

EL CAMINO SOLIDARIO

<THE PATH OF SOLIDARITY>

MISSION NEWSLETTER FROM KATE LAWLER AND DAVID WUNSCH

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Living in God's amazing grace

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Do you know a young person who might be interested in the YAGM Program? The application for 2007-2008 is due in February 2007 and can be found at: <http://www.elca.org/globalserve/youngadults/index.html>.

Knowing Our Neighbors at 36,000 Feet

I never did get her name, but her story will stay with me for the rest of my life. I was the first to board the plane from Santa Cruz, Bolivia to Buenos Aires that day, my seatmate was not far behind. As she sat down, I looked over to smile a silent greeting and noticed that she was looking anxiously out the window. "I'm afraid they won't put my dog on the plane", she said, intently following the vehicles scurrying around the tarmac. We chatted amiably about pets and flying and how it can be so very complicated. A few minutes later she verified that the dog was in the luggage hold. She seemed to relax a little. Several hours of silence followed.

Like many frequent travelers, I wait until the plane is descending before striking up conversations with my neighbors. "What took you to Bolivia?" I asked her. I was curious. An elderly Argentine woman traveling alone with her dog to Bolivia. "I'm looking for a house in Cochabamba. I will be moving there. There are some Bolivian friends that are helping me," she replied. She paused as her expression changed from polite to pained. "You see, I am all alone. Last year my daughter died of cancer. She was only 34. I lost my son during the dictatorship. They came one night for him and I never saw him again. Yes, I am one of the mothers of the disappeared who march around the Plaza de Mayo. That little dog is all I have left." She looked ahead, the tears coming, and then continued. "For me, there is no God. How could there be a God who would allow these things to happen?"

A bell sounded and the "Fasten Seat Belt" sign came on. The plane was descending, though not nearly as deep and as far as she was into her own pain. I sat praying to a God that knew the deepest of hurts, persecutions, and rejection by His own people, hoping that this Jesus could be a balm to her, even when for her God is so far away.

"Even though I walk through the darkest valley, I fear no evil; for you are with me; your rod and your staff — they comfort me." Psalm 23: 4

Please pray for her, for everyone who feels utterly alone, and for the unlikely Good Samaritans who like the Bolivian family, sweep the lonely and excluded up into their loving arms. May they know a God of love, compassion, and justice. Amen. (David)

A Journey Begins

A central part of Kate's work is to coordinate the Young Adults in Global Mission Program (YAGM) in Argentina and Uruguay. After nearly a year of preparation, on August 30 we were thrilled to greet our first group of volunteers at the Buenos Aires airport.

The ELCA's YAGM Program is a leadership development program that offers opportunities for young leaders (ages 21-30 for the Argentina program) in the church to grow in faith and global understanding through a year-long international mission experience.



Young Adults in Global Mission (YAGM) in Argentina and Uruguay (2006-2007) arriving in Buenos Aires. From left to right: Stacey Siebrasse, Meredith Johnson, Justin Haaheim, Carrie Smart, Rachel Dexter and Lesley Johnson.

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YAGM volunteers will be working in the following areas: supporting youth ministries at a Lutheran congregation in La Plata (Stacey); working on human rights and gender issues as well as helping with children's programs in a shantytown outside of Buenos Aires (Rachel); starting a tutoring program at a Lutheran mission in northern Argentina (Lesley); working at a youth development center and assisting with Lutheran music ministries (Justin); working on youth programs at an ecumenical organization and with women at a Lutheran church program in a poor neighborhood in Montevideo, Uruguay (Meredith); and living and working in a faith-based community where people with disabilities and people without disabilities live together in solidarity (Carrie).

A concept central to the ELCA's accompaniment model for mission, is "walking together in a solidarity that is characterized by interdependence and mutuality." We are reflecting a lot on how this idea applies to the Young Adult in Global Mission Program. If we are working toward relationships of solidarity that break away from the historic North-South dynamics that have always favored the global north, then the YAGM program cannot only be an investment of resources and opportunities in the young people who come from the United States.

Instead, through the program we are seeking to have a broader reach, developing networks and relationships that feed into local processes of leadership development, spiritual transformation, and awareness raising in our companion church and other partners.



Weaving Webs of Solidarity: During our orientation, we participated in an interactive workshop on peace and violence together with a group of Argentine volunteers who are working in Barrio Providencia, a shantytown on the outskirts of Buenos Aires (represented by the three young men in the back row). Our host was the human rights organization, Service, Peace and Justice (SERPAJ) founded by Argentine Nobel Peace Prize winner Adolfo Pérez Esquivel. Rachel (far left on bottom row) will be volunteering in Barrio Providencia and SERPAJ so this is just the beginning of our relation-



Blessed with wonderful singing voices, our group practices a hymn for a worship service at the ecumenical seminary where we had our 10-day orientation.

OUR YAGM PROGRAM YEAR WILL BE SHAPED AROUND THE FOLLOWING FIVES THEMES:

- 1) Personal and Spiritual Growth** as we gain awareness of our own and others' gifts, vulnerability, and faith journey, we create space for God's spirit to transform us and deepen our capacity to be leaders who connect with others through our shared humanity;
- 2) Awareness-raising** around globalization; economic justice; gender; environment; sustainable development; human rights and the structural causes of injustice;
- 3) Reflections on "peace making" leadership** that is inspired by our faith and shared humanity and grounded in horizontal relationships and networks of solidarity rather than in vertical structures of power and control;
- 4) Reflections on the role of church in society** as we grow in our awareness of global issues, we will reflect upon the role of the church in society and the potential that our churches have to be spaces of transformation;
- 5) Theological and Biblical approaches** that inform and guide our process of awareness-raising, spiritual growth, leadership development and reflections on the role of church in society.



YAGM volunteer Meredith Johnson with Pepa Noia, founder of the Madres de la Plaza de Mayo. Pepa's daughter Lourdes, along with 30,000 other Argentines disappeared during the military dictatorship from 1976-1983.