

EL CAMINO SOLIDARIO

<THE PATH OF SOLIDARITY>

MISSION NEWSLETTER FROM KATE LAWLER AND DAVID WUNSCH

March/April 2007

Thirsting for Living Water



Living in God's amazing grace

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There is a woman — let's call her Paula — that I have met many times over as I have visited churches in our South American region. Paula is usually the first to offer to fill my plate or cup at the community meal, or is the one making sure there is a Bible, a pencil and some paper at each place around the prayer table. She comes early and stays late. Both her presence and absence are deeply felt. Paula most likely works at least two jobs, though neither is lifting her out of poverty. Her simple house in the *barrio* is well kept and clean, but very humble. As I step into her house, I realize the man she introduces to me as her "husband" may not be the father of the children standing beside her. Most likely, violence — in one form or another — has been present in her life since the beginning. Paula is the head, heart, soul, feet, hands, and backbone of the Lutheran church in South America.

Paula is the Samaritan woman at the well. Theologian Jean Vanier describes how moving it is to see how Christ — rather than judging or being morally condescending toward the woman at the well — engages her in a theological discussion, chooses her as His missionary, transforms her with His living water, and sets her on a path where she in turn gives life to others. As surely as she is real, she is also a symbol of brokenness, of the world's brokenness and our own. We are all the woman at the well. A tired and vulnerable Jesus reveals to us that if we drink from God's fountain of love and compassion, we ourselves will be converted into life-giving fountains of love and compassion. Through His encounter with the woman at the well, Jesus "converts" her, but she in turn converts us over and over again. Recognizing the sin that separates her from a loving, compassionate God, the woman at the well empties herself of this chaos, making room for the living water which alone can satisfy her deep thirst for forgiveness and acceptance.

During this Easter season, please join me in praying for the thousands of Paulas that give life in abundance to the Lutheran churches in Latin America and all over the world. Pray for her strength in times of weakness, her courage in the face of danger, and her love for others in a world of hate. As we pray together, we will discover a thirst for Christ's living water that Christ Crucified so freely shares with us so that we may be free to live in God's wondrous grace. *David*

The Transforming Power of a Ministry to People Living with HIV/AIDS

In downtown Buenos Aires, in a neighborhood that tourists don't frequent and that has seen better days, stands a building that houses a most remarkable ELCA-supported ministry of our companion church in Argentina: *El Hostal Solidario*, or *The Solidarity Hostel*. At its heart, this ministry is not about a place or this terrible disease (HIV/AIDS) that ravages the immune system and in many cases still leads to death, or even the pastoral accompaniment provided there. Instead, it is about the transforming presence of the HIV positive young men who live there, and what this presence means for the Lutheran church in Argentina and Lutherans around the world.

Not long after arriving in Argentina to serve as Lutheran missionaries in the ELCA, we made our first visit to the *Hostal* to meet with this ministry's leader, Pastor Lisandro. After a year and a half serving in Argentina,



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we have made several return visits. What we have slowly realized is that the *Hostal* is a place where the core components of our faith and our theological understanding of church and mission are not only challenged, but turned on their heads. It is also a place where our faith grows.

So why is this? Why is this ministry to mostly low income, socially marginalized, gay and straight, HIV positive men more than simply one more example of how congregations provide the support to directly care for those who have tremendous needs. Without a doubt, the *Hostal* is this, but it is much more, and this cannot be lost on us.

As Jesus did throughout his life, this ministry invites us to put people in a preferential place over the "Law" that excludes, shames, judges and betrays. Martin Luther wrote that Jesus should not be transformed into Moses, the bearer of the Ten Commandments. In His life and deeds, Jesus testified to "loving our neighbors as ourselves", a new commandment that sits above all the others. This radical new love puts us into a new relationship with the God of Love heretofore unknown to the world.

Accepting God's love for us and others is a challenge for the church, because HIV/AIDS and the people who live with this disease are in many ways "taboo" and threatening to us because of who they are and how they may have acquired the disease, be it through drugs or sex. By sitting with the Samaritan women at the well and inviting the children to come to Him, Jesus makes citizens of people that society has placed at its margins. But the ultimate destination of the Gospel's message of liberation and transformation is not only us, but the societies we live in and are compelled to shape into more inclusive, compassionate and just places. A necessary step toward changing our societies is the transformation of our churches.



Pastor Lisandro Orlov, pictured with residents of the Hostal Solidario and ELCA Young Adult in Global Mission volunteers (and Kate, David and Daisy the dog)

Direct ministry in places and among people who suffer tremendously also invites a very deep reflection that begins with Christ's own words: "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me." (Mark 15: 34) These words that come from the darkest places of anguish and despair are deeply human and are marked by the abandonment that Christ knew on the cross and that we all can experience, especially when we suffer.

Christ's words on the cross invite deep questions about suffering in the world, in our lives, and how we are to understand it — or not. The *Hostal's* ministry shows us that we should have these questions, sit with them for a while, and not seek cheap and easy answers to them. But more than this, it shows us that the way of the wounded, suffering Christ is the same path that will take us to the light, joy and freedom of the resurrected Christ. This path is the conversion we seek. Not the conversion of others, but the gradual conversion of ourselves and our church as we seek to become children of the Light, of a Lord who does not fear accepting the hand of a leper or the way we may be transformed by someone living with HIV/AIDS.

Excerpt from Pastor Lisandro Orlov sermon on parable of the "The Prodigal Son" (Luke 15)

"Today we find ourselves with the same invitation (as that received by the Prodigal son) and still many of us are angry because of such unconditional love from God. I think that a great part of our task with the HIV/AIDS epidemic is to leave the party, to come close to the brothers and sisters who think that they are not the prodigal son and daughter and convince them to overcome their anger and convince them to enter and participate in the party.

We will never know how this parable ended. The final reaction of the older brother will always be a hidden mystery in the most profound sense of the story. However, whether or not we accept the invitation that today this same Father extends to us to enter and celebrate the party of inclusivity, we will always know that it is celebrated in the space where those who want to be faithful to Jesus of Nazareth gather. Let's celebrate because God has broken all apartheid of purity, of orthodoxy, of sexual orientations, of stigmas, and of different oppressions.

What will we do so that this parable has a happy ending? Will we accept the invitation of the Father or will we continue angry until the end of time? This is the mystery of our personal and community response."

See and hear Rev. Orlov at the 2006 ELCA Global Mission Event: www.elca.org/gme/GME%202006/video/video02.html