

A LIGHT IN MOUNTAINS OF DARKNESS

By Chris Turner
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Lucila Huamani (wah-MAHN-ee) is a widow. She faithfully maintains God's house every week and puts fresh flowers at the altar. On Sundays, she opens the church, reads her Bible, prays, and sings hymns. Many weeks she's the only one there. She daily faces ridicule from neighbors for her Christianity. She perseveres. Her prayer request is that the church will one day be filled and that the gospel will spread across the mountains that surround her village of Machahuay (mah-CHAH-why). Pray that God will reward her faith by granting her prayer request.

VIRACO, Peru – Julissa knelt beside her daddy and urged him to get back on the donkey. He'd collapsed by the side of the road, torso in the bushes, legs and feet stretched out into the dusty mountain road.

"C'mon Papi. We need to go home."

But he was barely conscious and unable to move, a stupor brought on from a morning of heavy drinking.

Julissa's plight is not that uncommon from many other children living in the isolated Andean Mountains of Peru where there is a high level of alcoholism among men. Much of the bacchanalia centers around the veneration of Catholic saints, such as Saint Ursula, who is the patron saint of the town of Viraco (vee-RAH-co), located in the shadows of the dormant volcano, Coropuna.

Saint Ursula is uniquely recognizable. Most female Catholic saints have crowns atop their heads. Not Ursula. She wears a cowgirl hat. Legend has it that Ursula appeared to the Inca people here in the 1500s to warn them of an impending Spanish ambush. The people rallied and defeated the Spanish, solidifying Ursula's significance in perpetuity.

Far from being a protector, however, she is a slave owner, the visual representation of the spiritual bondage that shackles these Inca descendants who are scattered like lost sheep among the massively imposing mountains. Eventually, the Spanish conquered their ancestors and imposed Catholicism as

an alternative to death. Most took the deal, but more than five centuries later, if you scratch the surface of this brand of Catholicism, you find a commitment to the animistic worship of the sun, earth, moon, and stars. The Inca religion is alive and well and creates an odd mix with Catholic traditionalism that often manifests itself in these drunken celebrations that invite vast numbers from across the countryside.

“The prevailing attitude is fear,” said Greg Danford, a volunteer stateside strategy coordinator from Wrightsboro (N.C.) Baptist Church, working to spread the gospel in this region. Wrightsboro is one church of a small partnership of churches that have adopted this area and these people. There is currently a weak evangelical presence at best, and the few Christians here face persecution and crave discipleship.

“The fear comes from the control the priests hold over the people and from the superstition related to the mix of religions,” Danford said. “Christians who don’t participate in the rituals and celebrations face reprisals such as the irrigation water to their crops being cut off.”

Danford was part of a five-man hiking team trekking to about 10 remote villages seeking to better understand the spiritual and physical needs of the people. It’s a grueling exercise to get to these isolated locations connected by rugged trails and elevation changes of several thousand feet. Given the vastness, Danford’s team looked like a band of marching ants against the backdrop of imposing mountains.

But beyond the isolation, another challenge of working here is overcoming the suspicion people have of outsiders, especially Caucasians.

“It is easy to understand their suspicion considering that to a large degree we look like their conquerors,” said Lynn Frankland, Wrightsboro’s field strategy coordinator. “They’ve heard a lot of myths about us over the years. Another issue is that evangelicals have a history of showing up, creating changes, disappearing, and never coming back. That’s what they expect. Part of building trust is showing them that we are committed to them.”

Information gathered on the trip will be used to develop a strategy for enhancing that commitment. The number of people professing Christ in these scattered little villages is miniscule by comparison to non-Christians. Both Danford and Frankland said that it is important to find “people of peace” who can be a foundation for both growing as disciples and becoming missionaries advancing the gospel to places and in ways stateside volunteers couldn’t.

The good news is that despite the spiritual darkness that blankets this region, there are some rays of gospel light. For instance, there is a family living in a remote area that is a bit of a crossroads between the market town of Viraco and distant villages. All the members of the family are believers, are interested in growing in faith through discipleship training, and are interested in their home being a center for gospel advance.

And then there is Lucila Huamani (wah-MAHN-ee), a widow whose husband was the pastor of a small evangelical church in the village of Machahuay (mah-CHAH-

why). He died eight years ago but she prepares the church every week, places fresh flowers at the altar, and opens the doors for any who will come. She straightens the benches, prays, reads her Bible, and sings hymns. Many weeks Lucila is the only person present.

“I pray that God will send someone to lead the church,” she said. “And that this church will become a place that shares the truth of Jesus Christ in this entire area.”

Danford said the road ahead will be difficult because of the challenges but he also felt confident that the people were hungry to hear the gospel. It will take a consistent presence and a focused strategy, he said, and that if anyone was interested in knowing more about the needs in this area or about participating with Wrightsboro he can be contacted at gregdanford@gmail.com.

– Turner, a former IMB missionary, served on the five-member team in Peru.