

CANADIAN MENNONITE

December 1, 2023 Volume 27 Number 24



Scar of Bethlehem

Palestinians reflect on a Christmas like no other

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What kind of peace church are we?

BY WILL BRAUN

As Israel obliterates Gaza, and hostages await sunlight, it's easy to look away. Indeed, sometimes we must. Not everyone can take every war to heart. But this war demands something of us collectively.

Mennonite Church Canada issued a brief statement on November 2, calling churches to combat antisemitism and Islamophobia in Canada and pray for a “just peace” in the Middle East.

A year ago, MC Canada hosted Jack Sara and Yousef AlKhouri of Bethlehem Bible College, an official partner of MC Canada. What would they think of our statement?

A statement, however good, if unaccompanied by action, means little. Still, surely a peace church could condemn the killing of children and capture of hostages. Surely it could invite Palestinians to address us, or launch a social media campaign to express solidarity with Palestinian churches, or put out an alternate Advent litany, or send an emissary of solace to Israel and Palestine.

Why have our leaders not acted boldly? Four considerations:

1. One could say Mennonite Central Committee (MCC) takes care of advocacy on behalf of Mennonites, while denominational bodies do church work. MCC has written to the prime minister and met with politicians to call for peace. At its encouragement, over a thousand people have written their elected officials about Gaza. MCC also works with partners to address the humanitarian crisis.

The MCC response, whether adequate or not, does not let MC Canada off the hook. We can still speak and we can still discern how to respond as a church. There are options beyond advocacy. For instance, Mennonite World Conference president Henk Stenvers issued an October 9 “pastoral letter.”

2. As a priesthood of all believers, those of us in the pews must ask if we have given church bodies the funds required to take bold action.

3. A third consideration in assessing MC Canada inaction is that the Palestine-Israel networks—volunteer groups officially mandated by the denomination—are doing the collective work. While these groups are showing conviction and heart, they do not speak on behalf of leaders. Leaders still bear responsibility.

4. In the current structure, MC Canada cannot speak or act publicly without the approval of each regional church. If one objects or stalls, MC Canada remains silent.

In fact, it took the regions seven weeks to approve a webinar in response a call from Palestinian churches.

After 12 years of denominational restructuring and visioning—going back to the lead-up to the Future Directions Task Force—our peace church is somehow unable or unwilling to respond decisively to the killing of thousands of children in Gaza and the killing of Israelis by Hamas.

After years of consultations, consultants and organizational diagrams, we've put the dove on our logo in a cage.

As Gaza goes to hell, our leaders have struck a committee. It will untangle the structural work of previous committees so that we can act effectively. Important work.

However, the structure is not entirely to blame. It does not prevent regional churches from acting, but MC Alberta appears to be the only regional church to do so, sending a letter to Ottawa.

Any new structure needs to find a way to “lean into tension,” to quote Shel Boese (page 14). Real differences exist within our denomination. We must do better than set up a system that allows the majority to out-vote the minority.

This war demands that we look beyond ourselves. Maybe the re-structuring committee should be sent to Israel and Palestine with a mandate to deliver solace, listen to Jewish and Palestinian partners—surely some of the most outstanding peace advocates alive—and return with a new vision for our peace church.

This war invites us to turn our face toward the Holy Land (page 8), the place where God broke into hearts and history as a tiny, tender miracle in a time of trouble.

What better time than Christmas to turn toward Bethlehem.

We say a temporary farewell to Betty Avery, our designer, who is now on maternity leave. We wish her the best in the gentle adventures ahead. ❧



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“Scar of Bethlehem” is a piece created by renowned graffiti artist Banksy. It sits in the Walled Off Hotel which opened in Bethlehem in 2017. The hotel, which was designed by Banksy and sits next to the concrete partition wall erected by Israel, boasts “the worst view of any hotel in the world.”

PHOTO: USAMA NICOLA

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Graham prays with Netanyahu

In November, Franklin Graham, son of Billy, toured areas of Israel attacked by Hamas, and then met with Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu. He offered armored ambulances to replace ones damaged during the attack and he prayed with Netanyahu, asking that God would “give him victory over his enemies.”

Source: *Washington Post*

Photo: Wikimedia Commons / Cornstalker



Nuns and activists square off

Construction of a 3,500-seat chapel and accompanying buildings in a scenic valley in southeastern France has pitted nuns against environmentalists. The Catholic complex, under construction since 2019, will accommodate pilgrims to the area. On October 17, a nun was filmed tackling a protester who had broken into the construction site.

Source: *National Catholic Register*



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Argentine president attacks Pope

Javier Milei, the president-elect of Argentina, has described Pope Francis as a “malignant presence on earth” and a “filthy leftist.” The Trump-esque Milei, who has strong ties to Israel and Judaism, easily won the presidential election in the nation with a strong Catholic tradition.

Source: *The Catholic Register*



FLICKR PHOTO BY PERCITA

Child liberation theology

The emerging field of child liberation theology says children have the same worth as adults, and children’s time in church teaches segregation. R. L. Stollar, a main figure behind the theology, says it begins with “the child that is Jesus.” He says churches should ask children: How are we treating you, and how can we treat you better?

Source: *rlstollar.com*, *Religion News Service*



PHOTO BY THE WHITE HOUSE

Bethlehem pastors visit DC

Two pastors from Bethlehem arrived in Washington, DC on November 27 with a letter for President Joe Biden from numerous church leaders in Bethlehem. The pastors, Jack Sara and Munther Isaac, both serve at Bethlehem Bible College. "All we want for Christmas is a constant and comprehensive cease-fire and an end to this war," said Isaac.

Source: Religion News Service

Lights out in Bethlehem

Bethlehem's municipal authorities have decided there will be no Christmas tree or decorative lights in Manger Square this year. Authorities said: "Our people in Gaza are being massacred and killed in cold blood. Therefore, it is not appropriate at all to have such festivities."

Source: Relevant and The Telegraph



FLICKR PHOTO BY BEN & GAB

Manger Square in a normal year.

50 YEARS AGO

The use of scripture to define the role of women

It is possible to misinterpret scripture. The worst type of misinterpretation is when we use scripture to verify our own wants, desires and preconceived notions.

Whole generations used texts of scripture to justify slavery, when it was clearly written that in Christ "there is neither bond nor free". Most of the Christian world even today is able to use the scriptures to justify war, racial discrimination, economic disparity, nationalism, individualism etc., etc. How is it possible?

One of the areas in which we are just now discovering that we have, en masse, misinterpreted scripture is in relation to the status of women in society and in the church. We have used scripture to reinforce a view of women that certainly did not come from Jesus or the early church—that is, from scripture. We have used scripture to reinforce the status quo, the cultural practises of western society.

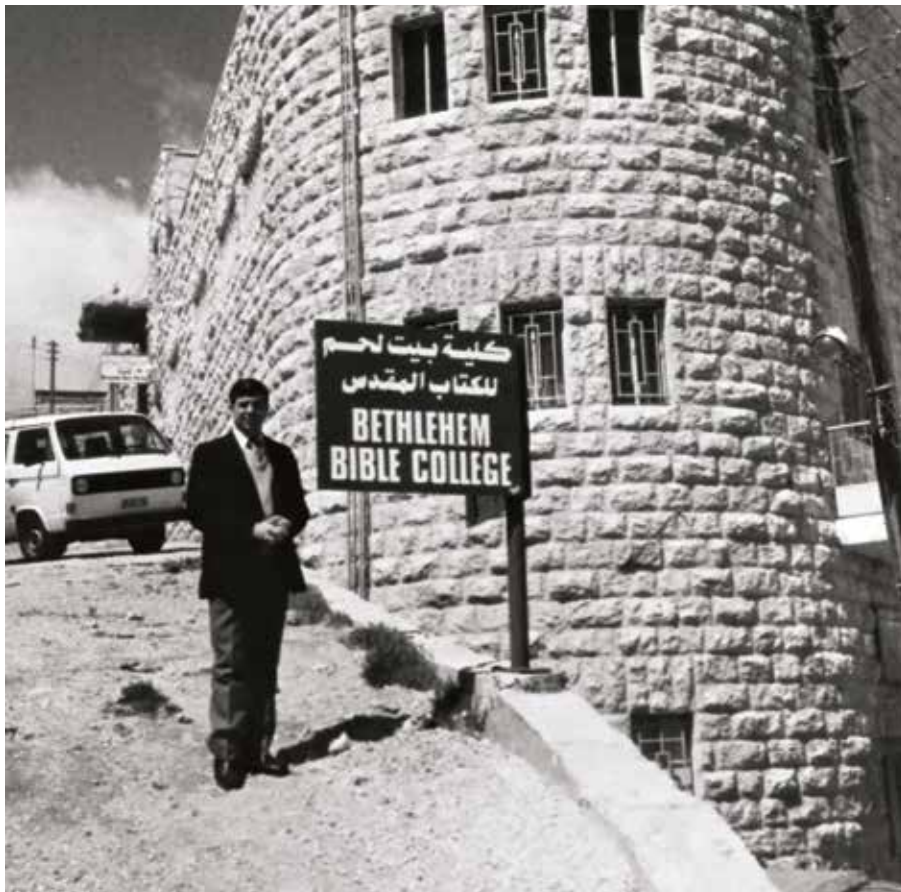
If, however, we read the biblical text afresh we will see how truly revolutionary the scriptures are on the subject. The problem was that a few decades after its beginning the church took its norms from society rather than the New Testament and the cause of women, so notably begun, suffered defeat. We have not to this day returned to the insights of the New Testament on this subject.

MENNONITE REPORTER, NOV. 12, 1973



©nakedpastor

A moment from yesterday



Bishara Awad stands outside Bethlehem Bible College in Bethlehem in 1985. Awad, a Palestinian Christian, founded the school in 1979. He had previously served with Mennonite Central Committee in a Palestinian school and attended Mennonite Brethren Biblical Seminary in Fresno, California, in 1981-82.

Text: Staff

Photo: Kathy Bergen/Mennonite Heritage Archives



/// Readers write

✉ Don't ignore pain and rage

I was encouraged to see *Canadian Mennonite* give space to understanding the conflict in Palestine that is currently so front and centre (“Palestinian voices,” October 20; “Attending to war,” November 3).

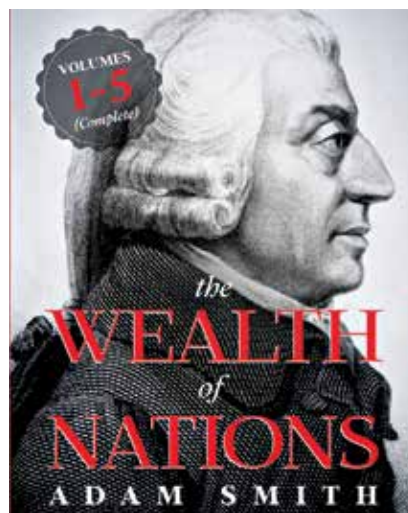
I was especially pleased to see the focus on the stories of Palestinians themselves. Given that our own government has averted its eyes from the oppression that Palestinians have been under for the past 75 years, let us not look away from these courageous people who have trusted us with their pain. If our government will not stand with them, let us at least be brave enough to say, “Not in my name.”

I hold dear the commitment to peace, but sometimes we ignore the pain and the rage of oppression and injustice in our race to see the culmination of peace. We need also to hear and feel the pain.

Let's keep looking in the eyes of our Palestinian brothers and sisters. Let us weep with them at the outrageous injustices perpetrated against them. Then, let us do all what

is in our power and influence to work for an end to the oppression.

JOAN BARKMAN, WINNIPEG, MANITOBA
(ABERDEEN MENNONITE CHURCH)



/// Online comments

✉ Sustainability and capitalism

Great piece (“Can we talk about capitalism?” November 17). Yesterday, in a faculty/student gathering on campus, we were discussing that any definition of sustainability that did not mention capitalism was suspect. It is a very open question right now as to whether the two are compatible.

BLAKE D. POLAND

✉ Alternatives to capitalism

Thank you for daring to talk about capitalism (“Can we talk about capitalism?” November 17). It is a system that I have grown up within and didn't think about much until the last few years, when I started learning about alternatives.

When I grew up, words like socialism and communism were considered evil. As I get older, I want more cooperation instead of competition; more equitable income and resource sharing, resulting in less crime and punishment; more connection to nature and less emphasis on tech and working in offices; less hierarchy and fewer material goods.

I'm slowly changing how I spend time to create my world around these new values.

ANDREW BLAKE

✉ The peace button and the poppy

Thank you for this article (“To remember is to work for peace,” October 20). I'm not a Mennonite, but I wear my peace button every November 11 alongside a poppy.

Many years ago I met a Mennonite couple who were wearing the buttons, and I immediately wanted one for myself. They gave me one of theirs. Since then, I've twice brought some to my Quaker meeting, where they are much appreciated.

My parents used to wear white poppies in England, but I wouldn't feel good about that. I think that wearing the peace button alongside a poppy recognizes the heroism and sacrifice of those who have fought in wars. It also recognizes that war is never the answer, and that we always need to be working toward peaceful solutions.

CHRISTINE TANSLEY



/// Milestones

Baptisms

John Farrell—Brussels Mennonite Fellowship, Brussels Ont., Nov. 19, 2023

Isabel Hough—Brussels Mennonite Fellowship, Brussels Ont., Nov. 12, 2023

Deaths

Driedger—Harry Alfred, 92, (b. Dec. 12, 1930; d. Oct. 17, 2023), Hanover Mennonite Church, Hanover, Ont.

Driedger—Harvey, 80 (b. May 7, 1943; d. Nov. 2, 2023) Foothills Mennonite Church, Calgary, Alta.

Jantz—Marlys (nee Epp), 80, (b. Dec. 7, 1942; d. Nov. 22, 2023), North Star Mennonite Church, Drake, Sask.

Shantz—John "Lowell," 89, (b. Dec 8, 1933; d. Sept 28, 2023), Hanover Mennonite Church, Hanover, Ont.

Unruh—Johann (John), 91, (b. Jan. 29, 1933; d. Sept. 29, 2023), St. Jacobs Mennonite Church, Kitchener, Ont.

Be in Touch

- Send letters to letters@canadianmennonite.org. Our mailing address is on page 3.
- Please keep it concise and respectful. Any substantial edits to letters will be done in consultation with the writer.
- If you have feedback not intended for publication, please contact editor@canadianmennonite.org or at 1-800-378-2524 ext 5.

Canadian Mennonite welcomes Milestones announcements within four months of the event. Please send Milestones announcements by e-mail to milestones@canadianmennonite.org, including the congregation name and location. When sending death notices, please also include birth date and last name at birth if available.



The ruins of Al Zahra, south of Gaza City, after Israeli airstrikes.

PHOTO BY MOHAMMED ZANOUN/ACTIVE STILLS

Scar of Bethlehem

Palestinian Christians reflect on a Christmas like no other

What will Christmas be like in Bethlehem this year? What can we learn about the birth of Christ from those who live where he was born and where he lived?

Below, we share reflections on Christmas by Palestinian Christians. We asked them about Christmas in general and the words of Mary and Zechariah, from Luke 1, in particular. Mary speaks of the lowly lifted up; Zechariah speaks of “the dawn from on high” that will “give light to those who sit in darkness and the shadow of death.”

We are honoured by those who agreed to share deeply in these intense times. We also acknowledge Kathy Bergen, Joanna Hiebert Bergen and Byron Rempel-Burkholder, whose friendships with these people create a bridge between Palestine and our pages.

While Bethlehem is located in the West Bank, not Gaza, the anguish and fear of Gaza is shared by Palestinians in the West Bank and beyond. Plus, under cover of the war in Gaza, violence toward Palestinians in the West Bank has increased dramatically, with a reported 231 Palestinians killed there since October 7.

– Eds.

Hello God

I find myself reflecting on the words of Mary. While carrying Jesus in her womb, Mary said that God “looked with favour on the lowliness of his servant,” and “brought down the powerful . . . and lifted up the lowly.”

However, during these days in which it is the language of power that prevails, both financially and militarily, it seems the Lord is looking with favour on the powerful. They are getting more powerful while the lowly are becoming more lowly.

This phenomenon was so glaringly clear in the latest carnage on the Gaza Strip. Like Christ on the cross, the whole Palestinian population, who are mostly refugees from the 1948 Nakba (see sidebar) felt hopelessly forsaken as their families, homes and institutions were continuously shelled.

The area now looks like it has been hit by an atomic bomb. The powerful

international community, led by the U.S. and European countries, watched while the victims and the faithful cried out, wondering where the Lord was in the midst of all that was happening. He certainly was not with the lowly.

And that is why I felt like joining them with a few lines of Dolly Parton’s song “Hello God.”

*Hello God
Are you out there? . . .
We really need you
We can't make it without you
Hello God
We beseech you
In the name of all that's true
Hello God
Please forgive us
For we know not what we do
Give us one more chance
To prove ourselves to you
Hello God*

Nakba

The *Nakba* (“catastrophe” in Arabic) refers to the violent expulsion of approximately three-quarters of all Palestinians from their homes and homeland by Zionist militias and the new Israeli army during the state of Israel’s establishment (1947-49).—Institute for Middle East Understanding.

With all the devastation of the Gaza Strip, as well as the killing and suffering of so many people in the rest of the Occupied Territories during the last two months, all church leaders in the Holy Land decided to cancel Christmas festivities and limit them to church services and donations to the needy, to enable them to celebrate a Christmas meal with their families.



PHOTO BY MOHAMMED ZAANOUN/ACTIVE STILLS

After weeks of bombardment, Palestinians head to the southern part of the Gaza Strip on November 9. The UN says 1.7 million of Gaza’s 2.3 million people have been displaced since October 7.



PHOTO BY WAHAJ BANI MOUFLEH/ACTIVE STILLS

A child reacts during an Israeli military raid on Balata refugee camp near Nablus, West Bank, on November 9.

Maybe that will help us reflect on the true meaning of Christmas and not be driven by material or superficial festivities that we have borrowed from the Western world despite the humility of the birth of our Lord Jesus Christ in our country.

Nevertheless, Christmas has always been a joyful time of family gatherings, exchange of meaningful mementos and singing of carols. So during these difficult times we hope and pray that the spirit of Christmas will usher us into a new era of justice and peace worthy of this land called Holy by the birth, teachings, death and resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Samia Khoury co-founded the Sabeel Ecumenical Liberation Theology Center in East Jerusalem. Now 90 years old, Khoury served as the first president of the YWCA of Palestine and later as president of an elementary school, in addition to other roles in education and peace building.

Looking to heaven

In the ancient Roman Empire, the gods seemed always to be on the side of the prideful and powerful, but not in Mary's song and Zechariah's prayer. God is with those who are meek and humble.

Humility here is of those who have nothing but God to trust. They are

those who have no power of their own, or they made the decision not to use power but to fully rely on God's intervention to liberate them and bring order to a disorderly world.

Mary's song and Zechariah's prayer speak to Palestinians today. As Israel and its western partners continue to rely on their own power and their imperial network, Palestinians, on the other hand, look up to heaven and trust in a God who listens and sees, a God who is not threatened by the Empire, a God of light whom darkness cannot resist, a God who promises and delivers, a God whose Kingdom will bring about redemption and just peace for creation and humanity.

Yousef AlKhouri teaches at Bethlehem Bible College in Bethlehem. He is from Gaza, though he is currently studying in Europe. He visited Canada last year at the invitation of Mennonite Church Canada.

Longing for dawn

As a Palestinian who has been living for many decades under brutal military occupation, an apartheid regime, violence, suffering and a constant struggle for survival, the words of Mary and Zechariah offer me a message of hope, reassurance and promise of peace.

Mary's words reflect an emphasis on God's recognition of the marginalized and the oppressed. In the place where I live, these words remind us, Palestinians, that God sees and cares for those

who are considered lowly or powerless in society. It provides comfort and a sense of worth to us who feel marginalized, abandoned and forgotten by many countries and churches amidst this genocidal war on Gaza and the Palestinians.

Zechariah's words echo a longing for an end to darkness and death and a promise for a dawn which will bring us hope and new life. The light of God's mercy and guidance will shine even in the darkest of times, providing a path toward justice and peace.

These verses do serve as a reminder for us that we are not alone in our struggle. The words speak of God's favor and mercy, providing a source of strength, solace and a vision for a better future filled with prosperity and salvation.

Rifat Odeh Kassis is the Palestine candidate for the UN Committee on Rights of the Child, and the general coordinator of Kairos Palestine. He lives in Beit Sahour, just east of Bethlehem.

Do not fear

In the gospel accounts of the birth of Jesus, what strikes me most this year is the prevalence of fear. Fear is the first reaction of the characters in the stories: Mary's encounter with the angel Gabriel (Luke 1:30), Joseph's encounter in his dream (Matthew 1:20), King Herod and all of Jerusalem upon hearing the good news (Matthew 2:3), Zechariah's encounter in the temple (Luke 2:13) and the shepherds' reaction to the appearance of the angels (Luke 2:10).

While all of these actors are understandably afraid, they are assured that



PHOTO BY MOHAMMED ZANOUN/ACTIVE STILLS.

At the Nasser hospital in Khan Yunis, Gaza, a child carries the body of his brother, killed by an Israeli bombardment in southern Gaza on November 21. Three of the four photos on these pages were taken by Mohammed Zaanoun, an award-winning Palestinian photojournalist whose house in Gaza City was destroyed. Zaanoun's work has appeared in Le Monde, the Toronto Star, The Atlantic and Agence France-Presse. See activestills.org.

despite their fear, *God is with them*. They are our ancestors in faith.

In Luke's account, an encounter with the sacred is met with fear. This teaches me that faith, specifically, a strong faith, can harness fear.

Characters in Luke's account also represent the poor and lowly in their societies. Mary, a young girl from Nazareth—an unexpected place fraught with strife, resistance and trauma—finds favour in God's eyes and becomes the medium of liberation. *"For he has looked with favour on the lowliness of his servant. Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed"* (Luke 1: 48).

Zechariah and Elizabeth, an older couple serving in a small town in the Judean hills, receive a blessing from God at a time when society deem them retired.

The shepherds, nameless young boys most likely paid minimum wage to herd their landlord's flock, are elevated to be among the first witnesses of God incarnate. Luke's account of the birth of Jesus focuses on the reversal of unjust structural systems. *"He has brought down the powerful from their thrones and lifted up the lowly"* (Luke 1:52).

Many Palestinians have been living with fear. This has intensified since October 7. The unprecedented loss of life in Gaza, reaching more than 14,000 lives (at time of printing), is proof that Palestinian lives are viewed as disposable, worthless. Despite ongoing international support for a ceasefire, it seems no one is able to stop injustices against Palestinians.

In Luke, the angels tell the shepherds to *"go and find a child wrapped in bands of cloth lying in a manger"* (2:13). In past weeks, Palestinians have found many babies wrapped in bands of cloth pulled from the rubble. Some estimate that 6,000 children have died in Gaza so far.

As a Palestinian Christian, I ask, is it enough to know that "it will be better"?

I'm trying to make sense of the barrage of images and sounds of death: numerous images of Palestinian babies plucked from the rubble, babies with

death certificates preceding their birth certificates, families being wiped out of the registry. We have been witnessing a high-speed and high-tech *Nakba* (see sidebar).

Amid the devastation, we cling to a thread of the promise that injustices will not remain.

Can we see in ourselves the characters who played a positive role in the nativity story? Can we see something of Mary in ourselves—Mary who goes against social norms, embraces her fears head on, is displaced several times, sacrifices her body and youth to bring liberation to the world? Can we see Zechariah when we see God working in our doubts to experience impossibilities? Can we see Elizabeth, who does not judge Mary but accepts her part in God's plan?

We are reluctant to see in ourselves the spiritual leaders in Herod's court, who were also afraid, but used their position and knowledge of scripture to be on the right side of power. Or the soldiers, who follow their rulers' orders and massacre the children in and around Bethlehem. They killed innocent babies just because they

were born in the same place as God incarnate.

Can we see these characters lurking within us as well, even if we do not want them to be there?

This is the context Palestinians face. Some of us are grieving the loss of loved ones. Others fear their loss.

And many of us are grappling with hope.

In this reality, we are afraid.

The Advent season is when we look to the stories of our ancestors of faith and respond to the promise that *God is with us*.

In this season, we Palestinians look to the stories of our ancestors' fears and cry out: *God be with us!*

Shadia Qubti is a Palestinian Christian born and raised in Nazareth. She worked in faith-based peacebuilding and advocacy initiatives in Israel and Palestine for 15 years. She is a recent graduate of Vancouver School of Theology and currently serves as community engagement Animator at Trinity Grace United Church in Vancouver. ✎

/// For discussion

1. Church leaders in the Holy Land have cancelled festivities this Christmas; how will the reality in Bethlehem inform your Christmas?
2. What questions do you have about the suffering that people in the Holy Land are experiencing?
3. Considering the Palestinian perspective, how do you interpret the words of Mary and Zechariah about the lowly being lifted up and the "dawn from on high" visiting those in darkness?
4. Mary speaks of the lowly and the powerful; which category do you see Christians in Canada fitting into? What is our role in bringing about God's kingdom?
5. What is your prayer for Samia, Yousef, Rifat and Shadia?

—Canadian Mennonite staff

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OPINION

FROM OUR LEADERS

False unity vs. true unity

Shel Boese

In B.C. we've heard stories of churches in at least two denominations choosing to use secondary or tertiary doctrines and opinions as litmus tests for belonging.

These groups are doubling down on the wrong ways of trying to maintain unity.

The more you focus on secondary sources of unity, the farther away you get from life-giving mission, unity that allows for real questions and the orthodox centre, which is Jesus.

I have heard of people misusing their power and spiritually abusing those who are in different places in their personal journeys of holiness. We are called instead to lean into tension with one another, because grace and mercy requires it. You cannot scare or bind others into holiness, nor can you enter the kingdom by using violent speech to enforce a bounded set (focusing on hard and fast lines or rules to determine who can and who cannot be part of a community).

We arrive at compromises, recognizing that the recreated body is not complete until the final resurrection and restoration of all things in Christ and the new kingdom.

Some years ago, David Boshart, who is now the president of Anabaptist Mennonite Biblical Seminary, did a deep dive into the topic of unity. In his article, "Becoming a united church in a world of division," Boshart identified four foundations that conventional wisdom suggests unity might be built on. He wrote:

1. Sameness. *Sameness implies that conformity is the path to unity. The church in many places mirrors the broader culture, in which people are becoming less loyal to historic roots and, instead, gather into like-minded communities defined by common taste*



UNSPASH PHOTO BY KELLY SIKKEMA

in music and worship arts, political party, race, and class. Seeking unity on the basis of sameness places unity in opposition to diversity.

2. Niceness. *In an attempt to hold people together, it is believed that unity will be the outcome of our niceness. We see this tendency when we cut off important conversations because we "agree to disagree," when we pretend that differences do not exist and when we avoid topics because someone's feelings might get hurt.*

3. Tolerance. *Some in our culture suggest that unity is found in our ability to tolerate "the other" as long as "the other" doesn't limit our own rights and freedoms. Setting the bar for unity at the level of "tolerance," however, implies that mere tolerance results in a whole relationship. But there is a power issue in this view that undermines unity. For example, if I "tolerate" you, you are present in my circle because I allow you to be. This basis for unity presumes the one who is tolerated is "less than" the*

one who tolerates.

4. Coercion. *"Unity" in our culture is built on a belief that if I can force you to act like me, we will get along. When one group wins the culture or international war, we will have peace and can live as one people. This leads to a world where people believe that the ends justify the means.*

"While all these foundations for unity operate in our culture today, they do not equal the unity reflected in the prayer of Jesus; that is, they are not the foundations of Christian unity," Boshart wrote. "As Christians, we are concerned with unity because this was the hope of Jesus for the church."

If these four things can't hold us together, what can? I suggest that a centre-set approach—a focus on a clearly defined centre and attention to one's trajectory toward or away from it—is the answer.

Jesus is the centre of our approach. So many other sources promise a false holiness and false clarity that is shattered in a second. When we focus on Jesus, we find a broader way to talk about what holds us together.

There is no perfect church or organization. The adage is true: the grass is greener where you water it.

We are wrestling with applying centre-set approaches to unity in Mennonite Church B.C. We invite the rest of the church to join us.

Mark Baker's 2022 book, *Centered-Set Church*, is helpful. Our Jesus Collective friends have worked a lot of this out as well.

There is only one source of unity that can hold us together and unite us on mission, and that is Jesus. ☺

Shel Boese is executive minister of Mennonite Church B.C. He can be reached at shelboese@mcbc.ca.

THE CHURCH HERE AND THERE

Cultural or biblical?

Arli Klassen

It is exactly 100 years ago that my congregation, First Mennonite Church in Kitchener, divided over the issue of women's head coverings.

Two-thirds of the congregation left because they did not want women to be forced to wear head coverings. They moved one block up the hill to create Stirling Avenue Mennonite Church.

A century later, we are aghast that a

two controversial topics, so I mentioned others: sexuality and gender, ordaining women in ministry, baptism, gifts of the Holy Spirit, divorce and remarriage.

I am intrigued that the leaders didn't understand why people would get worked up about some of these issues. If it wasn't an issue for them, it was hard for them to understand why it was a serious issue somewhere else in MWC.

Convictions, and that includes all of the controversial topics currently being discussed in MWC member churches.

This is a hard concept. How can we be in communion with people who don't interpret the Bible the same way we do?

This question is relevant everywhere, at all levels of the church.

I talked with the Caribbean church leaders about the importance of obedience in following Jesus, the Bible and the church.

I also talked about the importance of unity in the church. Jesus's prayer was for unity among his followers. Paul's plea is for unity in the early church, particularly the struggles between Gentile Christians and Jewish Christians.

Some of my discussion partners nodded and others were quite troubled. It is hard for some to imagine that something they believe is biblically wrong can be accepted by Mennonite Christians in another part of the world.

We came back often to the question of what is cultural and what is biblical, and how to do biblical interpretation. The answers to these questions are not always obvious.

I like the idea of holding two contrasting ideas together and that we are called to both. I believe that as Mennonite Christians we are called to a life of obedient discipleship and we are called to live in unity.

Neither are possible with just our own pure determination, but both are fuelled by the grace of the Holy Spirit.

I pray we will welcome the Spirit in both. ❧



UNSPASH PHOTO BY PRISCILLA DU PREEZ

church would split over such an issue.

I related this story to some of the leaders of the Mennonite churches I recently visited in the Caribbean as part of my work with Mennonite World Conference (MWC). One of them had a very quick response: "Oh, that's a cultural issue, not biblical."

I tried to push back, but they did not see that this issue could be something that was defined as a question of obedience to the Bible, to Jesus and to the church.

In all four countries where I visited Mennonite churches recently, we discussed the current divisive issues in the MWC communion.

Most people could name only one or

The only issue that mattered to all of them was sexuality and gender, and these leaders saw that one as different than all the other topics I mentioned.

Of course, they wanted to know MWC's position on that one issue. I handed out the MWC Statement of Shared Convictions, and explained again and again that this short statement does not replace the Statement of Faith that all the different member churches have.

Instead, this one-page statement is the core set of beliefs expected of all MWC member churches.

MWC does not take a position on the many theological topics that are not included in the Statement of Shared



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LIFE IN THE POSTMODERN SHIFT

The rally call

Troy Watson

Curiosity is a powerful spiritual discipline.

Curiosity has blessed me with many opportunities to spend time with kind, intelligent and reasonable people, in many different social, political and theological camps. I'm grateful for the privilege of hearing the typically calm and logical explanations they have for the positions they hold.

In these moments, I've seen glimmers of hope in the reconciling power of honest and humble conversation. Yet, that glimmer of hope has dimmed in the past few years.

Today, many people seem to view listening and engaging in dialogue as insufficient. There is intensifying pressure to pick sides. Lines are being drawn. There are "good guys" and "bad guys," and we must choose our allegiances.

"You must pick a side. Silence is complicity. The only thing necessary for the triumph of evil is for good people to do nothing." I've heard variations of this same message from people on all sides of just about every issue under the sun. I find the logic of these statements flawed. The only thing? Really?

I think it's clear the people who are convinced they are right and on God's side have done far more damage throughout history than the quiet listeners seeking more dialogue and understanding.

Recently, I've felt pressure from some people to choose a side in the Israel-Palestine conflict. As with most complicated issues and conflicts in our world, it's not that simple for me. Any reductionist oversimplification of a complex, nuanced and heart-breaking reality won't and can't be helpful. Or truthful.

Not all Palestinian and Israeli people fit into homogeneous categories or

sides, sharing the same beliefs, attitudes, values, politics and responsibility for what has happened and is happening. There are many Palestinians and Israelis working toward a lasting, peaceful, two-state resolution. I support their work for peace, not one side.

American sociologist and preacher Tony Campolo has said that whenever someone asks him if he is a Democrat or a Republican, he responds, "Name the issue."

I love this. Like Campolo, I find myself aligned with different people and groups, depending on the issue or topic. My allegiance is always and only to the Divine Reality (kingdom of God), where the sun shines on all human beings, and the rain falls on the just and the unjust.

The need to make complex and nuanced issues black and white is usually part of the problem, not the solution.

We're not as different from our perceived enemies as we think we are. I sense the same self-righteousness, judgmentalism, fear, ignorance, hyperbolic rhetoric, dogmatism and intolerance coming from all sides on any given issue. Myself included.

It seems to be getting worse. Public discourse today increasingly sounds like battle cries and rally calls to wage war. I agree that these issues are serious, and we need to be courageous and take action, but I refuse to join a war.

I joined the Mennonite church and Anabaptist tradition for a reason. I refuse to dehumanize and cause harm to anyone, in any way, on any side of an issue.

Frankly, I'm overwhelmed by the anger, hostility, hatred, blaming and scapegoating energy that has permeated Canadian culture, focused on naming, defeating and even eliminating the enemy.



UNSPASH PHOTO BY MARIO GOGH

The spirit of this age is clearly a spirit of war. It seems everyone is at war with someone or some group.

The Spirit of God isn't calling me to wage war or fight for truth, justice, peace, freedom, equality or any other word you think I should fight for. The world has enough warriors, fighting for their causes.

The world doesn't need more warriors. It needs more medics and healers to bravely venture into the battlefields around us and mend the wounded and broken on all sides.

The issues we face today are real and important, but so are the people being torn apart by the social, political, theological and cultural wars we're fighting (not to mention the literal wars).

It may seem like some of us are cowardly centrists, sitting on the fence. But many of us are not sitting, we're continually hopping over the fences we've collectively built, to extend the compassion and grace of God to all those hurting and suffering.

The rally call of Christ we've heard is to go into all the world and bring divine healing, peace and reconciliation to all people, no matter which side of the fence they're on. ☛



Troy Watson is a pastor at Avon Church in Stratford, Ontario, and can be reached at troy@avonchurch.ca.

RIDING THE WAVES OF INTERCULTURAL CHURCH

Open communion and intercultural church

Joon Park

One of the contradictions I have observed in intercultural churches in North America is that, while they intentionally strive to welcome all people, almost all of them stubbornly adhere to the “closed” communion tradition, which allows only baptized participants to partake.

For these churches, the meaning of welcoming is limited and conditional when it comes to communion (a word that, ironically, means “sharing in common”).

The book, *In Church as It Is in Heaven*, is a practical liturgical guide based on the story of a fascinating multi-ethnic church, Sojourn Midtown, in Louisville, Kentucky.

Even this non-traditional church, which brings together different social and ethnic groups to the fullest degree, adheres to a traditional way of serving communion: “Communion is a holy ordinance for baptized believers in Jesus.”

The essence of intercultural ministry lies in its openness and inclusiveness. The call to worship of many, if not all, intercultural churches will begin with the non-controversial statement, “All are welcome here!”

Without the indiscriminate welcome of people, the church tends to fall into performative ministry clothed with outward diversity, and not the love of Christ that transcends human limitations and boundaries.

Intercultural churches weave three types of “inter” all together—interethnic, intergenerational and inter-socioeconomic—embracing all intersectional modes of lives.

The gospel message of Christ calls for the integration and reconciliation

of all people. As such, when the trifold meaning of intercultural meets a church founded in the gospel, it becomes a place that is ruthlessly open to everyone.

How can an intercultural church display the true spirit of openness and welcome toward new people? It begins when communion is open to all, no matter who they are and no matter if they are baptized or not.

Communion is the most important church ritual because we receive the very body and blood, soul and divinity of Jesus Christ. Every other ritual of the church leads up to communion or flows from it.

Without communion, we have no spiritual life in us. John 6:53-54 says, “*Very truly, I tell you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you. Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood have eternal life, and I will raise them up on the last day.*” This text alludes to the fact that, insofar as communion is important for us to sustain life on earth, it should be open to anyone.

If a church claims to be intercultural but sticks to closed communion for only baptized adult members, it is a contradiction to both theological concordance and missional and intercultural openness. A closed communion has no biblical foundation.

The Confession of Faith in a Mennonite Perspective calls for closed communion, and this needs to be revisited. Three decades have passed since it was written in 1995, and the church has changed seismically.

In 1995, Holyrood Mennonite Church, where I currently serve, was a white congregation; now it is an African-dominant congregation. Over

its 70-year history, its white pastoral leadership has also become interracial.

Shaping an intercultural church is all about contextualization. That’s the wisdom of Christian churches that have survived and sustained for the past 2,000 years: flexibility and adaptability.

According to Darrel L. Whiteman, a missiological anthropologist, “contextualization attempts to communicate the Gospel in word and deed and to establish the church in ways that make sense to people within their local cultural context, presenting Christianity in such a way that it meets people’s deepest needs and penetrates their worldview, thus allowing them to follow Christ and remain within their own culture.”

In the same vein, interpreting and applying the Bible should be done in context, with flexibility. Church doctrines and ordinances are no exception.

Eleanor Kreider writes that communion is “a personal encounter with Christ Jesus, the servant from above, who loves us, serves us, saves us, and calls us into fullness of life.” It should be kept and remembered as often as we can but should not be used to gate-keep.

No one can be separated from the grace of Christ’s salvific and transforming love. Communion now becomes an open, ecclesial invitation for all-in-one fellowship. ☯



Joon Park serves as intentional interim co-pastor at Holyrood Mennonite Church in

Edmonton. He can be reached at cwcfounder@gmail.com.

 GOD'S STORY, OUR STORY

Part V: Risking relationship

Kara Carter

This six-part series draws on Kara Carter's PhD studies, for which she conducted five focus groups with Mennonite Church Eastern Canada pastors.

"Relationships involve risk," a pastor from MC Eastern Canada told me. "It's not a risk to hang out with people that I know, that I love, that are like me. . . . being a missional community means putting myself at risk to meet and be with people that are different."

How do Mennonite Church Canada congregations live within the tension of formative Anabaptist ecclesiology, separateness from the world theology and our "sent" calling?

This tension was raised by a wise pastoral colleague as she discussed the possibility of writing proposals for community grant money.

"Pastor Ruby" grew up in a south-western Ontario church which held a strong "separate from the world" identity and theology. According to Ruby, "the church in the world but not of the world" has been huge in our theology. We don't partner with. It's one thing to work with neighbours, but it's another to get funding from our neighbours to fund programs for and with our community."

Ruby's experience highlights a monumental shift that is unfolding: the church needs her neighbours.

It is not a new posture for the church to respond to local, national, or international needs. A strong "barn-raising" culture has shaped us as God's people and has led to the establishment of Mennonite institutions focused on service, justice issues and peacemaking.

Rebuilding homes and communities following ravaging floods or fires, providing finances and sweat equity in support of affordable housing projects, hosting community meals and more have been both fulfilling and spiritually transformative.

However, what does it mean to be

the church when the church needs the community's finances and resources to run its programs? Is the church primarily focused on one-sided relationships, "doing for," or, are we taking the risk of engaging in ministry with our neighbours?

As God's people, are we open to receiving the community's hospitality and being transformed?

Non-conformity and separateness, rooted in Scripture, has historically been formative for Anabaptist theology. The Apostle Paul wrote, "*Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds*" (Romans 12:2). Amidst 16th century oppression, "separateness from the world" was closely tied to self-protection and survival.

As we live into a 21st century post-pandemic context, "separate from the world" is working against a missional church.

At the heart of God as Trinity is relationship. It is through the power of the Holy Spirit that God's people connect with the Divine and one another. Amidst the reality of church decline and shifting demographics, not only did my research reveal that the church needs its neighbours, it also revealed that self-sufficiency is a relational barrier for a missional church.

Pastor Ruby and her congregation are trying to figure out what it means to walk with people in their community; "not fix them, just love them and welcome them in our homes," she says. Ruby is also building relationships with the mayor, various community partners and ecumenical colleagues in response to community social issues.

Relationships are both beautiful and life-giving, both challenging and messy.

Communal relationships can be open or closed.

One pastor suggested, "Our Christian community is having such a good time together, but we haven't learned what it means to open the door to people who may be interested."

On one hand, this leader acknowledged the congregation has discussed how to connect with households settling into a newly developed subdivision. On the other hand, the pastor has lived on the same street for more than a decade and acknowledged knowing just two neighbours.

As God's people living and serving in an ever-changing world, are we committed to ongoing personal change? Are we committed to developing new capacities, including relational risk-taking in ways that enable the church's larger transformation?

Formation and transformation are core to our relationship with Jesus, one another and all of creation.

In his book, *Canoeing the Mountains: Christian Leadership in Uncharted Territory*, Tod Bolsinger writes, "Christianity is about the Creator God's mission to transform his world and all his creatures. That transformation is accomplished not through signs of power, shows of force or unavoidable miracles that force us to our knees, but through the transformed lives of people who transform communities who transform their spheres of influence" (Romans 12:2).

May we continue to be transformed into the people whom God uses to further God's mission of restoration and reconciliation with all of creation. ✎

Kara Carter is pastor of Wellesley Mennonite Church.

Battle for the character of Israel

An interview with Uri Weltmann

By Madalene Arias
Eastern Canada Correspondent

Uri Weltmann says support for Israel's government and support for the people of Israel are two different things.

"This is not one and the same," he says, speaking by video call from Tel Aviv, where he lives.

Weltmann is one of the founding members of Standing Together, a grassroots political movement of Jewish and Palestinian citizens of Israel devoted to ending the Israeli occupation of Gaza and the West Bank. Weltmann serves as national field organizer for the movement.

my family and my friends should agree with me that my own government is undermining my security by taking a very hawkish position towards the Palestinians," Weltmann says.

Referring to wars in Syria, Iraq and Afghanistan, he says using military means to take power from political parties has disastrous consequences for human life, and ultimately it proves unsuccessful.

Weltmann says he would like to see leaders and regular citizens in Canada, the U.S. and other countries tell the Israeli

Gaza or the West Bank, focusing instead within Israel.

A critical pillar of the movement is recognizing how much Jews and Palestinians need one another to create a peace that makes sense for everyone. Weltmann explains that Palestinian Israelis have a vested interest in establishing peace as the occupation wages war on the nation they belong to. However, a minority cannot end racial discrimination and inequality without the allyship of the Jewish majority. In turn, Jewish society cannot secure its own safety without the Palestinian minority.

"We felt that none of the existing organizations provided an adequate response to what we saw was lacking in Israeli social and political scenery," Weltman says. He explains that many other peace groups limit themselves to only organizing with Jews or only with Palestinians, and they further limit themselves to only one issue.

"We do not live in a single-issue reality," says Weltmann.

Standing Together views present Israeli society as a place where a small minority benefit from the "status quo" of military occupation and economic inequality. The same small group also seeks to maintain a division among the people of Israel. The country often referred to as the only democracy in the Middle East is not without its own internal troubles.

Standing Together seeks to end the political, social and economic marginalization of Mizrahi Jews (Jews from Northern Africa and Central Asia), immigrants, women, the elderly, the LGBTQ+ community and people with disabilities.

With respect to the LGBTQ+ community, Weltmann recalls times when Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu would talk about LGBTQ+ rights in English during visits overseas, then, back home, speaking in Hebrew,



SUPPLIED PHOTO

Uri Weltmann

He says that unless people's moral compass had been corrupted, their hearts went out to Israelis following the October 7 Hamas attacks. However, translating this empathy for Israelis to unequivocal support for the Israeli government is "misconstrued."

"I think that those who really want to support me, and my two daughters and

government that they're "not going in the right direction."

Standing Together, which was created eight years ago, is composed of Jewish and Palestinian citizens of Israel. Approximately 20 percent of the population of Israel—about 1 million people—are Palestinian. The movement has 18 chapters throughout Israel. They do not operate in

“didn’t utter a word on that.”

While Israel is often seen in the West as tolerant of the LGBTQ+ community, it is not legal to perform a same-sex marriage in Israel.

Weltmann notes racism as another issue, saying that since the attacks on October 7, the Israeli government has encouraged racist, anti-Arab sentiments throughout the country. Standing Together has received thousands of reports describing “witch-hunt” type incidents in which Palestinians have been summarily dismissed from their jobs.

Many university students have faced disciplinary charges for “liking” social media posts that depicted human suffering in Gaza. Weltmann learned of at least one incident in which a student faced charges of supporting Hamas after posting a Facebook profile that read “stop war” in English, Hebrew and Arabic.

The discourse in Israel’s mainstream

news media and in statements from key politicians has shown an intolerance toward those who express sympathy for human suffering in Gaza.

“There really is an attempt to narrow down public discourse into a one-dimensional track,” he says.

After the Hamas attacks, Israeli police arrested two members of Standing Together for putting up posters that read, “Arabs and Jews, we will get through this together.”

Prominent leaders with the organization regularly receive hateful messages on social media.

Weltmann notes that Standing Together does not speak in the name of the Israeli majority; however, they view themselves as speaking in the name of the majority’s interests while trying to win them over with their worldview.

“The majority has an interest in achieving Israeli-Palestinian peace and

having a Palestinian state alongside Israel with ending the occupation.”

Every week, more and more people join Standing Together’s local chapters, searching for ways to become active in the movement.

In a November 14 article in the UK-based Guardian, Weltmann said, “while war rages in Gaza, there is also a battle in Israel for the character of our society.”

Speaking from Tel Aviv, Weltman makes it clear that the hope for change among Standing Together members is not the product of naïve optimism. Rather, it is the result of looking to history for examples of organized struggle creating change. He cites the examples of women earning the right to vote and African Americans winning the abolition of discriminatory Jim Crow laws.

Weltmann says that even challenges that “seemed undefeatable were defeated.”

Witness workers visit from Philippines

By Valerie Kauffman

Growing up as a member of the Sumacher Indigenous peoples group in the Philippines, Tala Bautista listened to American music. She longed to see snow and perhaps roast chestnuts on an open fire. She wanted to see the West Virginia country roads of which John Denver sang.

American cultural influence is pervasive in the Philippines, partly because it was a United States territory from 1898 to 1946.

Eventually, Bautista went to the United States to complete a master’s degree at the Center for Justice and Peacebuilding at Eastern Mennonite University (EMU). There, she understood the draw of the Blue Ridge Mountains and Shenandoah River that Denver sang about.

Today, back in the Mindanao region of the Philippines, Bautista is a leader at Peacebuilders Community Inc. (PBCI)

and Coffee for Peace (CFP). These organizations were founded by Dann (also known by his Indigenous name, Lakan) and Joji Pantoja in the mid 2000s.

Bautista treasures her Indigenous heritage and grieves the harm done by well-intentioned but misguided missionaries. She remembers missionaries who came to the Philippines speaking disparagingly of Indigenous culture, calling traditional music demonic.

During the month of October, Bautista, Joji Pantoja and Ka Boyet Ongkiko, also of PBCI, travelled to several locations in Canada, including Niagara-on-the-Lake, Kitchener-Waterloo, Leamington, Winnipeg and Vancouver, to share about their work.

While in Leamington, the group made stops at UMEI Christian High School and Uni-Fab metal fabricators. They also visited the Gleaners project, where

they saw how dried vegetable mixes are packaged, and Seacliff Energy, to learn about ways to deal with food waste. The Barkovsky family’s organic farm was also on the itinerary.

In the Philippines, colonization and the strong influence of multinational corporations have resulted in unjust societal structures and tension between groups. When the Pantojas returned to the Philippines after 20 years in Canada, they saw how economic inequities cause conflict. They learned the Mennonite tradition of peaceful engagement through organizations such as Mennonite Central Committee (MCC) and used the teachings of Mennonite scholars such as John Paul Lederach to promote peace in the Philippines. This connection with the Mennonites has resulted in long-term support from MCC.

What began as conflict resolution over

cups of coffee became a way for economically disadvantaged farmers to support themselves and their families by cultivating coffee, which CFP sells at fair prices in the Philippines and beyond. For PBCI and CFP, the process of nurturing coffee farmers and nurturing peace cannot be separated. The organization has worked throughout the Philippines to teach harmony with the Creator, others and creation.

Ka Boyet Ongkiko, who has served on the board of PBCI and is now tasked with organizing community members, has an infectious passion for his work. “Wherever we are,” he says, “we share the same heart; [we’re] created in God’s image, with inherent value and dignity as human beings. Our lives are joined together and we share each other’s joy as well as each other’s pain.”

The work is paying off. Today, multinational corporations doing business on Indigenous land work with the tribes and share profits, to the benefit of all. One corporate CEO was so interested in the principles of peace that a 15-minute meeting with PBCI stretched to hours. He had his administrators trained to facilitate positive relationships with the Indigenous community.

Today, the corporation says peace and cooperation with Indigenous tribes is one of its central values.

Peacebuilders Community Inc. has received several awards from the United Nations, as well as the Oslo Business for Peace award. Despite all of this, Joji never loses her focus on the micro level and says that change happens “one farmer at a time.” Coffee is a means of empowering individuals, families and communities to bring about peace and harmony.

As Bautista, Joji and Boyet gathered in homes of the Mennonite community in Leamington this past month, a sense of joy was evident in the laughter, stories and shared values.

The Leamington portion of the trip was organized by Lois and Edna Konrad, sisters-in-law who went on a learning tour to the Philippines in January 2023. The tour was led by Norm Dyck of Mennonite Church Eastern Canada.

On Sunday, at Leamington United

Mennonite Church, Bautista shared her experience growing up Indigenous, and the strong sense of exclusion she felt, even from God’s story. Later, she realized that her Indigenous core values of harmony with the Creator, self, others and creation were central to the biblical story as well.

Matt Tiessen shared about his life-changing time serving as an intern in the Philippines, working with the Pantojas. Afterward, over cups of coffee produced by CFP farmers, church members listened as Joji shared that her greatest joy is seeing farmers enjoying a peaceful life and having dignity and pride.

As the Pantojas begin the process of retirement, Bautista, Boyet and other leaders will continue the work of peace-building that has already borne fruit. The focus will continue to be on coffee production.

Back home in the Philippines, Dann is overseeing an exciting new project—the construction of the Malipayon Peace Hub, which will provide a peace and reconciliation training centre for PBCI, an upgraded processing and farmer training centre for CFP, a new staff house and

guest house, and a delivery vehicle.

Over the past five years, PBCI has received 25-35 percent of its budget from Mennonite Church Canada, but this funding is expected to be replaced by the increased capacity and profits from the new and upgraded post-harvest processing operations.

MC Canada welcomes donations toward construction of the Malipayon Peace Hub. It has received donations of \$83,000 toward the goal of raising \$235,000 by March 2024.

If you ask Bautista what she dreams of these days, she speaks with anticipation of finding more microroasters in Canada so that an entire 33-tonne shipping container of coffee can be sent to Canada, opening up a whole new market for peaceful coffee. ☸

Valerie Kauffman attends Leamington Mennonite Church.



PHOTO BY ROB KONRAD

Ka Boyet Ongkiko, Joji Pantoja, Roger Tiessen (President, Seaclyff Energy), Tala Bautista and Lois Konrad at Seaclyff Energy, an organics recycling and bioenergy facility in Leamington, Ontario.

Toronto United Mennonite turns 75

By Doreen Martens

Toronto United Mennonite Church (TUMC) celebrated its 75th year in ministry on October 22.

The church began as an urban mission when Mennonites drawn from rural communities to the big city came together for fellowship. TUMC was chartered in 1948. For a few years, members met in a house that also served as the pastor's home, before erecting their first building in 1956, across from a racetrack where crowd noise competed with the pastor's sermons on Sunday mornings.

Today, TUMC is a vibrant, inclusive urban congregation drawn from many nations, with ministries that include refugee sponsorship, partnership in the St. Clair O'Connor Community (intergenerational residence), and Aurora House, a transitional shelter for women and young children who have experienced trafficking or domestic violence.

A weekend homecoming celebration drew former members from far and wide for a Saturday-night gala dinner



PHOTO BY LYF STOLTE

Erna Huebert, supported by Carolyn Loewen, prepares to blow out 75 candles.

and historical presentation by Harold Thiessen, a Sunday presentation by Linda Washburn on the current building's construction in the 1990s, and a service of thanksgiving highlighted by reflections from former pastor Gary Harder.

The afternoon included a heritage potluck of eclectic foods reflecting the congregation's multicultural make-up and a birthday party featuring open-mic sharing, a Fabulous Fifties photo booth, and a historical scavenger hunt for kids.

Other anniversary projects include a series of historical photo collages and timeline banners decorating the church walls, an Urban Mennonite Cookbook, an updated, multilingual Carol Sing booklet, and a gorgeous anniversary quilt featuring the names of every current attendee. Erna Huebert, the congregation's longest-tenured member, drew laughs when she pulled out a fan to complete the candle blowout as the congregation sang "Happy Birthday." ❧

/// Transitions



William Loewen completed his ministry as pastor of Trinity Mennonite Church in Calgary, Alberta, at the end of August. He served the church for 13 years. Before joining Trinity, Loewen was a Mennonite Church Canada Witness worker in South Korea and a youth pastor at Tavistock Mennonite Church in Ontario. He is currently working on "Free Radicals," an Anabaptist history podcast. Trinity Mennonite is searching for an interim pastor.



Lois Bukar completed her ministry as pastor of Zion Mennonite Church in Swift Current, Saskatchewan, at the end of August. In September, she started work as co-pastor of Emmanuel Mennonite Church in Winkler, Manitoba. Her previous pastoral ministry experience includes a stint at Wideman Mennonite Church in Markham, Ontario.

Zach Stefaniuk is the new lead pastor of Zion Mennonite in Swift Current, Saskatchewan, assuming the role at the beginning of October. He recently completed a master of theological studies at Conrad Grebel University College in Waterloo. This is his first full-time ministry role.



Andy Brubacher Kaethler is the new lead pastor of Ottawa Mennonite Church. He replaces Anthony Siegrist, who completed his ministry at the church in early 2022. Prior to joining Ottawa Mennonite in September, Brubacher Kaethler served at Anabaptist Mennonite Biblical Seminary for 20 years. Under his leadership at AMBS, more than 200 high school youth from across the U.S. and Canada participated in !Explore, a summer program encouraging youth to test Christian ministry. Brubacher Kaethler was also a professor at the seminary for more than 10 years. Before joining AMBS, he pastored at Bethany Mennonite Church in Virgil, Ontario, and led youth ministry for Mennonite Church Eastern Canada.



Peace from the podium

Pastor teaches Peace Studies at University of Saskatchewan

By Emily Summach
Saskatchewan Correspondent

Working for a more peaceful world can take place anywhere. For Susanne Guenther Loewen it takes place at the front of the classroom at Saskatchewan's largest public university. Guenther Loewen is in her third year of teaching Introduction to Peace Studies at Saint Thomas More College on the University of Saskatchewan campus in Saskatoon.

She also serves as co-pastor of Nutana Park Mennonite Church in Saskatoon.

Students from any program can enroll in her Peace Studies course as an elective. Students from a range of programs enroll in the course, including pre-law, social work, political studies and kinesiology. There is often a waiting list to enroll.

Guenther Loewen finds hope in the fact that so many students are interested in the course. "I think there's something about being that age, when you feel like change is possible in the world, and you want to make a difference. I think young people are optimistic about their future and the future of the world, and many of them are choosing their majors in that way too," she says.

Guenther Loewen's interest in the academic discipline of Peace Studies is rooted in her Mennonite identity. In the opening lecture of the course, she talks about being part of the Mennonite church as well as the long tradition of pacifism and non-violence within it. Her own family history includes conscientious objectors.

She earned a PhD in Peace Theology from the Toronto School of Theology. Her own academic specialty is Christian, Mennonite, Feminist perspectives on peace.

The course she teaches provides a broad survey of peace movements, issues and



SUPPLIED PHOTO

Susanne Guenther Loewen

theories, including reconciliation with Indigenous people, non-violent resistance and restorative justice.

Her aim is for the course to have a strong emphasis on the practical skills of peacemaking. She often invites guest lecturers from Mennonite peacebuilding organizations such as Mennonite Central Committee or Parkland Restorative Justice.

"As a Mennonite, I already have all these built-in connections to peace-building organizations," she says, laughing.

One of the first exercises the class does together is to workshop the university's land acknowledgement statement. Students are invited to make changes and additions to the statement. Once it's completed, that acknowledgement is used to open each class for the rest of the semester. Guenther Loewen describes it as a fascinating exercise. Students often

add in the names of the specific First Nations in Treaty 6 and use more explicit language to describe the harms done.

This term, students amended the statement to make clear that this acknowledgement is just *one* step toward reconciliation, rather than the primary way reconciliation is practiced.

Students report to her how eye-opening the course has been for them. "I've received comments like 'I didn't realize peace was so complex,'" she says. "I think some students come in thinking of peace as this utopia, where everyone gets along. Restorative Justice is always a big one for my students; it's quite mind-boggling for some of them to find out there's another way to approach justice." These moments feel especially gratifying for her as she considers the number of pre-law students enrolled in the course.

Members of the international and Indigenous community are often in the course, and she aims to create space for those students to share their unique perspectives. Once, a Palestinian student was able to share their "powerful story" of displacement and eventual immigration to Canada.

Ultimately, Guenther Loewen seeks to remind students that peace work can and needs to happen at all levels: peace with self, family, community and the global community. "I try to impart to students that peace is accessible to anyone," she says. "Even my young kids can contribute. For peace to last and be sustainable, it has to be at all levels. When we think of peace, we often think big stuff, you know, like governments, like that's where peace really happens. Really, it's much more disseminated across society; there's something we can do at all levels." ❧

Housing seminar reimagines living space

By Amy Rinner Waddell
B.C. Correspondent
ABBOTSFORD, B.C.

A recent seminar in Abbotsford, B.C., considered how churches can help fellow British Columbians find reasonably priced housing. The November 18 event was hosted by Emmanuel Mennonite Church. The Affordable Housing Task Group of Mennonite Church B.C., formed after the 2023 MCBC AGM, recognized that some church communities are ideally positioned to apply faith-based resources to this critical issue.

Lisa Helps, of B.C. Builds, a program of BC Housing, explained that while most of the focus has been on low-income housing, the government realizes that a different group of people, middle-class

essential workers such as nurses and teachers, also have difficulty keeping up with the housing market. BC Builds focuses on finding and partnering with organizations such as churches that have underutilized land. However, she explained, the process from the idea stage to shovels in the ground can take three to five years.

Tim Kuepfer, pastor of Chinatown Peace Church in Vancouver, explained how a group of Mennonites there are exploring how both revitalization and the Vancouver housing crisis could create a “golden opportunity.” They are working on a proposal for a communal living four-storey building on the property of Sherbrooke Mennonite Church. It would maximize shared common living space, combined with traditional apartments. Kuepfer described this as “Young Mennonites living, serving, worshipping together.”

Participants heard from Rebecca Pousette of the Co:Here Housing Community in Vancouver, a mixed-income apartment building that sits on the former parking lot of Grandview Church. More Than a Roof resource persons Lee Ann Michayluk and Lorne Epp gave in-person input on their faith-based program to provide housing to low- and middle-income seniors, families and singles and to break cycles of poverty and homelessness.

Participants also heard from Peter Andres of the Emmanuel Mennonite Church In-Community Committee, which has explored reimagining the church property to include construction of affordable housing units along with worship space. An original plan to use the former Clearbrook Mennonite Church property for a combined church and living space did not work out for financial reasons.



PHOTO BY SHARON MKISI

Lee Ann Michayluk, CEO of More Than a Roof Housing Society, speaks at the Affordable Housing Seminar in Abbotsford, B.C.

Several years ago, the church had also proposed building on the existing church property, but the City of Abbotsford did not approve the project because the land was not zoned for high residential use. However, since that time the provincial government's plans have evolved, and it has cited Abbotsford as one city needing more affordable housing, so the concept is being explored once more. Emmanuel's plan for a housing unit would include building on its existing property without razing the existing building. Michael Redekop, of Emmanuel, presented figures on how such a housing unit would look, including underground parking and various combinations of living space.

Dan Kyte of GiveWise Foundation, a charitable giving facilitator, explained possible structures of creative funding for affordable housing ventures. He noted that housing costs have risen several times above income over the last years. “What if social ROI (return on investment) and the health of our communities entered our everyday analysis?” he asked.

Participants then had opportunity to ask questions of the presenters and ask, “Where to from here?” ❧



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 Anabaptist Mennonite
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A short history of Mississauga Mennonite Fellowship (1981-2023)

By Margot Fieguth

Some weeks ago, an article describing the closure of several churches stimulated me to write about Mississauga Mennonite Fellowship, which closed last year. In one sense, “closing” sounds sad, but on the other hand, we served as God’s hands and feet for a time when we were needed in our community.

In 1978, I was serving on the Ontario Missions and Service Committee, which, among other initiatives, was encouraging the formation of churches in underserved areas. At the time, about eight families from Toronto United Mennonite Church (TUMC) were living in Mississauga, a large and quickly growing city which had no Mennonite church.

Some of us began to consider forming a church in Mississauga, which would reduce our long commute to TUMC and hopefully also appeal to other Mennonites who were moving to Mississauga from elsewhere. We recognized it would also benefit TUMC, which was bursting at the seams.

We checked with a number of southern Ontario churches and got names of previous members who had moved to Mississauga. In 1980, we started gathering monthly on Sunday evenings for worship and to get a sense of future direction.



PHOTOS COURTESY OF MARGOT FIEGUTH

Mississauga Mennonite Fellowship gathers for a picnic in 2011.

We officially formed Mississauga Mennonite Fellowship (MMF) and started regular Sunday morning services in September 1981. Quickly our fellowship was growing in numbers and enthusiasm. We met initially in a community centre, but soon moved to Erindale High School, which had more space.

We debated hiring a pastor but decided to manage without. People happily took turns leading worship, giving sermons and teaching Sunday School. People from the surrounding area joined, and MMF became a vibrant fellowship. Members visited in homes on Sunday afternoons. Newcomers were welcomed. Many of us had families far away, so we became family for each other.

We hosted many church people coming to Toronto for meetings and conferences. We were very involved with refugees. Self-Help Crafts provided great opportunity for outreach. We tried to be involved with local

community needs but could not find a niche that worked for us.

In 1988, eight families moved far away and left a large hole in our fellowship. By this time we had hired a pastor, but the possibility of owning a church was now no longer considered feasible as our membership declined.

By 2000, our youth had grown up and moved away from home, so MMF consisted mainly of the initial adults. A few young families came, but after a while they joined other churches where their children had more peers.

In the 2010s, the erstwhile enthusiastic members had become seniors, and many moved away to be closer to their families. The fellowship tried to carry on, choosing different formats and locations, but numbers kept shrinking.

In the 2020s, few people remained. They had to concede that it was too challenging to carry on. The books were officially closed on August 31, 2023.

God’s love and light shone during these 40 years, and we provided a loving family presence to many people. ☞



Easter 2006 at Erindale High School.

BOOK REVIEW

The shoofly pie question

Eating Like a Mennonite: Food and Community Across Borders.

Marlene Epp. McGill-Queen's University Press, 2023, 304 pages.

By Barb Draper, Books Editor

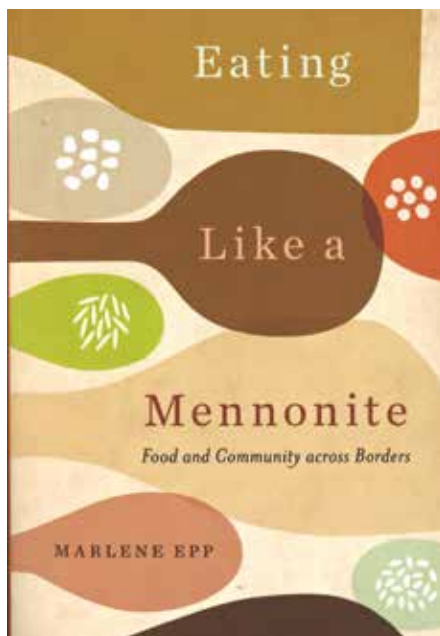
In her new book, *Eating Like a Mennonite*, Marlene Epp addresses the question of whether there is such a thing as “Mennonite food.” She assumes there is, and declares it should be celebrated, disagreeing with those who say “Mennonite” is a religious label that should not be used as an adjective for food.

Food and spiritual traditions are closely related, says Epp, and “religious belief and practice are embedded in culture.” Eating traditional foods connects us with the past, thus shaping our memory and identity.

When she talks about her own tradition, she uses multiple examples of Russian Mennonite foods that evoke nostalgia and connection to her family and faith community. Foods such as *zwieback*, *rollkuchen*, *borscht*, *vereniki* and peppernuts remind her of who she is and her connection to her ancestors who lived in what is now Ukraine. She talks about “the role of food in personal and group identity.”

Today, the Mennonite church around the world includes people of many ethnicities. To avoid being exclusionary, Epp argues that we need to broaden our concept of Mennonite food to include the cultural foods of everyone who identifies as Mennonite or Anabaptist, wherever they live around the world. Epp includes observations from her travels to India and the Democratic Republic of Congo. Celebrating all cultures can be a unifying factor.

Certainly Epp is right that there is a connection between food and identity in the Russian Mennonite context. I remember being surprised at the emotion with which my former pastor, a



Russian Mennonite, would speak about his mother's *zwieback* and *platz*. Online photos of items such as *paska* and *zwieback* result in numerous instinctive responses, suggesting that these traditional foods carry special power.

However, for those of us descended from Swiss Anabaptists, it is not clear that food plays a similar role. Epp works hard to mention foods that she assumes will evoke emotion in our tradition, but sauerkraut and shoofly pie just don't do the trick. These are foods that outsiders have told us define who we are, but in my experience, they are not foods we associate with our families or faith community.

Epp mentions David T. Martin, a Swiss Mennonite church leader from Ontario, who declared in 2017, “no more Mennonite cookbooks,” because he didn't want cultural baggage connected to the term “Mennonite.”

Epp's response is that food and faith are connected; it's impossible to avoid the cultural baggage. But the idea that there is a deep connection between faith and food is foreign to Swiss Mennonites. In 2011, in *Canadian Mennonite*, Martin wrote that, “there is nothing ‘Mennonite’ about the foods we eat.”

Are those of us who are Swiss Mennonites missing the faith and food connection because the right foods have not been identified? Have food memories become so individualized over time that we have lost a connection with the religious community? Or are the cultural histories of the Swiss and Russian Mennonite traditions simply different, such that food has a connection to faith in one but not the other?

Beyond the question of “Mennonite food,” *Eating Like a Mennonite* includes much more about how food has impacted Mennonite life. Epp provides a useful exploration of the role of cookbooks, suggesting that even during times of modernization and acculturation, “published cookbooks served to reinvigorate collective cultural identity.”

She also looks at how food has impacted the role of women in Mennonite culture and the effect of food scarcity in those who survived.

Epp points out that eating together builds community, commenting that, “in many congregations, potluck meals are akin to religious observances.” Food is a unifying force, she says. “At a food sale, Mennonites from diverse backgrounds and with diverse languages, histories, cultural customs, and worship practices find common ground.” ❧

/// Arts briefs

Winnipeg filmmaker receives \$15,000 award

Curtis L. Wiebe is the recipient of the 2023 MFM Manitoba Film Hothouse Award for Creative Development.

Wiebe is a filmmaker, illustrator, animator, musician and sculptor in Winnipeg, where he attends Hope Mennonite Church.

Presented by the Winnipeg Film Group, the award recognizes an established mid-career Manitoba filmmaker. It comes in the form of \$10,000 cash and \$5,000 in film group services.

Wiebe, whose short films have screened at festivals around the world, is pursuing the production of his first feature-length film, *The Last Spell Drake of Saskatchewan*.

SOURCE: WINNIPEG FILM GROUP



SUPPLIED PHOTO

Curtis L. Wiebe.

Psalms-inspired album explores suffering, creation

Toronto musician Mike Janzen has released *Songs from the Canyon*, his third album of music based on the Psalms.

“This album consists of 11 songs that range from belting gospel choir to deeply moving ballads,” Janzen wrote in his e-newsletter on November 1, the day of the album’s release. “The songs explore creation’s awe-inspiring landscapes as well as the deep, plunging canyons of life’s suffering.”

Janzen, who frequently collaborates with Winnipeg singer-songwriter Steve Bell, started writing songs based on the Psalms while recovering from a debilitating concussion.

Songs from the Canyon is available on all streaming platforms. Physical copies are available at mikejanzen.ca.

Mixed martial artists focus of new exhibit

The gloves are on at MHC Gallery in Winnipeg. The gallery’s next exhibit, “What Are Men For?” will feature drawings and

paintings by artist Tom Lovatt that depict mixed martial arts fighters.

Lovatt’s “technical skill and searching gaze” cause “viewers to pause and consider the shared humanity and identity politics that might define and drive male participants.”

“What Are Men For?” is on display at the gallery, located on campus at Canadian Mennonite University, from December 15, 2023, until January 13, 2024.

SOURCE: CANVAS

García calls for MEDA-like organizations around the world

By Mike Strathdee, MEDA

Mennonite World Conference's general secretary, César García, wants Mennonite Economic Development Associates (MEDA) to work with churches to start similar organizations in various countries.

"We dream of local businesspeople who experience business as a gift and a call in their everyday lives," García said at MEDA's annual convention in Toronto in November.

MEDA is an international economic development organization that creates business solutions to poverty. Its efforts to create decent work in agri-food market systems combine technical assistance and access to capital.

García said MEDA's experience and history of good work in creating business

solutions to poverty are worth emulating.

García expressed gratitude on behalf of Mennonite World Conference (MWC) to MEDA for its positive impact on millions of lives worldwide. The main reason MWC wants to see MEDA's work replicated is the Golden Rule, the biblical admonition to love your neighbour as yourself, he said.

That command appears eight times in the Bible. Jesus combined several Old Testament passages from the books of Deuteronomy and Leviticus to make a link between love and justice.



SUPPLIED PHOTO

Hadija Jabiri, pictured with one of her employees, is a participant in MEDA programming in Tanzania.

Love and justice go hand in hand in the Jewish and Christian traditions. Love of neighbour is lived out by challenging injustice and changing social structures, García said.

The biblical notion that everyone is made in the image of God means no one should be without the basic needs of existence, he said. "Every human should experience the dignity that seeing the fruits of their labours produces."

While humanitarian relief is essential in the short term, it can humiliate the recipients. In the long run, job creation is more important than aid, he said.

In 1973, MEDA helped García's Colombian church start a foundation to help local entrepreneurs through small loans. That work continued for decades, providing opportunities for women and other victims of the country's civil war.

MWC continues to "dream of local businesspeople who experience business as a gift and a call in their everyday lives," he said. "We dream of local entrepreneurs who work together to help new entrepreneurs create sustainable business solutions to poverty, like MEDA experienced in Colombia." ❧

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Affable colony ‘rock star’ steps down

Kennert Giesbrecht reflects on two decades at Die Mennonitische Post

By Aaron Epp
Associate Editor

How do you adjust after stepping away from the work to which you’ve dedicated two decades of your life?

That’s the question facing Kennert Giesbrecht now that he’s no longer the managing editor of *Die Mennonitische Post*, the German-language paper that serves conservative Mennonites throughout the Americas.

Giesbrecht’s tenure at the paper was bookended by celebrations characterized by mischief and fun: He started on April Fool’s Day 2002 and finished on Halloween 2023.

But the 21-and-a-half years in between included serious work that saw him write and edit thousands of articles for the *Post*, which publishes a 28-page issue every two weeks.

Giesbrecht says the sad and tragic stories spread on their own, but, “the good stories—the success stories about the colonies—have to be sought.” Between sips of hot chocolate at a cafe near the *Post*’s Main Street office in Steinbach, Manitoba, Giesbrecht says: “Getting good stories, positive life stories, was always part of my goal.”

Giesbrecht’s dedication to the *Post* meant that, for 20-plus years, he was almost always “on.” If he and his wife, Gredel, hosted friends, Giesbrecht had his ears open for something in the conversation that might inspire an editorial. The same thing happened when he watched the evening news or listened to a Sunday morning sermon.

When he and Gredel travelled to Israel on holidays four years ago, he wrote a 10-article series about the things they saw.

“Pretty much everything in my life revolved around the *Post*,” he says. “I know I’ll have major

withdrawal symptoms now.”

Well-suited for the role

The things that made Giesbrecht’s childhood difficult are the things that ended up making him a good candidate for his work.

He was born in 1964 in Loma Plata, the third of four children born to a Paraguayan couple. Giesbrecht’s father was a missionary for the Evangelical Mennonite Conference, which meant the family moved frequently between Loma Plata, the mission field and southern Manitoba. Giesbrecht learned Low German, High German, Spanish and English along the way, but changing schools so often made fitting in with his peers difficult.

“It’s an asset I have nowadays, but back then, it was painful and hard,” he recalls.

“I was angry at my parents for moving back and forth.”

By the time he was an adult, Giesbrecht had settled in Loma Plata. In 2001, he was almost a decade into a career as a high school teacher and principal. Gredel was working as a nurse, and they had three small children. That year, they decided to move to Canada.

“We felt that God had something else in store for us,” he says.

At the end of 2001, *Post* managing editor Abe Warkentin resigned. When Giesbrecht arrived in southern Manitoba in early 2002, he applied for the job and got it.

Giesbrecht’s background in geography and education, his love for Mennonite history and stories, his experience writing for colony newspapers and his ability to speak multiple languages made him a great fit for the role.

“It was an answer to prayer for sure in many, many ways,” he says.

Started by Mennonite Central Committee (MCC) in 1977, the *Post*’s mandate is to connect and inform the Kanadier Mennonite diaspora.

The *Post*’s readers are descendants of those who left Canada for Mexico and Paraguay in the 1920s when the governments of Manitoba and Saskatchewan went back on their promise to let them run their own schools.

When Giesbrecht became managing editor, the *Post* had about 5,000 subscribers with an estimated readership between 20,000 and 25,000.

The level of technology available to *Post* readers varies from colony to colony. For some Mennonites, the paper is the only reading material available to them besides the Bible.



SUPPLIED PHOTO

Kennert Giesbrecht (left) and teacher David Schmitt in the school on the Swift Current Colony in Bolivia, September 2023.

Hundreds of days travelling

As managing editor, Giesbrecht was part of a two-person team responsible for every aspect of each issue—conceiving the ideas, writing and editing stories, taking and collecting photos, proofreading everything and then laying it out.

It was a job that necessitated a lot of travel. Giesbrecht made it a policy to take one trip of two to three weeks as well as a couple of 10-day trips each year. During his time at the *Post*, he made more than 50 trips and spent more than 500 days travelling to colonies. Some of Giesbrecht's favourite articles are the ones he wrote about the steps colonies took to care for the vulnerable members of their communities, like building rehabilitation centres for people addicted to drugs and alcohol.

While travelling, Giesbrecht got to hear about the *Post's* impact. In Bolivia, a man told Giesbrecht how, when he was in his early 30s, he hired a private tutor to teach him to read and write, with the express goal of being able to read the *Post*.

After Giesbrecht wrote a series of articles about depression, a reader in

Paraguay whose son had died by suicide years earlier sent him a message saying that the articles helped the reader better understand his son's state of mind.

"Writing about things the readers see as important in their life was always a goal," Giesbrecht says.

Along the way, Giesbrecht helped people in mainstream society understand what life is like for colony Mennonites.

"There's so much good," he says.

While colony life has its challenges, Giesbrecht urges people not to generalize when they talk about conservative Mennonites.

"I hate it when people just absolutely condemn old colony people, conservative Mennonites, horse-and-buggy Mennonites, and say it's all bad, it's all sinful," he says. "That hurts. We can be an incredibly judgmental people sometimes. I guess I have to include myself in that group, too. But it's just not right to judge people either way."

Two personas

Giesbrecht has two personas, according to Royden Loewen, retired chair in

Mennonite studies and professor of history at the University of Winnipeg.

"In Canada, he is an affable, intelligent, hardworking guy," Loewen says. "In Latin America, Kennert is a rock star."

For almost 20 years, Loewen and Giesbrecht have served together on the board of directors at the Plett Foundation, a charity that supports and promotes history research projects related to Mennonites.

They have travelled together throughout the Americas as part of their work with the foundation, allowing Loewen to see firsthand how Giesbrecht's work with the *Post* has made him a household name in hundreds of communities.

"People gravitate to him," Loewen says. "He's very affirming of these people in their mission to be a corporate witness through their simple lifestyles... He shows a deep and profound respect for them, and they know that."

He describes the impact the *Post* has on its readership—which today is estimated to be around 50,000 people—as "breathtaking."

"From what I've seen over the years, it's just remarkably successful," Loewen says of the paper.

In early 2023, Giesbrecht told MCC that he was resigning. He can't point his finger at any one reason, but the cumulative stress of meeting a deadline every two weeks for a publication where two people do everything has something to do with it.

At 59 years old, he's fit and lively and interested in doing other work before he retires.

"I'm very much looking forward to new challenges in life," he says.

He had mixed emotions during his final weeks on the job. Ultimately, he hopes that his time at *Die Mennonitische Post* played a role in improving the lives of readers.

"You want to think we're at least planting a seed here and there and making a positive impact," he says. "Can it be measured [in numbers]? No. But I have some pretty awesome stories of people telling me in the colonies how the *Post* changed their life." ❧



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Calendar

British Columbia

Dec. 9, 10: ADVENT VESPERS with Abendmusik Choir, 7:30 pm. Emmanuel Free Reformed Church, Abbotsford (9). St. Philip's Anglican Church, Vancouver (10). Donations go to Menno Hall project at UBC (pcda.bc.ca).

March 11-14: Mennonite Camping Association is hosting its bi-national gathering at Camp Squeah in Hope. More information to come.

June 7-9: Young Adult (18-35) Anabaptist Conference, "Faith, Activism, and Church: Building an Active Future" at Camp Squeah.

Alberta

Mar. 15, 16: MC Alberta Annual Delegate Sessions at Holyrood Mennonite Church.

Saskatchewan

Dec. 4: Join Micah Mission at Wanuskewin for our learning series, *Conversations in the Spirit of Truth & Reconciliation*, as we dive into the theme of Justice. Contact info@themichahmission.org for more information and to buy tickets.

Dec. 5: Youth Farm Bible Camp annual Christmas Fundraising Supper. Menu is Slow Roasted Beef and Turkey, Stuffing, Potatoes, Salad and all the fixings! Admission is by donation. Come support the camp and learn about the ministry. More information is available at mcsask.ca/event/11567-2023-12-05-yfbc-christmas-fundraising-supper.

Dec. 10: A Very Shekinah Christmas with North Sky Chorale conducted by Richard Janzen. There will be a formal farewell for Ron and Sue. Goodies to follow. Admission by donation.

Mar. 11: MC Saskatchewan Annual Delegate Sessions at Bethany Manor, Saskatoon.

Manitoba

Dec. 10: Soli Deo Gloria choir presents Rheinberger's "Der Stern Von Bethlehem" eine Weihnachtskantate—Advent Concert with orchestral accompanist

conducted by Yuri Klaz at First Mennonite Church, 922 Notre Dame Avenue, Winnipeg, Manitoba.

Dec. 15: The exhibition, "What are Men for?" by artist Tom Lovatt opens at the MHC Gallery at 7:30 p.m. This exhibition runs until January 13, 2024, and features Tom Lovatt's unflinchingly larger-than-life series of portraits of mixed martial arts fighters.

Dec. 17: Join the Faith and Life Women's Chorus and the Faith and Life Male Choir as they share Christmas music and invite you into singing some of our favourites, at Bethel Mennonite Church in Winnipeg.

March 1-2: MCM Annual Gathering at Emmanuel Mennonite Church, Winkler. Friday Evening - Worship Service and Celebration, Saturday - Delegates, guests, and friends meet, learn, deliberate. Lots more info to come.

May 4-5: Faith and Life Choirs Spring Concerts. (4th)First Mennonite Church, Winnipeg; (5) Morden Mennonite Church, Morden.

June 21-23: 75...Already?! Save the date for Camp Assiniboia's 75th Anniversary. More details to come.

Ontario

Dec. 10: Menno Singers and the 225 voice Mennonite Mass Choir perform Handel's beloved Messiah at Centre in the Square with Artistic Director Brandon Leis. Tickets at the Centre in the Square Box Office. www.centreinthesquare.com.

Jan. 21: Join us for our Junior Youth Gathering from 1-5 p.m.! This gathering will include music, interactive activities and more for grades 5-8. Watch for more details!

Mar. 4-6: TiM (Transitioning into Ministry) Spring Equipping Days. Equipping days filled with worship, prayer, spiritual reflection, coaching, peer to peer support, and more. TiM provides a three-year formational experience for beginning pastors or pastors new to MCEC to assist them in integrating their seminary training into the life and ministry of a congregation and to develop faithful habits and practices.

Mar. 7: MCEC Spiritual Retreat Day

for Pastors. A day set aside for pastors for rest, refreshment and spiritual care. Mark your calendars!

Mar. 16: Intercultural Volleyball Tournament. More details will follow soon! Come on out for a fun day of volleyball, fellowship and fun! Save the date!

Apr. 26-27: MCEC Annual Church Gathering, "Transformed, Inspired, Called," at UMEI Christian High School in Leamington. Come and be transformed by the love of God, inspired by the hope we find in Jesus and called to action by the power of the Holy Spirit. Join new and now friends as we grow, learn and serve together as a community of faith. Save the date!

Online

Until Feb. 13: Join us for Climate Pollinators, a webinar series on creation care. This webinar is jointly organized by the Creation Care Task Force and Anabaptist Climate Collaborative. In these webinars, MWC's Creation Care Task Force

members from each region will host one hour of storytelling and Q&A. Church members from around the world will share how they are affected by climate change – and responding with resilient action and gospel hope. Each webinar will take place at on Tuesday at 2 p.m. UTC. Register at mwc-cmm.org/en/resources/climate-pollinators-webinar-series.

To ensure timely publication of upcoming events, please send Calendar announcements eight weeks in advance of the event date by email to calendar@canadianmennonite.org.

For more Calendar listings visit, canadianmennonite.org/churchcalendar.

Classifieds

Employment Opportunity

Shekinah Retreat Centre (www.shekinah.ca) has an opening for the Executive Director position. We are seeking a high energy person to grow our camping and facility rental programs. The preferred candidate will have a commitment to the Anabaptist tradition, an entrepreneurial spirit, non profit leadership experience and excellent communication skills. Position starts as soon as possible. Most salary and benefits follow MC Canada guidelines. For further information contact Board chair, Phyllis Goertz: 306 242 8367 or p.goertz@sasktel.net.

Upcoming Advertising Dates

Issue Date	Ads Due
Dec. 15	Dec. 5
Dec. 29 <i>Digital Issue</i>	Dec. 18

Advertising Information

Contact Ben Thiessen
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Calm and quiet carols

John Van Deusen wants to bring you peace this holiday season

By Aaron Epp

John Van Deusen plays in a pop band called Telephone Friends and a punk band called Buffet, but he suspects it's his Christmas album that you'll like best.

In the Bleak Midwinter features Van Deusen playing 14 holiday hymns, his acoustic guitar and tenor voice augmented by rich string arrangements. He released it digitally last year and on vinyl in October.

"I actually think it's one of the few things I've made that can appeal to a wider range of Christians and specifically crosses age in a way that my other music doesn't," Van Deusen says by video call from his home in Anacortes, Washington.

The story of the album starts in November 2020. Van Deusen was the worship director at a Presbyterian church and was keenly aware of the unease congregants were feeling because of the pandemic and the political atmosphere in the U.S.

With the holidays on the horizon, Van Deusen started playing Advent and Christmas hymns during the church's livestreams.

"My goal was to play them as gently as possible," he recalls. "People just responded really well. They would write me and just say, wow—that version of 'Come Thou Long Expected Jesus' . . . I felt really calm and at peace when I heard it. And so I thought I should just record it like that."

Van Deusen tracked his vocals and guitars live off the floor in two days at a recording studio that was once a Catholic church.

He self-recorded additional piano and percussion parts at home, then sent the recordings to Andrew Joslyn, who wrote and recorded the violin, viola and cello parts.

"It was just this small, natural thing," Van Deusen says. "Sometimes the best creative projects don't happen because you have some big idea or ambitious end game in mind."

"The First Noel," "Joy to the World," "Hark the Herald Angels Sing" and "O Holy Night" are a few of the hymns included on the album.

Van Deusen appreciates that these songs "have a deep sense of spiritual awe."

He says, "They also acknowledge the gloom and the depravity and the helplessness of our situation prior to Christ. I think maybe that's what makes them so potent—that they have this perspective of [how]

we really needed Jesus. And then he came."

Van Deusen hopes that *In the Bleak Midwinter* brings peace and calm to listeners.

"I picture people listening to the record while the TV is off... and they're decorating a tree or baking cookies—doing something that involves their hands, that is quiet and life-giving," he says. "That would make me so, so happy."

To stream the album or purchase a vinyl copy, visit iamjohnvandeusen.bandcamp.com. ☘

Read more from this interview at canadianmennonite.org/jvd.

