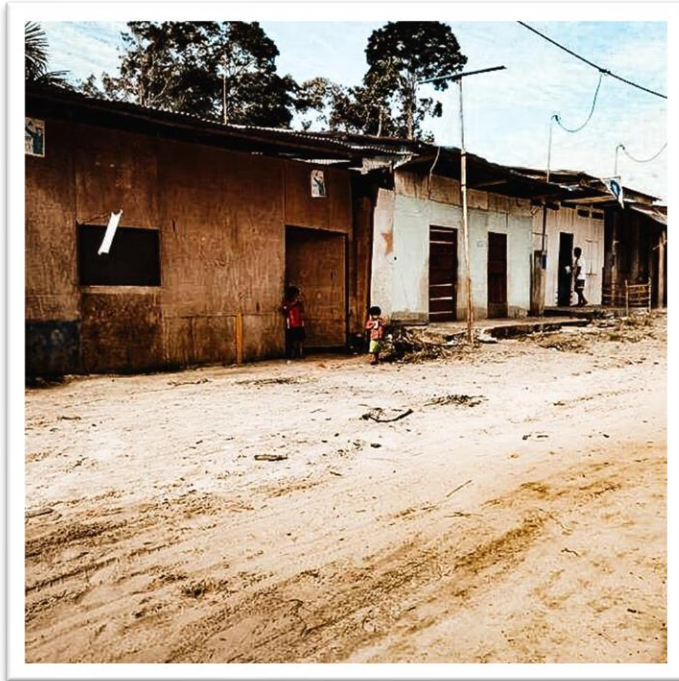


WHITE FLAGS IN PERU

The giving community at GoServ Global rallied when the global pandemic hit last year. Collectively over \$80,000 was given for emergency supplies and food to people who were in lock down around the world. the Lord used the generosity of many to deliver hope in a desperate moment.



What comes to mind when you see a white flag?

Most people think surrender. In Iquitos, an isolated city of about half a million near the Amazons in northern Peru, it means desperation. It means the household has no more food, forcing those within the walls to set aside all shame of poverty and visibly declare their desolate condition. Then they wait, hoping someone will stop and give them a little food. While the number of homes waving the white flag is surprising, the number of people in the same condition without a white flag is even more heart-wrenching.

On March 14, the government declared the country to be in a state of emergency because of the rapidly spreading COVID-19. Overnight they regimented lockdown, closed borders, and decreed a mandatory 15-day quarantine. The only places of business allowed to operate were approved banks, food markets, and medical facilities. As the majority of the population subsists on a day-to-day income, many could not imagine making it through two weeks without work. Soon white flags began to appear on homes throughout the city and surrounding villages.

When Genesis Church was born eight years ago, we wanted to make a difference in our neighborhood. We weren't interested in just filling a building with good people who knew the right words and could complete a list of religious duties on Sunday. We also wanted transformation and reproduction, with discipleship at the heart of our strategy.

The implications of the pandemic presented us with real and visible ways to move beyond the pulpit and live out truth in our community. Our church leaders recognized that many people no longer had access to neighborhood markets and no way of getting to the centralized markets. We began gathering food—some that we'd grown ourselves, much of which we purchased—and delivering it to those who couldn't get out.

It only took a few days for us to realize that the problem was deeper than transportation. People needed food; but, without jobs, they weren't able to pay for it. We expanded the delivery service into food distribution, providing relief to the many families unable to do so for themselves.

Delivering food to hungry families / Courtesy of Iglesia Genesis

Even before the pandemic, my husband, Nelton, and I tried to live out these principles daily by opening our home to the many young people in our church who are trapped in a life of gang violence, addicted to drugs or alcohol, or do not have stable families. Over the years many have lived under our roof and our discipleship. When quarantine began, our biological family of five had an additional 19 people living with us. This is where my faith was put to the test, and I was given an opportunity to personally exercise trust in God.

Our city ran the risk of food shortages, and I am embarrassed to confess that my first thought was to disband our household and send everyone back to their homes. Seconds later, I remembered that some of our guests don't even have that option. But more, this was a time where faith required action. Active trust believes—and lives like—God is faithful, will provide, and will keep his promises, just as he said. We decided that everyone would be welcome to stay, and we experienced firsthand the miraculous provision of our loving Father.

One way he's providing is through Lucas Kirchhoff, a 22-year-old missionary from Iowa. Last year he bought his own house here and instituted an open-door policy. Throughout the pandemic, many kids and teenagers have wandered into his house throughout the day, often around mealtimes. At first, he was a little annoyed that they always showed up when it was time to eat. He didn't always have enough prepared for 12 extra mouths. But he soon realized they were from white-flag homes. Often he sacrifices eating reasonable portions so he can share his food with those in need.

The operating conviction for ongoing action in our homes and community is not only that God is a good and faithful Father who provides, but also that prayer is the power that moves his heart and hand. In our home we began daily prayer meetings to seek God's favor and provision for our family, church, and community. It was not long before generous donations began coming from unexpected people and places. In a time when we should have been struggling and paralyzed, we moved forward in boldness with the ability to provide for and encourage more than 400 families with over 600 bags of food.

By the fifth week of lockdown, the medical system in Iquitos had crashed. More than 500 oxygen tanks a day were needed, but the hospital's poorly maintained oxygen plant could provide only a fraction of it. Private providers raised prices from about \$150 a tank to nearly \$1,000, out of reach for most people in Iquitos.

Public hospitals overrun with COVID-19 patients were turning away all other conditions. Those with broken bones or heart attacks are given bandages, at best, and sent home. In

Lucas's village, a 5-year-old boy died because he couldn't get a simple operation. Thirty-three hospital doctors died from the disease, and private clinics began closing down for the safety of their own staff. One by one, the hospitals shut down, until just one was left open.

Riley Brinkman, a 23-year-old missionary nurse who works with us, began making house calls to provide relief and treatment to a variety of patients, including many COVID-19 cases. At the start of her house visits, she told several of her severely sick patients they would be better in the hospital. When she returned, she found the patients back home because there are no doctors in the hospital.

Riley began standing for hours in pharmacy lines that stretched for blocks. Sometimes she went to multiple pharmacies, often without successfully filling the growing list of medicines. The rest of her hours before curfew were spent making rounds to patients throughout the city and highway villages.

Even in the shortages, God has never stopped providing. Often Riley's team has decided to spend the last of their money on a specific need, only to return home to find a message that someone felt led to send a donation that day. In the midst of crisis and suffering, faith continues to grow.

Without a doubt, prayer is our defensive and offensive weapon against the physical and spiritual devastation around us. Our position must be one of trust evidenced by action. Generous giving and extending a helping hand, especially when it means sacrifice, will result in experiencing God's faithfulness and love. He's said so. And one thing is sure: The Word of God is not in quarantine.

BETHANY BAXTER DE NORIEGA