

Chickens and eggs, humor and embarrassment Expected the unexpected on the mission field

By Kenneth D. MacHarg

LAM News Service

Miami, FL (LAMNS)—While talking comes naturally to most of us, trying to speak in another language can often create embarrassing or at least amusing situations.

Take veteran LAM missionary theologian John Stam. Early in their missionary career he remembers, confusing the Spanish words "huevos" with "jueves" and so he ordered "a dozen Thursdays" when he went to the store. When the storekeeper couldn't figure out what he wanted he began to imitate a chicken with no success.

For Joan Wilson Carter, the director of Nicaragua's Los Sembradores ministry, her gaff was just plain embarrassing. As with most people, she has times when she also confuses words. "Among the words that give me difficulty are the words for socks and underpants," Joan explains. "Both words start out the same--it is only the ending that is different. For example, socks translate to calcetines, underpants to calzonillos. During one meeting the man who teaches the Bible in our schools was saying that the weather is so hot that when he walks in the sun his feet burn inside his shoes. 'Well,' I asked brightly, 'Were you wearing your underpants while you were walking in the sun?' His slightly red face and quizzical expression told me that I had used the wrong word again."

HCJB missionary John Adams passes along a story told by his colleague who told a workman that if he would go to her husband's office, he would pay the contractor. Her problem was that she confused the words pagarle and pegarle, and thus told the man that her husband would hit him rather than pay him.

Not all language errors occur outside of the country. Lynne Kettering and her husband from Washougal, Washington, are host to many foreign visitors, especially work teams from Latvia. They were showing around one foreign visitor who finally asked if they would simply introduce him at Normunds from Latvia. It seems that in mispronouncing the man's last name, they were referring to him as Normunds the turd.

Then there is a problem understanding local foods. Joan Wilson Carter remembers an early experience when "one of the people I was working with gently placed a packet of food in my hands and I knew from her face that I was receiving something considered special. The packet continued steaming as I made my way home. In the kitchen I got out a plate, a knife and fork and sat down to eat. The food inside the packet was a dark green leaf type thing. It was tied together with its own leaf structure. I wondered what I had in front of me. I poked it with my finger. Something soft and mushy was inside the leaf. After considering it for a few minutes I decided that it resembled stuffed cabbage leaves. So I set about cutting into it. But I couldn't get the knife to cut the leaf. I finally wound up with a sharp butcher knife and managed to cut some slices. I couldn't get the fork to pierce the leaf so I had to pick the portion up in my fingers and put it in my

mouth. I chewed and chewed and chewed and couldn't get the leaf to break down. The filling of the leaf was tasty, but the leaf was indomitable. I finally scooped out some of the filling and ate that leaving the rest untouched.

“The next day my friend asked me how I liked the Nacatamale. I didn't have the heart to tell her that the leaf was undercooked and inedible, so I told her it was tasty. I consoled myself that I wasn't really lying. The filling was tasty. Months later I learned that the green leaf that I was trying to eat was a banana leaf and was only the packing in which the Nacatamale is boiled for 24 hours. The filling was the Nacatamale. The banana leaf was supposed to be thrown away.”

Some missionaries sense God's sense of humor. The Southern Baptist's Mark Kelly reports that two missionaries risked imprisonment to smuggle 300 Bibles into a country where the government was hostile to Christian witness. After delivering their cargo, the workers realized they faced a new problem: On the way in, their van had cleared a low tunnel only because the van was weighed down with the Bibles; now it would be too tall to make it back through. At a checkpoint, however, policemen ordered the pair to take with them four very large soldiers who needed a ride. The van sank enough under the soldiers' weight to clear the tunnel, and the missionaries were able to get their van back home to use in future Bible-smuggling efforts.

And, humorous or uncertain situations can also result in ministry. Former LAM missionary Greg Saracoff relates that he and his wife Kathy “were renting land in the back yard of a poor person where I built a small house. We only had one twelve-volt light bulb in the house, which we powered from a car battery. When the battery went down we exchanged it with our truck battery. We needed to push the truck to get it started. Once, the truck took off with no driver and both doors wide open right down a hill, through a garbage dump, and directed right at a small trailer. This trailer was the home of a poor family.

“At this point I will mention something else related to this story. The Lord had revealed to me that I should start to witness to the new area of housing behind our home. I responded to this by telling my wife she should witness to the new neighbors-which she did not do. I then told the local church they needed to witness to the new neighborhood but they also ignored my pleas. At this point the truck was barreling down the hill at a great speed. The poor family eating their breakfast looked out the window. Greatly surprised they threw their hands in the air and ran out of their trailer.

Kathy tried to jump into the moving truck and was thrown out as the truck bounced. She got hundreds of small cuts from the garbage as she rolled across it in her shorts. Then right in front of the trailer the moving truck was caught in a hole with a bedspring and a bunch of tires. It was like an angel caught it and stopped its deadly progress. Kathy looked at her cuts and started to return to our home. I looked around and saw everyone in the new neighborhood out in their front yards looking at us. I told Kathy to stop walking and return. She thought I was crazy. I said, ‘we finally got their attention.’ The family we nearly killed all came to the Lord and the father became a deacon in the church. We

renamed our truck the “evangelical pick up truck” because it went when the rest of us didn't want to go.

Missionaries can also find themselves in humorous and frustrating predicaments. LAM's John Stam tells about the time that he preached for the annual general assembly of the Guatemalan church which was held in remote Kekchí Indian territory in Izabal.

“As I remember, well over 1000 people were there, very few of whom spoke Spanish so my sermons were translated into Kekchí. The first night, warming up to a peak in my sermon, I remembered a great illustration and launched exuberantly into it. But then I realized it involved a telephone, without which it would make no sense, as 95% of those present had no idea what that was. So I had to explain what a telephone is: kind of like a "talking tube" attached to a wire, with two holes in it, one you talk to and another hole that you listen while people from far away can talk to you. John says he trusts that the people understood what he was talking about.

Finally, just living in another culture can bring daily situations that one has to address with a sense of humor. ABWE's Larry Armstrong reports that in the Philippines, the only difficulty they had was when it rained so much the clothes didn't dry. But in other countries where he and his family have lived, the problems were different.

“In Italy and Hong Kong, it was too expensive to have the laundry done, so we washed our clothes in the sink everyday, hanging them in the shower to dry. In Australia, it was easy, we had a washer, dryer and clean clothes ready to wear.

“In the Ukraine, it is a different story. You put five inches of water in a tub, dump in soap, place an eight-inch board across the tub and sit on it. Swish your feet back and forth until the water is dirty or you collapse. Wringing out thick towels is a challenge. I have wrestled those brutes to the point of placing one end between my feet and twisting the other end with my hands until they smart. With this type of work, you don't need to pay to take aerobic classes.”

The Latin America Mission works in partnership with churches and Christian agencies throughout Latin America and supports missionaries and projects in many Latin countries as well as in Spain. LAM is seeking to place new missionaries throughout the region. The U.S. headquarters can be reached at Latin America Mission, Box 52-7900, Miami, FL 33152, by e-mail at info@lam.org, or by calling 1-800-275-8410. The mission's web site may be found at <http://www.lam.org>. LAM's Canadian office is at 3075 Ridgeway Drive, Unit 14, Mississauga, ON L5L 5M6.

Chickens and eggs, humor and embarrassment; Expected the unexpected on the mission field, *LAM News Service*, July 10, 2001

