 1908.

Some men may be inspired to change if their shortcomings are shoved in their faces long enough, but I think a more effective approach is to celebrate their strengths. In addition to celebrating all the wonderful fathers out there, I think Father’s Day gives us the opportunity to look at the men and boys in our lives and evaluate whether or not we are feeding the negative stereotypes surrounding them. Maybe if the church stands on the front lines of defending fatherhood and affirming men of character, we will see more men stepping up to take “a place in the ‘Son’.”