

Peruvian Christians Wage Tireless Effort to Spread Gospel

Just three days after his wife died, 72-year-old Edison Romero climbed into a cramped wooden boat for a journey down the Amazon. He could have stayed home to mourn. Instead, he took a 12-hour trip from his village to Iquitos, Peru, to attend missions training.

“I just couldn’t miss it,” he said of the training.

Romero attends the School of Cross-cultural Missions near the city of Iquitos. It’s one of three **missions training** centers begun in Peru by *Peru a las Naciones* (Peru to the Nations), a Peruvian Baptist organization.

Every two months, Romero and about 30 other participants and family members—ranging from toddlers to elderly adults—convene outside Bethany Evangelical Baptist Church in Iquitos. There they pile into two crude metal buses with their luggage and half a dozen live chickens for a jarring, hour-long ride over a muddy road full of potholes.

When the road ends, the travelers—loaded down with young children and luggage—hike barefoot through a swampy mud pit. At the bank of the Nanay River, which flows into the Amazon, they cram into a narrow wooden boat. There’s barely breathing room; the air is stifling. Then it’s another 45-minute trip downriver to the jungle camp.

After they reach the shore by the camp, they haul their belongings down a dirt path to the wooden cabins – covered with dried banana leaves and mosquito netting – that will be home for three days. There’s no electricity or hot water. And since there’s no refrigeration, the live chickens will provide

fresh food each day. Many students bring their small children, who must occupy themselves without the help of modern conveniences, toys or physical comforts.

But no one complains.

Living in Cross-Cultural Missions

Leaders of the group are Tommy and Beth Lerner, International Mission Board missionaries in Peru. Tommy works with Peru a las Naciones and helped to start the school. At the school's training camp, he and Beth lead a team that teaches Bible storying, evangelism techniques, church-planting methods and other missions principles.

Training national believers in missions is crucial to reaching Peru with the gospel, Tommy said.

"We can't [reach the world] by ourselves," he said. "There's just too much to be done. We could go to an unreached people group. But if I can send a bunch more Peruvians and invest my life in them, I can be more effective sending than I can going."

"Cross-cultural missions" often implies taking the gospel to other countries. But the school near Iquitos teaches believers in the Amazon how to effectively share Christ in the many jungle villages throughout Peru.

"These [believers] live in cross-cultural missions," Tommy said. "Their passion is to go deeper and farther into the jungle where the Gospel has not been preached."

Carlos Peñaherrera, pastor of Bethany Evangelical Baptist Church in Iquitos, shares that passion.

He met Tommy at a missions conference in another Peruvian city and helped him begin the school. Peñaherrera now travels to Amazon villages already reached with the Gospel, promoting the school and challenging believers with the Great Commission. He

also participates in the school's training sessions.

"There is a lot of need in our own villages, in our own country and particularly in the Amazon," he said. "There are places that haven't been touched by the gospel yet. Some are small. Some are large. There are many cultures, languages, ethnicities. Some may be similar, but they're still different peoples."

Going the Distance

Students at the School of Cross-cultural Missions are ready to do whatever it takes to reach the Amazon with the gospel, leaders say. Sergio Soria is one example.

On the boat trip from Iquitos to the school's training camp, passengers are crowded and uncomfortable, but Soria has learned to sleep through just about anything. He naps sitting with one hand clinging to the edge of the boat's thatched roof, snoring softly. He's had lots of practice.

Like many of his fellow students, Soria lives in a jungle community. The boat ride from his village to Iquitos takes 12 to 18 hours, depending on the condition of the Amazon River. And that's before the group trip from Iquitos to the training camp. Still, he makes the journey every two months to get the training he believes will help him fulfill God's purpose for his life.

"I've been [to] villages along the river and seen the needs of the people," he said. "And God just put in my heart the desire to work as a missionary. I want to use what I've learned at this school to better understand the people so I can go into places where the Gospel has never been taken."

Worth the Struggle

The boat ride to Iquitos costs Soria about \$30. For an artisan who sells inexpensive crafts at a local market, that's hard to come by.

Many of Soria's fellow students face similar financial struggles.

Rafael Ijuma repairs and sells used shoes for a living but wants to be a full-time missionary. Every three weeks he goes up and down the Amazon, sharing the gospel in different communities. During the time he's at home, he must earn enough money from his shoe business to support his family for when he's gone later doing missions.

But sharing Christ is worth the struggle, Ijuma said.

"I have seen the need of the people," he said. "I put myself in their place, and I see them as I was before Christ. The need that I had before, they have now. And all my effort is so that they can understand what I was before, and what I am now."

"But money is a real issue," he added. "I want to work full-time as a missionary, but it's a question of finances. So I pray that God will provide a way for me to give more time to missions."

Both Soria and Ijuma have identified new places where they want to take the Gospel, but both need their own boats to get there. They are **praying** for God to provide.

Meanwhile, Soria and Ijuma will be among the graduates of the School of Cross-cultural Missions' first commencement ceremony in June in Iquitos. The school's leaders ask Southern Baptists to pray for all of the graduates.

"Pray that they will use their training to be better witnesses for Christ in Peru," Tommy Larner said. "Pray also that God will provide them the transportation and finances needed to spread the Gospel throughout the Amazon jungle."

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