



Hungry for the Word

IN ECUADOR

By Joshua J. Perkey
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“Blessed are all they who do hunger and thirst after righteousness, for they shall be filled with the Holy Ghost” (3 Nephi 12:6).

Ana Visbicut leans back against the wooden slats outside her home with a smile on her face. Her children sit with her on a bench, each smiling as broadly as she is. It’s a warm, sunny Saturday afternoon. Ana lives in Puerto Francisco de Orellana, a small city in the jungles of eastern Ecuador. Members of the Orellana Branch presidency have just stopped by, unintentionally interrupting Ana’s visit with the sister missionaries, but she doesn’t mind. She welcomes the company. She has much to be thankful for and offers her thanks freely.

It’s not as though Ana hasn’t had her share of struggles. She lives alone with her five young children. Finding daily work is hard. And when she was baptized in August 2009,

only one of her children joined with her.

But over the course of the next year, the blessings came as three more of her children followed her example and were baptized and confirmed (one was too young at the time).

Yes, Ana’s eyes sparkle with gratitude. She, like other members of the Orellana Branch, has discovered the pure joy that comes from living the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Joy Begins with Desire

In December 2008, there was no formal Church organization in Puerto Francisco de Orellana. At the time, a number of members were living there, some of whom had not attended church in years.

But something happened. The Spirit



Left: Ana Visbicut and her children rejoice in the gospel. Above: Members of the Orellana Branch gather for a branch conference in 2010.

touched hearts and changed lives, prompting four families to begin meeting together to study the scriptures and teach each other. And this feeling permeates the city even now.

“The people here are hungry and thirsty for the gospel,” says branch member Fanny Baren Garcia.

This hunger inspired members in Puerto Francisco de Orellana to contact the Church and ask permission to have the sacrament. “We didn’t come to them,” recalls Timothy Sloan, former president of the Ecuador Quito Mission. “They called me. The desire to act upon those feelings—to follow the invitation of the Savior throughout the Book of Mormon to exercise faith in Him and to repent—was already there. That’s a message to all of us.”

A similar desire existed in the hearts of those moving to Puerto Francisco de Orellana. In early January 2009, Marco Villavicencio—now the branch president—and his wife, Claudia Ramirez, were considering a job opportunity that would require relocating to Puerto Francisco de Orellana from their home in Machala, on the other side of Ecuador.

“My first question,” says President Villavicencio, “was ‘Is the Church there?’ My wife and I talked it over with our family, and we prayed to know if we should move. As soon as the offer came,



EMBRACING THE SAVIOR AND HIS GOSPEL

“In order to embrace the gospel of Jesus Christ, people must first embrace Him whose gospel it is. They must trust the Savior and what He has taught

us. They must believe that He has the power to keep His promises to us by virtue of the Atonement. When people have faith in Jesus Christ, they accept and apply His Atonement and His teachings. . . .

“I love the gospel of Jesus Christ, for it defines the way we can partake of the fruits of the gospel, experience the ‘exceedingly great joy’ (1 Nephi 8:12) that only it can bring, and endure to the end through all of the challenges of mortal life. The gospel teaches us all we need to know to return to live with our Father in Heaven as resurrected and glorified beings. May all of us maintain in our minds the vision of eternal life. May we be diligent in following the recipe for eternal life that is the gospel of Jesus Christ.”

Elder L. Tom Perry of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles, “The Gospel of Jesus Christ,” *Liahona and Ensign*, May 2008, 44, 46.

we learned that the Church was being established in Puerto Francisco de Orellana. We moved here in February 2009, and the branch was formed the following September.”

The Joy of Service

The desire to come unto Christ leads naturally to a desire to serve. The gospel of Jesus Christ changes both those who give and those who receive. This reciprocal process happens when hearts are humble, minds are open, and service is rendered. Service has played a principal part in the growth of the Church in Puerto Francisco de Orellana and has strengthened those who have served.

“How do I feel about my calling?” asks Clara Luz Farfán, who was called in September 2010 to serve in the Relief Society presidency. “Happy, because I know I’m going to be able to help other sisters come to church and strengthen

the new sisters who have been baptized.”

That same feeling has swept through the hearts of the members of the branch. Lourdes Chenche, the Relief Society president, says that strengthening the sisters requires effort, but it is effort she gladly gives: “As a presidency and as members of Relief Society, we visit the sisters. We draw close to them when they have problems. We provide them food when there is a need. We let them know they are not alone, that we have the help of Jesus Christ and the branch. And we teach them that they have to do their part—pray, study the scriptures, and prepare themselves. We pray with them, we console them, and we love them deeply.”

But the sisters do not do the work alone. “We talk with the branch president to see what can be done,” adds Lourdes. “We share their needs with him and the branch council so we can decide what we need to do.”

“There is a thirst here to know the gospel. People here really are desirous.”

President Marco Villavicencio

Below, left: Branch president Marco Villavicencio with his wife, Claudia, and their son.

Below, right: Clara Luz Farfán attends a fireside with other branch members.



The sisters' commitment to do their part is a sentiment common throughout the branch. At one service project to help a family in the branch, "we all participated," says Lourdes. "The children, the youth, the adults, the Relief Society, the missionaries. The experience was very edifying. I know that when we 'are in the service of [our] fellow beings [we] are only in the service of [our] God' [Mosiah 2:17]. When I serve, it is like I am doing it for Jesus Christ. That's what the kingdom is about."

The Joy of Fellowship

There is something undeniably strengthening about unity, that sense of belonging to the community of Saints. Blessings result when we become "fellowcitizens with the saints, and of the household of God" (Ephesians 2:19) and we live like members of a family who "are willing to bear one another's burdens, that they may be light; yea, and are willing to mourn with those that mourn; yea, and comfort those that stand in need of comfort" (Mosiah 18:8-9).

Fanny explains, "I believe our strength comes from the fact that we as members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints feel like a family. And I think serving each other has done great good. We give whatever is needed, and this has created a sense of unity. We receive every new person who comes to church with open arms. We welcome them. I believe a hug says more than a thousand words."

Ana's experiences confirm that. As a single mother of five, she faces a constant economic challenge of trying to provide for her family when work is not easy to come by, and that effort can be emotionally and spiritually



President Villavicencio and other members visit with Lourdes Chenche, branch Relief Society president and seminary teacher.

draining. The fellowship of branch members has been an important contribution to her family during difficult times. "The members come and read scriptures with me," says Ana. "They watch over me. When we struggle, they are there. That's very important for new members."

This sense of fellowship is part of the reason the branch has grown so quickly. From 28 members on its first Sunday, the branch grew to 83 in attendance just a year later, including a dozen visitors not of our faith.

Branch leaders spent the Saturday before their branch conference visiting with members and those investigating the Church. They shared scriptures with them, encouraging them to be better.

One recently baptized brother was converted by a study of the scriptures—reading both on his own and with the members and missionaries. "The Book of Mormon is the key," he says. "It is the key for me." He has found joy in the Church. The pull of the gospel is so strong he started paying tithing even before he was baptized.

But friendship goes beyond sharing the gospel with others. It can change a way of life.

"Before I joined the Church," says Bernabé Pardo, another recent convert, "the only friends I had were

people who would go out to drink. But now that I am a member, I have many friends—real friends. They invite me to read the Book of Mormon with them. They invite me over for family home evening. They serve each other. I have gone on service projects with them. My life is completely different now. I have received many, many blessings. I pay my tithing, and the Lord has blessed me."

It's a way of life that is not limited to adults. "We are always teaching

*"We are like Enos—
hungry for the
word of God"
(see Enos 1:4).*

Clara Luz Farfán

the young women about the power of fellowship, of saying hello and engaging others,” says Claudia Ramirez. “When people arrive at church for the first time, what makes an impression on them is how they are received. So we teach the young women how important each soul is to the Lord. This has been a great help. And we set goals with the young women for Personal Progress. This motivates them so they can share their friendship with others.”

President Villavicencio explains that “we try to put in practice President Gordon B. Hinckley’s admonition that every new convert needs to be nurtured by the good word of God, have a friend, and have a responsibility.”¹

Ana serves as the second counselor in the Primary presidency. Her son Jorge serves

as the first counselor in the teachers quorum.

“We give them a responsibility,” says President Villavicencio, “a chance to learn in leadership positions, to have someone help them along.”

The Joy of Being Changed

For Claudia, serving in the gospel resulted in a subtle swelling of confidence in her heart. “I was baptized when I was eight years old,” Claudia says. “We always attended church. But as I grew older, I saw many bad marriages. I thought about them a lot, and I worried that I could never marry because it wouldn’t be successful. I was afraid to trust my life to someone, that it would be too hard. But when I returned from my mission, I didn’t think the same. Teaching the doctrine changes you.”

From left: President Villavicencio with Bernabé Pardo, a recent convert; Relief Society meeting; Fanny Baren Garcia with her husband, Ricardo, and their children; Gospel Doctrine class.



Claudia and Marco Villavicencio were friends before her mission. Not long after she returned, they attended the temple together with some friends. Something special occurred. “I felt as if the Lord was answering my prayers, that this was a man I could marry,” Claudia explains. “I have the greatest blessing to have a good husband.”

Joy in Living the Gospel

“Our happiness doesn’t depend on material things,” says Oscar Reyes, age 15, “but in how we live our lives. That’s why I keep the Sabbath day holy, because it is pleasing to God. And that’s why I will serve a mission and why I like serving others.”

By living the gospel, members of the Orellana Branch have found true joy. “I am very happy,” Lourdes shares. “Even though I am very far away from my family, I have a family here too, a spiritual family. I have a great testimony of this work. I know that Jesus Christ lives and that, if we are obedient, He will bless us.”

It is a joy that permeates their lives no matter the challenges life throws at them. It is the joy that comes from righteous living. ■

NOTE

1. See Gordon B. Hinckley, “Converts and Young Men,” *Ensign*, May 1997, 47.



PUERTO FRANCISCO DE ORELLANA, ECUADOR

About 60 miles (100 km) east of Quito, massive volcanoes and the Andes Mountains give way to the lush tropical climate of the Orellana Province. Vast forests crisscrossed by streams and rivers fill the landscape in every direction. Parrots and toucans and a thousand other species of birds call this their home. You can even find monkeys and sloths, armadillos and capybaras and, amazingly, pink dolphins.

The province was formed in the late 1990s to support the exploration of petroleum. The small settlement turned into a city almost overnight. Puerto Francisco de Orellana lies at the confluence of the Napo, Coca, and Payamino Rivers. Today the city and its environs boast roughly 80,000 inhabitants.

