

## Stories of Hope and Resistance from Chile: EPES supports and gathers popular educators to share experiences during the pandemic

- "I needed this space. Our work continues to be taxing, and with little support. Spaces of this kind re-energize and inspire us. We need each other!"
- "The conference was a dream come true. I had dreamed of returning to EPES. Thank you!"

Comments from participants in EPES' Virtual Reunion of Popular Educators

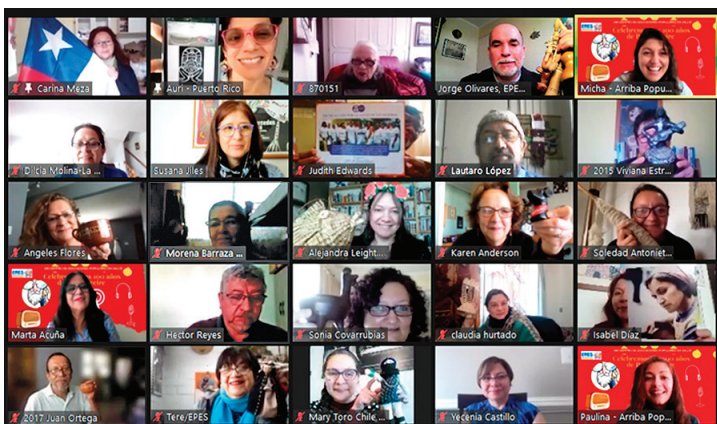
On July 10, 2021, EPES finished a five-day **virtual reunion conference of Popular Educators in Health** bringing together alumni from our eleven International Training Programs (*Escuela Internacional*) for a week of reflection, learning and sharing the experiences that organizations from throughout the region had during the pandemic. During the conference, we had an average of **40 participants** in every session including graduates from our *Escuela* (from **nine countries**), health promoters and EPES staff. We were happy to see our friends from Lutheran churches in the region – from Chile, Peru, Colombia, Guatemala, Bolivia – actively participating.

This series, **Stories of Hope and Resistance from Chile**, presents accounts of concrete ways EPES is working to address the crisis as it affects the communities, families and people we love and work with. This issue describes our virtual regional gathering and the importance it had for people working in situations of uncertainty and isolation during the pandemic.

- Karen Anderson, ELCA Global Mission personnel in Chile and Director of EPES' International Training Program

Alumni gatherings are joyful occasions that renew old friendships and gauge the strides made over the course of years. The July 5–10 reunion of graduates from EPES' eleven International Training Programs (*Escuelas*) on popular education and participatory strategies for health, was this and much more.

Unlike past *Escuelas* and the previous reunion in 2013, the gathering did not take place in bustling urban neighborhoods of Santiago or with the scent of the sea air in Concepcion. Symptomatic of these pandemic times, the alumni came together virtually, yet both the emotions and empowering messages came through as palpable as ever in this singular learning space.



Zoom virtual reunion of graduates of EPES' International Training Programs.



Mauricio Salazar shares his experience as a city council candidate.

Social distancing and confinement have been challenging for everyone; all the more so for an organization such as EPES, whose hallmark is hands-on learning and on-site grassroots work. The reunion conference was a synthesis of previously unimaginable challenges, showing once again EPES' efforts to creatively adapt to changing times and address emergent issues. The design of this reunion conference reflected EPES' experiences and learning throughout the past year, combining new content in a virtual setting that strengthens the emotional support that makes EPES a caring community. And even in the virtual format, participants engaged in small group work and discussion.

The pandemic took center stage during the weeklong conference. Some of the topics presented included: food sovereignty in pandemic times; community strategies for addressing gender violence in pandemic; natural leaders in response to the COVID-19 pandemic; and school issues, traumas and challenges for immigrant children in times of pandemic. As in years past, the Rev. Lisandro Orlov, from Buenos Aires, reflected on faith communities, this time on how they have addressed people's needs during the pandemic.

### LAS COMUNIDADES DE FE REFLEXIONAN SOBRE LA PANDEMIA DEL COVID 19

Pastor LISANDRO ORLOV. IGLESIA EVANGÉLICA LUTERANA UNIDA EN ARGENTINA Y URUGUAY. PASTORAL ECUMÉNICA VIH-SIDA

Rev. Lisandro Orlov moderating and speaking on the panel, "Communities of faith and popular education during the pandemic."

Several *Escuela* graduates shared lessons from their recent experiences as city council or constitutional assembly candidates. Their reflections attest to processes of growing political agency, harnessed from the community organizing groundwork learned from EPES. Mauricio Salazar, of Las Cañas Community Center in Valparaíso, who rose as a leader in response to the devastating fire of 2017 and the campaign for justice for the negligent death in 2018 of his young daughter Amelia, credited EPES for equipping him with the skills and confidence to launch his city council candidacy. Valeria Garcia, a veteran health promoter with the Llaleta Group, was city council candidate in San Ramón, an area hard hit by COVID-19. Garcia spoke of the transformation in her own life that forged her as a neighborhood leader, thanks to the tools acquired through EPES.

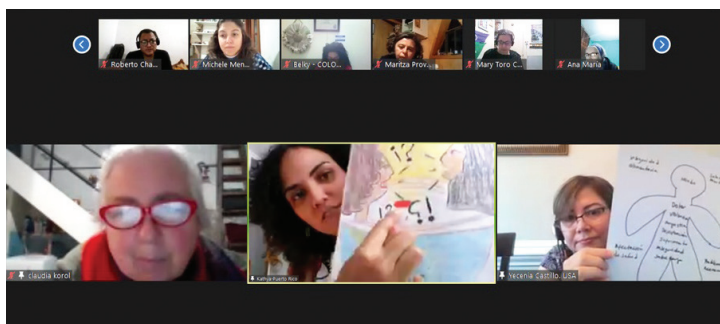
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*"Education doesn't change the world. Education changes the people who will change the world." – Paulo Freire*

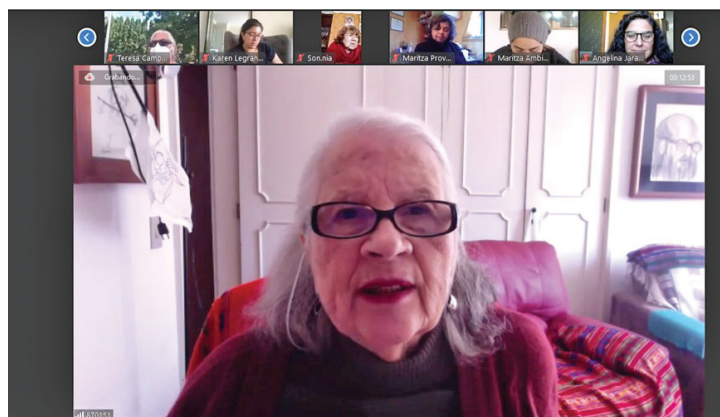
**EPES**  
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*Claudia Korola asked her workshop participants to draw symbols of popular education, and then show their drawings to everyone.*

When asked how the *Escuelas* had shaped their work, participants acknowledged a powerful impact. Puerto Rican Aurinés Torres replied, "Wow! So much. It validated my desire to strengthen my dedication to popular education in health. It opened doors to learning and a supportive community that still sustains me. Roberto Chávez, of Mexico, affirmed, "EPES transformed my vision of change processes to establish new ways in which people are protagonists of their own reality." Soledad Burgos de la Vega, of Chiloe in southern Chile, expressed, "It was the push I needed to shift my professional training and redirect my public health efforts to a rights-based perspective, connected to the social processes we are experiencing."

Midweek the Argentine feminist journalist and popular educator Claudia Korol transported participants in a ritual with lit candles that connected to the feelings that generate each person's dedication to transformational work. Each was asked to illustrate how they understand popular education in a simple drawing, and then hold them up to the Zoom screen. Constellations, the sun, a circle, fire, the planet, trees, a spiral were among the images displayed from places far away. "Although these little Zoom squares make us equals and shorten the distance, I still would like to be there in Chile," she admitted. Korol called on everyone "to take care of life, and we also have to take care of the territory, the river, the seeds... we also need to take care of memory. We are going to put all our knowledge, wisdom, emotions and joys to move forward." It was a much-needed, positive message in a year marked by uncertainty.



*Ana María Araujo keeps alive the legacy of her late husband Paulo Freire, the Brazilian popular educator. She offered words of encouragement to participants to keep up the great work of promoting the health of the most marginalized people.*

This unique *Escuela* reunion coincided with the commemoration of the centenary of the birth of Paulo Freire, the pioneering Brazilian educator for change, who shaped EPES' vision and methodology. His widow, Ana María Araujo, on hand from Brazil, recalled the love Freire had for Chile during the four years he lived there in the late 1960s, after fleeing persecution from the Brazilian dictatorship. In closing the conference, Araujo told participants, "I salute all of you who devote your lives to this work that is so important to society. In Paulo you found the principles and concepts to promote the health of the most marginalized people. I thank you for your lovingkindness and the love you have for Paulo." And she added, "I want to tell you this: Keep up this great work!"

**We are profoundly thankful to the ELCA, supporting congregations and so many friends of EPES** for making the *Escuela* possible over these past eleven years. In these times when social distancing continues to be the norm in Chile, your enduring support enables us, once again, to find new, creative ways to bring an empowering, uplifting message that overcomes despair and encourages transformational action throughout the Americas.

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EDUCACIÓN POPULAR EN SALUD  
POPULAR EDUCATION FOR HEALTH

EPES was created in 1982 to promote health with dignity for the poor through empowerment, mobilization and collective action. It began as a program of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Chile (IELCH) and maintains close ties nationally and internationally with the Lutheran church and is an ELCA Global Mission supported ministry. EPES became an independent, non-profit Chilean foundation in 2002.

