

A Report
Venezuela 2013 - Rev. Steve Parelli and Jose Ortiz in Venezuela
3 Days (and 3 nights) of Pro-LGBT, Faith-Based Activism in Venezuela
Wednesday, July 10 – Saturday, July 13, 2013
Other Sheep – othersheepexesite.com

Written by Rev. Stephen Parelli
October 7 - 8, 2013

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Email: Acci3nEcum3nica@gmail.com
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Fundacion Feflejos de Venezuela (Reflections of Venezuela Foundation) page 1
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Part I Background

Rev. Maria Ramirez and Acción EcuMénica

In the fall of 2012, Jorge Lockward who was, at the time, a member of the board of Other Sheep, contacted Steve Parelli and arranged for him to meet the Rev. Maria Ramirez, a Presbyterian minister from Venezuela, in his United Methodist Church office in the Manhattan “God Box” building. At that appointment, Rev. Ramirez spoke to Steve (through Jorge who translated from Spanish to English) her interest, and the interest of certain parties in Venezuela, in ministering to the general religious needs of the LGBT community at large. Rev. Ramirez, having been re-introduced to Other Sheep through Jorge, remarked that she knew Rev. Tom Hanks personally having been one of his students in Costa Rica at UBL (Latin America Bible University). In the days that followed her appointment with Steve, Rev. Ramirez, having returned to Venezuela, connected Steve and Jose to Cesar Henriquez, the Director of Acción EcuMénica (Ecumenical Action), who made all the arrangements for a visit to Venezuela.

Email: AcciónEcuMénica@gmail.com

Web Address: <http://www.AcciónEcuMénica.org.ve>

Fundacion Reflejos de Venezuela (Reflections of Venezuela Foundation)

While attending, in Lima, Peru (June 27-30, 2013) the 5th Convention of the International Association of Families for Sexual Diversity, Steve and Jose met Gerardo Rafael Vanezca, Coordinator with Reflections of Venezuel Foundation who, upon learning that Steve and Jose would be in Caracas for meetings with Acción EcuMénica, scheduled seminar a with Steve and Jose, asking them to present on the topic of the Bible and homosexuality.

Email: reflejosam@fundacionreflejosdevenezuela.com

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Part II Daily Log of Events

Tuesday, July 11, 2013 –

Departure Delayed for Several Hours at Lima, Peru Airport

Steve and Jose’s flight, originally scheduled to depart from Lima, Peru, on this date at 12:35PM and arrive in Caracas at 5:15PM on the same day, was delayed for several hours. They did not leave Lima, Peru, until almost midnight or after. Jose and Steve spent the day in the airport in the VIP lounge as guests of the airline. Steve wrote the report on Peru and Jose, using Skype, kept their contacts in Venezuela up to date on the delay.

Day 1 of 3, Wednesday, July 10, 2013 –

Arrival at Acción EcuMénica and Seminar with Reflections of Venezuela Foundation

Acción EcuMénica Facilities, Staff, and Our Housing Accommodations

Steve and Jose arrived in Caracas, at the Simon Bolivar international airport in the early hours of the morning. Their host, Cesar Henriquez, the Director of Acción EcuMénica (EcuMénical Action), accompanied with a driver, picked them up at the airport and took them to the facilities of Acción EcuMénica, in Caracas where Steve and Jose met staff and settled in to their housing accommodations. Acción EcuMénica has two separate buildings: (1) A medical clinic and offices for general operations (including a conference room and a kitchen for staff), and (2) waking distance from the general offices on the same street, a retreat center with guest rooms, a conference hall, kitchen, several private shower stalls, and a huge library (rows upon rows of books and literature on religion and sexual diversity and related topics).

Steve and Jose stayed in a guest room in the retreat center. Mauro Bellesi, one of the leaders of Acción EcuMénica who acted as Steve and Jose's host and guide while in Caracas, also resided in the retreat center during their visit and was always on hand when needed. A second staff member who worked closely with Mauro was also available for assisting us, especially in transporting us by car (to the Wednesday evening Reflections of Venezuela Foundation meeting, making a money order, and some shopping for groceries).

Seminar with Reflections of Venezuela Foundation

Steve and Jose presented a PowerPoint on the Bible and homosexuality to about 30+ LGBT individuals (young and middle aged adults with a college level education) hosted by Reflections of Venezuela (Gerardo and Rafael Vanezca of Reflections of Venezuela were the contact persons and organizers). The seminar was held in a classroom in the Los Palos Grandes Library in the Chacao section of Caracas, from 5:00pm – 7:00pm on Wednesday, July 10. The facilities were provided by the library free of charge. The PowerPoint was in English; Steve presented in English and Jose translated into Spanish. Jose's translation was remarkably fast (owing in part to the fact that he knows the material) so that there was little to no time-pause between Steve's speaking and Jose's translation.

10 copies of the book *The Children Are Free* in Spanish were distributed by lottery method. An additional copy was given to a college student in journalism who was writing an article on the topic.

Following the meeting, Steve and Jose went out for food and conversation with the leaders of the organization.

Day 2 of 3, Thursday, July 11, 2013 –

Steve is Sick; Planning next-day Meeting with Acción EcuMénica

Steve was sick with a stomach bug that left him weak and indisposed. He treated it with over-the-counter medication and plenty of electrolytes. He slept for much of the day. In the late afternoon, Steve and Jose met with Cesar Henriquez and Mauro Bellesi to discuss the agenda for the next-day meeting.

Day 3 of 3, Friday, July 12, 2013

Acción EcuMénica hosts meeting for pro-LGBT clergy and religious leaders

A meeting of about 12+ pro-LGBT leaders from the HIV and religious community met at the retreat center of Acción EcuMénica for the purpose of "fostering a dialogue" around "the creation of new spaces for inclusion, and the creation of new gestures, actions and words of inclusion." Following scripture reading and prayer, Mauro Bellesi presented on Acción EcuMénica's ministry of HIV and Steve and Jose presented on the ministry of Other Sheep. Discussion on the stated purpose of the meeting followed. Copies of TCAF and Mel White's pamphlet on the Bible and homosexuality were made available to the attendees. The meeting lasted from 9:00AM – 12:15PM. Later in the day, Cesar Henriquez, director of Acción EcuMénica, meeting with Steve and Jose, reported he felt the meeting generated a positive response and that in perhaps two years from now he envisions Other Sheep returning to participate in a more involved seminar.

Jose records Mauro Bellesi's story on audio-video for publication on the Internet

Saturday, July 13

Steve in extreme physical pain. Departure from Caracas

Steve and Jose had an 8:30am flight from Caracas to Guatemala City (with a connecting flight in Mexico City). In Caracas, at the retreat center of Acción Ecu mica, Steve woke early with extreme, almost unbearable constant pain in the left side of the stomach area. Mauro, sleeping next door, gave immediate attention to the area of pain by applying strong, deep pressure and circular rubbing motions with both hands. The pain was not alleviated (although applied pressure did seem to help), and Steve seriously questioned out loud to both Mario and Jose if he should be taken to a hospital. Mauro expressed, with certain confidence, that the pain was being caused by gas trapped in the intestines and instructed Steve to proceed directly to the airport. Steve travelled to the airport by taxi with Jose, the pain not subsiding in the least bit. Finally, at the airport, after waiting some time in a long line at the security check point, Steve sensed the pain easing up slightly. By the time he and Jose reached the security officer the pain was completely gone.

Part III – Summary Statement of Activities Accomplished

- One Other Sheep seminar conducted on the Bible and homosexual; 30+ LGBT people attended; organized and hosted by Reflections of Venezuela Foundation (Wednesday)
- A meeting with clergy and religious leaders to discuss creating safe spaces for LGBT people of faith; organized and hosted by Acci n Ecu mica
- Distributed copies of The Children Are Free and copies of Mel White’s pamphlet on the Bible and homosexuality
- Received theological and religious magazines on various topics published by Acci n Ecu mica to distribute to religious leaders in Guatemala and Colombia
- Director of Acci n Ecu mica initiated discussion with Steve and Jose on the possibility of doing something much larger with Other Sheep in two or more years
- Jose recorded on audio-video Mauro Bellesi’s story as gay and Christian for publication on the Internet