

Reconnecting in Ecuador

Brethren share faith and memories with a small

Ecuador—land of the equator, and the Andes, and the rain forest, and the Brethren. And the Brethren? We don't hear much anymore about the churches begun by Church of the Brethren missions in Ecuador. But several recent contacts by US Brethren with the church "El Mesías" in Llano Grande give witness that a vital faith community was nurtured into being by Brethren missionaries and volunteers in Ecuador.

Although small in membership and no longer officially Brethren, the congregation El Mesías is mighty in spirit and integrity and, like its mother church, wields an influence much larger than its numbers would suggest. They have sent a message to the US Brethren that it is my privilege to share with you. First some background.

From 1942 until 1965, the Church of the Brethren was directly involved in Brethren Service and mission work in Ecuador. This included development of a boys club in Quito, followed by a rural mission program among the Quichua Indians of the Calderon Valley. The mission included evangelism, agricultural improvement, elementary and adult literacy, and public health. Llano Grande was the first of six congregations that were developed. In 1965, during the time of indigenization of world missions, the Brethren congregations joined with others to form the United Evangelical Church of Ecuador.

In January 2002 our family had the opportunity to visit and worship with the congregation in Llano Grande. Our daughter Margo was a Brethren Colleges Abroad (BCA) student living in Quito for the year. We had planned a trip to visit her as soon as we learned that she

was going. Having worked in the General Board's Latin America office during the 1970s, I was aware of some of our Ecuadoran history and was eager to make contact with people there.

A chance meeting with Ralph Detrick, co-pastor of the Elizabethtown, Pa., congregation, provided the connections. Ralph had been in Brethren Volunteer Service in Llano Grande in 1963. He and his family had just returned from a 10-day trip to Ecuador as Margo was preparing to go. Ralph had a marvelous reunion with the folks there. He found that the work and values of the Brethren were still deeply appreciated and integrated into the lives of the people. And he found the people at Llano Grande to be very hungry and eager for contact with the Brethren.

After getting settled into her life in Quito, Margo and a BCA friend who was doing some volunteer work in Llano Grande looked up the church on a Sunday morning. "I introduced myself as a friend of Ralph Detrick and they welcomed us with open arms," she reports. "That began a relationship that lasted through my year. The congregation is small—regular attendance was 10-15 adults and children each Sunday. We always sat in a circle for worship. We prayed, we sang, we discussed meaningful things, and we listened to the preacher or the chosen speaker. Without fail I could feel God's presence among us."

During Ralph's visit, he learned that the congregation had few photos or written records of their early history. When he learned that Margo would be going to Quito



Nathan Shull

Benton Rhoades with Enrique Tasiguano and his granddaughter.

church in Llano Grande by Peggy Reiff Miller

and that we were planning a trip to visit her, Ralph collected photos from Brethren who had served in Llano Grande, as well as MESSENGER articles and newspaper clippings about some of the local people and key events. It was a very moving encounter when we delivered these during our January 2002 trip.

We were hosted for lunch after church by Enrique Tasiguano and his sister, Mercedes Tasiguano Guaman, who were teenagers when Ralph was a BVSer there. Mercedes was the subject of one of the MESSENGER articles (Feb. 4, 1965) about her tradition-breaking struggles as a Quichua woman to gain her high school and teaching diplomas. Enrique's and Mercedes' young adult children were eager to see the photos and articles of their parents and ancestors. They were seeing their history for the first time.

Ralph also sent with us a video made from a film that was shown to the Church of the Brethren 1970 Annual Conference about the work in Ecuador. It included footage of Raúl Tasiguano, a brother of Enrique and Mercedes. Raúl was a leader in organizing the indigenous people of Llano Grande in a nonviolent struggle against oppressions they were experiencing. He was assassinated after the movie was filmed. One of the MESSENGER articles Ralph sent (June 15, 1971) was about the parallel stories of Raúl and of Ted Studebaker, a young Brethren man doing nonviolent service in Vietnam who was killed about the same time. As the family watched the video, the younger generation was seeing their Uncle Raúl and their history for the first time. It was an

incredibly moving and humbling experience to be present for that moment.

We had also taken with us as a gift for the congregation one of the tagline posters of the Church of the Brethren: Continuing the work of Jesus. Peacefully. Simply. Together. As the words of the poster were translated, the congregation resonated very strongly with its message. As they had to Ralph, they expressed to us their very deep appreciation and gratitude for the presence and influence of the Brethren in their lives. Even though they no longer have an official connection, they are still at heart Brethren.

Germán Guamán, one of the younger generation who is a very skilled and impressive leader of the congregation, took us on a tour of Llano Grande after lunch. He showed us the valley below the village, which bears one small example of what the Brethren did for the people of Llano Grande. The plots of land in the valley which had originally belonged to the families of Llano Grande were taken over at some time in the past by a white man. Mercedes helped to organize a group of women who successfully, against great odds, re-claimed the deeds to the land, and now each family has its own plot back. The missionaries had enabled the church members to claim their identity as indigenous Quichua people and develop the strength to fight for liberation and justice.

The struggles against oppression continue. The city of Quito wanted to claim the gorge in the valley below the village for a garbage dump until village residents




"Tía" (Aunt) Maria Tasiguano, a Llano Grande church elder.

Margo returned home in May 2002 from her year in Ecuador with a gift from the people of the El Mesías congregation for the Church of the Brethren and a request. The request was for assistance in the fight against the garbage dump. The gift was a representation of the rainbow-colored flag the indigenous communities of Ecuador have claimed as a sign of hope and promise. To this, they had attached pictures of their community and Ecuador, along with explanatory notes. The gift was presented to the Church of the Brethren General Board during its meeting in October.

Margo told board members: "The gift was presented with words I often heard. They talked of how wonderful the Church of the Brethren people were, of how much they gave to the community, and of how much they helped the people learn to work for change and be conscientious. They remember individuals fondly and the whole church as a very special part of their history."

In a letter to the Brethren who had worked in Ecuador, Ralph Detrick wrote, "Repeatedly I was asked to tell 'you all' what a difference you made. We were not like other missionaries; we respected Indian culture and empowered them.... There were words of deep appreciation for Brethren friends in Christ who made a difference. Their last words to us were, 'Please tell everyone that we are forever grateful.'" And they said the same to us. And we say the same to you.

But the story does not end there. It continues with the trip of Benton Rhoades and his grandson, Nate Shull, who in November were able to meet with the people of Llano Grande and share ideas about the garbage dump issue and others that face indigenous peoples. And it will continue May 30-June 8 this year, when a Church of the Brethren young adult work-camp will be going to Ecuador. Campers will spend a portion of their time working side by side with the Llano Grande El Mesías congregation on projects and worshipping there. 

Peggy Reiff Miller is a former member of the Church of the Brethren General Board. She is a freelance writer living in Milford, Ind.



General Secretary Judy Mills Reimer accepts a gift from Ecuador presented by Peggy Reiff Miller and Margo Miller.