

TALITHA KUM: THE BIRTH STORY OF A LUTHERAN FAITH COMMUNITY IN CUZCO, PERÚ

AS TOLD BY PASTOR OFELIA DÁVILA OF THE EVANGELICAL LUTHERAN CHURCH OF PERÚ

“He took her by the hand and said to her, ‘Talitha Kum’, which means, ‘Little girl, get up!’” Mark 5: 41 (NRSV)

A Difficult Beginning: In The Ashes Of One Faith Community Seeds Are Planted For *Talitha Kum*

I started my mission work as a recently ordained pastor of the ILEP (Peruvian Evangelical Lutheran Church) in the outskirts of Cuzco, a city of the ancient Incan Empire with a population of around 300,000. I was sent to form a Lutheran congregation in Cuzco where I was told about an emerging faith community called *Tierra Nueva* (New Earth). No other ILEP Lutheran churches existed in Cuzco at this time and this continues to be the case today.



Area around Cuzco where *Talitha Kum* was founded in 2003

Upon arriving at *Tierra Nueva* on January 5, 2002, I encountered only a couple and their three children and with them I organized a church service for the next day which was Sunday. The couple had been confirmed and their three children baptized a few months earlier by ILEP pastors Katharine Bergbusch, Federico Haller and Pedro Bullón. That same Sunday I was installed as pastor of this faith community and was joined at the service by friends and representatives of local non-governmental organizations NGOs

and churches. Unfortunately, *Tierra Nueva* did not prosper. After sporadic church attendance, by the end of 2002, the couple and their three children — the only members of the church — stopped coming altogether. *Tierra Nueva* was no more.



Three of the girls shown at the alter in the temporary space where *Talitha Kum* gathers will be confirmed in 2006.

Step By Step: The Seeds For A Lutheran Faith Community Take Root

There is a phrase in Perú that goes *Dios aprieta, pero no ahorca*, or “God squeezes, but does not strangle.” Of course, this is not a Biblical phrase, but — like Job’s laments- it helped me during the difficult times during my first year in Cuzco. I know that God accompanied me during 2002 and touched the people I was witnessing to, as the seeds were planted for the faith community that was to be — even though I didn’t yet see it.

I was attempting various strategies of living my faith as a witness to others. Overall, I wanted to be in a place where individuals truly needed Christian accompaniment. In order not to duplicate efforts, I didn’t want to be in a place where other Christian churches were working. Over shared cups of coffee in cafes and in the homes of friends, I began to organize a reflection group for the people I was meeting in Cuzco. The problems and worries of everyday life became the topics of the reflection group, and together we worked to resolve them. At the same time, I accompanied this circle of friends to the hospital

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or to negotiate government bureaucracies to get help for themselves or their communities. I was also invited to give a presentation about the Lutheran church at a community outside of Cuzco called Izcuchaca. In spite of these efforts, my sense was that a Lutheran faith community was not forming. This all changed in early 2003.



Pastor Ofelia Dávila (far right) and Mrs. Julia Huaman Ruiz (second from right) and church youth at a door of a building they are replacing with a church.

In February 2003 I was introduced to Mrs. Julia Huaman Ruiz who in turn invited me to visit the *Pro Vivienda Sol de América Association*. This was the local organization seeking to bring basic services like water and electricity to *Sol de América* (Sun of America), the name of the neighborhood. The Association's 19 members — all women — were waiting for me that day I went to meet with them and wanted to know how I could help them in their efforts to improve the neighborhood.

After listening to each member of the Association talk about the daunting challenges facing an impoverished community like *Sol de América*, I explained to them that I was a pastor of the Lutheran Church and talked about how as Christians God gives us the power to change our lives.

All the women were nominally Catholic, as such I felt they would be open to a Christian message. I told the women that they were created in the image of God and as God's creatures they should all be able to live with dignity. Although their living conditions were harsh, I told them that they could make their own history and change their living conditions if they believed in themselves and their God-given gifts. Promising to return the next week, I left them with these thoughts and, as homework, asked them to think about how they could change their lives.

Differences That Can Help Us To Grow: On Common Ground A Faith Community Is Born

One of the first things I did with the women was to start a Bible study group. One day the group asked me, "What is the Lutheran Church?" "Can we participate in it?" So, I invited them to my home for worship. In response to questions about the Reformation, I drew a parallel between the "reforms" they make to their homes in August to prepare for the wet season by re-thatching their roofs to the changes the Catholic Church needed to undergo in the time of Martin Luther.

The women also wanted to know if the Lutheran Church was as generous as other evangelical and Pentecostal denominations that gave away Bibles and food to those that attended their Bible studies. I told them that our group was open to anyone who wanted to attend, and because we respect the dignity of all people we were not going to give away gifts to attract people to the Lutheran Church. I said that being a Christian is a personal decision and commitment and if you want to become part of the Lutheran Church or another denomination, it needs to be out of a personal commitment to God. I told them they were all sons and daughters of a Living God who is present in our histories and brings us together in one or another denomination. I made it clear that regardless of their decision, I would continue to be a friend and sister in Christ for each one of them.



Talitha Kum women gather around the sewing machine used for workshops.

As interest in becoming members of the Lutheran Church grew, I not only organized a confirmation class, but also a sewing workshop to help the women learn skills that could supplement their household budgets.

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At the same time, we continued with the Bible study group which also became a space for the women to tell about their experiences with domestic violence. They decided that they wouldn't let other women in the group be abused in that way, and when violence did occur, they would go to the house of the batterer and help the wife file a complaint with the police. I offered to help counsel both the victim and the batterer.



Talitha Kum members perform a traditional dance for visitors from Lutheran churches in the United States.

Finding a Name for Our Faith Community

The first celebration in *Sol de América* was a children's service where more than 30 boys and girls participated, along with two or three adults. Some adults came because they were curious about how Lutherans worshiped and others because they were looking for something different in their lives.

After hearing the liturgy, the adults asked, "How is your liturgy different from what is read in the Catholic mass? It sounds so similar." In response to their questions, I invited them to come to church not to only listen, but to personally experience and become part of the celebration of God's Word and the new life we find in the Eucharist.

Then the time came to give our faith community a name! After numerous suggestions, we read the text about the resurrection of Jairo's daughter in Mark 5:41 and we decided to give ourselves the Aramaic name *Talitha Kum*. As a young community that was being born we were like Jairus' young daughter who was given new life and arose. In this way, the Faith Community *Talitha Kum* was born.

Prepared by David Wunsch, Missionary of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA)

Hands United for Christian Ministry: *Talitha Kum* Grows Spiritually and Numerically

The time had come to rent a space close to Sol de America, so for ten dollars a month we rented a room in the home of one of *Talitha Kum's* families. While very basic, it gave us a space for worship, Bible Study, Sunday School and for the workshops the women were asking for. Our services had been held out-of-doors, but this didn't work when it rained.

In March of 2004 eight adults who had been participating in the Bible Study asked to be prepared to join the church. This was a little more than a year after I had begun accompanying the *Sol de America* neighborhood association. Today *Talitha Kum* has nine confirmed adult members and 35 children in Sunday School. Three of the children are preparing for confirmation.



This plot was purchased for *Talitha Kum* to build its church home.

Talitha Kum looks to the future: Bringing our Hopes and Dreams to Life

It has been my pleasure to share *Talitha Kum's* birth story. This is the story of how the seeds we plant are used for the construction of God's Kingdom here on earth. It is also the story of how as Peruvian Lutherans we are faithful to God's command to be missionaries and give testimony to the Good News — in our own setting and from the perspective of our unique and vibrant Andean culture that shapes the expression of Lutheranism in our land.

I hope by telling this story you will be inspired to walk with the ILEP and *Talitha Kum*, as our ministries grow and our roots firmly take hold in this rich Andean soil!

Sincerely,

Pr. Ofelia Dávila

Cuzco, Perú