Learning to Learn: The Journey of a Cross-cultural Public Friend

by Nancy Thomas
2002

I loved Bolivia from the first. As the mission jeep carried my husband Hal and me from the airport down the winding road into the city of La Paz, I looked out the window at a living collage of colors, textures, and sounds, entranced. We were here at last, called to serve among the Aymara people.

Youth, idealism, and my own romantic imagination wove a dreamlike haze as we moved through those first few days. We met and talked with many people, explored the cobblestone streets, fingered bright textiles in the market, and gazed on the surrounding peaks of the Andes Mountains. I felt great joy and anticipation. I remember wondering why missionary work was so often connected with suffering in the literature. Clearly, we were going to have a wonderful time.

This euphoric state of being lasted ten days. At the end of the tenth day, I wrote the following prayer in my journal:

Lord, I honestly thought I was prepared for culture shock. After reading Customs and Cultures and all those other anthropology books, wouldn't you think I'd be a little more immune?

Tonight I went to an Aymara wedding. We got there a half-hour later which offended no one. The ceremony started an hour later and seemed to last several more hours. But it didn't really bother me until the wedding feast. We walked down to the small church basement and crowded together, all 200 of us, on the wooden benches.

The first course was soup—hot and spicy. One hour later someone gave me a plate heaped full of potatoes with a piece of chicken on top—the main course. Those funny potatoes all stuck to the roof of my mouth and I could not finish. All the while street odors wafted in the window and mixed with the spicy smells in front of me.

Lord, it took an effort to keep back the tears. This isn't my home. I'm not like these people. How can they sit there ignoring those smells? And how can they laugh crowded together in that dank dirty room?

Remind me of yourself, Lord. You, too, left your home to walk among people different from yourself. You lived in simple rooms, fought dirt, drank unboiled water, smelled the same human smells that filled that room. Was Galilean food strange to your palate—you who were accustomed to food from the tree of life? Did you experience culture shock?

Remind me of this often, Lord. And remind me of your reason for leaving home to live among us. With you beside me, I'll rise above these feelings and grow into love. And someday—learn to laugh with them.

Emotional ups and downs are typical of the initial experiences of people called to minister long-term in cross-cultural situations. For Hal and me, the succeeding 18 years among Aymara Friends were marked by the very growth into love and understanding that we prayed for in the early years. It's been a process, slow and painful at times, exhilarating at other times. But we did "learn to laugh with them"—we learned to laugh, listen to stories, tell our own stories, eat (and appreciate) all sorts of potatoes, and minister along side our Aymara sisters and brothers.

Participation in God's mission in the world has been a part of the Quaker experience from the beginning. George Fox's seminal visions (that of Christ Jesus as the one who can "speak to thy condition," and that of a "great people to be gathered") are missionary in nature and, as part of our narrative, they connect us with the larger story that begins in Genesis and will end when people of every language and nation gather around the throne.

In this essay, I will look at the tradition of Public Friends as it applies specifically to those called to minister across cultural barriers. I will weave together strands from our own experiences among Andean Friends, along with Friends history, especially the story of John Woolman's ministry among native Americans.

PERSONAL PILGRIMAGE

I wasn't raised in a Christian home, but my parents were good people, and my mother, in her desire to see us kids grow with strong principles, took us to the small Quaker church in Ramona, California. There I became part of a loving community who took an interest in this young girl who wanted to be an actress when she grew up. There I first heard the stories of Christian and Quaker heroes--Daniel in the lion's den along with Elizabeth Fry in the prisons. And it was there I first heard about a Savior who loved me and offered me a life filled with purpose and love. Through the influence of the Ramona Friends Sunday school, I decided at nine years old to throw my lot in with that of Jesus. He became my best Friend; He still is.

But it wasn't until my freshman year in George Fox College that I seriously considered participating in God's mission in the world. College was an expanding experience for me in many ways, one of which was a growing interest in what God was doing in other parts of the world. Hearing about how the church was growing in other cultures fascinated me. One night in prayer, I simply asked if God might let me be a missionary. The answer from God's Spirit to my own was a simple immediate "yes." I felt God's smile at that moment, and thus began what has proved to be a lifetime adventure.

Hal and I got to know one another in Guatemala where he was serving as a conscientious objector to war, during the Vietnam era, and I was on a short-term summer mission trip. An important part of our early relationship was each of us trying to figure out how serious the other was about mission service. We married in 1968, went to California for a few years of pre-field seminary preparation, then arrived in La Paz in January 1972, having added one-year-old David to the family. Kristin was born in La Paz during our first term of service.

When we arrived, the Bolivian Friends Church (INELA) had already been functioning for some forty years, and the Friends Mission now served alongside the church in a teaching/advising role. For the first decade of our service in Bolivia, Hal's work was very much like that of the early traveling Friends. As part of a team along with Bolivian Friends, he often traveled up to four days and nights a week, visiting the far flung Friends churches on the altiplano (high plane) and down in the mountain valleys, or preparing the way for churches to open in new communities. We found our Aymara brothers and sisters to be dedicated workers, with a strong desire to see God's word of reconciliation spread among their people.

Teaching became a key ministry for both of us, with many opportunities in the Bible school, an interdenominational seminary, a theological education by extension program, and, of course, all the quarterly meetings, annual conferences, and church services the Aymara so love. Other ministries grew in time—participation on the Bible Society team that translated the Old Testament to Aymara and encouragement of many social projects (greenhouses, a clinic, rural grade schools, a vaccination program for llama herds, etc.). Needs and challenges always

abounded. I found a special vocation encouraging and training Aymara writers. We carried out much of this ministry as Friends working in cooperation with other denominations.

Our growth in cross-cultural ministry was gradual. We came prepared to teach, not realizing how much we had to learn. I remember that first year in La Paz, being asked to teach a series of classes on the Christian family in the annual women's conference. I was 26 years old, had been married for three years, and had a one-year-old son. Before beginning the first lesson, I looked out over a sea of 300 faces and realized that all of these women were older than me, many of them grandmothers. Their life experiences were miles from mine. Yet here I was, standing out in front, the Teacher. The Public Friend. I experienced two sensations: fear and a sense of the absurd. But, of course, I went ahead. I figured I had to start sometime, so I shared some insights from the Bible. The women graciously received my words, even asked me to come do it again, but I knew that any genuine ministry was going to be by the grace of God.

Now when I go to La Paz, I visit with many of those same women. I know their names, remember when their kids were babies, look back to times when we prayed for each other, when I bore their burdens and they bore mine. They ask me about David and Kristin, share my amazement that I am a grandmother. It took me years to earn the right to be their teacher. And it happened, not because of my wisdom or expertise in teaching, but by living with them, sharing our lives, raising our families together, ministering side by side. I've learned much more than I've taught.

MY ANDEAN CLASSROOM

What I call my "Andean classroom" is not a formal classroom at all, of course, but rather the dirt roads, mountain villages, marketplaces, potato fields, meeting houses and adobe homes where people welcomed me, fed me, talked to me, prayed with me, and received my gifts even as I learned to receive theirs. More than anything else, my Andean classroom has been the relationships built and nourished over the years.

Some of the things I've learned have their roots in the traditional Aymara culture and others come specifically from relating to and ministering alongside Aymara Friends. This section will present highlights and will only scratch the surface.

I've learned much about hospitality and generosity from my Aymara friends. Learning to cope with the huge amounts of food that people serve becomes almost a survival skill. Eating together is highly valued and a major aspect of church services and quarterly meetings, especially in rural areas. After the service, a long row of blankets is spread on the ground, and the women lower their *awayos* (Andean woven version of the backpack), take out the chuños and tuntas (freeze dried potatoes), sheep cheeses, strips of dried meat, oca roots, toasted corn, hot chili pepper sauce and other items they've prepared, and place them on the blanket. This is pot-luck, Aymara Friends style. Everyone helps themselves, and there is always more than enough.

And there is always room in the homes of believers for "traveling Friends." Many times Hal has shared a raised mud platform with the other men he was traveling with, almost smothered with heavy woven blankets, while family members slept on the floor or made do in other ways.

Many of the people who have taken care of us when we traveled would be considered poor by current economic standards. Even so, people always have something to share. I've learned that generosity and hospitality aren't necessarily related to the material possessions a person has. I've become a more generous, hospitable person because of it.

I've learned much about community from my friendships with Aymaras. Coming from a culture that, in general, idealizes rugged individualism, I had a lot to learn, and, again, I've changed because of it.

I could give many examples of how community values work out in life. One example has to do with decision making. In the traditional Aymara village, decisions are made according to consensus, and in a town meeting, everyone has their say. Meetings, therefore, tend to last a long time (also reflected in Aymara church services and business meetings). Especially if there are sensitive issues to be dealt with, one by one, each person, man and woman, stands and delivers a formal speech. If everything goes well, the group reaches consensus about a solution. Of course, as is typical in any group involving real human beings, the chances of "everything going well" aren't high, but that's another story. At any rate, consensus decision making is the cultural ideal.

Another example of the traditional focus on communal values is the marriage relationship itself. The old Aymara word for "to marry" is "jakechaña" which literally means "to become a person." The married couple is considered the complete person, with both the woman and the man equally contributing to the relationship. When a man was appointed to be head of a community for a year, the appointment actually went to the couple, and the couple would be jointly positioned.

Some of these values and customs are being lost as the Aymara culture is gradually becoming urbanized and intersecting with the values of modernity. The evangelical Christian movement in general, across all denominations, has almost over-emphasized Robert's Rules of Order (or some variation thereof) in church business, and the headship of the husband and submission of the wife in family life. Aymara Christians struggle in these areas, caught between traditional and modern values. While change is a feature of any culture, Aymara traditional community values still have much to teach the rest of the church.

I've also learned about sacrifice and hard work from the Aymara culture. The stereotypical lazy Latin American ("mañana") may be part of the heritage of the Spanish conquistador (basically a middle class soldier who expected to rule while others worked the mines or plowed the fields), but it doesn't relate to the indigenous people groups of the continent. Aymaras value hard work and personal sacrifice, both necessary for survival amid the harsh conditions of life on the altiplano.

Follow an Aymara Friends pastor around for a week to see a living example. My friend David, raised on the altiplano, now lives with his family in the lowland city of Santa Cruz. Several years ago, David and his wife began a new Friends church in a marginal zone of town known for poverty and violence. The church has grown, and David's ministry includes long hours visiting in homes, discipling a lively group of young people, raising leadership from within the congregation, as well as the weekly meetings. Along with this, David also serves as treasurer on the board of trustees of a major university in the city. He gives more than half time to his work in the university, for which he receives a modest salary. And, until recently, David was director of a local school for the blind. Demands that he could not ethically comply with forced his retirement from that job, although the family needed the money. His wife works full time at the university as registrar, and together they manage to make a living for themselves, their two daughters, and other extended family members they are helping. David also coordinates monthly meetings of Friends pastors in the area and is active in local interdenominational ventures.

I'm always impressed by David's cheerfulness and willingness to extend himself to help others. His servant's heart is typical of many Aymara Friends leaders who make loving sacrifice a lifestyle.

I've also learned lessons about balance and harmony. The quest for these ideals forms an intrinsic part of Aymara worldview. According to numerous anthropological studies as well as our own observations, the traditional culture sees life in terms of the struggle of conflicting elements. The struggle could be between the mountains and the valleys, the upper and lower sections of a village, older and younger brothers, masculine and feminine, shepherds and farmers, community and individual, rural and urban, or natural and supernatural. The list goes on. But, while struggle is build into the very nature of existence, one of the major life forces is the quest for equilibrium, for harmony.

This equilibrium comes through mediation, whether by human or supernatural means. The "typi," literally, the "middle," is a much valued, though often elusive, aspect of Aymara worldview.

One of the ways this works out in life is in the rites of reconciliation, part of the pre-Christian heritage of this people. At some point, when the struggle between different family groups in a village, for example, has gone on long enough, a mediator will rise up and through both magic and ritual, the feuding sides will come together in a peace that may last several years.

This rite has found its way into the Christian church in services for reconciliation. I see the whole set of forces that long for and move toward reconciliation, balance and harmony as part of the footprints of God built into the foundations of this culture. It's one of the reasons Aymaras are drawn to Jesus, the Mediator between God and humanity, the One who, as Paul writes, "is our peace, who …broke down the barrier of the dividing wall" (Eph. 2:14). Developing the themes of struggle, mediation, reconciliation, and harmony are aspects of an Aymara contribution to Christian theology that will one day enrich the whole church.

One further thing I learned in my Andean classroom has to do with aesthetic values. The Aymaras are able to find and create beauty in a harsh environment. I remember once when Hal traveled out to visit Friends churches in the Pacajes area, bordering Peru. This is llama herding territory, too high and cold for many crops grown elsewhere. He was gone over Mother's Day and when he came home, he brought me the gift of a potato sack. It was functional, hand-woven of sheep's wool, quite ordinary to the family he was staying with, but Hal had asked them if he could buy it. They probably thought he was crazy, but they had others and could use the money. It was beautiful, with alternating brown and beige stripes, scratchy, as home-spun material tends to be. The beauty went beyond its function and spoke to us of this culture's values.

The altiplano is a harsh, dry, and mostly brown place for a good part of the year. But people plaster their adobe houses and, when they can afford it, paint them in bright reds, blues, greens, and yellows. Their fiesta or church clothes include the same brilliant colors in shawls and ponchos. Several years ago, after attending Easter conference on the Altiplano, I wrote in my journal,

> *I'm amazed at these ladies, Lord, not only at how comfortable they are sitting on the ground, but at how they seem built to defy the cold and wind, to roll with life in this high stark place. Short and rounded, bundled in their layers of bright skirts and shawls, they make me think of living Easter eggs, meeting the challenge of the altiplano with spunk and color. Sunday afternoon the conference ended and the ladies dispersed, walking the kilometers back to their own villages. Every direction I looked green, red, purple, yellow and blue Easter eggs floated out over the prairie, gradually becoming smaller and smaller, points of color*

peppering the planes, dots of light, the spectrum of your love. How wonderful your craftsmanship, Lord! How intricate your designs!

My Aymara friends have shown me that's it's possible to bring color and beauty to any corner of the earth, no matter how harsh, to any task, no matter how mundane. Time and space prevent me from writing about their music, humor and stories, but it's all part of the pattern of Aymara creativity.

Other lessons the Aymara have reinforced in my life include placing relationships and events above time and schedules, a deep reverence for the land and its products, and a wholistic view of life that does not separate sacred and secular.

As in all cultures, the Aymara people have their shadow side. Along with all cultures (my own rural, middle-class North American heritage included), the Aymara need the Good News of the gospel. But in this section I've purposefully stressed the positive, the gifts these people have given me, the things that I, sent to teach, have learned. A good measure of my growth as a long-term, cross-cultural Public Friend (i.e. "missionary") has been learning to become a learner. The Aymara culture and the Aymara Friends Church provided the classroom, my Aymara sisters and brothers, the "professors."

HISTORY AS MY CLASSROOM: THE EXAMPLE OF JOHN WOOLMAN AS A CROSS-CULTURAL PUBLIC FRIEND

Travel in cross-cultural mission has been a part of the Quaker experience from the beginning. George Fox's visits in Barbados, Jamaica and among Native Americans in the colonies, as well as Mary Fisher's visit to the Sultan of Turkey exemplify this aspect of Quaker mission.

In this section, I will draw from the experience of 18th century Quaker John Woolman and his experience as a traveling Friend among Native Americans. Woolman is most well known for his prophetic ministry against slavery in the colonies, but other aspects of his work are instructive as well. The experience I will explore is what we would call today a short-term mission trip that took place in June 1763. But while the trip itself was brief, it reflects a long-term concern of Woolman's, and his attitudes and actions have much to teach us.

Woolman records in his journal that for many years he "felt love in my heart toward the natives of this land who dwell far back in the wilderness, whose ancestors were the owners and possessors of the land where we dwell, and who for a very small consideration assigned their inheritance to us" (122; I use Phillips P. Moulton's 1989 edition of The Journal and Major Essays of John Woolman, Richmond, IN: Friends United Press). His compassion sprang partly from a keen sense of the injustices committed against Native Americans. In August 1761, Woolman met some natives from Wyalusing, a town two-hundred miles from Philadelphia, and from this contact grew a longing to visit that place. It's important to note that while Woolman considered that Native Americans did not "profess Christianity" (129), from this very first contact he recognized the work of the Spirit in these people. He writes of that first meeting, "I believed some of them were measurably acquainted with that divine power which subjects the rough and forward will of the creature" (122-123).

Woolman and his wife mulled over in their minds for a year his "inward drawings" to visit the native community, and in the winter of 1762 they finally shared this concern with their own monthly meeting and then at the "General Spring Meeting," obtaining the community's blessing.

Then in June of 1763, Woolman took advantage of the visit of natives from the village to travel back with them to Wyalusing.

The trip took ten days, and included steep mountains, swamps, storms, and an encounter with a raised tomahawk. Reports of uprisings, slaughter, and scalpings accompanied the travelers and tried Woolman's sense of call, "till the Lord, my gracious Father, who saw the conflicts of my soul, was pleased to give quietness" (130). Woolman's traveling companions were Native Americans, and when opportunities arose along the way, he visited with other natives, expressing the motives for his visit and his concern for their welfare. The trip itself provided opportunities for ministry.

Woolman and company reached Wyakusing on June 17th and stayed until the 20th. While there he visited with people informally and participated in meetings that a Moravian missionary was already conducting. In the meetings, he spoke only as moved by love and the Spirit, and always through an interpreter, unless he was praying. Cross-cultural communication proved difficult. Woolman does not record the themes of his messages in his journal, only his attitudes and the positive responses he perceived. The trip back took six days, and Woolman notes with characteristic understatement that his family and friends "appeared glad to see me return from a journey which they apprehended dangerous" (136).

The first lesson I learn from John Woolman's cross-cultural experience concerns his motives. At the deepest level, love drew him to the Native Americans, a love that included a concern for social justice. It was love that led him to brave the dangers, even though "the thoughts of falling into the hands of Indian warriors was in times of weakness afflicting to me" (134). Love not only motivated the journey but provided the criterion for his ministry. He spoke up the meetings as he felt "the current of love run strong" (133).

This love, of course, was connected to the life of the Spirit in him. Woolman's commitment to listen to and wholly follow the Spirit's leading provides the second lesson. The experience began two years before the actual journey, as Woolman attended to the "inward drawings" of the Spirit. He tested his leading first by sharing it with his wife and they waited together for a year before presenting the concern to the local and regional meetings of Friends. At one point, Woolman informed his wife of the need to pass through tribes at open war with the English; he noted in his journal that "she appeared to be deeply concerned about it, but in a few hours time my mind became settled in a belief that it was my duty to proceed on my journey, and she bore it with a good degree of resignation" (124). Woolman went with the blessing of family and the group of Friends he was most closely associated with who confirmed his sense of the Spirit's leading. His quiet dependence on the Spirit continued throughout the journey, as well as in the various times of ministry. He depended on the Spirit to know when to listen, when to speak, and, eventually, when to leave.

I also find instruction and inspiration in noting the purpose of Woolman's cross-cultural mission trip. He wrote, "A concern arose to spend some time with the Indians, that I might understand their life and the spirit they live in, if haply I might receive some instruction from them, or they be in any degree helped forward by my following the leadings of Truth amongst them" (127). Woolman's attitude was clearly that of a learner. He was ready to respect the culture and "spirit" of these people and he fully expected to find God's footprints. It's almost as though any teaching he had to give was an additional grace and not the primary purpose. Looking back on the experience, Woolman thanked God who "instructed me that I might have a quick and lively feeling of the afflictions of my fellow creatures whose situation in life is difficult" (137).

In considering these purposes, we need to keep in mind that this was a very short mission trip. Woolman actually spent less than four days in the village. Plans for evangelization, beginning a new meeting, or carrying out a project to better their condition would have been out of proportion to the time allotted. But the goals of learning from the culture, discovering how God was already at work, experiencing first hand the hardships, and being willing to teach as God led have a certain compelling simplicity and integrity.

Another way in which John Woolman inspires me is his willingness to cooperate with how God was already at work in the situation. Not only did he perceive God's presence in the culture, he was also aware of the contributions of other parts of the body of Christ. Before his trip, he had learned of a Moravian missionary, one David Zeisberger, who had already begun a mission work in Wyalusing. From the beginning of his visit, Woolman established a friendly relationship with Zeisberger, explaining his concern and requesting liberty to speak in meetings as the Spirit led. Woolman fit in with what Zeisberger was doing, careful not to organize any extra meetings, but affirming and supporting the work already begun. The parting between the two was warm. Woolman's statement, "I believed that a door remained open for the faithful disciples of Jesus Christ to labour amongst these people" (134), implies that he saw his brief visit in the context of a longer, ongoing ministry that would not necessarily be affiliated with Friends. He focused on the work of the Lord for the salvation and well-being of these people, not on the growth of Friends as such.

Woolman's wholistic view of mission also instructs us. His concern did not focus only on the spiritual condition of people, but on their whole life situation. He saw social justice, freedom from war, and a healthy life style as part of the mission of God among the peoples of the earth.

Finally, John Woolman as a cross-cultural traveling Friend demonstrates mission-from-being as well as from doing. Who he was as a person, public or private, was more important than what he said or what he did as a "Public Friend." This focus on being was an integral part of his mission. In one of his times of reflection on the journey, thinking of the troubles of both Native and African Americans, he wrote, "I was led into a close, laborious inquiry whether I, as an individual, kept clear from all things which tended to stir up or were connected with wars, either in this land or Africa, and my heart was deeply concerned that in future I might in all things keep steadily to the pure Truth and live and walk in the plainness and simplicity of a sincere follower of Christ" (129). He won the trust of those he traveled with, as well as the people in the village, more by the way he treated them and the sincerity of his concern than by his formal ministry.

APPLICATIONS FOR FRIENDS IN THE 21ST CENTURY

Several hundred years and a continent separate the inhabitants of Wyalusing and contemporary Aymaras living in the highlands of Bolivia and Peru. Yet the experiences of Friends visiting both these groups yield similar insights. The tradition of traveling Public Friends continues, in new forms. Globalization as one of the realities of the 21st century is more than an economic phenomenon; it touches the life of the church across continents. This includes Friends, and part of the profile of the 21st century Public Friend will be increasing travel and ministry across cultural barriers. In this section I draw from my personal experience and from the example of John Woolman for recommendations that would guide Public Friends called to minister cross-culturally today.

1. Intentionally adopt the attitude of learners. From the beginning of his journey, Woolman adopted the attitude of a learner, an attitude that developed more slowly in my own experience. The importance of a learner-attitude applies to both short- and long-term cross-cultural ministers.

In North America, the emphasis on short-term missionary work is increasing. Young people, looking for guidance about their future or, sometimes, just adventure; successful business people wanting to make a contribution; medical personnel willing to volunteer their services in a poor country; retirees desiring to make the remainder of their lives count—more and more people are using their resources to travel to the majority world and spend a few weeks, hoping to make a difference.

The attitude of the learner is subtle and does not come naturally. People from Western cultures bring their wealth, their education, their specialized skills and tools, and, often, an unconscious attitude of superiority, hidden under the idealism that wants to help those less fortunate. Respect for another culture involves more than altruism and an interest in quaint customs. It includes openness to learn from perspectives, stories, experiences, and relationships different from our own. It includes a commitment to search for the footprints of God in that place and a willingness to be surprised.

Recently we received notice of a group of Quaker educators from the east coast of the United States who want to come to Bolivia to give classes on Friends distinctives, hoping to help people here become more deeply Quaker. I'm still waiting for the group who wants to come just to listen to Andean Friends, to learn how Quakerism is developing among the unique challenges of life in the Andes, to receive and be enriched. Such a group would, by the very work of listening, make a contribution to Andean Friends.

In the 1980s, the young people of Northwest Yearly Meeting organized a program of short-term summer mission trips for high school students. The program adopted the name, "Youth Committed to Evangelizing the World," going by the acronym YCEW (pronounced Y-Q). Hal and I smiled at the title, but said nothing, not wanting to squelch youthful idealism.

The program proved successful. Bolivian youth loved the interaction with the "Gringo" kids as they spent time together playing soccer, singing, and trying to communicate. But more than the fun, adventure, and new friendships, the young people who traveled returned home changed, with the vision of a world, and a God, much bigger than they had realized. They did not, however, "evangelize the world." After a few years the YCEW leaders wisely changed the title to "Youth Committed to Enlarging their Worldview," keeping the familiar acronym.

2. Encourage travel and public ministry by majority world Friends. The 20th century saw the balance of the world's Christians shift from Europe and North America to the nations of the southern hemispheres. There are now more Christians in Asia, Africa, and South American than in the traditionally Christian nations of the north. The 21st century is seeing the shift in the balance of the missionary movement, with more missionaries now being sent from places that were formerly considered "mission fields." Korean, Indian, Brazilian and Nigerian Christians are crossing cultural barriers and moving out in mission in increasing numbers. Some of them come as missionaries to the United States.

We as Friends participate in this trend. Even as I write this, a young Honduran Quaker is serving in a church in Southern California while preparing to go to Cambodia as a missionary. Visiting speakers at Northwest Yearly Meeting this year included Arabic, Nepalese and Filipino Quakers. I'm currently mentoring a young Quaker woman from Peru who senses God's call to serve Him among Muslims in North Africa. We from the West need to encourage this trend, receiving and learning from Quakers of other cultures as they minister to us, and helping them go out in mission to places that do not yet have a strong Christian witness. Cross-cultural mission

teams--Friends from Guatemala, Kenya and the United States working together—will be a part of the picture.

Another important way Quakers in the north can encourage Quaker leaders from the southern hemispheres is by taking seriously their contributions to theological development. Theology, as the growing understanding of God's person and mission in the world, needs the unique perspectives of leaders and thinkers from other parts of the world. Guatemalan, Rwandan, and Indian Friends potentially have much they could teach the rest of the church on issues such as social justice as part of the gospel of Jesus Christ, or holiness and integrity in the midst of corrupt and often violent situations. Andean Friends could add much to a theological understanding of the land and our relationship to it, of reconciliation, of Jesus Christ as Mediator. These are all matters pertaining both to theology and life experience.

The genius of the original Friends movement was partly in the ability of George Fox, Margaret Fell and so many others to integrate Scripture and the leading of the Spirit with the specific context and problems faced by people in 17th century England. We call this "contextualization" in today's theological jargon. Friends distinctives were contextual theology, specific answers to specific life situations. Many of these distinctives have proven to be more than answers to 17th century questions and now define Friends in all contexts. But we need to let the new contexts wrestle with 21st century realities, under the authority of both the written and the living Word, to enrich Quaker theology, and the distinctives that flow from it.

3. Recognize the wider Body of Christ. Even as we affirm the richness of our Quaker heritage, we need to recognize that we're part of something bigger—the universal church of Jesus Christ, that spans generations, genders, and cultures. We are members first of the Body of Christ and secondly of that part of the Body known as Quakers. Historian Pablo Deiros notes what he calls "postdenominationalism" to be one of the 21st century trends in Latin American Protestantism, and he sees this as a movement of the Spirit. Part of this is the growth of new churches not connected with any traditional denomination, and another aspect is a lessening of emphasis on denominationalism as such. Not that denominations will, or should, cease to exist, but rather the emphasis will be on what we have in common, how we complement each other and how we can work together to participate in the extension of God's kingdom. And what is happening in Latin American reflects the reality in other parts of the world as well.

Friends will still be Friends, with a unique contribution to make to the larger Body of Christ. Perhaps one of new roles of Public Friends, especially those who travel cross-culturally, will be to help their Quaker sisters and brothers sense and value their wider family connections.

4. Nurture a spirituality of ministry in mission. Some things don't change with time. The old Quaker emphasis on listening to God and moving under the direction of the Spirit continues to be a vital part of any public ministries, including those that cross cultures. Of course, this emphasis pre-dates Quakerism, finding its roots in the Scriptures. Jesus worked and spoke only as He received instructions from the Father, and the Apostle Paul modeled following the Spirit in mission.

God still calls people to participate in mission. The call to travel as a Public Friend comes to people who know how to listen. And these are people who learn to listen not only at the beginning of the journey, but along the way. God still calls ministers to a life of purity and love. God calls us to be, before calling us to do, and the being is part of the doing, as John Woolman so beautifully modeled.

God still calls people to "be with." A call to be a Public Friend cross-culturally still needs the testing and confirmation of the church. God calls us to be with the church even as God calls us to move out into the church's surrounding context.

And God calls us to "be-with" those to whom we are sent. Perhaps the greatest lesson I learned from my years among the Aymara was the importance of relationships. More than strategies devised, lessons taught, sermons preached, greenhouses built, or textbooks written, it's loving relationships with other people that build the bridges to transformation, justice, reconciliation and all the other things that mission means.

Listening to God, listening to others, being the persons God wants us to be, and being genuinely present with others—these are still the spiritual foundations for the ministry of Public Friends.

CONCLUSION

I live in the creative tension of cross-cultural ministry, a 21st century expression of the old tradition of the "Public Friend." I am a member of one culture, ministering in a second culture, helping prepare those God has called to go out to still other cultures. I am a teacher, both by calling and by profession, while on a deeper lever, I am a learner. I include Andean Friends, today, and John Woolman, yesterday, among my favorite teachers.

I am also witness to the fact that God is raising up a new corps of Public Friends, calling them from South and Central America, from Asia and Africa, calling them to share their insights, give their gifts, and minister to the rest of the church. We will all be richer.

This essay was published in:
Post Abbott, Margery and Senger Parsons, Peggy. *Walk Worthy of Your Calling: Quakers and the Traveling Ministry.* Richmond, IN: Friends United Press, 2004.