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**Mennonite  
World Conference**  
A Community of Anabaptist  
related Churches

**Congreso  
Mundial Menonita**  
Una Comunidad de  
Iglesias Anabautistas

**Conférence  
Mennonite Mondiale**  
Une Communauté  
d'Églises Anabaptistes

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Cover Photo:

The hills above Jericho in the West Bank.

Photo: David McLenachan on Unsplash

## Word from the editor



### Confession and much humility

“God is under the rubble in Gaza... He walks with us through the valley of the shadow of death. If we want to pray, my prayer is that those who are suffering will feel this healing and comforting presence.”

Pastor, professor and author Munther Isaac preached these words of lament to his congregation in the West Bank in October. Shared on video and in print, they reverberated with challenge around the world in the months after as the piles of rubble grew higher.

This issue of *Courier* deals with a subject which is controversial at any time. As this issue goes to press, death has been rained down on two peoples in land called Israel, Palestine, the Holy Land, the Middle East, the Levant.

The subject “calls for confession and much humility,” says J. Daryl Byler, former Mennonite Central Committee service worker in Jordan.

Through Mennonite Central Committee, Mennonites have been contributing the education among Palestinian people since the 1940s. In a land steeped with churches, some Mennonite groups have chosen to leave an impression through service rather than church planting.

Mennonites also have a history with Jewish peoples. Early Anabaptists recognized the insights Judaism offers for our understanding of Jesus as a Jewish man and for resisting empire to pursue the reign of God. However, Mennonite and Jewish coexistence in Europe in the 19th and 20th centuries were often not harmonious. In Nazi Germany, Mennonites were as likely to support the state as resist it.

“Christians have used the Bible to support both anti-Jewish and Christian Zionist positions. One position suggests that Jewish people are less than fully human and the other suggests that they are specially chosen and favoured,” says J. Daryl Byler. “Neither of these positions is consistent with the core biblical themes:

- God loves the world
- All people are created in God’s image
- God calls us to act justly, love kindness, and walk humbly
- Jesus calls us to love our neighbour as self
- “There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus” (Galatians 3:28).

This issue takes a step away from the horror unfolding through our screens every day to consider those biblical themes and to share stories.

In our feature, scholars and practitioners share their readings of the Bible regarding the land and the peoples on it.

Our Perspectives authors share how their sojourn in this land has shaped their faith.

“We have to unlearn myths,” says Jonathan Kuttub, a Palestinian Christian with many points of intersection with Mennonites.

There are myths about Palestinian people to be unlearned and there are myths about Mennonite innocence with Jewish people that require humility and confession.

Holding power over other people, dehumanizing them does not build a world where anyone can flourish. It is certainly not the way of Jesus. Whether experiencing oppression, experiencing wealth, we all face temptations to blame others and destroy others for our own benefit – Israeli, Palestinian, Jewish, Mennonite or any other identity.

But as followers of Jesus, as we read our Bibles, may it call us to speak for those who are suffering, no matter which “side” they identify with. Let us walk through the valley with those in the shadow of death. Let us stand against injustice, no matter who is perpetuating it. And let us repent of how often we fail to discern injustice, speak with courage and act with love.

**Karla Braun is editor, writer and website coordinator for MWC. She lives in Winnipeg, Manitoba, Canada.**



Click here for further resources on Israel, Palestine

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# Blessed are the peace-makers

**Mennonite World Conference has no formally associated Anabaptist member churches in the Middle East. This was a missiological decision not to start another church in a region replete with variety.**

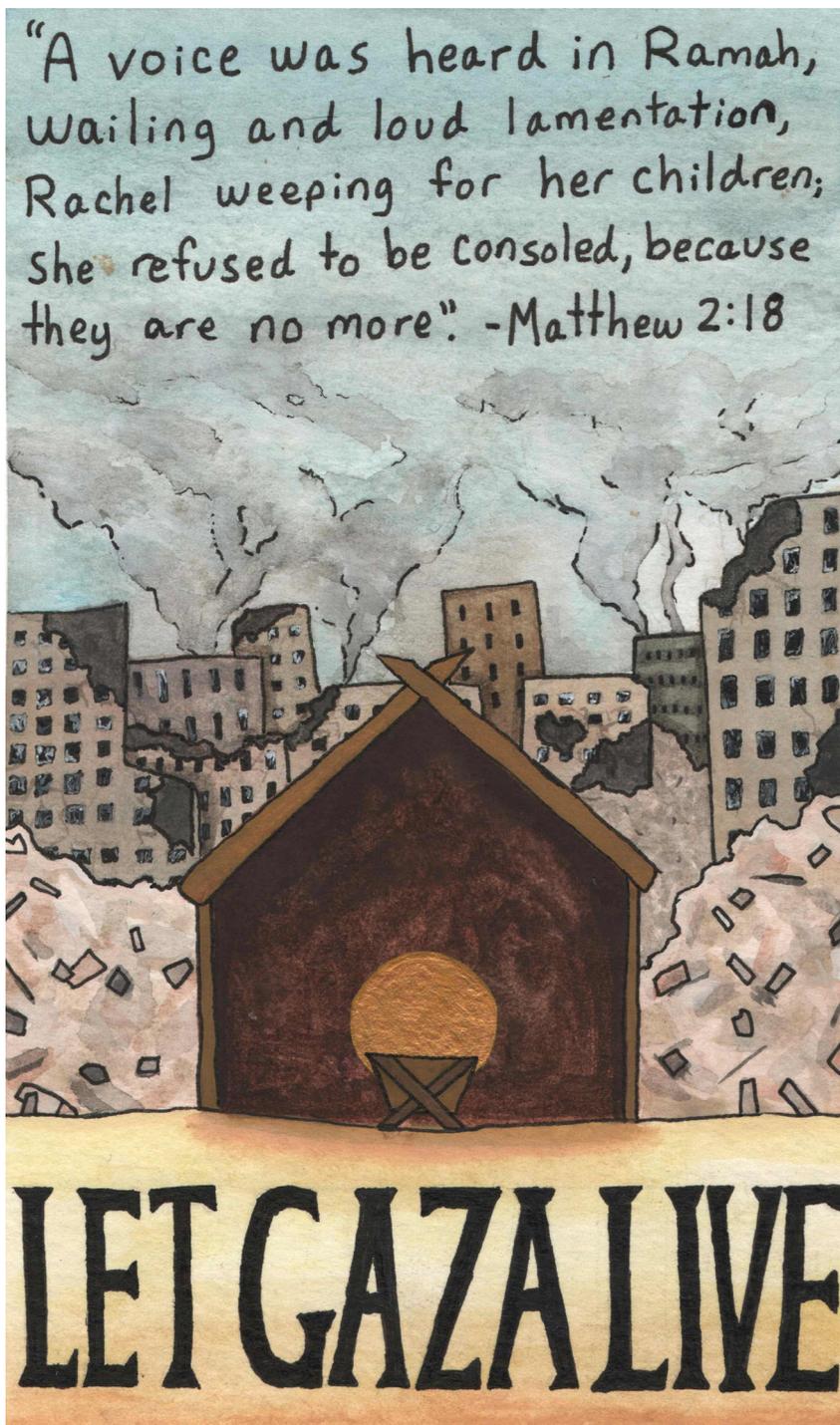
**However, Palestinian Christians are a witness to the Mennonite communion around the world. Where theory meets reality, they have shown those who are paying attention what it is to be faithful to Jesus' call to nonviolence.**

**S**ince 7 October 2023, the eyes of the world have been turned to the Middle East where an act of violence and violation has unleashed a flood of death and destruction.

As Christians, we may look to our Bibles to interpret today's realities in light of long ago promises.

The answer to this question is different for each faith community, says Dorothy Jean Weaver. A Jewish community's answers arise from the Hebrew Bible, but as Christians, we are called to live out of the new covenant where geography is "no longer a factor for the disciples of Jesus."

She joined several Mennonite scholars with experience in the region to reflect on what we read today.



"Let Gaza Live," artwork by Leyla Barkman

**Readers of Scripture everywhere have the same call: love mercy, seek justice, free the oppressed, release the captives, declare Jubilee (Micah 6:8).**

### **A trajectory of inclusion**

Starting in Genesis 12, we see the trajectory of inclusion that can be followed throughout Scripture, says J. Nelson Kraybill. It speaks of blessing and cursing but of these coming *through* the people of Israel to others.

“In Amos 9:7, God frees not only the Israelites, but also other people, even those who are considered the enemy of Israel,” adds Paulus Widjaja.

“One of the themes that comes through in the Old Testament in passages like Leviticus 26 or Jeremiah 7 is that covenant with God’s people is contingent upon acting justly,” says J. Nelson Kraybill.

“Jesus then picks up on Isaiah’s vision of all nations streaming toward the mountain of the Lord’s house (Isaiah 2:2) when he says the Temple Mount is supposed to be a house of prayer for *all nations* (Matthew 21:13),” says J. Nelson Kraybill.

Matthew (which is a very Jewish Gospel) ends with the disciples leaving Jerusalem, leaving Galilee and going to make disciples of *all the nations*, says Dorothy Jean Weaver.

And the very same thing happens in the Gospel of Luke. There’s a lot of focus on Jerusalem in the early story of Jesus, but by the end and even more so in Acts, “the gospel is moving from Judea to Samaria to the ends of the earth,” says Dorothy Jean Weaver.

### **A different framework**

There is sometimes a problem of ignorance even among some Christians, says Paulus Widjaja. “The Israel in the Bible and the modern State of Israel are two different things. We cannot just bring it together as if the modern Israel is the biblical Israel.”

“What makes me sad is that what has been created today is hatred, not love. Both Israelis and Palestinians have become victims,” says Paulus Widjaja.

“According to Leviticus, the land is God’s – people are tenants and aliens

in the land,” says Alain Epp Weaver. This applies whether talking about Israel or North America or any place.

“Remember, as Mennonites, we have historically rejected the idea of the nation state and the sovereignty of kings,” says Jonathan Brenneman.

“If we read the Bible carefully, Abraham was chosen not for himself but to bless others,” says Paulus Widjaja.

“And in the New Testament, we see that these ideas are being taken and broadened to include the people of God who are followers of Jesus (1 Corinthians 6:19, 1 Peter 2:9),” adds Dorothy Jean Weaver.

“The test of whether we are faithful stewards of the land we inhabit is whether we are doing justice in the land. We need a humane theology for Israel and Palestine, a theology that recognizes the image of God and each person – in Israeli, Palestinian, Muslim, Christian, Jew. God calls people to do justice and to stand against the violence of the nation-state that mars that image of God,” says Alain Epp Weaver.

“As an Anabaptist, I seek deeply for a transnational, grassroots, non-state-based system. It’s not related to ethnicity. There’s no justification for violence in the life of any Christian because we follow one who – even in his capture by the imperial army (the cops) – said ‘it’s not coming in through violence’ and healed Malchus’ ear (John 18:10),” says Sarah Nahar.

“Reading the Bible through to Revelation, we find our call to be egalitarian, boundary-breaking groups of people who are living with integrity with deep respect for the land and each other,” she says.

“It’s a call to complexity, not simplicity. We seek to be people living without a need to control others,” says Sarah Nahar.

“White churches of European heritage inherit legacies of anti-Jewish theologies that say that God has repudiated the Jewish people. We need to examine and reject anti-Jewish theologies which have fueled antisemitism,” says Alain Epp Weaver.

“Antisemitism historically has been part and parcel of European colonialism and racism. As Anabaptists, we need to stand firmly against antisemitism as a form of racism,” says Alain Epp Weaver.

Readers of Scripture everywhere have the same call: love mercy, seek justice, free the oppressed, release the captives, declare Jubilee (Micah 6:8),” says Jonathan Brenneman.

The answer to ‘who is chosen’ is in the Beatitudes: blessed are the peacemakers; blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness; blessed are the poor (Matthew 5:3-10).

“Blessed are those who are oppressed, basically,” says Jonathan Brenneman.

**Some commentators, including human rights organizations, have referred to the Middle East today as an apartheid reality. How can Mennonites support a place where all people, Palestinian and Israeli, can sit securely under vine and fig tree (Micah 4:4)?**

“It’s very hard to see what road map can chart a path from the current reality of violence and structural discrimination toward a future reality in the land in which both Palestinian and Israeli peoples can live freely, securely and at peace,” says Alain Epp Weaver.

“We pray, we support Palestinians and Israelis who are working to bring down the dividing walls that keep people from seeing each other as children of God and those dividing walls. We need to stand against the dividing walls in our hearts – and against the very physical walls erected by the Israeli state – that harm, degrade and kill people,” he says.

“We live in a world that has been divided up, where there are plots of land that some group says, ‘*this is ours!*’ But our calling to be faithful from wherever we are in society is to push for God’s justice on earth to the extent that we have the energy to move toward that goal as we

are empowered by God: ‘your Kingdom come, your will be done on earth!’ (Matthew 6:12),” says Dorothy Jean Weaver.

“Who is responsibility for God’s will to be done on earth?” she asks. “The ultimate answer is that God is powerful over all. But God will also call us into action in bringing God’s will into existence on earth. We need to pray the Lord’s Prayer boldly and courageously.”

For those in Canada and the USA, the Mennonite Dismantling the Doctrine of Discovery Coalition is helping people do the challenging work of recognizing that sin is structural.

“The tasks that I can do include understanding how dynamics of power show up everywhere; recognizing systems of displacement and dispossession; asking at what cost and whose cost I gain privilege in society,” says Sarah Nahar.

“The gospel offers a new way of thinking about our lives and encouragement to reach across barriers no matter where we are or who we are,” she says.

“In ethics, if we want our action to be meaningful, that action should be based on a narrative because otherwise the action will not be meaningful at all,” says Paulus Widjaja.



There is opportunity for those who seek meaningful narratives to ground action and understanding regarding the Holy Land. Bethlehem Bible College, an evangelical school in the heart of the West Bank, is hosting their 7th Christ at the Checkpoint conference 21-26 May 2026. “Do Justice, Love Mercy: Christian

Witness in Contexts of Oppression” – an invitation to “come and see!”, in person or on livestream. (Click [here](#) to learn more.)

**How can Mennonites be peaceful but not passive? When there seem to be two sides, is it possible to be neutral without implicitly siding with the oppressor?**

“Neutrality is a very dangerous word for us because it allows us to imagine that things are equal and very often things are not equal,” says Dorothy Jean Weaver.

In much of the world, especially the USA, Christians are assumed to be on the side that of the military that is committing the genocide. As Christians, if we are not speaking out, we are assumed to be on the side of militarism, of violence and of genocide,” says Jonathan Brenneman.

“If we look at that question from the theological perspective, then yes, we take a side, but not on the people, certainly not on a state – we take a side on values: justice, peace, reconciliation,” says Paulus Widjaja.

The Israelites in the Bible assumed that God was always on their side, but there were times God said: ‘I’m on your side when you are oppressed, but I’m also with others when they are oppressed.’

Just look at the biblical prophets. They could never ever be accused of being neutral about the situations in which they lived,” Dorothy Jean Weaver adds.

“So I’m taking the side of the Christian principles of justice, love and reconciliation. Whoever is being oppressed, then I will be with them regardless of their nationalities,” says Paulus Widjaja.

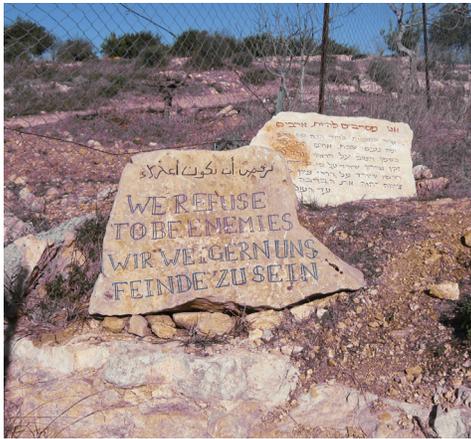
“It’s been really meaningful to do theology out on the streets together, working for a ceasefire with Jewish, Muslim, Christian, Baha’i and humanists,” says Sarah Nahar who sees far more than two sides.

“I’ve had a chance to do theology alongside anti-Zionist Jewish people who are experiencing great grief when their beautiful, multifaceted, deep

faith is being smashed on one side by nationalism and crammed in on the other by militarism,” she says.

Christians are still recovering from CE 313 when the empire took over Christianity, so we can understand people who say they don’t want a state force to be associated with who they are.

“State violence does not protect me: relationship protects me. We can have safety and space in a shared world,” she says.



**Boundary stone of Tent of Nations. Read more on page 8.**

Photo: Gied ten Berge, CC BY-SA 3.0

“In an eschatological sense,” says Alain Epp Weaver, “there is one side, the side of humanity, the humanity God is reconciling back to God’s self through the work of the Spirit, the Spirit that breaks down walls of division and hatred.”

“For the church to witness within this broken world means speaking out against all forms of injustice, including the structures of military occupation that build walls and deepen divisions. When we speak out for justice, people will sometimes accuse us of creating division, but we

are doing it animated by this vision of a reconciled humanity that God is calling back to God’s self, calling us back to our created nature,” says Alain Epp Weaver.

**Palestinian Christians raised a call that was published at the end of October: “We hold Western church leaders and theologians who rally behind Israel’s wars accountable for their theological and political complicity with the Israeli crimes against Palestinians,” they wrote.** (Click [here](#) to read the full document.)

“I saw and affirm that call,” says Alain Epp Weaver. “The Western Church has been complicit in the dispossession of Palestinians. And the time for speaking out in action is long overdue.”

“The wide Palestinian Christian coalition that wrote that letter are working together in significant concord with each other and they are calling the bluff of the Western Church. I pray that the Western Church has ears and heart to listen,” says Dorothy Jean Weaver.

“I’m grateful for the tradition of pacifism so we can boldly and humbly not only take stances, but do action and be in prayer with a commitment to not eliminate others,” says Sarah Nahar.

“If we are wrong, we can seek, repair and learn. I’ll carry some of these questions into our 500-year anniversary which some believe should be a celebration because we have been faithful and others think this should be a moment to grieve that our Christian body was torn,” she adds. “That is also a complex question.”

“We all continue to work and pray for wholeness in that broken part of the world and in our own broken lives,” says J. Nelson Kraybill.

## Contributors



Dorothy Jean Weaver is retired from teaching New Testament at Eastern Mennonite Seminary in Harrisonburg, Virginia, USA. She also has a long history of travel in and out of Israel-Palestine, both for academic sabbaticals and for leading study tours and work groups.



J. Nelson Kraybill is a retired academic and former president of MWC (2015-2022). He also has long-standing involvement in Israel-Palestine both as tour leader and as an academic. He recently served as scholar-in-residence at Bethlehem Bible College in the West Bank for eight months.



Paulus Widjaja is an ordained minister in GKMI. He is a lecturer in the faculty of theology at Duta Wacana Christian University in Yogyakarta, Indonesia.



Alain Epp-Weaver directs strategic planning for Mennonite Central Committee. He lives in Lancaster, Pennsylvania, USA. He has worked in occupied Palestine for 11 years, including two years in Gaza, as program coordinator and has written and edited books related to Palestine.



Jonathan Brenneman is a Palestinian American Mennonite. He has worked with Community Peacemaker Teams in Palestine and worked on Mennonite Church USA’s “Peace in Israel and Palestine” passed in 2017.



Sarah Nahar currently lives in Syracuse, New York, USA (unceded Onondaga Nation land). She was the North America representative on the AMIGOS – a precursor to MWC’s YABs Committee. A former executive director of Community Peacemaker Teams, she served with Mennonite Central Committee in Jerusalem at the Sabeel Liberation Theology Centre.

# Indonesia

## Not just a tour; a pilgrimage



The underground tunnel of the Western Wall in Jerusalem.

Photo: Sarah Yetty

by Simon Setiawan and Sarah Yetty

It was 7 October 2023. Husband and wife Simon Setiawan and Sarah Yetty, members of Jemaat Kristen Indonesia (JKI) church from Indonesia, were in Egypt, leading a tour group of more than 40 people from Indonesia and the United States intending to enter Israel-Palestine. They heard about the Hamas attacks on Israel in the early morning. They were concerned about the safety of their tour participants. The Indonesian embassies in Egypt and Jordan were on the phone with them, telling them not to go into Israel.

“After speaking with embassy officers and getting an update from our local partners, we explained the situation to the group. We said we would follow whatever the participants thought was best,” says Simon Setiawan. “The vast majority wanted to continue, upon getting assurances from our local partners that our adjusted routes were in the safe zones.”

So that day, they entered Israel through the Taba Border, crossing into the resort town of Eilat. The wait to cross the border was long. There were more soldiers than usual at the checkpoint. The officers were friendly albeit tense. One officer asked, “You know what’s happening in Israel, right?” and was surprised when the group said they still wanted to enter. The streets were quiet, with only two other tour groups to be seen.

From there, they went north, adjusting their plans according to the latest security updates. On one occasion, they stayed in their hotel because they heard there was a disturbance locally. In another occasion, their plan to stay overnight in Bethlehem was diverted to Jerusalem for security reasons. But they managed to visit Jericho, Bethlehem and Jerusalem, meeting a few other tour groups.

They are making plans to go again this year, subject to the security situation on the ground. “Because we love the Holy Land,” Simon says.

### Longing to visit the Holy Land

In 2009, for the first time, Simon Setiawan and Sarah Yetty signed up to go to the Holy Land with their church.

“We’d been wanting to go to the Holy Land for a long time, but we knew it was way beyond our means,” says Yetty, “I was a kindergarten teacher and Simon was helping out with the church’s mission program. We didn’t have much.”

They renewed their expired passports and prayed daily for a miracle.

“Three months before the tour departed, a woman from a Presbyterian church that we never met before paid for our tour in full. She said she had a dream a month earlier whereby she saw someone in a shiny white robe coming to her and telling her to bless a couple to visit the Holy Land,” Sarah Yetty says.

“And then Simon says that because someone paid our way, we have to serve.”

### God will be with you

When they relayed this to their pastor, he said they could be tour leaders.

“Even though we said we had absolutely no experience, he said we’ll be alright and God would be with us.

“That was our first time, and we absolutely loved it,” Simon Setiawan says.

On that first trip, they led a tour with 11 buses, about 500 people. They had to split the group and go in different directions, with Sarah Yetty leading one team and Simon Setiawan taking the rest.

“We departed with only USD\$20 in our pocket. But God kept blessing us, like everyday manna,” Sarah Yetty says.

“After that first trip, the senior pastor asked us to calculate the expenses to visit the Holy Land and set up a business specializing in Holy Land tours. We were also told to study more about the Holy Land and took training about how to run Holy Land tours. Since then, we committed ourselves to offering affordable tours of the Holy Land, so that pastors and church workers, especially those from small towns and villages, could get a chance to go there,” Simon Setiawan says.

“I love taking groups there, being on the land where Jesus was and seeing the Bible come to life. But more importantly, I love being on the tour bus listening to people’s testimonies: of a marriage that has almost ended up in divorce until they arrived in Cana and decided to reconcile. Of a doctor who walked up Mt Sinai with me, and only after reaching the top did he confess to having his 13th stent placed in his arteries just a week prior,” says Simon Setiawan.

“I always say that this is not just a tour – it’s a pilgrimage. Pray that whatever God’s plan is for you on this trip, your eyes will be open to see that,” he says.

### We long for peace

“Our prayer is for peace for the people in Israel and Palestine,” says Simon Setiawan.

“Everyone is emotionally invested in the Holy Land. When there is a bit of instability, the whole world hears about it and got scared. When they’re scared, they don’t come, and the local tourism industry suffers, especially workers who live within the Palestinian Authority areas (Jericho, Bethlehem, Ramallah),” says Simon Setiawan.

“We want local industries to thrive, and for ordinary people to be able to live their lives without fear. The people want stability, safety, on both sides. And this is what we wish for them too,” say Simon Setiawan and Sarah Yetty.



Interim Chief Communications Officer Elina Ciptadi spoke with Simon Setiawan and Sarah Yetty about their experience.

## Germany

## Resistance, repentance and a sweet harvest

by Benjamin Isaak-Krauß

**A**fter high school, I spent a year in the Israeli-Occupied West Bank, living and working at [Tent of Nations](#), a Palestinian Christian ecological peace project. I learned many things during this time: from cooking on an open fire and caring for animals to recovering from tear gas by smelling raw onion.

But the most transformative and lasting learnings concerned how I understand and follow Jesus.

It was Palestinian Christians who taught me to see that Bethlehem, Nazareth and Jerusalem are real places whose histories shaped Jesus. His context, plagued by military, economic and cultural oppression, was not so different from the situation of Palestinians growing up today in refugee camps in the West Bank or Gaza. Now as then, injustice breeds resentment and repression creating spirals of violence and complex patterns of trauma which seem inescapable.

**Solidarity with the oppressed**

It is in this wounded world that God chose to come and be in solidarity with the oppressed and model a different way to struggle for dignity and freedom – one that sets both victim and oppressor free.

The Nassars, my Palestinian Lutheran hosts, taught me how to put Jesus' teaching to love our enemies into practice. On boulders originally placed by Israeli soldiers as a roadblock they wrote their manifesto: "We refuse to be enemies."

I witnessed Daher Nassar invite armed settlers who broke into his land for tea, causing them to retreat confused. At the same time, they refused to give up on their connection to the land and their dream of a shared future for all.

The Jewish and Muslim members of Bereaved Parents Circle also taught me a new understanding of forgiveness. As they came together to mourn the deaths of their children in the conflict, they realized that retaliation did not bring life. Only forgiveness

had the power to set people free from bitterness, free to work for liberation for all.

**Reconciliation over recrimination**

Having witnessed these living stones before me helped me honestly face my own entanglement in this conflict. Both my grandfathers fought in the Nazi army and contributed to the murder of six million Jews in Europe. Jews refer to this atrocity as the Shoah, a Hebrew word meaning "catastrophe." This heinous crime against humanity represents the culmination of 2 000 years of dehumanization and terror toward Jews.

It bears repeating that this violence was perpetrated out especially by Christians. Gentiles who forgot that they were adopted into God's people by grace.

Antisemitism is the trauma that created the need for a Jewish state. Yet this state was not founded on "empty land," as the common colonial trope goes, but by displacing hundreds of thousands of Palestinians, whose children and grandchildren still live as stateless refugees around the world. Palestinians refer to this as the "Nakba" – Arabic for "catastrophe".

These twin catastrophes are the foundational wounds of the two people, and as is common with wounds, we usually pay more attention to our own.

**Stories that unsettle**

In conversations with Israeli and Palestinian peace activists, I was humbled to learn that owning my legacy of my entanglement in violence did not taint me. Instead, it opened up conversations about what repentance and reconciliation can look like.

These activists shared about their slow and painful realization that they had been lied to. While the *Shoah* was central to Israeli education, they had never learned about the *Nakba*.

Meanwhile, Palestinian schools portrayed the Zionists only as colonizers, while omitting that they were fleeing genocidal violence in Europe.

From the peace activists, I learned the importance of sharing our stories and

allowing for another's truth to unsettle us. To work for a just and lasting peace between the Mediterranean and the Jordan River, we must repent both of our deep-seated antisemitism as well as our colonial imagination and resist their manifestations in our societies today.

There is an image that grounds my hope. Each year, the Nassars invited people to the vineyard to help with the harvest and provide a nonviolent deterrence to settler violence. I remember harvesting buckets and buckets of the sweetest grapes I have ever eaten together with dozens of volunteers from around the world – including some Israelis.

Both the Israelis and my Palestinian hosts took considerable risks in this encounter as there are people on both sides adamantly opposed to any form of coexistence. Yet they consciously took the risk, because they were convicted that peace requires relationships of trust and solidarity that only grow with time and shared labour.

The joy at this harvest and the feast of hummus, olives, and falafel at lunch break has become a foretaste of the kin-dom of heaven I cherish and long to taste again.



Benjamin Isaak-Krauß co-pastors with his spouse Rianna at Mennonitengemeinde Frankfurt, a congregation of Arbeitsgemeinschaft Mennonitischer Gemeinden (AMG) in Germany. He represents the Deutsche Mennonitische Friedenskomitee (German Mennonite Peace Committee) on the steering committee of Community Peacemaker Teams.

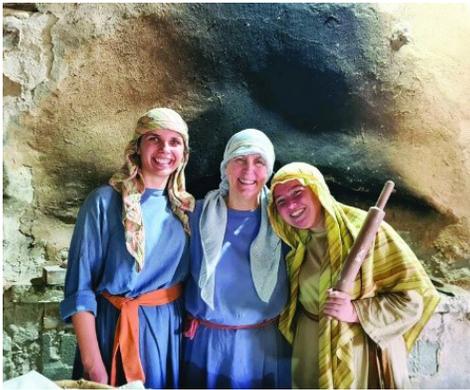
Click [here](#) to learn about Tent of Nations



## Paraguay

# Faith, history and actions

**I learned it doesn't always have to be words that convey the love of Jesus. Sometimes it is actions that speak louder than the words.**



Monika Warkentin of Paraguay, left, poses with other staff at Nazareth Village, Karen Bettencourt and Anna Hering of the United States. Nazareth Village is an open-air museum of the life and times of Jesus.

Photo courtesy of Monika Warkentin

by Monika Warkentin

**M**y name is Monika. I come from Paraguay, and I did a voluntary service in [Nazareth Village](#). Nazareth Village is an open-air museum in Nazareth, Israel. This museum recreates life of the first century and aims to show tourists the Nazareth of Jesus' time.

I was with the YAMEN\* program for 11 months, 2022-2023.

When I look back and think about what I was able to experience, I realize that there were many things that shaped me.

The Bible, and therefore also our faith, is historically proven. This fact first became clear to me in Israel/Palestine. And it helped me give my faith a new appreciation.

For me, faith – and especially the person of Jesus – was very abstract. It was difficult for me to understand that Jesus became a man and lived here on earth.

During my time in Nazareth, I spent a lot of time explaining life of the first century to tourists. I passed on the same information over and over again, and suddenly it was no longer an abstract thought. It would become easier and easier to imagine Jesus teaching in the synagogue in Nazareth or walking on the Sea of Galilee. It felt like I was in the events of the Gospels.

Something I also didn't understand until then was that the scriptures in the Old Testament refer to Jesus over and over again. I was aware that there are verses like in Isaiah 9 that point to Jesus. But the fact that there were so many promises that Jesus fulfilled was new to me. And I was thrilled to discover these connections.

It wasn't the places themselves – the excavations or the locations where Jesus spoke to his disciples – that strengthened my faith. It was the fact that what I read in the Bible is confirmed in so many cases by history. I was impressed by how God used people and nature to reveal God's existence.

The museum is a replica of a Jewish village from the first century, and Nazareth is now an Arab city. The majority of the staff are Christian Arabs who represent the people in the original village.

Although I knew nothing about Arabic culture and didn't speak a word of Arabic, the team at Nazareth Village welcomed me as part of the group from day one. I have always admired the staff for the time and energy they put into building relationships with the volunteers even though most volunteers only stay for a few months.

People at the Village taught me to cultivate relationships and not to judge people on their performance.

Something very typical of the Arabs is to ask about the family. Every Monday they would ask if I had spoken to my mom on the phone and how she was doing. At some point, I found myself calling my mom on the weekend so that I wouldn't have say again that I hadn't spoken to her.

I learned it doesn't always have to be words that convey the love of Jesus. Sometimes it is actions that speak louder than the words. I have come to love and appreciate the staff at Nazareth Village, and I am grateful for the testimony they leave behind.



Monika Warkentin is a member of HMC – Iglesia Hermanos Menonitas Concordia (Mennonite Brethren), Asuncion, Paraguay, part of the Mennonite Brethren conference. Her boyfriend from Paraguay, came to visit her in her year of serves and proposed to her at the Dead Sea, and now she is happily married.

\*The Young Anabaptist Mennonite Exchange Network (YAMEN) program is a joint program between Mennonite World Conference and Mennonite Central Committee. It places emphasis on expanding the fellowship between churches in the Anabaptist tradition and developing young leaders around the globe. Participants spend one year in a cross-cultural assignment starting in August and ending the following July.

Click [here](#) to learn more



USA

# A moment to relentlessly seek peace

by Saulo Padilla

I grew up in Guatemala in evangelical and Pentecostal churches. Our songs, Sunday school teachings and sermons were filled with Christian Zionist theology that declares God's will to be the establishment of a Jewish homeland in Palestine. The duty of Christians is to support Israel. Some churches even display an Israeli flag in their sanctuary.

There and in evangelical and Hispanic Mennonite congregations in Calgary, Alberta, Canada, and Goshen, Indiana, USA, our worship included songs about the God of Israel who cuts the heads off our enemies. Our readings were primarily from the Old Testament which depicted violence and genocide.

In our worship, we celebrated the deaths of the enemies of Israel.

I was taught to believe that the nation and state of Israel were the people of God. It was sinful to question this belief.

## No surprise

It is of no surprise to me that many who come from similar theological frameworks do not question the actions of the Israeli government in this current moment.

They see the state of Israel as a David coming up against a Goliath. They believe that Israel continues to be the little biblical nation it once was and not the world superpower it is now.

I held that Zionist vision of Israel for most of my life. That is, until I studied history and theology at Goshen College in the Hispanic Ministries program.

Theology professors such as Juan (John) Driver and Ron Collins were patient enough to help me deconstruct these violent narratives and reconstruct a new Anabaptist peace theology with a different vision of God, Jesus and Israel.

I learned that the Bible is not flat. There is a mountain in the gospels, where we stand with Jesus and can see and understand the rest of the Bible through Jesus' teachings, vision and mission.

So, when my Hispanic/Latino(a) brothers and sisters opposed a "Seeking Peace in Israel and Palestine" resolution at the Mennonite Church USA convention in 2015, I knew exactly where that opposition came from.

## Come and see

In that instant, I decided to join the "Come and See" Israel-Palestine Working Group (composed of Anabaptist agencies and organizations).

The objective of the working group was to educate leaders about Palestine and Israel and to join a learning tour of the Holy Land which included a visit to both Israel and the occupied Palestinian territories.

More than 110 Mennonite leaders signed up, including most of my Hispanic/Latina(o) brothers and sisters walked to the microphone at the convention in 2015.

Some stated, "I am pro-Israel and will not change my mind." But that mindset was challenged as we listened to stories from people on both sides of the Israeli separation wall.

In 2017, I again joined a learning tour group. It included leaders from MC USA Iglesia Menonita Hispana (Hispanic Mennonite Church), a few Anglo Mennonite leaders and an African American couple.

In addition to visiting the typical Christian "holy sites," we went behind the walls which very few visitors cross. We walked through checkpoints, reminding us of the challenges undocumented members of our congregations face in the USA.

We visited Palestinian refugee camps and Israeli settlements.

We enjoyed the hospitality of Christian Palestinian sisters and brothers near Bethlehem, and listened to stories from Jews, Christians and Muslims alike. At Bethlehem Bible College, we learned about the complex Christian theological perspectives on the land.

We planted olive trees in the West Bank, near Israeli settlements (built against international law). The settlers wanted to displace the Christian Palestinian farmers.

We learned that the conflict is not Muslim-Jewish, or Jewish-Palestinian, it is between the State of Israel and anyone who opposes the expansion of its occupation – even against Jewish people of conscience who oppose illegal expansion and the displacement of Palestinians.

## Apartheid experience

We began to get a sense of the apartheid experience as soon as we arrived, seeing the strong segregation and oppression of Palestinians under a brutal military occupation.

We felt the tensions and racial segregation. We, Latinas(os), share some physical features with ethnic groups in the Middle East (I was constantly asked if I was Lebanese).

As we passed through Israeli immigration and customs, one woman was held for interrogation. She had been so excited and joyful as we landed. But when she came out of the immigration and customs area, she was almost in tears.

Three days into the learning tour, the African American woman in our group wanted to return to the U.S. She felt unsafe, referencing the Jim Crow times in the USA.

By the end of our Come and See learning tour, we were not able to consider the single story of our Christian Zionist upbringings anymore.

Our belief system and theology had been changed.

## Commitment to peace

At the Mennonite Church USA convention in 2017, Hispanic Mennonite and People of Color leaders were some of the first to approach the microphone to speak in support of the Seek Peace resolution.

But our new narratives held the complexity of the stories we heard and of the shared humanity of Palestinians and Israelis.

We committed to read and study [The Kairos Document](#) put together by our Christian brothers and sisters in Palestine and Israel.

We committed to speak out!

As we witness the atrocities of the recent violence in Israel, Gaza and the West Bank, I am reminded of that commitment.

This is the time to use our Christian political leverage to call for a permanent ceasefire and a just resolution to the conflict.

This is the time to embrace complexity in a world where media often simplifies narratives, promotes misinformed stories and fuels conflict.

This is a moment to relentlessly seek peace.



Saulo Padilla is migration education coordinator for Mennonite Central Committee's U.S. National Peace & Justice Ministries.



## Peace Sunday 2024 Worship Resources

22 September 2024

Theme:

***Kintsukuroi*: The broken vessel is often more beautiful than the original**

Biblical texts:

- 2 Corinthians 4:7
- Haggai 2:9

Why this theme was chosen:

2 Corinthians 4:7 describes the gospel as a “treasure” in “clay jars.” These humble vessels bring to mind the Japanese tradition of *kintsukuroi* that creates (or recreates) pottery from broken pieces. Damaged vessels are put back together, often with gold binding, to create a useful object once again. The new piece tells a story about the past and is infused with glory that is greater than the former, as in Haggai 2:9.

## Share the impact

“Thank you for sending!”

“News from *Courier* will add faith and knowledge to us.”

These are responses we’ve received after *Courier* brings you testimonies, teaching and news from the global Anabaptist-Mennonite family around the world.

How have you been moved by the sharing you read in *Courier*? How have you shared that with your wider church community?

Tell us what you learned – and what you want to learn more about!

We welcome your feedback...

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## The Officers' Column

# One God and Spirit: a bond of peace

“...Making every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace” (Ephesians 4:3).

A global fellowship, 109 national churches, 58 countries, some 10 000 congregations, 1.4 million members, 45 languages: can that ever be unified?

The church is often called the body of Christ. A physical body needs different organs to function. And so it is with the church: you need diversity to function, to be a whole entity.

So it is also in the world communion. Depending on their place in the world, depending on their context, MWC member churches are different. So they can support each other and learn from each other.

Being a faith community in the Netherlands is very different from being in Indonesia or in Myanmar. Living as a very small minority in a country where another religion is by far the majority or in a country torn by violence of civil war is different from living in a country where there has been no war for more than 70 years and where there is freedom of religion.

Old communities have different challenges than new ones, and in that too we can learn from each other and encourage each other.

This unity in diversity is very vulnerable. Too easily we protest that the other does not belong to us because they do not live the faith exactly as we do or because they read the Bible differently than we do.

But Scripture says that unity is given by the Spirit: who are we to break it?

So you have to make an effort, to look for connection rather than separation. And we must have courage to endure one another even when we disagree. For it is the “mortar” of one God and one Spirit that binds together our disparate pieces into a picture of beautiful diversity.

This is how we came to set out the 7 shared convictions of Mennonite World Conference. It took 13 years to get those formulated and approved by consensus in the General Council. Among other things, we wrote down the values we share about God, the Bible, Jesus, peace witness and about worship.

If that sense of connection based on convictions is our basis, then we can talk about the differences. We can approach

each other without judging, but instead with interest in what concerns the other.

And if we are brave enough to hold that, we can make a beautiful mosaic, showing the world that we can reach across human borders of nationality, colour, language and more to live in peace with each other.



**A member displays the MWC member map at Comunidad Cristiana Menonita de Girardot in Colombia on Anabaptist World Fellowship Sunday.**

Photo supplied

**Henk Stenvers is president of Mennonite World conference (2022-2028). He delivered this address on Anabaptist World Fellowship Sunday to his local congregation of Doopsgezinde Gemeente Bussum-Naarden, in the Netherlands.**



Click [here](#) to watch the service on YouTube (in Dutch).

## From our Leaders: Deacon Commission

# Pastoral arm listens, prays and encourages

“We are called to be *shalom*-makers wherever we go. It takes courage, discipline, commitment and, of course, the guidance of the Holy Spirit,” says Andi Santoso, chair of the Deacons Commission.

### What is the Deacons Commission?

The Deacons Commission\* is the pastoral arm of Mennonite World Conference, focusing on the welfare of member churches, particularly in times of distress. The Commission offers listening, prayer, encouragement and support to churches by “walking with them” in their particular need.

The Commission promotes the attitude and practice of service among member churches by means of visits, teaching and materials.

### What does the Deacons Commission do?

#### Global Church Sharing Fund

The Deacons Commission manages the [Global Church Sharing Fund](#) (GCSF), to which MWC member and associate member churches in Africa, Asia and Latin America/Caribbean may apply for a grant of up to US\$10 000 for ministries that advance the life and mission of their churches. In 2023, GCSF disbursed more than USD\$100 000 to churches in nine countries, on initiatives ranging from church building, translation of Anabaptist documents into local languages, disaster responses, ministry support for disadvantaged groups, to capacity building.

“It is important for us to continue to support each other so that ‘Those who gathered more did not have too much, and those who gathered less did not have too little’” (2 Corinthians 8:13–15),” Andi continued, “Yet it is equally important that those who receive the gift have the power to determine how it will further God’s mission in their circumstances.”



Click here to learn about the Global Church Sharing Fund

#### Prayer

The Deacons Commission publishes a monthly prayer network newsletter, which raises prayer requests from MWC member churches globally. Along with the regional representatives, the Deacons Commission also hosts the bimonthly **Online Prayer Hour**, a one-hour virtual meeting for members from around the world to pray for and with each other.



Sign up for the prayer network email here



Register for the next Online Prayer Hour here

#### Delegation Visits

During their in-person meetings, the Deacons Commission agreed to expand the definition of delegation visits to churches facing a prolonged or extremely challenging situation.

- a. **Virtual meetings** with church leaders and other MWC Networks. In 2023, the Deacons Commission met virtually with the Young Anabaptists (YABs) Committee to learn their priorities and see where the two teams can collaborate. Future plans may include training sessions.
- b. **Unofficial visits.** When Deacons Commission members are invited to speak in a different church or country, they can visit local Anabaptist-Mennonite churches, host a workshop, or be in dialog about the role of MWC in empowering local churches.

For example, in 2023, Deacons Commission secretary Tigist Tesfaye was invited to India as speaker at the annual All-India Mennonite Women’s conference. She also visited 15 local Anabaptist-Mennonite churches while

there, and discussed how women were involved in the work of the church.

- c. **Official visits:** a team of continental delegates, subject matter experts and Deacons Commission members make a formal visit to encourage a member church experiencing distress, challenges or conflict. The last official visit was in 2020 to Burkina Faso.

### Plans for 2024

After a moratorium on travel during the COVID years, the new members of the Deacons Commission held face-to-face meetings alongside the Global Peacebuilding Festival in Harrisonburg, Virginia, USA, in June 2023. They reviewed the tasks of the Deacons Commission (Global Church Sharing Fund, Prayer Network, delegations) and made plans for the future.

“We want to relaunch the Deacons’ delegation visit to the least-supported congregations or those suffering from natural disasters or horizontal conflicts,” says Andi Santoso.

Plans are also underway to train Deacons Commission’s members on trauma-informed ministry and how to be in solidarity with churches dealing with collective trauma.



Who are the members of the Deacons Commission? Click here to learn more

Like the chambers of a heart, the four MWC commissions serve the global community of Anabaptist-related churches, in the areas of Deacons, Faith and Life, Peace, Mission. Commissions prepare materials for consideration by the General Council, give guidance and propose resources to member churches, and facilitate MWC-related networks or fellowships working together on matters of common interest and focus. In the following, one of the commissions shares a message from their ministry focus.



## Renewal 2024

Saturday, 6 April 2024

7:30 pm

1ª Igreja Evangélica Irmãos Menonitas do Boqueirão – Cruz Verde

Curitiba, Brazil

**Sendo transformados, juntos vivemos Jesus**

Transformed, together we live Jesus

Siendo transformados, juntos vivimos a Jesús

Transformés, ensemble, nous vivons Jésus



Photo by Henrique Ferreira on Unsplash

## Courage to love

Celebrating 500 years of Anabaptism

Thursday, 29 May 2025

Zurich, Switzerland

Workshops, musical performances, theatrical performances and panel discussions culminating in an ecumenical worship service.

## The Courage to Love: Anabaptism@500

# Zurich 2025 builds bridge to reconciliation

“We have walked a long way as Anabaptist-Mennonites; today we are learning to be bridge builders,” says Jürg Bräker, general secretary of Konferenz der Mennoniten der Schweiz/Conférence mennonite suisse. “The Courage to Love” is a public, international event on 29 May 2025 marking the 500th anniversary of the birth of Anabaptism.

On Ascension Day in 2025, global Mennonites will join locals on the streets of downtown Zurich.

- Vocal ensembles from each of the five MWC regions will perform inside and out of church buildings.
- Workshops will consider lessons Anabaptism may teach the church today – and still have to learn.
- A walking tour will explore significant sites and invite reflection on how God’s Spirit transforms in history and today.
- A panel discussion between church and society leaders will explore the relevance of Anabaptism today.
- A game that combines strategy and movement will connect activity with the historical event.
- The day will close with a public worship service in the Grossmünster, with ecumenical representatives, MWC General Council members and local Swiss attendees alongside a range of participants from around the world. The service will also be livestreamed for virtual participation.

Courage for early Anabaptists meant breaking from the established church. Young students of fiery reformer Ulrich Zwingli read their Bibles and called for greater freedom of conscience: adult baptism, separation of church and state. Their courage led many to suffering and martyrdom.

Today, The Courage to Love compels Anabaptist-Mennonites to work at reconciliation. Mennonites are

known for the peace-making work of Mennonite Central Committee and other organizations. But the planning of this event is itself an act of reconciliation.



**Members of the planning committee for The courage to love meet in Bienenberg, Switzerland, to work on the event.**

Photo: Karla Braun

For more than a year, MWC event planners have worked in close collaboration with representatives of the Evangelisch-reformierte Kirche of the canton of Zurich.

“This event will both acknowledge the difficult break from the Reformed Church in the sixteenth century while affirming the many steps that are leading us to reconciliation with Reformed churches today,” says John D Roth. “We are moved by the graciousness of our hosts – both state and church officials – who will part of our closing worship service in the symbolic cathedral, the Grossmünster, where Ulrich Zwingli preached.”

“We are looking forward to seeing people gather from many parts of the world to get inspired by the early beginnings of the Anabaptist movement as well as by today’s experiences from around the globe,” says Liesa Unger, MWC Chief International Events Officer.

## Survey

Hello. This survey will only take five minutes of your time, but your response will help MWC keep *Courier* relevant for you and your church. Please answer all mandatory questions and fill out any relevant sections below. Thank you for your help.



Scan to donate

Photo:  
BIC Zimbabwe

### Add your fragment to the MWC mosaic!

We invite you to **join the MWC movement!** Stand in solidarity with Anabaptist sisters-and-brothers from Argentina to Zimbabwe. When we work together, we learn from each other while blessing the world.

You can make a difference through **investing your financial gifts** in the worldwide mission of Mennonite World Conference as together we form a beautiful mosaic as a global Anabaptist family of faith. Like all mosaic, our beauty comes from every piece that forms part of the whole.

When you contribute, you form part of this diverse image:

- resource and strengthen Anabaptist leaders around the world
- encourage congregations to live out Anabaptist faith
- nurture a thriving global communion through MWC gatherings in person and online
- equip MWC's commissions, networks, YABs (young adults) to serve the church

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Thank you for sharing your gifts with the MWC global family!

1. In one year, how many editions for <i>Courier</i> do you usually read?	[ 1 ] [ 2 ] [ 3 ] [ 4 ]
2. Are you aware that <i>Courier</i> was published quarterly in 2023 (in print in April and October; digital only in February and July)?	[ yes ] [ no ]
3. How do you read <i>Courier</i> ?	[ digital version only ] [ print version only ] [ both ] [ whichever is available ]
4. How many articles do you usually read?	[ 1-2 ] [ only certain sections ] [ all of them ]
5. Which column in <i>Courier</i> do you like best?	[ ] Inspiration and Reflection/Feature [ ] Perspectives [ ] Country Profile [ ] Resources [ ] General Secretary Column
6. What topics would you like to see in <i>Courier</i> that we may not have covered before? [open answer]	

#### Fill out this section if you read *Courier's* PRINT version:

7. What do you do with <i>Courier</i> magazine after you read it:	[ share it with someone ] [ recycle ] [ I read it at church, so it stays at the church ] [ I use the materials in my sermons or Bible study ]
8. How many people in your household read <i>Courier</i> ?	[ 1 ] [ 2 ] [ 3-4 ] [ more than 4 ]

#### Fill out this section if you read *Courier's* DIGITAL version:

9. How do you notice that a new issue of <i>Courier</i> is out?	[ ] I click the link on MWC Info [ ] I get a special e-mail notification about it [ ] My MWC regional representative tells me [ ] My pastor/bishop/church leader tells me [ ] Other:
10. How do you read the magazine?	[ ] I read the PDF on my phone or computer [ ] I download the PDF for offline reading later [ ] I download and print the PDF [ ] I click through on each story through the web page [ ] I only read articles that I notice on social media
11. What platforms do you use to read other digital publications? [open answer]	
12. What excites you the most about the work of MWC? [open answer]	
13. Would you be interested in discovering more about local events and volunteering with MWC?	[ yes ] [ no ]
14. If you answer "YES" in the previous question, please write your e-mail address here so we can send the information to you.	

If you fill out the survey by hand, please take a photo of your completed survey and email the photo to [info@mwc-cmm.org](mailto:info@mwc-cmm.org). Thank you.

## AWFS Story

# Becoming part of God's bigger picture

From Antakiya Mennonite Church in rural Kodopali, India, to Iglesia Hermanos Menonitas Concordia in bustling Asuncion, Paraguay to the open-walled gathering place of the Mennonite Church in Ntale, Uganda, to congregations in North America and Europe with generations-long followers of Jesus, Anabaptist-Mennonites celebrated becoming part of God's bigger picture this [Anabaptist World Fellowship Sunday](#).



Antakiya Mennonite Church Kodopali, India.

Photo: supplied

### Creativity and communication skills unleashed

"I had the opportunity to serve and celebrate Anabaptist World Fellowship Sunday with a church full of farmers – just like the poster image. I saw their excitement about a good harvest. We sang joyfully and danced gracefully as expressions of worship to the Lord. Their patience extended from their cooking before the rooster's crow in the cold pre-dawn, to listening attentively to Scripture reflections and testimony sharing," says Richard A. Rancap.

"Celebrating Anabaptist World Fellowship Sunday (AWFS) far away from home made me more appreciative of becoming a part of God's bigger picture because the hospitality made me feel at home. AWFS is not hard to observe when the people in the mosaic are compelled by the love of the Lord."

Mission Service Department director Richard A. Rancap travelled for two days

to celebrate an AWFS weekend with the multidialectal mountain congregation Dupax Del Norte, Nueva Vizcaya, Luzon, Philippines. (Congregation members speak Bungkalot, Ibaloi, Ilocano, Kanakanaey and Kalanguya.)

"Looking at the AWFS poster I wondered, if those tiny parts of the mosaic could only talk, what would they tell? How do they feel being surrounded by other shapes and colours?"

Focusing on the theme "Mosaic: Becoming a Part of God's Bigger Picture," the members realized that their roles are to talk to God, care for the creation, share the good news and strengthen the church.

"This experience unleashed the congregation members' creativity and intrapersonal and interpersonal communication skills. Their listening skills were activated and they practiced traditional dance and songs in the service," says Richard A. Rancap.

Although the congregation had not been aware of the event before, with only a day's notice, they put together 17 activities for their 66 attendees (18% youth, 27% children, 55% adult).

On Saturday evening, the elders wrote the verses from the four Scripture passages onto coloured hearts.

In Sunday school, youth and adults divided into groups. Each meditated on the verse and then had opportunity to share. "Some were nervous while reading the verse but many confessed that the verse was exactly speaking on their personal experience. They were thankful for the lessons they learned about *being a part of God's bigger picture*," says Richard A. Rancap.

Inspired by the testimonies from the resource package, the sermon proclaimed that the Lord who draws his people into a global mosaic is the Lord who acts (Job 42), the Lord who is thoughtful (Psalm 8), the Lord who cares (John 10) and the Lord who calls (Ephesians 4).

To remember brothers and sisters from different parts of the world, members wore traditional costumes from the Middle East, Hawaii, Texas, China, Indonesia, Tagalog, Ifugao and Ibaloi.

In the afternoon, they held a Bible study in a house; many from the community attended.

During the evening service, 12 members spontaneously gave a testimony and posted it on the heart-shaped mosaic:

- A pastor was healed of his sickness and God helped him during struggles.
- A woman was able to attend AWFS 2024 because her employer gave a day off on weekends.
- A man who was questioning God and was blessed by the story of the life of Job.
- A man is thankful on his 55th birthday for God's faithful provisions.
- Ephesians 4:2 taught a woman to correct her behaviour.
- A man is thankful God has chosen him to be a part of God's family.
- God remains faithful, healing a family of their sickness.
- A woman who reflected on Ephesians 4:12 wonders what spiritual gift she has.
- A man confessed his need for prayer to totally abandon alcoholism.
- A woman sang a song of thankfulness to the Lord for her spiritual journey.
- John 10:14-16 challenges a woman to share the gospel with others.

One member testified that morning transformed a memory from sadness to joyfulness. She contributed a traditional gown from the Middle East. She obtained the beautifully designed dress decades ago in traumatic circumstances. When she arrived in the Middle East as a domestic helper, she discovered she had been cheated by the immigration agent and had no working visa. Her employer overworked her, underfed her and was violent while keeping her passport so she couldn't leave. After 20 months, God answered her prayers to escape and she returned to the Philippines. This morning, the gown was a testimony to the goodness of God.

After the testimonials, the congregation divided into groups to pray for the requests in the worship resource.

"Without the Lord, we are simply a club focussing on personal interest; perhaps 'God's bigger picture' would be a filtered selfie. But for becoming a part of God's bigger picture, our prayer is *"May Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven,"* says Richard A. Rancap.

# Another way

“There should be justice. They should pay for the terrible wrong they have done.” These and other similar phrases have been repeated in the news in recent months.

In my country, Colombia, I have heard the same sentences too many times on the lips of Christians who claim to follow Jesus, the God who chose compassion over retaliation, the one who taught us to give to our enemies and even oppressors, not what they deserve but what they need.

While I reflect on the images of the atrocities caused by the war in uncountable places in the world, I remember the words of a wise Jewish rabbi, Jonathan Sacks, who served as Chief Rabbi of the United Hebrew Congregations of the Commonwealth from 1991 to 2013. Let me quote some of his writings here:

“It is our task [of the Abrahamic faith] to be a blessing to the world.... To invoke God to justify violence against the innocent is not an act of sanctity but of sacrilege. It is a kind of blasphemy. It is to take God’s name in vain.”<sup>1</sup>

“Nothing is more dispiriting than the cycle of revenge that haunts conflict zones and traps their populations into a past that never relaxes its grip. That has been the fate of the Balkans, Northern Ireland, India and Kashmir, the Middle East.... Retaliation is the instinctual response to perceived wrong.... Historic grievances are rarely forgotten. They become part of a people’s collective memory.... It is this that makes forgiveness so counterintuitive an idea. It is more than a technique of conflict resolution. It is a stunningly original strategy. In a world without forgiveness, evil begets evil, harm generates harm, and there is no way short of exhaustion or forgetfulness of breaking the sequence. Forgiveness breaks the chain.”<sup>2</sup>

Rabbi Sacks observes – as does anyone who has considered the conflict in Israel-Palestine – that the issues are complex.



**Saulo Padilla walks by the Israel separation wall in 2017 at Aida (Ayda), a Palestinian refugee camp north of Bethlehem in the West Bank, Palestine. Read more on page 10.**

Photo: MCC Photo/Saulo Padilla

It would have been implemented if it had been simple to find a solution acceptable to the major parties.

There are long memories involved: Israelis think about “2,000 years of Jewish suffering and the existential need for Jews to have, somewhere on earth, defensible space,” Rabbi Sacks writes, and Palestinians remember “displacement and loss, political impotence and economic hardship, of humiliating defeat and anger.”<sup>3</sup>

As each group attempts to protect their own space, their attempts to secure it sometimes result in harm that affects the other and turns back on themselves. “Forgiveness seems absurdly inadequate to substantive conflicts of interest and the sheer momentum of suspicion, distrust and cumulative grievance,” Rabbi Sacks writes.

“Yet in the end peace is made, if at all, then by people who acknowledge the personhood of their opponents. Until Israelis and Palestinians are able to listen to one another, hear each other’s anguish and anger and make cognitive space for one another’s hopes, there is no way forward [... As a Jew] I honour the past not by repeating it but by learning from it – by refusing to add pain to pain, grief to grief. That is why we must answer hatred with love, violence with peace, resentment with generosity of spirit and conflict with reconciliation.”<sup>4</sup>

As I write these words, the cycle of violence and retaliation continues to deepen. It is almost impossible to say anything about that situation without angering someone somewhere, as was the case with the [Reconciling response to war in the Middle East](#) statement we wrote in October 2023. And yet, we are called to respond, as a Global Communion, to this and many other terrible scenarios of war we see today. That is why we invite you, in this issue of *Courier*, to reflect on understanding biblical messages in terms of today’s realities.

Yes, amid terrible atrocities, people, whoever they are, have the right to demand that the perpetrators get what they deserve for what they have done. But, thanks to God, *it does not have to be that way*. Thanks to God, Jesus shows us another way.

César García is general Secretary of Mennonite World Conference. Originally from Colombia, he lives in Kitchener, Ontario, Canada.

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— *Not in God’s Name: Confronting Religious Violence*. First American edition. ed. New York: Schocken Books, 2015.

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### Courier

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