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# FRIENDS IN SOUTH AMERICA

HAROLD THOMAS

My purpose in this presentation is to consider the future of Quakers in South America. I briefly review the historical origins of the eight groupings of Evangelical Friends in Bolivia and Peru and identify seven areas of challenges and opportunities that need their reflection and response, and which will shape South American Friends in the present century. I will focus on Friends as the people of God in worship, in community, and in mission.<sup>1</sup>

## EVANGELICAL QUAKERS IN SOUTH AMERICA

There are eight groups of evangelical Friends in South America, seven in Bolivia and one in Peru. The present denominational organizations in Bolivia of the *Seminario Bíblico*, *Amigos Centrales*, “*Santidad Amigos*,” *Estrella*, and the *Estrella de Belén* come from the mission work of the Union Bible Seminary in Westfield, Indiana (1919) and the Central Friends Yearly Meeting (1926). The *Unión Boliviana de los Amigos* and the INELA Friends in Bolivia and Peru come from the roots of Juan Ayllón, commissioned by Guatemala Friends (1924), and the Oregon Friends who took the mission responsibility for Ayllón’s work (1930).<sup>2</sup> The “*Santidad Amigos*,” the *Amigos Centrales*, and the two INELA organizations of Bolivia and Peru are now significant church denominations in the two countries and recognized Yearly Meetings among Friends.

Reasonable and conservative estimates of the entire Friends community of these eight groups in Bolivia and Peru point to 30,000 faithful believers on church lists within a wider community of about 50,000 believers who would identify themselves as *Amigos*. They are part of a Bolivian and Peruvian Aymara population of about 2.5 million.<sup>3</sup> The seven Bolivian groups in 2010 made up about two percent of the total Evangelical Protestant community of at least 2.2 million persons within a total national population of 10.16 million.<sup>4</sup>

From this snapshot of the beginnings and development of Friends in South America, I now refocus on challenges that are at the same

time unique opportunities for Andean Friends as the people of God who organize and administer their denominations and local meetings.

## THE PEOPLE OF GOD IN WORSHIP

Worship is that vertical dimension of being the people of God privileged to enter and participate in the presence and council of God. I identify two challenges that are also opportunities of worship.

## AUTHENTIC EXPRESSION AS FOLLOWERS OF JESUS CHRIST

South American Friends in Bolivia and Peru have the overarching challenge and unique opportunity to express authentically and creatively what it means to be followers of Christ in their social contexts. For Aymara Christians, who make up the majority, the temptation has been to be ashamed of their traditional cultural formation and to reject it as inferior or uninformed within the context of wider Bolivian mestizo and western culture. Although this is now changing in present Bolivian politics, shame and rejection of one's origins has eroded the platform of self-acceptance that persons, families and communities need for healthy intercultural integration. And shame and cultural self-rejection has often threatened the effective ministry of pastors and congregations in their wider communities. Conversion easily distorts to westernization.

From the mid-70s through the 80s I taught classes on Aymara culture and values to our seminary students. The problem wasn't that they did not know their own customs, but that they had never considered the possibility that understanding and reflecting objectively and positively on their personal formation had value and could be life-giving within the wider culture's depreciating stereotypes of "Indians." This unawareness of one's own deep-level values is the nature of unexamined worldview perspectives. These pastors and leaders who represented nearly all the Friends groupings in Bolivia began to discuss and debate these issues. And many began to recognize positive values in their own Aymara perspectives and traditions.

Bolivian and Peruvian Friends at their best have become Christian through understanding biblical truth, recognizing and confronting the traditional powers, and changing their loyalty to Jesus Christ as the true revelation of Creator God. They have not accommodated

with the Gospel the powers of the *pacha mama* (mother earth), the storm, the lightning and thunder, the ancestors, the various protectors of home and animals and crops, or the dark powers. They have experienced the authority and power of God, and have chosen a new way and entered a new reality. But now the entire country is opening to the revival of indigenous religion, from the “re-evangelization” of the Catholic Church to its active promotion by the Bolivian government. The greatest temptation Aymara Friends face in the 21st century may be the pressure to return to animistic practices they have understood and rejected. At the same time, their greatest opportunity will be to express authentic Aymara Christianity as Friends who work in partnership with each other and with God.

### AUTHENTIC CONTEXTUALIZATION OF WORSHIP

Related to this comes a challenge from the wider evangelical community. Bolivian and Peruvian Friends face the ongoing challenge of appropriate contextualization in order to structure meaningful and flexible expressions of worship that express and enrich the cultural, Christian, and Quaker values that form and feed their people. They have already done this in profound ways through the use of the Aymara language, the notable development of an Aymara hymnody and literature, and the development of congregations and administration through Aymara leadership. But their temptation, especially in the wider context of the urban evangelical movement, has been either to uncritically copy what other dynamic and “successful” Christian groups are doing, or to lapse into a defensive legalism of what they themselves prohibit. In all of this, Friends have the unique opportunity to promote intentional and participative theological reflection among their leaders on the nature of worship, on cultural appropriateness, and on the content and forms of worship that sustain and build local congregations.

### THE PEOPLE OF GOD IN COMMUNITY

The second dimension of the church in our evaluation is to understand that we are the people of God who partner together with God and with each other to form our community. Community expresses the corporate nature of the people of God, the *koinonía*. In the

Aymara culture community is already a prominent cultural value and perspective. But as expression of the *koinonía*, the mystery of Divine interaction with human organization and administration distinguishes Christian community.

## THE CHALLENGE OF LEADERSHIP FORMATION

A challenge to Christian community among Friends in every generation is the education and formation of its leaders. Historically, pastoral education has taken many forms in the different independent groups, according to their needs for leadership.<sup>5</sup>

But at the present time pastoral leadership training is faltering. Bolivian Friends have not been able to sustain the magnitude and focus of the educational efforts of the 1970s through the '90s, which were carried out in cooperation with the missions. Bolivian and Peruvian Friends have the challenge and opportunity that comes with each new generation of re-envisioning and re-structuring viable pastoral-leadership training programs. It seems that, for the stability of the educational programs, leadership training will continue to require outside cooperation through scholarship aid along with other creative approaches. This has already happened in limited ways. The Sarrin Foundation, benefiting all Friends students, cooperates with grants for accredited programs of theological education. Northwest Yearly Meeting recently established the beginnings of an endowment fund whose proceeds provide scholarships to qualifying INELA university students who serve in local Friends congregations.

An unexpected niche of creative cooperation and community building apart from a direct focus on theological education has come with the establishment of the Bolivian Quaker Education Fund in 2001 through the leadership of Newton Garver of the Buffalo Meeting of New York. This program has made it financially possible for more than 100 Friends students from the various groups in Bolivia to complete their professional studies.<sup>6</sup>

These are small beginnings, but they have significant potential as they are developed. No church can sustain itself for long without its leaders intentionally multiplying themselves through some form of effective discipleship. The temptation for Friends leadership that functions with painfully limited budgets is to focus on short term responses to immediate needs, and to put off long term educational planning.

## THE CHALLENGE OF THE SECOND GENERATION

Along with leadership formation, a fourth enduring challenge to community among Bolivian and Peruvian Friends is to increase attention to the unique needs of the second, third, fourth, and now fifth generations of their children and families in a rapidly urbanizing culture. An encouraging number of these “second generation” Friends provide leadership and as teachers, youth leaders, church council leaders, and pastors. But a significant number leave the churches.

The issue of winning and keeping the second generation is complex for families in the church. Quaker families and persons migrate away from their traditional communities, many to the large cities where they face a difficult struggle to survive. They may not re-establish contact with Friends congregations. There are those who find more appeal and life in other evangelical churches. Others simply respond to the social pressures of life around them and drift away. The overwhelming cultural currents of secularization and nominalization, especially through the pressures of education, the search for financial stability, and professional recognition in the urban context demand overwhelming energy and bring difficult questions and increasing crisis to faith. Friends’ pastors and leaders, especially in the cities, have the challenge and unique opportunity to mobilize their congregations as relational, active, relevant, and bridge communities where each person and family finds community and a place to grow.

## THE CHALLENGE OF GREATER COOPERATION AMONG FRIENDS GROUPS

A fifth challenge to community among South American Friends is to identify points where they can profitably cooperate among themselves. Various of the Friends denominations in Bolivia have cooperated and participated since the 1970s in theological education through the TEE and San Pablo Seminary programs. And since 1986 Evangelical Friends Church International (EFCI) has been a significant point of cooperation and participation. Although only the INELA Friends of Bolivia and Peru are members of EFCI at this point, Friends of all groups in Bolivia and Peru have actively participated in its periodic International Friends Pastor’s Conferences in Central and South America. These have raised international awareness and promoted interaction and friendship among leaders. I see increasing interaction

and cooperation among South American Friends, through the vision and activities of EFCI as significant opportunity for new and creative projects of cooperation.

Another area of increasing cooperation with the wider Quaker movement has emerged through the efforts of the FWCC and its Latin American organization COAL. Through the vision of COAL a significant number of Bolivian and Peruvian Friends leaders have participated in local and international gatherings, have studied in various short term and longer term courses, completed degree programs, and have even visited NWYM sessions. Such varied levels of cooperation have exposed increasing numbers of evangelical Friends leaders in all of Latin America to the wider Quaker movement. Historically there has been acute tension between the Cristo-centric evangelical Quaker Yearly Meetings and those who have made these characteristics secondary to their faith and witness. But the FWCC has been persistent in its vision of contact and communication, and has found a place in promoting cooperation among Friends in South America.

## THE CHALLENGE OF CONTACT WITH THE WIDER EVANGELICAL MOVEMENT

Friends in Bolivia tend to isolate themselves from participation in the wider Christian evangelical movement. Although a few Friends pastors have become national and international leaders, participation has proven difficult, especially because of severely limited finances. But the more insidious danger that affects South American Friends is defensiveness because of the persistent discounting and, at times, direct public attack on Friends sacramental positions, especially by newer evangelical groups.

The temptation for Friends leadership is to ignore these attacks and issues in their congregations as long as possible, then to send delegations to correct and discipline non-Quakerly understanding and practice that has arisen. They often fail to engage the questions and doubts people bring. Friends lose persons, families, and occasional congregations this way. The opportunity I see for Latin American evangelical Friends is to understand and find appropriate ways to express the deep level meanings embodied in the formal sacraments, the same realities that are at the heart of Quaker understanding and experience. The opportunity is to strengthen our participation in the

wider evangelical movement in Latin America, and to enrich it by who we are as a valid expression of the church. The danger is to marginalize ourselves through not responding effectively to attacks that threaten our Christian identity and unity. The Lausanne Covenant and its wider concerns may provide a helpful vehicle as it has come to express this common Christian identity and unites the evangelical community around the world.<sup>7</sup>

## THE PEOPLE OF GOD IN MISSION

Mission flows from God who approaches the world God loves with purpose born out of compassion and love. God calls us to partnership in every dimension of the *missio Dei*. Mission focuses on the outward movement of the church from Jerusalem to Judea to Samaria and to the ends of the earth. This intentional evangelism unites with holistic mission in the transformation of persons, families, and communities.

## NEW CHALLENGES OF PARTNERSHIP IN DIVINE MISSION

Life in both the traditional Aymara communities and in the cities provides the two principal contexts that challenge the church as participant in Divine mission. In the rural community there is the public obligation for each rural couple to complete traditional rural community *cargos*. There are similar obligations in the cities. It is important to recognize that public responsibility cannot be separated from the *missio Dei*. But the ritual obligations lead many husbands and wives to ask permission to temporarily leave their congregations for the duration of their *cargos*, with the promise to return, repent, and reintegrate when they complete their public responsibility. Many never do. Perception of community responsibilities needs to transform to seeing these as opportunities for witness and service through word and deed. There are notable examples of this transformation among Friends leaders who have changed the attitudes of entire communities through their service.

A second major challenge to the church in mission is the intensifying culture of urban poverty and survival among the tens of thousands of families and persons who are migrating to the major cities of Bolivia and Peru. The city has become increasingly dangerous and violent as traditional values erode. Churches and their families must deal with



vandalism, neighborhood gangs, frequent assaults and robberies. In the cities, Friends again have not only the challenge of but also the opportunities for witness and service.

In addition to the everyday rural and urban contexts of living, new opportunities for mission are emerging among Aymara people and families who are moving to the cities beyond Bolivia and Peru into Paraguay, Argentina, Brazil, and even Europe. Friends are already organizing Christian communities in these international cities. Finally, vision and opportunities for cooperative mission within the international community of evangelical Friends is becoming a reality of this 21st century. These challenges are again open opportunities for leadership and pastoral response.

South American Quakers have the unique opportunity as an active and reflective community to recognize and examine dominant cultural perspectives and trends in the light of their identity as the People of God in worship, community, and mission. I note that there has never been in a time in Bolivia or Peru when nearly overwhelming challenges did not threaten the continuation of Friends, or when the leadership did not need to identify and respond to the opportunities these really were. The story will not end without divine surprises. These men and women are the people of God, called and gifted to partner with God and each other as Friends in God's mission.

## ENDNOTES

1. Charles Van Engen, *Mission on the Way: Issues in Mission Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1996), 22-26. These are theological categories that presuppose mission not primarily as denominational extension, but as the partnership of the church in the mission and purposes of God, the *missio Dei*. See the foundational work by Georg Vicedom, *The Mission of God: An Introduction to a Theology of Mission* (St. Louis, MO: Concordia, 1965). The categories I use here parallel Van Engen's theological process model, but come from Daniel Schipani's development of Orlando Costas' reflections on the Church (Daniel Schipani, "Crecamos en todo ... en Cristo" ("Let us grow in every dimension ... in Christ", in *Misión en el camino: Ensayos en homenaje a Orlando Costas* (Mission on the way: Essays in honor of Orlando E. Costas), Samuel Escobar, et al. (Buenos Aires, Argentina: Fraternidad Teológica Latinoamericana, 1992), 115-128. For an excellent overview of historical and missional ecclesiology, see Charles Van Engen, *God's Missionary People: Rethinking the Purpose of the Local Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1991).
2. I am using the shortened names, not the formal names of these Friends organizations.
3. Accurate and comparable records in Bolivia have been problematical over the years. This includes both studies within specific Friends groupings and estimates that attempt to summarize the eight denominations. However, to give a general idea of the size of

Friends in both Bolivia and Peru I suggest the following, based on personal contacts, detailed studies of INELA records up to 1986, observation, and estimates. I am estimating church community at about 1.8 percent of church lists rather than membership lists, recognizing that membership among Bolivian Friends is far more restrictive than baptismal statistics in other evangelical denominations. Where I have little information or contact I am inserting reasonable “filler estimates” which should result in better representation in the total figures than to use no amount. It also seems reasonable to assume that the Holiness Friends (*Santidad Amigos*) are presenting community estimates of their size, which have varied from 40,000 in the 1990s to 25,000 in the decade of 2000, not their church lists.

For further studies of the statistics and trends of the Bolivian Evangelical Protestant movement see Peter Wagner, *The Protestant Movement in Bolivia* (South Pasadena, CA: William Carey Library, 1970) For a specific historical study of INELA Friends in Bolivia, see Quentin Nurdyke, *Animistic Aymaras and Church Growth* (Newberg, OR: The Barclay Press, 1972). Although projections were overly optimistic in both of these volumes, the historical studies and trends are valid. Douglas Smith has updated and revised Wagner in *Toward Continuous Mission: Strategizing for the Evangelization of Bolivia* (Pasadena, CA: William Carey Library, 1978) and later studies. My own article updates Bolivian statistics and conclusions to 2000 in Harold Thomas, “Bolivia,” in the *Evangelical Dictionary of World Missions*, edited by A. Scott Moreau, Harold Netland and Charles Van Engen (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2000), 136-137.

<b>Friends Yearly Meeting* or denominational organization,</b>	<b>Church lists estimate</b>	<b>Community estimate</b>
Seminario Bíblico (statistics unknown to author)	Filler estimate 2,000	Filler estimate 3,000
Amigos Centrales*	4,000	7,200
Estrella (statistics unknown to author)	Filler estimate 1,000	Filler estimate 1,600
Estrella de Belén	600	1,000
Misión Evangélica Misión Boliviana de Santidad Amigos*	14,000	25,000
Iglesia Evangélica Unión Boliviana de los Amigos	1,400	2,500
Iglesia Nacional Evangélica “Los Amigos” de Bolivia (INELA Bolivia)*	8,000	14,000
Iglesia Nacional Evangélica “Los Amigos” de Peru (INELA Peru)*	2,000	3,600
<b>Totales of estimates</b>	<b>33,000</b>	<b>57,900</b>
<b>Presented as reasonable estimates until further study is able to replace them.</b>	<b>30,000</b>	<b>50,000</b>

4. For the total Bolivian population in 2010 see “Bolivia Population 2014,” accessed September 27, 2014 at <http://worldpopulationreview.com/countries/bolivia-population/>. As a point of reference there were about 180 evangelical churches and organizations registered in Bolivia in 2000.
5. Notable for Bolivia INELA Friends was the founding of the Helen Cammack Friends Bible School with the mission acquisition of the *hacienda* Copajira in 1947. It functioned though 1960 and provided the training and formation for the pastoral leadership of the INELA Friends in its most formative years. This was followed by the

residential Patmos Bible Institute in La Paz in the 1960s and '70s, the theological education by extension (TEE) program from 1972 through the mid '90s, and the higher level San Pablo Seminary beginning in 1972. Both TEE and the seminary were cooperative efforts that included Peru and Bolivia INELA Friends, Central Friends, and other similar groups. Students from nearly all of the Friends groups in Bolivia and Peru have participated in and graduated from both the TEE and San Pablo Seminary programs. At the present time the vision for cooperation has diminished, with more emphasis on separate schools that fit the needs and vision of each group of Friends.

The opportunity for full university level education for pastors opened as the Bolivian Friends Mission and INELA leadership became part of the founding board of the Bolivian Evangelical University (UEB) in Santa Cruz in 1981. The possibility of graduate level training became available with Northwest Yearly Meeting's cooperation in founding the UEB's first Master's program in 2000, which was in missiology. And NWYM added their participation with the Latin American Doctoral Program in Theology (PRODOLA) for advanced leadership training in ecclesiology and missiology to open the option of doctoral level formation.

6. See <http://www.bqef.org/>.

7. See <http://www.lausanne.org/content/covenant/lausanne-covenant-2>