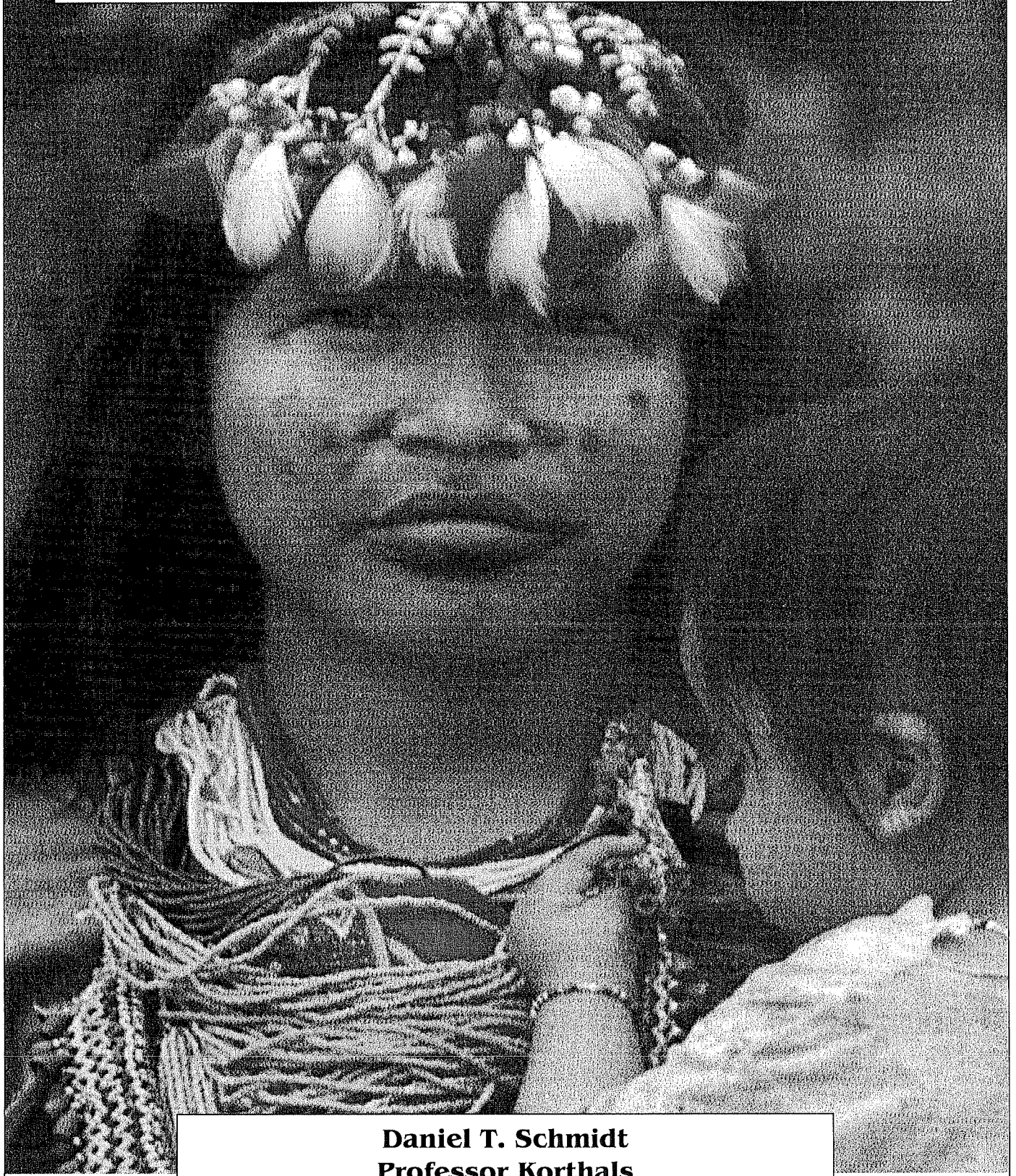


The ELS Peruvian Jungle Mission: A History of the Beginnings



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Normally when foreign missions are a topic of discussion there's an air of intrigue and wonder. Ears perk up to hear the strange and fanciful stories that have actually happened. Awe fills those who marvel at the work of the Spirit in often times "primitive" peoples. I pray that this is the case for you as you learn more about the Peruvian Mission to the peoples of the jungle. This is a history of the beginnings of the ELS's (Evangelical Lutheran Synod) efforts to evangelize to a people that had never heard that Jesus is their Savior. Throughout this paper many parallels will be made between what is going on today amongst our fellow Christians in the Peruvian Jungle and accounts that took place in the Bible. Enjoy!

The Apostle Paul and his coworker Silas were both men filled with the Holy Spirit sent out into the world to preach the good news of Jesus Christ. Often times they had to adapt to different cultural settings and get to know the people in order to communicate this saving message. Paul preached at the Areopagus and was mindful of the culture in which he was preaching. The people were very eclectic in their worship styles. They had idols set up to worship all kinds of gods. They even had one idol with this inscription, "TO AN UNKNOWN GOD" (Acts 17:23). That day Paul told those people about the true God.

In the same way two men filled with the Spirit have endeavored to reach a people that had many gods but did not know the true God who has saved them from their sins. These two men are Missionary Terry Schultz and Peruvian Pastor Ronal Fredi Rivas Carrera. Both of these men have been working under the auspices of the Evangelical Lutheran Synod.

Their work in the Amazon Jungle began in May of 1999 and its beginnings are very similar to the account of Jesus calling his first disciples. “Andrew, Simon Peter’s brother, was one of the two who heard what John had said and who had followed Jesus. The first thing Andrew did was to find his brother Simon and tell him, ‘We have found the Messiah’ (that is, the Christ). And he brought him to Jesus” (John 1:40-42). The Jungle Mission started from one woman coming to know Christ and having the desire to share that message with her family much like Andrew shared it with Peter. The following is a quote from an interview I did with Missionary Terry Schultz in July of 2004. Here he describes how God produced a harvest through the planting of one seed.

All the jungle work could actually be traced back to a single mom named Lydia who was from Tarapoto. It’s a city kind of up in the last foot hills. You cross these final foot hills and you finally get to the edge of the true Amazon basin. Lydia is a single parent who moved down to Lima with her daughter hoping for a better life like a lot of Peruvians do. She became a member at one of our barrio (neighborhood) churches called Año Nuevo (New Year), a very poor barrio.

All around Lima they have what they call the ring of misery which is these barrios or shanty towns that have sprung up. People from the tierra (the mountain region) and people from the jungle come down thinking they’ll find some kind of work and end up living in these shanty towns. But our gospel work has been very effective in these areas. In Año Nuevo there’s a Pastor Abraham who works with the people. And that’s where Lydia became a member by the grace of God. Actually, with a little help from the mission she also became a preschool teacher. She has a wonderful ability to teach and a wonderful personality. She helped start a preschool. And she became very, very popular. They actually started a grade school there in part because of what a good job she did with the preschool. She had always asked, after she had become a Christian, if we would come up to Tarapoto. At the time we weren’t doing any work there. Lydia wanted us to come and spread the gospel and especially bring the news to her family.

So we came up there several years ago [May of 1999 to be exact] and visited her mom and her older sister. Both are on one side of Tarapoto. Interestingly enough with Lydia’s mom and her older sister the message didn’t take root and nothing happened on that side of town. We also followed up on Lydia’s brother, Oto, who’s married to a lady named Nelly. They are both former Catholics and are on a different side of Tarapoto. We did, by the grace of God, have some conversions take place and formed a nucleus. Nelly and Oto actually run a small restaurant

out of there house. We would come and talk to them at their restaurant. Eventually we would hold church in their restaurant area on Sunday nights when they didn't have their restaurant open. We had a wonderful response there and started the Tarapoto congregation. Neighbors of Nelly and Oto, named Socorro and Ramon, started coming to the church services and they were from a river town called Pelejo.

One day while we there they had asked us, along with the aunt and uncle, if we wouldn't please come to Pelejo and bring the Gospel message there. To get to Pelejo you have to get on that horrible careterra (highway) from Tarapoto to Yurimaguas. It takes anywhere from 4 to 6 hours. It's actually in some books like Lonely Planet. They say that it's essentially one of the worst highways in the entire country. You get to Yurimaguas which they call the Perla del Guayaga (The Pearl of Guayaga), for who knows what reason. It's a dump of a town. We stay at the Luis Antonio [hotel]. We get to Yurimaguas. We rent a boat and go 3 hours down the river and get to a place called Pelejo. Start having church services with relatives of Ramon and Socorro, with their aunt and uncle. Interestingly enough, again, the original aunt and uncle invited us to come to Pelejo. It looked like they had other motives though. They wanted to hang out with gringos (a name given to foreigners). They maybe thought there would be something in it for them. The original aunt and uncle are not active members, but once again the word produced a huge harvest and we have a wonderful congregation in what you would call a river village along the Rio Guayaga. The Rio Guayaga is one of the three main tributaries of the Amazon River. We have a nice congregation there.¹

Getting into Pelejo for the missionaries was one thing but getting into the heart of the jungle was another. Much like a passport is a must to travel from one country to another likewise the jungle has its own passport system. In July of 2000 Missionary Schultz and Pastor Ronal happened upon such a passport by the grace of God in the most unique of situations. Missionary Schultz explained:

One day in Pelejo, a place where there are simply no gringos, Ronal and I were in the town and a hunter, named Emilio, came by just after we had been working there close to 2 years. He asked us if we would like to meet the natives, the Chayahuita that were living several hours down the river. The only way to get into a native Chayahuita village is if you have the permission of the Apu. That is the elected chief of the community. So we told Emilio we for sure would like to get into this village. It turns out that Emilio, that because he was such an expert hunter, had permission to enter a Chayahuita village named Nuevo Barranquita. From Pelejo this trip is a couple of hours to the little river then two more hours down a small river to get to that village.

¹ Schultz, Terry Interview with the author, July, 2004

The Chayahuitas, back in the 1950's, were down to 3 to 5,000 natives, according to George Hartz, the man who did the translation of the Chayahuita Bible. Today, because of improved hygiene more than anything, and vaccinations they are in the 15 to 16,000 range. They live usually several hours down the small rivers. They prefer to live a very isolated existence. They're down there on purpose. They want people to leave them alone.

The average Chayahuita community is about 50 people. This is about what the jungle in this area (this is what you would call high jungle) can support. Generally the rule is 50 people to within a one day's walk of sufficient jungle in order to have enough animals, fruits and vegetables for everyone. In other words people don't have to walk more than a day away to still find enough animals that will sustain a community of 50 people. When the community gets to be more than 50 then a couple of the families will usually spin off and go way deeper and start another community. There are a lot of people that are related.

Emilio had permission to hunt in the Chayahuita's jungle. Where they live is considered to be their jungle. And all the animals that Emilio would shoot; monkeys, little jungle deer, a lot of wild boars, large ones and small ones; of all the animals that he would get he would give half of them to the community in exchange for taking the other half out and selling them. And again, in the river villages like Pelejo, up and down the river this was a place to meet. Hunters would shoot the animals and then bring them into the towns to the butchers or supermarkets.

So, Emilio took us to Nuevo Barranquita. Later we found out that the only reason Emilio was hanging around with us is because he is actually a village Shaman, someone the people go to in order to put a hex or hechicería (sorcery) on another person or an enemy. But Emilio being a jungle Shaman thought that if he hung around with Ronal and I, spiritual men, that he might pick up a few extra incantations, charms and sorcery. In other words, this man who literally works for the devil became our introduction to Nuevo Barranquita.²

This account goes to show how God is in control of all things. Emilio, this man of the devil, had no idea that he was actually hindering his own work by helping these godly men. Missionary Schultz's account reminds me of Simon the Sorcerer in Acts 8 who saw the power that God was working through Philip and wanted to have it for his own personal gain. The account says, "When Simon saw that the Spirit was given at the laying on of the apostles' hands, he offered them money and said, 'Give me also this

² Schultz Interview

ability so that everyone on whom I lay my hands may receive the Holy Spirit” (Acts 8:18-19). There is nothing new under the sun. But again praise be to God that through Emilio these Christian men were given a passport into Nuevo Barranquita.

Before Missionary Schultz and Pastor Ronal actually entered the city they had to wait patiently for permission. While they were waiting something interesting occurred. For those who live outside the jungles seeing a white person is a normal everyday activity; for the most part. And even those who have no personal contact with Caucasians have at least seen one on television. Well, this isn't necessarily the case with many of the people who live in the jungle villages. Most of them live very basic and isolated lives. If you've ever seen a documentary on PBS you know exactly what I'm talking about. What they consider running water is having a stream flow through the village. Late night reading ends when the sun goes down unless of course they have candles. They have no electricity. They have not generators. They don't even have refrigerators. This means that much of their food is collected and eaten day by day. This isolation not only keeps the people from modern conveniences but also from other peoples; especially the white man. This next quote by Missionary Schultz explains the reaction of the jungle women when they found themselves face to face with a white person for the very first time.

Now, as I said before you can't enter a village without the permission of an Apu. So our little group came to the edge of Nuevo Barranquita and Emilio went in to ask for permission while we stood on the edge of the village. But while we were standing there some of the women saw this white person (referring to Missionary Schultz) and let out a huge scream. They ran across the commons area [of the village] snatching one little child under each arm and dashed as fast as they could to the nearest hut. And again according to the Chayahuita folklore and myths the only reason a white person would show up in the Amazon Jungle was to kidnap the children and use them. This was a very common myth, that you would then take these babies to a big city and draw out the fat [from them]. This fat then is

what is used to run the factories that produce these magical items like TV's and radios. Interestingly enough the anthropologists who have studied the native groups will say that there is a little tinge of truth in all of this. In the sense that back when the Spanish Conquistadors came through they actually did in fact raid native villages to get young men to work in the silver mines of Peru. And this may in affect be a convoluted modern day version of what was passed on for generations and generations. Be that as it may the women of Barranquita thought we were there to steal their children. This was their worst fear; you know the boogie man finally had in fact shown up. After all this time of being told that the only reason the white man would come to their village is to steal their children, all of a sudden one day there was in fact a white man at the edge of town. ³

When Missionary Schultz and Pastor Ronal were finally permitted to enter the village they had to partake in a common ritual that demonstrated that they had been accepted. For many, common hospitality consists of a handshake and an invitation to have something to eat or drink. The custom of the Chayahuita isn't much different. When the two men arrived they were offered a very special drink made out of the yucca plant. This is a root plant similar to the potato but very stringy. Missionary Schultz explained what happened:

So there we were waiting on the edge of town. We waited for about 20 to 30 minutes and finally received permission to enter. We came in and had to have a bowl of masato which is a drink made by the natives. There are only three ingredients to masato. It's a real integral part of their culture. Yucca root, saliva, time and I guess the sun too. So there are four elements. That's the traditional drink where the ladies chew up the yucca root in their mouth and mix it with saliva and spit it into a huge giant trough, add water, set it out into the sun and eventually it makes this fermented drink. So we enter and they offer us some masato which is a very good sign. ⁴

Masato is more than just a drink offered to guests to signify that they have been accepted. Masato is a staple of the Chayahuita society. Much like Coca Cola, milk, or coffee would be for us. The sad thing about this drink though is that it is even given to the children. Both Missionary Schultz and Pastor Ronal told me stories of how some of

³ Schultz Interview

⁴ Schultz Interview

the people would have their children drink this alcoholic beverage and then poke fun at them as they wobbled about in a drunken stupor.

For a time Pastor Ronal and his wife allowed one of the Chayahuita teenagers to live with them in the “big” city of Tarapoto. When she arrived it was total culture shock for her. It was the first time she had ever seen cars, streets, buildings made of brick and yes even a TV. Pastor Ronal told me of a time she had been watching Barney, the purple dinosaur on television. She thought it was a jungle animal that she had never encountered before and she was scared to death. After a time the young girl began to develop headaches. Both Ronal and his wife thought it might be culture shock or maybe homesickness. But surprisingly they found out that it was none of those things. This teenager was so accustomed to drinking masato every day that now her body was going through withdrawal. They went to the store and bought her the store brand rendition of masato and the headaches immediately went away. Alcoholism among these people is a problem that only the gospel has the power to change.

As in any situation education and patience is the key. Though the missionaries would love to see an immediate change in some of the habits and customs of the people they realize that the gospel will do its job as the Lord sees fit. First things first, share the good news of Jesus and let him work on their hearts. And after drinking their bowl of masato that’s exactly what the missionaries did. Missionary Schultz continued:

Then we gave them a super simple law and gospel presentation. We talked a little bit about the spirituality that the Chayahuitas do have by nature. They know that evil spirits do exist. They have their own myths etc. We simply began talking about the evil spirits, the devil, and how Jesus had come to defeat the devil and gave them a simple message on how we are saved; very simple, God’s plan of salvation. And after our 20-30 minute presentation we simply asked if it would be okay for us to come back again. The village Apu said we could. So we kept coming back once a month, sometimes twice a month. And again the Spirit

worked mightily through the word and several conversions took place. Today, several years later, we actually have a Christian grade school which is just starting up there. We've had some wonderful stories of people being saved.⁵

From Nuevo Barranquita the mission efforts continued on to the town of Paranari. Again the message of salvation was eagerly accepted and that meant that there was much work to be done, especially in the realm of understanding spiritualism. In the Bible there are many accounts of spirits and demon possessions. There was the man who had the legion of demons cast out of him and sent into the pigs. There was the possessed man from Capernaum who followed Jesus around whom he finally told to be quiet. There are many other examples given in Scripture but often times these accounts are questioned by those who live in the so called civilized world because they have no first hand knowledge of these things. Such things are not common topics in our culture today unless of course you're talking about the movie *The Exorcist*. It seems that the devil has resorted to different means to draw us away from Christ; apathy, laziness, hours of television, constant entertainment and the blinding desire for more have all been ways to take our sights off of Christ.

For the Chayahuitas the spirit world is very much alive and apart of their daily experience. In the jungle setting it seems that the devil has resorted to his original tactics such as demon possession or fear of spirits to bring these people under his control. As Missionary Schultz points out these people live a life of fear. Romans 1:20 says, "For since the creation of the world God's invisible qualities—his eternal power and divine nature—have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, so that men are without excuse." They have a natural knowledge of God but they do not know him as their loving Father. Missionary Schultz goes on to further explain this concept:

⁵ Schultz Interview

We began working at another village next door called Paranari. A Chayahuita community, some Mestizos but primarily it's Chayahuita. Before I continue here's a quick little background on the natives themselves. Essentially they live a life of fear, a fear of spirits. They think that any huge tree has its resident spirit. They think there's evil spirits in the rivers. They think there are evil spirits in the dolphins (in the Amazon River there are fresh water dolphins). Say for instance if they're taking one of their rafts up stream full of jungle produce to sell and their child falls off the raft. They think the evil dolphins immediately grab the child and take them to an under world where evil spirits dwell. This would explain why the child's body is often times never seen when they slip off the raft and fall into the Rio (river). So again to come in with the gospel message saying that as children of God we have absolutely nothing in this world to fear certainly resonated with the natives.⁶

Pastor Ronal shared with me another custom that the Chayahuita observe. When a loved one dies, especially those who die at an early age, it is said that the spirit of that person does not live in peace but lives in constant anguish searching for its loved ones. Night after night the spirit will return to its former dwelling reminding its family that he or she died before their time. To confuse the spirit of the deceased and to stop the haunting it is said that the family must tear down their home and move it, albeit 10 feet away, in order to carry on as normal. In an article written in the November 2005 issue of Missionary Schultz's Jungle Journal he explains how one of the newly converted members was still struggling with this practice:

In the deep darkness of a jungle night, lying in her hammock in the cool breeze, Norma would be suddenly awakened by a noise. The noise was always faint but unmistakable. It was the distinct sound of her little girl crying. In her half-sleep, half-awake state, Norma would begin to get up to attend her child. Then the heart-breaking realization would flood into her mind: Her baby was dead. It was almost more than Norma could bear. Understand here: To the Shawi (this is another tribe) mind, the crying sound is a real, physical sound. The natives believe it is the cry of the inconsolable spirit of a child. As Norma expected, the spirit child somehow found its way back from the spirit world to the house, distraught at having left home and the world way before its time. The spirit child is in anguish, looking for her mom.

⁶ Schultz Interview

Norma cannot of course, take too many of these gut-wrenchingly emotional midnight visits. She never doubts for a moment that it's real, the return of the dejected spirit child looking for comfort. The parents are called upon to do what's best for the child, and also find a way to get on with their lives. Resignedly, Julio and Norma decide they are ready to take the next step. The Shawi response to the nightly appearances of a grieving dead-before-its-time spirit: It's time to tear down the house.

It all makes sense to the Shawi. The comfortable, warm, family dwelling must be taken apart and cease to exist. For then, when the wandering spirit of the child returns at night looking for home and mom, it will become confused as there will be no home to be found. (Anthropologists conclude that disassembling this house serves two purposes: 1. No more perceived hauntings. 2. The parents no longer reside in the home that contains so many powerful, wonderful memories of their life with the child.)⁷

Such a custom may bring psychological comfort for a time but having no idea if you'll ever see that child again is a pain that will last a life time. Julio and Norma eventually tore down their house and rebuilt it a few yards away in the hopes that this would stop the pain. Missionary Schultz had a chance to talk with Norma one day while walking along the jungle path. Her face continued to show the pain that she felt even after her and her husband had moved the house. The following is the interaction that took place that day according to Missionary Schultz:

There was a stoic pain written all over Norma's face. I could barely get through a few introductory words of condolences to her (using simple Spanish words as it is her second language) before I rushed on with a torrent of good news for Norma. I could hardly wait to proclaim it: Norma would be seeing her little girl one day in paradise. For Norma had stood in the waters of the muddy river last year to have her baby baptized!!!

The exiting words fairly flew out of my mouth. Norma's baby was indeed waiting for her. Norma would one day feel the little girl in her arms again. Her Savior had seen to that. Also, I hastened to add, Norma needn't worry herself about the child sadly wandering the community at night looking for her. Far from it! The child was experiencing supreme joy in heaven! She had no need or *desire* to sadly wander back to this tough world! All that was left was for Norma, to one day rejoin her girl!

⁷ Schultz, Terry, Jungle Journal, November 2005

Now in five years, I have only seen Shawi women crying twice. Norma stood there motionless, but huge tears began streaming down her eyes. Obviously, she wasn't sure how to act or what to say. But her huge eyes and the intensity with which she looked and listened to me was unmistakable. Her small nods and big tears indicated that she understood exactly what I was saying!⁸

As you read these accounts remember that Missionary Schultz and Pastor Ronal are not from these parts. Terry Schultz grew up in the comforts of modern day West Chicago, IL. Ronal Carrera grew up in the mountain town of Paillon (pronounced Pa-lee-own), Peru, a drastic change to the jungles of the Amazon. And though these men are from entirely different cultural structures God's Word still penetrates the heart of even the people of the jungle.

Their ministry has been a constant learning experience and adaptation in order that some might be saved. They adapt as the Apostle Paul adapted. Paul wrote in his first letter to the Corinthians:

Though I am free and belong to no man, I make myself a slave to everyone, to win as many as possible. To the Jews I became like a Jew, to win the Jews. To those under the law I became like one under the law (though I myself am not under the law), so as to win those under the law. To those not having the law I became like one not having the law. To the weak I became weak, to win the weak. I have become all things to all men so that by all possible means I might save some. I do all this for the sake of the gospel, that I may share in its blessings (1 Corinthians 9:19-23).

Both Missionary Schultz and Pastor Ronal have found themselves ministering in very unique ways for very unique and not so unique situations. Many of the cultural differences can pose a challenge for these men of God. Missionary Schultz pointed out some of those cultural differences:

Here are a couple of other quick little facets about native life. When the gal has her first menstrual cycle which can occur around 14 but even as early as 12 or 13 to the Chayahuitas this indicates that they are now ready to be married. It is very common for the gals to be married at a super early age. And they may have 8, 10,

⁸ Schultz, Jungle Journal

or even 12 children. We have some members who have 12 to 14 aunts and uncles when it's all added up. Infant mortality rate at times is horrendous in certain villages. 1 out of every 3 babies dies before the age of 2. The men go out and work in the fields. They raise corn and rice. There's a lot of alcoholism, a tremendous amount of alcoholism. The women do all of the house keeping, the cooking, and the cleaning. An anthropologist would probably label it a matriarchal culture where it appears that the women make most of the decisions for the family also. Even though they get married at a very early age there's very little divorce, but a huge problem with domestic violence.⁹

These are just some of the cultural differences that the missionaries must adapt to.

But imagine having to deal with certain situations and not being unable to speak the native language. As Missionary Schultz pointed out in his account about Norma, Spanish is the second language of these people. And some of them don't even speak Spanish.

That's why Maravid, one of the Chayahuita leaders, is such a blessing to the work in the jungle. Not only does Maravid perform the integral task of translating but God has used him to open doors to other communities so that they might hear about Jesus. Missionary Schultz explained:

After working in those two villages Maravid, one of our leaders from Paranari who came down to study with us, has asked us to work and visit a couple of other communities who are now starting exploratory work in three more villages called Santa Rosa, Nuevo Tocache Norte, and Nuevo Tocache Sur. And again going back to the dynamic of communities having about 50 people in them and if they get larger spinning off and starting a new community, essentially everyone in some way is related to everyone. Once we gain the natives' trust and there are some conversions we are now asked to come to one more village, and one more village, and one more village. People want their relatives to hear the message. Everyone has aunts and uncles, as I said even up to 12 and 14. So once we get in with the natives and the word has passed that we're trust worthy the doors start to open.

Now that we are using Maravid to translate our Spanish sermons into Chayahuita we literally have more contacts than we can follow up on. And when we come to a village we simply describe a little bit of who we are and we are immediately accepted. The Apu sometimes takes his shirt off on the spot and puts it on a bench before I sit down. The entire village essentially listens to our message. That has worked very well. We've had a lot of baptisms. We've had up to 10

⁹ Schultz Interview

children at a time down at the river baptized which has been a wonderful blessing. That is an outline of how we got where we did. ¹⁰

This short history is just the tip of the iceberg of what God has been doing in the Amazon Jungle. Missionary Schultz has written and continues to write updates on his many experiences in his Jungle Journal. Many of those can be found reprinted in Mission News, a publication of the ELS. These papers have been provided with this history if you would like to learn more on God's magnificent work done through the ELS Peruvian Jungle Mission.

“The harvest is plentiful but the workers are few. Ask the Lord of the harvest, therefore, to send out workers into his harvest field” (Matthew 9:37). From one tiny seed of faith planted in the heart of a woman named Lydia from the town of Tarapoto to a man named Maravid in the deep jungle of the Amazon, God has sown a field ready to be harvested. May God bless this harvest field with many more workers.

¹⁰ Schultz Interview

MAP OF PERU



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