

Report No. 8 from Alto Cayma - 29 Jan 21

Picking Up Where We Left Off

I last wrote (Report No. 7) on 6 Sep 20, more than 4 months ago. Usually, when I'm in the States, I don't write any reports at all, but since this homestay has been so long (over 9 months and counting), due to the COVID-19 pandemic, I've at least been writing every 4 months or so. At any rate, when I wrote in September, I reported on the progress of the pandemic, the Peruvian government's response, and how our Association Serving Alto Cayma was operating to try to provide relief to the people. Now, in Report No. 8, I'll bring you up to date from 6 Sep 20 to the present.

COVID-19 in Peru



Today, almost a year into the pandemic, here's how Peru compares with the rest of the world on COVID-19 numbers, normalized for population:

- Peru = 32,591 total cases per 1M population, vs. the world avg. of 12,597
- Peru = 1,182 deaths per 1M, vs. the world average of 270

Peru has officially been in lockdown for most of the past year. Even so, their numbers are high, because it's impossible to make people who depend on a day's labor for that day's food stay home to avoid the virus.

Just now another wave is rising in Peru. The government has taken responsible measures to control the spread, and in the ASAC, we're making changes to minimize contact again, with some activities cancelled outright. We've completely restocked our food pantry, in case there's another lockdown and a complete prohibition on the use of POVs, as has happened so many times in the past, leaving Arequipa looking like a ghost town.



There's still no word of when a robust vaccination program might start, with either the Chinese or the Russian vaccines, or both. Meanwhile, the impact of the COVID on those closest to us is as follows:

- There have been no deaths of "ahijados" (sponsors) in our program beyond the two elderly people whose deaths were reported back in May
- ASAC staff members who caught the COVID are: Glenda, Oscar, Sabina, Gregorio and Briyith (less than half of our staff).
- Staff members who haven't caught it: Victor, Briza, Lidia, Malú, Tula, Giuliana, Silvia, Genoveva and Joseph.
- The ASAC first returned to full office hours in early October, but we've had to retreat from that posture several times, whenever cases in Alto Cayma flared up.

Peru, as a nation, reopened as follows:

- In October, they allowed internal travel within the country to resume.
- In October, they also resumed international flights of 4 hours or less duration, which meant just to other South American countries, not to the US.
- In November, they increased international flight durations to 8 hours, sufficient to reach the US.

- In December, they allowed flights to Europe, but they cut back on that again in January, when the UK strain of the virus arose. Just now they've also eliminated flights from Brazil, where there's another new strain they want to keep out of the country.

Antics of Peruvian Politicians

Martín Vizcarra ascended to the Peruvian Presidency a few years ago, when



the last duly-elected President resigned to escape impeachment on corruption charges. Even though he was considered to be just a caretaker President, Vizcarra vigorously fought corruption, giving the people hope at last that perhaps something could be done about Peru's No. 1 problem. When the pandemic hit, he did an excellent job of organizing the government's response to that emergency too, even as he continued trying to root out the corruption, which is mainly found in the Congress. His approval rating reached and maintained record levels throughout his time in office.

Congress, of course, resisted Vizcarra's every anti-corruption initiative, so he dissolved that Congress and the country elected another one. Unfortunately, the new Congress was no improvement, and they used a provision in the Constitution that permitted them to depose Vizcarra from office merely on suspicion (no charges

even brought, much less proven) of corruption for something he supposedly did while Governor of the Department (State) of Moquegua years ago. Even though the people overwhelmingly supported Vizcarra over the Congress, he said that he would respect the Constitutional process, and in a statesmanlike act, he stepped down.

Congress then appointed as his replacement a person with no qualifications, but who had been the head of the movement in Congress to remove Vizcarra, and this provoked a massive uprising, especially of young people, in all parts of the country. The new President had to resign two days after being sworn in, and Congress appointed yet another President, this time one who was well qualified and who was accepted by the people. Fortunately, the new man has followed Vizcarra's lead on combatting the COVID pandemic, so at least that much has not been lost. Meanwhile, there will be elections for a permanent President in April, to take office for a 5-year term starting in July.

ASAC Support - Food

Our hunger relief work has continued throughout the pandemic. Victor continues to look for, and find, new settlements that need our help.



Giuliana's efforts to patrol neighborhoods looking for reclusive elderly people needing our help has continued. Because the people she is seeking out are the least well-versed and able to protect themselves from the virus, Giuliana



protects herself by suiting up like a HAZMAT specialist before going out. Her efforts have borne fruit, as she now has a roster of 25 elderly people who don't have a sponsorship yet, but are receiving relief (mainly food) from the ASAC.



We are still giving out food baskets and cash to our "ahijados" in our



sponsorship programs, as well as to "those who have nothing".



We are also continuing to support "Ollas Comunes" (Common Pots) which



operate as cooperatives in 5 marginalized settlements, where our support consists



of helping buy ingredients to go into the pot which feeds the whole community at mid-day.

ASAC Support - Other

There has been an increase in family violence, with the stress of the pandemic and everyone being cooped up with each other at home. Gregorio, our psychologist, has been trying to defuse these situations, but there have been 3 cases sufficiently serious to cause formal charges to be brought - charges that will take some time to resolve.

Our Bed and Blanket projects have been ongoing. Now that we're in the



rainy season, we're also reactivating our Roof Repair project as well.

A Leg for Luisa - A sponsor paid for construction of a new prosthetic leg for Luisa, who lost a leg in a bus accident many years ago. She's had 2 earlier legs, both of which have worn out. Doctor Salas went to Argentina, where he buys parts with which to build prosthetic limbs, but he got trapped in a quarantine upon arrival, and he's still not back.

A Bride for Dr. Juan - Juan Quispe, our first MD to graduate from the Salir



Adelante program, got married recently. We wish him and his new bride all the best.

A Badge for Patrolman Eliacím - Eliacím, a fine young man we sponsored for many years in the Acercádonos program and then helped get into Police



training, graduated recently. Now he's making good money, taking economic pressure off his mother, who had been his sole support growing up.

Christmas in Alto Cayma

Victor, his family, and our ASAC staff had many activities scheduled for Christmas Eve and Christmas Day, but at the last minute, the government announced a lockdown for those dates, to prevent the spread of the virus through extended family gatherings, so our activities had to be moved up with almost zero notice. However, as always, our ever-resourceful crew pulled it off.

Everyone got the usual Christmas baskets, but this year that included not only 233 "ahijados" from our Acercádonos program, but also 57 people in the category of "those who have nothing", including 17 of Giuliana's new elderly people. A total of 290 baskets, costing a little over \$40 each, came to a total of over \$12,000 just for this one effort alone.

A traditional activity in Alto Cayma is what's called the "Chocolatada". That's a party where everyone eats "panetón" (a light Italian fruitcake), washed down with copious quantities of hot chocolate, while the kids all receive presents. This year the Chocolatada was broken down into 3 separate groups, due to the pandemic, where a total of 167 kids still got their presents, albeit with minimum



social contact. Alfonso, our new psychologist (introduced below) served as Santa



Claus this year, in the absence of Flaviu, his Romanian "twin", who did the honors last year.



As always, Alfonso Claus had help from his Elves.



And finally, in lieu of the traditional dinner at Victor's house for the neediest families of all, as seen in this photo from last year, this year dinner and presents



were delivered to the homes of these same people. It wasn't the same, of course, but it was the best that could be done, under the circumstances.

Emergency Relief Fund

As I've reported earlier, we've had to rely on purpose-driven fundraising to finance all we're trying to do for the people of Alto Cayma. Our donors have responded generously to appeals we sent for funds in October and November, and we have now raised a total of approximately \$60,000. Of course, with another wave rising now, and uncertainty as to when a vaccine will provide measurable help in controlling the disease, the government has no choice but to continue using the brute force measure of lockdowns, with the economic impacts these bring. Thus the need for our relief efforts will be ongoing for some time. Be on the lookout for future opportunities to support this vital effort.

Education

A big part of the support we provide families always goes to education, even in these trying times. Our kids in the Acercádonos sponsorship program are all "attending" grade school and high school on the internet, and we've had to help a number of them gain access to the necessary technology to be able to participate. Danilo, our student teacher, had to give up his tutoring activities for fear of contracting and spreading the COVID. However, Gregorio, our psychologist, who was in contact with the families to provide psychotherapy, was able to pick up some of this slack. Briza undertook an initiative to give out gold stars and prizes to the

kids who kept up with their homework, and this drew a positive response from a great many students.



This year we have a record number of students - 22, to be exact - who finished high school last year and are transitioning to our Salir Adelante program for post-secondary studies this year. Gregorio has put them all through his Vocational Orientation program, and Lidia and Sabina have been giving them and their parents an intensive orientation on how the Salir Adelante program works, which is quite different from the Acercádonos program they're familiar with. Much more is expected of the kids when they get to the level of Salir Adelante. If they want to train to be professionals, we demand that they begin to act with professional-level responsibility from the beginning.

The expectations of this year's crop of new students seems to have dropped from those of previous years, perhaps somehow due to the impression the COVID pandemic has made. We're just now entering a new cycle of testing for admission to the National University, and only 1 of our 22 new students intends to take the exam at this time. 9 others either don't feel sufficiently prepared for the exam yet, or have doubts about what profession they wish to study. Over half of the group (13 - a much higher percentage than usual) have already decided to pursue a 3-year technical program rather than a 5-year university program.

Salir Adelante Service Projects

In 2020, we began to require the Salir Adelante students to do service projects to plant the seeds of the ethic of giving back to the community which nurtured and raised them. Because our student group is so large now, they divided themselves into 6 groups to do 6 projects in parallel:

- Big Brothers/Sisters - mentoring selected kids in the Acercándonos program
- Tree Planting - planting and nurturing a grove of trees across the road from our JHD Community Center in Mujeres con Esperanza. (I've already told the kids that if the trees thrive, I'm going to name the grove Sherwood Forest, because after all, the business of the ASAC is to rob the rich to aid the poor. :-)
- Career Orientation - arranging a series of talks by professionals about careers of potential interest to students who are still undecided
- Animal Control - finding homes for stray animals, spaying and neutering
- Covid Information - educating the community on how to survive this disaster
- Composting - employing this technique for improving the environment

Aldea Birthday Parties

We couldn't have our normal birthday parties at the Aldea (orphanage) from March onward, due to the COVID. Therefore, at the end of the year we



delivered birthday presents to all the kids at once - sneakers, sandals, a portable radio and sweets. Of course we couldn't have the normal party activities, but at



least the kids didn't end the year empty-handed of "loot".

Cardmaking

A couple of small orders for cards have come in, and the girls have produced them, working as always, but with social distancing. Meanwhile, Janet and Juan



Alberto are making embroidered cards to help support themselves. (Their mother's work has been drastically reduced by the pandemic.) If anyone would like to buy some of their cards to give them encouragement, please let me know. And



of course you can always go to www.serving-alto-cayma.info to see all the cards the girls make and send me an order.

The JHD Community Center

Electric power has always been a problem for us at our Community Center in Mujeres con Esperanza. Due to a bureaucratic Catch 22, we've never been able to get a meter for our own electrical service. Instead, we've always had to

"subcontract" our power from a neighbor. The supplier we had for the first few years began to get greedy and was trying to take us to the cleaners, which Victor couldn't permit. Victor looked into solar power, but such an installation would have cost us over \$5,000, which was out of the question. Instead, Victor found another neighbor we can work with. Originally, we had a wire from the first neighbor's house spanning the road to reach our roof. The power company told us that it's not allowable for one building to receive power from another like that, so, good citizens that we are, we don't do that anymore.



Even under the conditions of the pandemic, Victor has been able to advance some on other improvements to the building. All the doors and windows are now installed, and our entire staff turned out to give the place a top-to-bottom cleaning before reopening in mid-October.



Our Arequipeñan author friend, who writes under the pen name of Miguel Angel Arcanus, came up to Mujeres con Esperanza recently to bring food, clothing



and toys for the kids, and books and a bookcase for the library on the second floor



which we've named in his honor. Little by little, this library continues to grow.



ASAC Staff

Throughout this pandemic, Victor has always made the safety of our personnel his No. 1 priority, insisting they observe all the protocols of personal



protection. We also gave them economic security by continuing them all at full pay, even during those times when the pandemic didn't allow us to operate full time. Out of gratitude for this, they unanimously volunteered to give up their vacation time for the whole year, but I insisted they each take a week for their own mental health.

Several staff changes took place at the end of the year. Gregorio resigned to pursue other opportunities, and was replaced by Alfonso. Alfonso was the head of



the Kaizen Consulting Group, which had helped our staff improve our performance in years past. Kaizen had ceased to exist, due to the pandemic, and when we invited Alfonso to join our staff, he was delighted, not only because he needed a job, but also because he had always been taken with the nature and nobility of our work, and welcomed a chance to be an integral part of it. Alfonso will take over the cases of individual and family psychotherapy which Gregorio had initiated, and will do many other things besides.

In other staff changes, Joseph is leaving us to resume his career as a restaurant chef, and will be replaced by a new social work assistant we're in the process of hiring. Also, Oscar will be concentrating on finishing his thesis project so he can be licensed to practice law professionally.

Staff Productivity

The systems we have used thus far to keep track of, and advance, our work are largely manual, a legacy of our start-up days as a "Mom and Pop" operation. I have finally bowed to Lidia's expertise (she has a degree in Business Administration), and agreed to let her drag me, kicking and screaming, into the 21st Century with an integrated data management system which will improve productivity and reduce errors. The company that is developing the system, tailored to our specific needs, is charging us \$2,650. The system is to be delivered in mid-February for operational testing, and will hopefully prove to be one of the best investments we ever made.

Mercedes Aragón

Mercedes continues translating all the letters that go back and forth between "padrinos" (sponsors) and "ahijados" (sponsees). She and I also continue to generate devotionals and reflections to send to Alto Cayma to share with our staff and those they serve. Mercedes "escaped" from Cusco and returned to the States on 16 Nov of last year, and on Christmas Eve we became formally engaged.



Returning to Peru

As I write this report, we are planning our return to Peru. We have both just had our first dose of the Pfizer vaccine, and should get our second dose in mid-February. Even so, the date of our return to Peru will also depend heavily on the conditions there at the time, as we need freedom of movement if we are to make our presence there worthwhile. Meanwhile, my daughter Carol and son-in-law John took a leap of faith and returned to Peru on 15 Jan, without the vaccine. John contracted the COVID while they were in the States, but Carol did not. They were briefly home-quarantined when they returned to Peru, and are now doing their best to operate within the ever-evolving restrictions being imposed in that country.

And that, dear reader, brings you pretty much up to date with the happenings in Alto Cayma. Thank you for your patience as you've wondered, during these 4 long months, what was going on down there. Hopefully you won't have to wait so long for the next Report from Alto Cayma.

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

Jim

