

# EL CAMINO SOLIDARIO

<THE PATH OF SOLIDARITY>

MISSION NEWSLETTER FROM KATE LAWLER AND DAVID WUNSCH

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## Finding God's Love at the Cross



Living in God's amazing grace

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Each time Kate and I sit to compose our newsletter we find that when telling about the joys, challenges, and wonders so evident in the "mission story" of our companion churches in South America, we are also called upon to describe the suffering that is manifest all around us, especially among those who are excluded, marginalized and stigmatized by society.

This edition of our newsletter focuses on the Lutheran church in Bolivia. Bolivia is one of the poorest countries in Latin America. Few statistics capture the tremendous suffering and hardship endured by a significant part of Bolivia's population, especially its Quechua and Aymara peoples, along with others whose diversity is symbolized in Bolivia's rainbow flag. However, every year the United Nations (UN) issues a "Human Development ranking," a tool which attempts to measure hardship and suffering, or a least a lack of access to basic necessities that promote human development. In 2006 Bolivia was ranked 115 out of 177 countries in the world. This means that in Bolivia there is a lower life expectancy, less access to primary and secondary education, a greater probability of not surviving past age 40, more illiterate adults, less access to clean drinking water and more underweight children than in the majority of nations of the world. Think of these statistics when you read about Lucy and Julio in the piece below.

Luther wrote that the "love of the cross (...) turns in the direction where it does not find good that it may enjoy, but where it may confer good upon the bad and needy person." In this sense, we are all "bad and needy," a status that puts us at one with our neighbors across the street or across continents in Bolivia and elsewhere. At the cross the joyous message rings out that God's love for us is an offer of saving grace for all humanity — if only we accept it as a wonderful gift. Marked by the cross and its suffering, we are reborn and let Christ work through us, as we love goodness and justice, and work to reverse the course of statistics that reduce the bountiful life that God desires for all of creation.

## Bolivia's "Mission to the East": Telling the Good News Story in New Places

Lucy and Julio are the faces of the Bolivian Evangelical Lutheran Church (IELB) mission efforts. They are faithful members of the *Centro Luterano Galilea* in Cobija, a city in the Amazonian region of Bolivia that borders Peru and Brazil.

So, what is it about the Lutheran church that is so important for Lucy and her son, Julio? Lucy came to Cobija to escape a difficult domestic situation in La Paz. The *Galilea* community has welcomed her and offered her a spiritual home. In the traditional Quechua and Aymara cultures of the Bolivian Highlands, adults are usually only fully accepted into society when married. At *Galilea*, the full expression of Christ's love has broken through society's exclusions, as Lucy and her son have been warmly embraced.

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Lucy and Julio are two new members of the mission in Cobija. They are pictured with the goods sold in Lucy's store.

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Today, with 23,000 members and 130 congregations mostly in the highlands areas around La Paz, the IELB is the largest Amer-Indian church in the Western Hemisphere. At the same time, Bolivia is a multicultural nation that is undergoing dramatic changes, especially in rapidly growing lowland areas to the north and east of La Paz. These warmer, sub-tropical cities, like Santa Cruz and Cobija, are Bolivia's economic engines and are attracting an influx of new migrants seeking better economic opportunities. These are the areas where the IELB wants to grow.



Members of *Fe y Esperanza* (Faith and Hope) in Santa Cruz stand before a quilt, a gift from the Montana Synod.

Mision Oriente is the IELB's effort to plant faith communities in these newly developing parts of the country. *Galilea* in Cobija and *Fe y Esperanza* in Santa Cruz are emblematic of the IELB's approach to mission. A few years ago IELB mission workers were sent to live in the impoverished, marginalized neighbourhood where the *Galilea* is now located. Simultaneously, funds were used to build a multiuse hall for worship, meetings, and after-school activities.



Members of *Galilea* welcome a group from the Montana Synod for worship, fellowship, temple construction, and a round of soccer in the Amazonian heat.

At the same time, *Galilea* has access to IELB programs that offer economic opportunities for its members and the communities they live in. Lucy received a 300-dollar microcredit loan from the IELB, which she will pay back with interest. She used these funds to purchase a freezer for her store. Now she sells cold drinks, a product much in demand in an area where electricity is still scarce. This investment boosted her sales and household income.

Like most of *Galilea's* neighbors, Lucy's house is very humble. Lucy and Julio do not have running water. They are considered lucky because a well sits in the backyard from which water is extracted by hand. Many neighbors must fetch water several times a day from the tank that sits on *Galilea's* roof. The alternative is to bathe and wash clothes in the river a long walk away.

To consolidate this growing Lutheran community, *Galilea* needs improved on-site housing for its mission workers. A parsonage would help the IELB maintain a continuous pastoral presence at *Galilea*. While funds are available to finish the church, none are available for the parsonage. Construction of the parsonage will cost 10,000 dollars.

As you pray for the IELB mission efforts in Cobija and elsewhere in Bolivia, please consider supporting the construction of the parsonage. For more information about how to provide funds directly for the parsonage, please send an e-mail to David at [david.wunsch@elca.org](mailto:david.wunsch@elca.org).

**A SPECIAL THANK YOU** to all of our sponsoring congregations for your continued support over the past twelve months, our first year of mission service. The opportunity to serve in this way has been a gracious gift and a privilege. We would also like to wish everyone a very blessed Christmas, as this will be our last communication before the New Year. Keep us in your prayers as we travel back to the United States for a month to visit family and friends — and for a little break. We would also like to direct a word of thanks to one of our sponsoring congregations, **St. Paul's—Borchers** in Seymour, Indiana, for their generous gifts to our companions in Chile and Peru. Borchers made Huch Uy Runa, an ELCA companion in Peru, the beneficiary of their 2006 mission festival, raising over \$1,900 to provide education and training to indigent boys and girls in Cusco, Peru. They also raised \$1,350 for the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Chile (IELCH)'s Buen Samaritano Nursery School. Thank you Borchers!