

The Story of Ruth Siemen – founder of Global Opportunities



It was April 4, 1954 when PanAm's prop plane finally landed me in Lima, Peru, after a brief stop in Guatemala and an overnight in Panama. It was about 5 A.M. when I arrived, and at 8 A.M. I was in the secular bi-national school where I would be earning my living and doing low key evangelism.

It was the beginning of 21 years of ministry in Peru, Brazil, Portugal, Spain and Austria, and at least 25 years more all over the world through the tentmakers we helped go abroad! I was asked to share what first made me interested in missions, how God led me, why I chose tentmaking instead of donor-supported "full-time" missionary work, and why I started Global Opportunities. I agreed to write this very personal testimony because it can help other Christians to better understand how God is leading them.

First, I never chose tentmaking – I knew almost nothing about it. Rather, God unmistakably called me into tentmaking, and then oriented all the rest of my life around that ministry approach. But first, he drew me to himself, and gave me a commitment to missions.

Home and church. I think God intended me for cross-cultural ministry when he put me into an immigrant family. My parents had come from the Russian Ukraine to Canada in 1903 and 1905, and then to California, where I was born--one of ten children. At home and in church we spoke German and Frisian Dutch, and we learned English mainly in school. The largely untrained pastors of our vital little Mennonite Brethren country church partially supported themselves, and when we had none, godly young laymen capably led the congregation. Language and cultural barriers meant there was little local outreach, except for the lifestyle of members. But we had a large missions budget, missionary speakers, and several of our small membership serving in India, China and Africa. Our three church bookshelves had about ten missionary biographies, which I read--probably, three times each.

A major crisis was the illness of our dear, hard-working father, leaving my mother with full responsibility for a large brood. Her strong dependence on God enabled her to give us a happy upbringing--without many things, but with everything important. At Christmas, we loved finding our old toys under the little tree--repaired and repainted, and our old dolls in new dresses. My church strongly emphasized eschatology. That Jesus could come at any moment and take all the good people up to heaven with him worried me. I knew I was not good enough. But I had a plan. I would grab my doll and my mother's rag bag (remnants for new doll dresses), and hang tightly to my mother's skirt as she was taken up, because I knew for sure she would be going.

A teacher facilitated my personal encounter with Jesus Christ when I was 11. When I was 12 I was baptized in a river. I could never forget the sights and sounds and smells. The choir was on a little island, and sang antiphonally with the congregation on the shore. When I was 13 our Sunday school superintendent (Art Riffel, I think) gave me responsibility for a large nursery class, to replace Frieda Voth, my teen idol.

She went off to Multnomah and then Asia. I helped start a Bible club in our high school. My Spanish classes gave me an interest in Latin America.

Bible and missions training. At 17 I went to Biola to find a once-for-all experience which could transform me into a permanently spiritual Christian. I learned instead, that I needed to renew my commitment to Jesus Christ every morning and live in daily obedience to him. A new ministry called Navigators, got me started on Bible memory—a valuable lifelong gift. Biola missions courses were weak because there was little data to be had and little missiology in those days. What influenced me was the lives of the teachers. Dick Hillis left in midyear to go to China. His twin brother Don took over, but soon left for India. John Wiebe of SIM (my cousin) finally got us through the year and then left for Africa. These were not armchair faculty—they lived what they taught! On the Student Missionary Union exec I met many missionaries, and gained a growing interest in Peru, then a fairly restricted country. I signed an FMF-IVCF promise card I still have—I would serve abroad if God opened the door.

I thought he was leading me into Bible translation with Wycliffe, and filled out an application for their Summer Institute of Linguistics at the U. of Oklahoma. But the deadline came and I still had no money at all. I told the Lord I would know he wanted me to go if he would send just enough money that day for the three-cent postage. But there was no money in the mail. The last envelope, tiny and pink, did not look hopeful. It was from an elderly woman I had seen only once. It contained no money. But what dropped out onto my desk was—a three cent stamp! I took that as guidance. Wycliffe let me earn my room and board by illustrating reading primers and word games for Mexican Indians. I loved the linguistic training, and applying the analysis techniques with two Kiowa Indian informants.

Time out in the hospital. But then I became seriously ill, and dropped out of everything. Now I felt really let down. After three surgeries and a long slow recovery, when I finally resumed normal activities, I knew no mission agency would send me to the boonies, with only one functioning lung.

Chico State and campus ministry. So I went to nearby Chico State to acquire a degree in English and education—a bit more marketable than systematic theology, church history and Greek. I found myself on a mission field! A secular campus is a microcosm of a cross-cultural, spiritually hostile world. With Gene and Earline Wellsfry and several other Christians, we established the first IVCF group on the campus. The Norman Lofgrens, a dear faculty adviser couple opened their home to us. IVCF staff visits were infrequent. But Alice Alter (Swan), on her first visit, spent an hour showing me how to look at a Bible text inductively. I stayed up all night questioning one passage after another. My habit focus was gone and every text gave me new insights. I often stop to thank God for this life-changing gift he gave me through her—without which the rest of my ministry would be inconceivable. I made it to every IVCF training course, usually without enough money to get home. (My part-time jobs didn't provide for extras.) It was important to me never to tell anyone in any way that I was broke. Repeatedly, I saw God provide in unpredictable ways. (It is not easy to get first-hand experience God's love and power if loans and credit cards are easily available!)

Public school and TCF. I began elementary school teaching in the California Bay Area. Two of the teachers were San Diego State grads with similar IVCF training. We gave substantial help to the only staff worker in the area, Bob Young, who soon left for Argentina. We also prayed together about our responsibility for fellow teachers, pupils and parents.

We started a teachers Christian fellowship, which quickly spread far beyond our district, with Bible study groups, evangelistic breakfasts and teas, even a weekend conference. I was active in Berkeley First Pres, and Dr. Bob Munger spoke in some of our meetings.

In the middle of all this fulfilling ministry, God surprised me with a salaried, secular job abroad—in Peru, the very place he had put on my heart. I didn't look for it because I didn't know paid secular jobs existed. And there were very few in 1954. But World War II had ended, the U.S. was giving massive reconstruction aid to Europe, and decolonization was in full swing. Soon 120 newly independent countries would need development help of every kind. An international job market began to grow. Americans were considered very provincial, but ten million men had been recruited by the military, and many Christians came home with first-hand experience of the mission field. A new wave of missions interest began to grow.

My teacher friend Wanda, and I were cooking for an IVCF missions conference in Berkeley, when Don Burns, the Wycliffe missionary speaker from Peru, told me he and his wife were praying that I would come teach in the binational school in Lima. I applied and was accepted. An administrator from Peru was to meet me in San Francisco with the contract. Friends said you could know a decision was God's will if you had complete peace about it. I was filled with apprehension. David Adeney wisely said, "Only people who don't think don't have misgivings about such a big step." He believed God was telling me to go. But the administrator from Peru never came. Now I had no job, and little money. I had been packed for two weeks. Besides, I felt obligated to go--friends had given me three farewell parties! Had God let me down? Then a cable asked me to come at once. God had been rearranging circumstances in Lima for my benefit.

. Tentmaking in Peru. My enjoyment of this long flight, turned to panic on the last leg. My departure had been sudden. It was my first foreign travel, I knew little Spanish, and in 1954 Latin America was not at all tourist-friendly. And I had suddenly realized that no one would be meeting me at the airport, and my only address was a post office box number! No one had phones. We landed. Somehow, I made it through immigration and customs. I stood in the middle of the dusty little airport, with my bags, worrying about what to do next. But only about five minutes. Then, before my disbelieving eyes, there stood the missionary, Don Burns. I said, "How did you know that I would be coming in on this 5 A.M. flight this morning?" He said he did not know, but had come to see another passenger off. In this way God gave me an overwhelming experience of his presence and love and power. Only five minutes after my arrival, as though he couldn't wait to reassure me that he was there! That he had brought me. That he would pick up the pieces after me, even when a problem was due to my own inexperience or negligence. He has been doing it ever since.

There was so little cross-cultural training available at that time for anyone, and so little discussion of issues. I made many mistakes. If I could do all my ministry over again, this time I think I might know how to do it right. But we never have that option. At each stage, we must do the best we can with what we know, and to give the Lord both fish and all five rolls. Then he multiplies them to be enough.

I went to the school that first morning in Lima with a confidence I could not have had without God's wonderful reassurance in the airport. But I did not know anything about "tentmaking" or how to be a missionary when you had a full-time secular job. I had never met a tentmaker. (About that time Christy Wilson and others were beginning their tentmaking in Afghanistan, by creating jobs for themselves. But I knew nothing about them.) I thought I would have to find a church ministry to do in my spare time.

People often ask me if it wasn't frustrating to have so little free time left over for God, but I considered all of my time to be God's. Soon I realized that tentmaking is "full-time" ministry. You are evangelizing even when you are not speaking, because your life is under the unrelenting scrutiny of non-believers.

But at the beginning, the only thing that was clear to me was something Miss A.W. Johnson had told us in an IVCF conference soon after her arrival from China, before she started her women's Bible studies. She said that Jesus, who had walked where he wanted to in Palestine on his own two feet, now lives in us and depends on our feet to bring him face to face with the people he longs to meet. He wants our minds, eyes, ears, lips and hands also at his disposal, so he can love people through us. (Rom. 12:1, 6:13,10:15).

Not many hours after my arrival, I met Marta, an attractive young Peruvian teacher, at the school board's reception. I soon realized she was one of the people Jesus wanted to meet. Our small-talk halted abruptly when I heard her say, "You probably know what is in the Bible—would you teach me?" I am not sure what I had said to encourage her request, but God knew I loved Bible study. I learned that she had become open to God because her pilot husband had recently been killed in a fatal crash. After a few Bible studies at my place, she invited Jesus Christ into her life. Then she brought her three teenage sons, whom this doting mother had named Miguel, Rafael and Gabriel. None of the three were angels, but it was a pleasure for me to teach three just normally naughty adolescents about Jesus Christ. Then there were other teachers. Almost all my sixth graders found Jesus Christ in a Sunday class I taught nearby. I started a Bible club for the high school girls I taught every afternoon. My second and third years I did in-service teacher education. It was important for me to put a great deal of effort into my job, because God expects all Christians to serve their employer as though he were Jesus Christ! (Col.3:23-25) God requires quality work even if the employer does not.

I also audited classes in San Marcos University, to improve my Spanish. I met Maria, and she started coming three times a week to teach me Spanish. The language lessons turned into Bible studies and Maria put her trust in Jesus Christ. By then her friends were coming, and I became convinced God wanted me to begin a student ministry. I found about a dozen students in the churches. I felt instinctively that I must not approach them as a missionary, but as a fellow student. I could not only teach them campus evangelism, but provide a model for them of workplace evangelism, something no missionary could do. The IFES invited me onto staff, and I began sending in reports, even though I would need no donor support. Many students God brought to this group had far more potential than I. (Today, Dr. Samuel Escobar is the international president of the IFES, and the Bible Society, and a world class missiologist. Law student Carlos Garcia, became pastor of the largest Baptist church in Lima, and eventually was elected as a vice president of Peru. Pedro Arana, Presbyterian pastor and writer, was elected to congress to help rewrite the constitution. The list is longer!) Even then, I could not have preached to these students, but I taught them to love inductive Bible study discussions. So everything I wanted to teach I included in my preparation of the Bible study guides. The missionaries in Lima were tremendously helpful to me, especially in our week long training courses. We sent a few students to IFES conferences in other countries. By the time my contract was nearly up, I realized I had taught everything I knew and it didn't take three years. There already were fine leaders.

So I applied for teaching positions in other Spanish-speaking South American countries. I knew I wanted to begin another campus ministry, while I again integrated work and witness in another school. But finally I was running out of money, my visa was about to expire. Then I received the last answer to my job applications. Negative. Every door had closed. I was in trouble.

Then a cable from a Brazilian school asked for my final answer about their job offer. I had received no job offer. Important cross-continental mail must have been lost. I had briefly met the administrator, but had not applied because God would never expect me to learn Portuguese when I was still struggling with Spanish. But he did. When there is only one open door, guidance is clear.

Tentmaking in Brazil. On arrival in Sao Paulo, I discovered I was to head a large binational elementary school and would receive a generous salary! I found poor teacher morale. So together we set high new standards, which soon gave them immense pride as most of the children began performing well above grade level in most subjects. God quickly opened doors for witness. A teacher in the adjacent high school died, and the principal asked if I would say the prayer at a memorial service, since no high school teacher was willing to do it. I don't know why any of these new associates thought I might know how. I asked God to comfort the family and then said, "Thank you, Lord, that we can know about life after death!" This brought teachers and students from both schools into my office to talk. I could freely evangelize without imposing conversations, because they were asking questions. I learned to let them pace the conversations with their questions as they were ready. Among the people who came were several Christian high school students. So I started a club in my apartment to help them win their friends--multiplying my ministry through them. In both Peru and Brazil I had numerous invitations into upper-class homes, that would have no contact with missionaries.

The university work? The night I arrived I met the student who would become the first president of the first group to form--in my apartment in Sao Paulo--before we even had furniture. Bob Young had arrived from Argentina four days before, and was present in Brazil on and off for a couple of years. But I soon found myself traveling all over Brazil (bigger than continental U.S.), to do student training during school breaks. IFES is not a mission to students, but a student movement, and the goal is always to develop student leadership. The work was patterned after Paul's model for producing indigenous ministry. If I had been on donor support, the students might have felt they could leave the ministry to me because I had more time and I was getting paid for it. But instead, because I had a demanding job, they kept offering to take responsibility. They had ownership of the ABU from the start--one of the many advantages of tentmaking. I found students in Goiania in the interior of Brazil, and scheduled a meeting. But instead of going myself, we sent Lucas and Peter to help the group start. I took at least ten Sao Paulo students with me to Belo Horizonte for a holiday weekend to help students there to start a group. When the Baptist National Convention met in Sao Paulo, Lucas made an announcement from the pulpit that anyone interested in university student work was invited to my place for tea at 5 PM. It was mid-afternoon when he called me at school to say what he had done, and that he never expected that 60 people would sign up!

I caught the first cab I could get, and kept it waiting at a little grocery store while I bought just about everything that could be served. Then, I put water on to boil, and stirred up two big cakes for the oven, and had the girls put snacks on trays. Meanwhile, Lucas and Wangles were leading an orientation meeting for students from all over Brazil, and a few pastors. I felt pleased that Lucas had had enough confidence in me to take this strategic action, which resulted in several new ABU groups. Later, two girls from Belo Horizonte requested and received two free round trip plane tickets from their governor, so they could come help me with the Recife camp. My apartment was always like a railway station--with many people for meals, and with girls staying over on foam mats on the floor. In both Peru and Brazil, I was able to mobilize missionaries and a few tentmakers to help student groups, especially in cities I could not often visit. Dr. Ross Douglas, a physics professor in the university, and his wife, eventually made Brazil their permanent home.

The student movement grew best under Brazilian national directors, especially Neuza Itioka, an unusually capable, godly Japanese-Brazilian woman, and later, capable Dieter Brepohl, who then became general secretary for all of Latin America.

Did I ever feel a time conflict between my job and spiritual ministry? Not often because my secular job was spiritual ministry. But there were two occasions. I accompanied four students in a very rough, eventful 3-day trip across the Brazilian wilderness on a wood-burning steam-engine train, followed by a three-hour flight and a 12 hour bus trip through the Bolivian Andes—to our first all-Latin America student conference. I had already learned that it was dangerous to travel with students, because God would let problems develop, so we would pray together, and then see his remarkable answers, and then thank him together. This trip was no exception. It's good to know the rumors about God's love and power, but he wants us to experience it first-hand. After an unbelievably eventful trip, I was sorry that I could stay at the conference only a few days before flying back to Sao Paulo.

The second time I felt a conflict was when a Canadian evangelist was to begin a week of meetings Monday night in Curitiba, and I wanted to do follow-up. But I had school. You won't believe what happened. Monday morning many children were absent, and many who came had sore throats and speckles. The doctor ordered the school closed for a week! I took the first flight out and made it in time for the first meeting. I am sure it was not my prayers that gave the children measles. They would have gotten them in any case, but God may have conveniently concentrated them in that week.

But when my three-year contract at the school ended, I agreed to the request of IFES and local leaders, to go on donor support and give all my time to the student work. But first I would have a brief leave at home with my family. The school sent me home the long way, paying for a wonderful trip through Europe. This ended abruptly when word came that my mother was very ill. God graciously gave me this time with my brothers and sisters, and allowed me to care for my mother the last three months of her life before taking her into his own safekeeping in glory.

Back in Brazil—it would take a book to tell of all God's constant provision and protection. When I was apartment hunting in Rio and I knew no property owner who could co-sign the rental contract. I was quite sure engineer Dirk van Eyken would not do because he lived in a city about an hour from Rio. But I kept praying about a specific building in an ideal location for student meetings. There was no apartment for rent, and only one empty. The owner would not agree to a co-signer who did not live in Rio. But when I almost accidentally mentioned the name Dirk van Eyken, he stood up. It turns out that God had led me to the only apartment owner who also knew the only person who could have been my guarantor! In a city of three million people! Tentmaker Dirk worked in the office next to my new landlord! Later, God also arranged for me to miss a couple of flights that crashed, and a bus that went down into the river when a bridge collapsed.

But looking back on my early years, I marvel most that God had used illness to delay me in the U.S. just long enough to add two essential pieces to my missions training: how to start a campus ministry, and how to have a "full-time" spiritual ministry in the context of a "full-time," secular job. That is what tentmaking is and what God had led me to do. I would never have included Chico State and Ashland School in my missions training and no one else would have suggested it. But God himself undertook to direct my preparation!

Faithfulness in our present assignment is always the best education for our next ministry. Jesus said, "You have been faithful over little, now I will set you over much. . . ." Mt. 25:23.

But the Lord's "call" is never to geography or to a ministry, but "to be with him," and to be sent out wherever and however he chooses—his agenda, not ours. God had kept me in good health. So after three years in Peru and eleven in Brazil, IFES asked me to pioneer the student work in Spain and Portugal.

Campus ministry in Europe.

Campus ministry in Europe. Important decisions often have to be made when one has insufficient information. I had a map of Barcelona but no apartments were for rent near the new university campus. Disappointed, I settled for one in the city center where numerous bus and tram lines crossed, so it would be easily accessible to the largest number. Surprise! It turned out the new campus had not yet been built, and I was one block from the medical school where most of the Christians students were, and within walking distance of all the other buildings!

But then I wondered if I should have come to Spain at all. Even though I registered to audit classes in the university, I could not now relate to students as a fellow student. Why should they listen to anything told to them by an older, American woman? How could I even find Christian students? There were very few. Evangelicals had suffered much under fascist Franco, so they could not meet legally, nor get decent jobs, nor study, nor be buried in the cemeteries, etc. When Franco wanted to confiscate the evangelical hospital, it was put under the Swiss and British consulates for protection. Persecution had made the Spanish churches spiritually strong. But a law in 1965 made a few concessions to them, and in 1967 a few evangelicals had been able to get into the university. I arrived in 1968. Finally I met Pedro and Samuel, two medical students. Two weeks earlier they searched out all the evangelical students and held a meeting. Not for campus evangelism, but to raise money for the hospital, which was now going to be returned. That's why all the Christians were studying medicine or nursing. Pedro and Samuel were excited over what I had told them about campus evangelism in other countries. So they said they would arrange another meeting, so I could share the same vision with the other students. That was the beginning of regular weekly meetings and the GBU of Spain. God's timing had been perfect. Two weeks earlier would have been too soon. I helped start groups in seven cities, at a time when whole provinces had no evangelical church. God raised up additional local leaders. Medical student Pablo Martinez, who won his fellow-student Juan, and others, serves the Lord in his psychiatry practise and in continued service to the national and international student movements.

In Portugal, the persecution was more political than religious and had a different effect on the churches. Many young people had no personal faith in God, and some were antagonistic, but the church was their safe social environment. A missionary couple who had been trying to start a group got a few students together at a pleasant campsite they had built in a fishing village. Several of these real believers told me you couldn't evangelize in Portugal, but then lovely Celeste asked me how to respond to all her friends' questions about God. She was among the five Christians studying in the famous old U. of Coimbra. They did not think any one in Portugal would come to a Bible study. I asked if we could try it three times, and if it didn't work, I wouldn't mention it again. They asked, "Where?" I suggested the busiest place on campus--in the lounge of the medical school cafeteria. We huddled together, five Christians and two seekers. As I led the study, people walked by, turned around to ask what we were doing, and stayed.

Soon we had an enlarged circle sitting, with two circles of people standing around behind. When I announced another meeting for the next day, it was the non-believers who begged for meetings at hours when they could be free. So we scheduled meetings throughout the day. We had to use a different passage each time because some cut class to attend every session! Several of these students put their faith in Jesus Christ, and several others did so later. And the Christians were sold on IBS evangelism..

Besides the work on the Iberian peninsula, I helped with conferences in several countries, and spent six long, pleasant summers in the Austrian alps, where the IFES had acquired a thousand year old castle. We always had simultaneous translation, and once we had students and young professionals from 55 countries. I usually did Bible study or evangelism training, and several times had responsibility for the eastern Europeans--who came at great risk. I also did several completely secret training courses inside Poland. Today, with new freedom, strong national movements have developed in these ex-Soviet satellites.

IVCF-USA. In both Latin America and Europe, training students and young professional people for lay ministry was also preparing them for tentmaking, which is cross-cultural lay ministry. When I left Europe, I wanted to spend a few months to get reacquainted with my family, because I had not had a proper furlough in my 21 years abroad. Then I hoped to go to another country, as a tentmaker, and begin more student work--Eastern Europe or the Muslim world. But first, IVCF asked me to work as a missions staff worker at-large, so I criss-crossed the country, doing missions promotion, Bible study and evangelism training, evangelistic dorm discussions, etc. A number of students found the Lord. And I found Christian students turned off to traditional missionary work, but excited about tentmaking. They wanted to know how to get overseas jobs like mine, so they could integrate work and witness. I ended up with the names, addresses and job requests from 600 people! Then I researched overseas jobs and my sister helped me send out the information. A massive task, with limited information, but a number of people did get positions. However, I wanted to provide better job help and counsel and training. Dr. Reuben Brooks, head of IVCF Missions, said, "You have a new ministry going--give it a name and do a brochure!"

So I never decided that I wanted to start a new organization. God already had led me into it. But it was a struggle to continue with few resources, and a generally negative attitude from mission leaders. They would say, "What do tentmakers ever accomplish for the Lord?" That is because they considered every American Christian with a job abroad, as a tentmaker. But they were only Christian expatriates, who had little or no ministry at home or abroad. Tentmakers are self-supporting business or professional people committed to missions and to cross-cultural workplace evangelism.

But God was helping us get good people overseas, and I became convinced that rather than to go abroad myself for a few more years, I should try to send several hundred other people who could serve many more years. Before long we had several hundred applicants. We worked on a shoestring, with mainly volunteer staff. We spent hours on laborious research to turn up 3000 new jobs a month. Sorting and preparing them for mailing became tedious. Until Henry Trist offered to computerize our service in 1978. Our ministry could not have continued without his help, which he gave us for years, at great expense to himself.

We are so glad for all the people God helped us get overseas for short or long terms, and for many others whom we counseled on the preparation they needed to qualify for both jobs and ministry. We have no way to track them all, but are in touch with many, and keep meeting others. And we send new ones.

In these 25 years, the international job market has mushroomed like never before. But now, our operations director can access as many as 70,000 jobs a day on the Internet! He and our GO executive director, Dave English, have been modifying our services to fit our new cyberworld. Tentmakers are desperately needed in that 80% of the world whose governments do not allow missionaries, but also in other unevangelized countries where non-believers will more readily accept the gospel from colleagues than from religious workers.

I am grateful to so many old friends whose faithful gifts and prayers have made this ministry possible. Many are the same people God used to influence my early life and my early ministry. Some are people we helped go overseas. Some are people who hosted me in their homes on my speaking engagements. I wish I could mention every name! I am grateful too, for donors who are the friends of Dave and Kendra English, or of Scott and Sharon Gordon. One extra advantage of donor support--God makes us rich in friends and partners! As for me, I'm still busy, mainly writing, about tentmaking and for tentmakers. And marveling over God's continued faithful leading and caring.

—Ruth E. Siemens

"We regret to inform you that Ruth passed into her Lord's loving presence on December the 20th, 2005."

GLOBAL Opportunities