

## Lake Titicaca to the National Congress

Cristóbal Villasante, head elder of the Puno Central SDA Church, explains his election as a supporter of President Fujimori.

by Charles Teel, Jr.

 $\P$ he date: *el 28 de Juli*o, 1995—the eve of Peru's Independence Day, and the eve, too, of the second-term installation of Alberto Fujimori—Peru's president—his cabinet, and the Peruvian National Congress, the nation's 120-member unicameral legislative body. The venue: Hotel Bolivar, only one city square removed from Plaza Bolivar, the locus of Lima, Peru's Government Palace. The occasion: I have come to interview recently elected Congressman Cristóbal Villasante Chambi of Puno, Peru. Villasante is or has been, at one time or another, mayor of Puno City, Puno County supervisor, Puno City councilman, vice rector of Juliaca University of the Andes, dean of Puno College of Public Accountants. president of Puno's football league, a volleyball letterman, president and valedictorian of

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his high school graduating class, a successful businessman, an active hunter and fisherman. For three decades, *Don* Cristóbal Villasante has also been head elder of Puno Central Seventh-day Adventist church. He is a product—as were his parents and grandparents before him—of the Lake Titicaca indigenous school system founded by Adventist missionaries Ana and Fernando Stahl. <sup>2</sup>

Don Cristóbal is of medium build, brighteyed, brown-skinned, and blessed with a countenance weathered by 60-odd years of existence on the *altiplano*—Peru's 4,000-meter "high plain," which boasts Lake Titicaca and its surrounding dusty villages, mud brick huts with thatched roofs, fledgling commerce, and topsoil so thin it is barely able to sustain the Quechua and Aymara peoples who inhabit it. His expressive face runs the gamut from gravity to humor, from animated curiosity to calm self-confidence.

When I ask, jokingly, if the congressman is prepared to trade his Andean poncho and informal dress for the more formal attire dictated by congressional protocol, he recalls

September 1995 3

a 28 de Julio some 50 years earlier when he was a student at the Lake Titicaca Training School. "As president of the student body, it fell my lot to lead the Independence Day parade. Given that my family was too poor to supply me with pencil or notebook—let alone a school uniform—the principal found a uniformed student my size who agreed to trade his outfit for my sole shirt and pants for that half day."

But Cristóbal Villasante's story is more than that of a poor boy from the provinces who made good; it is also the story of a parochial people—poor and proud—whose forebears embraced a progressive Adventism that took them, not out of the world, but into it.

Villasante's peasant grandparents learned to read by singing hymns from Adventist hymnals imported by Ana and Fernando Stahl and their Argentine *compadres*, Guillermina and Pedro Kalbermatter. In turn, Villasante's parents were first schooled outdoors and later in mud-brick *chozas*, without benefit of chalk

Adapted from Carl Berman's "The Alcalde"—a Quechua representative of the Peruvian government, circa 1964



boards or maps. So fierce was the opposition by the privileged classes to the indigenous schooling brought by these missionaries that on one occasion a dozen people were killed; in another disturbance, 15 lost their lives.

Newspapers in Puno City, capital of the Department of Puno, recorded the heated rhetoric from Villasante's village of Azágaro, whose ruling class recognized, correctly, the threat offered by education of the indigenous classes: "These schools spread doctrines of the most crimson communism. They destroy the spirit of the nation by teaching the most extreme and dangerous socialistic concepts of class and racial equality—and unbounded liberty in the ignorant masses."<sup>3</sup>

When I ask if he was raised in a "politically active home," Villasante offers an answer straight from Civics 101: "Life is political. How individuals and communities agree to organize themselves, their institutions, and their traditions is political. While my parents—as with their mentors the Stahls and Kalbermatters—eschewed political parties, the very act of establishing schools for an oppressed indigenous class was a political act. It challenged a status quo which kept knowledge and authority in the hands of a few powerful overlords—the landowners, priests, and judges. In short, my parents were not involved in party politics, but by teaming up with the Stahls and Kalbermatters, they were very much involved in the ongoing political process that brought a fenced-out majority into full participation in the religious, social, economic, and political life of the community and of the nation."

But, I counter, isn't their grandson now involved in party politics as a member of the national legislature? "Not really," he says, grinning; "the current administration's Change '90 initiative—followed in this last election by Change '95—is less a political party than a grassroots movement which achieved success outside any political party structure."

While acknowledging that he is playing with words, Villasante is emphatic about one crucial point: The 1990 election of Alberto Fujimori signaled an effort to renew the political process from without rather than from within. This presidential candidate of Japanese ancestry founded a people-based movement that claimed loyalty to no political party. And he won. Handily. This *chino* (generic in the Spanish for anyone of Asian descent) convinced majorities in the middle and lower classes that he was identifying as a *cholo* (an indigenous person from the provinces only a few steps removed from traditional village life).

"So," Villasante concludes, "my presence in congress rests less on a political party system than on an inclusive movement that opened politics to the people rather than limiting it to political professionals."

Indeed, at the outset of his 1990 campaign, the chino/cholo now leading Peru invited voters to declare their disapproval of "politics as usual" by electing a candidate with no ties to party politics. This engineer, cum professor, cum university rector presented his case to the Peruvian people in clipped sentences that contrasted starkly with the manicured syntax and rhythms of his opponent, Mario Vargas Llosa—a party-backed candidate whose prominence as an author provided him international name recognition. Fujimori won the 1990 runoff campaign against Vargas Llosa hands down. In 1995, Fujimori's two principal opponents ran campaigns as political party outsiders, mimicking his "politically free" 1990 campaign. Nonetheless, the sitting president walloped the opposition in the first round with a stunning 64.4 percent majority—especially impressive in light of the fact that one opposing candidate was former United Nations Secretary Javier Pérez de Cuéllar.

When I challenge Villasante to justify Fujimori's decision to close congress and the judiciary only months into his first term,

Villasante pursues his "beyond party politics" line of argument. "In the United States you have had three centuries to perfect your 'balance of powers' doctrine, a plank central to your democratic platform. You must recognize, however, that in Peru we have not had the luxury of even three decades of uninterrupted true democracy in which to define and refine the democratic processes. Accordingly, with the shifting of winds brought on by coups and dictatorships, privileged and powerful interests have routinely 'owned' the vote, not only of congressional representatives, but of judges as well.

"Fujimori's election was a call to end that kind of 'democracy,' in which such forces as the terrorists and the narcotics lords could control the political process. Yet as the new president made bold strides in confronting/arresting the narcotics lords and the *Sendero Luminoso* terrorists, congressional representatives and judges alike blocked his efforts. In effect, what the president did was to wipe the slate clean so that the legislative branch and the judicial branch could be in a position to start anew, as had the executive branch."

The newly elected congressman concludes with a flourish: "That this state of emergency

## Former National Library Director Calls for International Conference

Four days following this interview with Cristóbal Villasante, the author interviewed former director of the National Library José Tamayo Herrera, esteemed Peruvian historian and published authority on indigenous movements in the Andes. In the course of this interview Tamayo Herrera called for two international conferences to be held which would bring together specialists from North and South America on the subject of indigenous education in Puno. One conference would be sponsored by the La Sierra University Stahl Center and the second by Lima's Centro de Estudios País y Regíon. The conferences would contribute to one of the key goals of Fujimori's second term: reforming/upgrading the nation's education system.

September 1995 5

lasted but months; that the only person consistently articulating opposition was former presidential opponent Vargas Llosa (from the aseptic and less-than-informed distance of European capitals); and that the people resoundingly backed the president and re-elected him by the 64.4 percent margin speaks for itself."

In his state of the nation address the following day, Fujimori will cite the 64.4 percent figure twice, and I am curious why people support the former professor in such numbers. Villasante's staccato listing of Fujimori's accomplishments parallel responses offered by local taxi drivers—sources, I find, that tend to offer a fair reading of a nation's pulse: (1) The economy has been stabilized, and crippling inflation reigned in; (2) terrorism has been decisively limited, with the seemingly invincible leader of Sendero Luminoso arrested: (3) corruption in congress and the judiciary has been largely rooted out; (4) visible improvements have been made in the infrastructure schools, hospitals, roads, and bridges; and (5) Peru has become, once again, a part of the global community of nations—paying off its loans in accord with standards of the World Bank and International Monetary Fund.

Villasante is only one of several Adventists in the current legislature who follow in the tradition of the first Adventist elected to that body—the eldest son of the Stahls' first assistant, Luciano Chambi. Villasante is a disciplined, religious man; his hope is grounded in the eternal, and he is informed by a world view that is theological to the core. Still, I wonder how he can hope to do God's work by trading his local church for a paneled room at the nation's capital; for the hustle and negotiation that is politics.

Villasante answers simply: "One's image of God affects the totality of how one understands the human experience. If one's image of God is that of a parochial and legalistic judge keeping track of behavior as requirements for entrance into a future heaven, one's

lifestyle becomes exclusive, parochial, legalistic, and futuristic. In contrast, the gospel communicated to my family by the Stahls and Kalbermatters included an image of God as a loving and beneficent Creator seeking the best possible for all of the creation and in the present order—now. This 'best possible fulfillment' (and I share details of this experience with my legislative colleagues) was mediated to the altiplano by foreigners so dedicated that they passed nights on the ground beside peasant peoples who slept with animals to keep warm; they trudged miles to lower our fevers and deliver our babies; they shook our hands while looking us in the eye; and they called us 'brother' and 'sister.'

"These individuals brought a new world view to the highlands—a new understanding of God, ourselves, and our place in God's creation. This held implications not only for our spiritual understanding, but also for our intellectual fulfillment, for our social life, and for our economic development. That liberating image of God continues to shape my daily devotions, my weekly Sabbath school class, my monthly meetings with the church board. How much more ought that same image of God inform questions of public policy? What does justice and righteousness mean for this time and this nation? How can we effect justice on behalf of the poor less than on behalf of the privileged? How can we define what is 'equitable' in a national context in which a privileged few have extracted a toll on the destitute many?

"What better than a just and righteous image of God to inform an individual or group in wrestling with such questions?"

Dutch missiologist Jean Baptiste August Kessler, in his definitive history of Protestantism in Peru, endorses Villasante's understanding of God as mediated by the Stahls. Flatly asserting that "there was no sectarianism in Stahl," Kessler notes that "Stahl preached righteousness by grace alone," and suggests

that "in this he was well ahead of most Adventists of his time." José Tamayo Herrera, Peruvian historian and two-term director of Peru's National Library, singles out the Stahls and the Kalbermatters by name, lauding their indigenous education efforts as having wrought "surprising and transcendent results." He concludes, "For the first time the indigenous acceded to hygiene, letters, and a consciousness of their own dignity."

Cristóbal Villasante's story provides powerful evidence that in missiology the disciplines of theology, ethics, sociology, and anthropol-

ogy must cohere. It demonstrates that Christian education can be a vehicle for progressive social transformation as politically marginalized peasants are transformed into politically aware professionals. His presence in Peru's National Congress offers evidence that terms such as grace, righteousness, and justice may find a place in the formulation of public policy. His experience demonstrates—in the words of one Peruvian social critic analyzing the Adventist presence in the *altiplano* some 50 years ago—that the gospel not only "saves souls," but also "saves lives."

## NOTES AND REFERENCES

- 1. *Don* is a bestowed title that reflects the esteem and respect of associates.
- 2. See Charles Teel, Jr., "The Radical Roots of Peruvian Adventism," *Spectrum* 21:1 (December 1990), pp. 5-18.
- 3. From an untitled memorial, September 1923, printed in *El Heraldo* 3:144 (June 2, 1927), p. 7.
  - 4. A Study of the Older Protestant Missions and
- Churches in Perú and Chile With Special Reference to the Problems of Division, Nationalism, and Native Ministry (Goes: Oosterbaan, 1967), p. 230.
- 5. *Historia social e indigenismo en el Altiplano* (Lima: Trentaitres, 1982), p. 95.
- 6. José Antonio Encinas, *Un ensayo de escuela nueva en el Perú* (Lima: Imprenta Minerva, 1932), p. 148.

September 1995 7