

WHAT WE HAVE SEEN AND HEARD

VENEZUELA RESOURCES

ECONOMIC BLOCKADES AND COMMUNION BREAD

Bishops Gamaliel Lugo and Elida Quevedo

Can you tell us a little bit about yourself and the organization you represent?

My name is **Gamaliel of Jesus Lugo Morales**. I was born in 1954 in Santa Bárbara del Zulia, a city located in the south of Lake Maracaibo, State Zulia, Venezuela. I am the son of the Reverend Melitón Lugo, who was ordained in 1948 at the Pentecostal Church "Zion" in the city of Encontrados, State Zulia by the Reverend Exeario Sosa Lujan. When I was born, we were in Santa Barbara del Zulia, in the Pentecostal Church "Emmanuel," accompanying the pastoral ministry of the Reverend Sosa Luján. In 1955, during my first year of age, my father was sent by the Rev. Sosa Luján to the Pentecostal Church "Jerusalem," in Mene de Mauroa in the state of Falcón. We then departed for the Falcón State, together with my mother, Rev. Blanca Rosa Morales de Lugo. After two years in Falcón, 1955-1957, we returned to Santa Bárbara del Zulia, and together with Rev. Sosa Luján we proceeded to create and establish the Pentecostal Church "La Zarza Ardiendo." My father became this church's pastor in 1957. A very important historical event takes place in this Pentecostal Church: **The First National Convention** where the **Evangelical Pentecostal Union of Venezuela** is formed (UEPV).



My father, in addition to the founding pastor of this Church and working along side Rev. Sosa Luján, was the photographer and was in charge of the graphic testimony of this great event. In the official photograph of the event, I encountered a group of children in the front row who traveled from all over the country. Just being there makes me a founding member of the UEPV at the age of three. I was born and raised in the UEPV. I am currently the General Bishop of UEPV and I have been the leader of this movement since 1983. I studied theology at the Latin American Biblical Seminary, and at the Latin American Biblical University in San José, Costa Rica (1979-1982).

In 1982, I returned to Venezuela and one year later assumed the leadership of Bishop of the UEPV within the events of the National Convention. The Rev. David Vargas was present at this Convention, who had accepted the position of Executive for Latin America and the Caribbean for the Christian

Church (Disciples of Christ). During the Convention celebrated in 1961, the official partnership agreement was signed by by the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) and the UEPV.

The Organization I currently chair has its historical beginnings in 1914 with the arrival of the first Pentecostal missionary in Venezuela, *Geotes Frederick Bender*, considered the founder of Pentecostalism in Venezuela. God made Pastor Bender understand that service to the impoverished and needy people was his greatest blessing; thus, he dedicated himself vigorously to the development of the evangelical union of pastoral leaders committed to the social and solidarity to the poorest sectors of Venezuela.

The Rev. Exeario Sosa Luján was recipient of Pastor Bender's Christian thought and repeatedly affirmed¹: "you cannot be a Christian without doing something for the social transformations of humanity"; "you cannot be a Christian without assuming the responsibilities of Christianity itself"; "if you are a Christian, you have to take on social and political responsibilities"; "whoever preaches the gospel has to do social work because otherwise, he is preaching the unfinished gospel, for Christ came to deliver the whole man."

This Pentecostal Christian thought has marked the whole of UEPV. Today, the organization I chair is deeply marked by the dedication of helping the poor, by the ecumenical work and a clear commitment to the defense of life, human rights, and all creation.

What does the Celebration of Communion mean to the UEPV?



For the UEPV, Communion is a Sacred Act, instituted by Jesus Christ, which is celebrated to honor and remind us of his great sacrifice of love for everything, for everyone. This Act should be celebrated with great responsibility on the part of all people.

The pastoral meaning of this Act is mainly of community, it is for the unity of the whole body of Christ, and the spiritual and real union between Him and us, and with everything created. We do not celebrate Communion every Sunday. In most churches, it is celebrated once a month, also when new members are received through the Act of Baptism. And of course, it's celebrated with sick people.



Since 1990, we have adopted the concept of the "Open Table," in order to be inclusive of all sectors of humanity: children, women, young people, all sisters and brothers who share our Faith, all created, in order to honor the pastoral sense of unity and communion that this Christian celebration has.

¹ Exeario Sosa Luján. 1979. Interviewed by Marcos Rivera, March 12, 1979, in La Piedad, Barquisimeto, State of Lara. Published by UEPV as part of the celebration of its 40th Anniversary

What impact does the political situation have on your daily life and the life of your congregation and community?

The current political situation has created many drawbacks in the daily life of families, the church, and our people. Some of our churches have lost membership due to the economic crisis and the effects of emigration.

Food and medicine supply, products that are part of the blockade that the U.S. government has imposed on Venezuela and the high costs that basic items have on the daily market, have resulted in the dramatic decline in the value of the worker's wages. That means that it is practically impossible to survive on only a minimum wage, or about \$2.00 a month.

Fuel or gasoline are also scarce, also due to the blockade of our oil company, which further complicates the daily situation of the entire population. In general, we have to fight against many toxic feelings, such as anger, frustration, resentment, lack of motivation, fear, uncertainty, hopelessness, and contained rage for the injustice that this situation entails.

Yet on the other side, the work of pastors and bishops of churches has doubled in many ways, as we have engaged in many tasks of service and care for the neediest and most vulnerable in our churches and communities. These tasks range from the organization of feeding houses in Christian homes, community pots in churches, health fairs in communities, sometimes not only from churches but also from some of our households, as shown in the following photographs:



Orthodontic Fair, services provided by Dr. Gabriela Lugo, at the home of Bishop Gamaliel Lugo's home.

Performing these types of tasks involve constant attention to personal cases, solving situations, organizing daily tasks related to aid planning, and permanent mobilization in search of the best options to buy the needed food, medicines, and other items.

Due to the current situation, how is the issue of the cost of buying food handled in Venezuela?

Bartering has become an alternative. Many families have turned their back yards into small "conucos" or productive courtyards. In these courtyards, cassava, banana, chili pepper, onion, and tomato are sown on a small scale. These crops are then exchanged for other food products that families with greater resources can acquire on the market. Small socio-productive entrepreneurship of animal husbandry, farming, baking, as well as cutting and making fabrics have also been initiated from churches and families. These products are also exchanged. Finally, work is exchanged with food. Cleaning a patio is paid for with rice, flour, or another product from the basic basket products.

What about buying the elements for Communion every Sunday?

The wine for communion, between us, has been replaced by orange juice, guava, papaya, and melon. Bread is made in houses; however, it has been replaced by Venezuelan “arepa” (a mixture between a tortilla and a pancake) and *cassava*.

Has your church, or churches found creative ways to share Communion/food at this time in Venezuela?

UEPV's Creative Ways in Sharing Communion

For Communion, what we are doing in many churches is to use juices with fruits that are produced in our country, juice of papaya, guava, corn “chicha,” sometimes also with coconut water or Venezuelan coffee, and instead of bread, we use “arepas” or cakes of some cereal.



Communion Element of coconut water at assembly of the UEPV



Communion elements of yucca and coffee

UEPV's creative ways of sharing food in the current food crisis in Venezuela

A large number of families have organized to help each other. Everyone is dedicated to getting food and contributing to what each is able. Through this community pot, family members can eat once or twice a day.

Churches also work with the families who are most in need and most vulnerable when they are unable or almost impossible in getting food to meet the needs of their members.



UEPV has implemented the practice of the Community Pot in several churches. Soup is made with vegetables and animal protein for 50, 100, or more people. This task is carried out by families, churches, and communities.

The practice of the "Love Basket" or the "Kilo of Love," as it's commonly known through the communities, continues through the church communities. It consists of Sunday gathering of essential food items such as rice, pasta, cornmeal, and other products, which are then shared with families who are in most urgent need.

Many Christian families in our churches have opened their homes to the Food House experience, to share food with people in greatest need.



Currently, my home offers daily one or two meals, to about ten persons, and sometimes even more people. Some people in the church help in the preparation of these foods, who also benefit from food.

What do you think people in the United States may not know about the current situation in Venezuela? What would you like to share?

Venezuela's socio-economic reality and its current crisis is the result of a systematic and ferocious attack on the new economy that has been building for historically impoverished majorities.

The "Venezuelan Economic Crisis" is a political crisis, as "there would be no economic war if there were no struggle for power." The **political crisis has to do with two conflicting historical and socio-economic models**. The effects of this economic war are extremely harmful to the country, especially as they are a direct attack the life of the citizens, mainly in the popular sectors, the most vulnerable, people who are on a fixed salary, older adults, who only have their elderly pension, people with chronic diseases, families with a large number of children and relatives, children, adolescents.

The harmful effects of this economic war and the sanctions imposed by the United States have had a disastrous impact on food, health, safety, and productivity in the nation and quality of life in general.

The food emergencies that have arisen from this cause is of great concern, which has led to forced emigration in search of better living conditions.

Economic warfare is a perverse dynamic carried out by private, national, and transnational companies, which have been greatly enriched by it. Subsidized commodities by the government are secretly hidden from the people and then resold at exorbitant prices or destined for smuggling into Colombia. The smuggling market into Colombia is above 40% of what Venezuela produces or imports.

What does it mean in a missionary context like the one that Venezuelans are living in at this moment, "Making Bread" to others?

LIKE JESUS, MAKE BREAD FOR YOUR BROTHER AND SISTER

With this motto, UEPV began in 2017 an initiative of solidarity with church families and communities in the face of the economic emergency affecting the Venezuelan people, caused by the trade blockade and the economic embargo that the U.S. government has imposed illegally against our nation, along with partners in Europe and within our very own Latin American region.

The motto of "Making bread for Sister and Brother" had its genesis from the campaign the UEPV has been promoting among its churches to "produce for economic justice," within the framework of a dynamic aimed at building a new ecclesiology, aimed at socio-productive experiences, from the paradigm of internal development.



Our church's families participate significantly in the dynamic of "producing for economic justice" and "Be the Bread in the Style of Jesus." In the photo, Pastor Karina Villalobos brings bread made with her own hands to share in a celebratory event, held in the Church together with other productive hands of men and women who decided "to be the bread for their siblings in Christ."

Today, humbly and without reservation, we share the food that we all have and for some achieved with great difficulty. Yet, at the same time, reach for the recovery of values of the Kingdom of God, which also constitutes a human need in our current situation, such as love, justice, solidarity, and mutual cooperation - thus enabling peace and lifting in this manner the Venezuela culture to the rest of the world. We close this presentation with the song of Bishop Elida Quevedo, created in May 2018, for a Communion service: "Like Jesus, let us be bread for your brother and sister," held in the Church Morning Star (Estrella de la Mañana), Maracaibo.

*Be the bread, brother, be the bread, sister
the way Jesus was bread for us*

// Make the bread, be the bread //

*May there be bread in every house, that our hands may produce peace
as Jesus is bread*

// Make the bread, be the bread //

Give food to eat, make bread, be the bread //

