

A LEAP OF FAITH
Reflection Upon My Lay Mission Experience
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For me this experience proved to be a year of never before experienced challenges through which I grew and learned like never before. It all began after graduating from the University of Dayton (UD) in May of 1999. I had decided, based on my experiences at UD of service and social justice and through spiritual guidance by various Marianist Brothers, that I wanted to do at least one year of voluntary "service" in Latin America. Fortunately for us here at UD we have Bro. Phil Aaron, S.M. as director of International Service Programs and Phil has substantial knowledge of the Marianist works around the world. Thus, taking advantage of this knowledge base, Phil Aaron then put me in contact with Bro. Phil Melcher, S.M. in Peru where he is director of the Instituto Chaminade Marianistas.

Once contact was established with Phil Melcher in Peru, a dialogue began. Through this dialogue, we came to know each other, I came to know about the Instituto Chaminade - the work and mission there, we discussed goals, objectives and expectations related to this potential experience, and of course many logistics were slowly and laboriously worked out – funding, health issues, living issues, etc. Since there was no formality or established process to create this type of experience, we were in uncharted waters and simply feeling our way through this – keeping the lines of communication open and honest. Through this dialogue, through prayer and through a developed trust I came to the conclusion that going to Peru was what I felt called to do.

I arrived in Peru on the 15th of January, of the year 2000. My original goals were rather simple, at least simply stated. One of my principal goals, and actually a necessary process, was to get to know and gain a better understanding of: the community/culture at large where I would live and work; the mission, work and the vision of the Institute; and the mission / purpose of the Marianists in Peru.

Related to this, an additional goal was to do my best to live the culture and to live in solidarity with my neighbors, the students and the people with whom I worked. One step I took toward this goal was by choosing to live with a host family in the barrio.

Another critical objective was to work on my Spanish language skills, which I felt would be my greatest weakness at first. Thus, I made it a goal to study my grammar and to do my best to only speak Spanish upon arriving.

Also, I really wanted to use my skills and knowledge to be of benefit to the Institute and local community. Therefore, an important goal for me was to constantly be aware of who and how I am benefiting and to periodically evaluate the appropriateness of my work. Finally, one of my most important goals was that I be open to learn and grow from the people: my colleagues, the students, the Marianists, my host family and the community in which I lived.

So, in order to accomplish all of my goals and objectives, I needed to commit my self to work hard, listen, participate, have faith, pray and most of all - LOVE.

My year began working mainly in maintenance and installation at the Institute and enjoying that – getting my hands dirty and working up a sweat – taking my time to slowly work my way into the job and to the trust and friendship of my colleagues. I was being drained by the combination of adjusting, working and most of all, conversing in Spanish.

After the first five weeks there, I was in need of a spiritual renewal and the perfect opportunity came. I went on a retreat up into the Andes Mountains to the Marianist Rural Mission Center. Those days there in the mountains allowed me the time to reflect and pray and through this I found the resolution I needed.

Many of the changes I wanted to make were related to my work at the Institute. I wasn't having much contact with the students and was not working in the areas where I felt I could be of help. I had a meeting with Brother Phil Melcher, and we evaluated my time and made many changes in my role at the Institute.

I soon found myself involved up to my elbows in a multitude of projects and tasks at the Institute and was having fun with it while trying to maintain some type of order and balance to my schedule. I began working longer hours and over the ensuing months I became more and more an integral part of the administrative team at the Institute. I became better each day with my Spanish skills and this, along with my increased experience there, allowed me to make a greater and more

positive impact in my work and through more profound dialogue. My improved speaking abilities meant that I could have better conversations with the students and therefore I began to form more positive and friendly relationships with them.

However, it wasn't all peachy keen. Frustrations still existed about some cultural issues that really ate at me. Additionally, I was frustrated often by a few of my colleagues who did not pull their weight and lacked a sense of dedication to the mission of the Institute. Also, I became frustrated by the fact that I was not able to fully use my technical skills as an engineer. Phil and I had many conversations through this time and he did his best to listen and work with me.

By the first part of July, about the six-month mark, I felt very confident about my language skills and had become very accustomed to the culture. I was working long hours – about 80 hours a week including Saturdays – and soon realized that I was burning myself out.

I was visited by a good friend in the middle of July, which was a refreshing experience for me and marked another turning point for me along my journey through this ever-challenging experience. As a result, I made some conscious changes in my work and personal habits and began to get out more, periodically removing myself from Santa Rosa, the barrio in which I worked, slept, ate, played and in a sense – drowned.

Due to some organizational circumstances in the Institute, coupled with my renewed spirit and newfound passions for my life and work at the Institute, I again refocused my role. I still maintained a substantial hand in many of the technical projects, however, with the hiring of a new competent technical leader I was able to put more time and energy into the pastoral / youth ministry work at the Institute.

So, with having the support and encouragement of Phil and most of the administration at the Institute, I began working with the Pastoral Team along with a few other faculty, and initiated a few new activities for the students. In the past there had been some interest shown and potential talent in theater. Well, it had been a dream of mine ever since I participated in it three years ago to put on the Musical "Godspell" with a group of students. I shared this dream from the start with Phil and in particular Rosa, the Administrator at the Institute who had participated in Godspell before.

After two full months of frustrating hard work, lengthy practices, struggling with the kids, arduous preparation, and much laughing, crying, praying and a hell of a lot of singing and dancing the big weekend finally came. After a disastrous Friday night dress rehearsal, the dedicated cast of 28 students and faculty rebounded exuberantly back to life for each of the live Saturday and Sunday performances, proudly and boldly presenting "Godspell." Each show played to a crowd of about 200, and all 200 were emotionally and spiritually energized at the end of each performance and also very surprised at the caliber of our performance.

The dates of the presentation of Godspell had fallen on my last full weekend in Peru. I was to leave the following Saturday without knowing if I would ever return. The final two months were for me the most challenging, yet they were by far the most rewarding, likely because they were so challenging.

Godspell provided a wonderful and very appropriate closure for me to the extremely challenging and emotional year I had shared with the Marianists (lay and religious) in Peru. Just as the story of the life of Christ we had presented, my year was a positive struggle with many issues including faith, relationships, work and confidence among others. This year was, as Christ's life was, filled with sharing, love, frustration, hope and friendship. And also, as Christ was to leave his friends, I was to leave mine. However, as Christ also did, I pray that I will not forget these friends and that some day I shall return, to continue the sharing of faith and love with these friends who have marked my life – God willing – forever.

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"...we choose to stand in solidarity with our sisters and brothers who are poor, collaborating with those who attempt to change the social structures which institutionalize poverty and injustice. ...to witness that communion is possible by our efforts to form community with all who touch our lives. We commit ourselves to closer partnership with the other branches of our Family in formation, spirituality and mission."

- Partners in Hope, 31st General Chapter of S.M., 1996 (pg. 6-7)