



## 3 Churches in 6 Days

**In late January of 2019** Mary Lynne and I received an email mentioning that a group of friends from Nikiski Alaska were coming to Peru in four days to build three churches.

Before I go further, some background is needed. For a number of reasons, some good and some not so good, the demand for our Quechua Bible Institute in the Andes had been falling off. We were also expecting that our naturalization papers would have been approved and with this, we would be on our way for our first sabbatical in almost 20 years. So... our schedule was no longer as intense as it had been. Indeed, I had been invited numerous times over the years to join this same group building churches. But now, I felt I could as my schedule was less demanding.

After inquiring with Dave, the president of the Kingdom Alliance Ministry (KAM), I was given the "Ok" to join the team. I was "in." As I thought more about it, I got emotional with the realization that I was going to hang with some great guys and pound nails, build some churches and most importantly for me, NOT be the leader, boss or director. Ahh... this was going to be good. I needed it.

Mary Lynne (the most capable administrator this side of the moon, I might add) hopped right onto finding me a RT flight from Lima to Iquitos where the excitement would begin. After a ten-hour overnight bus ride to Lima, I met up with the team in the Lima airport, We were on our way!

**Iquitos is an interesting place** and here are a few reasons why I say this:

- #1 Iquitos is located at about 90' elevation and about 2,200 miles upriver from where the Amazon dumps into the Atlantic Ocean. Where it enters the Atlantic, its mouth is 200 miles wide!
- #2 The Amazon river basin is home to about 27 indigenous groups that speak 26 languages.
- #3 The Amazon river is so big that ocean going ships can sail up it to Iquitos. This is serious jungle and an entirely different world from the Andes where I have lived for almost twenty years. It is home to piranhas, anacondas, jaguars and a whole lot of other things that want to eat you! Perhaps the worst creature to encounter is an itty-bitty mosquito that carries Malaria. Note: Not all do.
- #4 In the main plaza there is a prefabricated metal building that was designed by Gustave Eiffel (the same guy that built a famous tower in Paris) and erected in Iquitos over 129 years ago. It is in remarkably good shape.
- #5 Iquitos was the center of the rubber boom in the early 1900's. The movie, "Fitzcaraldo" is loosely based on things that occurred there.
- #6 KAM has a long history of building churches for the Misión Evangelica Pentecostal Independiente organization (MEPI). MEPI has been working in the Amazon basin for almost fifty years and they have a network of at least 150 churches with more being added every year. It is an impressive ministry with a lot of local homegrown indigenous leadership. I was impressed by their commitment to sharing the Gospel and planting new churches and the joy so easily seen on their faces as they do this.

**OK, on with the story:** We arrived in Iquitos and spent a day getting things ready for the long boat trip downriver to the site of church #1. The next morning, we left at around 3:30 am on our ten-hour trip. This was a new experience for me. Our long and narrow boat held 88 passengers. The seats were nothing to write home about, but sufficed. We even had air conditioning! I was amazed at how big the Amazon River was. In 1983 I solo kayaked all 2,200 miles of the Yukon River. Towards the end of that trip the Yukon was pretty big, or so I thought at the time, but the Amazon was gigantic by comparison. We passed numerous rivers that joined the Amazon that were about the size of the Yukon at its widest.



We arrived and settled in at a bustling little town on the Brazilian side of a small river opposite from where we were going to build church #1. We did this because the area where we were to build was under 2' of rising water. This region or area is called the "Frontier" as it is where the countries of Colombia, Brazil and Peru share a common border.

**Church #1:** The next day we boated ten minutes across the river and back in to Peru to start construction. Every day but one, we saw those famous Amazon pink dolphins.

I was baffled about how we were going to build a church on a flooded piece of land and with a large and unhappy black pig following us around in the water. However, I was with a very experienced team of builders. This would be their 45<sup>th</sup> church. They got right down to it and used a collection of boats as platforms, functioning almost like scaffolding, to come up out of the water. Fortunately, the vertical uprights or columns had been put in place before the river flooded this area. By the end of the day we had the floor completely done. We boated back to Brazil satisfied with our progress.



The flowing water still posed a big challenge as we had to drag the water logged lumber in the water and over to where the church was being built. That threatening pig was ever present. The water was nasty and no one wanted to get cut, scratched and especially, bit by the pig. The infectious and parasitic-type things in the water were scary and there we were running around in shorts and sandals.



On our second day, and as we were boating back to the job site, I saw a young, maybe 8 y/o girl working outside of her floating house with a big machete in her hand. She was butchering a small freshly killed caiman, a creature similar to an alligator, that was at least three-feet long. I suspect she was helping her mother prepare a great lunch for her family. I bet it was going to taste good.

We started the day putting up all of the walls and later building and erecting the roof trusses. After lunch we installed the corrugated metal roof and built twelve heavy duty benches. With this done the church was finished. We boated back across the river, bathed using buckets and river water, had dinner and went to sleep or tried to. The constant buzz of mosquitos, kids playing, and dogs barking was ever present. It was so hot and humid that if we tried to think hard even a little bit, we'd break out sweating. Amazingly, we finished church #1 in just two days after about 15-1/2 hours of work. The guys knew what they were doing and nothing slowed them down. The morning after we finished #1, we packed up and boated for almost an hour further upriver to our next job site which was in Brazil.



**Church #2:** I was delighted to see that it was high and dry and the lumber pile, also dry, was not too far away. Ah... it was nice working on dry ground. We started early and worked hard.

At this job site I discovered one more determined and ubiquitous creature that wanted to take a bite out of me. It was a small innocuous-looking ant. I had just lathered up my lower legs and feet with 100% Deet. Not a moment had passed and I looked down at my right foot that was still glistening wet with Deet and saw this ant crawling over my foot. It then paused and slowly sized up an area on my foot that must have looked inviting

for some reason and then took a painful bite. He must have held his breath and then pressed his head down and through the Deet to do this. Hmm... I thought to myself, this is the stuff that is supposedly protecting me from the mosquitos and malaria? Fortunately, I did notice that the mosquitos stayed away from the Deet. Ants, not so much.



Not having to deal with a flooded building site was nice. Progress with #2 obviously

went much faster than with #1. A number of the local church members also energetically joined right in with the construction. I was glad to see their engagement as this was, after all, the construction of "their" church.

After our first day of work we cleaned up, had dinner and then entered our tents. The mosquitos came out as soon as the sun went down. This is when things can get dangerous. Once in our tents and with the bug netting closed up and all the unwelcome bugs killed, we started the long effort of going to sleep. We could hear the ever-present buzz of the mosquitos. These little things were just inches away from our skin. They were innocently enough just looking for a little "sip" of our warm blood. I suspect that they did not know or care that their little "sip" could make us very sick.

Just as with church #1, our second day was focused on putting up the walls, building trusses, roofing and the benches. By now I had been tacitly assigned three tasks. I think they considered me unskilled, but useful labor. This was fine with me. I was put in charge of keeping all of the batteries charged for the saws and drills, hauling and staging the lumber, and I became a part of the bench building team. We finished church #2 by 10:00 am on the second day! I was impressed, but the guys were like, hey no big deal, this is how fast we build all of them.



Dedication of Church #3

We then packed up the tools and our personnel stuff, had lunch, and before boating off we returned to the newly constructed church for a touching and heartfelt building dedication.

**Church #3:** We then took a long two-hour boat ride back downriver to the site of #3 located in Peru and on Santa Rosa island. On our way to #3 we stopped by #1 and participated in that church's dedication. We then continued on to #3 and arrived in the late afternoon. We setup camp inside of an open-air night club. We didn't care. We were under a roof and the area was large enough for all of our tents.

While waiting for dinner, a number of Peruvian locals and some from our own Iquitos team started telling malaria stories. This was done in the same fashion as when Alaskans tell their grizzly bear tales except for the odd reality that these little mosquitos are far more dangerous than a grizzly!

We started construction early the next day and made great progress. We had a team of at least ten locals helping us, including five hard working kids aged 12 to 15. Even though this church was built a little larger than the first two, we finished it the next day before 11:00 am. After lunch we returned to the church for the dedication. The congregation was beyond happy and surprised to see a church appear where there had only been an empty lot just one day earlier.

**We had just built three churches in six days.** I was sure impressed. We gathered up our tools and personal items and then boated across the Amazon river to Colombia where checked in at a hotel in the city of Leticia. We spent the next full day visiting an "Eco" type nature park as our return boat wasn't scheduled for another day. We learned a lot about the local flora and fauna. This was fine with me as I enjoy learning new things and I was ready for a rest. Besides, the hotel had great air conditioning!



Haute Cuisine with Suri on a stick



The "ALL" Alaskan construction team,  
L to R: Dave, Dan, Walt and Lou

We left Colombia on the morning of February 5<sup>th</sup> and arrived back in Iquitos around twelve hours later. River travel is slower heading upriver against the swift current.

**Our time passed quickly.** The MEPI folks put on a great "thank you" dinner for us. MEPI and KAM make for a great example of how two different ministries can complement each other and, I might add, have fun doing it. It was great hanging with these "older" men.