



The "M" word

My personal awakening to God's work

BY PAULA KILLOUGH

Missio Dei is published by Mennonite Mission Network to invite reflection and dialogue about God's mission in today's world. Some features in the series focus primarily on the biblical and theological foundations of the mission task. Others present ministry case studies or personal stories of attempts to be faithful to Christ's call. Perspectives represented reflect the passion and commitment of the agency: to declare in word and demonstrate in life the whole gospel of Jesus Christ, "across the street, all through the marketplaces, and around the world."

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My personal awakening to God’s work

By Paula Killough

Introduction

In 2006, when I came to Elkhart, Indiana, the “M” word—mission—was certainly not part of my vocabulary. Mission, in my view, was the method used to accomplish the goals of colonialism—cultural genocide, coercive baptisms to Christianity, wealth and resource extraction.

I vividly remember reading an issue of Mennonite Mission Network’s *Beyond* magazine in 2004 on Christian-Muslim dialogue. There were three vignettes of agency encounters with Muslim people. Unfortunately, these “friend-making” conversion stories just reinforced my negative views of mission as coercive and disingenuous.

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Then I encountered Galatians 1:11-12 as a primary sermon text, and was transformed. I realized I had missed the point of the *Beyond* stories. My frustration that our Christian mission workers must have had an agenda all along, got in the way of me being able to accept that the gospel of Jesus Christ is so powerful and infectious that it makes its way into the hearts and lives of people of all kinds. My liberal assumptions, I came to realize, created walls, not bridges.

The New Testament proclamation of good news

For I want you to know, brothers and sisters, that the gospel that was proclaimed by me is not of human origin; for I did not receive it from a human source, nor was I taught it, but I received it through a revelation of Jesus Christ (Galatians 1:11-12, NRS).

The revealing of the Spirit as described in various New Testament passages empowers followers of Jesus. In Acts 2, Peter quotes the prophet Joel, who earlier prophesied that the Spirit would fall on both women and men, old and young, slave and free.

God chose to perform the Pentecost miracle in Jerusalem in a specific way. Scripture does not say that everyone was able to understand one and the same language. Rather, each person heard God's words through the Galileans in their own language (Acts 2:6). Now, as then, all people have been gifted with God's Holy Spirit in their own context and culture. This happened to me. Galatians 1 got through to me.

Hearing God's word, God's message for us in our own language . . . that is often the challenge. Even the word "mission" is a loaded word, carrying very rich and fruitful images for some, and fraught with all the negativity of colonialism for others. As my colleague James Krabill would say, "People of all cultures are hungry for the Bread of Life, but many choke on the Western-cultural wrapper we place it in."

As I have served Mennonite Mission Network, several stories have been central to my expanding view of this "M" word. When I asked what the turning point had been for Mennonites from colonialism toward a more holistic approach to witness, I was directed to the inspiring story of Irene Weaver. I offer only a brief summary of Irene's life dedicated to God's reconciling love, along with five additional stories that have expanded my view of the "M" word.

Six stories that have expanded my view of the “M” word

STORY 1

Irene Weaver and India—from compound to celebration

In 1899, in response to a devastating famine, North American Mennonites sent missionaries to their first overseas location in India. They began orphanage work, followed by an extensive medical ministry. More mission workers soon followed, allowing for the Anabaptist presence to expand this witness.

In the mission field of the 1800s—in India and in other settings around the world—Christianization was manifested in the creation of Western-type mission compounds comprised of stores, schools, clinics and chapels. Buildings were often constructed in European home styles, and symbolized the area of program concentration designed to promote the colonial patterns of the day. The dominant culture worldview of this time was one of confidence in the essential goodness of the missionary community environment. Christianity could only flourish, it was thought, within this defined cultural norm.¹

¹ For more on this, see Wilbert R. Shenk, *Changing Frontiers of Mission* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis, 1999), pp. 50ff.



Photo courtesy of Mennonite Church USA Archives

Irene and Ed Weaver immersed their own lives in the study of God’s word in order to empower others to worship God in ways that were meaningful in their cultural contexts.

In the course of missionary Irene Weaver’s 103 years of life and service, she experienced every phase of Mennonite mission history. She was born into a missionary compound setting in India in 1910—just 11 years into the first overseas mission endeavor of North American Mennonites. In 1935, married to Edwin Weaver, the mission agency asked the couple to accept a ministry post in India. Early on in their assignment, Irene overheard an Indian woman say that “living in a White person’s house must be what it would be like in heaven.”

“Those words burned shame into my soul,” Weaver admitted. “I began to question many things. I decided my strategy of work in a foreign country would be different from anything I had experienced before.” The Weavers began to realize that Western mission had encumbered Mennonites in India with colonial structures that hampered their capacity to fully be God’s people.

In later years, when the Weavers were invited to undertake new ministries in northern India and West Africa, they made a commitment to practice an “incarnational” approach to mission, respectful of local cultural values and patterns, and wary of introducing unsustainable Western structures and institutions.

Reflecting back on the early India experience, Irene noted, “When the church in India finally shook off our trappings, when we were out of the way, then they could take charge of things.”

This pain and heartache manifested itself clearly as the North Americans began to pull back on leadership and financial support, creating misunderstandings and conflict during the transition from dependent to independent church bodies. “We could have saved the Indian church a lot of heartache,” Irene observed.²

When the North Americans departed from India in the 1980s, they did leave a self-supporting church, a medical board and hospital, and an education board that operates several schools today. By 1998, the church in India had grown substantially. Today, the Mennonite Church in India is a ministry led by followers of Jesus in that context. Mennonite Mission Network partners with the Indian church and its institutions.

In December 2015, new fruit of the partnership was marked as North Americans were invited to celebrate the expansion of Sankra Christian Hospital. The two-story building honors Dr. Florence Coopriider Friesen and her husband, Bishop Peter A. Friesen, who had earlier served as mission workers. Bishop Friesen and his first wife, Helena, established mission work in Sankra in 1910 and constructed Zion Mennonite Church. Following Helena’s death in 1921, Florence



Photo by Angela Rempel

Lakshmishri Balasobramanian and her mother, Rekha, greet Irene Weaver during her centennial birthday celebration.

² Weaver’s reflections are recounted more fully by Lynda Hollinger-Janzen in “A New Day in Mission:” Irene Weaver Reflects on Her Century in Mission [No. 8 in the *Missio Dei* series, ed. James R. Krabill] (Elkhart, Indiana: Mennonite Mission Network, 2005).



Photo by Cynthia Friesen Coyle

Sankra Christian Hospital was completed in the spring of 2016 and is now a fully functioning hospital, providing much needed medical services to those living in and around Sankra.

and Peter A. were married while both were home on furlough in 1922. They returned to Sankra to work in partnership from 1924 until 1942.

Grandson Dr. G. Weldon Friesen, who had also served in India with his wife, LuEtta, from 1968 to 1971, was an honored speaker at the church service and the building dedication. The Friesens' daughter, Cynthia (a graphic designer at Mennonite Mission Network), was a part of the Friesen family delegation for this historic visit, marking four generations of friendship and partnership with the church in India. The celebrated building expansion takes the medical facility from an outpatient clinic to a 24-hour, 12-bed hospital, and is a collaborative project of the extended Friesen family, Mennonite Mission Network, and Dhamtari Christian Hospital.³

Three things about this story have challenged my earlier views:

1. **The kingdom of God must be embodied in cultural forms.**

Ed and Irene Weaver were pioneers—both in India and later as ground-breaking mission workers in West Africa. They encouraged indigenous expressions of the faith that aided adaptation to the modern world while respecting local cultural beliefs.

³ See Wil LaVeist, "India medical building honors mission legacy," Mennonite Mission Network (January 20, 2016); accessed November 1, 2016. See <https://www.MennoniteMission.net/news/India%20medical%20building%20honors%20mission%20legacy>.

2. **Women often approach other cultures differently.** At the same time that anthropologist Margaret Mead was listening and learning about the values of culture, Irene Weaver began her remarkable work in mission, seeking to incarnate the gospel in the context of those among whom she served.
3. **Following the path of faithfulness is not for the faint of heart and does not happen overnight.** The Weaver and Friesen stories illustrate that ministry with integrity is possible, but often takes many years—sometimes even multigenerational efforts—to build long-lasting friendship, deep trust, and abiding relationships.

STORY 2

Mission to the Cheyenne and Arapaho native peoples

My connections to Native peoples are founded within my own family relationships with the Wichita and Lakota Sioux. I have had the privilege of serving as Mission Network's liaison to Native Mennonite Ministries, and recently as part of the Hopi Mission School task group. Mennonite pastor and Cheyenne peace chief, Lawrence Hart, has been an inspiration and encouragement to me since our first meeting in 2008. More recently, I have been challenged by the disturbing, uncomfortable truths with which I have become more acquainted regarding the "Doctrine of Discovery."⁴

One of the first organized mission efforts of North American Mennonites was initiated by Russian and Prussian immigrants, many of whom were themselves newly arrived in the United States beginning in the early- to mid-1870s. As a result of that migration, nearly 1,300 Mennonite and Hutterite families settled in the Dakotas, Minnesota, Kansas, and Manitoba (Canada). In 1880, just six years after their arrival, these Mennonites felt led to begin "foreign mission" to the Arapaho and Cheyenne peoples of Oklahoma Territory. Samuel and Susie Haury of Halstead, Kansas, were the first of more than 100

⁴ "What is the Doctrine of Discovery?" See <http://MennoniteUSA.org/what-we-do/undoing-racism/doctrine-of-discovery>.

Mennonites from rural communities who responded to the call of this ministry.

The modern mission movement of this era was deeply rooted in Old Testament theology and the worldview of the Doctrine of Discovery in which true expression of the faith was defined by the dominant culture. James C. Juhnke puts this into context in his 1979 historical analysis of this era. He offers that these young Mennonite missionaries in the 1880s and 1890s were products of their society. The mission task was to duplicate among the Arapaho and Cheyenne the social, economic and religious aspects of their own home communities. Unfortunately, from today's 21st-century perspective, we would label this colonialism, and in worst case scenarios, cultural genocide.⁵

Here is a quote from Pastor Samuel Haury reporting to the Department of Indian Affairs in 1883:

We may teach the Indian child all the arts of our civilized life, keeping him away from the influence of his ignorant, superstitious and idolatrous tribe for many years. But without a living Christ in the heart of such a child, returning as a young man to his people, he will soon fall back into the old superstitious customs and habits of his race.

The Indians are religious people; religion permeates their daily life; almost every act they do is connected to some religious meaning scrupulously inculcated into the child from its infancy. They will be civilized only by giving them higher, the only true religion, that of Christ.⁶

Indian boarding schools became the institutional means through which the United States government and local Christian missions attempted to erase indigenous culture from the national landscape. In these schools, indigenous people were stripped of their native language, cultural identity, and familial relations. During the recent Canadian Truth and Reconciliation Process, many First Nations survivors reported having experienced repeated instances of severe abuse

⁵ This era is described more fully by James C. Juhnke in his work, *A People of Mission: A History of the General Conference Mennonite Overseas Missions* (Newton, Kansas: Faith and Life Press, 1979).

⁶ In S. S. Haury, "Report to the Department of Indian Affairs" (1883); accessed May 20, 2016. See <https://books.google.com/books?id=XU0OAAAAQAAJ&pg=PA78&clpg=PA78&dq=s.+s.+haury&source=bl&ots=pc5vV54Dd&sig=6AuWTKGFzu2LPbiNF-x4LS2DN0c&hl=en&csa=X&cved=0ahUKEwit5Jyj6YXQAhXM7YMKHR-RDBIQ6AEIKTAC#v=onepage&q&cf=false>.



Mission Network file photo

In 2011, Betty and Lawrence Hart were honored for four decades of presence and ministry with the Arapaho and Cheyenne people in Oklahoma.

and neglect within some of these schools. Three such schools in the United States were administered by one of our predecessor agencies: in Darlington, Oklahoma (1881); Cantonment, Oklahoma (1883); and Halstead, Kansas (1884).⁷

This is part of our mission history. The destruction of indigenous peoples and their ways of life was the method employed for making an indigenous person Christian. Today, the church must acknowledge the negative effects of previous actions, and work toward right relationships with indigenous peoples here in the United States and around the world.

Mennonite minister and Cheyenne peace chief, Lawrence Hart, has given his life to helping us do just that. Hart is a bridge-builder and has devoted considerable energy to “reconciling all things” between two peoples—Cheyenne and Mennonite.

Hart was born into the Cheyenne tribal community on his family’s allotment near Hammon, Oklahoma, in 1933 during the hard years of the Depression. He was the sixth child of Homer and Jennie Hart and, due to his mother’s ill health, spent his childhood years with his paternal

⁷ A fuller account is available in “Called to Witness: Mennonite Church USA and the Truth and Reconciliation Project,” Mennonite Church USA (February 15, 2014). See <http://mennoniteusa.org/news/called-to-witness-and-healing>.



Photo by National Park Service

During “An Evening to Honor and Recognize Chief Lawrence Hart” by the National Park Service at the Washita Battlefield National Historic Site at Cheyenne, Oklahoma., on Aug. 28, 2010, Hart greets a well-wisher. Behind him, from left, are granddaughter, Christina Yellowman; daughter, Connie Hart Yellowman; and daughter, Cristina Hart-Wolfe.

grandparents, Corn Stalk and Chief John P. Hart—originally Peak Heart, before his name was changed at the Carlisle Indian Boarding School he attended in Pennsylvania.

Grandfather John P. was the son of Afraid of Beavers and Walking Woman, both survivors of the 1868 massacre of the village of the great peace chief, Black Kettle, on Oklahoma’s Washita River. Chief John P. Hart handpicked Lawrence to teach him the ways of the Cheyenne people. Lawrence remained close to his grandfather, who traveled as a peacemaker between tribes and was a well-known missionary of the Native American Church.

When Grandfather Chief John P. Hart died, Lawrence was called out of the military to become a peace chief of the Cheyenne. In subsequent years, he completed a history degree at Bethel College in North Newton, Kansas, and went on to study at Associated Mennonite Biblical Seminaries (currently known as Anabaptist Mennonite Biblical Seminary) in Elkhart, Indiana, before being credentialed as a Mennonite pastor.

In this way, Hart grew into a role as a principal peace chief to the Cheyenne people, a Mennonite pastor at Koinonia Church near Clinton, Oklahoma, and a leader in the Mennonite Church. He has spent his life negotiating this delicate balance—one foot in the Cheyenne world, one foot in the Mennonite world—a sometimes prophet to his mixed flock. Always, he has served as a peacemaker, cultivating the traditions of servanthood in the peace chief tradition, and reinterpreting Bible stories for Mennonites and Cheyenne to help his diverse flock understand the tribal Jesus he knows.

Lawrence Hart still remembers a Mennonite gathering in Fresno, California, where as a young pastor he told for the first time the story

that changed his life and helped him understand the servant leadership he would be called to practice. This story—the horrific account of the centenary battle reenactment of his people’s massacre on the Washita River—would presage the work Chief Hart would be called to do in the “Return to the Earth Project” in later years.

To re-enact the Washita battle, which had taken place a century earlier, the Cheyenne people set up tepees on the original site of the conflict beside the river, and appeared in their traditional regalia. They were unaware that the Grandsons of General Custer’s Seventh Cavalry from California would be in attendance. And there was an ugly scene far too real as the Grandsons came thundering in on horseback firing weapons, the Cheyenne children screaming in terror. The Cavalry even played the battle tune, “Garry Owen,” that their grandfathers had used on that fateful day 100 years earlier.

Finally, the enactment over, the old Cheyenne chiefs and young Lawrence made their way into the Cheyenne Washita museum to bury remains from the original battle as they had planned, with the careful dignity and ceremonial songs mandated by Cheyenne tradition. Again, the Grandsons of the Seventh Cavalry showed up to salute, and the young Chief Lawrence Hart was shocked that they would tread on this hallowed ground to acknowledge one their grandfathers had killed.



Photo by Howard Zehr/MCC photo

Lawrence Hart, Cheyenne peace chief from Clinton, Oklahoma, at the 1993 repatriation ceremony in Washington, D.C., wraps an ancestral skull for burial in Oklahoma. From left: elder Chester Whiteman, elder Willy Fletcher, (Lawrence), and elder Lucien Twins.

Then, as the small coffin was carried by the crowd to the burial site, a young woman, Lucille Young Bull, respectfully stepped out of the crowd and placed a blanket over the coffin. Cheyenne tradition mandated that this blanket be given to someone in attendance before the burial, someone like the governor of Oklahoma, who was present that day. However, the old chiefs instructed young Chief Hart to call forward Captain Eric Gault, the commander of the Grandsons. The chiefs had chosen Captain Gault to wrap in the blanket! Onlookers were powerfully moved by the wisdom of the elders—as was the Captain, who took the “Garry Owen” pin from his uniform and handed it to Chief Hart to accept for his people, promising that the Cheyenne people would never hear that battle song again.

In 2000, at the Native Mennonite Assembly gathered on the Hopi Reservation in Arizona, Lawrence Hart delivered a compelling manifesto he called “Culture and Christianity.” In it, Hart spoke of a tribal Jesus too often whitewashed in the Euro-Western reading of the Scriptures. “The Jesus way,” he explained to his mostly Native audience, finds resonance in a tribal Jesus who healed by using rituals akin to those used by the Cheyenne people. Hart cited Mark 8, where Jesus uses his own spittle to heal a blind man, as the Cheyenne use spittle in purification ceremonies. Jesus’ sojourn on earth as a tribal person manifests God’s choice to reveal himself in a way no televangelist in a luxurious sanctuary will ever understand. Rather, this Jesus, born in a manger with dust on his feet, was not Anglo. Tribal lenses for viewing Jesus’ ministry, said Hart, have a better chance than the Anglo lens for seeing Jesus for who he was.

For more than 45 years, working together with Betty, his spouse and partner in ministry, Lawrence has pastored Koinonia Mennonite Church just outside Clinton, Oklahoma, with Cheyenne worshipers. Nearby, they built the Cheyenne Cultural Center, and from those two locations they have hosted hundreds of people to teach history, tradition, and ritual—both Mennonite and Cheyenne.⁸

⁸ For more details, see Raylene Hinz-Penner’s article, “Lawrence Hart’s Vision of Peace,” in *The Mennonite* (January 1, 2011).

Three things about this story have challenged my earlier views:

1. **Native spirituality can make a significant contribution to Christian understandings.** Honoring the Creator and caring for all creation in a wise and peaceful way has been a dominant theme for many Native peoples.
2. **Lawrence Hart’s description of Jesus as “one of the tribe” speaks to me.** This incarnational Jesus who lives humbly, yet professes our God boldly, is a needed image in our world today.
3. **The Cheyenne chiefs enacted loving one’s enemies with great wisdom and faithfulness.** I have experienced this same generous spirit in my relationships with Native peoples today.

STORY 3

The church in the Congo—celebration, joy and growth in challenging circumstances

In 2013, I was invited as an ordained woman to participate in the first ordinations of women in the Mennonite Church of Congo. Over the course of three weeks, our delegation would participate in two separate services with more than 4,000 of our Congolese sisters and brothers. In preparation for this trip, I attempted to steep myself in the history of one of the largest national groups of Mennonites worldwide. This is a brief summary of that history.

Congo Inland Mission (renamed Africa Inter-Mennonite Mission [AIMM] in 1975) began work in Congo in 1912. Two large Mennonite denominations grew out of this holistic ministry—*Communauté Évangélique au Congo* (Evangelical Mennonite Church of Congo) and *Communauté Mennonite au Congo* (Mennonite Church of Congo).⁹

Beginning in the 1970s, North American missionaries were invited by and worked under national church leadership. By 1998, due to political insecurity and family considerations, all long-term North

⁹ A third denomination—*Communauté des Églises des Frères Mennonites au Congo* (Mennonite Brethren Church of Congo)—grew out of North American Mennonite Brethren mission work, and is now a Mennonite Mission Network partner through AIMM, and collaborates with the other two Congolese Mennonite denominations.



Photo by James R. Krabill

The *Mille Voix* (Thousand Voices) choir led by Bernice Mobutu Bongela greets guests outside the Welcome Center in Tshikapa during the centennial celebration in Congo in 2012.

American mission workers had left the country. Some workers returned in 2003, a sign of hope to Congolese believers.

The Mennonite Church of Congo and the Evangelical Mennonite Church of Congo celebrated a century of Mennonite presence and witness in 2012. In his historical overview of North American Mennonite history in the country, Mennonite Church of Congo President Adolphe Komuesa Kalunga named weaknesses and failures in the missionary approach of those who came as workers through Africa Inter-Mennonite Mission and its predecessor agencies. These shortcomings, according to Komuesa, included paternalism, a heavy focus on spiritual matters with less concern for the socio-economic conditions that oppressed the Congolese people, and a reluctance to trust the Congolese church with financial management.

However, Komuesa also acknowledged with gratitude that these same missionaries, hundreds of them, were faithful to God's call to share the good news of Jesus—braving sickness, a harsh climate, difficult living conditions, and political instability. Some died of illness during their time of service in Congo. Komuesa asked the gathered assembly to stand for a moment of silence to remember all the Mennonites who sacrificed their lives in obedience to Christ's call.

In his concluding address, Komuesa said, "I salute those missionaries who gave of their youth and their lives for our country. I also render homage to their descendants who are still laboring for the welfare of our church. Let all of them know how grateful we are." It should be noted, added Komuesa, that "missionary accomplishments



Photo by Sandy Miller

One of the first women pastors ordained in Congo, Bercy Mundedi stands with Pastor Dr. Adolphe Komuesa Kalunga, president of Mennonite Church of Congo.



Photo by Christian Mukuna

Women leaders from Democratic Republic of Congo and the United States join hands in prayer and singing *We are one in the Spirit* at Kalonda Bible Institute in 2013.

were only possible because Congolese people worked hand-in-hand with their brothers and sisters from North America.” It was this kind of solidarity and partnership between church and workers that made ministry successful.¹⁰

In 2013, our delegation joined in worship to celebrate the first ordination of women in *Communauté Mennonite au Congo*. One of those ordained in 2013 was Bercy Mundedi, who has recently been named to lead the Kalonda Bible Institute, where she has taught for the past decade. The institute, located about three miles from the denomination’s headquarters in Tshikapa, is one of the main centers where Mennonite pastors are trained in Congo. There are currently 36 students enrolled at Kalonda, eight of whom are women.

At her installation, Bercy Mundedi described her vision for this ministry in a beautiful play on words, saying that she desired church leadership *formation* to lead to whole person *transformation*, especially for women and girls.¹¹

Three things about this story have challenged my earlier views:

1. **In a country with political and economic instability, war, and cultural genocide, the church remains the one of the most stable influences and beacons of hope for suffering people.** One observer recently noted that if prayer by Congolese Christians could be traded on the economic market, Congo would be the richest country on earth.
2. **One hundred years of faithful service by North Americans can be held up alongside the pain inflicted through power and privilege.**
3. **Again, women are changing the church.** Many male leaders have called for acknowledging what has already been happening across the church. These newly named women pastors are calling for education for all women in a country where the female literacy rate is below 50 percent, complicated by the common use of numerous languages.

¹⁰ See Lynda Hollinger-Janzen, “Congolese Mennonites Celebrate 100 years of God’s faithfulness and partnership,” Mennonite Mission Network (August 1, 2012); accessed November 7, 2016. See <https://www.MennoniteMission.net/news/Congolese%20Mennonites%20celebrate%20100%20years%20of%20God%20faithfulness%20and%20partnership>.

¹¹ See Lynda Hollinger-Janzen, “First woman to direct Mennonite Bible School in Congo,” Mennonite Mission Network (August 2, 2016); accessed November 2, 2016. See <https://www.MennoniteMission.net/news/First%20woman%20to%20direct%20Mennonite%20Bible%20school%20in%20Congo>.



Photo by Peter Ringenberg

Community meals at the Jubilee House in Elkhart, Indiana, included neighbors and friends.

STORY 4

Lavish hospitality at Jubilee House

According to the Gospel of Luke, Jesus is either on his way to eat, partaking of a meal, or just leaving the table.¹² This is an overstatement, of course, but it does capture the prominent place of table fellowship in Jesus' ministry. According to Luke's gospel, sharing a meal defines hospitality. But as Luke tells it, the emphasis is more on being a gracious recipient than on being a host.

While Jesus dines frequently in Luke, he never gives a dinner party. He is always a guest. Even at the Passover feast at which Jesus presides, someone else prepares and hosts the meal (22:7-8).

I learned about acts of extravagant hospitality in Elkhart, Indiana, through Jubilee House—a Mennonite Voluntary Service (MVS) unit

¹² See Luke 5:29ff, 7:36ff, 10:36ff, 11:37ff, and 14:1ff.

cosponsored by two congregations, Fellowship of Hope and my own Prairie Street Mennonite Church.¹³

From the beginning in 2007, the Jubilee House unit hosted a weekly gathering to share fellowship and food with neighbors, church members, friends from the community, and family members who were able to attend.

South-central Elkhart, where the MVS unit is located, is a culturally diverse and socio-economically challenged community. But as one MVS volunteer astutely observed, “In God’s abundance, everyone has something to contribute, whether telling a good story or helping with dishes. Community meals defy scarcity because everyone is capable of sharing something.”

Continuing, he added, “I think about how many times the Bible speaks of hospitality to the stranger. We need to learn to see the face of God and the face of Jesus in our neighbors. I really feel the Spirit when we are sitting around a community meal. So many of these midweek meals re-center me and remind me of what the kingdom of God looks like, feels like, and how it moves.”

Three things about this story have challenged my earlier views:

1. **Community meals redefine hospitality.** Everyone arrives full of gifts to share with others present for the occasion.
2. **Learning to be a gracious guest can be difficult—yet extremely important—for those of us from the dominant culture.**
3. **Small, mustard-seed events define and demonstrate the visible kingdom of God.** Every Wednesday evening, God’s kingdom was present as people gathered to share what they could. At each meal, every person found themselves blessed in their fullness and their brokenness. These were small events that spread the light of Christ throughout south-central Elkhart.

¹³ Mennonite Voluntary Service is one of the short-term mission and service opportunities provided by Mennonite Mission Network. Others include Service Adventure, Youth Venture, Journey International, SOOP and DOOR. For more details on each program, see <https://www.MennoniteMission.net/Serve>.



Photo by Karla Wimer

Campus of *La Casa Grande* in Benin.

STORY 5

***La Casa Grande* in Benin, West Africa—a ministry partnership with churches on three continents**

La Casa Grande is one of the most heartwarming ministries with which Mennonite Mission Network partners. It came into being in an amazing Spirit-filled way. I had the privilege to work with the ministry's executive director, Paulin Bossou, at our Mennonite Church USA national convention in 2015. Bossou's energy and hospitality are infectious!

Mennonites first became active in Spain in the late 1930s, providing relief during the Spanish civil war. Current ministry in Spain with Mission Network emerged from the vision of Spanish Christians who developed relationships with Belgian Mennonites in the 1960s.

For more than 30 years, Mission Network has related to emerging Anabaptist-Mennonite communities in Spain, as well as being involved in wider teaching ministries with a network of other Spanish faith communities and seminaries.

In 1997, Burgos Mennonite Church in Burgos, Spain, sent a delegation to Benin to teach at the Benin Bible Institute, a leadership training school founded by Beninese church leaders with support from Mission Network workers. While there, they met Marie Sagbohan, who welcomed children from families who had experienced severe crises, like the death of parents. When the Spanish delegation returned home, the team members couldn't shake the needs they had witnessed,

especially for children who had no one to provide food, shelter and love. And so ... they prayed.

Three years later, the fruit of this trip began to ripen in the founding of *La Casa Grande* (The Big House), a home for orphaned and abandoned children in Cotonou, Benin. The ministry was launched as a partnership between Mennonite Mission Network, the Mennonite church in Burgos, and the Christian community in Benin.

Paulin Bossou and his wife, Esther Zingbe, are the directors of *La Casa Grande*. While initially the project was focused on children who were brought to *La Casa Grande*, the organization has now expanded into a development organization that is responding to the broader needs of its community.

“*La Casa Grande* is a practical response to several ailments that undermine the Beninese society,” Bossou said. “We can now say the Beninese people, in particular, and Africans in general, need what *La Casa Grande* has to offer, not only to orphaned children, but in the areas of education, health, and community development projects.”

Among the most important needs they meet, he said, are spiritual ones. “We do everything on the basis of the love of Christ. We are trying to make sure these children can grow up in a Christian environment so that one day they may also reflect the Lord’s love to others, because we have the firm conviction that the world can change with the love of God.”

La Casa Grande in Benin is essentially a “grandchild” of Mennonite Mission Network. For Mission Network Africa director, Steve Wiebe-Johnson, it is an exciting example of listening-as-mission.



Photo by Christian Mukuna

Paulin Bossou and Esther Zingbe with three of their four children: Ruben (9), Ephraim (2), and Nathan (10). Paulin and Esther are co-directors of *La Casa Grande*.



Photo by Lynda Hollinger-Jenzen

Annoncia fills in her workbook at *La Casa Grande's Les Leders* (Leaders) School.

“Ministry follows relationship,” he said, “and when we take our partners seriously, we listen to what the Holy Spirit is saying to them. When their vision meets with our priorities, we can collaborate even though the vision didn’t originate with us.”¹⁴

Three things about this story have challenged my earlier views:

1. **Prayer is mission.** Mennonites in Spain saw a situation, but had no answers, and so they prayed for three years. We always want to act, but often, joining God’s healing activity through prayer will bear fruit as well.
2. **Local knowledge and wisdom matter.** *La Casa Grande*, as most Christian service organizations in Benin, has always been led by Beninese people, while supported by others from a consulting and behind-the-scenes approach. This has led to infrastructure that is flourishing.
3. **Mission is now “from everywhere to everywhere.”** The old colonial pattern carried out mission “from the West to the rest.” But that is now drastically changing as churches around the world become agents of change in their own right, and, on occasion, invite Western churches to join them in living into their vision for ministry.

¹⁴ See “The ‘Big House’ in Benin spans three continents,” Mennonite Mission Network (August 3, 2011); accessed November 3, 2016. See <https://www.MennoniteMission.net/news/The%20'Big%20House'%20in%20Benin%20spans%20three%20continents>.

STORY 6**Indigenous expressions of the Christian faith in the Argentine Chaco**

I had the privilege to meet Willis and Byrdalene Horst and Gretchen and Keith Kingsley early in my time at Mennonite Mission Network. The stories of their transformative way of being among the people of the Argentine Chaco made me say, “Yes!” But the story began quite differently in the earliest days of the ministry.

Mennonite missionaries were deeply engaged with the Toba people in the Argentine Chaco already in the 1940s. Initially, these efforts did not go well as missionaries, operating in the dominant culture theology and practice of the day, established a walled compound . . . and received natural resistance from the Toba/Qom people. The Mennonite workers, discouraged with their lack of progress, decided to seek counsel in 1954 from staff working for the United Bible Society. The advice they received: Abandon traditional missionary blueprints and approaches, and focus on learning from and interacting with Toba/Qom people, indigenous church leaders, their culture, and locally-generated goals and vision.

Changing course and adopting these new ministry principles, here is what the mission workers learned:



Photo courtesy of Willis Horst

Willis and Byrdalene Horst speak with Abelino Santo (Mocovi) at a community gathering.



Photo courtesy of Keith Kingsley

Gretchen and Keith Kingsley meet with a group of young people in a combined English lesson and Bible study at *Unida* church in La Primavera colony.

- The local, indigenous church was an authentic part of the body of Christ and should be respected as such.
- The mission compound had been a source of misunderstanding and conflict; it should be abandoned and disposed of.
- Miscommunication often happens through poor translation. As a result, mission workers should commit themselves to translating Scripture and other documents with Toba/Qom partners.
- A holistic understanding of mission should correspond with the local worldview—in this case, the Toba/Qom culture.
- Being advocates for legal recognition of the Toba/Qom people was part of sharing the good news of Jesus Christ with a marginalized population.¹⁵

For more than 55 years, the missionary presence of the workers of the Mennonite team in the Argentine Chaco has been involved in an earnest search for practices neither paternalistic nor colonial in nature. Given the horrors committed in the name of Christ during the historic conquest of the Americas, mission among indigenous peoples requires such sensitivity.

¹⁵ For more on this story, see Wilbert R. Shenk, *Changing Frontiers of Mission* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis, 1999), pp. 60-64.

This alternative style of mission is best summarized as walking as Jesus walked—with others who are seeking the life of Christ, prioritizing the integrity of groups and individuals, and with weakness and vulnerability instead of attitudes of superiority.¹⁶



Photo courtesy of the Sociedad Bíblica Argentina

New Bibles translated into the Qom language.

In 2016, the new translation of the Qom Bible was at last completed. In this process it was learned that this indigenous group does not identify themselves as Toba, but as Qom. Juan Victorica, a Qom leader who led the celebration to receive the newly published translation, mentioned how in the past, people told the Qom that “being a Christian was making yourself like the people of European descent and leaving behind the Qom.” This included leaving behind the Qom language. The Qom have reclaimed their cultural identity in Christian expression. Victorica added that, “Now I know God is a Qom God!”¹⁷

Three things about this story have challenged my earlier views:

1. **Learning and transformation are possible.** God was faithful through the unintended mistakes of earlier mission efforts and through the grace extended by the Toba/Qom community to their North American brothers and sisters.
2. **Indigenous expressions of the Christian faith** should be respected and cherished.
3. **Carefully translated Scripture** into the language and contextual meaning of a people can bring them fully into the family of God.

¹⁶ A recent account of this story is recorded by Willis Horst and Ute and Frank Paul in *Mission without Conquest: An Alternative Missionary Practice* (Carlisle, UK: Langham Global Library, 2015).

¹⁷ See the article by Sara Alvarez, “Qom translation helps spread God’s Word” (February 4, 2015); accessed November 2, 2016. See <https://www.MennoniteMission.net/news/Qom%20translations%20helps%20spread%20God%27s%20word>.

Conclusion

How will the church and the world view our efforts at faithfulness 50 or 100 years from now? Will we be charged with new forms of cultural insensitivity? What are we yet guilty of today?

Of these things I am certain:

- God continues to speak. May we continue to listen ... with care and faithfulness.
- God's presence of healing and hope carry the church through all the challenges of daily life.
- We continue to be called by God to establish global ministry connections and to share of ourselves. We cannot and should not do this on our own power and wisdom.

But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth (Acts 1:8, NRSV).

Jesus calls us to be globally engaged Christian disciples because we worship an active and loving global God. The church is now a worldwide, multicultural reality, and there will always be room for and need of a multi-ethnic witness to the reconciliation that has come in Jesus Christ. If we from North America are to faithfully carry the good news, then our initiatives must be carried out with great sensitivity to local culture, context, and interpretation of Scripture.

God has sated the hunger for the Bread of Life *in partnership* with the church, but also, all too often, *in spite* of it. Our historic encounters with people “outside” our worldview of Christianity include the genocide of the Crusades, the oppression and imperialism of mission-allied colonialism, and the decimation of North American indigenous peoples in order to replace them with “Christian” settlers, including Mennonites. As a church, we must name these behaviors and repent of them.

In the midst of these destructive social, political, and church movements, we celebrate the Christians whose witness was to listen to “the other” and whose mission—in addition to sharing the gospel—was to stand with people in their context. As these few stories illustrate, some of these same mission workers have served with Mennonite Mission Network and its predecessor agencies, to join with local people in building up the body of Christ in diverse cultures without imposing their own cultural biases and biblical interpretations.

We are created in love and shalom for the purpose of building relationships across many chasms.

My colleagues and I recognize that this goal has not yet been fully realized. How are we to respond to the flawed practices of the past and present? Must we abandon cross-cultural holistic witness? No. We celebrate God’s wonderful ability to use our words and actions, limited, flawed, and sometimes harmful though they may be. May God continue to reconcile all things and set things right with the world!

We are all God’s beloved children made in God’s image. We are made for the purpose of glorifying the one true God who is acting to restore healing and hope, a God whose face is always turned toward the world God loves. God’s ultimate goal is shalom—wholeness for all creatures in the created order. We are created in love for shalom with the purpose of building relationships across many chasms.

The good news is *not* that the church has a mission, but rather that God’s mission has a church. The church is called to bless, restore, and heal all the peoples of our world. May we never lose sight of God’s restoring love for all creation and peoples.

Questions for reflection and discussion

1. Paula Killough begins her reflections in this booklet by describing the negative impressions she had developed over the years of the “M” word—mission. She writes: “Mission, in my view, was the method used to accomplish the goals of colonialism—cultural genocide, coercive baptisms to Christianity, wealth and resource extraction.” How did her opening statement strike you? Did you find it surprising, shocking, offensive ... or did you find yourself resonating with her description?
2. What are the comments you hear most frequently about mission from family and friends? From members of your faith community? Your classmates or professors? The news media? Commercial film industry? Music and pop culture?
3. How do you react to the personal journey that the author describes as she became more acquainted with mission history and the lives of people committed to God’s reconciling work in the world? If you were to tell your own story with mission, what would that sound like?
4. Which of the six stories that Killough recounts struck you most?
 - Irene Weaver and India
 - The Native American experience and Peace Chief Lawrence Hart
 - The church in the Congo
 - Jubilee House hospitality
 - *La Casa Grande* in Benin
 - Indigenous expressions of the Christian faith in Argentina
5. Do you have particular stories that have shaped your views of mission, either positively or negatively?
6. Do you believe it is possible to be a witness to God’s reconciling work today in a way that respects people of other cultures and religious worldviews? Name five characteristics of a person or church that best describe what you think that might look like.

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- No. 24** Paula Killough, *The “M” Word: My personal awakening to God’s work* (2017).*

*Available in Spanish.

The “M” word

My personal awakening to God’s work

Be prepared, in this booklet, to take a journey. Your guide is Paula Killough, senior executive at Mennonite Mission Network, as she describes her changing understandings of God’s reconciling work in the world. “In 2006,” she writes, “the ‘M’ word—mission—was not a part of my vocabulary.” Mission, in her view at that time, was “the method used to accomplish the goals of colonialism—cultural genocide, coercive baptisms to Christianity, wealth and resource extraction.”

The author walks the reader through six remarkable stories that have gradually transformed her view of how mission can happen with cultural sensitivity, biblical faithfulness, and mutual respect.

This booklet would be great for use in Sunday school classes or small groups as a discussion starter for people struggling with how to engage in mission with integrity, humility, and authenticity.

—James R. Krabill
Mennonite Mission Network



Paula Killough joined the Mennonite Mission Network staff in 2008. Drawing on her past administrative experience, she serves as the senior executive for Advancement. In this role, she gives leadership to the team that serves the church by inviting congregations and individuals into relationship and toward enthusiastic participation in

mission throughout God’s world. She holds a master of divinity degree from Anabaptist Mennonite Biblical Seminary.



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