

Stories from the Global Church
told to participants of Central Plains Annual Meeting
June 2018

Ecuador

told by Don Kempf

If you visit Quito Mennonite Church on a Sunday morning, around half of those attending are refugees. They come to the church through the MCC supported Refugee Assistance Program. These families are helped with clothing, food, toys, propane bottles, mattresses, blankets, cook stoves, school uniforms, school supplies, hygiene kits, diapers, medications, small amounts of capital to start a microbusiness, and psychiatric help. 45 families receive basic food weekly.

Previously, most of the refugees were from Colombia. Now they also come from Cuba, Haiti, Nigeria, Venezuela, Egypt, Sri Lanka, Afghanistan, Syria, and other countries. This program is unique in that all of them are invited to participate in the church community to have a support system. The women in the church meet monthly with refugee women to help them integrate into the church family.

The church also has an annual Christmas banquet, inviting refugee families to a meal, as Christmas is a hard time for them away from their families. They are careful not to offend Muslims, but they are always invited to church, to workshops, and the Christmas party.

Jennifer Rey, who was the coordinator says, "We first meet the material needs and then we listen. Many of the people get close to the church and start attending. This is the way we evangelize. We don't just talk and we also don't have theological studies. Many people come to church just because they were listened to."

Venezuela

told by Don Kempf

Our sisters and brothers in Venezuela continue to draw people into their congregations by evangelizing through seminary courses. These courses are teach Anabaptist theology. They are offered to anyone who is interested, whether they are already members of their church, members of other denominations, or unbelievers. When we visit Venezuela, we hear many testimonies of changed lives of the students. They are also spreading the good news of peace through what they call "Cooperative Games". These games, which are played with students and teachers in public schools, teach children about love, respect, empathy, esteem for others, self-respect, solidarity, cooperation, sensitization against bullying, conflict resolution, non-violence and peaceful resistance, and the Love of God.

This movement was initiated by Erwin Mirabal, who continues in leadership. He sums up their vision and work with the following words.

“Today in Venezuela, food can’t be purchased. Commerce is paralyzed, and medicine is lacking. Basic services fail. The price of this disaster is paid with lives. As Mennonites, we feel a deep commitment to our country. The Anabaptist vision has helped us to understand the message of the Lord Jesus Christ more clearly, and to commit ourselves to this immense task. We announce the good news of peace and reconciliation. We cultivate nonviolence and the love of enemies in our own lives. We gather around a shared table and trust in God, our Provider, who frees us from the tyranny of goods, to follow Jesus in his dedication to give abundant life.

The Anabaptist vision teaches us that when we are willing to follow Jesus and behave like the lamb, then we have the strength of a lion (Revelation 5:4-6). Although this vision may seem weak, we have been able to experience its power. It has been our commitment during these years to:

- Learn the Anabaptist vision.
- Ask the Lord to allow us to experience the Anabaptist vision through the Holy Spirit.
- Share the Anabaptist vision with others.
- Form small communities of disciples.

We want to share this message that we have received and experienced in each of Venezuela’s states.”

Tanzania

told by David Boshart

After 10 days in Tanzania, Bishop Kateti and I were having tea – we were constantly taking tea breaks – and the Bishop took a risk with me.

Several Tanzanian Bishops visited our convention last year in Orlando. Bishop Kateti said to me, “We noticed that there were people there who were talking about same-sex marriage.”

He said, “We don’t have that here. But we saw their workshops and their books in the exhibit hall.” (And I’m thinking, “Uh oh, I think I know where this is going...” But I was wrong.)

The Bishop said, “Our hosts kept steering us away from their displays and those workshops. They told us to go hear David Shenk’s workshop about Christians and Muslims in dialogue. They forgot that David Shenk was born in Tanzania – we already know everything he has to teach us. We wanted to understand what was going on these other conversations.”

Then he asked me a question to which he already knew the answer, “Is this the reason why churches and conferences are leaving Mennonite Church USA?”

He then switched from inquiring mode to teaching mode. He said, “I don’t understand that way of thinking.” His confusion wasn’t about a specific point of disagreement. His confusion was over the impulse to leave the church because of disagreement.

He said, “We don’t have this disagreement here. But, for me, I can’t judge these people. If they came to me, I would work with them. But when you leave the body, you can’t help the church in its discernment anymore. Here, when we have a disagreement, we study the scriptures together, and then we say, ‘Well, we disagree,’ and then we go back to doing the business of the church.”

Now, I was on the verge of saying, “Yes, but, Bishop, we have been disagreeing about the scriptures on these matters for 35 years. You don’t know what it’s like.” Before I embarrassed myself, I believe the Holy Spirit intervened because it suddenly dawned on me that when I heard pastors in Bishop Kateti’s church introduce themselves, it was common for them to say, “I am so and so and I am the husband of one wife and we have so many children....” Tanzanian leaders have been struggling with their disagreements about polygamy since 1934.

Bishop Kateti said, “When our North American brothers, the missionaries, saw us in our disagreements, they said to us, ‘You need to stay together in spite of your disagreements.’ So we, your spiritual grandchildren, don’t understand what is happening to the church that told us that.” And then Bishop recited the text from Philippians, “And if you disagree about anything, that too God will make clear to you, only hold on to what you have already attained.”

After admonishing me, he also offered a final word of grace. He said, “I know the issues are real for you. They are very painful. People are hurting each other. We have committed ourselves as a national church to pray for Mennonite Church USA – every day and in all of our gatherings.

“It was from you that we first received the Gospel, and we are so thankful! Now, we see that you are suffering from division caused by your disagreements. We are praying for you to allow Christ Jesus to make you one.”

Democratic Republic of Congo

told by Rod Hollinger-Janzen

ADOLPHINE TSHIAMA- A WOMAN AFTER GOD’S OWN HEART

“I am the vine, you are the branches. If you remain in me, and I in you, you will bear much fruit, because apart from me you can do nothing.” John 15:5

Adolphine Tshiamo is a strong woman. You can see that strength, it comes from the inside, out. She is friendly, unhurried. There is always time to greet people. But you’ll not be with Adolphine long before you’ll see her eyes flash and you’ll get some sense of the level of perseverance and determination that she possesses.

Adolphine was born in the city of Luebo, in the Kasai region of the Democratic Republic of Congo. Her parents were Christians, and her father was a pastor. She learned faith from infancy.

After her marriage in 1978, she began a career by studying law at a university in the city of Tshikapa. She also bore 6 children. Eventually Adolphine ended up in the education field. She currently is the Director of a 1400 student Mennonite-run primary school and oversees a staff of 22. She is a competent professional with considerable management ability. Perhaps that was a reason why her peers in the national women’s organization of Mennonite Church of Congo voted her as national President in 2012. They may have seen her competencies both as a school administrator and as a faithful church member. It may also have been because during a time of intense conflict in the church between 2004-2007, Adolphine became a leader in a different way. She organized regular informal prayer gatherings of church women to pray for an end to the conflict. She is a woman of deep faith, and she does not hesitate to name prayer as the single most important activity for a believer.

Once Adolphine was settled in her post as national women's President, she got to work. She impressed upon myself and others that her leadership team had identified literacy as the number one issue for women in the Mennonite Church of Congo. Eventually she played a role in gathering her peers from sister Mennonite denominations, and now they are working together at a coordinated literacy program focused on training congregationally based trainers. The trainers are taking their acquired skill in literacy training home to their congregations where they are launching literacy classes. These classes are serving mostly women and children who have not yet had the privilege of attending school. Adolphine, having enjoyed access to a university education, is now reaching out to the most vulnerable, and giving back by raising others up.

Adolphine is also familiar with grief. She lost her husband in 2011 after 33 years of marriage. In May 2017, during the violence that spread through the Kamuina Nsapu rebellion in the Kasai region, she learned that her brother, her brother's son, along with the brother's wife, the son's wife, and two of the son's children, had been massacred by a rival ethnic group. Completely crushed, she reached out for prayer.

The next month, Mennonite Central Committee mobilized the church in Tshikapa to assist in doing an assessment of the needs of the large numbers of displaced persons who were then flooding into the city to escape the violence. Adolphine, suffering deeply from her own losses, was called upon to minister to others. Somehow she found strength. "Without me, you can do nothing." She sat and cried with many displaced persons, listening to story after story of horror and incredible suffering. She was able to tell them, "Yes, I know, I believe you. I understand your pain. I am suffering too, this is what happened to me."

And so Adolphine received into herself and absorbed not only her own pain, but also the pain of many others.

Several months later, she received an amazing phone call. Her brother's wife, his son's wife, and the two children had miraculously shown up alive in a town several hundred kilometers east of where her brother and his son had been murdered. It was a sort of resurrection. She was flooded with joy.

Adolphine is serving her church by facing into the deep darkness of evil and caring for its victims. God's power is shining through her as she shares hope with the vulnerable and hopeless. "If you remain in me, and I in you, you will bear much fruit."

