

abwe

# Message

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## When a Seed Falls

25 years after Roni Bowers' death, the gospel continues to bear fruit in Latin America and beyond

When Success Costs Everything

Between Borders and the Kingdom

Sent Ones: The New Missionary Class

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**WHO IS ABWE?**

ABWE was founded in 1927 as an independent Baptist mission. Supported by a network of more than 450 like-minded churches, we are a global family of ministries, dedicated to fulfilling the Great Commission by multiplying leaders, churches, and missions movements among every people. Currently, nearly 1,000 ABWE missionaries are reaching the lost in more than 90 countries through evangelism, discipleship, church planting, leadership development, and national partnerships.

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## Editorial

FROM THE PRESIDENT



Paul (far right) and Martha Davis (left) visit ABWE missionaries Randy and Cindy Richner in Brazil.

## Flooding Latin America With the Gospel

BY: PAUL L. DAVIS  
ABWE PRESIDENT

### Across Latin America, faithfulness to Christ is often forged in hardship.

Political instability, corruption, violence, and the spread of false teaching have created challenges for families and churches alike. As this issue shows, the answer is not retreat or silence, but a renewed commitment to flood Latin America with the gospel through patient church planting, biblical counseling, and steady discipleship. When the gospel is proclaimed clearly and lived faithfully, it does more than address surface needs. It meets suffering with truth, restores what sin has fractured, and builds churches that endure.

Recently, I spoke with a church planter serving in this region, and his words have stayed with me. He described a surge of cults and increase in prosperity preaching. Then he said something that landed heavily: families are disintegrating rapidly. Marriages are breaking. Fathers are disappearing. Children are being shaped by instability. When the family collapses, communities do not merely struggle; they unravel.

His plea was not for another imported program or quick solution. He asked for *clear biblical counseling and instruction*. He asked for missionary pastors and church planters who can open the Scriptures and say, "This is what God says," and then apply it patiently to real suffering, real sin, and real questions. People are not only seeking relief. They are seeking truth strong enough to carry the weight of their lives.

This is why the theme of this issue matters: flooding Latin America with the gospel. Latin America needs the true gospel of Jesus Christ—not vague religion, not moralism dressed up as Christianity, and not the empty promises of prosperity preaching. A flood does not arrive cautiously. It comes with force and reach, leaving nothing untouched.

We pray for missionaries who preach Christ without apology, for church planters who remain when the work is hard, and for leaders who disciple patiently. We pray for gospel advance that does more than skim the surface but reshapes hearts, restores families, and raises up healthy churches that multiply for generations—deploying their own missionaries not only in Latin America but around the world.

That is the burden of this issue. It is my prayer that as you read these pages, God will not only inform you but orient your prayers and support toward the beautiful lands of Latin America. ■

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#### ON THE COVER

Roni Bowers and her infant daughter, Charity, travel along the Amazon River on the family's houseboat.

Photo: Joe Sherman

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## Connections

STORIES FROM THE FIELD

# Graduate to Glory

BY: KATELYN HAWKINS

LOCATION: THE GAMBIA



## Joanne Tompkins

June 19, 1963 – October 17, 2025

**“The main thing that motivates me to press on is the fact that I know, beyond a shadow of a doubt, that God called me to serve here to minister to these people.”**

Chatting with Gambian friends outside her home in the remote, tropical village of Ndungu Kebbe, ABWE missionary Joanne Tompkins mused that she wanted nothing more than to take her last earthly breath serving her Lord in West Africa—and if she died there, she wanted to be buried in the sandy village soil.

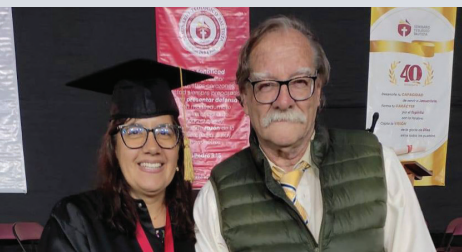
On October 17, 2025, God granted her request. Joanne unexpectedly passed into his presence in her beloved home. On October 26, local believers, village members, and ABWE colleagues gath-

ered for the first-ever Christian funeral in Ndungu Kebbe.

“The fact that the Muslim leaders did not just allow us, but encouraged us, to bury her in the village and hold the first Christian funeral speaks to her legacy,” shared ABWE teammate Alison Dominguez.

Joanne first arrived in The Gambia in 1992 at the request of her sister, missionary Ruth Wood, to fill an urgent need teaching missionary children. Discovering a passion for literacy ministry, she was appointed to long-term missionary service in 1995 to work alongside Deborah Newsome.

“Their ministry started with teaching Gambian adults the power of educa-



### JON & ANGELA STONE

Peru

“For 30 years, Jorge rejected the gospel, even as our team worked alongside his adult children and trained them in ministry. One day, he suddenly asked Jon to answer some spiritual questions. They began studying *The Story of Hope*. During the last lesson, Jon asked if he was ready to accept Jesus as Savior. Jorge answered: ‘Yes, but I want my family to be there.’ The next day, Jorge trusted Christ surrounded by his family.”



### ELIJAH & ELIZABETH NORRIS

Ecuador

“Elijah received an incredible invitation to speak at the Ecuador National Firefighter Convention about his experiences as a US flight paramedic and his faith in Christ. We also hosted a booth where the first responders and spouses we disciple boldly shared the gospel. One man declined to listen, stating he would rather enter a burning building than read the Bible. The next day, he returned and asked for a Bible.”

tion and instilling in them the pride that comes from reading and writing their own names,” Alison explained.

As word spread, Muslim leaders from surrounding villages petitioned for similar classes. Joanne developed a two-year program to train local facilitators. Annually serving over 150 students, primarily women, the literacy center opened doors for gospel witness.

“Joanne would present the gospel each day to trainees from five or six different villages,” recalled ABWE Team Leader Joan Schmitz. As part of the curriculum, Joanne facilitated spiritual conversations, showed Christian films, and prepared SD cards with gospel teachings for facilitators to share in their villages.

Gifted linguistically, Joanne led translation teams to produce evangelistic and discipleship materials in the local Wolof language and oversaw new missionaries in language acquisition. Her fluency even opened doors for biblical conversations with government officials. In the afternoons, Gambians—mature

Christians, secret believers, or seekers—gathered on her front porch for discipleship or wise counsel.

Joanne’s greatest burden was for her spiritually dark village, entrenched in Islam and animism, to know Christ. She said in 2024: “One of the most painful things, when I think about my Gambian friends and neighbors, is the fact that they are lost, but they have no concept that they’re lost. They have been completely blinded by a false religion that they follow to the best of their ability, hoping it will gain them favor with God.”

Even through her funeral, Gambians from around the nation heard the gospel proclaimed.

“Joanne committed her life to serving the Gambian people, recognizing that truth is not only taught but lived,” observed ABWE Regional Director Jason Laird. “Although Joanne has finished her race, we pray that God will raise up workers in her footsteps with a vision for developing relationships, engaging in discipleship, and pointing Gambians to Christ.” ■

Gambians and international believers mourn the passing of Joanne Tompkins at her funeral in Ndungu Kebbe.



**ZAC & LISA**  
Honduras

“Zac and two Live Global teammates, Caleb and Jacob, recently led a Business as Mission workshop in Honduras for an indigenous people group who, until 60 years ago, had a cashless economy based on bartering. They taught a biblical theology of business and basic business modeling. The workshop continues to bear fruit as the Christian students witness to others through godly business dealings.”



**JOEL & MEGAN RICHNER**  
Brazil

“After hearing Joel’s sermon on Paul’s admonition to remove all strife and bitterness, a man in our church plant was convicted to seek peace with his sister after four years of conflict. He called her, apologized, and asked to restore their relationship. Two weeks later, she came to our ladies’ art outreach. God is opening doors through the faithfulness of believers applying his Word and exemplifying redemptive grace.”

Photo: ABWE missionary





## LAURA FOUSER

Brazil

“As part of our goal to train Latin Americans for ministry, Lynell Smith and I coached seven people from four churches as they facilitated our Growing Around God’s Word workshop. The facilitators and participants received valuable training on leading discipleship groups. They excitedly commented, ‘I can do this!’ and ‘I never thought about discipling people in groups, but that’s what Jesus and Paul did!’”



## NICK AND REBEKAH ECKER

Chile

“Our church plant is focusing on missions outside our four walls. We recently partnered with a team of Chilean youth to do evangelistic outreaches in local hospitals, visit homes, and set up a stand offering free Bibles in the weekly outdoor market in the town center. We were so encouraged to see people in our church who recently came to Christ already learning to share the gospel with others.”

# Connections

STORIES FROM THE FIELD

## Saved Twice on the Amazon

**A young man’s attempt to end it all leads to new life and a ministry multiplying churches and missionaries across South America.**

**BY:** KATELYN HAWKINS

**LOCATION:** PERU AND COLOMBIA



Photo: Bob Trout

ABWE missionary Peter Hudson (left) visits with Pancho Acho (right) in Medellin, Colombia.

**L**ife meant nothing anymore. Although still in his teens, Francisco “Pancho” Acho had tried everything: alcohol, sex, money. Nothing satisfied. He stared at the rifle in his hands, raised it to his head, and then pulled the trigger.

Hovering between life and death, he was rushed down the Amazon River to the Iquitos city hospital. The gun had misfired, but the bullet shattered his lower jaw and severed part of his tongue. With limited healthcare in 1962, a doctor gravely informed Pancho’s parents that he would not leave the hospital alive.

In the ICU, members of a local church visited his bedside and compassionately

shared the gospel. Moved but unable to speak, Pancho wrote out a prayer begging Christ to save his soul.

“I found the peace I was looking for, and I understood the reason I was still alive in this world,” he later said.

Pancho began to recover. He was transferred to a hospital in Lima, where he underwent seven plastic surgeries over the next year. He told God that if he were ever released from the hospital, he would serve him as a pastor. Eventually, he moved to his roommate’s home in Lima for convalescence and found himself only two blocks from an ABWE church plant. Fulfilling his promise, he joined the church—

launching his career into ministry. He attended a Bible institute and received discipleship and training from his pastor, veteran missionary Bob Trout. Bob soon transitioned the church to Pancho's leadership.

Overcoming his speech difficulties, Pancho established another church in Lima before leading a national pastors' fellowship and serving on the cabinet of the president of Peru.

"The story doesn't stop there," recalled Bob. "We had moved on to Bogota, and when Pancho visited, he said, 'I think God wants us to come to Bogota to plant churches.'"

Pancho and his wife, Rosalina, sold their house to fund their move to Colombia. They served with Bob and his wife, Lynne, leading church plants and training nationals at an ABWE-established seminary before Pancho later returned to ministry in Peru. Their five children follow in his footsteps serving the South American church.

"God has used them in abundant ways," Bob remarked. "It was a real testimony to us of how God works saving people and using them in his service."

**An Epicenter for Missions**

In 2024, Pancho's daughter, Liliana, experienced a very different crisis.

"God put in my heart, 'Peru, Peru'—but how could I be a missionary in my own country?" she wondered.

Her childhood in Colombia, combined with the story of another global worker, had impassioned her to become a missionary. "As a family, we were always involved together in ministry," she continued. "Watching my parents serve was a powerful example in my life."

She joined a Colombian missions agency and served two years in Bogota, followed by 13 years in Medellin alongside ABWE missionaries. God began redirecting Liliana as she heard another ABWE missionary, Evelyn Stone—who had founded Latin America's first pro-life pregnancy center in Lima in

1999 to offer hope to women considering abortion—speak at conferences in 2017 and 2024.

"God confirmed in her heart the call to join this pro-life work and to dedicate herself to biblical counseling here in Peru," shared Evelyn.

As Liliana wrestled with leaving her church ministry in Colombia, she sensed a need for additional training, explaining, "I often felt that my answers were insufficient and that I lacked the necessary tools. . . . I kept asking, 'How do we use the Bible to apply God's truth to these lives?'"

With the full approval of her Colombian missions agency and supporting churches, Liliana joyfully returned to her native Peru to study at ABWE's Lima Baptist Theological Seminary and to serve as a counselor at the New Life Prenatal Center, where God is using her to transform the lives of mothers and their families.

As the Latin American church flourishes, national believers like the Acho family are stepping into Christ's mission. Today, Peruvian missionaries serve in more than 20 countries around the world.

"Our team partners with local leaders and churches, training and empowering them not only to reach their neighbors but for worldwide missions," explained ABWE Regional Director Steve Douglas. "We want to see Peru as an epicenter for missions and the South American church as a new missions force." ■

You can help us reach Peru and Latin America with the gospel.

Learn more:  
[abwe.org/hopeforperu](https://abwe.org/hopeforperu)



Liliana Acho (center) and ABWE missionary Evelyn Stone (right) counsel a client at the New Life Prenatal Center.



Photo: Jeff Simon

## ‘After the Storm Comes Hope’

In the wake of Hurricane Melissa, relief efforts break down barriers for Jamaican churches to share the gospel.

BY: KATELYN HAWKINS

LOCATION: JAMAICA

The roaring wind and raging torrents of rain hurled by Hurricane Melissa had subsided into eerie stillness when ABWE missionaries Caleb and Charity Gibbs emerged from the shelter of their house to survey the devastation. They and their children—like the Jamaican population—had endured the long hours of October 28, 2025, huddled in a dark interior room as the catastrophic Category 5 hurricane pummeled the island nation.

The eye passed east of their home in Montego Bay, causing severe flood-

ing and destruction throughout western Jamaica. The death toll rose to 102 across the Caribbean.

Caleb and Charity’s thoughts immediately turned to helping others. With no electricity, water, cell service, internet, or possibility of navigating obstructed roads, their options were limited.

“We just started where we were,” Caleb explained.

Both the church where Caleb serves as assistant pastor and the Christian school where Caleb and Charity serve as chaplain and reading specialist, respectively,

are located within a mile of their home. Despite sustaining major damage, both served as meeting points for people in the community.

“We were able to share in their stories, to listen, cry, hug, and be there with the love of God for those who desperately needed it,” Caleb continued. “A lot of our work became finding out who needed help and then either delivering it or working with others to get it delivered.”

Ministry partners in Kingston arrived with supplies loaded in a



Photo: Caleb Gibbs

An assessment team from the US, including ABWE Construction missionary Matt Brown, inspects damage to a Jamaican church.

National partners Pastor and Mrs. Llewellyn faithfully serve their congregation.



Photo: Caleb Gibbs

15-passenger van. After Sunday services, congregation members—themselves suffering loss—remained in the roofless building to repackage and distribute the aid.

Even as day-to-day ministry shifted, their mission remained the same. “We came to Jamaica to help churches, especially pastors, to train their people in the faith and equip them to reach their world,” Caleb said. “As we packed bags with people from our church, supported by another church, we saw that reality in motion.”

When roads cleared, Caleb and an ABWE regional director, Gary, traveled to assess damage at dozens of churches planted or trained through ABWE ministry. Many national partners lost homes. Over 15 churches were damaged, including several that were destroyed. With help from generous donations to ABWE’s Caribbean Compassion Fund,

surpassing \$100,000, they have supplied water filters, generators, and solar lights; outfitted a Bible college for temporary housing; organized construction teams from North America; and sent eight 20-by-40-foot tents so churches can continue gathering.

Amid the crisis, the Gibbs family has witnessed increased openness to the gospel. “Prior to this, Jamaicans would not let people into their homes. But this has literally broken down walls and allowed for real conversation and real honesty about physical and spiritual needs.”

Attendance at their church has increased, and humanitarian aid has led to countless opportunities: while distributing food and toys in one neighborhood, they received an unexpected invitation to begin regular Bible studies at a children’s home.

Caleb prays that God will continue to use them during the long rebuilding process to bring Jamaicans to Christ, observing after additional flooding, “[A]fter the rain shower was a rainbow, and it reminded me of the promise that after the storm comes hope.” ■



Photo: Caleb Gibbs

Help churches in Jamaica rebuild and share the gospel after the storm. Give now: [abwe.org/caribbeancompassion](http://abwe.org/caribbeancompassion)



Members of Bay Life Baptist Church and ABWE missionary Charity Gibbs (front right) package food and supplies for distribution.

# When Success Costs Everything

**A Peruvian businessman gains everything he wanted but loses his family—until he finds a greater form of success in Christ.**

BY: KATELYN HAWKINS

LOCATION: PERU

**W**ilber Centeno's business consumed his life. Uprooting his family from their town in the Peruvian jungle, he had established a successful furniture manufacturing company in Lima—but his skyrocketing financial achievement came at the cost of his marriage.

As relational fractures compounded, Wilber told his wife, Elizabeth, "We can't go on any longer. Take the things you want, and I'll keep what remains." Angry and heartbroken, Elizabeth left him to raise their four children alone. Their teenagers rebelled, blaming him for destroying the family, and they began to encounter immoral influences at school. At a loss, Wilber convinced Elizabeth to return. They coexisted separately in the same house.

Wilber, Elizabeth, and their daughter, Valeria, serve at a church event.

Elizabeth had always considered herself spiritual. While searching for a church, she struck up a conversation with a man in their neighborhood who revealed he was the pastor of an evangelical church two blocks away. Elizabeth and the children began attending.

Wilber watched them skeptically. His experience in the business world led him to believe churches were corrupt, only after people's money. He criticized his family week after week until curiosity overcame his reluctance to visit.

"Everyone greeted me kindly, as if they had known me all my life," he recalled. Their warm welcome shattered his preconceptions. He agreed to attend an evangelistic Bible study based on ABWE's *The Story of Hope*.

"After three months, I understood that salvation was only through faith in Jesus Christ—that neither works, nor money, nor anything I can do would save me," he declared.

Desiring to make his new faith public, he and Elizabeth joined the church baptism class.

"As I listened to Elizabeth, it became evident that she knew the gospel but had not actually made a profession of faith," observed ABWE missionary Jon Stone. "I asked if she would like to do that, and she did, right there in the class."

Wilber and Elizabeth began following Christ whole-heartedly. They reconciled and were baptized in December 2024. A year later, so were their children.

"This is a church of families," said ABWE missionary Steve Frerichs. "We want to reach the hearts of the adults, youth, and kids." Burdened for their neighborhood, Steve and his wife, Kelley, began this congregation in 2011 with six other missionaries and 30 believers sent from another church. Since then, it has grown to 250.

Wilber actively serves in the church and shares the gospel through his business. He attends an ABWE seminary to prepare for full-time ministry, whether by planting a church near his factory or by returning to the jungle as a Peruvian missionary.

"I am here because of God's work," he reflected, "and he will continue to guide me." ■

Photo: Brian VanTimmeren



Watch Wilber and Elizabeth's story of transformation.

[abwe.org/wilberstory](https://abwe.org/wilberstory)

# A Sovereign Bullet

The dramatic shutdown of an ABWE plane in Peru cost Roni Bowers her life—and 25 years later, the impact continues to reverberate for the gospel and global missions.

**BY:** KATELYN HAWKINS

**LOCATION:** PERU



Photo: Mark Henry

# 'They Are Killing Us!'

A Peruvian fighter jet mistakenly shoots down U.S. missionaries, raising new questions about the drug war. An inside story of one family's devastating loss.

FOR JIM AND RONI BOWERS, THE plane ride high above the Amazon river was a welcome respite from their rewarding but rigorous life as missionaries. They'd gone to the border town of Leticia, Colombia, with their 6-year-old son, Cory, to get a Peruvian visa for their newly adopted daughter, 7-month-old Charity. And now they were enjoying a breathtaking view of the rain-forest canopy during a three-hour return trip to their mission base in Iquitos, Peru. For days Jim had been happily anticipating the opportunity to gaze down upon the 56 villages where he had been spreading the Gospel by houseboat. "I'll get a better feel for how they're situated and their full size and location on the river," he emailed a friend, Pastor Terry Falk, back in Fruitport, Mich. He was just where he wanted to be—in the cockpit's seat at 4,000 feet, feeding his infant daughter Cherries.

With fire spreading in the cockpit, Donaldson tugged himself out of the left side of the plane, co-lapping on the pontoon. The jet swooped back and forth under the Cessna, then popped up on the left side. Bowers, sensing trouble, passed Charity back to his wife. Pilot Kevin Donaldson could not contact the A-37B fighter because he had no access to military frequencies. Instead, he radioed the control tower in Iquitos to ask what the fighter was doing. Roughly a minute after, according to an account

This story was reported by Joseph Conover in *Lima and Iquitos*, Flynn McRoberts in *Michigan* and Mark Hosenball, Donatella Lorch and Michael Takoff in *Washington*. It was written by Jeffrey Barbolet.

46 NEWSWEEK MAY 7, 2001

Donaldson later gave to his brother, the jet opened fire. Bullets tore into the pilot's legs; another hit Roni Bowers in the back, catted her chest and then penetrated her baby's head. Donaldson stayed on the radio to the Iquitos tower: "They are killing us!" he yelled.

Donaldson didn't panic. Smelling smoke in the cabin, he cut off fuel to the engine and put the pontoon plane into a dive toward the river. Bowers grabbed a fire extinguisher and sprayed the flames, then reached across to help his wife and daughter, who were already dead. The plane was veering into the river, slanting to the left, and Donaldson was struggling unsuccessfully to push the rudder pedal. It was only then that he realized that bullets had badly mangled his right leg. The Cessna hit the water on its left pontoon, then came down on the right, and slid to a stop about 50 feet farther on.

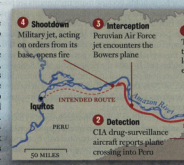
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tered bones grinding in his right leg. Near him, Bowers tried to keep the corpses of his wife and daughter face down so Cory wouldn't have to see their lifeless expressions. The 6-year-old, however, pleaded with his dad to lift their heads and keep them from drowning. It was then that Jim Bowers told his son that his mom and new sister were in heaven. "Now they won't hurt anymore," he said.

As Donaldson and Bowers learned later,

## Tragedy in the Amazon

A pleasant morning flight turns into a life-and-death struggle in the skies over Peru.



# OUT OF THE BLUE

Killed with her infant daughter as a Peruvian jet shoots down their small plane, a dedicated American missionary had given her life to serving the poor



The Cessna, owned by a Baptist missionary group, frequently flew along the Amazon.



Roni Bowers (with husband Jim Cory and Charity) took a break on their boat in March.

Arriving in the remote Peruvian rain forest in 1996 to begin her career as a Christian missionary, Roni Bowers felt at home from the very beginning. She had dreamed of doing evangelical work for much of her life; now she was ready—and fearless. "The first time she saw the Amazon she dove right in," says her longtime friend Gloria Radd with a laugh. "Very few women would do that, with the piranhas possibly all around, but she was willing to do anything."

That spirit of adventure, as well as Roni's devotion to her calling, soon became her signature traits, which made her death all the more heartbreaking to those who knew her. On the morning of April 20, while Bowers, 35, flew over the Amazon in a single-engine pontoon plane with her husband, Jim, 38, and their two children, Cory, 6, and Charity, 7 months, a Peruvian air force jet, apparently mistaking them for drug smugglers, raked the Bowers' plane with bullets. One went through Roni and struck Charity, who was on her lap, killing both of them. Pilot Kevin Donaldson, 42, seriously wounded, managed to crash-land the plane on a stretch of water below. Only Jim and

Cory escaped with minor injuries.

For whatever small consolation it might have been worth, Roni died not far from where she had done the work that she loved, nurturing the ministry she had shared with her husband. They had lived on a 60-ft. houseboat, spending four or five weeks at a time visiting villages along a 200-mile stretch of the Amazon, then returning for supplies before setting out again. Jim would deliver sermons, while Roni helped teach children to read. They would assist in setting up churches and training pastors, all the while trying to avoid poisonous snakes and disease. Communication with the outside world

was mostly through ham radio.

Though little in her upbringing could have prepared her for it, living in the jungle seemed to come naturally to Roni. Born in Nebraska, Veronica "Roni" Luttig was a self-described Air Force brat who moved with her family frequently as a child. The Luttigs hadn't been especially religious until the family was born again when Roni was 12. Soon she announced she wanted to be a missionary. She graduated from Poquoson (Va.) High School a year early and went off to Piedmont Baptist College in Winston-Salem, N.C. Such was her religious conviction, friends say, that she wouldn't even date a man who

60 5/7/01 PEOPLE

"Iquitos tower, this is OB-1408. I'm at Pevas, en route from Islandia, at 4,000 feet. The military is here. I don't know what they want."

Peruvian military personnel and forensic scientists inspect the recovered plane.



Photo: Mark Henry

Kevin Donaldson's terse words cut through radio static as the missionary pilot attempted to raise air traffic control.

Seated beside him, missionary teammate Jim Bowers watched the Peruvian Air Force A-37 swoop under their single-engine Cessna, first to the left, then to the right. The fighter had appeared in the cloudy sky an hour into their two-hour flight from the Peru-Colombia border.

The Bowers family—Jim, Veronica "Roni," six-year-old Cory, and seven-month-old Charity—was returning from an overnight trip to Leticia, Colombia, where they obtained a resident visa at the Peruvian consulate for their adopted baby daughter. For the past six years, Jim

and Roni had ministered in the isolated Amazon region of eastern Peru, using their houseboat to access river villages, train pastors, and teach local churches.


The missionaries didn't realize that their takeoff had been flagged by a CIA surveillance plane in a drug interdiction operation—or that the Peruvian liaisons had scrambled a jet to intercept them.

As CIA observers debated whether the plane's actions warranted engagement, Jim saw a puff of smoke erupt from the nose cone of the A-37. A bullet pierced the windshield in front of him. A cacophony of gunfire exploded around them as rounds tore through the fuselage.

"They're killing us! They're killing us!" Kevin shouted over the radio.

The CIA pilot yelled for the Peruvians to stand down. "Don't shoot! Tell him to terminate; *no más, no más!*"

Smoke and flames engulfed the small cabin. Kevin fought to guide the rapidly



# AMERICA'S SHADOW DRUG WAR

A gruesome shoot-down on the Amazon hints at a large and growing U.S. narcowar in Latin America. A report from the front lines

By JOSHUA COOPER RAMO IQUITOS

IQUITOS is the kind of town you might expect to read about in the pages of Joseph Conrad, tucked hard along the Amazon and alive with equal parts danger and promise. It draws missionaries of all kind, zealots intent on changing the world by starting here. It was two such crusades—one to stop the narcotraffic that runs on this river and one that is trying to bring Jesus to its darkest corners—that collided 140 miles east of town April 20 when a Peruvian jet shot down an unarmed Cessna carrying missionaries back from an upriver stint. The results were predictable: Roni Bowers, 35, and Charity, her seven-month-old daughter, killed by the gunfire that forced the crash landing of their plane.

The narcocrusaders are everywhere in this part of the world, as common here as the Internet entrepreneur seemed to be in the U.S. two years ago. There is a growth business. Everyone seems to be on one side of the game or the other—except those unfortunate enough to be caught in the middle. Charts of coca production and the violence that goes along with it—kidnappings, massacres, executions—look like a road map chart from 1968. The jungles of Colombia and Peru and Bolivia are dotted with the paraphernalia buttressing a shadowy and bloody war: American radar systems, air bases and special-operations training units.

One of the things that astonished many Americans about the one-sided gun battle

36 TIME, MAY 7, 2001



USA TODAY NO. 1 IN THE USA

## A puff of smoke, and then chaos at 4,000 feet

Missionary worker Jim Bowers peered unseeably out the front passenger window of a Cessna 182 floatplane. In his right hand, he held a rifle. It had been raining for about 15 minutes. Suddenly, there was a puff of smoke from the fighter. Bullets pierced the

**Drug war over Peru**

Missionary plane in machine-gun bullets. The jet flew under the Cessna, disappeared on its left and fired again.

A bullet hit the Cessna's left wing where fuel was stored. A fire erupted and roiled through the fuel line into the plane. Flames shot up from the floor of the cockpit, engulfing Jim Bowers and his wife's feet. A bullet struck his right leg, shattering two bones.

Sitting next to Donaldson, Bowers felt the impact of a bullet speeding past him. He handed his infant daughter, Charity, back to his brother, Roni, and opened a window to let out smoke. They had long ago learned to brace for impact. The bullets kept coming. One hit Roni Bowers in the back, causing him to lose consciousness. Another hit Charity's head. Her blanket flew into the air. The plane, on fire, plummeted toward the Amazon River. They're killing us," Donaldson shouted in Spanish to the control tower in Iquitos, Peru. "They're killing us!"

An U.S. and Peruvian satellite network is investigating why the missionaries were mistaken for drug traffickers and shot out of the sky the horror that unfolded around the crippled Cessna on April 20 is just now becoming clear. Through more than three dozen interviews, documents and an unimpaired copy of a cockpit conversation on a cell-operated surveillance jet, USA TODAY has pieced together new details of the last moments of the mission.

COVER STORY By Jack ...

The Peru Incident was featured in prominent US newspapers and magazines.

descending Cessna toward the break in the rainforest where the Amazon River snaked below, the only place the pontoon plane could land. Unable to step on the rudder, Kevin realized that both his legs had been shot; his shattered right leg remained only tenuously attached to his foot.

At 10:50 a.m. on April 20, 2001, the plane smacked down into the Amazon. Flames spread across the water; Jim urged Cory to jump to safety. He turned toward Roni and Charity. Realization dawned: a single bullet had ushered both mother and baby into the eternal arms of their Savior.

For those who remained, the ordeal was not over. Jim, Cory, and Kevin watched as the perforated left float sank and the plane overturned in the water. They clung to the inverted pontoons for more than 30 minutes before locals arrived in canoes from the nearby vil-

lage of Huanta. Shocked to see the familiar faces of Jim and Roni, who had ministered in their village, they mourned Roni's and Charity's passings and ferried Kevin by speedboat to the nearest jungle clinic, 90 minutes away—saving his life. Jim discovered a ham radio donated by another missionary in one of the huts and reported the situation to Kevin's wife, Bobbi.

Six hours later, Peruvian military personnel descended on the village, joined by two American DEA agents, to find the alleged drug traffickers they had shot



Local Peruvians transport missionary Kevin Donaldson down the Amazon River by speedboat to the nearest jungle clinic—saving his life.

Photo: photographer unknown



**Left:** Jim Bowers speaks at Roni and Charity's funeral.



**Right:** Pastors and Christian leaders greet Jim and Cory at the funeral.

**“He talked about how Roni’s death was not good, but it was good in God’s sight. Jim trusted in a God who doesn’t make mistakes.”**

Dave Southwell

down. As an international incident simmered, Jim endured hours of questioning in Iquitos before he and Cory wearily boarded a flight to the US for the funeral of his beloved wife and daughter.

### **An Unexpected Platform**

“The thing I remember most about the memorial service was Jim’s testimony about his trust in a sovereign God,” said Dave Southwell, former ABWE executive director for Latin America. “He talked about how Roni’s death was not good, but it was good in God’s sight. Jim trusted in a God who doesn’t make mistakes.”

The impact of those events that began in the Peruvian skies continues to reverberate 25 years later. Through the everyday faithfulness displayed in the missionaries’ lives and deaths, God’s sovereign hand has portrayed to his church and a watching world the cost of obedience, the power of forgiveness, and the unsurpassed worth of his kingdom.

Initially, the political backdrop of Roni’s and Charity’s deaths captured the attention of the American public. As

legal investigations later concluded, the procedures outlined in the US government’s 1994 authorization for the drug interdiction program had, in practice, been condensed or omitted. The plane’s registration was not properly verified, and the Peruvian Air Force pilot’s attempt to contact the missionary plane came over a radio frequency not typically used in flight.

“It garnered attention because a mother and baby were killed,” Dave noted.

Others drew parallels with the 1956 martyrdom of five missionaries attempting to evangelize the Huaorani people in Ecuador. Yet the ABWE missionaries were quick to point out that, while the location of their ministry may have led to some level of risk, the incident occurred in the course of a routine aspect of their work.

“Jim said at the time, ‘We weren’t shot down because we were missionaries. We happened to be missionaries and we got shot down,’” recalled Kristen (Stagg) Gardner, author of *If God Should Choose: The Authorized Story of Jim and Roni*

Photos: photographer unknown



Jim Bowers speaks at a press conference held in Florida in 2001.



*Bowers.* “One of the things people struggled with, like in the story of Job, was ‘Why would God allow this to happen?’”

As interest grew, reporters lined the driveway at the ABWE international headquarters outside Harrisburg, Pennsylvania, and gathered outside Jim’s temporary home in North Carolina. Jim accepted an interview with Diane Sawyer, then met with President George W. Bush at the White House—each interaction revealing his unshakable hope in Christ.

“A lot of people asked me questions about how I was dealing with this, and all I could say was, ‘God has given me grace,’” he shared recently. “People say it was a tragedy . . . but I don’t know how it’s a tragedy that my wife and baby got to be with the Lord, and the rest of us survived.”

Jim and Kevin, along with ABWE staff members, discovered an unexpected platform for sharing the gospel.

“We were managing the information, trying to take advantage of the situation for the Lord and for ministry,” explained

Dave, who became the Bowers family spokesman. ABWE mailed hundreds of gospel booklets to those calling to find out more about the God the missionaries served. Others, like Kristen herself, developed evangelistic opportunities through Roni’s story lasting to this day.

#### ‘Why Would You Do That?’

Back in Peru, ABWE missionary teams experienced an outpouring of concern, even while handling ongoing governmental ramifications. ABWE had established a long history in Iquitos; missionaries arrived in 1939 to open the organization’s first field outside of Asia.

“Our Peruvian friends and neighbors were very sympathetic,” remarked Glenn Budd, an ABWE missionary pilot serving mountain villages near Chiclayo—who himself was pursued by an air force helicopter two weeks after the shutdown. “They recognized we came down from



Diane Sawyer meets with Jim and Cory Bowers at the ABWE international headquarters.



Photo: Joe Sherman

Jim Bowers teaches Peruvian church leaders during a Bible study in 2001.



(From left) Lauren, Stacie, Jim, and Marlene Bowers gather at their home in Puerto Rico in 2025.

**“I’m convinced that God directly intervened to spare Kevin and Cory and me because he still has some kind of work for us to accomplish.”**

Jim Bowers

the States to Peru, where we had all these risks, and asked, ‘Why would you do that?’ And, of course, we could share that our love for the Peruvian people and our desire for them to know the Lord is what motivates us to keep doing that.”

Even more powerful were Jim and Kevin’s decisions to forgive those who had caused their suffering. As a tangible demonstration, they sent Bibles to Peruvian Air Force pilots inscribed with a personal message of forgiveness.

“When we were able to share in our area and in Lima that they forgave the people who did that to them, that was a great testimony,” Glenn observed.

Later, the Peruvian ambassador to the US issued a letter to ABWE requesting that missionaries remain in the Amazon region to continue their beneficial work.

#### **Unfinished Work**

While speaking to the crowd gathered at the memorial service, Jim reflected, “I’m convinced that God directly intervened to spare Kevin and Cory and me because he still has some kind of work for us to accomplish.”

Even in his grief, he prepared for the next chapter of God’s plan. “I read

a number of different books in those first years that were a big help to have the right perspective and to encourage other people,” he said.

God revealed not only Jim’s next steps but a companion for the journey. Through a long-distance condolence phone call to Jim’s family after the plane crash, Jim reconnected with Stacie. He and Stacie had been good friends while growing up attending a boarding school in Brazil, and she had been serving for many years as a single missionary in Portugal. They married in late 2002 and served together in a Spanish-language church in North Carolina, then briefly in Portugal, where their daughter, Lauren, was born. In 2005, they began a nine-year ministry in Mozambique developing a Christian recreation center and adventure camp. “We used sailing to get youth interested in hearing about the Lord,” Jim explained. During their first term in Africa, God blessed them with another daughter, Marlene.

Jim and Stacie currently serve through Maritime Ministries International and host retreats for pastors and missionaries from their home in Puerto Rico. Jim notes how God continues to



**Above:** Kevin Donaldson transports missionaries in his Cessna 185 floatplane in the early 2000s.



Photos: photographer unknown

**Right:** Kevin and Bobbi Donaldson continue to travel regularly on short-term missions trips.

use his experience for his glory: “It’s given me an opportunity to come alongside other people who have asked me how I coped with it and things that help. . . . The Lord orchestrates our conversations.”

### From the Rainforest to the Desert

Kevin, after healing from multiple surgeries, returned to Peru, where he and his wife, Bobbi, had served since 1985. With the aviation ministry suspended in Iquitos, however, they soon turned their focus to a unique opportunity in the Middle East. Kevin partnered with another missionary to establish a business at a local flying club, operating powered parachutes. Through aviation sports, he and Bobbi developed relationships with influential families in the nation and spoke openly about the gospel.

“Whenever people marvel at our subsequent overseas ministries and bemoan the dangers for us, we assure them that we’ve experienced a lot worse in surviving the shutdown, and God was there,” he remarked.

Now living in Pennsylvania, Kevin and Bobbi travel regularly on short-term missions trips, often while mentoring young people.

Kevin notes that God has redeemed his experience in Peru to grow his faith and encourage other believers. “I don’t take the future for granted. Because missionary aviation is inherently dangerous, I was already accustomed to trusting the Lord moment by moment, day by day, and the shutdown showed me why,” he said. “Sometimes serving the Lord involves physical and emotional pain, but it’s still worth it. . . . I hope and pray that God can still use that painful memory for his glory.”

### A New Generation of Missionaries

The impact on world missions extended well beyond the Bowers and Donaldson families. Jim’s funeral address included additional evidence of God’s sovereign plan: “One thing that convinces me that God did this to Roni and Charity is the profound effect this event is having on

**“Sometimes serving the Lord involves physical and emotional pain, but it’s still worth it. . . . I hope and pray that God can still use that painful memory for his glory.”**

Kevin Donaldson



Ministry continues in the present-day city of Iquitos, Peru, located along the bank of the Amazon River.



Locals travel through the city of Iquitos in motorcycle taxis.



**“The Peru Incident, as it came to be called, got so much publicity that we saw God use it to guide people to missions, not just with ABWE but many different places. It was a wake-up call.”**

Dave Southwell

people around the world. The interest in missionary work now, I’m hoping, will result in an increase of missionaries in the future.”

When Dave Southwell received the shocking phone call from missionary Larry Hultquist informing him of the shutdown, just down the hall from his office, the president of ABWE was finishing a lunch meeting to discuss how ABWE could become more widely known.

“The Peru Incident, as it came to be called, got so much publicity that we saw God use it to guide people to missions, not just with ABWE but many different places,” Dave shared. “It was a wake-up call.”

Among those burdened for missions were Andy and Carol Patton, who first traveled to Iquitos to oversee the construction of a sports complex built with memorial funds, launching a missionary career in South America that continues today. Likewise, Patrick and Gina Cassidy changed course from Togo to Peru from 2002–2007 to restore Jim and Roni’s houseboat ministry among Amazon villages, and an additional couple joined the ABWE team in Peru, stating, “The incident with the Bowers family caused me to evaluate how little I had been serving God.”

Another couple, John and Bev, launched a ministry equipping national partners in Southeast Asia. John wrote,

“God used the Bowers tragedy to get our attention, not just on ABWE, but on the price God’s servants can be called to pay by the One who gave it all (2 Corinthians 5:15).”

Since 2001, the propeller of OB-1408 has been displayed at ABWE’s international headquarters as a visible reminder of the gravitas of the missionary call.

### **A Life That Impacted a Church**

While Roni’s death prompted believers in the US to pick up the mantle in the Great Commission, her life left a lasting impact on the Peruvian church.

“She built into people through her life,” Kristen recounted, “not just through teaching but through activities like volleyball. . . . They were always inviting people to travel on the boat with them.”

Jim has returned to Peru several times to maintain connections with local church leaders. “Living aboard a riverboat for five years in the late 1990s allowed us access to dozens of remote villages along a 300-mile stretch of the Amazon,” he remarked. “In communities with a maturing church, some of Roni’s friends were deeply impacted by her life and sudden death. They were inspired to be more like Roni in their witness and faithfulness to disciple others.”

On a recent overnight river trip, Jim and his family passed the location of the

Photos: Brian VanTimmeren



ABWE missionaries Andy and Carol Patton were inspired to serve in Peru as a result of Roni's death and continue to minister in Iquitos today.



shootdown. Unable to stop while navigating in the dark, Jim spoke via phone to Ivan, a dear friend who, with his family, tearfully watched from the bank as their boat continued down the river. Ivan and his brothers had traveled as teenagers with Jim and Roni to minister in remote villages. Several of these men now serve as pastors in their towns.

"It's been very encouraging for me to hear about yet another Peruvian friend God has challenged through my loss," Jim continued.

Through their sacrifice, and the faithfulness of many other missionaries through the years, Peruvian churches are maturing.

ABWE Regional Director Steve Douglas observes, "In Iquitos, we're seeing local pastors now starting churches. They've taken over the riverboat ministries that our teammates did decades ago, and they're beginning to reach their Jerusalem and Judea."

### The Cost of Missions

Seconds before the first bullets strafed missionary floatplane OB-1408 on April 20, 2001, CIA pilots questioned whether to engage: "Are you sure it's *bandito*? . . . I think we're making a mistake."

Though their error had devastating consequences, the sovereign hand of God continues to use the missionaries' sacrificial service to urge Christ's church to his mission—not only among the isolated

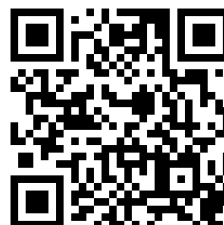
villages of Peru but to the unreached around the world.

John Piper, in a 2026 sermon, underscored Jim's perspective: "If you were the husband, having lost your wife and your seven-month-old daughter, what would you say? What did Jim Bowers say? 'Roni and Charity were instantly killed by the same bullet. Would you say that's a stray bullet? That was a sovereign bullet.' . . . This is the price that some of you will pay as you follow Christ obediently to the unreached of the world."

Christ has promised to build his church, and even risk and suffering will not deter the advance of his kingdom.

"We've often heard it said that the safest place to be is in the center of God's will," added Dave Southwell, "but that's not always true. Sometimes it's safer to not be involved in missions. But it's something that we're called to do—to give up ourselves regardless." ■

Watch or listen to how the Bowers' story has impacted missions in Peru and beyond. [abwe.org/peruimpact](https://abwe.org/peruimpact)



**"If you were the husband, having lost your wife and your seven-month-old daughter, what would you say? What did Jim Bowers say? 'Roni and Charity were instantly killed by the same bullet. Would you say that's a stray bullet? That was a sovereign bullet.' . . . This is the price that some of you will pay as you follow Christ obediently to the unreached of the world."**

John Piper



(From left) Jim, Cory, Charity, and Roni Bowers access remote Peruvian villages from their houseboat on the Amazon River in 2001.

Photo: Joe Sherman



# Sent Ones

THE FALL 2025 NEW MISSIONARY CLASS

BY: KATELYN HAWKINS

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**Counting the cost in a world abounding in difficulties, dangers, and strife, God's people still boldly follow his call to the nations.** Since October 2025, 14 new missionaries have joined ABWE. Some are engaging indigenous groups living among drug violence in Central America. Others will bring healing and hope to West African villages. Still others will shine the light of the gospel in oft-forgotten Muslim nations or in European cities where the once-bright gospel legacy has nearly been extinguished.

While each story of calling is unique, every new missionary highlights common ways that God sovereignly directs his people. Whether we're called to go or to support those who do, their insights are valuable to consider.

First, encountering the needs of the world and considering our God-given giftings help us determine where we can be most useful in his service. When Ken Kistler heard a Scottish pastor say, "You could throw a dart at a map of Scotland and you'd probably hit a town of 1,000, 5,000, or 10,000 with zero gospel influence," he was burdened to use his background as a pastor to reach a nation with few Christian leaders.

Second, God often directs us through other believers, whether through godly input or through the example of those who have gone before. Wise counsel and mentorship from ABWE missionaries in Romania encouraged Sydney

Spielbauer to join their team, while Aliza Curtis Urias was inspired by the faithful sacrifice of a Bible translator whose husband was killed on the field.

Third, God speaks through the local church. Matthew and Amanda Bixler noted the positive impact of their church in following the example of Acts 13 to affirm their call, disciple them for ministry, and guide them to the field.

Finally, the gospel itself compels us to join Christ's mission. Boris Ramirez described how Christ's sacrifice in John 3:16 motivates him: "When I think about the gospel message, that's what giving is—it's the giving of our lives, of our families, of our dreams, for death. But when we think about the death of our Lord, we remember the life that it gives us."

As these new missionaries prepare for the field, may we also be sensitive to God's leading and how we may pray, partner, or join them in his mission. ■



God still calls workers to the nations. Take your next step:

[abwe.org/jointheharvest](https://abwe.org/jointheharvest)



# Sent Ones

THE FALL 2025 NEW MISSIONARY CLASS



## Matthew and Amanda Bixler

**Ministry:** ABWE GO | **Track:** Long Term | **Giving:** [abwe.org/m/0172951](https://abwe.org/m/0172951)  
**Sending Church:** Grace Church Waco | **Location:** England

Passionate about the role of the local church in missions, the Bixlers developed a partnership between their church in Texas and a church in England before moving to the UK in 2022. They mobilize leaders to plant and revitalize churches.



## G. and K.

**Ministry:** ABWE GO | **Track:** Long Term | **Giving:** [abwe.org/m/0193041](https://abwe.org/m/0193041)  
**Sending Church:** Middle Creek Church | **Location:** Central Asia

Witnessing the inaccessibility of the gospel in Muslim nations led G. and K. to find a fit for their natural giftings in Central Asia, where they will disciple, train, and mentor young national church leaders to introduce the gospel in their region.



## Rose Jones

**Ministry:** ABWE GO | **Track:** Long Term | **Giving:** [abwe.org/m/0173141](https://abwe.org/m/0173141)  
**Sending Church:** The Baptist Fellowship of Randolph | **Location:** Togo

Rose, a physician assistant and second-generation missionary, has pursued medical missions since childhood. She will combine compassionate medical care with intentional discipleship at the Hospital of Hope.



## Ken and Lynn Kistler

**Ministry:** ABWE GO | **Track:** Long Term | **Giving:** [abwe.org/m/0173111](https://abwe.org/m/0173111)  
**Sending Church:** Crossroads Community Church | **Location:** Scotland

While visiting family in Scotland, the Kistlers were struck by the number of church buildings that were closed or converted to stores or pubs. They are joining an ABWE team to equip the few but faithful believers to rekindle the gospel in Scotland.



## B. and D.

**Ministry:** International Security and Crisis Management

**Track:** Long Term | **Giving:** [abwe.org/m/0173131](https://abwe.org/m/0173131)

**Sending Church:** Grace Christian Church | **Location:** Worldwide

B., a police officer, and D., a civil servant, apply their professional experience to share the gospel through TACTICA law enforcement training in Latin America and by equipping US churches for disaster response and crisis intervention.



## Boris and Beth Ramirez

**Ministry:** EveryEthne | **Track:** Associate | **Giving:** [abwe.org/m/0192081](https://abwe.org/m/0192081)

**Sending Church:** Cornerstone Baptist Church | **Location:** United States

Boris and Beth served 30 years in Boris' native Guatemala translating the New Testament into the Poqomchi' language. Now in Pennsylvania, they lead outreach to immigrants and train new missionaries to Latin America.



## Sydney Spielbauer

**Ministry:** ABWE GO | **Track:** Mid Term | **Giving:** [abwe.org/m/0173121](https://abwe.org/m/0173121)

**Sending Church:** Prince Avenue Baptist Church | **Location:** Romania

Through repeated ministry trips with ABWE missionaries in Romania, God led Sydney to refocus her college studies and activities in preparation for serving in Bucharest to reach and disciple young people.



## Jenny Stevenson

**Ministry:** ABWE GO | **Track:** Long Term | **Giving:** [abwe.org/m/0194381](https://abwe.org/m/0194381)

**Sending Church:** Calvary Baptist Church | **Location:** Liberia

Jenny's teaching degree, administrative background, and youth ministry experience converged on a trip to Liberia, leading her to return full-time to help local leaders enhance and strengthen outreach and church planting ministries.



## Carlos and Aliza Urias

**Ministry:** ABWE GO | **Track:** Associate/Long Term | **Giving:** [abwe.org/m/0192901](https://abwe.org/m/0192901)

**Sending Church:** Community Bible Chapel | **Location:** Mexico

Carlos, saved at a church plant in Mexico, met ABWE missionary Aliza while serving in Culiacán. They present the gospel to migrant farm workers from least-reached Mexican indigenous groups and disciple them to reach their communities.

# Between Borders and the Kingdom

A Scriptural view of Christ's kingdom offers a framework for living responsibly as citizens while embracing our commission as disciple makers.

BY: ALEX KOCCMAN

Immigration is as controversial as it has ever been in American life, particularly as patterns of migration from Latin America intersect with broader global movement and displacement. Some cross borders fleeing violence or persecution. Others move primarily in search of economic opportunity and stability. According to the United Nations, an estimated 122 million people, including refugees, internally displaced persons, and asylum seekers, have been forcibly displaced by conflict, violence, persecution, or other crises around the world. This is the highest recorded level of forced displacement, nearly double that of a decade ago.

For Christians, the question is not only whether migration is complex or disruptive, but also how we are to think and live faithfully in the midst of it. Scripture gives us a framework that is both clarifying and demanding. We live as members of two kingdoms. We inhabit an earthly, terrestrial order with real duties and obligations. We are citizens, husbands and wives, parents, neighbors, and church members. These roles are not incidental. They are given by God and ordered for human flourishing. At the

**The Table of Nations in Genesis 10 shows God ordering humanity into distinct peoples, languages and cultures, a diversity he declares good. That diversity does not disappear in redemption.**

same time, we belong to the kingdom of Christ, where our highest allegiance is to the risen Lord who reigns over all things.

These responsibilities do not cancel one another out. As theologians across the centuries have observed, grace does not erase nature. It perfects it. Our obedience to Christ should deepen and mature the way we engage the natural world, not bypass it. Faithful Christian discipleship ought to produce better citizens, not indifferent ones, even as it produces bold witnesses to the gospel.

When we turn to Scripture, we see that God takes nations seriously. In Acts 17, Paul reminds us that God determines the times and boundaries of peoples. The Table of Nations in Genesis 10 shows God ordering humanity into distinct peoples, languages, and cultures, a diversity he declares good. That diversity does not disappear in redemption. In Revelation 5 and 7, redeemed men and women from every tribe and language and nation worship before the throne. Nations endure into eternity.

We live, then, in the in-between. The Bible does not treat borders as meaningless, nor does it treat human government as morally suspect. Governments and



**Alex Kocman** is the director of communications and engagement for ABWE. He serves as general editor for Message Magazine and co-hosts The Missions Show. He lives in Pennsylvania with his wife and five children.

Photo: Getty Images

individuals make fallible decisions, and civil authority remains a real category in God's world (Romans 13). Yet Scripture also teaches us that God is never absent from upheaval. What man means for evil, God means for good (Genesis 50:20). He sovereignly advances his purposes even through broken circumstances.

Recently, a missionary working among Afghan refugees shared a striking account. An Afghan believer, once a leader in the underground church, fled Taliban persecution and came legally to the United States. Here, God placed him in ministry among fellow Afghans. Separately, another Afghan man arrived unlawfully, carrying fragments of gospel truth he had once heard. In God's providence, he walked into a church pastored by that same underground church leader. Through that unlikely convergence, God brought him to saving faith in Christ.

God's redemptive work is not bound by human institutions. He gathers his people from unexpected places, often through paths we would never choose.

So how should we respond? One step is to properly distinguish between issues of public policy and matters of Christian mission. We can begin by praying inten-

**God's redemptive work is not bound by human institutions. He gathers his people from unexpected places, often through paths we would never choose.**

tionally for the nations God has brought near us, asking him to open doors for faithful witness. We can take stock of our callings, seeking to live responsibly as citizens while also embracing our commission as disciple makers. And we can pray regularly for the lost people God has placed in our ordinary lives.

May we labor until the knowledge of the Lord covers the earth as the waters cover the seas, and may the Lord grant that many will see the light of Christ through the quiet, faithful witness of his church (Habakkuk 2:14). ■

God is bringing the nations to us. Help your church reach them with the gospel. Learn more: [abwe.org/opendoors](https://abwe.org/opendoors)





# Trusting God With the Impossible

A missionary family's crisis offers a sobering reminder that God is worthy of trust in suffering and in healing.

BY: JOSH AND JODIE GREVE

LOCATION: BRAZIL

**W**e sat in the hospital room holding the hand of our nine-year-old son. He was practically lifeless. A tube protruded from his neck as ECMO life support took and returned blood from his body.

Our precious Malachi had somehow contracted Shiga toxin-producing *E. coli*. Antibiotics would worsen the toxins, so doctors made the risky decision to withhold them. His kidneys failed anyway. He went into septic shock, was intubated, placed on dialysis, and later required surgery to drain fluid from his abdomen and heart. When his heart function dropped to 35 percent, he was placed on ECMO. For two weeks, each day felt like a downward spiral.

We couldn't believe this was happening. Jodie's mind replayed the last image of him healthy—walking around our house before a quick grocery trip. She squeezed his hand to reassure him we were there. He squeezed back. He begged for water by mouthing words.

At one point, he asked me (Josh) if he was going to die. Every part of me wanted to promise the outcome I hoped for, but faith required something else. Acknowledging that God's will stands above my own, I replied simply, "God will take care of you."

We played Scripture songs, doing all we could to remind him he was loved, even though—like him—we had no control.

This helplessness was not new. Two years earlier, we were told our oldest son, Micah, had advanced keratoglobus, a rare, progressive corneal disease. As we waited to see specialists, my mind spiraled with questions. Sitting beside Malachi, I felt the same fear—only magnified.

I remember thinking, *Okay God, you have my attention*. I searched for meaning, even wondering if this was happening because we were missionaries. Eventually, I realized my thinking was wrong. We live in a sin-cursed world. Being a Christian does not exempt us from suffering. I stopped asking why and focused instead on the One who was in control.

I prayed the simplest prayer I could form: "God, please help him." As Robert Morgan writes, "We must trust God with the impossible and leave room for him to work." I tried to picture myself holding up my son to Jesus as if to say, "Here, Lord—he

is yours." As hard as it was to release control, I knew that his arms were the safest place for Malachi. I also knew that God's people across the world were lifting us up in prayer. We felt it every hour of the day.

As Morgan says, "The same God who led you in will lead you out." God did lead us, and he healed Malachi. Months later, his lead doctor told us that, on a clinical basis, no doctor believed he would survive.

Yet our faith does not rest in this outcome but in the character of God. God's healing is always according to his will and is not promised in the temporary but the eternal. Whether through healing or suffering, God remains worthy of our trust and faithfulness.

Because he has been faithful to us, we can remain faithful to the call he has placed on our lives. We rest our future in the promise: "Fear not, for I am with you; be not dismayed, for I am your God. I will strengthen you, yes, I will help you, I will uphold you with my righteous right hand" (Isaiah 41:10). ■



**Left:** The Greve family praises God for restoring Malachi's health.

**Bottom:** Malachi undergoes treatment in the intensive care unit at a Brazilian hospital.



Photos: Greve family

# Where Brazil's Next Generation Meets Christ

By discipling youth and training leaders, Camp Paradise is helping Brazil become a growing force for world missions.

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LOCATION: BRAZIL

The future of the Brazilian church hinges on the next generation. As the burgeoning evangelical population matures and begins to send its own missionaries, many throughout Brazil still need to be reached with the gospel, disciplined, and trained so that the Brazilian church can continue to become firmly rooted and grow as a force for world missions.

Camp Paradise does just that. Running onto the lush, tropical campus, children and teens exuberantly join in activities designed to develop their natural athletic, artistic, and academic abilities—and point them to Christ. The camp brings youth from greater Recife, on Brazil's northeastern coast, and many arrive with struggles, hurts from broken families, or confusion from Catholic and spiritist beliefs.

“We want our campers to know Christ and grow in all aspects of life,” shared ABWE missionary and camp director Dan Cook. “We view camp as a maternity ward, where, in a short period of

time, new babes in Christ are born and fed spiritually.”

Since the camp was founded 60 years ago, hundreds of campers have committed their lives to Christ. Many of the 50 staff leaders—volunteers from local churches—were saved as campers and now use the training and discipleship they receive as camp counselors for vocational or lay ministry. Others are now dispersed around the world, sharing their faith through professional or ministerial roles.

As Camp Paradise pours into Brazilian youth, the future is dawning—and it is bright. ■

See how God is raising up the next generation of leaders in Brazil. Learn more: [abwe.org/reachbrazil](https://abwe.org/reachbrazil)



**Gary Chapman** has covered humanitarian stories in more than 80 countries, helping organizations create awareness, express their vision, and build their community. His visual storytelling has advanced the work of TOMS Shoes, Delta, World Vision, National Geographic, Johnson & Johnson, and Atlanta Mission. Gary's wife, Vivian, assists Gary on assignments. She is in charge of marketing, copywriting, and all aspects of business that don't include pushing a camera button.

**Katelyn Hawkins** is a communications specialist with ABWE. She serves as managing editor for Message Magazine and the ABWE blog. She holds an M.A. in Social Sciences and B.A. in Communications, and has lived in locations across Europe, Asia, and the Middle East.



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