

MISSION IN CONTEXT IN NORTHERN ARGENTINA

Province of Misiones

Let justice roll down like the waters and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream. (Amos 5:24)

Mission in Context

In Argentina's northeastern province of Misiones, the United Evangelical Lutheran Church in Argentina and Uruguay (IELU) is prayerfully discerning the local, national and global factors that are shaping the lives of its congregations and surrounding communities. By carrying out its mission with a keen awareness of this context, the church is better able to reach people in their daily struggles and joys, and to transform the realities that lead to injustice, the loss of human dignity, and the destruction of nature.¹

Misiones is part of one of Argentina's poorest regions. Despite the rich natural resources that bless this region, these resources have not been used to promote sustainable development and human dignity. Instead, unjust chains of production for the region's principal agricultural products impoverish local farmers and put sovereignty and control in the hands of large companies. These companies engage in ongoing deforestation, withhold properties that belong to the native population, negotiate the installation of dams without local consultation and consent, and install waste transfer plants rather than recycling materials. All of this is done with the silent compliance of public officials.

In the face of this bleak agricultural picture, many families who have farmed for decades are either eking out subsistence wages under the control of large companies, or selling their farms and moving to cities where they continue to face poverty because they lack the skills to earn a decent urban wage.



These children are from a family of tea growers. Large companies buy their produce for a subsistence wage and require the farmers to use toxins that are detrimental to humans and the environment.



The IELU accompanies small farmers in their struggle to regain sovereignty over their land and the agriculture that their families have practiced for decades.

Theological Motivation

Within a context where many people feel that their lives are driven by forces beyond their control, the IELU faces the challenge of keeping hope alive as individuals and communities struggle to realize the rights and dignity that God intends for all Creation.

By proclaiming that God is just and merciful and wants fullness of life for all Creation, we are called into action to transform the world; changing the systems that lead to injustice, poverty and environmental degradation.

We have Jesus as an example. Jesus lived in a concrete reality. Traveling through cities and villages, he put himself at the side of the other; always walking, sharing and sitting with the poorest and most excluded, each in his or her necessity, each in his or her context. Jesus also denounced injustice and advocated for and with the oppressed.

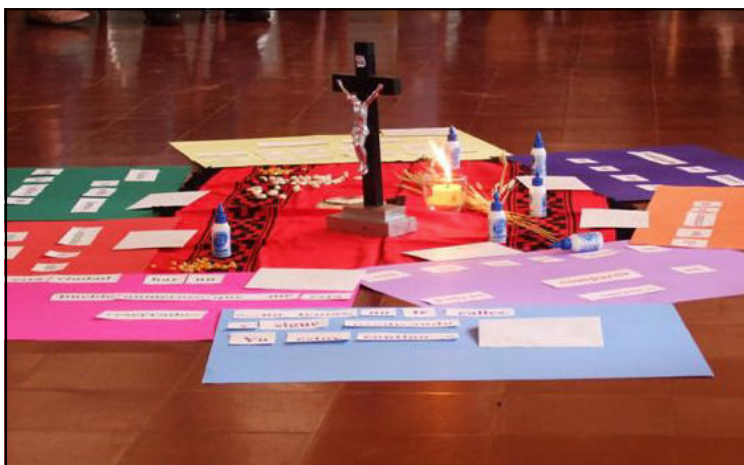
Jesus calls us to engage in a process of mutual transformation with other human beings, everyone equal in creation, acting together as citizens with equal participation and responsibility for the good of all with a preferential option for those who are excluded and silenced.

In its "diaconia," or *faith put into action in response to God's love*, the IELU is following Jesus' call to honor the ability of people to have power over their lives and to participate in decisions that affect them as individuals, families and communities.

Community and Participatory Diaconia

An ELCA World Hunger grant supports a IELU project in the central zone of Misiones that responds to this call through a broad community and participatory process of diaconia. The project aims to strengthen the ability of IELU congregations, missions, leaders and their surrounding communities to be active protagonists in the struggle for sustainable development and human dignity. Concretely, the project engages in capacity-building initiatives; awareness-raising about social, political and economic realities; network-building and joint advocacy with other religious and secular organizations; and a constant process of reflection and dialogue around the inseparable connection between Proclamation of God's Word and diaconia, or service to and with one's neighbor.

Within this context of community and participatory diaconia, one of the strongest images for reflection is that of the table. A table where everyone is sitting together, on the same level, no one above, no one below, partaking in the most intimate sharing of the bread. Within this image we can engage in mutual transformation, changing relationships of unjust power that are frequently present in diaconal work, such as the "rich donors, those who know, those who decide, those who have the answer" and the "poor receivers, those who do not know, those who cannot act for themselves." In our mutual transformation we are all equal; sharing, walking and working together so that we can transform the world into a place where no one is excluded from the banquet.



During a IELU gathering of people working in its diaconal ministry in northern Argentina, this devotional invited participants to reflect on Bible verses that address our relationship with God, Creation and one another.

Promoting Human Dignity

Consistent with our understanding that humans are created in God's image and that God intends a life of fullness for all, we are called to uphold human dignity and denounce the human-made structures that shatter God's vision of wholeness. As stated in the Preamble to the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights, "Recognition of the inherent dignity and of the equal and inalienable rights of all members of the human family is the foundation of freedom, justice and peace in the world."

The IELU's diaconal work in central Misiones incarnates these commitments to human dignity and justice in the lives of real people. Through the project's activities, individuals build their self-esteem as well as an awareness of their civil, political, social, economic and cultural rights. They also identify and address the unjust structures and systems in society that enable some people to exercise these rights while many more cannot.



Women in this region work multiple shifts daily to fulfill job, farm, parenting, household, and community responsibilities.

Advocating for Gender Justice

The IELU's diaconal work also views justice issues through a gender lens. In the rural context of this region, women often work multiple shifts that include physical labor on the farm, full responsibility for childcare and household duties, community and church work, and an additional job for supplemental family income. These extensive responsibilities usually go without recognition or decision-making power within family or societal structures. Women and girls are also disproportionately excluded from educational opportunities and often lack access to reproductive health services, or negotiating power within sexual relationships, that enable them to control the number and spacing of their children. They are the primary victims of domestic violence as well as trafficking and other forms of sexual exploitation. The IELU works to address these issues through awareness-raising among both women and men as well as engaging in joint advocacy with ecumenical and secular networks.

Supporting Sustainable Development

In the central zone of Misiones the IELU is also working to promote sustainable development. The industrial infrastructure of Misiones is focused primarily on the industrialization of raw materials, for example sawmills, the pulp and paper industry, and the preparation of maté (traditional Argentine tea), tobacco and tea leaves.

Mounting problems surround the cultivation of tea and maté due to the unjust nature of the chain of production. The planting, growing, and harvesting is, for the most part, in the hands of small producers who have little acreage and sell their crops to the large tea and maté companies, under an unjust and oppressive system that pays an extremely low price per kilogram. This minimum price amounts to exploitation given that it does not even enable rural workers and small farmers to meet the basic needs of their families. Since 2000 a local movement for fair pricing has been gaining momentum among small farmers and broader social sectors.



These tea and maté growers are discussing the unjust prices set by the large industries that buy their produce. The IELU accompanies farmers from a faith perspective, promoting the sustainability of Creation, community development, and solidarity among people.

The struggle of small tobacco farmers mirrors the unjust system that maté and tea growers face. While the price of tobacco is significantly higher, the most pressing problem in the tobacco industry is the use of highly toxic agricultural chemicals that harm human and animal life, in some instances irreversibly. The small farmer depends on large companies for the seeds and fertilizers, as well as for health benefits, without fully comprehending the grave harm to human life and the environment involved with the use of agro-toxics.



The IELU is working with farmers, like the couple pictured above, to explore farming alternatives such as organic pig raising that offer more autonomy and fewer hazards than tobacco.

Making the situation still worse is the fact that tobacco companies have imposed the use of a specific type of seed which has forced producers to abandon the use of native seed, making them dependent on the purchase of hybrid seeds and the accompanying fertilizers of multinational companies. The same phenomenon is occurring with pine tree plantations. The industry is not locally sustainable and is controlled by a few companies, some being foreign.

Another factor is the increasing production of soybeans in the region which is characterized by the distribution of genetically engineered seeds by multinational companies and the deforestation of land expanses to make way for soy planting. Soil depletion, the razing of the rain forest in order to plant soy, and the current droughts are the disastrous consequences of a model of subjugation of the richness and identity of the region's people, hurling them into an inescapable cycle of poverty.

In response to this growing soy industry and the imposition by multinational companies of genetically engineered seeds, over the past 7 years a native seed movement has developed under the slogan **"seeds in the hands of the small producers."** This campaign emphasizes the recovery of native seed, control by local people of its use, recovery of species that are native to the area, and identification and preservation of crop genetics. Among its many diaconal activities, the IELU walks beside small farmers in their struggle to regain sovereignty over their land and the agriculture that their families have practiced for decades.

Call to Justice

The reality of poverty and environmental degradation in northern Argentina and around the world impress upon us the urgency for solutions to the injustices that threaten God's creation. In its Social Statement on Caring for Creation, the ELCA makes a call to justice based on four principles²:

- 1) **Participation** -- Through God's covenant with all of Creation, all living things are entitled to be heard and to have their interests considered when decisions are made.
- 2) **Solidarity** -- Through Creation's dependence on the Creator and its interdependence within itself, we stand together as God's creation.
- 3) **Sufficiency** -- The earth and its fullness belong to the Lord. No person or group has absolute claim to the earth or its products. The principle of sufficiency means meeting the basic needs of all humanity and all creation.
- 4) **Sustainability** -- The sabbath and jubilee laws of the Hebrew tradition remind us that we may not press creation relentlessly in an effort to maximize productivity. We are called to provide an acceptable quality of life for present generations without compromising that of future generations.

Inspired by the spirit of these principles, our commitment must also be expressed through action. Christians around the world are increasingly recognizing that while acts of charity can temporarily alleviate the human impact of poverty and injustice, they are simply not enough. A justice approach, on the other hand, seeks to eliminate the need for charity by permanently transforming unjust social, economic and political systems.

An example of a justice approach is ONE: The campaign to make poverty history, a movement that the ELCA and many other churches and humanitarian organizations have joined.³ The ONE campaign does not ask for members' money but rather for them to raise their voices to world leaders. At the United Nations Millennium Summit in 2000, world leaders agreed to the Millennium Development Goals, a set of measurable goals for fighting poverty, hunger, disease, illiteracy, environmental degradation and discrimination against women. As Christians we can play a key role in building the moral and political will to realize these goals as well as holding our government accountable to its resource and political commitments.



In June 2006, a joint companion synod delegation of women from Nebraska and Tanzania visited the IELU and had the opportunity to walk with small farmers in Misiones, seeing agriculture and globalization through their eyes.

In the words of ELCA Presiding Bishop Hanson, "Our baptism calls us, Scripture compels us, and the world demands that we be a public church — a church that is deeply affected by the pain of others in our interconnected world. When addressing issues of global concern as a public church we must listen intently to our international partners and commit ourselves to accompaniment — not to lead or follow, but to walk with — on a journey of reconciliation and hope, centered on God's mission of restoring community."⁴

Our companion relationships with the IELU and other churches around the world gives us the opportunity to walk together toward this goal. Through these relationships we can raise our own and others' awareness of global issues, build relationships of solidarity with individuals and communities around the world, share resources, engage in joint advocacy efforts, and pray and act together to restore God's vision of wholeness, peace and justice.

References:

1. *Mission in Context: Transformation, Reconciliation, Empowerment*, Lutheran World Federation 2004.
2. ELCA Social Statement, *Caring for Creation: Vision, Hope and Justice*: www.elca.org/socialstatements/environment.
3. See www.elca.org/one
4. Foreword to *God's Mission in the World, An Ecumenical Christian Study Guide on Global Poverty and the Millennium Development Goals*, Prepared by the Episcopal Church and the ELCA.