

February 2021 — The space I take

*Jed Hawkes Koball, Mission Co-Worker in Peru
Presbyterian World Mission*



Conrado Olivera (front row, right) and Jed Hawkes Koball (back row, center) with colleagues from across the globe at an international advocacy and global solidarity training event they hosted in Huancaayo, Peru, with sponsorship of the Presbyterian Hunger Program.

Conrado Olivera is about 25 years my senior. As the executive director of our global partner Red Uniendo Manos Peru, he serves as my immediate supervisor. I've known few folks in my life as thoughtful and gracious as Conrado. He has not only given up precious time over the past many years to involve me in the anti-poverty work we share, but he has also sacrificed space in the interest of collegiality and partnership. He literally moved furniture in his office to make a workspace for me. He said he wanted us to be in ongoing conversation. Only recently have I come to understand the fuller significance of this sacred space, and the conflicting realities this space continues to hold for us as we share it together.

Some months ago (prior to the pandemic), Conrado was interviewing candidates for a new job opening. He asked me to sit in on the interview process in order to lend another set of ears. To be clear, it was his interview process that was to take place in his office, and for this process he had placed a chair in front of his desk facing him.

Conrado was excited about the first candidate who came from the same Andean town where he had grown up. When the 20-something-year-old arrived for his interview, Conrado made a gesture toward the chair. The young man walked to the middle of the room, saw me, picked up the chair in front of Conrado's desk and placed it in front of mine. The candidate then sat down directly in front of me and said, "I'm here for my interview." As my face reddened, I saw the joy dissipate from Conrado's eyes. I responded to the candidate, "Señor Conrado Olivera is the executive director, and he will be conducting your interview." All three of us felt shame.

From that very moment I have not stopped ruminating on the potentially harmful impact that my white body has on Black, Indigenous, People of Color (BIPOC) in Peru simply by existing here, even when I am doing nothing more than sitting, listening and breathing.

It would be too easy to dismiss myself of any responsibility by characterizing the situation as one shaped only by a young man's internalized racism born out of a white supremacy ideology planted in Peru 500 years ago by Spanish colonizers. While a caste system eradicated long ago continues to shape intercultural encounters today, so too do the behaviors of those of us who are white and were born and raised in a United States culture also driven by a white supremacy ideology. Rarely does a day go by that I don't question the validity of my presence here. It is the faith of our partners and their continued invitation to walk with them that encourages me to stay and inspires me to do more to honor the sacred space they provide.

It is hard work to honor such sacred space, but it is the hard work that we are called into. More so, it is work we cannot do alone. I am grateful to have found and been found by other white mission co-worker colleagues with the same sense of urgency to change our behaviors toward the end of changing the impact that our white bodies have on our BIPOC partners around the world, BIPOC colleagues in the Presbyterian Mission Agency and BIPOC members of churches in the U.S. who support the work we do.

Mission co-workers Sarah Henken (Colombia), Cindy Corell (Haiti), Bob Rice (South Sudan), Doug Tilton (South Africa), Cobbie Palm (Philippines), Kurt Esslinger (Korea) and I did not all know one another before we came together for the first time this past year. This was important to creating a trusting and vulnerable space. None of us consider ourselves to be experts in anti-racism work, and so with some initial guidance from the PC(USA)'s Mission Personnel Office and Crossroads Anti-Racism Training, we defined our purpose:

To be a space for white mission co-workers to participate in
building an embodied anti-racist culture and practice.

And we set our intentions. Initially, we came together weekly, but now we meet once a month. Some of the work we are engaged in includes:

- Learning to recognize, confess and correct our racist behaviors
- Learning to recognize how our racist behaviors relate to racist systems
- Connecting with our own embodied experience and practicing being uncomfortable
- Becoming more effective disruptors of racism

- Becoming better colleagues to BIPOC mission co-workers, Presbyterian World Mission staff and our global partners of all races and ethnicities
- Becoming better supporters of BIPOC leaders and institutional changes that promote equity.

We share our experience to encourage other mission co-workers who feel a similar urgency to be in touch with the Mission Personnel Office about forming your own group. We also offer ourselves as a resource. Soon we will make accessible a document that articulates our methodology and some of the resources we have accessed thus far.

As for the interview with the young man from the same Andean town as Conrado, I was unsure what to do next. Following his interview, Conrado suggested we move the interview process to a separate meeting room where he would wait by the door to greet the next candidate, introduce himself as the executive director and then present me as a colleague who would be joining them for the interview. On a day when people unfamiliar with our relationship would be arriving to our workplace, I should not have assumed that sitting at a desk in the director's office would be construed as anything less than the positioning of my white body in a place of power. Indeed, the space I take has impact on those around me.



The Rev. Jed Hawkes Koball and his wife, Jenny Valles, serve as mission coworkers in Peru.

Jed accompanies the work of Joining Hands, a Presbyterian Hunger Program partner, in identifying and interpreting root causes of poverty, and Jenny coordinates the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)'s [Young Adult Volunteer](#) program in Peru.

[Subscribe to their letters.](#)

[Support their work in Peru.](#)