

Faith Mennonite Church  
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**Cast out into the deep!**  
*Luke 5:1-11*

Fisherman Peter was weary. He and his partners fished all night, without catching anything, and still needed to clean the nets. You know that weariness: you work all day and still need to come home and fix dinner. Or you've had your heart broken listening to clients whose lives are broken or attending to patients whose pain is hard to control, and when you get home, your family needs your ear and your care. Or perhaps you live alone and have no one with whom to share your burden or frustrations. Or you think you have a relaxing weekend ahead of you and then the clothes washer stops working and you need to go to a crowded laundromat. Or you couldn't wait for the election season to end, but then it ends in a way that is deeply troubling and you know you'll be called to even greater acts of protest and community building to protect the vulnerable lives and institutions in our country and our fragile environment.

Fisherman Peter was weary. He was glad to offer his boat to Jesus and listen as he taught; it made the net-cleaning a bit more interesting. But was he hearing right when Jesus said, "Go back out into the deep and cast your nets." Really? But this Jesus was compelling...irresistible. Despite Peter's weariness, he consented: "If YOU say so, I will let down my nets....I will let down my guard. I will give up my will and my weariness for your will, your way.

Peter made the right decision! His caught-nothing night quickly changed to a net-busting catch that sent him to his knees in amazement and contrition. Why was Jesus doing this for him and his friends? Why this abundance? Why this generous, abounding gift to these rag tag, sometimes foul-mouthed fishermen?

Jesus made it all seem so usual, so ordinary. Now Peter gets to join the company of Mary and Joseph and Elizabeth and Zachariah and the shepherds who heard the words, "Do not be afraid." "Do not be afraid, Peter, because I'm taking a chance with you. I'd like you to leave these nets and go out into the deep in another way....with me....to bring this abundant life to other people...to everyone! You will be catching people!"

Ah, but here we bounce back to reality and balk. Catching people? Isn't that coercive? Doesn't that mean walking up to people on the street and asking them if they're saved or telling them that Jesus is the answer without having any idea what their life questions are?

I experienced a perspective on this scripture last weekend when I was privileged to visit an indigenous community in eastern Ecuador. This community thrives and is playing a small but critical part in protecting 400,000 acres of the Amazon jungle all because a few people over a half century ago responded to Jesus' call to them to share abundant life with others. The people are the Cofán and the village is named Závalo, after a nearby river with the same name.

Some people are critical of missionary efforts to reach indigenous people, believing that pristine cultures should be left untouched. But in our globalized world, there is almost no place that gets left untouched. The exploration for oil, the desire for minerals, the promise of wealth from cutting timber are no respecter of indigenous people or their historic care of and claim to the land.

The 400,000-acre reserve of the Cofán in eastern Ecuador is a direct outcome of the work of one couple, Marlytte and Roberta (Bub and Bobbie) Borman, who worked with Wycliffe Bible Translators beginning in the 1950s. The Bormans felt called to "fish for people" and they went to live in an indigenous community, without electricity or any of the comforts we take for granted. There they raised their four children and helped bring life to a

community that was literally dying around them when they arrived. Tuberculosis and malaria were rampant. As they began their translation work they realized the first order of business was healthcare needs and they brought vaccinations to the community. The Cofán were nearing extinction—down to just 300 people—because of these diseases. Today they have grown to around 3,000, living in small villages in Ecuador, Colombia and Peru.

The eldest son of Bub and Bobbie is named Randy. He came to the US for his university education and trained as a biologist and then returned to Ecuador and married a Cofani woman, Amelia. They have raised their children as trilingual (Cofan/Spanish/English) persons equally comfortable in the rain forest and in the city. Where the elder Bormans recognized that disease was threatening the community, young Randy knew that the invasion of those who wished to extract oil and minerals, cut the forests, and hunt the animals was the new threat to the community and their ecosystem. He worked tirelessly at all levels—locally, nationally, and internationally—to obtain a legal designation of protection for the land as a reserve. He and the Závalo community adopted commitments to use the non-renewable resources of their reserve only for their own good—for housing and food; they would not commercially sell timber, fish, or animals. They do grow and sell cacao and they're just beginning to cultivate coffee.

With support from some NGOs Randy and his community began a “forest associates” program in which men were trained to use GPS and satellite phones and then guard the perimeter of their land against poachers or illicit miners and loggers. This provides an income of about half of what the men could earn if they would leave and work for an oil company, but they prefer the lower salary and the chance to care for their forest. The Cofan have no concept of land ownership, rather, according to Randy, they understand that “the land owns us.” They do, however, have personal ownership of some goods and income; they have rights to portions of land on which they can grow crops to consume or sell. The community hosts groups such as ours as a way to provide income for their forest associates program.

The Cofani are a very gentle, soft-spoken and soft-stepped people. The couple who cooked for our group, Luis and Joaquina, were nearly silent as they worked together. Often several of their grandchildren would come in and quietly sit or lay on a bench nearby, watching us curiously. After a couple days they ventured to come closer and talk with us. On Sunday we worshipped with a small group that is led by a young 34-year-old pastor named Iter. He and his wife, Irene, have nine children, two of which spend the week up-river in a town where there is a high-school. Mennonite Mission Network workers Jerrell and Jane Ross Richer and their four children have begun spending time in this community and intend to increase their time there. They are drawn to the environmental commitments and sustainability of the community, and they want to encourage and help train pastor Iter who is a relatively new Christian.

Our group experienced Závalo as a place of abundance, health, and hope. It thrives in large part because a young couple made a commitment to follow Jesus into the deep of the rain forest. Their commitment and the ongoing commitment of the Cofani people to live sustainably on their land—despite the oppressive heat and humidity, the yearly floods, and many biting bugs!—encourage me to follow Jesus into the deep of our current reality. I pray that we will experience the abundance of grace that comes when we venture out, and that we will share what we have received.