

From Encounter To Ministry: *The Life and Faith of Latin American Friends*

MANUELA CALISAYA MORALES DE ALANGUÍA
MARIO COLQUE MAMANI
YRMA HILARIÓN ESCOBAR
RICARDO JOVEL SARAVIA
HILARIÓN QUISPE YANA



The Wider Quaker Fellowship
La Asociación de amigos de los Amigos

INTRODUCTION: "IT'S OUR TURN NOW"
BY NANCY THOMAS

These articles were first published by the Wider Quaker Fellowship in Spanish in 2012, under the title "De encuentro a ministerio: la vida y fe de los Amigos latinoamericanos." They are drawn from a book of the same title (Editorial CALA, La Paz, Bolivia, May 2012), which was a joint venture of FWCC Section of the Americas, and Northwest Yearly Meeting.

Nancy Thomas served for many years as a missionary in Bolivia, sent by Northwest Yearly Meeting of Friends in the U.S. She has a special calling as a writer and writing coach. Together with her husband, Harold, she led the writers' workshops that resulted in this book.

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I lifted my head during a moment of silence and glanced around the room. Our group had been exchanging ideas with Mario, whose essay described a family crisis over his daughter's illness. I observed that the interactions in the other groups were just as dynamic. In one circle, arranged to soak up the sun coming in through the window, four men were engaged in serious debate. Another group was listening to Manuela read her manuscript out loud; this was the first article she had ever written in her life. What I saw and heard filled me with contentment.

It was the first afternoon of a writers' workshop in Juli, Peru in September 2009. The workshop was jointly sponsored by the Friends World Committee for Consultation Section of the Americas and Northwest Yearly Meeting of Friends. The 27 participants represented the various yearly meetings of Bolivia and Peru. This was actually the third in a series of writers' workshops that my husband Hal and I were facilitating. The first two took place in 2006 and 2007 and focused on the preparation of teaching materials for adult Quakers. They resulted in several small books (or plans for books) on such themes as reconciliation in the family, the local congregation in relation to its social context, and practical holiness.

But this time around I wanted to do something different, and so I had proposed a focus on narrative writing. It's been my conviction for several years that we need to be writing and collecting the stories of Latin American Friends, individual stories as well as stories of faith communities.

Narrative writing fits in the Aymara context of Bolivia and Peru. Cultural communication styles emphasize orality and narrative. In traditional rural communities, the grandmothers transmit cultural values to children through the talking animal

stories, among other types of tales and legends. And although universal education and urbanization are influencing and even changing some of the traditional values, something that is happening around the world, even so, the stories—the narratives—maintain their appeal.

We presented the workshops on narrative writing three times: in Juli for Friends of the high Andean plains in both Bolivia and Peru; in Santa Cruz, Bolivia, for lowland Friends; and in Chiquimula, Guatemala for Friends in Guatemala, Honduras and El Salvador. In all, 57 women and men participated in the experience, with enthusiasm and dedication.

We began the workshops with a discussion on narrative literature—its nature, its universality among all the cultures of the world, and its special importance in our Latin American contexts. Why do we need to remember and pass on our stories? How can we do it in ways that attract and inspire? How can we write our stories in culturally appropriate forms? And how can we help each other in this task?

We included an emphasis on Quaker values as part of the fascinating history of Quakers as “Publishers of Truth” from the very beginning of the movement. We observed that for the most part Quaker literature has come from the global West and that now it’s our turn. It’s time to hear Quaker voices from Africa, Asia, and, of course, from Latin America.

The heart of any writers’ workshop is always practical experience. Practice. Participants arrived with the first draft of a narrative essay, the story of a personal experience of some kind of encounter with Jesus. After an orientation explaining the characteristics of good writing and the writing (and re-writing) process, we divided into small groups to work. Each participant took his or her turn and read their essay out loud. Then they carefully listened to the observations and suggestions of the others in their group. I wandered from group to group, mouth closed, to observe the process. I felt very pleased as I listened to

the observations and saw the ways in which people were learning to give and receive evaluation and constructive criticism. This is never easy, but it’s an important step forward in growing as a writer.

From the very beginning, we dreamed that a book would come out of these workshops. We even envisioned two audiences: Latin American Friends and English-speaking Friends. The resulting book is a collection of stories of both people and congregations that demonstrate the faith and life of Spanish and Aymara speaking Quakers. The book’s primary purposes are aimed at uniting Latin American Friends and helping them to self-identify as Friends with certain characteristics and callings, a significant part of the world family of Friends. Of course passing the stories on to future generations of Friends is part of this purpose. But the book also has purposes for English-speaking Friends, to inform and inspire them with the reality of their Latin American brothers and sisters and to help us all better understand what it means to be Quaker in the 21st century.

I hope you’ll like these stories that are selected from the longer book. They represent a variety of experiences and perspectives, but through them all run threads of a vibrant faith in Jesus, a commitment to hear his voice and live in obedience, and a sense of fellowship in the family of Friends.

All the writers who participated in the workshops are Friends—men and women, pastors and lay people, old and young, experienced writers and those who wrote their first article for this book. These five authors are from four yearly meetings in Bolivia, Peru, and El Salvador. They represent a spirit of unity and cooperation between the various groups. Together we are growing as the people of God known as Friends. And together we are raising our voices as writers, publishers of truth.

AS YOU WILL, LORD
BY YRMA HILARIÓN ESCOBAR

I remember well the day that my mother was diagnosed with leukemia. For us, her family, this news was terrible, very hard to face. From that day on, our lives began to change course. From that day on, we began to take more account of our mother's presence in our lives. From that day on, we began to treasure her words of advice. From that day on, we loved our mother more.

I remember my siblings trying to hide their grief, and looking for the right moment to tell her what was happening. But she didn't wait for us to tell her, because she already knew.

When she understood about her illness, her first reaction was to say that God alone knew why she had to go through this. Then she decided to actively seek healing. That was what she sought and asked God for, with prayers, between tears and praises.

I remember the terrible pains that racked my mother. I saw in her eyes the question, "Will our Lord heal me?" She drew hope from the testimony of a servant of the Lord who, having the gift of healing, prayed faithfully and fruitfully for many sick people, although she herself was suffering from cancer. But also I can't forget the times that I found my mother crying in silence, wiping away her tears with her hands while she prayed for healing.

Those last months that my mother was with us were precious for me. Instead of seeing a woman who was upset, angry, and blaming God for the misfortune that was befalling her, instead of hearing from her lips that she would never again pray to God for anything, she remained faithful. She remembered God's promise that where two or three are all in agreement together, he would be in the midst of them and hear their petitions. My parents together kept on praying for healing.

I found myself unprepared to live through this experience. I

felt a deep emptiness in my heart. I was tempted to think that all the years I'd spent as a daughter of God had been useless. It seemed to me that attending worship services and listening to sermons hadn't put down any roots in my life. I almost couldn't bear the death of my brother, who'd recently passed away, and now this other hard truth—the sickness that was maybe going to kill my mother.

But the hard times were my opportunity to draw closer to the Lord, to let his word come alive in me. I suffered to be able to understand that God, our Lord, was beside me, and that he was allowing to happen all that we were living through. Little by little, my faith gained some hope.

Many times my mother told me that just as that servant had served the Lord until her death, and in spite of her own illness, she also longed to serve God. But the body no longer responded as she wished, and she looked for some other way to please God. She found a simple way, dedicating herself to singing and praise, in her bed or sitting on a sofa in her room. Sometimes with tears, other times smiling, she worshipped God. We saw how she sought more and more the presence of the Holy Spirit.

With time I saw a change in my mother's prayers. She no longer asked so much for healing. I heard her say that she accepted and understood what God had decided for her. She didn't hide her tears, but her eyes showed that she was putting all her life—and death—in God's hands. She understood that she wouldn't get well, that this illness would be with her until the day of her death. And she was at peace.

For me, this was another blow. I was still praying for healing. But I understood that what interested our Lord was that my mother give herself over to his will, that she be able to accept whatever he might decide to do with her life.

All of this reminded me of a scene in the life of Jesus. When our Savior prayed on Mount Gethsemane, he asked God his Father to set aside this test that had to happen, but the words

that followed have stayed engraved in my heart: “Not as I will, but as you will.” It was this same expression that I had seen in my mother, when she chose to accept whatever happened as in God’s hands.

And this is how my mother left us to rejoin the healer and lord of her life.

A LESSON IN HOSPITALITY
BY MANUELA CALISAYA MORALES DE ALANGUÍA

When God is going to use you for his ministry, first he trains you. I can give testimony of this work of God in my life. One week before the visit of a couple, I heard a teaching in church about hospitality. Of course I knew about that, but for me it was hard to receive visitors in my house. That same week, through a family member, God provided us with an extra sum of money. Though it hadn’t been part of our plan, with this money we bought a new bed. All this was part of God’s preparation.

The next week, when I came home after a day of work, I found my husband very worried. He gave me the news that a Friend who was very sick was coming to the house, accompanied by her husband, and that they were asking to stay with us. We received the couple because it was our duty as Christians, but I felt very uncomfortable.

The next day we took the woman, whose name was Graciana, to the clinic for an ultrasound. When he gave us the results, the doctor said that her condition was very complicated. To make matters worse, they didn’t have enough money to cover the medical treatment. Their children were at home alone in another town. Seeing all this, we felt an enormous sadness, and decided to do everything we could to help this family.

After one night, Graciana asked that we have a time with God in the room where we’d put them up. We had family

worship; together we prayed, sang and meditated on the word of God. Graciana asked us to sing the hymn that’s called “Who Can Separate Me from God.” She sang out in a strong voice, expressing all that she felt, and all that God meant to her. When I looked at her face, I saw a beautiful, light-filled woman.

After meditating on the word of God, she asked leave to say a few words. She said, “During the time that I’ve lived together with my husband, I’ve spent some very sad days, because I didn’t have his direct support. This caused me to live a hurt, resentful, and even grudging life, weighted down with a lot of pain and worry. Today I want to ask my husband’s forgiveness, and forget about all that. I want to live for God and serve him with all my heart.”

So they were reconciled, and they hugged each other and cried together. It was very beautiful to see God’s hand touching the hearts of this couple.

The next day, very early, sister Graciana’s husband woke us with some worrisome news. She had gotten worse and was complaining of pain in one of her feet, which had swollen. Her husband went out to look for help, but he couldn’t find anyone to help her. We took her to the general hospital in the city of Puno, and she was admitted to the intensive care unit.

That morning was the last time that I spoke with Graciana. In that conversation she said, sobbing, “I feel very bad, but I know that if I live, I’ll live for God, and if I die I’ll die for him. My children are with Jesus, and in all difficulties God will provide for them and keep them. That’s my trust.”

The next afternoon I went to the hospital to visit her. I went in by the emergency door, and walking through the corridors I passed a stretcher with a person covered by a blanket. I looked to see who it was, and when I uncovered her face I had the most painful surprise of my life. It was my sister Graciana. She had died already; she’d gone to God’s presence.

For me, it was very distressing. She’d left five children,

among them a little girl who was only a year old. My great consolation was remembering the time of forgiveness and reconciliation with her husband. God had prepared her for her death, and thanks to him, he prepared us through his lessons in hospitality.

Some years have passed. Her children have grown, and are well. Of the five, four are living in Santa Cruz, Bolivia, and all of them love and seek God as their guide.

Though years have passed, I remember this experience as if it were yesterday. From that day to this, all the blessings that we receive from God are shared with the people who come to our home.

DREAMS OF HOPE
BY MARIO COLQUE MAMANI

God, in his grace has given my wife and me five beautiful daughters. We love all of them, but at this time I want to tell you the story of the next to last one, Imogene.

The difficulties began with the birth of this little one. Before she was born, several different hospitals refused admittance to my wife Celia, who was ready to give birth. Thanks to God, we finally came to a hospital that would treat her.

My desperation increased later after she went into the delivery room, because it seemed to be taking too long. Women who went in after her came out, and this went on from the morning until very late. I didn't know what was going on in there, but finally they informed me that she was in the act of childbirth. My worries increased when a doctor who I knew came out to meet with me, and he asked me something with a lot of hemming and hawing that made me very uncomfortable.

I prayed, sitting out there in the hall. I begged the Lord for everything to come out all right, and finally I just asked that his

will be done, I would accept it. At 4:00 in the morning, Celia finally came out of the delivery room. She looked at me with a worried expression. I felt that something was going wrong. I went into the nursery, and they informed me that my daughter had been born with a physical malformation. She had a mass exposed on the outside of her body, on the arm and chest.

My first job was to calm my wife. Then, in just a few days we felt we had to remove our daughter from the hospital, because she was being subjected to speculations and physical manipulations by doctors and other staff.

Once we were home, we went through days of anguish. In my prayers, I asked the Lord what his purpose was.

Time passed, until early one morning when I had a dream. I saw a being dressed in fine cloth, a cloth of pure white. This being was looking over Imogene. At first I didn't pay attention to my daughter, but kept looking at the celestial being, which reflected peace and joy. It's hard to describe all that I was feeling. It seemed that I was there for a long time observing that pure being. My happiness was complete when the being raised up my daughter and I heard it say, "She isn't sick." At that moment I saw Imogene without any physical malformation, whole and beautiful.

Now I know that that celestial being in my dream was no less than my Lord Jesus Christ. Only he could have given me such hope, which has lasted up to the present day.

That dream was abruptly interrupted by my wife. She woke me up, crying, "Mario! Mario! Wake up! I had a dream! Let's pray!" She had also gotten an answer in a dream similar to mine. When I opened my eyes, I noticed that she was very startled. I sat up, and seeing her in that state, I was worried. I encouraged her to tell me her dream. But first we knelt down there in our bedroom and called out to the Lord to let us know what message he was giving us in these two dreams. We cried with happiness, because we felt that God was showing his mercy to our family.

After we finished praying, Celia told me that in her dream she went into a sort of building with large rooms where a lot of doctors were walking around. It seemed that they were doing experiments. She didn't trust them, thinking they were going to experiment on Imogene. She took her into her arms and wanted to get out of that place. Just then she noticed that the little arms were now healthy and free of malformations. But at the same time, she saw a different baby girl going around her, as if wanting to grab onto her, as if she wanted to ask Celia to take her along, too. She felt compassion and took the other baby girl into her arms, and went running with both of them. She felt that people were coming after her. She came to a hanging bridge that looked unstable, and was afraid to cross it. But she succeeded, with a lot of hard effort. Next she came to a tunnel, and as she came out of the tunnel she woke up. She was very moved at having seen our daughter healthy.

Feeling the importance of the two dreams, we went to our other daughters' bedroom. By then it was between five and six in the morning. We went in, woke them up, and told them about our dreams. They were impressed, and we all got down on our knees and prayed. With all of the family together, we consecrated those dreams to the Lord and asked him to declare to us their actual meaning.

My wife trusted in God, but as time went on she began to lose hope. Almost two years passed and there was no change in the situation. She went here and there but with no results. I told her that the Lord was going to prepare the time and the manner, and that we had to keep praying.

Celia wanted to go to Argentina, following the advice of her brother, to have Imogene examined in hospitals in Buenos Aires. I asked her not to go, because she was pregnant, but she insisted, and I finally changed my mind. So she went to Argentina. In reality, three people went: my wife, our two-year-old ill daughter, and the other one that was in the womb. I prayed a lot for God

to care for and protect them. My heart felt sad because of the separation from my family, but we felt this was all for the good of our Imogene.

When they got to Buenos Aires, Imogene was well received by the doctors. They evaluated her quickly in order to make a plan of treatment. Here in Bolivia with my other daughters, we prayed and asked God to protect them. Afterwards I found out how much Celia suffered from the separation from her family, as well as from the lack of understanding of some family members in Argentina. There was even a day, as she was walking beside some train tracks, when desperation pushed her to thoughts of suicide. I thank God for giving her the courage to overcome those moments of pain.

Here at home, I felt powerless about the suffering of that part of my family that was so far away. I began to think, "How could I have let her go there alone?" I decided to go there myself, but Celia told me that she was coming home. The doctors had gone on vacation and told her that within four months they expected to be able to do the operation. That worried her, having to wait so long, and in her pregnant state; she was now seven months along. So she decided to come back to Bolivia. When she got home, I felt that I was whole again, with all of my family back together.

When we figured out the costs, we were at zero, and I was out of a job. We didn't know how we could go forward. Personally, I had faith in God that one way or another he would help by providing me with a job to support my family.

Two months after my wife came home, our last daughter was born; we named her Belén Tanimba. With this birth, I began to understand what the Lord had wanted to tell us in those dreams. Faced with so many pains, the arrival of this new little life brought joy to the whole family. It was a miracle. I say this because during her pregnancy, all of the problems and great struggles that were going on for my wife could have caused a

miscarriage. Today I can say that our last daughter is the ideal complement for Imogene. Ever since her little sister Belén was born, Imogene has been happy and helpful, as she still is today. I can conclude by saying that Imogene and Belén are the two dreams that the Lord provided for us.

The miracle that the Lord was going to present to us was still in the future. It was a day like any other day, and we found out about a medical campaign that we hadn't been aware of before, about little hands. We knew that our chances were slim—first, because we were contacting them late and one selection had already been made. Also, this campaign was not related to the problem that Imogene had. But we felt that at least we ought to go and try.

When my wife went to the site of the campaign, she got a surprise, because one of the doctors gave the impression that he knew about Imogene's problem. Awhile later, there was a special meeting at which they decided to do an immediate operation, based on the clinical analyses and documents that had been prepared in Argentina. All of this was with the intent of removing some of the mass from her little arm. The doctors were from other countries—surely from the United States. Imogene was upbeat when she learned that they were going to operate on her. Her excitement caught on with us, too.

I was working at home, and in the afternoon my wife called me; how great was my surprise when she told me that Imogene had already gone into surgery. That first operation lasted for about four hours. During that time, I prayed to God for his will to be done.

We weren't aware of how much Imogene suffered during the entire week the doctors stayed there, before their return to their country. On the last day, they came to say goodbye to Imogene and check her over one last time. But they noticed something that was not normal: her little arm had become hard. They were alarmed and decided to operate on her again. That worried me,

because I didn't know how much of this a little girl could stand. She had to go in as an emergency.

At that point, we found out that all of their surgical equipment had been packed up and sent to the airport. Faced with that situation, the doctors had to ask for a sterilized operating room for this emergency operation, and they operated on her again. When she came out of surgery, she was very weak, and we felt so bad for her. After these operations, we heard from the mouths of the American doctors that she was the bravest girl they had ever seen; never before had they seen such courage in a child. Our daughter gave me a lesson in perseverance and bravery.

The Lord Jesus Christ made my family strong and united. In spite of the fact that Imogene still needs several more operations, we know that God will guide us and will heal her in his own time. Until now, this test has been like a school for our family. We pray to God to continue to give us the courage to face everything that comes along in life, and to give us the strength to serve him in the lives of other people.

MOONLIGHT

BY RICARDO JOVEL SARAVIA

Six o'clock, the first of December. It was a trip just like any other. Hearing the singing and conversations of my friends and workmates, we were on the highway going across from Santa Ana to San Salvador. Suddenly, in the blink of an eye, something happened that we never could have imagined. Like an arrow shooting through the wind, there appeared on our right side another vehicle going a lot faster than we were. Upon trying to pass us, the back of that car hit the front of ours, and we were thrown off the highway. In our efforts to steady our course, we managed to get back on the highway, but because of the speed

we were traveling at, we started zigzagging and totally lost control. We skidded for around 30 meters along the pavement. My body hit one of the two other people in the car; it was a horrible sensation, like metal scratching across glass.

These scenes are still clear in my mind. All attention was turned on us. Among the onlookers, I heard these words: “Poor guy! Pull him out.” And—“Call the police. Call an ambulance.”

Some people pulled out José’s motionless body from among the heavy tools that we were transporting. Just one year before, José had had an accident at work, falling from a height of 5 meters and suffering a fractured skull. But this time, only a miracle could save him. This desire for a miracle fortified my spirit for a little while.

In the distance, we heard the sound of a siren rapidly coming closer and closer to us. When it arrived, people lifted José onto a stretcher. A man put his hand on José’s chest and said something very strange: “Jesus loves you, my brother.” Those words kept repeating in my mind as we rode in the police car, the way the peals from a “steeplehouse” go all around a village making the call for the faithful to come to Sunday activities, or announcing the death of someone known in that place.

I had never been so anxious to get quickly to a hospital. “Hurry! Hurry! Critically wounded patient!” called out a woman doctor as the car wound its way through the narrow, crooked streets of the area. Once we were in the hospital, we stayed outside hoping for favorable news about José’s condition, and also communicating with our families.

After five long hours of waiting, the moment came when we heard something we didn’t want to hear: “The patient has died.” Those words fell on us like a bucket of cold water. All of us were shocked and confused, looking across at each other in the midst of a tomb-like silence, looking for some answer to the question of what we should do at that moment. And with that, we all went home.

Time of Crisis

It’s hard, several years later, to explain the feelings and emotions that I was having at that time in my life. I went through four intense months of anguish, confusion, and suffering. But that crisis was the trampoline that propelled me into making the most important decision of my life.

With the scene of the accident going through my mind, I would go out in the morning seeking solace in a cup of coffee and conversation with certain friends. We would touch on themes like the cost of living, politics, loves both past and present, and so on. In a way, this briefly fulfilled my need for distraction. But my nights were full of tormenting ghosts, memories of grating sounds, and voices and reproaches that fell across my heart like whip-lashes.

The Light

One morning in the hours before dawn, with more of a desire for pardon than for life, stretched out on the floor with no more companionship than a sleeping mat, a pillow, and a ray of moonlight, I started crying like a child. In between the tears and sobs, I tried to swallow the pain of the death of my beloved friend. There surged up in my heart an indescribable desire to search for God. Just like the light that was coming in the window, this desire penetrated into the deepest part of my being. The tears from my eyes began flowing more freely, as if emptying out and washing away all my guilt. The strangling knot in my throat had disappeared.

Just then, the hand of my wife (who enters my story at this point) rested on my forehead, and she made a short, simple prayer. She commended my soul to the Creator, begging for mercy.

The rest of that night I could not sleep. Sunday morning dawned. My wife and son got up early to go to church. I watched them with uncertainty, but with a desire to go along

with them. Although pride would not allow me to give in that day, I couldn't stand it, and I said, "The next time I will go with you." Feeling happy, but with also some disbelief because they thought I was making fun of them, they answered me, "On Thursday, the conferences start. If you can, come with us!" "They will be very nice," my son chimed in.

From that moment, an enthusiasm that I couldn't understand kept running through my thoughts. I couldn't wait for that day to come.

Finally, Thursday! I got up very early. We got ready and then left for the church. I was a bit nervous, but with a lot of expectation.

When we went into the church, there were already a lot of people there. Walking down the aisle, I felt as if all of them were looking at us. We sat down in front, in the third row. Soon I heard a serious voice coming from behind us, saying to my wife, "God has made quite a catch with this man, Sister Rosita!" The voice was from a tall man with a thick mustache and white hair.

They prayed, and then the music started. It was all very nice. After that came the preaching. I won't say that the message affected me a lot, but when it was finished, they made a call for people to go up to the altar. I bowed my head. A man came up to me. He put his hand on my shoulder and said, "The Lord says that he has saved you from death many times, and that this is your opportunity to really escape from it. Jesus loves you. Give him your heart."

When I heard those words, I felt a current running from my head down to my feet. In an instant, part of the story of my life ran through my mind like a movie, and I remembered not less than five different occasions when I had been face-to-face with death. I raised my face, looked right into the eyes of that man, and said to him, "I don't feel anything, and it seems that to do that I should be feeling it."

He answered, "No, you don't necessarily have to feel

anything." "What do I do, then?" I asked.

"It's simple. Just do as I tell you." He took my arm and we walked towards the altar. Once we were there, he suggested that I kneel down and close my eyes. Fighting against my ego, I did it. I repeated a prayer of commitment, while a large part of the congregation cried out and gave thanks for all of the goodness of God.

At that moment, I remembered the words of that strange man who had put his hand on José's heart and said, "Jesus loves you, my brother." I now have no doubt that those words were not for José, but for me. They were the same words said by this man here in the church, a man that God was using to bring me to Jesus's feet.

I have to confess that my previous experience, looking for God all by myself, on my mat with my pillow and the ray of moonlight, was more intense than the activity that took place during the worship service that day. But everything—the accident, my anguished searching, my wife's prayers—served to bring me to God. At any rate, I found my Savior. This is my experience of the redeeming and transforming power of our Lord Jesus Christ.

WALKING BAREFOOT
BY HILARIÓN QUISPE YANA

In the year 2002 it fell to me to be part of the Administrative Committee of INELA (National Evangelical Friends Church of Bolivia), in the role of recording secretary. Naturally, I gave thanks to God, as well as to the Annual Meeting representatives who supported me this way in becoming part of the Board of Directors.

The time for the first quarterly meetings in all of the Districts arrived, and our custom is that members of the

Administrative Committee should be prepared to travel to the different sites. I accepted the task of traveling to Alto Beni, the farthest away place, since that District had chosen my name as one of a group of three.

I didn't know, or even imagine, how far away the church was where we were to meet, in a town called San Pedro de Condo. Together with my wife and daughters, we got ready and left La Paz on a bus at 7:00 in the morning. In the afternoon we arrived at Caranavi, a town in the lowlands where the summer heat was intense.

We set out from there on another bus at 3:00 in the afternoon, headed for a little town called Sapecho, where we had to wait for a hired van. This trip was long, winding through the middle of lush tropical vegetation. As I went along, I meditated upon the meeting that I was going to have with the sisters and brothers of that place, and the theme that I was going to teach on, and the message from the Gospel that I was going to share with them.

We arrived at this place at 6:30 in the evening, when the sun was about to go below the horizon. The sisters from the Board of Directors of UFINELA (the Yearly Meeting women's group) had already arrived; they were going to attend the same quarterly meeting.

We were all there waiting for the van to arrive and take us to the church. Finally a small white Toyota arrived, already full of passengers. One of the pastors of the area recognized me and begged the driver to give me a ride. The driver was resistant to take us, because he had only agreed to take the equipment needed for the event.

With a bit of embarrassment, the pastor agreed to come back with the van once his group had been dropped off at the place in question. My family and the ladies from UFINELA stayed behind, satisfied with his promise to return for us.

Meanwhile, we looked for some food, but we couldn't find any. We looked for at least some soda to drink, but we didn't

find any of that, either. The worst thing was, none of us had brought a flashlight to help us walk at night.

We finally got tired of waiting so long and decided to start walking through the night by the light of the full moon. After walking for more than an hour, we decided to rest at the side of the road; carrying our baggage was very tiring. By now it was around 9:00. We had been resting for around 15 minutes, when we heard the sound of a car, which made us very happy.

How great was our joy when we saw that it was the same van that was supposed to pick us up. We climbed into the vehicle, but then to our surprise, the driver took us back to the same village where we had been left, saying that he had to get gasoline. Once back in the very place we had started walking from, he refused to transport us, and said we would have to wait until the next day.

We begged him to have mercy on us and our daughters. That went on for an hour, and finally the driver showed some understanding. Once more, now feeling excited, we left for San Pedro de Condo.

We traveled for around an hour in the van, and then the driver became afraid to take us any farther on that swampy road, which was wet from rain. His vehicle was skidding and sliding in the mud and muck.

He left us there on the road, and we, worried now about getting to the church, decided to walk the rest of the way. We picked up our bundles and started walking. I had my daughter Sara Iblín on my shoulders, because the rain wouldn't stop.

We walked and walked. Ten minutes after we started, I slipped in the rain and my sandal slipped off my foot and went way down into the mud. We fumbled around for it, but it was in vain; it had gotten lost in the muck. Finally we decided we had to go on without the sandal. I walked in just my socks, and you can imagine how that made me suffer, with swelling and everything; at night I couldn't see the pebbles or sticks in the road.

After 20 more minutes of walking, we came to the path that would take us up to the church itself. By now it was 11:00 at night. The sisters and brothers from the church were sound asleep, but they woke up to receive us. We arrived tired and wet, but finally, thanks to God—We arrived!

That night, in the little hut where we were resting, the soles of my feet were burning. The ladies from UFINELA started laughing, and finally even I was laughing about all we had been through.

On Sunday, after the last service had ended and it was time to go home, the same driver acted the same way and refused again to take us, saying that his van was full of passengers. So we had to walk for about two and a half hours, until a taxi picked us up, and within minutes we arrived in Sapecho to wait for the bus to Caranavi. I don't know how, but eventually, after a very long trip, we got back to La Paz.

Today I am thinking about that trip; it took place more than eight years ago. I think about the walks that our Lord Jesus Christ took when he was on earth. In the same way we did, he felt tired from so much walking and needed to rest. But our Lord Jesus did not refuse to travel, walking far, to minister to people throughout Palestine.

Today, in the same way, let's not forget to walk, in spite of mishaps along the road. Nor should we feel tired when we are visiting members of the church who live far off the beaten track, at a place we have to get to on foot. We should deeply appreciate those brothers and sisters who walk long distances every Sunday to get to church and serve as pastors.

Forward! Let's walk barefoot for the cause, the honor, and the glory of God.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

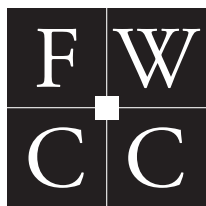
Yrma Hilarión is an active member of a congregation of the National Evangelical Friends Church (INELA) of Bolivia, in Santa Cruz. She serves as a Sunday school teacher and worship leader.

Manuela Calisaya serves as a member of the National Evangelical Friends Church (INELA) of Peru. Among her different activities, she has been a youth counselor and a support for her husband Noé on the Missions Committee of INELA-Peru.

Mario Colque lives in El Alto, near La Paz, Bolivia, and serves in the denomination called the Bolivian Holiness Friends Church, where he is an active member of the Writers' Committee.

Ricardo Jovel is a member of a Friends congregation in Soyapango, El Salvador. He has served the church as a District (quarterly meeting) President.

Hilarión Quispe has served in various capacities on the Administrative Committee of the National Evangelical Friends Church (INELA) of Bolivia. He is also an active member of a church in El Alto, near La Paz. He studied economics in the university and is a high school teacher by profession.



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Friends World Committee for Consultation, Section of the Americas
Friends Center, 1506 Race Street, Philadelphia, PA 19102 USA
tel: 215.241.7250, email: wqf@fwccamericas.org