

Jack & Janine Swanson's "CHILE CONNECTION" January - February 2008



Iglesia Cristiana "JESÚS es El Camino"
(The "JESUS is The Way" Christian Church)

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¡WOMEN, WOMEN, WOMEN!by Janine Swanson

Jack asked me to tell about this year's national women's retreat, held in January, hoping that you will have a glimpse into a bit of the world of the typical Chilean Christian woman and how that relates to me. I hope you find it interesting (even if it *IS* a little long to read!!), **as it will end with a very special request/opportunity that I hope you will find *very inviting and do-able***. First, a brief bit of background.....

THE CHRISTIAN CHURCH/CHURCH OF CHRIST in CHILE

There are about 70 Christian Churches in Chile, strewn throughout the 3000-mile length of the country. Because of this there is a lot of isolation in the churches and no shared vision. Add in the dictatorial past of the country, along with a general mistrust of others, a general lack of education, and "territorial" tendencies of men and women alike, and it is easy to see and understand the reason why many churches are so "alone". A few of these churches that have an attendance of 150 people, but the majority average between 30 and 50. Many churches don't even have a building, and if they do, it is at best very basic with a meeting room with little or no other space and maybe a bathroom.

Within the society and churches alike, men, and the Pastor, are the authority, and for their part women and others are to be *conquered, controlled, and even romanced*. Authoritarianism, emotions, and feelings are often more important than doctrine and growth. Many pastors are not very educated and not supported full-time by their churches. Add this to the fact that most Chileans can't afford books and don't see reading as a means to open the world for them. It's amazing that the church continues to grow with this reality!! Our God is all powerful!!

..... AND NOW, THE WOMEN

Every summer in January there is a national women's retreat lasting three days (Friday evening to Sunday noon). In my first ten years here, I attended one women's retreat in Chile. First of all, in order to understand, my best ambience is not a group of women—children are my interest!! Also, I was not looking for another activity to add to my already full schedule with family, mission, and church responsibilities. Adding to my list of reasons for not attending, I never received an invitation from the host church—so maybe they were telling me not to come—a good excuse not to go. The one time I did go, the talks were a bit boring and long (given by men), and I felt out of place since I didn't really feel welcome or know hardly anyone. All good excuses not to attend, but I think now that I was missing the point!!

Two years ago a U. S. missionary, Pam De Leon, decided to take some initiative to help put some structure to the annual women's retreat held in January (our summer). There are probably about ten missionary families within the Christian Church in Chile, but Pam and I are the only ones who are now active in the national women's group. For me, her intervention was a welcome change. In general most events here are not well organized and everything happens at the last minute. She asked me to be a part. The goal was not to take over, as U.S. missionaries, but to try to help the Chilean women make their program better. The food was usually good, although nothing different from normal fare. Up to this point, the speaker was always a man (perhaps an attempt by the Chilean Church of Christ pastors to insure that what was being taught was in accordance with doctrinal issues) speaking on topics unrelated to a woman's special needs. Activities for recreation were songs and/or children's games. In other words, not particularly uplifting, and in my opinion a waste of time. OK OK, maybe I was not looking at the event quite correctly—BUT I like to relax, too, and learn and have more interaction. Being a missionary can be a lonely road, so how *could* I participate and feel like I had spent my time well? At the same time, what was the real goal??

The 2006 Women's Retreat

I attended the retreat in San Carlos in 2006—five hours in bus south of Santiago. I didn't take any other women with me because I wasn't sure what I would find, and we were just starting to form a women's ministry in our church. I wanted to check out the retreat before inviting others to participate and spend their hard-earned money. I slept on a mattress on the floor of a schoolroom, and even though I knew the other women in my room I felt left out, as they seemed to be caught up in themselves. Then two more women arrived from Arica (about 35 hours in bus). Ana introduced herself to me—she knew Jack from his visits there, and we began to talk. All of the main retreat sessions were on the working of the Holy Spirit, lead by a male member of the church. The praise time was OK—three times a day before each talk. The women of the local church served the meals in the school cafeteria. There were about ten children running around and about throughout the retreat—I guess children of the participants. My highlight of the weekend was the group relay races. On Sunday we went to a nearby nature preserve. There, we had a service to close and a leader's meeting. I went reluctantly.

At this meeting decisions were made concerning future retreats. Another pastor's wife brought up the topic of having women presenters, and she was shut down by the person running the meeting--the prevailing point was that the host church could do what they wanted. I in turn spoke up, saying that I thought that this person wanted women speakers (a good idea in my opinion). Someone else then commented that there was no one who had the necessary qualifications to be a speaker. My response--then we had better begin preparing women for speaking!! OK--now you need to "meet" the typical woman in the Christian Church in Chile. Most middle-aged women do not have a high school education and very few have college degrees!! All in all, although things are changing in Chile, at this point not too many women *are* qualified to address and challenge such conferences.

Later that day, Pam called another meeting to re-think and set down a few ground rules for future conferences. There was a lot of discussion, and several decisions were made. First, the level of service was going to be higher, with real beds for all. No children over 12 months would be allowed to come in order to permit the women to concentrate on the task at hand and relax, too. The presenters would, if possible, be women from the Christian Churches/Churches of Christ, and would need to have training and/or the equivalent of a college degree--basically raising the level of the conference as a whole, instead of trying to throw together a cheap event.

The meeting was a success, and we all left satisfied, if not without some trepidation as to how it would go in establishing a new approach and identity for ourselves. In the process, a permanent women's "directing board" was formed. We also knew that some, if not several, pastors would not approve. The first of the "new" retreats would either fall on their face or set the stage for a new pattern of hope, fulfillment, and growth for the women in the churches.

The 2007 Women's Retreat

We were still in the States on furlough in January 2007, so I wasn't able to attend the retreat that year, held in Concepción (six hours south of Santiago). It was marked by enthusiasm, less speaker time and more small group time, for discussion and for prayer. The woman speaker came from Oregon and the retreat theme was "*Una Nueva Criatura*" ("*A New Creature*"). Attendance doubled to almost 100 women. Below is a group photo.



The 2008 Retreat

The theme of this year's retreat held in Limache (two hours west of Santiago on the coast) was "*Somos una Poema de Dios*" ("*We are God's Poem*"). I was the only one of four women from our church who could afford the price of \$30.00 for the 48-hour event. Jack was still with his parents in North Carolina (his father was in the hospital), which meant that any and all running around would need to be done by me. So I scuttled around and picked up our brand new 9 passenger Hyundai van (the first new vehicle we have ever had!!). I had a car alarm installed and prepared for the retreat.

Thursday (the day before the retreat)-- At 4 o'clock in the afternoon I received a call from Pam asking if she and three others could spend the night with me, since no one had made arrangements for them to spend the night at the retreat center. Sure, I have beds for six at home. And, by the way (she added), if it was possible, could we all go out to dinner and a folklore show that started at 9PM. Flexibility is the name of the game!!

Friday-- We decided to go early in the day to take advantage of the trip. Since no one had extra money, the gas expense was mine to pay. Karina, the "marble lady" arrived early to go with us. The five of us loaded up and headed to the conference. We had a great day, stopping for cappuccino and iced latte (no one had tried that before) at Mc Donald's and beach-hopped our way to the conference.

We arrived and got settled in our rooms. Nothing was planned before dinner, so Pam asked me if I could teach a few songs and entertain the ladies that had arrived. OK. I know two children's songs that my children learned on mission trips, so I proceeded to teach the group so that they in turn could use the songs in their churches. I also tried to teach the ladies a guessing game, but no one could catch the idea of it. In the evening session, all the music was done Karaoke style with a computer used for the music transmission—the person who was supposed to prepare the music apparently hadn't put in the time necessary to come up with a selection of songs, so we repeated the same ten computer songs many times over the weekend (apparently these were the only ones she had)!! Bedtime came early, as everyone was beat from traveling.

Saturday-- The day was well planned, with two women speakers—a U.S. missionary serving in Mexico and a Mexican pastor's wife. After each session I led one of the small groups (of ten women each), discussing issues relevant to the theme. In the afternoon we separated into groups to practice for a talent show for the evening entertainment. One group sang, another did an interpretive dance, and third prepared a skit. I taught my group to do the "dwarf" people—each person consists of a face and feet (one person using his hands as feet on top of a table) with another behind and out of sight who is the hands of the person. I felt so creative and our part was very funny!! The evening session lasted until about 11 PM—everything starting late, Chilean style. Afterward, some ladies chatted in the cafeteria, and others danced together. Sometime during the day the ladies were also requested to clean the bathrooms—fortunately they were ceramic and well-maintained. This is always interesting, and I wondered what we were paying for. At least we did have toilet paper in the bathrooms and plenty of hot water. There were no hand soap or hand towels in the bathrooms.

Sunday-- I left after breakfast to return to Santiago (1 ½ hours) to pick up a different U.S. church work group from the airport and accompany them for the day. We went to a

restaurant for lunch, and I used the van for their luggage, leaving them in the bus terminal in the late afternoon for their trip to southern Chile. I then returned to the retreat. There was a leader's meeting earlier that afternoon while I was gone, and three churches from Santiago (*including ours*) decided to host the retreat for next year—whee!! This is fine, but it will be a lot of work to put together a good retreat. I arrived in the evening, and we paid extra for extra meals and an extra night.

Monday-- After breakfast, we packed up and left for the beach and Santiago. I had invited a group of six from Calama (way north in Chile) to spend a few days with me, so they wouldn't have to spend their hard-earned money on a hotel. They had saved their money all year to come to the retreat by air. A total of fifteen ladies had come from there, a bus ride of about 20 hours. The group that came with me all work, so they had saved their money to fly.

When we left the retreat center, there were 11 people in my 9 passenger van. We spent a little time on the beach and then went to a decent restaurant. The ladies from Calama even said they could pay their own lunches!! As gringos we know that many people can not afford to eat out, but we had decided beforehand that we could help out our own group with this as they rarely, if ever, get that opportunity. For dessert we went to Bravissimo for ice cream treats, dropped a few ladies off at the bus station and headed for Santiago. Pam and her group of four followed and stayed at our ministry site for two nights. The other group moved in for two nights at our house—thank goodness Jack wasn't back yet from the United States—he would have been inundated with women in our house with one bathroom and suitcases in our living room!!

Tuesday-- I relaxed a bit while the Calama group went downtown to get acquainted with Santiago. They arrived late and asked if I could go to someone's house to talk to the ex-husband of one of them. We all went and waited in the car while the two conversed about their son, and then we returned home, had sandwiches, and went to sleep!!

Wednesday-- In the morning we had a meeting to discuss next year's retreat and get ideas from the other ladies. After lunch I dropped off the Calama group at the airport, receiving many thanks and lots of invitations to visit them. Most of them already know Jack, as he has been in their homes when he goes there. I returned to my empty home and took a deserved rest!!



2008 Group photo



Janine, Lorena, Karina, Sonia, & Patricia

OK- I rolled with the punches for a whole week, not accomplishing a whole lot, but doing what I think God wanted me to do. A typical several days?? Hardly, but these sort of things seem to pop up here and there in Chile.

AND NOW FOR THE GRAND "UPSHOT"!!

OK—now what do I need from you?? I have volunteered to be in charge of obtaining the speakers and arranging for the workshops for the retreat in 2009. **The dates are January 30, 31, and February 1.** I have talked to my planning group about having a theme of "*Beauty*", both inner and outer. My thoughts are the following—I think we can do some of the following workshops with the women:

<i>Exercise/aerobics</i>	<i>Hair coloring & treatment</i>	<i>Face & skin care</i>
<i>Good nutrition</i>	<i>Hand & nail care & coloring</i>	<i>Eyes & lips & Make-up</i>
<i>Recreation/relaxation</i>	<i>Podiatry & toe nail care & coloring</i>	<i>Dental</i>
<i>Mental/intellectual/</i>	<i>Massaging-general & specific</i>	<i>Medical Consulting</i>
<i>Spiritual</i>	<i>Dress & Color-combining</i>	<i>Attitude</i>

Add in house decoration, friendship, personal habits, and use of time and there is plenty there for one person to start or continue growing. (You are thinking, "And you want to address or do all of this in only two and one half days?!!")

The Big Idea...

I would like to see about five or six ladies come from the U.S. with the talents in the above areas represented between them. These areas all impact and give attention to the physical and mental well-being of a woman.

At the same time, coinciding with the above teachings/activities, **I am also asking** if a woman reading this could come and be the central speaker/commentator of the retreat, speaking specifically (in three or four one-hour sessions) on the ***inner health & beauty of a Christian woman***. God makes no mistakes—therefore no more "walking wounded".

We will provide any and all translating for each of you, and once here you would have no costs except personal purchases, etc (perhaps we could look into and plan a site-seeing type trip to another part of Chile—covering the cost of that between us). What we won't be able cover would be your airfare—probably around \$1,000 or a little more, round trip.

Some or none of those responding may come from the same church. You may be a friend of ours who receives our newsletters. All I ask is that you think and pray about this opportunity if you are able to travel. It would be a great mission trip. Ideally, the "team" would come a week or so ahead of time to do final planning and adjustment of themes. After the retreat, we can play!! Not only that—January in Chile means ***SUMMER!!*** I would like to begin receiving responses soon and in the coming months. Please E-mail me at dcccchilemission@hotmail.com You can also E-mail and ask me/us to call you. (We have a very inexpensive Vonage phone plan to the States). Just provide your number and best days/times to try.

If you don't have talents along the "beauty" line or are unable to consider such a trip at that time, can you help support someone who could come with financial help or the donation of makeup, decorations, gifts for the Chilean ladies, favors, etc.? Let us know.

A word of encouragement-- many Chilean women desperately need "beauty" help. They barely have enough money to live on. So it is not surprising that there is a lot lacking in how to dress, put on make-up, choose a nice haircut, etc. Add to this lack of education, lack of reading, legalism, lack of opportunity to develop—in other words the inability to overcome your personal circumstances!!

Wow—I feel I have my work cut out for me—on the other hand I know the retreat will open new horizons for the women who participate. Thanks for reading and for sharing/highlighting our newsletters in your churches. Life is short, but God is eternal and He is the Great Life-Changer/Master Craftsman!

Love and thanks in "woman-forming" Jesus,

Jack & Janine, on behalf of the church and work