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Cross-Cultural Program - Wider Horizons: Reflections on my Peru Experience

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This past February, ten Canadian Lutherans traveled to Peru in the Cross-Cultural program of Lutheran Theological Seminary, Saskatoon. What an experience it was! Our group comprised five students — Nathan Fong, Rebecca Graham, Daranne Mills, Fran Schmidt, and Ali Tote; one alumnus - Doug Scott; two members of the faculty — Eddie Kwok and Jann Boyd; and two members of the staff of Canadian Lutheran World Relief (hereafter “CLWR”) - Sophie Gebreyes and Irma McKenzie.

Our adventure began with farewells from the Seminary community on February 13th. From Saskatoon, we traveled to Lima, via Winnipeg, Toronto, and Atlanta, Georgia. Some 18 hours later we arrived in the late evening and were greeted by two staff from CLWR offices in Peru.

The sites, the smells, the sounds, the humidity in the air, were all new sensations in this strange, new place. The obvious ironies of Lima were striking: the natural beauty of the landscape contrasting with twelve-foot high concrete walls surrounding most homes and businesses. It was impossible to miss, atop the concrete, barbed wire or electrified wiring, with surveillance cameras at each corner. Armed guards with bullet-proof vests in every bank contrasted with the money exchangers out in the open on almost every street corner.

The economic divide between the wealthy and poor is most obvious. Most Peruvians are struggling to meet basic needs and they certainly live in substandard conditions, well below what we would consider to be a poverty line. People were constantly approaching us, trying to sell us some goods or services. Local congregations work to provide after-school programs, meal programs, and offer tutoring for children in school. Canadian Lutheran World Relief sponsors a program that offers extra-curricular education to students, who work through an in-house radio program designed to enhance

communication skills. CLWR also devotes resources to promoting gender equality.

As we drove north of Cajamarca through the highlands of the Andes mountain ranges, with its rich vegetation, mountain springs, rivers, and waterfalls, we were struck once again by the amazing natural beauty of the country. But it's no paradise — at least not anymore. We visited several potential mining sites, Cerro Quilisch and Cerro Negro. CLWR is working with several advocacy and educational organizations to empower the *campesinos* (peasant farmers) to fight against the mining companies who want to exploit these mountains. Serious environmental damage is caused by mine waste. There aren't enough environmental laws in place, and those that exist are often not enforced. We were saddened by the devastation wrought by two mining sites — devastation caused by American, Canadian, and even Peruvian companies. In Choropompa we heard stories of people affected by a mercury spill several years ago, a spill for which the Yanacocha mine has not taken full responsibility. CLWR is working as an advocate for the people in this situation.

Our three “touristy” days took us to the southern parts of Peru and as close to the tropical Amazon basin as we would get. We visited Cuzco, Aguas Calientes, Machu Picchu (ancient Inca ruins), and the Sacred Valley. We visited several archeological sites, museums, and churches, and learned about the history of the Inca people and the conquest of the Spanish conquistadors.

Toward the end of our trip, we drove through Cerro Blanca (White Mountains) near Huaraz, with its glacial peaks, a popular tourist destination for Europeans. We saw the work of Diaconia and Urpichallay, educational and advocacy organizations that are sponsored by CLWR. Our visit in the area took us to two farming communities, Escalon and Vicos, to witness “new” farming methods. These new farming methods are actually going back several hundred years, to teach farmers the ancient techniques, that helped soil erosion and depletion, making canals for irrigation, crop rotation, and composting.

As Lima was our home-base, we spent several days in this coastal desert. Lima's coast is lined with beaches, exclusive clubs, and soccer fields. The temperature there was 33 degrees Celsius, and the relative humidity was 99%. We were informed that rainfall is rare. This was

quite a contrast to our experiences at higher elevations, where the air was cooler and drier.

Peru is also a land of ethnic diversity. This was as true for the farming communities of Llappa, Choropompa, Escalon, and Vicos, as it was for the streets of Lima, Cajamarca, Cusco, and Huaraz. There is racial diversity in the faces of the people, reflecting the original indigenous population, the influence of Spanish and broader European colonialization of past centuries, and more recent Japanese and African immigration.

Wherever we went, we were warmly and graciously welcomed. Whether sharing a meal at a first-class restaurant or on a mountainside, Peruvians were generous in their hosting. They honoured us as Canadians who came as part of a CLWR delegation. Having seen the work of CLWR and its positive impact on the lives of Peruvians, I have never felt prouder to be a Canadian Lutheran!

It's easy to see only the economic struggles and hardships of a developing nation. But there is so much more to the country and its people. Peru's wealth includes its rich history, heritage, cultural diversity, and incredible beauty... but especially in the strength, hope, and faith of its people.

Our two-week adventure was an intense experience. We were to learn, in this experience, the effects of globalization, and yet, we learned so much more. We came to see first-hand the work of CLWR and came to realize the importance of continuing to support the efforts of CLWR worldwide. We learned about a foreign country and gained a new appreciation for our way of life and the conveniences we take for granted. We learned about the discrimination and injustices toward Peruvian farmers and indigenous peoples and were confronted with the biases we hold. We learned of the human and environmental impacts of globalization, and came to realize that the effects are apparent not only in developing countries but here in Canada as well.

This experience has a huge impact on our understanding of our own ministries, for we have witnessed the effects of God's grace in some of the most devastating situations. We have been inspired by the strength, hope and faith of a people who are surviving despite their hardships. It makes our problems seem miniscule; moreover, we are strengthened in our resolve to work — not for ourselves, but for the sake of Jesus Christ and the Gospel; for the sake of justice, equality, and peace for all people.

The words of the apocalyptic seer ring in my ears: “Then the angel showed me the river of the water of life, bright as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb through the middle of the street of the city. On either side of the river is the tree of life with its twelve kinds of fruit, producing its fruit each month; and the leaves of the tree are for the healing of the nations.” (Revelation 22:1-2)