



Mission Connections

Presbyterian Church (USA)

A letter from Jed Koball in Perú

September 2009

I pray that... Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith, as you are being rooted and grounded in love. - Ephesians 3:16-17

Dear Friends,

There is life in the desert! The trees have taken root. A flower is in bloom. Deep inside “the bosque seco” (“dry forest”), a tarantula, seduced from his home beneath a rock, scurries for cover under a pocket of decaying leaves. On the other side, a small plastic bag with mouth opened wide by youthful hands of curiosity, waits patiently for its prey, or in this case, a new “pet.”

This desert forest in the municipality of Lomas, Carabayllo, is the last vestige of rustic nature in this northern district of the vast urban sprawl of Lima, Perú. And like the coastal desert terrains now occupied by nearly ten million people in the city (a third of the population of Perú), these lands are now under threat as well, but not without a fight.



Nelson Figueroa, director of Día del Pueblo, finds a moment to teach about conserving the environment.

Nelson Figueroa is the director of Día del Pueblo, and he is concerned about the *bosque seco* and about the young urban dwellers who have recently migrated to Lima and are now living in the impoverished barrios that are slowly but certainly encroaching upon this natural wonder in the desert.

Just over six months ago I myself migrated to the desert city of Lima. I was called to serve as the companionship facilitator for Joining Hands Against Hunger in Perú, a network of Peruvian NGOs and churches that have partnered with Presbyterian

churches in the United States in order to understand and address the causes of hunger and poverty. Día del Pueblo is one of twelve organizations in the Peruvian Joining Hands network.

Like a spider in the desert, and like the thousands of Peruvians who flock each day from the rural provinces to Lima, I was seduced from my home, called to make a new home in a foreign land. To grow new roots.

For a foreigner from the United States or a foreigner from the highlands of the Andes, the desert is not an easy place for one's roots to grab hold. This perhaps is what makes "the *bosque seco*" all the more fascinating and mystical. It's not like a typical forest. The trees are not tall; in fact, I'd hardly call them trees. And in these winter months in Lima, the only obvious sign of green life in the forest is the moss crawling up the rocks that are scattered upon the sandy and fragile slopes that shelter and protect the leafless vegetation. Nelson assures me that the trees will turn green again. He assures me that they have taken root and that there is life in the desert. I believe him.

And the youth who are with us on this day believe him too. As unlikely is this forest in the desert, so too is the budding movement to protect it. It is a movement of youth fueled by Nelson's care for creation and his hope for the future of these young people.

Like millions who have come before them to this desert city, these young migrants from the Andes are searching for jobs, for education, for direction. And like millions who have tried to plant roots in the desert, the future is precarious, resting on the shifting sands of a globalized world beneath their feet.

Yet in this dry forest in the desert, Nelson sees hope. Nelson sees fertile land. He hears not only the call to protect this fragile and threatened forest; he sees opportunity to empower young persons. The goal is not only to have the land declared a natural reserve; it is also to create a youth-run eco-tourist industry to educate local citizens on ecological issues and provide both professional training and modest income for young persons. Nelson is tending the soil of creation, the fertile space of the human spirit. In the barren desert of Lima, the desolate space of the human struggle, Nelson is helping roots take hold and grow.

As we walk out of "the *bosque seco*" that day, the young man with his new pet tarántula points towards something among the rocks. Anticipating another creature of the desert, my eyes fix on something else—precious and life-giving. A flower.

A flower and a smile. Many smiles. There is indeed life in the desert. There are indeed plants being sewn. Roots are taking hold as they are grounded in the fertile soils of hope, faith and love, the sacred space cared for and tilled by our partners. And with them, I know that my roots too are taking hold. I know that I am now at home.

May you also know your place, your home rooted in love these days and always.

Faithfully and gratefully,

Jed Koball

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