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Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)
Presbyterian Mission

Letting Go. Trusting God Through Change

September 4, 2020

A Letter from Chenoa Stock, serving in Peru

September 2020

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Dear Friends,

For those who know or email with me, know that I have a Type A personality. I am organized, I live by lists, I delight in marking things off of my list, and I do not like wasting time. And, for better or worse, I like to maintain a sense of control of my surroundings. (I swear I'm a fun person, though!)

My life in the mission field these past 15 years has undoubtedly pushed me to adjust certain parts of these traits, while also teaching me great lessons about myself in the process. Having a husband and then a son called for even greater adjustments. Moving to a new country as a family called me to dig deeper to embrace the change. And now, a new challenge, a pandemic.

Peru, where we serve, currently has the 5th highest COVID-19 cases and the highest fatality rate in the world. We were in one of the world's longest mandatory periods of isolation, from March 16th through June 30th, reaching our first peak of cases in late May. As has happened in so many countries around the world, once the economy re-opened in July, our case numbers began to surge, surpassing the first peak and heading toward a new one. The healthcare system has collapsed due to a lack of investment in infrastructure during Peru's recent economic growth. Oxygen is scarce, with cylinders selling for more than \$1,000 on the black market; access to decreasing quantities of medicine is limited; and unemployment and poverty are on the rise, along with food insecurity, for a great majority of the population.

The rise in case numbers triggered the government's ordering the return to strict quarantine for 20 of the 25 regions, resumption of the national Sunday lockdowns with a longer curfew, the prohibition of family gatherings, and the reduction of daily outside time for children from one hour to 30 minutes. In the midst of this, Jose and our family are mourning the loss of his father, who died of COVID-19 in mid-August. No. I am definitely not in control of my surroundings or the trajectory of the coronavirus during these times.

But as PERUSA, we continue to make lists and positive use of the opportunities we have despite the situation we are facing. We have been given the chance to have deeper conversations with our partners and learn more about them, their institutions, and also, to see their faith in action.

Pastors of our partner, the Evangelical Church of Peru (IEP), have not received a steady income since the pandemic began, as in-person worship services are prohibited, and offerings that provide their salary are not being taken. Despite this, many pastors continue to maintain contact with their members in different ways.

We spoke with Germán Arisaca, a member of the IEP church in Ayaviri (Puno) and the president of the session. He told us that, despite the members' desire to return to worship, the Ayaviri leadership has been clear that the Ayaviri members must follow the national laws. As Christians, they explained, they are called to be examples of "faithful witness," doing what is required to care for the whole community and not just the individual, to reduce the risk of spreading COVID-19. Even when sheltering in place, they must pray, encourage, and strengthen each other during this time of suffering. More than ever, this is needed as Puno, which had few cases in the first months of the pandemic, has just seen a great increase in cases and deaths these past months.

Eduardo Arboccó Gallardo, an IEP pastor in Lima who founded the Society of Christian Life, a partner of Joining Hands Peru, also calls his church a witness during these challenging times. His congregation in the neighborhood, Ingeniería, though not open for worship services, opens its virtual doors to its members and the greater community through worship, prayer services, and Sunday School classes. They have also opened their literal doors to two Venezuelan families, who are members of the church but could not afford housing during the pandemic. With the support of Joining Hands Peru, the church was also able to support other Venezuelan refugees and vulnerable church members by purchasing and delivering food baskets.

With these actions, Eduardo reminds his congregation that "la iglesia no es el templo." *The church is not the building.* Though his savings run low and his fear is high, his faith remains strong as he unwaveringly tells us that the church must continue to move forward during these difficult times. Now is the time to evangelize, to hear God's call, and share God's love through our actions; however, one can.

No, I am not in control. But seeing our partners' faithful witness of God's love, justice, peace, and strength, I know and trust that God, who moves through, within, and around us, most certainly is.

So, as we continue through this pandemic and I continue to adjust my reactions and learn to let go and trust, even more, I give thanks for your accompaniment and prayers that are our daily strength throughout these difficult times.

Thank you for walking with us in partnership as we are reminded that ‘la iglesia no es templo,’ but is so much greater – going beyond self-imposed walls to embody the compassion, love, and justice of God through Jesus.

In faith, trust and peace, Chenoa



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