

## Encounters

“Walk your own Camino” was a refrain I heard from many folks before I left for Spain. It didn’t take long for me to realize the importance of that. Some people naturally walked faster or slower than my natural pace. Sometimes I would adjust my speed in the interests of engaging with them, but walking at a pace that is not your own is uncomfortable, regardless of whether it is faster or slower.

On the first day, I encountered two people walking together – Hans from Germany and José from Peru. They wanted me to walk with them, which I did for a while. At one point Hans and José were going much faster than I was, and Hans would call back ‘Come on! Let’s go!’... but ultimately, I knew I couldn’t keep up with Hans – a marathon runner. I had to let myself be comfortable with letting them go on without me. I would later learn that José walked too fast to try and keep up with Hans and was having problems with his feet days later. Walk your own Camino.

This experience would be the first of dozens of times that I would connect with some people for a few hours or even a few days, and then need to let them go – either because I was faster or slower, or I had chosen to do an alternate route or an entirely different Camino before returning to the route I had started. This was a challenge emotionally and socially... particularly when you meet people you really appreciated and to whom you felt a connection.

When I turned off the Camino del Norte to walk the Camino Lebaniego, I immediately recognized that by the time I would return to the Norte after a few days, I would be in an entirely different cohort – and that many of the people I had seen on-and-off for the last few weeks would now be ahead of me and a whole new set of people would be walking along the path with and around me.

Having said that, you do adapt your pace when a situation calls for it. At one point I encountered a young Spanish woman who was walking slowly because her foot was hurting her. My pace slowed intentionally to spend a bit of time with her, and we had a profound conversation about some of the choices she had to make in her life outside the Camino, which is why she was walking it. If I had merely stuck to my pace, I never would have had the chance to engage with her. Likewise, I walked with a woman from France and her son for a few days and we both seemed to match each other’s pace although I suspected she normally walked much faster than I did.

It’s tough to say goodbye over and over again, and by the end of the first month, I began to feel hesitant to start a conversation and a connection with a new person, knowing that I would inevitably say goodbye again.

But just as in life, over and over again, we welcome people on our path and say goodbye to them. They help shape our hearts in the time that we know them, and we carry that encounter with us long after that part of the journey has passed. Walking the Camino is good practice for those of us who struggle with letting go. It’s also a reminder that the value of the encounter is worth it, despite knowing that it won’t endure forever. Every moment is treasured for what it is, not what will no longer be in the future.

Risking relationship in the knowledge that it isn’t permanent is an important lesson. For many of our congregations, letting go of what we’ve always known as ‘church’ is equally hard. As the world moves along, we need to ask ourselves if we’re prepared to let go of those things we cling to, without trying to walk at a pace that is so different from ours that we can’t sustain it.

How do we, as a church family, walk our own Camino and seek to be relevant to those whose pace is in tune with ours? How do we start relationships that we know are not guaranteed to be life-long, and still savour the moments shared? Some may walk with us for a few weeks, others may stay for years, and sometimes we need to adapt our pace so that we can have an important encounter with someone that will reshape our heart or theirs.