



# EXTENDING BEYOND

## Ministry: Consistency and continuity

A message from Stanley W. Green



**M**y spouse, Ursula, has been a teacher in the Goshen (Indiana) Community Schools system for the past 21 years. She has loved teaching and has relished that moment when the “light goes on” and a

student gets it, learning a new concept, gaining a new awareness of the connections between things, and advancing learning.

Perhaps more satisfying, however, is the relationship she developed with each student. Ursula set out to love every child who stepped across the threshold of her classroom. With some students it was easy. With others it took months of nurturing, patience, and investing in individual’s lives before they felt safe enough to trust her, to open up to her caring support and attention.

Through the years, she has loved each of the children entrusted to her. My delight at the end of each

day was to ask her about her encounters with various individuals whom she was determined to help. It was inspiring to hear of the risk she was willing to take with children whom others had essentially written off, that there was, in fact, a hope for transformation in each of these individuals fraught with hardship. Her love and care for these children helped many of them surmount the challenges they faced in their lives of struggle, stress and trauma.

At the end of each year, I have watched her celebrate the changes that had taken place in children’s lives as they became more relaxed, confident, self-assured, and able to function and learn. Gone were the anxious, fearful, angry and rebellious “problem” children.

The end of each year was also a time of grieving and apprehension for Ursula. What would the next year bring for these precious, though often troubled, children? Would they find adults who cared? Adults willing to extend compassion

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Connie Byler never knows a stranger. Here, she greets Yolanda, Mateo, and Richar during the construction of the new church building in Burgos. Yolanda is from one of the first families the Bylers met when they arrived 37 years ago. Richar was a Roma classmate of Bylers’ daughter, Mariberta, and is now a pastor. Photo by Amy Schmid.

“Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, **I am with you always, to the end of the age.**”

—Matthew 28:19-20



Photo by Lynda Hollinger-Janzen

Supporters of Connie and Dennis Byler bless them during their farewell celebration at Fellowship of Hope in Elkhart, Indiana.

## A legacy of love

In Spain, there's a common belief that good things take time.

“First, you must dedicate yourself to getting to know people and winning them with friendship and a good testimony,” said Augustín Melguizo, a pastor at an Anabaptist church in Burgos, Spain. “Then, after several years, you can begin to benefit from some occasions to present the gospel clearly.”

After 37 years of ministry in Spain, Dennis and Connie Byler did just that. And while numbers is never the primary goal of mission, it certainly can be an indicator of the Holy Spirit's presence.

“They have shaped the Anabaptist family in Spain,” said Tim Foley, Mission Network's director for Europe. They've brought people together and grown church membership to more than 500. Because of Connie and Dennis, nine Anabaptist communities in Spain are carrying on the ministry that Connie and Dennis worked at so faithfully.

In the beginning, Connie and Dennis were a part of a powerful movement of the Holy Spirit. They helped nurture Catholic young adults who had become disenfranchised by the church.

For nearly four decades, they modeled complementary ministries that grew out of the Burgos congregation, now called *Comunidades Anabautistas Unidas* (United

Anabaptist Communities).

Dennis taught seminary courses, wrote books, and edited *El Mensajero* (The Messenger), a monthly electronic newsletter to connect the Anabaptist network of churches in Spain and Latin America.

While Dennis reflects on how to best communicate the biblical foundation of God's mission, Connie lives it out, visiting people in their homes, in the hospital, and in hospice care. Her sentences often begin with, “I've got a friend ...” She has taken special interest in people living with HIV-AIDS, children whose parents are in prison, and refugees. She knows people all across Burgos and throughout the surrounding villages, including a military general who was an English-language student, and a Guatemalan immigrant named Ruth who came to Spain to take care of two blind men. Byler explained her approach to ministry: “We laugh with those who laugh and cry with those who cry.” In every conversation, she seeks “to share the goodness of God with others.”

**Through Bible study and living out their faith, the Bylers helped Burgos to become “one of the major Mennonite centers in Europe today,” Melguizo said.**

Connie and Dennis plan to retire to Cantabria on Spain's northern coast where the weather is kinder than that of the high-altitude cold of Burgos. ■

# The changing winds of leadership

The Bylers' retirement has had a ripple effect on their church in Burgos. While Connie and Dennis will no longer be present to preach on Sundays, the role will be filled by others at church. "This will be a great opportunity for some of our young adults ... to have more opportunities to develop their gifts," said Brian Fox.



**Brian and Noelia Fox** have served alongside the *Comunidades Unidas Anabautistas* in Burgos for 11 years with Mission Network. While most of their time focuses on ministry through an English-language academy, they are very involved in their church's youth ministry and in raising new leaders in the church. Brian has preached in the past, and looks forward to the challenge of preaching in Spanish again.

Connie and Noelia had both interacted with refugees in the past. Now, with Connie's retirement, Noelia is taking more leadership to help families transition to a new culture. Over the past year, Noelia had been walking alongside a refugee family from Ukraine. They've become more involved in the church, and when they moved into their own apartment, the entire church showered them with gifts and well wishes.

Connie and Dennis were based in Burgos, but through his teachings, Dennis sowed seeds of Anabaptism across the country. They've since sprouted into faith communities. Those faith communities are now welcoming two new worker families.



**Joshua and Alisha Garber** serve in Barcelona, along with their son, Asher. They work alongside the leaders of *Comunidad Evangélica Menonita* (Mennonite Evangelical Community), to

show that Jesus is still relevant to youth and people of all ages in Spain's post-Christendom society. "We believe the church is in a time of transition—metamorphosis, even—and we're hopeful the Anabaptist perspective can serve as that voice as we support the emerging church," said Joshua.

**Francisco and Juana Machado** are just settling into life in Madrid. They are focusing on church life, building relationships, and learning the culture. The Machados plan to work with local Christians to plant an Anabaptist church in Madrid by helping Spaniards to "discover the simple and genuine ways to follow Christ," wrote Francisco.

Post-Christendom\* cultures, like that of Spain, are often the result of a lack of authentic spiritual role models. While the Machados are new to Spain's post-Christendom culture, they know full well that authentically living out Jesus' teachings has implications for their everyday life.

Francisco and Juana spent most of their life in Honduras. They were first introduced to Anabaptism in 1982 and discipled by believers from Honduras and the United States, like Linda Shelly, from Mission Network. The Machados learned to love Jesus and their neighbors, to work for peace and justice, and to care for the poor. Francisco's faith led him to advocate for Hondurans exploited by open cast mining,



which is mining from an open pit. But his opposition of government policies and his influence among fellow Hondurans put his life in danger.

In November 2008, after several death threats, Francisco and Juana and their family left for the United States. "We ... left behind everything we possessed. Everything from the material aspects to the intangible pieces of a life," wrote Francisco. "I was not able to understand the purpose of God in my life in this new level, but now I am sure that the Holy Spirit protects me and our family. **Thus, friends and the church redeemed us from death to be servants of God for the rest of our lives.**" ■

\*Post-Christendom refers to the highly secular society that follows the decline of Christianity as the dominant social and religious belief system of a culture.

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and understanding and patience? Troubled by a possible setback for these children, I often heard Ursula's lament that she couldn't continue with her students through subsequent grades to provide the consistency of care and understanding.

Unfortunately, the U.S. education system often places little emphasis on consistency in teacher-student relationship. In Japan, where cognitive learning is stressed, elementary teachers stay with their classes for two years or more. Japanese teachers say that the first year is for getting to know the students, and the second is for teaching. Japanese educators clearly believe that it is more important for teachers to know students well than to be specialists in one grade level or content area.

Almost every study, and virtually every casual observation, shows that stability, longevity and intimacy are essential to healthy relationships. The Japanese education system seems to understand that healthy group cohesion and close adult-student relationships need time to develop. In their system continuity is a crucial factor.

At Mennonite Mission Network, we share this compelling conviction. This shared belief has led us to embrace two crucial commitments in our mission engagements around the world: developing strong relationships are essential and



Dennis Byler taught courses at seminaries throughout Spain, and helped found Kenosis Theological Seminary, the first specifically Anabaptist training offered in Spain.

indispensable; and continuity and consistency are imperative to developing trust and a willingness to risk in such relationships. We attempt to adhere to these commitments in every place where we work. Our commitment issues from the conviction that, just as in any marriage, investing time in building relationships is key to the happiness and thriving of the partners. So, too, in any partnership, but especially so in cross-cultural engagements, such an investment is imperative and indispensable.

Our engagement with God's mission in Spain is one example of this way of working. Connie and Dennis Byler

have invested their lives (37 years) in serving alongside Spanish sisters and brothers to bring healing and hope in a country that has experienced many challenges and struggles.

Whether ministering with drug addicts or people suffering with AIDS, planting churches, developing leaders for the church through formal and informal ways, leading worship, or simply through providing hospitality and companionship, **Dennis and Connie have provided a consistent Christian witness in that country for several decades.** As a result of the consistency and continuity their presence has provided, others have come



Connie and Dennis Byler lived and served in Spain for 37 years.

and gone (including our son, Lee, who served in their village of Quintanaduenas on the edge of Burgos). They have found their place and connected into the network of relationships and trust that were built over a lifetime of investment. Their reputation opened the door for others (the Foxes, the Machados, and the Garbers—about whom you can read in other parts of this piece) to find their place in God's mission in Spain.

With Bylers' retirement we are thrilled that the ministry can continue, and relationships strengthened through these new servants whom God has called. Our sisters and brothers in the Spanish church know that, though roles may shift and change with changing times, relationships will continue in the space of trust and consistency that has been painstakingly built over decades of mutual investment. For this we are grateful, because we are reassured that in this space a fertile imaginative field is created where trust is experienced, and the opportunity to creatively explore a vision for new initiatives in mission together is made possible. **Thanks also to you who have so generously contributed to making it possible for us to invest in developing enduring relationships marked by consistency and continuity**—the defining characteristics of the God we serve, and, as we believe, the essential characteristics of effective mission. ■

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Stanley W. Green".

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