

Transforming

Stories of making disciples in the way of Christ

Fall 2019
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SPECIAL ISSUE



the **WIND**
of the
SPIRIT

CELEBRATING 100 YEARS



● Table of Contents

1	The River and the Sea: Making Sense of the Story
2-3	One Hundred Years of Sharing Jesus with Neighbors Near and Far
4-5	Beginnings: Called to the Mountains
6-7	Tidewater Virginia: Our Antioch
8-9	From Virginia into the Heart of Christendom
10-11	Will You Go? Our Expansion into the Caribbean
12-13	The Walls Came Tumbling Down: Our Entrance into Albania
14-15	Extending the Reach to Every Nation, Tribe and Tongue
16	A Dream, a Need, a Gift: the Launch of tranSend
17	An Examen: God, Where Have You Been Present?
18-19	USA Ministries: A Story of Missionaries and Migrants
20	Getting On Board With Business
21	Gratitude to God Funds Mission
22	Bold Humility: Mission in the Way of Jesus
23	Presidents of Virginia Mennonite Missions
24-25	A Legacy of Faith: In Their Own Words

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Cover photo: A participant creates enormous bubbles at a Park View Mennonite Church neighborhood Kids Club Block Party in 2017.

Photo: Trina Trotter Nussbaum
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Do we still have our sails raised, ready to believe that the Spirit is blowing across our world? Are we poised to catch the high-in-the-sky breezes that will move us where God wants us to go?

● Editor's Notes

The River and the Sea: Making Sense of the Story



BY CAROL TOBIN
TRANSFORMING EDITOR

For one hundred years, VMissions has existed to help the church know itself as sent. We now have the opportunity to take a look over our shoulders. It is when we look back that we are best able to see an unfolding storyline that can then help us to orient toward our future. What do we see when we look back?

For one thing, we see that we are not the primary actors. We play bit parts. As I have pored through a treasure trove of archival material for this special centennial issue, I find that I am reading a story not simply about an agency and its work and workers, but about God. God has been active: energizing people in prayer, seeding vision for the new, providing joy in the midst of adversity, and pouring love and passion into those of us servants who, like jars of clay, are ready to be used, but who are admittedly full of cracks.

I see a river of outward impulse that simply keeps flowing. I resonate with the testimonies of workers who experienced riotous joy as they were swept giddily along in its coursing currents. I notice at times the temptation to stand timidly on the banks of this untamable river as we worry about whether the waters will rise and carry off what we treasure. At other times, I feel the heartbreak of gazing upon a barren landscape, wistfully wondering if the current has changed and left us high and dry.

Another thing that stands out is how easy it would have been to miss those tiny rivulets that wondrously grew to become wide channels of access. I remember visiting the headwaters of the Mississippi River. We laughingly straddled the shallow bit of stream at our feet. Who could have imagined what

would emerge from such humble beginnings? So it is with our beginnings, Italy and Jamaica in particular!

We can also note that looming obstacles have in some cases forced bends in the river, enabling new streams of blessing to emerge. When Guyana closed its doors, blessing multiplied in Trinidad! When a new generation of givers wanted to give to people rather than institutions, we found ourselves blessed with Ministry Support Teams!

What about apparent failure and tragedy? Melvin and Miriam Weaver had spent several years of seemingly fruitless ministry in Kentucky. While in the process of discerning with the mission board where to serve, Melvin and VMissions president Jacob Shenk lost their lives in a tragic plane crash. What was gained by the ever so costly investment of Melvin's years in the mountains of Kentucky? Perhaps there is an enduring legacy, not of buildings and programs, but of faith—examples of courage and passion that both inspire and instruct subsequent generations.

By looking back and noticing these things, we can turn with fresh vigor toward our future.

Perhaps a nautical image can help as we look ahead. We might picture our work together as VMissions as a small sailboat on the big and turbulent seas of the world, attempting to catch the winds of God's Spirit. Our ballast is God's word, steady and unchanging. The raised sail is our attentiveness to the Spirit.

Do we have sufficient ballast to keep us from careening off course in the face of contrary currents? Do we still have our sails raised, ready to believe that the Spirit is blowing across our world? Are we poised to catch the high-in-the-sky breezes that will move us where God wants us to go? May it be so!

One Hundred Years of Sharing Jesus with Neighbors Near and Far



BY AARON KAUFFMAN
PRESIDENT

This year marks 100 years of Virginia Mennonite Missions helping the church share Jesus with neighbors near and far. How did it all get started? What has God done through our work? Where might God be leading

in the future?

In the late 1800s, Mennonites in the Shenandoah Valley awakened to Christ's call to share the gospel with their neighbors in the highlands of Virginia and West Virginia (p. 6-7). Evangelists traveled 50 miles and more by horseback to spread the message of new life in Jesus Christ. In October of 1919, the leaders of Virginia Mennonite Conference agreed to organize a mission board to coordinate and guide this work. Thus was born Virginia Mennonite Board of Missions and Charities (often referred to simply as "the mission board"), now known as Virginia Mennonite Missions, or VMissions.

Mission often followed migration in the early days. As Mennonites moved to new areas in search of land and opportunity, they established churches. Yet they were not content to keep the gospel message to themselves. For example, it was the small congregation of transplanted Mennonites in Concord, Tennessee, that saw the need to begin outreach in the nearby city of Knoxville. That became the first project taken on by the newly organized mission board. Soon, ministry began in other urban areas like Washington, DC, and Newport News, Virginia, as well as rural areas like Harman, West Virginia, and Relief, Kentucky.



Zion Mennonite Church, Broadway, Va., was the site where Virginia Mennonite Conference voted to form Virginia Mennonite Board of Missions and Charities on October 17, 1919.

Photo: John L. Stauffer; James Rush collection

The early mission workers aimed to establish self-sustaining churches. Their integrated witness to the gospel included both evangelism through Sunday schools and tent meetings, as well as social outreach through educating children or visiting prisoners. Like the Apostle Paul, they sustained their ministry through both gainful employment and the support of generous churches and donors.

Within a few decades, VMissions extended its ministry beyond the borders of the United States, first to Italy in 1949 (p. 8-9), and later to Jamaica in 1955 and Trinidad and Tobago in 1969 (p. 10-11). Again, mission workers focused on establishing local Christian communities as they trained national leaders.

Over time, autonomous conferences of churches developed in each of those countries. They continue as vital partners with VMissions today.

Bearing witness to Christ has not been without challenges. Not every mission endeavor proved fruitful in the long run. People did not always respond, and foreign countries sometimes denied entry to mission workers.

Other workers faced opposition when they refused to compromise their distinctly Anabaptist convictions. Still others wrestled to discern the difference between gospel essentials and their own human traditions.

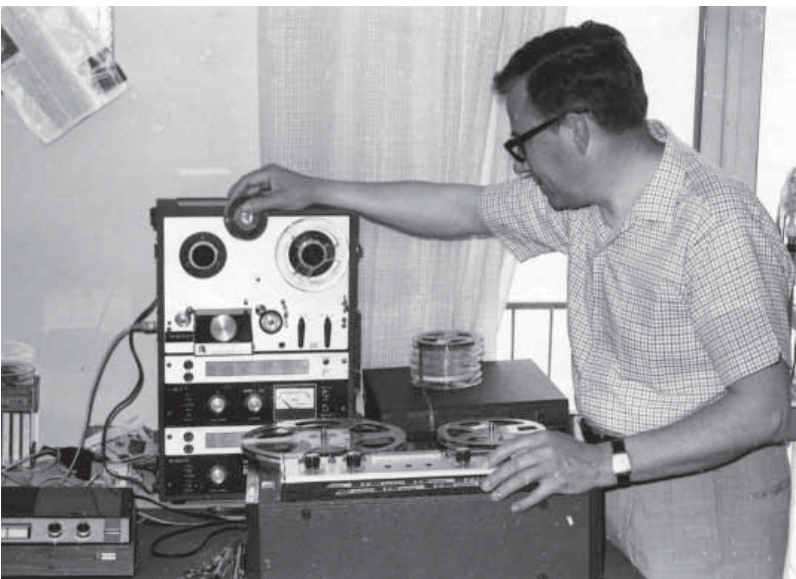
In recent years, VMissions has been particularly attentive to open doors in areas where Christian presence is minimal. Together with Eastern Mennonite Missions, outreach in Albania began in 1992 (p. 12-13). Now, a growing church, a Roma children's ministry and a Christian school are all located in the city



Dr. Richard Keeler served for many years in Trinidad, working to cure the country of Hansen's Disease (leprosy).

Photo: VMC Archives





(left) Missionary Paul Lehman produced music for Italian radio in 1950s and 1960s. *VMC Archives*

New models of funding mission have also emerged. Tentmakers have become job-creators through establishing businesses with a missional purpose (p. 20). Relational funding through Ministry Support Teams has expanded the number of missionaries VM-Missions can support, while endowments have added stability to long-term mission endeavors (p. 21).

Regardless of context or means of support, the goal of VM-Missions' work has always been the same: making disciples in the way of Christ. Increasingly, our churches and partners reflect the New Testament vision of a global people of God gathered from every nation, tribe, and tongue. Join us as we follow the Holy Spirit's lead into a new century of sharing Jesus with neighbors near and far.



College students at a prayer and worship service of Eastside College, a discipleship ministry of worker Rachel Yoder. *Photo: Rachel Yoder*

of Lezhë, where the team of missionaries includes North Americans, Brazilians, and Albanians.

Partnerships with other members of the global Anabaptist family have allowed VM-Missions to undergird outreach to some of the largest pockets of unevangelized people in our world today. This includes ministry in other areas of post-communist Europe, as well as North Africa, the Middle East, and Asia (p. 14-15).

Another growing area of focus is fostering discipleship through internships and short-term mission experiences (p. 16-17). Over the past 15 years, tranSend has allowed over one hundred people to explore a long-term call to mission through a year or two of mentored ministry. More recently, we've worked hard to harness the full potential of short-term missions by completing an accreditation process for our new program, E³ Collective. These teams provide a vehicle for joining local Christians in responding to the global refugee crisis in locations like Jordan, Greece, and Thailand.

Over the past five years, VM-Missions has reclaimed God's call to empower the church's witness not only to neighbors far away, but to those near at hand. This has resulted in Kids Clubs, prison ministry, college outreach, and a focus on releasing a new generation of church planters, especially in the Latino community. Perhaps these new immigrant churches are a gift from God, bringing fresh hope where many established churches are in decline (p. 18-19).



(left) Norma Teles (top right) has served in Lezhë, Albania, since 1999. She is the director of the Joshua Center, an early education center for Roma children. *Photo: VM-Missions*



Melody Zimmerman walks with a child at a Harrisonburg, Va., Kids Club. Kids Clubs have reached hundreds of children and families in the Shenandoah Valley. *VM-Missions photo*



Beginnings: Called to the Mountains

In the early days, mission vision emerged at the district level of Virginia Mennonite Conference. Middle District was exemplary in mobilizing witness over the mountains into West Virginia. Though many declined the invitation to serve, a steady stream of workers labored over the years, eventually giving birth to over a dozen churches. This story of Rhine and Anna Benner is one of many inspiring accounts.

BY AARON KAUFFMAN

On July 16 of 1915, Rhine and Anna Benner arrived in Job, West Virginia, to join the mission work Mennonites had been involved in there since just after the Civil War. Their “pale and frail” appearance did not convince the mission leaders from Virginia that they were suited “for the rigors of mountain life.” So for the first year, the board declined to provide them with any means of transportation. Rhine learned to walk the roads and trails that connected the small churches and mission outposts in the area, sometimes

walking over 30 miles to conduct three services in a single day.

A side from a house for their family of four, the mission board provided \$15 a month. This proved too little to live on, so Rhine invested in clock repair tools, since there seemed to be a market for such a service in the community. After proving their resilience during their first year on the field, the mission board provided Rhine and Anna with a capable but old horse and a wagon. They also gave funds to install a phone line in the house, which lacked



Rhine and Anna Benner with their children James (b. 1912), and Rhoda (b. 1914). Photo: Jan Liskey



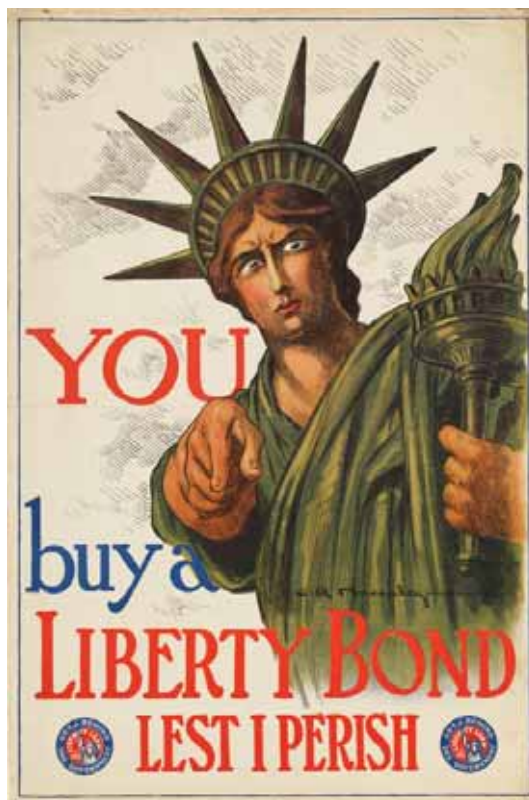
The mission home at Job for West Virginia mission workers in 1928. Photo: Roy Good



both electricity and indoor plumbing.

Anna tended the home, but also joined the ministry as a fervent prayer partner. More than once, the Lord placed a special burden on Anna's heart to pray while Rhine was making visits or preaching. She learned to make do with few modern comforts. She once remarked to Rhine, "Don't you believe the Lord wants us to live as the people here do? If we had conveniences they can't afford, wouldn't they resent us?" Tragedy struck not once but multiple times as Anna and Rhine lost five children in their infancy between 1916 and 1922. Eventually the Lord blessed them with seven children who lived to adulthood.

Perhaps the greatest test of their ministry came in 1918 as the United States declared war on Germany in World War I. Young men



A 1917 propaganda poster instructs viewers to finance the First World War effort by purchasing Liberty Bonds. Rhine Benner and his bishop, L.J. Heatwole, publicly resisted the buying of bonds and faced persecution. Both were fined and Benner served three days in jail. *National Archives*

from their congregations were drafted and the government issued war bonds and stamps. Rumor had it that buying the bonds and stamps was compulsory. Rhine needed an authoritative answer to give his church members, so he wrote to Bishop L. J. Heatwole back in Virginia. His response? "The report of compulsory buying is, I feel, completely false. Contribute nothing to a fund used to run the war machine."

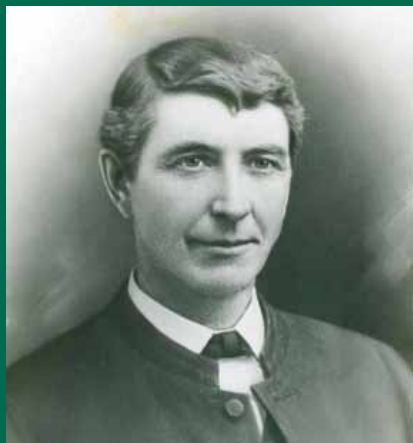
Rhine followed the Bishop's instructions, and he visited or wrote letters to all the church members, to pass them on. When officials called a local meeting to sell war bonds and stamps,

Rhine made it public that he would not do so. Noah Carr, the chair of the War Savings Stamp Committee, was overheard saying Rhine should be shot.

But that wasn't all. One of Rhine's letters got into the hands of law enforcement, and the Benner home soon had a visit from a U.S. Marshal. Rhine spent three nights in prison, and eventually both he and Bishop Heatwole were fined \$1,000 (equivalent to \$16,000 today). For their safety, the Benner family relocated to Virginia for a time, then served in Montana for a year.

When Rhine returned to Job just a year and a half later, he intentionally sought out and shook hands with Noah Carr. This demonstration of Christ-like forgiveness made an impact. Carr eventually became a believer and joined the church.

An Early Vision for Mission



John S. Coffman,
Mennonite
evangelist
(1848-1899)

Forays over the mountains had begun as early as the 1870s. Circuit riding preachers would hold meetings in as many as twenty different "schoolhouses" on grueling trips that lasted up to two weeks.

Upon returning from one such trip, Coffman wrote: "Today I have been thinking much of the necessity of mission work in the church. What we need is home mission work. Conference should make arrangements to send ministers into certain places where there is a prospect of a church being built. A mission board should be created and evangelists should be sent out under the care of the Board."



The Henry and Bettie Keener family also served in West Virginia missions in the early 20th century. *VMC Archives*



Norfolk Naval Shipyard in the 1940s. Photo: Wikipedia

Tidewater Virginia: Our Antioch

Robert Mast, having served a lifetime with Virginia Conference and VMissions, says of eastern Virginia, “We know that in the time of the early church, ministry began in Jerusalem. Later, Antioch became an important mission center. The Shenandoah Valley is the Jerusalem of Virginia Mennonite Conference. But, realize, Tidewater Virginia is our Antioch!” What made that particular context so special? How could one region spawn and support so many different ministries and church plants? How did VMissions contribute to the picture, promoting greater faithfulness and fruitfulness?

BY CAROL TOBIN

In the final years of the 19th century, the word was out that cheap farmland was available in the Tidewater area of Virginia. Mennonite farmers came from as far away as Michigan, bringing with them a robust faith. It is said that one of the first men to migrate to the area got off the train, promptly went into the nearby woods, and knelt to pray.

Sarah Lapp, the beloved daughter of one of the first settlers became a missionary to India. While on furlough in 1908, her husband Mahlon preached at the dedication service of the Warwick River Church. It was partly through the influence of this passionate couple that a quarterly mission meeting was instituted in 1917. This laid the groundwork for cooperation with the mission board.

Records indicate that in 1924 the Warwick River Church sent each of the West Virginia preachers \$17, equivalent to \$250 today. By 1928, the congregation was bravely invested in mission work in the culturally diverse city that was quickly engulfing their rural enclave. In time and with the help of the mission board, this concerted energy resulted in the foundation of Huntington Avenue Church.

Warwick River Church was likewise ahead of its time in being open to its African-American neighbors. With the support of both Warwick District and the mission board, Nelson Burkholder patiently built rapport with the African-American community in the 1940s. Local leadership eventually emerged with Bishop Leslie Francisco II, resulting in Calvary Community Church, the thriving congregation known today as C3 Hampton.

The list goes on. Warwick River had integral connections to other church plants in Williamsburg, Powhatan, and Richmond, and as far away as Kentucky, North Carolina, and Florida.

So what was it like in the early 1950s? Reflecting on his high school years in Warwick River, Sam Weaver shares, “I was a member of an octet singing group. On Monday nights we sang at the local jail, on Tuesday we had our church youth gathering called ‘Literary,’ on Wednesday we attended our church prayer meeting, on Thursday we sang at the local hospital, and on the weekend we had a social or sang at street meetings. And we went to church, morning and evening on Sunday! There was so much interest in revival and reaching out! We were busy! It was encouraging! We felt like we were important to the church.”

Lloyd and Sara Weaver, Sam’s parents, had moved to Newport News in 1948 at the request of mission board president Harold Eshleman, who was looking for someone to anchor ministry within the Jewish community following World War II. “My mother took our call to service seriously,” Sam recalls, “and so my father was willing to leave his thriving business in Lancaster.” The mission board purchased a home for the Weaver family right in the center of the Jewish section of Newport News. At first, the doors were open wide for evangelism. When two young men professed faith in Jesus, however, that particular door was closed.



Lloyd Weaver, Sr., (center) ministered to Japanese military officers in Newport News. “Our non-resistance witness has been a great help in our work. [...] Our Japanese friends remember the bombs that were dropped on Nagasaki and Hiroshima. We are thankful to prove to them by the Scriptures that Jesus’ program is one of peace, and that the Christian’s is no less.”

Lloyd and Sara Weaver



The 1982 groundbreaking of Calvary Community Church in Hampton, Va. Bishop Leslie Francisco II (far left) served as pastor of Calvary Mennonite Church in adjacent Newport News until the new church in Hampton was built. The two churches agreed to merge in 1987 and the Newport News location closed. VMC Archives

Still under assignment, God turned Lloyd and Sara's attention to a new open door. "My father would eat at a coffee shop. One day, he saw an Asian man eating by himself, so he went over to talk with him and found out that this man was an officer on a Japanese ship. He had to stay in Newport News because of an injury. My father discovered that all of the officers could speak fluent English! So, in 1952 he and my mother started boarding the ships, developing relationships, writing letters and sharing the gospel." Thus began the unique and fruitful ministry called "Church at Sea." Sam recalls, "My dad counted 25 men who gave their lives to Christ in baptism during those years. My father would take these new converts to church and

"We feel so unable to give the witness that will make folks sick of sin and want to turn to Jesus. Please, Christian friends, remember us down here that we may be able to show people our Savior."

Andy Hartzler, *Missionary Light*, Nov-Dec 1950

have them give their testimonies. One time he was preaching at Huntington Avenue Church and a Korean man came up afterwards to say, 'Where did you learn to speak Korean? I heard you in the Korean language!' It was just like Pentecost!"

Here was a door that stayed open for almost 30 years. Writes Harry Brunk in his history of the Virginia Mennonites, "Yes, a great work, but of a type and significance that the Virginia mission board and the Warwick River Church had not originally planned." Such is often the case in mission.

Who would have been able to predict the trajectory of Bertha Brenneman's life? She was a serious-minded girl in the serious-minded post-World War II era. She grew up in a poor

family in Denbigh and sometimes felt a lack of acceptance from her peers. "I spent my last year of high school at Eastern Mennonite School. It was 1949, and I was 16. We had a weekly prayer meeting and were supposed to choose a topic to focus on. For some reason, I chose 'rural Mennonite ministries.' Someone shared about the work in Kentucky, stories about drunks breaking up church meetings! It sounded so different than anything I had ever experienced. Later, after graduation, a young man from Kentucky came to Denbigh to work. He seemed serious about his faith, like I was. I told him I would like to go to Kentucky sometime, so he told Mahlon Horst. I was invited to be a summer Bible School teacher. During that time I really felt blessed and fell in love with the people. I knew when Bible School was over I wanted to stay, but I thought, 'Maybe I should do my nurses training first.' I didn't know what to do."

Bertha traveled with an octet and after that time of service was over, Mahlon Blosser from the mission board came by and talked with her. Evidently, he sensed God's call on her life. "We aren't going to tell you what to do," Mahlon said, "but if you get your training, the mission board wants you!" Bertha recalls, "It felt good to be wanted!" After her training, however, she was again at a crossroads. "My family seemed to need me. Perhaps I am meant to stay in Denbigh." Again, Mahlon approached Bertha and asked, "Why don't you go to Kentucky on a temporary basis?" That was 1955. Bertha didn't return to Denbigh for 15 years. As she puts it, "It was in Kentucky that I discovered how God could use me."

What can explain this blossoming of Bertha, and many others like her from Tidewater, the "Antioch" of Virginia Mennonites? No doubt they would say, with the Apostle Paul, "I planted the seed, Apollos watered it, but God has been making it grow" (I Cor. 3:6).

From Virginia into the Heart of Christendom

"I do not believe that it is above what we could expect, if the Lord tarries, that we would have a native Mennonite Church in Sicily." These were the words of Truman Brunk in his report to the executive committee of the mission board upon his return from a visit to Sicily in November 1950. He had gone to see for himself something that originated—not in a strategic planning meeting—but in Detroit, Michigan.



BY AARON KAUFFMAN

An Italian immigrant in the United States named Russell Maniaci had grown disillusioned with conventional Western culture and the Catholic Church of his birth. He read about a group of Amish who had moved away from Kansas to avoid getting rich from oil discovered in their fields. He was intrigued. Eventually, he made his way to the Detroit Mennonite Mission, and he and his family converted.

With the zeal of a convert, Russell threw himself into the Mennonite world and into propagating his newfound faith. He moved to Elkhart, Indiana, and his correspondence with his aunt back in Sicily turned evangelistic. Little did he know that his message was actually getting through to the woman who transcribed his aunt's letters. Her name was Franca Ceraulo. At some point in their correspondence, Russell's aunt passed away. But Franca continued to write letters as if the elderly woman were still alive. Money sometimes came in the mail. And so did a New Testament. Franca read it and felt convicted of her deception.

On a visit to Elkhart, Indiana, Lewis Martin, the treasurer of the Virginia Mennonite Board of Missions and Charities, learned about Franca and her interest in the gospel. A frequent business traveler, Lewis decided to stop in Sicily during a trip to Europe in the fall of 1949. Jason Weaver, a deacon in the Virginia Conference, accompanied him. With the help of an English dictionary, Franca communicated her desire to be baptized. Though her mother was a devout Catholic, she provided a pitcher of water and Deacon Weaver baptized Franca Ceraulo into the faith.

Franca could not keep the joy of following Jesus to herself. On a subsequent visit by Lewis Martin and Bishop Amos Horst



Lewis and Cora Martin (left) with Franca Ceraulo, the first Mennonite baptized in Palermo, Sicily.

Photo: VMC Archives

Virginia churches provide material aid to Sicily. Franca Ceraulo appointed director of Palermo mission work.	First Italian Mennonite Conference held in Palermo.	Francesco Picone baptized.	Centro Agape experiences split. Church reorganized.	Virginia gospel team in Sicily. CEMI created.	Italian Mennonite Church joins Mennonite World Conference.	Blossers move to work in Capaci.
1949	1954	1962	1969	1973	1979	1982
1950	1960	1965	1972	1976	1981	1986
Lewis Martin and Jason Weaver visit Sicily and baptize Franca Ceraulo. Centro Agape born.	Translation of Mennonite materials into Italian begins.	VMMissions assumes full responsibility for Italy work.	Willard and Eva Eberly begin serving in Palermo.	James and Charlene Duncan begin serving in Palermo.	Ken and Sue Horst join team. New Palermo church dedicated.	Floyd and Janet Blosser join team. Eberlys begin work in Cinisi.



The Centro Agape church in Palermo, Sicily, in 1966. The work in Palermo was the first international outreach of the mission board in 1949, and the congregation born through the ministry of Franca Ceraulo and others was the first Mennonite church in Italy. Photo: VMC Archives

of Pennsylvania, Franca's brother, Guisepppe was baptized.

Before long, her sisters and brother-in-law had come to faith as well. Franca hosted a Bible study in her home with the fledgling group. In June of 1951 she wrote, "The worship services at my home are from the *Gospel Herald* that I receive every week. First I translate it and then speak with our members and explain. There are some new members in our fellowship. They come to my home for the Bible study."

Franca was so dedicated to the work that she left a well-paying job at a local bank to be appointed by the Virginia mission board as the local mission director. By 1958, she was ordained as a deaconess. The Board provided funds for her and other local leaders to study English.

Meanwhile, back in Virginia, Lewis Martin hired an assistant and tasked him with learning Italian and translating key Mennonite publications into Italian. George and Erma Brunk were eventually sent as long-term missionaries to Italy in 1964, but Franca remained an anchor in the Italian Mennonite Church until her death in 1969.

Taking the Leap

BY JANET BLOSSER

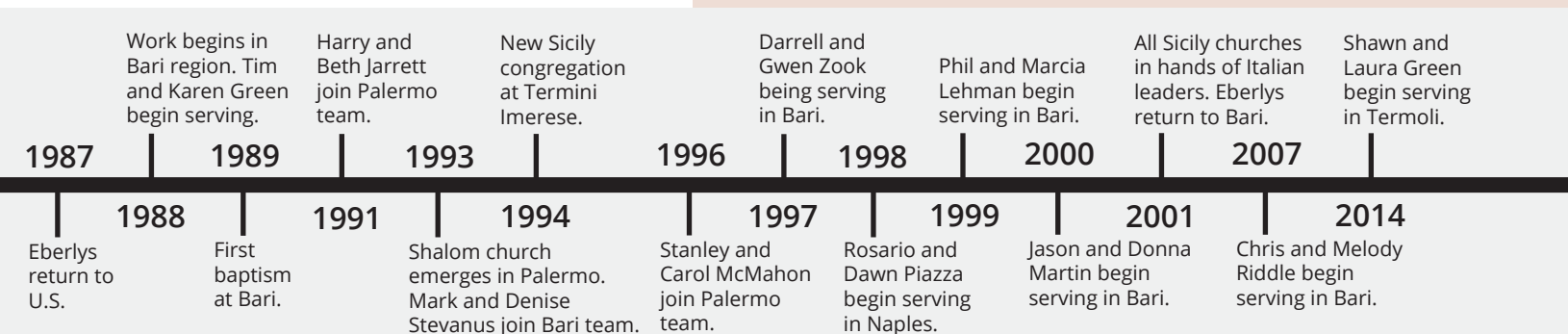


We stepped into the picture in August of 1982, thirty-three years after Lewis Martin's first visit to Sicily. I can clearly remember the flight from Washington, DC, to New York. My heart was breaking as I had just left all that I knew and held dear and was embarking on a totally new journey – that of a mission worker, going to Italy. My tears fell on 20-month old Jesse asleep in my arms. By the time we boarded at New York, I knew I had to mentally change gears and set my sights for the journey ahead. My prayer in that moment: "God, I cannot do this unless you do two things for me: first, you must go with me, and second, you must give me a love for the people among whom I will live!" That prayer became ever so real as we lived and worked in Italy.

Living in the heart of Christendom, we realized that for many, church was just a religion with a dogma that held little meaning. Less than ten percent of the population attended services regularly in the South, and only four percent in the North. Sorcery had a foothold in the culture as the place where people would find answers and healings. There were many social issues, such as strong family units but many broken families, rape, abortion, corruption at every level, mafia strongholds, economic hardship, high unemployment, and relationship issues. Few believed that the church held answers to real life problems.

Our family joined the missionary team: Willard and Eva Eberly, Ken and Sue Horst and Roger Oberholtzer. After language and acculturation in the city, we sensed God calling us to move to Capaci, a town with no evangelical church. We moved into a building with six other families. The Italians taught me so much about not only being friendly, but being real friends. We had many conversations over cups of coffee together. Our kids played together. They introduced us to their extended families and friends.

God gave me a deep love for them. That love changed them, and in return their love changed me. The gospel touched every family in our building in some way. There were healings, deliverance from past bondage, broken relationships restored. And the gospel expanded from there! I received so much more than I gave and my life will never be the same. Although the years were often difficult, there was the joy of knowing Jesus so much more fully. I encourage others to "take the leap!"



Will You Go? Our Expansion into the Caribbean

Twila Y. Brunk's book, *Together in the Lord*, is an engaging account of the first twenty-five years of the Jamaican Mennonite Church. The following recounts those beginnings, as well as the expansion of VMissions' work into Guyana and Trinidad and Tobago.



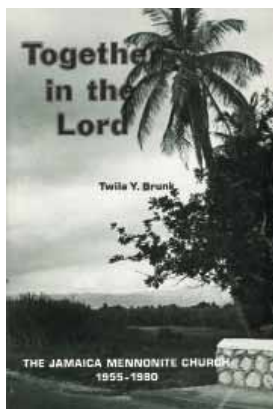
BY CAROL TOBIN

An elderly pastor and his wife from Manitoba traveled to Florida for health reasons. D.H. and Annie Loewen sensed the Lord saying that a mission station should be opened in either Jamaica or Cuba. As Sister Loewen later recounted, "The Lord gave Brother Loewen the assurance that it was Jamaica." Returning to Manitoba, they began making their appeal to their Mennonite congregation for a couple to be sent. Their church wasn't convinced that it was possible. "So one day the Lord said that we should go," Sister Loewen recalled. "How the Lord was with us! We could just feel his presence so often!"

One morning, shortly after their arrival, Brother Loewen said to his wife, "Today we're going to find a place where we should move to and open up a mission station." "That day," she shared, "we found that place." The building was used for a school and the two dozen or so children were their first contacts. They posted a sign, "Night Service Held Here Once A Week." One evening, Simeon Walters, a respected longtime resident and tailor no longer serving within his former church, stepped into the meeting. "The old man, he explained so nicely the Scriptures that I decide in my mind to ask, 'Who are you?'" Walters made a face when Loewen said he was Mennonite. "Mennonite. Well I never hear that name before!"

After about two months, there were members to baptize. Walters said "We dip." Loewen said, "We pour." Loewen resolved to seek counsel and permission from his Canadian Mennonite church. He sent a petition; the petition was rejected. Mrs. Loewen reports, "We were at our wits end. Then the Lord told Brother Loewen that help was coming."

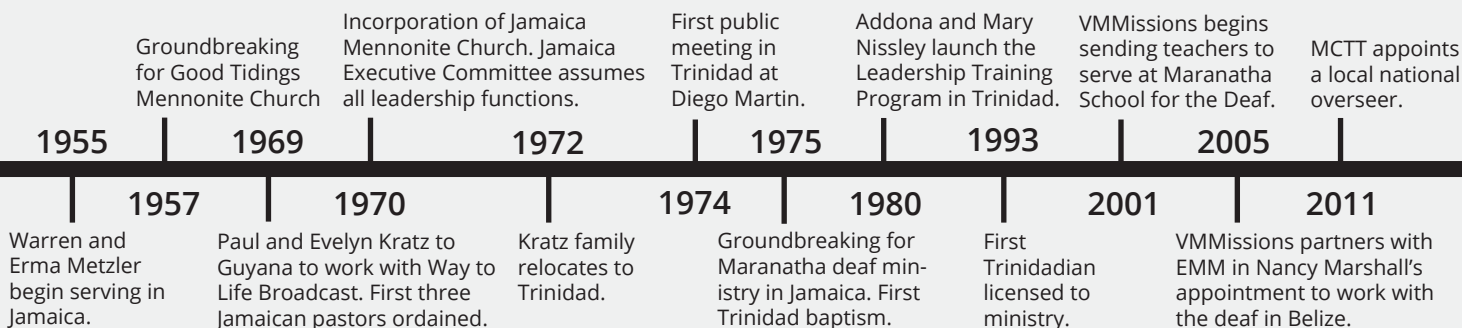
Unbeknownst to the Loewens, God was already weaving another thread into the story: Myron and Esther Augsburg-er were serving a pastorate in Pensacola in the early 1950s.



Seeing the Jamaicans working the fields east of Sarasota, Myron developed an interest in Jamaica. He shares, "We started to talk about trying to get over there." But then, in 1954, he was called into campus ministry at Eastern Mennonite College. A young student, Warren Metzler, sought out Myron for counsel. "I was talking to Warren about a pastorate here or there," Myron recalls, "and he said he would rather go to some fields where there hadn't been any Mennonite work and start something from the ground up. So I said, 'Well, maybe you're the person we're looking for; Esther and I want to see something start in Jamaica.'"

Myron remembers the cool response he received from the mission board. "I suppose this idea sounds like a wild goose chase or a brainstorm of this young pastor at the college." Nevertheless, the Board commissioned Mahlon Blosser to accompany Myron and Warren on an exploratory trip. Before they left, they received a phone call from Mennonite Central Committee regarding a request for clothing they had received from a Mr. Loewen in Jamaica. Armed with the clothing and the address, their first order of business when they arrived was to take a taxi to the address given them. Myron shared, "When I knocked at the door, the old gent opened the door, saw me standing there in my plain coat, threw both arms up in the air and said, 'Praise the Lord! I don't know who you are, but God sent you.' Sitting down inside, he told us, 'This morning ... I got up from my knees and told my wife that I'm sure there is an answer on the way. I don't know what it is, but it is on the way.'"

Coming back to Virginia, the Board decided unanimously to take over the work. Truman Brunk later visited the Metzler family and was asked to administer the first baptisms. A compromise between competing baptismal methods was found. Standing in the water of Kingston Harbour, buckets of water were poured over the heads of the candidates. Immersion by pouring!





Mission worker Warren Metzler with a baptism class in Kingston Harbour, Jamaica, in 1957. *VMC Archives*

By 1967, there were four well-established congregations in Jamaica and the conference membership was just under 250. Lloyd Weaver, Jr., and Roy Kiser, mission board leaders, had begun to look for new fields in the region. Way to Life radio broadcasts from Jamaica had been reaching homes and hearts in Guyana; letters and requests were pouring in. They planned a trip to Guyana, disappointed that their itinerary entailed a full day in Port of Spain, the capital of Trinidad. However, a string of connections there gave them the marvelous sense that God was leading.

They attended a church service in the city and met the aging rector. Roy writes, "He related his intense interest in Mennonite history and traced the lineage of his denomination back to Menno. When we told him of our purpose, he said, 'You have come to the right person!' Evidently, all applications for entrance into Trinidad by religious bodies were referred to him for evaluation! He asserted, 'I will be glad to help the Mennonites!'"

As it turned out, the process of entry was more stringent than anticipated and it was only possible to gain entry through the offer of agricultural or medical expertise. Four years later, Richard and Martha Keeler began their work in Trinidad. Within six years of the Keelers' arrival, more workers were able to be sent to nurture the budding faith of Dr. Keeler's patients and neighbors. This pattern of sending continued for the next 33 years, with 12 additional couples each having the opportunity to fall in love with Trinidad.

In politically tumultuous Guyana, Roy and Lloyd heard this complaint and

plea: "Our country is desperately in need of warm, evangelical witnesses. When can you come to help us?" After that trip, Roy and Lloyd invited the Jamaican church to choose and commission three young men to serve with the Christian Literature Crusade in Guyana for the summer. The men handed out thousands of packets of literature; interested persons were then able to enroll in the Way to Life Bible correspondence course.

Roy shared the new vision with the Board, "It was our feeling that the Lord is opening the way for our involvement in the needs of this area of the world. He has blessed remarkably in our work in Jamaica... We will want to help the young Jamaican church to reach beyond their borders... American and Jamaican personnel side-by-side in a new endeavor for Christ."

Perhaps this particular vision was ahead of its time. Paul and Evelyn Kratz were appointed for service in Guyana in 1969, but after one term, the country closed its doors more tightly. Thanks to the opening gained in Trinidad by the Keelers, the Kratzes were able to join the Keelers and continue to direct the Way to Life correspondence course.

Changes were ahead for Jamaica as well. Due to both the government's refusal to grant work permits and the maturity of the Jamaican Mennonite Church, the sending patterns after 1980 changed. Rather than a dependence on long-term workers, the mission board sent couples on a shorter term basis to resource the pastors. By that time, the mission board had sent 16 different families, couples or singles to Jamaica, with a combined service of 123 years.



Paul and Evelyn Kratz, with daughter Celah in Guyana. They later served in Trinidad. *VMC Archives*

"What have I done of eternal value for the Lord? Do 40,000 tracts distributed or 22,887 lessons completed and graded mean anything? What of the 2,058 people who sat down and wrote to us at the Way to Life office? How about the 512 who wrote for specific help in prayer? Or the 510 who expressed appreciation and gave testimony of God's work in their lives? The 162 who made decisions for Christ—are they going on with Him? Were the hours required to write 762 counseling letters worth all the effort? Did they in any significant way point others to the Savior? Are these merely figures? A hollow effort to prove busyness?

I pray not! These are tokens of greater things! Evidence that God is at work behind the scenes. We can only measure a trifle. Our vision is incomplete, our work unfinished. We are powerless to estimate the infinitude of the Spirit's work in persons' hearts. Who, but God, can know the problems, the struggles, the failures, the vacillations, the motives, the renewals, the victories? He alone can see it all and understand it all. Small though our part may be, yet we experience the thrill of working along with him!"

Paul L. Kratz, *Missionary Light*, May-June 1975



A view of Lezhë, Albania. Courtesy photo

The Walls Came Tumbling Down: Our Entrance Into Albania



AS TOLD BY WILLARD AND EVA EBERLY

“We were swept along, praising God for opportunities!” Willard exclaimed as he reminisced about the beginnings of the work in Albania. “We didn’t program it! We connected with him and we could hardly keep up with it!”

The story of Mennonite mission in Albania begins with Gesina Blaauw, a Dutch Mennonite woman who had moved to Sicily to establish a Christian bookstore with Christian Literature Crusade. She also carried a deep longing to locate her Italian father. She didn’t find her father, but she did connect with the Mennonites in Sicily, where Willard and Eva were serving as missionaries. Gesina shared another deep longing with her newfound church family: the burning passion in her heart for God to move in Albania, a nation locked away in complete isolation under tight communist control.



Gesina Blaauw, a Dutch Mennonite serving in Sicily, with a passion for gospel breakthrough in Albania. Courtesy: *Missionary Light*, 1975

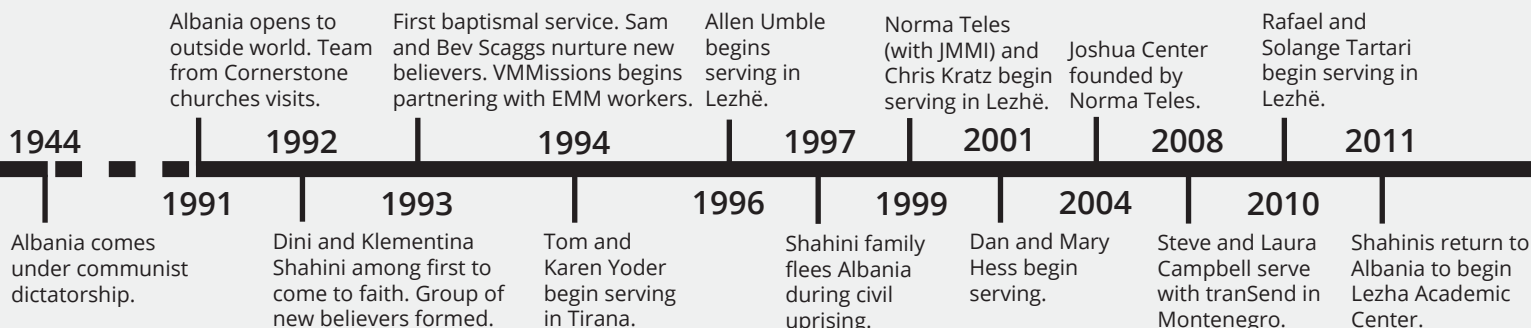
In order to enable trips to the closed country, Gesina created her own travel agency. During one of her trips to Albania, she was imprisoned for several months for distributing Christian literature. She invited the Italian Mennonites to join her in praying for Albania to open up to the outside world. Living in the apartment above Willard and Eva and their children, Maurita, Mike and Andy,

Gesina wanted to include Maurita in one of her tour groups. “Can I take Maurita to Albania with me?” she asked. “No, of course not!” they answered.

Finally, in 1991, after seven years of praying, the walls came down and Albania opened. At the same time, the Italian Mennonite Church was beginning church planting work in the city of Bari—directly across the Adriatic Sea from the Albanian coastline. VMissions workers, Tim and Karen Green (parents of present worker, Shawn) found themselves involved with Albanian refugees coming to Bari. They began taking humanitar-



A group from Dayton, Va., visited Lezhë, Albania, in 2002. They are joined by Albania workers Norma Teles (third from left), Allen Umble (center), and Italy worker/VMissions staff member Eva Eberly (second from right). Courtesy photo



“The miracle of Albania from day one was sixty or seventy agencies working together! It was like revival; so much sharing of resources among us all. The agencies had done so much good that the constitution was rewritten to allow for evangelical presence and religious freedom.”

—Eva Eberly



Dini and Klementina Shahini (left) participated in the new Mennonite church’s first baptism service in Lezhë in 1993.

Photo courtesy of Dini Shahini

ian aid into Albania. Meanwhile, the believers in Sicily worked with Albanian refugees arriving on their shores.

By this time, Willard was living in Virginia, serving as the Mediterranean Regional Director for VMissions, while also on staff with the Cornerstone Church. It so happened that a Cornerstone team was en route to Nigeria for a two-week visit with their workers, Tom and Karen Yoder. In Brussels, they learned of civil unrest in Nigeria and were advised to abandon their travel plans.

Not sure what to do next, the team consulted with Willard. “Maybe you can go to recently-opened Albania,” he suggested. “I’ll check with my friend, Gesina.”

Indeed, Gesina was in Albania, on hand to help with a huge evangelistic event in the capital city of Tirana. She said, “Bring the team to Albania! I know the government. I’ll get you in. I’ll meet you at the airport.” Thus, the team found themselves in the middle of a large stadium, with people flocking to hear the gospel, and many eagerly presenting themselves for baptism. It was Acts chapter two all over again.

With the first week completed, the team wondered about the second. An invitation came from none other than the Minister of Education of the city of Lezhë, asking the team to “do there what you did here in Tirana.”

That is what they did. Among those walking past the soccer field where team leader Sam Scaggs was preaching was an Albanian couple who had never heard the gospel. Dini and Klementina Shahini found the Lord that week, and so began an amazing discipleship journey in which God brought them to Virginia, only to send them back to Albania eleven years later, equipped to serve in ways that would transform their city!

Churches and mission entities of every variety flooded into Albania after communism fell. Willard and Eva took in a team in 1992. “People were impoverished, walking around without proper clothing,” remembers Willard. “Communism had stripped them of everything. So much material assistance was needed; we began doing lots of medical and economic development projects. In Italy, we hadn’t helped the church to be

outwardly focused, giving liberally. So we were attentive to that as we began to work in Albania.”

Eva recalls, “The miracle of Albania from day one was sixty or seventy agencies working together! It was like revival—so much sharing of resources among us all. The agencies had done so much good that though there was a traditional desire to name Albania’s religious identity as Muslim, Catholic and Orthodox, the constitution was rewritten to allow for evangelical presence and religious freedom.”

Now 76, Willard looks back on what he has learned about mission. “We take one step after the other, following the Holy Spirit’s leading and guidance. As God gives vision, we pray. We make ourselves available. And as we look from generation to generation, we see God’s faithfulness.”

Open Doors in Albania

- Long-term workers serving a combined 67 years, often with colleagues from Eastern Mennonite Missions.
- Eight short-term teams and 20 persons serving for at least one year through tranSend.
- The emergence of Guri i Themelit church in Lezhë.
- Norma’s ministry among the Roma through the Joshua Center, 1999-present.
- Significant involvement with agricultural development and loan projects.
- Lezha Academic Center, a thriving K-12 English medium school founded by Klementina and Dini Shahini in 2011.
- Albanian believers engaged in mission, both in Albania and beyond.

Steve and Laura Campbell return to serve long-term in Montenegro. First tranSenders to LAC.

Richard and Elsie Bowman begin serving at LAC.

Dan and Mary Hess return to serve in Lezhë, Albania.

2012	2013	2014	2017	2018	2019
	Vince and LaVonne Ramella begin serving in Kosovo.			Ramellas open <i>Lady Latte</i> in Istog, Kosovo. Jim and Pam Beachy begin serving at LAC.	Jim Beachy becomes LAC principal.



Extending the Reach to Every Nation, Tribe and Tongue

How does VMissions direct the missional energy of the church towards those who have not yet heard?

BY CAROL TOBIN

With a fan whirring lazily from the ceiling, Michael and Ruthy gathered to pray with their teammates around the map of the South Asian city that was spread out on the table in front of them.

After several years of learning language and culture in another city where they were the first Westerners their neighbors had ever seen, God had prompted them to relocate to this even larger city, where some of the world's dirtiest air blanketed its 20 million inhabitants. Even though the city's population was only 15% Muslim, Michael and Ruthy knew this to be the historic heart and center of Islam in South Asia. They were also very aware of the vast cultural divide limiting the witness of Hindu background Christians among their Muslim neighbors.

"Can our being here—praying, inviting others to pray with us—help to spark movement to Jesus among the four to five million Muslims in this city, the 45 million in this state, let alone the broader region?" Michael and Ruthy asked God for further direction: "Where should we live?"



Living in a guesthouse for Muslim pilgrims immediately adjacent to a shrine, Michael and Ruthy prayed from their rooftop for Jesus to be revealed to those gathered. Photo courtesy of Michael

Facts About the 50 Largest Unreached People Groups

- The 50 largest unreached people groups comprise 1.48 billion people, one-fifth of the earth's population.
- Every group has a population larger than 10,000,000.
- Every group has less than 2% who are Christ-followers.
- Individuals in these groups may have very limited, if any, access to the gospel.
- Forty-four of these 50 unreached people groups are in the 10/40 Window (pictured above). Forty-seven of 50 are in closed or restricted countries.
- For every dollar of Christian resources spent, less than one penny is directed toward reaching unreached people groups.

Source: The Joshua Project (joshuaproject.net)

What brought Michael and Ruthy to this place? And why would VMissions want to help support them, when another agency was already providing direction? Indeed, why the proliferation of new workers to new—often unnamed places—where VMissions has had no historic involvement and no direct invitation to come?

The answer has to do with a paradigm shift in the world of Christian mission. William Carey helped the church reclaim the Great Commission in the early 1800s, launching what is called the first era of modern missions. Another radical change has emerged in the last fifty years. Thanks to influential missiologists like Cameron Townsend, founder of Wycliffe, and Ralph Winter, founder of the U.S. Center for World Mission (USCWM), there has been an awakening to the cultural "boundaries" that can prevent the gospel from spreading spontaneously from one "people group" to another.

In other words, the gospel will not naturally spread across some cultural boundaries. Instead, it will take intentional effort to engage the half of the world's population hidden within what have been called "unreached people groups." If the church is to realize the biblical vision of people from every distinct tongue, tribe, and nation



A muddy dirt track leads to a Rohingya family's home, as members of a VMissions worker family based in South Asia and others visit with them. These stateless people represent another vastly unevangelized people group. Courtesy photo

worshiping before the throne of the Lamb (Rev. 7:9), new approaches, agencies, priorities, and partnerships are needed.

Michael grew up in the Shenandoah Valley of Virginia. After spending a year with a mission team in Nepal, Michael decided to give his life to something more than baseball. In his team leader, Ruthy, he also found the partner who would eventually join him in that missional adventure.

When Michael returned to the U.S., Skip Tobin (my husband) encouraged him to sharpen his missional vision by taking a course called *Perspectives on the World Christian Movement*. After all, the course, developed by Winter's USCWM, had radically changed the trajectory of our lives back in the late 1980s. It opened our eyes to the fact that most of the church's resources spin around those who already have access to the gospel. In light of these realities, we concluded that we would need a call to stay as much as a call to go. We spent the next twenty years devoted to seeing church emerge among the unreached Isaan people of Northeast Thailand.

Michael signed up for *Perspectives*. For 15 weeks straight, Michael drove to Fredericksburg, Virginia, where the course was being offered. He conveyed his enthusiasm to Gloria Lehman, the woman who most closely filled the gap left by the mother he had lost to cancer. Soon, Gloria, a VMissions staff person, took the course as well, this time in Chantilly, Virginia. It made such an impact that she resolved to bring the course to Harrisonburg, Virginia, where VMissions is headquartered. VMissions has had a key role in offering the class a total of eight times. As a result, *Perspectives* has informed the missional understandings of many workers, staff members, Ministry Support Team members, and church leaders in the surrounding community.

Back to Michael and Ruthy. Now married and serving a population underreached by the gospel, would God direct them to where they should live? While praying together as a team, some of the children included, they received a detailed picture of the very street, building and doorway of what would be the home base for their team for the next four years.

Amazingly enough, that home was owned by the imam of a highly esteemed Muslim shrine and pilgrimage destination. Day after day, streams of supplicants crowded its small courtyard, visible from Michael and Ruthy's rooftop prayer station. They regularly prayed with and for those needy supplicants who lined the narrow alleyways just outside their back door. They grew to know, love, and serve their neighbors and were known, loved, and served in return. They worked at developing Muslim-accessible Bible stories and worship materials. They organized prayer events throughout the city and region. Though no longer present in that city, Michael and Ruthy keep their eyes fixed on a hope that remains unrealized: a movement of Muslim background believers multiplying across South Asia.

In recent years, VMissions has placed greater priority on sending workers to unreached people groups. Thanks to the Lord of the harvest, dedicated and creative VMissions workers are living incarnationally among some of the fifty largest unreached people groups in the world: the folk Buddhist Isaan of Thailand, the Sundanese in Indonesia, and the Turks. We have others working among Berbers, Uzbeks, and the largest unreached people group of all, Bengali Muslims. Each of these workers understands the joy of being aligned with God's purpose for people of all cultures to add their voices to the chorus of the great multitude crying out, "Salvation belongs to our God, and to the Lamb" (Rev. 7:10).

A Dream, a Need, a Gift: the Launch of tranSend

Over 100 persons have explored their sense of call to mission through tranSend since the program began in 2005. What were the dreams and needs behind this one-year mission internship program, and how did it become a reality?

AS TOLD BY KEN HORST AND SARAH E. SLABAUGH

With his beard and bib overalls, Bob Histan didn't look any more like a millionaire than a mission mobilizer. But, in fact, he was both. Three months before his sudden death in 2002, he had shared his heart with VMissions president David D. Yoder, and staff persons Willard Eberly and Ken Horst.

He reflected on the fact that he had found his time of alternative service with Mennonite Central Committee's Pax program deeply transformative. How can other young people have the same kind of opportunity? Could his financial resources be of any help? The question hung, unanswered, but not forgotten.

Loren Horst succeeded David as president of VMissions. He found himself lamenting what the era was bringing to him, or more accurately what the era was failing to bring; namely, people ready to commit to long-term service. The stream of recruits in earlier times had dwindled to a trickle. The Partners in Mission program that Ken directed was very active and gave evidence of vigorous initiative within congregations across the conference, but it wasn't generating vision for long-term engagement.

Loren and Ken began to dream. What if we could launch an intentional internship program or one or two years in length that would allow singles or young couples to test a sense of call? Something that would test whether they could learn another language, work as a team, adapt themselves to cross-cultural realities, and work respectfully under local leadership?

They developed a launch budget and managed to earmark a meager few thousand dollars from existing funds. Ken recalled the conversation with Bob Histan. Perhaps they should pay a visit with his widow,

Sarah, to share their vision. Immediately, Sarah recognized this as the opportunity God was giving her to carry out her late husband's dream. Without knowing the specifics of the anticipated startup costs, she handed them a check, saying, "This can be helpful." The check met the exact remaining amount of their projected budget. What rejoicing! Here was a confirmation that God was leading!

Thus, in 2005, the tranSend program got off the ground. It included a generous grant of up to 50% to offset the costs of each worker's assignment costs, and eventually a two-week pre-service training and an ongoing mentoring program. Since its inception, tranSend has enabled VMissions to walk with over 100 people as they have explored their sense of call to ministry and developed their commitment to lifetime service in God's kingdom.

Over the years, tranSend has proven to be significant in the lives and formation of many present long-term workers. It gave Laura Green the opportunity to test her ability to embrace what had been her husband Shawn's call to Italy. It gave Steve and Laura Campbell the opportunity to explore what God was saying to them about Montenegro. Through a tranSend assignment at Nazareth Village, another couple were confirmed in their sense of call to the Muslim world. Even Aaron Kauffman, current president of VMissions, and his wife Laura were among the first group of tranSenders in 2005.

"I love to give," Sarah remarked, "but I like to see positive

results from it too! My hope is that it will grow, that tranSend people will grow, that the people they serve will grow, and more people will come to the Lord."



VMissions president Aaron Kauffman (center), his wife Laura, and daughter Abigail (right) served in La Mesa, Colombia, in the first class of tranSend in 2005. Here they are joined by Martín, Elsy, Ana, and Stephany González. Courtesy photo



"My experience is a reminder that this is all brought together by God and it is all part of his bigger plan and ultimately that plan is to bring him glory. That sense of perspective is probably the biggest fruit from my time in tranSend."

Caleb Benner, about his tranSend experience at Lezha Academic Center (2011-2012).

An Examen: God, Where Have You Been Present?

Now in our fourth decade of short-term missions, what have we learned at VMissions? Are short-term mission experiences about rendering a service or surrendering to Christ? Martin Rhodes shares his own story of how a short-term assignment in Mexico shifted his focus from doing to being.

BY MARTIN RHODES

In the year 1548, the missionary, Ignatius of Loyola offered God's people an exercise called the Consciousness Examen. I appreciate this practice of turning my heart and mind to God in prayer, recalling the day that has passed and noticing where I experienced God's presence. As I submit myself to God's tutelage in scripture reading and prayer, I become aware of God's many gifts to me and the ways that I accept or reject the way of Jesus in my life.

As VMissions celebrates 100 years, it seems an opportune time to prayerfully examine our history, giving God thanks for his sustenance and faithfulness, confessing our shortcomings and looking with hope to the future ahead of us. As the Discipleship Ministries Coach at VMissions, much of my work involves stewarding our short-term programs: Partners in Mission, tranSend, and E³ Collective. In looking back over the history of these programs, what is there to thank God for? Where have we missed the gifts that God wanted to lavish on us?



Deaf children at Rancho Sordo Muno in Mexico celebrate with Martin Rhodes (center) at his birthday party in 1990. Courtesy of Martin Rhodes

As a 13-year-old boy, full of the overconfidence and arrogance of youth, I had no idea how God would use the trip to transform my life.

At Rancho Sordo Mudo, my parents, six siblings and I quickly settled into new routines with our new acquaintances: children ages 6-18, their teachers and dorm parents. The wise elders at Rancho Sordo Mudo anchored our days with the



E³ Collective medical team, September 2019 (l to r: Martin Rhodes, Kerwin Borntrager, Dr. Wes and Nancy Ross, Lynne Eggert, Jen Kuhns, and Pastor Rami in Jordan. Martin shares, "In the months that led up to our being at this table in Jordan, we explored together our call to follow Jesus and submit our gifts, talents and whole lives to his leading. That call coalesced for each of us as we joined with the Church in Jordan in sharing the good news found in Jesus—of healing in body and soul." Courtesy of Martin Rhodes

awareness of God's presence and a reliance on his Spirit. Through the rhythms of tortilla-making, dish-washing, trash-carrying, Bible study and prayer, we were transformed from strangers into friends. And more than that, I slowly came to realize that our hosts were our teachers and that coming to a place to serve is secondary to coming prepared to receive.

Near the end of our time in Mexico, one 13-year-old girl had the wisdom to ask me if I had given my life over to the Lordship of Christ. I truthfully answered, "No," and she asked a question that the Spirit guided all the way to the depths of my heart: "Why not?" Having grown up surrounded by the love of family and the church and disciplined toward the way of Jesus, her question was the one I needed to hear. It helped me to respond fully and freely to Christ and set me on the path of discipleship that I am still walking today.

It is these lessons that almost thirty years later inform my hopes for our short-term programs. While it might have been tempting in the past to count a trip successful if a roof was repaired or some service rendered, now we position ourselves toward relationships. We look for the spiritual growth that happens when we engage cross-culturally, when our individualistic identities are challenged, and when we learn to know and be known in deeper ways. How needful this was for me as a young man! I pray that the Holy Spirit would likewise use short-term encounters with brothers and sisters around the world to form and shape participants of this generation into uncompromisingly committed disciples of Jesus.



Sunrise over Tegucigalpa, Honduras, where the Mennonite movements in Honduras were born. Photo: Wikipedia

USA Ministries: A Story of Missionaries and Migrants

God knows how to weave good stories, in which the puzzle pieces from one time and place come together to create something new and beautiful in another time and place. In this story, the puzzle pieces are missionaries and migrants, the places are Honduras and Winston-Salem, North Carolina, and the time will unfold in the telling.

BY SKIP TOBIN AND LIZZETTE HERNANDEZ

Skip writes: Mennonite missionaries first went to Honduras seventy years ago. A river of faithful people and a fortune in finances flowed out. The book, *Surviving, Thriving and Multiplying*, which traces the beginnings of the Honduran Mennonite Church, lists 193 American singles and families who played an important part over the course of some forty years. Eastern Mennonite Missions (EMM) of Salunga, PA, was the lead agency in the Honduran mission, but people from Virginia continue to pop up in the story, with relationships and connections running deep.

What grew along the banks of that river of lives poured out? What grew from all those many gospel seeds? A lot! Presently there are three large church movements in Honduras that trace their beginnings back to this Mennonite mission: The Honduran Mennonite Church, Amor Vivente and Centro Cristiano Internacional (CCI). Their combined membership is well beyond that of the sending agencies and Mennonite conferences. And the river of love continues to flow out. Church planting Honduran missionaries have now gone to surrounding Central American countries, China, Turkey, Spain, and the U.S.

As young missionaries to Honduras in the 1970s, Ed and Gloria King had no idea of the incredible impact and far reaching ripple effects that their calling would have. Their ministry “Amor Viviente” began in 1974 as a coffeehouse outreach in Tegucigalpa to at-risk youth and college students. The charismatic expression of this ministry was evident in the powerful testimonies of liberation, healing and restored relationships. Ex-drug addicts were converted to Christ and discipled by Ed. Soon, many of these disciples became leaders, flooding the city with “cells” or “growth groups.” A charismatic discipleship movement had begun! It spread quickly throughout the city and later throughout the entire country.

Lizzette writes: Many lives were impacted. Cecilia and Juan Jose Lagos had been attending concerts and weekend rallies in a school facility for a while before they heard the Holy Spirit’s call to deeper service. For the next twelve years they served the church. Ceci served as a worship leader and Juan Jose in discipleship and cell group work. Evangelism and discipleship were

central elements of the DNA that was injected into their hearts by the ministry of Ed King.

Another passionate teenager felt the call to ministry and was ready to jump into the vision of reaching his generation for Christ. His name was Marvin Lorenzana.

And years later, my husband and I were impacted by this same movement of God. During a cell group meeting, my siblings and I gave our lives to Christ and fell forever in love with Jesus. I later joined CCI.



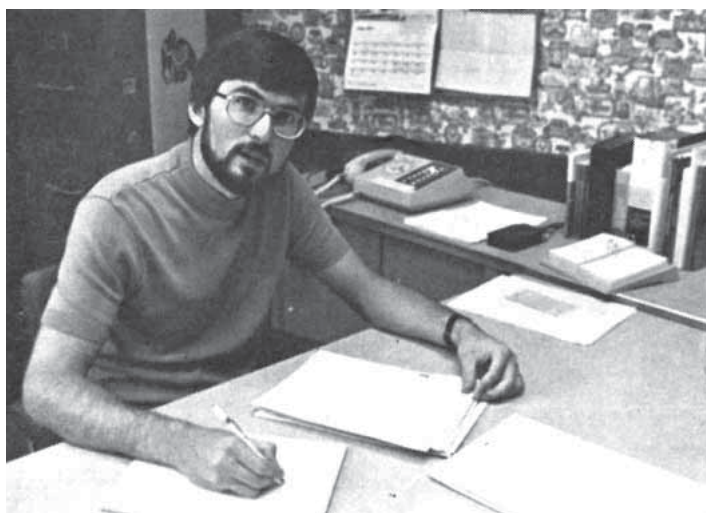
Juan José Lagos with his family in Winston-Salem, N.C. He is a VMissions worker planting a Spanish-language congregation in his city. Photo courtesy of Skip Tobin

In 2001, Juan Jose and Ceci, along with their youngest children, moved to Mocksville, North Carolina. Honduras was going through rough times, but even so, the decision to leave was a hard one. They had to integrate into a new world; they had to raise their children in a new messy reality. They didn’t know



Workers David and Merna Jo Kindy set up a mission location in Winston-Salem, N.C., in the late 1960s. David is now serving on the MST of Juan José Lagos. Photo: VMC Archives

the language or the culture and their college degrees had no value as they looked for jobs. They struggled to discern their calling, carrying the unanticipated heavy weight of their new identity as “Latino immigrants.” Where was God at work in



Loren Horst served as Eastern Area VS Director in Winston-Salem, N.C., pictured here in 1977. The Winston-Salem VS (Voluntary Service) Unit served low-income people, senior citizens, children through day-care centers, and others in that city, while nurturing the spiritual growth of the service participants. Photo: *Missionary Light*, Sept-Oct 1977

this? They clung to the Lord, and for many years they served in different capacities. But then came an ardent and urgent call from the Lord to move to Winston-Salem to plant a church. How? When? With whom? There were no answers to these questions.

In the meantime, another thread: My family and I had also left Honduras, not knowing what our future would be like. We were navigating seminary studies in a second language and trying to hold together family, finances, and spiritual vitality.

Many times the cost of being an immigrant felt overwhelming and I just wanted to go back home. But God had other plans, and in the midst of what looked like an uncertain journey, God opened up a role for me with VMissions, working with emerging Latino church planters.

The day came when Juan Jose reconnected with an old friend, Marvin Lorenzana, who had been sent by Amor Viviente to the US and was working with VMissions. As soon as Marvin mentioned “Mennonite,” Juan thought of one word he learned with them: mission! With excitement, Juan Jose discovered alignment with VMissions’ vision.

After a process of discernment last year, the Lagoses were appointed as church planters in Winston-Salem. Already, a group of new believers is gathering on Saturday evenings to worship and give witness to God’s transformation in their lives.

Skip writes: There is yet one more thread to be woven into the story. Fifty-one years ago, in 1968, the Virginia mission board sent David and Merna Jo Kindy to Winston-Salem to start a church. With the help of voluntary service teams, Oak Hills Mennonite Church was established. However, the church was officially closed in 1999. David recalls the memorial service that was held. A small tree was planted that day along with a prayer that there would be a rebirth of a Mennonite church in Winston-Salem.

Is God now answering this prayer? “Yes,” says David, recently retired, having lived in Winston-Salem for 51 years. “When I met Juan Jose Lagos, I felt drawn to him. I feel like it is kind of an answer to prayer.” David is now serving on Juan Jose and Ceci’s Ministry Support Team. He further states, “The gift I can offer Juan and Ceci is simply being present! We offer pastoral care to Juan Jose and Ceci. My wife Anita [whom he married after the death of Merna] and I feel that we connect well.” Juan Jose also shares, “We feel so connected and supported as the Kindys and the TCK (Tennessee-Carolina-Kentucky) District surrounds us with encouragement, prayer and financial support.” God has given him a name for the new church: Iglesia Renuevo, meaning offshoot or renewal. Who but God could weave a story like this?



From left: Juan José Lagos, David and Anita Kindy, and Cecilia Lagos. Photo courtesy of Skip Tobin



Lynn Suter (right), VMissions Director of Operations and International Ministries, talks with Jewel and Dave Yutzy, owners of a Broadway, Va., agriculture business, about possible ventures during a trip to Eastern Europe. Courtesy photo

Getting On Board With Business

BY LYNN SUTER

By overnight ferry, one can cross the Adriatic Sea from Italy to the Balkans. When Eastern European communism crumbled in the early '90s, VMissions workers boarded those ferries and went, first to Albania, and eventually to the former Yugoslavian countries of Kosovo and Montenegro.

As many of the early missionaries had a background in farming, they naturally set to work supporting impoverished socialist-era farmers who found themselves in the strange fields of a market economy. With Albanian partners, they established farmers' cooperatives, provided revolving loans, offered technical assistance, and built infrastructure. In all these relationships, the missionaries witnessed to the comprehensive good news of Jesus.

Willard Heatwole, a missionary who, with his family, had farmed in Jamaica while serving as a church planter and pastor there, came with wife Melba to Albania during this time to help with this ambitious agricultural development program. His son Gerald summarizes these years, as well as his parents' service in Costa Rica. "Dad invested in communities. He was always concerned with the physical and spiritual needs of people."

This body-and-soul investment in community is still motivating VMissions workers today. Business and practical professional skills are vehicles enabling the gospel to cross into places closed to traditional mission initiatives but open for business. The "Why are you here?" question posed to many of our workers finds an acceptable answer: "To start a business that God will use to bless your community." These workers do not hide their identity: they incarnate it in the marketplace. We see this in a computer business and language learning school in Central Asia, a thriving school in Albania, and a coffee shop for women in Kosovo. And, we hope, more is ahead.

In June, VMissions' Board created a subsidiary* with its own board of managers to advance the strategic priority of "equipping disciples to engage work as witness." This includes business as mission (or business for transformation), like the examples above, as well as creating pathways for professionals to serve internationally. Dr. Richard Keeler, whom VMissions sent to Trinidad to serve patients with Hansen's disease is a shining example of this; not only was the disease virtually eradicated as a result of his work but the Keeler's gospel sowing brought forth the beginnings of the Mennonite church in Trinidad! Today, many millennials are asking how they can serve as nurse, teacher, social worker, computer programmer, or graphic designer, reclaiming vocation as ministry.

And seemingly just on time, an opportunity has come to help launch kingdom businesses in Kosovo. A former Muslim - now pastor and church planter whom God dramatically called to himself - has identified big goals for the initiative in which we are being invited to participate: "to prosper more gospel in Kosovo by opening jobs for our youth," "to help our church be self-supporting in the near future," and "to help create jobs for our church members so they can stay in country." Goals that are impossible without the Spirit leading and empowering. Goals that are impossible without faith to try. Goals that hold the hope of a whole gospel coming to Kosovo.

Thus, the call is going out for business, professional and trade men and women who love Jesus and believe that the marketplace is a place for the good news of the gospel. Who will get on board?

*Name of subsidiary withheld to preserve its ability to operate in secure locations.

Gratitude to God Funds Mission

BY STEVE LEAMAN

A fundraising dinner. Everyone knows the routine: a meal, a pitch, and then it's time for wallets and checkbooks. In contrast, Loren Horst, former president of VMissions, remembers something special about an evening fundraising dinner for Phil and Terry Witmer, preparing to serve in Colombia. Before the dinner even began, it was announced that their funding was complete. People had already given generously to support this family they loved and their call to service. The guests could simply enjoy their meal!

Though not the norm, this story illustrates the Ministry Support Team (MST) model at its best. MSTs are about relational support. They both surround mission workers with encouragement in their call to mission and help them build a network of supporting churches and donors who resonate with their vision for ministry.

By contrast, the early model of centralized funding depended on institutional loyalty. Donors entrusted their God-given resources to the mission agency to use in accordance with its priorities. This was the dominant model for decades. Ideally, missionaries could focus on their assignment, while the mission board took responsibility for their finances.

The need for a different fundraising system became apparent to David D. Yoder, president of VMissions in the mid-1990s. Giving was rapidly declining. Donors wanted to give where they had involvement. A paradigm shift was needed. Following the example of other mission agencies, David implemented a relational model of mission support. Thus the Ministry Support Team (MST) was born.

One of the first workers to be supported with an MST was Norma Teles, a missionary from the Brazilian Mennonite

Church. In 1998, VMissions recruited a team of supporters around Norma's work with disadvantaged children in Albania. This MST became a key facet of VMissions' partnership with her sending community in Brazil.

This new system required new ways of tracking donations. Support for specific ministries, called "special projects," had to be tracked separately from other donations, and MSTs needed regular reports on fundraising progress. It wasn't long before this special project giving eclipsed giving to the general fund. To balance the lost revenue needed for staff and oversight, a small support fee was added into worker budgets.

David D. Yoder also convinced the mission board of the wisdom of endowments as a means of stewarding mission support over the long term. Donors could establish endowments with gifts during their lifetime or as a bequest. These endowed funds were then invested, with only a portion of the proceeds disbursed each year. David encouraged such giving, saying, "Let your light continue to shine!"

Loren Horst built on David's work, to the point that thirty-three endowments now regularly provide ten percent of the overall income needed for VMissions' annual budget. Working with donors was a satisfying part of Loren's work. In his words, "It is a form of pastoring with people who want to do something for the work of the Lord."

One hundred years after its founding, VMissions is exploring new ways to fund mission endeavors. One trend is a return to bivocational ministry, a form of mission support since the days of the Apostle Paul, who was a tentmaker (Acts 18:3). Another is the growing field of business for transformation (B4T), in which Christian entrepreneurs use business as a means of blessing communities, sometimes providing modest income for their own livelihood as well.

However funds emerge, giving to mission is simply a way of giving back to God. Generosity begets generosity, "overflowing in many expressions of thanks to God" (2 Cor. 9:12).

Two former VMissions presidents implemented and expanded the MST model, and helped establish endowments for the long-term health of the agency. From left: David D. Yoder (1991-2002), Shirley Yoder, Earlene Horst and Loren Horst (2002-2013) in this 2010 photo. VMissions photo



Bold Humility: Mission in the Way of Jesus

BY AARON KAUFFMAN

Is mission a thing of the past? Contemporary attitudes toward mission are much different than the ones that gave rise to Virginia Mennonite Missions one hundred years ago.

Back then, we had a simple trust in the gospel message and the courage to share that message at great personal cost. Today, the claim that Jesus is Lord offends our pluralistic sensibilities. That may be true for us, we think, but what about our neighbors of other religions, or no religion at all? We are fearful of being accused of “imposing” our religion on others.

Such fear is not entirely unfounded. The pages of church history include many stories of misguided mission. Too often, the sword has gone hand-in-hand with the Bible. Too often, Christians have looked down on other cultures rather than sought to learn from them. Too often, we’ve confused our traditions with the truth of the gospel, preventing the message of Jesus from taking root in authentic, contextually appropriate ways. Too often, we’ve used our money to create dependency rather than to build self-sufficiency.

Whenever we learn that our mission endeavors have been manipulative, arrogant, or insensitive, we must fall on our knees before God and our neighbors and say, “We’re sorry. How can we make it right?”

But is sharing the gospel inherently oppressive? Not if we follow the example of our crucified Lord.

Jesus was confident about the message God had given him. “The kingdom of God has come near,” he proclaimed. “Repent and believe the good news!” (Mark 1:15).

But Jesus was never coercive in his methods. “Do you want to get well?” he asked the disabled man lying near the pool of Bethesda (John 5:2-6). It was up to the man to respond.

Jesus boldly called people to acknowledge the God of Israel. To the Samaritan woman, he said, “You Samaritans worship what you do not know; we worship what we do know, for salvation is from the Jews” (John 4:22).

Yet Jesus also praised the faith of those outside his own Jewish culture. To the Roman centurion, he declared, “Truly I tell you, I have not found anyone in Israel with such great faith” (Matt. 8:10).

Jesus wasn’t afraid to issue a costly call to obedience. “Whoever wants to be my disciple,” he warned, “must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me” (Mark 8:34).

However, Jesus also wasn’t averse to criticizing his own religious traditions. He admonished the Pharisees and teachers of the law, saying, “You have let go of the commands of God and are holding on to human traditions” (Mark 7:8).

Jesus instructed his disciples not to depend on their own provisions when they went out in mission. “Take nothing for the journey—no staff, no bag, no bread, no money, no extra shirt” (Luke 9:3).

But he also challenged a mentality of scarcity. When his disciples were overwhelmed with the prospect of feeding the crowd before them, Jesus asked, “How many loaves do you have?” (Mark 6:38). He then proceeded to multiply their meager meal into a feast.

Mission in the way of Jesus combines boldness about the truth claims of the gospel with humility about our ability to live it out. We should never be ashamed to share the new life we have found in Jesus. But we should never assume we’ve understood all there is to know about life in God’s kingdom. We go out as proclaimers and learners at the same time.

That blend of boldness and humility is what I see when I look at the generations that have gone before us at VMissions.

I see bold determination in Rhine and Anna Benner, who

spent sixteen years of their lives with Appalachian folk in the rugged hills of West Virginia, losing five children in the process.

I see creative humility in Truman Brunk’s decision to adapt the Mennonite tradition of baptism by pouring in order to adjust to Jamaican expectation of baptism by immersion.

I see incredible courage in Lloyd and Sara Weaver, who left

a lucrative business in Lancaster, Pennsylvania, to be full-time gospel workers in Newport News, Virginia, crossing religious and cultural boundaries they had never encountered before.

I see remarkable humility in Richard Keeler’s decision to devote his medical career to serving the poorest of the poor in Trinidad -- the leprosy victims of Hansen’s disease.

The list could go on. The point is, we should measure our mission efforts not by their adherence to postmodern pluralism, but by their faithfulness to the way of Jesus. Too often we focus on the stories of failure and write off mission entirely. Our assessment of mission should consider not only the ways the church has missed the mark, but also the many faithful missionaries who have exemplified the bold humility of Jesus.

To return to the image of sailing, we must not let the shipwrecks of history deter our efforts to reach the far horizon of a healed humanity. When anchored in the truth of a Messiah whose outstretched arms beckon but never bully, we can confidently lift our sails to the wind of God’s Spirit, who is leading us to the heavenly city, where the One seated on the throne declares, “I am making everything new!” (Rev. 21:5).



Presidents of Virginia Mennonite Missions



Samuel M. Burkholder
1919-1928
Middle District



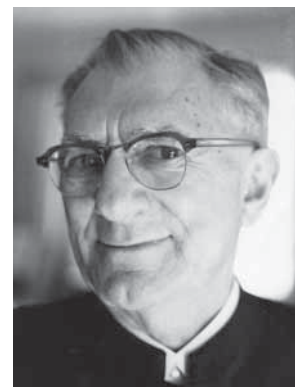
Joseph R. Driver
1928-1933
Southern District



Etter Heatwole
1933-1943
Southern District



Jacob A. Shenk
1943-1950
Northern District



Lewis S. Martin
1950-1952
Northern District



John H. Shenk
1952-1955
Warwick District



Harold H. Lahman
1955-1956
Central District



Mahlon L. Blosser
1956-1966
Central District



Lloyd Weaver, Jr.
1966-1979
Warwick District



Isaac M. Risser
1979-1982
Central District



Willard Heatwole
1982-1985
West Valley District



Paul T. Yoder
1985-1990
Harrisonburg District



David D. Yoder
1991-2002
Harrisonburg District



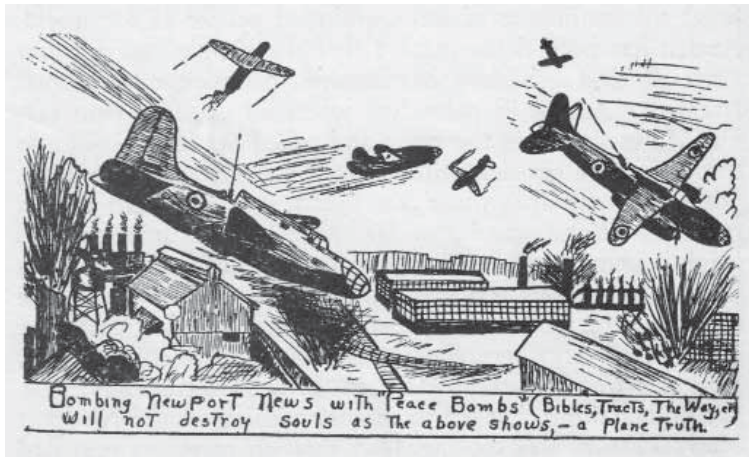
Loren E. Horst
2002-2013
Northern District



Aaron M. Kauffman
2013-present
Northern District

Photos: VMC Archives/VMMissions,
courtesy of Elwood Yoder

A Legacy of Faith: In Their Own Words



A wartime cartoon printed in the April 1942 issue of *Missionary Light* shows planes dropping “Peace Bombs” (Bibles, tracts, etc.) on Newport News, things that “will not destroy souls.”



The Warren and Erma Metzler family in 1959 (left-right): W. Frederick, Warren, Sharon, Philip, Erma, and John.

Jamaica, 1963

It was 10:00 p.m. and we had three more hours of traveling back to Kingston before our weary bodies could slump into bed for a short night’s rest. We thought, ‘Is the discomfort, the tiredness, and the weariness of a full day’s work in cell groups worth the sacrifice?’ to see the lost condition of our island friends, steeped in darkness and superstition and illiteracy; then to witness the positive response that the message of salvation brings—the love of Christ constrains us! The Jamaicans who can read are hungry for a written message. Traveling over the island, inlanders grasp for tracts as a thirsty hart for water.

Warren Metzler, *Missionary Light*, Sept-Oct 1963

Newport News, Va., 1942

Last Sunday we received a real thrill when one of our young members, Idahlia Jackson, aged thirteen, led one of her friends to Christ. There are so many discouragements in a work of this kind that it is a real joy to see young converts growing and witnessing for the Lord. Several young brethren from the Warwick river congregation, under the leadership of Br. Andrew Hartzler, have been distributing “The Way” each month. We are anticipating increasing our order to 2,000 copies per month.

Earl Delp, *Missionary Light*, April 1942



Lloyd, Sr., and Sara Weaver

Church at Sea ministry, Newport News, Va., 1967

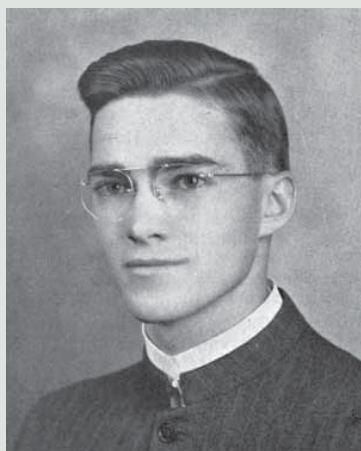
The ship, Oswego Venture, was ready to sail and many of the men had come in from closing the hatches where 50,000 tons of coal had been loaded. Their faces and hands were black with coal dust. The officers were dressed clean. They all sat together in the mess hall, hearing and seeing the most wonderful story that has ever been told.

After our Bible lecture, Lloyd began to give out literature. One man asked us for an Old Testament. When Lloyd handed it to him, he held it tightly between both his hands and asked, “Is this the Old Testament?” He then jumped up and down, right there on the pier in the presence of his four shipmates, saying, “Oh, I am so happy, this is just what I have wanted.” As we rode away on that long pier, it seemed that our car was filled with the Lord’s presence. Our hearts were so full of Him. This is the reward that God gives to the seed sower. We are so greatly blessed! How can we ever thank Him for calling us into this ministry?

Sara Weaver, *Missionary Light* May-June 1967



Jacob A. Shenk
1900-1950



Melvin H. Weaver
1923-1950

The lives of Jacob A. Shenk and Melvin H. Weaver were cut short when their plane crashed near Mountain City, Tennessee, on March 24, 1950. They both left a profound legacy of calls to faithful service, sharing God's story with others, and walking with Jesus in daily life.



Kathleen Joyce and Carol Ann Weaver with their father Melvin, just home from church in the Kentucky hills. Another daughter, Dorothy Jean, was only ten weeks old when Melvin died.

Crockett, Kentucky, 1950

Said in memory of Melvin Weaver, "I have mental images of a man hurrying over the hills on foot to meet an appointment; giving his wife a helping hand with the children; energetically repairing the Jeep; affectionately caring for his stock; giving a quiet testimony at prayer meeting; singing earnestly at street meeting; speaking with concern to a member who seems to be slipping; relating sorrowfully the unwillingness of his people to hear the gospel; praying fervently for the Lord's leading for himself and his family. It is impossible to think that the efforts of such a man on Lost Creek were in

vain, or that his influence there is ended. The people whom he sought to reach will carry the memory of a noble life, of unselfish service, of a yearning and a bleeding heart. The story of Bro. Melvin's self-sacrificing efforts in Kentucky will certainly also speak with convicting power to the hearts of some in our home communities whom God would send to the "Lost Creeks" and the lost souls in many parts of the world."

John H. Shank, *Missionary Light*, May-June 1950

Our Missionary Task is Never Completed

As we recall the past, let us be reminded that our missionary task is never completed. This history should serve as a springboard and encouragement to new mission ventures. God has done great things as we have labored together. He wants to again expand our labors, possibly into some new field ... somewhere. Then another story can be written, for his glory. Let us be faithful. Let us listen for his voice and follow where he leads.

Roy Kiser, introduction to *Together in the Lord* by Twila Brunk.





Transforming (USPS-15280)
Virginia Mennonite Missions
601 Parkwood Drive
Harrisonburg, VA 22802-2498



Clockwise from top left: Richard Keeler examines samples as he works with Hansen's Disease patients in Trinidad. *Photo: VMC Archives*

Eastern Mennonite College Quartet Gospel Team in Crocket, Ky., with Cora Maust and Martha Smoker, 1947. *Photo: Eugene Souder*

Mother Mon is baptized by Pastor Joi in Thailand in March 2016. Following her baptism, he shared her testimony about coming to faith through her daughter Ying's death. *Photo: Mark and Sarah Schoenhals*

Aaron Kauffman and Virginia Mennonite Conference Executive Conference Minister Clyde Kratz lead a litany of blessing for workers and ministers commissioned in 2019. *Photo: Jon Trotter*

Children enjoy Vacation Bible School at Salter's Hill Mennonite Church, near Montego Bay, Jamaica, 1990s. *Photo: VMC Archives*

