



# EL CAMINO SOLIDARIO

<THE PATH OF SOLIDARITY>

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## Preparing for Holy Week in Cuzco, Perú



There is a very special place I travel to once a year or so. It is a new Lutheran faith community in Cuzco, Perú called "Talitha Kum" (Aramaic for "Little girl, get up"; Mark 5:41). Over the past two years, I have visited Talitha Kum three times and each time I come away awed by how the Peruvian Lutheran Church has planted a thriving new Lutheran congregation in this particular place. Cuzco is a city of 350,000 where there has been absolutely no organized Lutheran presence until very recently. As our own ELCA seeds Lutheran communities among people that may be new to our denomination, the story of Talitha Kum is a gift for our own thinking about mission.

### What is the Talitha Kum community like?

I think the two dozen or so U.S. Lutherans I have joined in visits to Talitha Kum would agree that there is no other place like it on earth. First, as Talitha Kum is carved out of the side of a mountain high in the Andes, the setting is dramatic. The back-drop is the City of Cuzco, the one-time jewel of the Incan Empire which was stripped of its vast wealth by the Spanish conquerors who then returned to build their own cathedrals and palaces with the rubble left in their wake.

Today both the Incan and Spanish structures remain, standing side by side – or more like one (Spanish) sitting on top of the other (Incan)- testifying to the violence that brought these two civilizations together. This time of year when the rains come frequently, looking up from Talitha Kum, the Andes rise toward the heavens cloaked in green vegeta-

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*Living in God's amazing grace*

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Women of the Talitha Kum faith community in Cuzco reflect on Holy Week practices. Pastora Ofelia is seated second from left.

tion. When the visitor listens closely, Spanish sprinkled with fragments of the Inca's Quechua language will be heard, especially when neighbors are speaking among themselves. The dwellings are simple: adobe walls made of the very dirt that comprises the floors which in turn remind us how close the Andean Pachamama – or "Mother Earth" – really is. These homes are a metaphor for God's own creation: Works in progress, in near permanent states of construction and improvement.



Two women finish preparing the daily meal Talitha Kum offers at an accessible price to local children and adults.

### What can the ELCA learn from Talitha Kum?

Here I would like to present two lessons that can help us engage in mission in our own ELCA context, especially among people new to the Lutheran church.

*Lesson 1: Listen and learn about the people's past struggles, be it with domestic violence or organized religion. These life experiences are the platform for delivering God's liberating message of unconditional love and free-flowing grace.*

Pastora Ofelia Dávila is a mission pastor of the Peruvian Evangelical Lutheran Church (ILEP) called to bring a new vision of God to a community where the scars of the Spanish conquest – a historical event where the Spanish *conquistadores* arrived with a Bible in one hand and a sword in the other – are readily observed. I witnessed these scars during a recent visit some days before the beginning of Holy Week. Pastora Ofelia invited me to participate in a congregational meeting and Bible study one Tuesday afternoon. She turned to the approximately 15 women and girls gathered (and one man) and asked what Holy Week traditions are part of their personal experiences as Christians.

Nearly all the women and the man recalled a time in their lives when they were awakened at the crack of dawn on Good Friday, only to be subjected by their own parents to smacks with a thorny branch on their posteriors. While

chuckles emerged later on in the story-telling, at this point it was clearly a troubling memory. As these women grew up in rural areas around Cuzco, they also told of the various survival strategies used to avoid this harsh awakening. Some would surreptitiously hike into the mountains in the middle of the night, returning to their homes well into the afternoon on Good Friday when the moment had passed.

Not all the memories were negative. Some of the women recalled gathering flowers from the hills surrounding their childhood homes – a tradition that seems to continue to this day --- on Maundy Thursday, carefully forming them into crosses which would then decorate the doorways of village homes. After Easter the flowers were soaked in bath water. Still others recalled annual spates of petty crimes between Maundy Thursday and Easter morning. Certain thieves decided that Jesus was temporarily "dead" and therefore their sins would not curry divine displeasure, either in this world or in the hereafter.

At this point, Pastora Ofelia asked the group "What do these recollections tell us about the God we want to have a relationship with... and the one we don't want?" Is God a punishing God that requires us to suffer the physical, psychological and spiritual pains that Jesus was subjected to, to the point of inflicting harm on our bodies? Could it be true that with Jesus' death on the cross, God is absent? What about this other image of the flower crosses and a God who offers us beautiful salvation that washes over us, cleansing and purifying us? Which is the God we want to have present in the midst of our struggles to be a Christian community, a family united by Christ's love?

*Lesson 2: Make it the new church's business to join in the local struggles for revindicating rights and addressing individual and community wounds.*

What actually took place before the Bible Study began was an update on efforts to begin construction of a temple and community space (worship is currently in a small adobe room),\* along with other community news. Over the past four years, Talitha Kum has walked lock-step with the local community in its fight for electrical hook-up, legalization of property titles, water access and now an adequate sewer system. At the same time, Pastora Ofelia has supported the women of the community in these fights, as well as on issues closer to home like domestic violence.

The ELCA will find that as healing happens, new faith communities will grow and be transformed as God's love will take hold even under challenging conditions, like those in Talitha Kum. Truly, a faith transformed can lead to a life transformed. But we don't stop here. New challenges begin when the freedom found in love for the Risen Christ opens our eyes to the structures of injustice all around us and moves us from charity to justice, from concern to outrage, and from despair to hope. † *Your brother in Christ — David*

\*To provide financial support for construction of this church and others in Peru, please contact me directly at david.wunsch@elca.org and I can suggest ways that this can be done.

† Johnson, George S. *Beyond Guilt: Christian Response to Suffering* 1989.

The complete "birth" story of the Talitha Kim faith community can be found at <http://www.iksynod.org/ministry/globalmission/David%20Wunsch/Talitha%20Kum%20Birth%20Story.pdf>