It's Our Turn Now:
Introduction to
De encuentro a ministerio: La vida y fe de los Amigos latinoamericanos
by Nancy Thomas
2012

I lifted my head during a moment of silence and glanced around the room. Our group had been exchanging ideas with Mario whose essay described a family crisis over his daughter's illness. I observed that the interactions in the other groups were just as dynamic. In one circle, arranged to soak up the sun coming in through the window, four men were engaged in serious debate. Another group was listening to Manuela read her manuscript out loud; this was the first article she had ever written in her life. What I saw and heard filled me with contentment.

It was the first afternoon of a writers' workshop in Juli, Peru in September 2009. The workshop was jointly sponsored by the Friends World Committee on Consultation, Section of the Americas and the Northwest Yearly Meeting of Friends. The 27 participants represented the various yearly meetings of Bolivia and Peru. This was actually the third in a series of writers' workshops that my husband Hal and I were facilitating. The first two took place in 2006 and 2007 and focused on the preparation of teaching materials for adult Quakers. They resulted in several small books (or plans for books) on such themes as reconciliation in the family, the local congregation in relation to its social context, and practical holiness.

But this time around I wanted to do something different, and so I had proposed a focus on narrative writing. It's been my conviction for several years that we need to be writing and collecting the stories of Latin American Friends, individual stories as well as stories of faith communities.

Narrative writing fits in the Aymara context of Bolivia and Peru. Cultural communication styles emphasize orality and narrative. In traditional rural communities, the grandmothers transmit cultural values to children through the talking animal stories, among other types of tales and legends. And although universal education and urbanization are influencing and even changing some of the traditional values, something that is happening around the world, even so, the stories—the narratives—maintain their appeal.

We presented the workshops on narrative writing three times: in Juli for Friends of the high Andean plains in both Bolivia and Peru; in Santa Cruz, Bolivia, for lowland Friends; and in Chiquimula, Guatemala for Friends in Guatemala, Honduras and El Salvador. In all, 57 women and men participated in the experience, with enthusiasm and dedication.

We began the workshops with a discussion on narrative literature—its nature, its universality among all the cultures of the world, and its special importance in our Latin American contexts. Why do we need to remember and pass on our stories? How can we do it in ways that attract and inspire? How can we write our stories in culturally appropriate forms? And how can we help each other in this task?

We included an emphasis on Quaker values and part of the fascinating history of Quakers as "Publishers of Truth" from the very beginning of the movement. We observed that for the most part Quaker literature has come from the global West, and that now it's our turn. It's time to hear Quaker voices from Africa, Asia, and, of course, from Latin America.

The heart of any writers' workshop is always practical experience. Practice. Participants arrived with the first draft of a narrative essay, the story of a personal experience of some kind of encounter with Jesus. After an orientation as to what good writing consists of and an explanation of the basic writing (and re-writing) process, we divided into small groups to work. Each participant took his or her turn and read their essay out loud. Then they carefully listened to the observations and suggestions of the others in their group. I wandered from group to group, mouth closed, to observe the process. I felt very pleased as I listened to the observations and saw the ways in which people were learning to give and receive evaluation and constructive criticism. This is never easy, but it's an important step forward in growing as a writer.

From the very beginning, we dreamed that a book would come out of these workshops. We even envisioned two groups of receptors: Latin American Friends, and English-speaking Friends. This is the book you hold in your hands: a collection of stories of both persons and congregations that demonstrate the faith and life of Spanish and Aymara speaking Quakers. The book's primary purposes are aimed at uniting Latin American Friends, helping them to self-identify as Friends with certain characteristics and callings, a significant part of the world family of Friends. Of course passing the stories on to future generations of Friends is part of this purpose. But the book also has purposes for English-speaking Friends, to inform and inspire them with the reality of their Latin American brothers and sisters and to help us all better understand what it means to be Quaker in the 21st century.

The stories are divided into three sections. The first is entitled, "Encounters with God: Conversion Stories." The second section is "Encounters in Dark Times: Stories of Divine Intervention." And finally, the book concludes with the section entitled, "Serving the Living God: Stories of the Church in Ministry and Mission."

These stories represent a variety of experiences and perspectives, but through them all run threads of a vibrant faith in Jesus, a commitment to hear his voice and live in obedience, and a sense of fellowship in the family of Friends. For example, Gaby Maita (Bolivia) tells about her experience of finding Jesus in a context of animism and hostility to the gospel. Ricardo Jovel (El Salvador) shares how he learned to recognize and respond to God's voice during times of crisis. David Bercián (Guatemala) testifies to God's protection in a time of danger and civil unrest in his village. Teodoro Alanguía (Peru) tells the story of his early experiences with God and the Friends Church, and the development of his life-long ministry. Several writers share the experiences of Friends who left the high plains to found new works in the tropical regions of Bolivia. María Cárcamo (Honduras) writes about the life of a pastor's wife during one particular year of ministry.

All the writers are Friends—men and women, pastors and lay people, old and young, experienced writers and those who wrote their first article for this book. They live in Honduras,

Bolivia, Guatemala, Peru and El Salvador. Together they represent eight yearly meetings in these countries. More than that, they represent a spirit of unity and cooperation between the various groups. Together we are growing as the people of God known as Friends. And together we are raising our voices as writers, publishers of truth.

[Published in *De encuentro a ministerio: La vida y fe de los Amigos latinoamericanos;* Nancy Thomas, editor; La Paz, Bolivia: Publicaciones CALA, 2012]