

Report No. 7 from Alto Cayma - 6 Sep 20

Picking Up Where We Left Off

We left Alto Cayma on 4 Apr, and the last report you've had from me was written a month later, on 4 May, which is now 4 whole months ago. (Yes, yes, I know - way too long!)

As a reminder about conditions in Peru, the Federal government in Lima has called all the shots concerning the country's reaction to the Coronavirus emergency, and the President placed the entire country under a hard lockdown (much tighter than anything we've seen in the States) on 17 Mar. From that time onward, the government managed each region of the country according to the numbers of cases and deaths being generated in that region, so I'll talk about Arequipa, where Alto Cayma is located, but in the beginning, all regions were under a total lockdown. The only businesses allowed to be open were grocery stores, healthcare providers, and banks. All other work was shut down, which made for great economic hardship for the people and a tremendous blow to the national economy. People were confined to their houses, and could only go out for groceries, for medications, to get money from a bank or for a medical emergency. There were restrictions, and sometimes an outright prohibition, on the use of privately-owned vehicles, and there were restrictions on public transportation services as well. There was an overnight curfew every night, and all day Sunday. It looked like everything that could be done to prevent human contact was being done. And yet the disease continued to spread.

By way of further background, the following two sections were lifted from the 4 Apr report, as what they describe has remained valid to the present time.

The Life of the People at the Bottom of the Heap (i.e. Alto Cayma)

So, what is life like under these restrictions for people like those we serve? To begin with, people who work as day laborers, street vendors, etc. (i.e. the informal economy, which is up to 50% of all Peruvians, and a much higher % of people in Alto Cayma) can't work at all. ("Working from home" is only an option for people who already have good-paying jobs, ironically enough)

People at this economic level never made enough to be able to save, so they have no "nest egg" to tide them over. The government is trying to help - giving a food basket (one time) and periodic stipends of 380 soles (\$115) to families they know are poor, but the working poor initially didn't qualify (the

government is working to remedy this shortcoming), and in Alto Cayma, many families live so remotely that the government doesn't even know they exist.

Relief Efforts of the Association Serving Alto Cayma (ASAC)

About a week after the restrictions were first laid on, there was an "explosion" of need, as people ran out of money and exhausted the small food supplies they had in their houses. Our first job was to identify, locate and quantify the need. For the families who are already in our sponsorship program, we used our communication network to invite them to just call us with whatever need they had. Knowing that people who don't yet have sponsors would be in greater need even than our sponsorees, we asked people from outside the ASAC, whose judgment we trust (like Giuliana, whose job is to walk the neighborhoods and look



for elderly people in need, and Pastor Roger Puma, the pastor of our local Evangelical church) to refer people they know, who are in genuine need, to us for relief. (Note: Father Alex has his own effort going to meet the needs of those he serves.)

The people's main need is for food. Victor and Genoveva are ordering as much food as they can get, but transportation can be a problem. Our regular suppliers have their own vehicles, but one Saturday when they couldn't service us, Victor tried going to a nearby market outside our zone to pick up food with our own van. He got stopped, and almost had the van impounded for the duration of the epidemic. That was an unnerving experience! (We have an understanding with the police in our own area, who know who we are and what we do, but once we leave our zone, nobody knows us from Hogan's Goat, and it was only because Victor had all our documentation available to show them that he was able keep possession of the van, but even then, they turned him back and wouldn't let him proceed to the market.)

Even though it's sometimes difficult, we have been able to procure enough food to meet the needs so far, so the next challenge has been to scale up the scope of our food pantry operation by a factor of several times (The number increases from week to week.) Victor and Briza organized our staff into 2 teams to bag and hand out food. We open our doors for just a couple of hours on Tuesday and Friday mornings to quickly hand out food baskets. Our sponsorees call in when they need to reserve a food basket. Referrals are called in by the person making the referral. And then there are those who come to us "off the street" - people we don't know, because we've had no prior contact with them. It's this latter category - people in need who are new to us - that represents the "growing edge" of our food relief program. Victor interviews everyone at least briefly, but we try not to turn anyone away unless it's obvious that they're trying to take advantage of an opportunity they don't merit.

In between these scheduled distribution days, Victor makes runs up the hill to scout out and serve abandoned communities. Last Wednesday, for example, he went to 3 settlements we had never even heard of before. They were so far up the hill that many of the people he



talked to hadn't even heard of Father Alex. The people were flying white flags to signal that they're in distress and need relief, but their



houses are not in sight of the highway, so they were being ignored.

The people in these settlements don't even have water. One resident had a car he used as an informal cab. He went out to get drinking water for himself and his neighbors, but the police stopped him and impounded his car. He'll have to pay a stiff fine to get it back once the quarantine is lifted.

Victor and his helpers gave out 25 food baskets in the 3 settlements. In one of them, he had 9 to give out, but a 10th person,



whom the others knew was equally needy, also showed up. The 9 voluntarily and cheerfully shared their food with the 10th neighbor, which made Victor feel very good for having chosen these people to help.

(Here ends the refresher from Report No. 6. The material from here on is new.)

Our Modus Operandi from 4 May to the Present

During most of this time, our staff has just gone to the office to



either prepare foodbaskets or to hand them out, but depending on how



severe the threat from the virus has been, we've sometimes done more than that, and sometimes less. We even closed up all our operations completely and sheltered at home during the worst 2 weeks of the contagion. At other times, when the threat of the virus was high, we gave out cash which the people could use to purchase their own food, as



a means of limiting our contact with people who might be infected. At all times, the safety of our staff has been paramount, so that we would



be there the next week and the next month, to be able to continue serving. Just recently, we felt safe in returning to holding stable office hours for all comers, but so far this has been just half time.

Our work outside of just distributing food baskets has been varied, with a lot of initiative and creativity on the part of our staff. The things we've done include:

- Hiring Danilo (one of our students who is just graduating from teacher training) to tutor our kids in school. The problem is that all the classes are virtual now, and connectivity for the kids in Alto Cayma has been like it has been for the poorest kids in the States - they lack the home internet service and adequate devices to connect with the classes. We've help many of our students at least get adequate cell phones for this purpose. Meanwhile, Danilo's activities have been frequently limited by our concern for his health as he visited kids in their homes.

- Giuliana has continued walking all over Alto Cayma to keep in touch with the elderly people she has discovered.

- Victor & Briza have spent a lot of time driving around in the van, checking on people. In the process, they discovered a group of people

badly in need of help, but living in a settlement called La Bedoya, outside our normal service area. Our policy during the pandemic has been to help everyone who needs it, so we helped these people too.

- Victor even reached out to past "graduates" of the Aldea (orphanage), to see if any of them needed help. Many (some 12-15) did, and they were very pleasantly surprised to find that we even remembered them.

- Gregorio, our psychologist, has ridden his motorcycle all over our territory to bring psychotherapy to all the families who have come under tremendous stress, being cooped up at home and not able to work. This could have been fatal for families who weren't getting along all the well even under the best of circumstances, but Gregorio has been able to help them.

- Gregorio also continued, as best he could, helping our academy students prepare for the National University entrance exam, which was given virtually in August. Three (3) of our students gained admission this time, which is better than we usually do, so we're pleased about that.

- We've noted that the people we serve have become notably more spiritual as they suffer through this ordeal, and we've been ministering to their spiritual, as well as their material and emotional, needs. Mercedes and I, as well as Victor, have been sending out devotionals and reflections to all the families over WhatsApp, focusing on strengthening the people's faith in the face of the enormous challenge of the pandemic.

Olla's Comunes ("Common Pots")

One tactic which the people themselves have always resorted to, when food was scarce and money was tight, are what they call "ollas comunes" (common pots), in which a group of ladies in a neighborhood



sets up a field kitchen, and all the neighbors contribute what ingredients they have in order to make one huge pot of food which is



then shared equally among all of them. Those who can afford to, pay a little bit for each meal as well, to help buy missing ingredients. This



approach is surprisingly effective and economical, so as we've discovered these "ollas comunes", we've helped them out with



ingredients for their main meal at mid-day, and also with breakfast, especially when there are a lot of kids involved. We started supporting one in Señor de Huanca, then added one in Jardines de Cayma, another in 11 de Mayo, and finally one in a part of Embajada de Japón that is



barely even accessible.

Collapse of the Healthcare System

In Arequipa, the Regional Hospital, under the control of the Regional Government, was initially designated to exclusively handle all the COVID-19 cases, so that people hospitalized for other reasons wouldn't be jeopardized by the virus. As the number of cases kept increasing, however, a point was reached where the hospital was "full", and new patients couldn't be admitted because there were no beds. They set up a field hospital in the parking lot, but even that was



immediately overrun, and the new patients, many of whom were elderly, were sleeping out in the open during the cold Arequipa winter. This caused a huge uproar, as you can imagine, and the President of Peru came to inspect the hospital personally. The hospital administrators prepared for the visit by moving all the excess people out behind the hospital to try to hide them from the President. The investigation revealed that the Regional Governor is totally incompetent, and hadn't done anything to prepare for this emergency, so the President took control of the hospital at the federal level, putting it under the Ministry of Health, and began to ship in additional doctors, beds and other emergency equipment, all of which served to get out ahead of the need once again.

One "extra" that came to Arequipa as a result of private (Catholic) charity, rather than the government, was a portable oxygen plant. Before this plant arrived, there was no publicly owned facility for generating the large amounts of oxygen needed to treat the most seriously ill patients, and profiteers were selling cylinders of oxygen for \$1,500 - \$1,800 each. Of course only the most wealthy could afford oxygen at these prices, and many poor people died as a result.

How Peru has Fared in the Pandemic

The United States hasn't exactly been the world's Poster Child for effective response to the COVID-19 pandemic, but even using ourselves as the measuring stick, Peru has suffered tremendously. Adjusting for population, to make the numbers directly comparable, here's where we stand right now:

Total cases per 1M in population: US = 20,596 vs.
Peru = 22,319 (10% higher)

Total deaths per 1M in population: US = 607 vs.
Peru = 935 (half again as high)

How can this be, you might ask, given that Peru has been praised since the very beginning of the pandemic as one of the countries which acted most promptly, and imposed the strictest controls. There are a number of possible explanations, but two of the more salient ones are that a 6-month total lockdown in a country like Peru, where so many people live from day to day as part of the informal economy, just doesn't work. It can't. People can't stay home and starve to death, in order to avoid a disease they might be lucky enough to recover from even if they do contract it. The other is that so many people are completely without health insurance and are so poor they can't afford to go to the hospital, so they've stayed at home and died untreated. Lately, however, the government has been better at reaching out to the people where they live and start treating them before they require hospitalization, and that has helped slow the rise in the numbers.

Impact of the Disease on Those we Know and Love

- Fortunately, of the people in our sponsorship programs, we have only lost 2 elderly ladies to the disease. Ten (10) of our families have



been infected, but none of the family members have died.

- Many, however, have lost extended family members. Danilo, for example, lost both his grandfather and an aunt. Glenda (my housekeeper) lost a sister. Victor lost 2 friends, and 4 of his family members (his brother, his sister, his half-brother and his father) contracted the disease, but are recovering. One of our staff members (Briyith) tested positive, but she was asymptomatic. Another staff member (Genoveva's) husband tested positive, but she didn't get it. In all cases, people who had been in contact with positive cases were put under precautionary quarantine for 14 days to prevent the possible spread of the disease to other members of our staff.

Economic Impact of the Pandemic on the ASAC

At the beginning of the year, we hadn't provided anything in our budget for an emergency such as the pandemic, because back in January, who knew? Therefore, the funds we've needed to provide all this aid have all had to be raised through a special campaign to keep pumping up what we call the Emergency Relief Fund. I've gone out with repeated funds requests as the funds on hand were repeatedly exhausted, and many of you have responded promptly and generously, for which we are profoundly grateful. At this point, we have raised approximately \$30,000 for the Emergency Relief Fund, which we have also expended, so once again, **I'm appealing for ongoing contributions**. The struggle against the virus is still far from over, and even in the eventual aftermath, the people of Alto Cayma are going to **need continuing special aid** to get back on their feet. If you are **so blessed as to be able to help**, please make your checks out to Advent Peru Mission Support, with Emergency Relief on the memo line, and mail them to Susan Hartsell, 2900 South Devon St, Charlotte, NC 28213. And my God bless you, one and all.

"Love God, Serve Neighbor/Serving Alto Cayma",

Jim