

# Transforming

Stories of making disciples in the way of Christ

Fall 2020  
VOLUME 6 • ISSUE 3



## When Walls No Longer Divide



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 **VMMissions**

## Love tears down walls



BY AARON M. KAUFFMAN, PRESIDENT

In his 2017 book, *Dream with Me*, lifelong pastor and civil rights activist John Perkins describes his experience of opening up an integrated health clinic in Mississippi in 1973. The building had previously been owned by a white doctor whose dying wish was that it be sold to someone else who would use it as a medical clinic. Perkins recounts the day his ministry, Voice of Calvary, bought the building from the doctor's widow with \$75,000 cash:

As soon as we had the keys, a bunch of us went inside. The first thing we noticed was the wall that divided blacks and whites. Many times I had stared at the wall from the black side. For the first time, we were able to look at both sides of the wall, and it confirmed what we had already assumed: the white side had nice, beautiful paneling; the black side was bare and worn.

The stark contrast was symbolic of how everything we blacks had was inferior.

I picked up a sledgehammer and started slamming it against the wall with all my might. We tore down the dividing wall in less than thirty minutes. It felt good! It also reminded me of something the apostle Paul wrote in Ephesians 2:14-16: Christ has made peace between Jews and gentiles, and He has united us by breaking down the wall of hatred that separated us.

It was an emotional experience, and I didn't care that we had ruined nice paneling that, under other circumstances, we would have reused. From that time on, we determined there would be only one waiting room—open to blacks and whites.

Perkins' story and the passage he cites in Ephesians demonstrate a vital truth of the gospel of Jesus Christ: love tears down walls.

It was love that led Jesus to Jacob's well one hot afternoon to transform not only the life of a woman trapped in sin, but the prejudice of his disciples toward their neighbors in Samaria (John 4:4-42).

It was love that led Paul to confront the great apostle Peter for "not acting in line with the truth of the gospel" (Gal. 2:14) when, pressured by his fellow Jews, Peter stopped eating with his Gentile brothers and sisters in Christ.

It was love that led Francis of Assisi to cross the battle lines unarmed during the fifth crusade to meet with the Sultan of Egypt and share the gospel of peace, leading to a respectful dialogue despite their differences.

And it was love that led John Perkins to tear down the wall of that formerly segregated health clinic in Mendenhall, Mississippi. As Perkins puts it, "God's love and justice come together in the redemptive work of Jesus Christ, and we can't be about one and not the other. They're inextricably connected."

May God's love propel us to tear down the walls of prejudice and hatred in Jesus' name until that day when walls no longer divide.

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## Financial Report

Reporting: 09/01/19 to 08/31/20 (pre-audit)

Special Projects \$1,505,610	Special Projects \$1,495,091
Mission Fund \$887,004	Mission Fund \$919,343
<b>Revenue</b> Total \$2,392,613	<b>Expenses</b> Total \$2,414,434

**Mission Fund:** undesignated giving by households and churches, **Special Projects:** giving to specific workers or ministries. *The above figures do not include funds VM Missions received from the Paycheck Protection Program.*

## Transforming

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**Cover photo:** Divine Unity Community Church (DUCC) Pastor AJ Mosley (center) with VM Missions tranSenders Nik Tucker (left), Bryce Bouldin, Victoria Barnes, and Gabrielle Thorne. They all serve with Every Nation Campus and attend DUCC. See article on page 9. Courtesy photo

## VMissions hosts Prayer as Mission Seminar



Ruthy Hershey leads a session on praying in alignment with God's big heart. VMissions photo

VMissions workers Michael and Ruthy Hershey led a seminar focused on engaging prayer as the foremost tool given to us by which to engage in God's mission and see God's purposes unfold in our lives and in our world. Held in Harrisonburg, Va., on October 17 and 18, the socially-distanced event was attended by various VMissions workers, staff, members of Ministry Support Teams, and community members.

Ruthy led the group in a reflection of the riveting story from 2 Chronicles 20 of Jehoshaphat facing an onslaught from powerful enemy armies. She helped participants discover principles from this text that enable them to pray in powerful alignment with God's heart, to joyfully see God bring breakthrough in surprising ways. Participants were then guided by Michael and Ruthy in applying the material from the morning, which involved prayer and activation in small groups and reflection.

As one participant shared, "Wow! So refreshing and vibrant! I came away anxious to use what I have learned with my MST and elsewhere."

## A bridge between former inmates and the church

VMissions worker and jail chaplain, Jason Wagner, is happy to announce the launching of a new initiative of care for persons released from incarceration. He has begun a partnership to build bridges between former inmates and the church. This partnership consists of Strength in Peers, an agency which works directly with people in recovery re-entering from the jail, and The Open Table ([theopentable.org](http://theopentable.org)), a model that trains churches to gather around people and support them.



The Rockingham/Harrisonburg Regional Jail, where Jason Wagner serves as chaplain. Photo: Skip Tobin

The question of how the church can love its neighbors coming out of the local jail is one that Wagner has held since he started working as a jail chaplain. He explains, "Most people in our jail are there because of probation violations, meaning they weren't able to find stability upon re-entering the community. To me this appears to be a golden opportunity for the church to stand in the gap and care for those entangled in the justice system."

He acknowledges that it is complicated to walk with people in hard situations and churches are often ill equipped to do this. Despite the challenges, Wagner expresses the hope and prayer that "this new partnership will connect the church to those we often fail to incorporate into our lives and equip us to love and serve them both spiritually and physically."

Learn how churches can serve in this way by contacting Jason at [jasonwagnerrjchaplain@gmail.com](mailto:jasonwagnerrjchaplain@gmail.com).

## Karen Yoder hired as Ministry Support Coach and Global Assistant



This summer, VMissions hired Karen Yoder as the new Ministry Support Coach and Global Assistant.

In these roles she resources Ministry Support Teams and lends administrative support to Jason Showalter and the Global Team. Karen has served as a missionary in both Nigeria and the Balkans and has a passion for sharing her faith and supporting those engaged in cross-cultural ministry. She brings valuable experience in planning and leading teams in both church and non-profit settings. Karen is married to Tom (VMissions Ministry Coach for the Balkans) and they attend Grace Covenant Church in Harrisonburg, Virginia.

## My Coins Count raises over \$11,000 to benefit most vulnerable to COVID-19

VMissions and Mennonite Central Committee (MCC) cooperated this year to channel My Coins Count funds to help some of



the most vulnerable people during the global COVID-19 crisis. Gifts through My Coins Count are supporting VMissions' continuing response to needs arising in the communities where our workers and partners live and serve. This money is also helping MCC to distribute locally purchased supplies to vulnerable and displaced people around the world as MCC workers and partners identify needs.

This year, My Coins Count raised a preliminary total of \$11,649, which is evenly split between the two agencies.

# ● Barriers and breakthroughs

Now in their sixteenth year of service as a family in South Asia, Anne shares about this latest season of COVID-19.

BY ANNE (not her real name)

**T**his latest season of COVID-19 has been a time of very visible limitations. For months, the majority of the population of our country did not leave their homes unless absolutely necessary. Many activities such as visiting local believers, getting to know our neighbors, and enjoying worship times with others all halted, just like most of the world. All these limitations have pushed us to wonder what God is up to. Was God still moving?

In our country of over a hundred million Muslims, the few thousand believers are often the only believer in their town and have no church to meet with. Invisible walls of distance separate them from the church community. Due to COVID-19, our house church reluctantly switched to Zoom meetings. But to our surprise, attendance increased! Local members of our church invited isolated believers from

around the country, and our church participation tripled. A new believer named Soheli lives in an area where there is no church. Working in a garment factory, he only has one day off a week. Connecting on Zoom has enabled him to take part.

In a lot of churches there is a clear wall between minister and laity; the minister leads the service, and the rest listen. The Spirit seems to be breaking down this wall for us as well, as our church members have taken turns to preach, lead, or share their testimonies. One week, Soheli shared his testimony, and afterwards three believers spoke up with words of affirmation and encouragement to their new brother. We hope this taste of fellowship



## Shaken beyond the walls BY JASON RHODES SHOWALTER, GLOBAL MINISTRIES DIRECTOR



**I**n the early chapters of the book of Acts, we're told of two occasions when the Holy Spirit comes on Jesus' followers. On the feast of Pentecost, the disciples are gathered in one place, still waiting for the coming of the Spirit whom Jesus had

promised. A sound like a tornado fills the room, and tongues of fire appear above the believers. They spill into the street, or at least proclaim "the wonders of God" so loudly in the many languages of the Roman Empire that passers-by gather in curiosity. In response to the jeers of some, Peter clarifies what's happening, inviting the listeners to "repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of sins. And you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. The promise is for you and your children and for all who are far off—for all whom the Lord our God will call" (Acts 2:38-39).

Many respond to the message, and this group now representing many cultures and languages enters into a new depth of fellowship, dedication to the apostles' teaching, sharing of possessions and public worship—a witness that "added to their numbers daily those who were being saved" (Acts 2:47). Persecution follows soon after, and the believers gather again, this time in a

passionate prayer for God's intervention. Strangely their request isn't that opposition cease, but for courage to "speak your word with great boldness" (Acts 4:29) and for visible signs validating the identity of Jesus. And following their prayer, the place where they were gathered was shaken, and again the results are healing, courageous witness and sacrificial giving.

Shaken beyond our walls. In the past months our lives have been shaken by a global pandemic: the ways we gather in worship, our demonstration of care for each other in times of crisis and loss, the rituals of friendship and family life. At the same time, both the church and broader society are experiencing a reckoning like never before in relation to racial injustice. We're faced with opportunities for repentance, generosity and bold witness as ambassadors of God's reconciliation through Christ.

In his letter to the Ephesians, Paul reminds the church that "[Christ] himself is our peace" (2:14), the one who breaks down dividing walls, uniting us as "members of God's household, built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone... And in him you too are being built together to become a dwelling in which God lives by his Spirit" (2:19b-22). May we be shaken by that indwelling presence beyond our walls and to new places of repentance, healing and bold witness.



In the major city in South Asia where James and Anne live, the skyline changes as millions gather for an annual Muslim festival. Photo by Carol Tobin

will be so sweet that Soheli will search for fellowship and grow in boldness to share with his Muslim wife and co-workers. May Soheli plant a church in his neighborhood. That is our prayer.

The walls that separate the unreached in our country from the gospel are subtle but strong: ignorance, poverty, lack of education and access to knowledge, community pressure, seclusion of women. Due to COVID-19, media use has boomed in this country. So it's exciting that the media company that James works with is in the forefront of helping to provide gospel access for this huge unreached people group. We are seeing these barriers of access broken down as online seekers like Soheli are being connected via social media and websites both with the Word and with volunteer local mentors who can share the gospel with them.

This pandemic time has been a rich one for intercessory prayer. I pray regularly for families serving outside the capital who have very little emotional and spiritual support. It's been a joy to catch God's heart for these families and to pray accordingly. I have rejoiced from my prayer balcony of news about witnessing and discipleship opportunities, and healings. Recently, I was

praying for a local team ministering in one of the most densely-packed refugee camps in the world. Who would have imagined that during COVID-19 these believers would be brave enough to pray for the sick in that place? That day, the Lord moved. A lady who came for prayer with a sore ankle had an encounter with the Lord that led to her forgiving her enemies. Beyond that, the Lord is leading those who came for prayer to make steps towards baptism! Surely nothing can limit our Lord.

We also carry a prayer burden for young believers to be positioned for meaningful work. James has spent years working to pass on his particular computer and media skills to a handful of young believers. Now these not-so-young men have started an on-line training program for a rising set of young people who likewise need to be given skills and vision for work as witnesses.

This is a hard article to write because, though we are celebrating what God has done, we are also grieving. Life has been far from victorious. As believers it is possible to grieve and rejoice at the same time. To do one without the other feels like a lie. In recent weeks, James was called upon to help

with music at a memorial service of a 15-year-old believer who committed suicide—a kid who had participated in our last youth conference. Then just days ago, we said tearful goodbyes to our previous teammates who had to leave the country due to security clearances being denied. Likewise, other co-workers are now being forced to leave. Multiple friends of ours have been hassled rudely by police and asked for bribes. We grieve with our local friends who just buried their father after his untimely death from COVID-19. We grieve but we are not without hope; the Lord Jesus will return and wipe all these tears.

We take to heart Paul's words in Romans 10:2, which fit the people group we live among so well. "They are zealous for God, but their zeal is not based on knowledge." We resonate with the words that follow in 10:14. "How can they hear without someone preaching to them?" For that reason, we continue to serve and continue to look for the walls to come down.

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*Anne serves with her husband James (names changed due to security concerns) and three children in a major South Asian city, in partnership with Pioneers.*

# ● Eyes open on a ripening harvest

After seeking to engage in an overseas mission assignment, Ben and Risa felt God's call to move, not across the ocean, but across the field to a farm of their own. From this vantage point, they are seeing God transform obstacles into opportunities.

BY BEN YUTZY

**N**ever have I known a time in which I have had to be so very careful and so very wise, making the most of each day because I don't know what tomorrow will bring. I run an "essential" business, a 24/7 dairy farm that cannot shut down for a virus.

I have had to create contingency plans so that we can continue as a business should a large percentage of the 33 employees get sick at the same time and require a two-week quarantine. On account of this pandemic, I have been forced

There is so much fear from the evil one all around us which could be an obstacle. But I am finding it especially true that persons overwhelmed with fear are more open to the light of the gospel. One of the farm workers, Carlos\* was dealing with anxiety as a result of the stress of navigating the pandemic. So over several weeks, I began telling him the stories from the Bible that I was reading with some other co-workers. When I shared the story from Luke 7 about the woman who crashed the Pharisee's polite dinner party by creeping up to Jesus with her flask of expensive perfume and Jesus' follow up story about the debtor who was forgiven much and loved much, he was overcome with emotion and wept. He told me later that he never weeps.

Like many people during this time of COVID-19, I have found myself at a loss for what to do or say. But sharing the Bible stories with my coworkers after studying them through a Discovery Bible Study format has changed my way of relating. As a result of hearing these stories, Carlos asked me one day if he could join the group of others with whom I was studying. Instead, I asked him if we could start another Discovery Bible Study with his friends and family. His response was that he lives alone and has been wanting to have people in his house to eat with him. And, of course, he would invite his nephews who were soon to arrive from Mexico for the apple harvest.

I have also found myself at a loss for how to respond to all the needs that so many people are facing during COVID-19. I have felt like I have nothing but the gospel to offer. Linda\*, a co-worker and a single mother of three grade school children, came to me one day just to express her gratitude for all the ways that we have

helped her during this time of COVID-19. I couldn't help but tell her about Genesis 1, which I had just studied with Carlos and others, where God fills creation, making the waters teem with fish and the skies come alive with multitudes of birds. What a joy to remind her that we too are a part of



The dairy farm work provides Ben (left) with many opportunities to relate with his many (often Latino) workers. Jorge (right), is one of Ben's several co-workers who is starting his own Discovery Bible Study with a new group of men after doing DBS with Ben. Photo: Ben Yutzky

to understand what the Lord's will is day-by-day. As I have been listening, I believe this is God's word for the Church: "Wake up, sleepy Church. It's time for a new day!" We, with the light of Christ, can transform obstacles into opportunities for the glory of God.

**W**ake up, sleeper, rise from the dead, and Christ will shine on you.' Be very careful, then, how you live—not as unwise but as wise, making the most of every opportunity, because the days are evil. Therefore do not be foolish, but understand what the Lord's will is." (Ephesians 5:14-17)



Ben and Risa Yutzy named their property Hesed Hill. *Hesed* is the steadfast, covenantal love which Scripture uses to describe the love of God. Their desire is to show God's *hesed* love to those all around them through their personal and business lives. Photo: Risa Yutzy

creation that God wants to fill with good. Two weeks after school started Linda came to me again, but this time overcome with anxiety because of all the stress of her husband recently leaving her, her kids in virtual learning, car troubles, her youngest diagnosed with diabetes and her feeling of being so alone. I really didn't know how to even begin to help, so I asked if we could pray immediately.

Afterward, she visibly calmed down, and I sensed the Lord leading me to ask her if she would be interested in studying the Bible and if she would also invite a coworker—another single mother going through similar challenges. I wondered whether she felt she needed to be polite to her boss, but I was encouraged when she immediately invited her co-worker (who also said yes) and also expressed her eagerness for her children to study the Bible too.

These stories may seem extraordinary, but I want to convey that they are actually very ordinary. We are simply choosing to believe that Jesus is with us, to proclaim that God is greater than the obstacles and to invite the Holy Spirit to transform these obstacles into opportunities. Adrian\* is another co-worker who had little to do with God when we first started studying the Bible together. After reading in the Bible what Jesus says about believing and not doubting, he was told that a frost was coming. He chose to believe that God would preserve his large garden. He went so far as to tell his neighbors and family (who had also planted gardens nearby) that his plants would not die from the frost. The

next day, his plants alone survived the frost. He immediately understood this to be a work of God and it marked the beginning of his faith. Now Adrian and his wife want to be baptized.

These times are certainly not without real—even spiritual—opposition to being able to meet and share the gospel. Carlos' girlfriend tested positive for COVID-19, so our meetings are on pause. Adrian's wife is intensively caring for her brother because he fell terribly sick to an unidentified disease. Adrian suspects witchcraft, based on his awareness of the occult activity that preceded the disease.

We have been very careful. But what is more true is that we have been very intentional about who we connect with. All of the people I am connecting with are more eager to read the Bible together than they are afraid of getting sick. But I don't want to be foolish or make-believe that all is good. I want to make believers in God's good! I want to teach them to discern Jesus' will and to baptize with the Holy Spirit so every believer can make the most of this opportunity that is a pandemic. Pray with us and for the work we are doing. Truly, I believe Christ wants to awaken the Church to a new day.

*\* Names in this article have been changed.*

*Ben Yutzy is a farmer and mission advocate who recently served on the board of VM Missions' business for transformation initiatives. He and his wife Risa live in Broadway, Va.*

# ● Walls come down in Lezhë

Having known them for over two decades, Tom Yoder understands the significance of the small changes God is bringing about now through the life and ministry of Dini and Klementina Shahini in Albania.

BY TOM YODER



The ruins of Lezhë's castle tower over the city as they have for centuries. The castle's common medieval design featured a lower outer wall of defense and fortified inner walls near the mountain top in which homes, families, and most essential goods were kept safe. Recent earthquakes have damaged building walls in the Lezhë area, many of them beyond repair. Seismic activity persists, and all wonder if disaster may come soon.

We can hardly survive without walls, can we? But long before we invented walls, God was out to settle the issue of trust and the insecurity that grips the human heart. "The LORD is my steadfast love and my fortress," David wrote, "my stronghold and my deliverer, my shield and he in whom I take refuge..." (Psalm 144:2). Individually and culturally, we make choices regarding where we place our trust. Our fortresses or strongholds may seem to offer security, stability, or a space where we can live as we please. Too often we find, however, that the beliefs and rationalizations that our hearts have built have actually come to imprison and isolate us from God and others. These are walls we are to "demolish," as the Apostle Paul wrote in 2 Cor. 10:4-5.

Indeed, some long-standing walls are falling in Lezhë, Albania. In the wake of the traumatic earthquakes and the seemingly endless pandemic, God's Spirit is blowing afresh and breaking through! Dini and Klementina Shahini are seeing marvelous releases that are revitalizing both Lezha Academic Center and Guri i Themellit church.

"Our desire has always been to see a truly Christian community growing here in Lezhë," Dini exclaimed, "and now it's happening like we've never seen before!" Divisions between church and school are breached as more and more LAC families and staff are finding in the church fellowship something that is hard to find in this post-communist culture—belonging. Recently one school mom, venturing a first tentative connection with the church, found herself weeping as the love of God was proclaimed.

Walls that have kept men and women from knowing the full joy of fellowship in Christ's body are also coming down. COVID-19 has meant that the coffee bars, where men in the community gather for their segregated guy-time, are closed. So now more men are enjoying the pre-meeting coffee times in the church building. Following Dini's example, they even take their turn at serving and clean-up. This is truly miraculous for Balkan men, given the fact that these are things that women—and only women—are meant to do! Dini remarks, "When you see men washing cups and serving the women—this is overturning thousands of years of tradition!"

VMMissions' team of workers and coaches that are focused on the Balkans have all expressed gratitude to the Shahinis for their servant leadership in this challenging year. While our other workers there returned for their scheduled furlough times early in the pandemic, Dini and Klementina sensed a clear call to stay. In a city put on lockdown, they persisted in prayer and frequent phone calls—constantly reaching out to let folks know that they weren't alone or forsaken. Their steady hand of leadership has built increased trust and respect, likely dissolving some walls between VMMissions workers and locals that we scarcely understand.

And the miracles continue. Klementina shared with our staff recently, saying, "Yesterday we were cleaning the church. I am the principal, but they see me cleaning!"

"A Roma guy came to help," Dini continued. "I grew up in this community and what we did was just ignore them. But now, because we served them following the earthquake, they are eager to help, working hard!"

Long entrenched expectations that have defined and divided the people of Lezhë are changing!

Yes, we are learning more and more that through prayer and persistent obedience, barriers and strongholds are no match for the searching, loving power of God. We have a heightened sense of urgency to proclaim the kingdom that cannot be shaken, calling on all who will hear to choose to make God their strong dwelling. Will you join in the chorus of prayer that brings Kingdom breakthrough?

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*Tom Yoder is the VMMissions Ministry Coach for the Balkans.*

# ● We listen and learn

An interview with ministry partner, AJ Mosley, Executive Pastor of Divine Unity Community Church (DUCC), in Harrisonburg, Virginia. Four of this year's tranSenders are serving with Every Nation Campus (ENC), the global movement with which DUCC is affiliated.

**D**UCC is a dynamic multiethnic, multicultural, multigenerational church. How do you sense that God is using you “for such a time as this?”

It has been said that “the church is like the eye. It has a little black in it and a little white in it, and without both, we cannot see.” Because of our distinctive demographic, we are in place to help the church see the plight or privilege of their brothers and sisters more clearly. By doing so, we gain a more robust understanding of the gospel.

Beyond this, we want the broader community to see that divine unity is not just our name, but it is our mission and our strategy. We aim to show those who encounter our community that there is a different (better) way than what we're currently being presented with in popular culture.

Finally, we realize that the Lord has uniquely given us influence on the local campuses. Learning the “language” of college students has allowed us to keep the presentation of the gospel fresh and relevant for those who hear it. We see what we do on the campus as a launching point for many leaders that will go out to the world and make a difference with a biblical worldview.

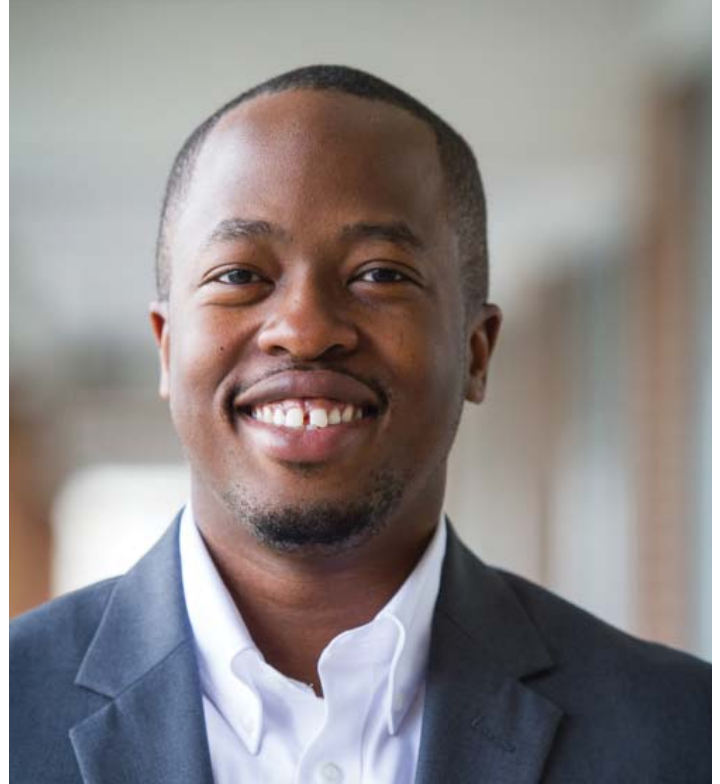
**We see some potential of dividing walls being torn down in this developing partnership between VMissions and DUCC. What are the walls that you see God helping us to notice?**

Traditionally, the term mission was applied to someone “here” who went “there.” I have appreciated how this partnership has worked to tear down that wall of thinking and encouraged the college campus as a unique mission field worthy of full-time exploration.

Additionally, through our partnership with the tranSend program, we have created an avenue for students to go into part-time mission work directly from college. This has allowed students to realize in greater measure that the call for mission is not something that they have to wait to answer “later in life,” but can be answered immediately.

**What do you want to say to mission agencies or churches that have been largely monocultural for most of their history?**

For the mission agencies/churches that have been largely monocultural, my response is simply a one-word question: Why? For DUCC, multicultural ministry wasn't a good idea, it was a conviction from God. Thus, our approach was that if we missed the mark on this, we were missing the mark on what God had called us to do. Others may not believe that a multicultural gathering or movement is something the Lord has asked them to foster or lead. However, if the gathering of monoethnic ministry was derived from



Pastor AJ Mosley. Courtesy photo

personal preference or cultural norms, and not out of kingdom calling, I would increasingly seek God as to whether or not he is pleased with what has been formed.

**What are some things that we can DO that would be meaningful to those who have felt marginalized within our community or by our institutional structures?**

There are three things that come to mind: repentance, reconciliation, and representation. If there are ways that a church or organization has been complicit in causing the pain of a marginalized people group, repentance is helpful. It breaks the bitterness of the one feeling victimized and opens the door for the Lord's healing work to take place.

The second is reconciliation. Reconciliation works to see those marginalized groups brought into the fold in a greater way. It works not only to apologize for the wrong but to right the wrong in a deeper and meaningful way.

And finally, representation. By putting those in the margin in places of authority — (only as God affirms, of course) — where they can be visibly seen, it communicates to others on the margin that they have a place and are represented in the church/organization.

# Call to Prayer: Seeing beyond the barriers

BY RUTHY HERSHEY

**A**s I interact with the Body of Christ in different places around the world, there are words that I have heard spoken on more than one occasion: “These people are almost impossible to reach... They are just so hard.” Maybe you have had the same thoughts about others whose world and ways seem so unlike your own. These thoughts about people who are different than us can make the barriers between us bigger. But are these thoughts accurate? Is this what God is saying about them?

When we moved our family to South Asia in 2009, our hearts were flooded with compassion for the millions of people in that area who had never had the chance to hear about God’s intense and never-ending love for them. We knew that there were some local Christians in that area, but the majority of them felt a huge barrier between themselves and their Muslim neighbors. Very few of them were putting energy into sharing the gospel with them.

Our heart and intention in going was to do as Jesus did when he “became flesh and blood and made his dwelling among us” (John 1:14). We started out by living with a Muslim host family, asking God how he saw these gracious hosts, as well as what he was doing and wanted to do in that whole area. As we listened, he blew open our little ideas with great dreams of his own.

We learned to speak their language, and we learned ways of sharing that built bridges to their hearts rather than bouncing off of walls that Satan has already built. We prayed a lot and obeyed as God showed us what to do and say. We knew that the Holy Spirit has ways of piercing through those walls and reaching into peoples’ hearts.

After many years of living among them, God began to open up opportunities to share in churches about reaching out to Muslims. We knew that the way



Michael (center) and Gabe interact with a man in their former neighborhood.

Courtesy photo

to begin was through prayer. When we have stereotypes, prejudices or misbeliefs about others, the first changes that God needs to do are within us. (Once God spoke to me about not being prejudiced. I was a bit taken aback, because I didn’t think that I was. Then I looked up the definition and I had to admit that there were times indeed when I had a “preconceived opinion that is not based on reason or actual experience.”) Since God has plenty of wisdom and experience, among all kinds of people, first I need to get his perspective. This change in the way that we think allows the soil of our minds and hearts to receive the seeds of God’s love. The more we pray, the more love grows, and love must be what compels us to move towards others.

At one such mobilizing event in South Asia where we were leading a church in praying for Muslims, I was in the back of the room praying that God would give the participants a picture of what he wants to do among Muslims in their country, a picture that would break through the walls

that kept them distanced from their Muslim neighbors.

Shortly after I had silently prayed, a young man spoke up excitedly: “I just saw a picture! There was a door with a brilliant light shining out of it! There were millions of people, Hindus, Muslims, Sikhs, Christians, all running towards that light and shouting ‘GOD!’ From this picture, I now understand that Jesus is not just for the Christians, but for *all* people!”

Jesus says, “I am the light of the world” (John 8:12), and “I am the door. If anyone enters by me, he will be saved” (John 10:9a). So when the enemy tries to tempt me to focus on the barriers, I remember that picture and pray for eyes to be opened to see the compelling beauty of Jesus shining into our world with arms wide open, causing all to run to him.

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*Ruthy Hershey leads regular in-person and virtual prayer gatherings in a VMissions assignment. She and her husband Michael are VMissions workers based in Millersville, Pa.*



## ● Worker profile: **Tyler and Kendra Yoder**

### **Assignment:**

We are planting Garden City Church in Richmond, Va., where we seek the wholeness of Southside Richmond by focusing on reconciliation, maturity, and multiplication. We moved to Richmond in 2018. We are creating a network of neighborhood-based house churches that will also meet regularly as a large group. We see that lasting and effective discipleship happens in smaller groups, so our primary focus is on house churches, while we still desire to meet as a corporate body to celebrate God and his work in the city and in our lives.

### **Biggest challenge:**

We launched our first house church on the day of Virginia's stay-at-home order, so we immediately pivoted towards meeting online. Even with this change, God worked in profound ways. In August, we started meeting in our backyard. Engagement has increased since meeting in person, which is evidence of people's great need for community right now. Part of our vision for Garden City Church has always been to actively participate in reconciliation of all kinds, and to be

a multiethnic body of believers. The need for the church to take action in racial reconciliation was amplified by George Floyd's killing and the Richmond protests which followed, both peaceful and violent. Though choosing how to respond from one day to the next was challenging, we are grateful for the ways that the broader church of Richmond has taken action as well as for the opportunities we have as Garden City Church to continue to enter into this work.

### **Biggest joy:**

We sensed God inviting us to put down roots more deeply in our neighborhood. During quarantine he answered our prayers for a house right where we felt him leading us to be, only about eight blocks from where we had been living. It has a front porch where we can take part in our front-porch-sitting neighborhood, and great hosting potential both inside and outside. Our neighbors on our new block have been incredibly friendly, and we are learning to know them more quickly than we anticipated. Kendra also decided to put more of her time and energy toward church planting rather than

teaching art again this fall. Making this change has been life-giving for her and has opened up more space to cultivate new and existing relationships.

### **A typical day:**

Both of us are bi-vocational. Thus, we can naturally integrate with our city while also devoting time to church planting-specific work. On a typical weekday, Tyler drives school bus in the morning and afternoon for students whose in-person learning is necessary. In between, he prepares teaching for church, meets with others, and prays in the neighborhood. Kendra's schedule alters daily as she works at a local coffee shop, connects with others, prays, and spends time in learning mode exploring church planting resources on our porch. On Tuesday evenings, we meet for church in our backyard, which involves eating food, hearing a short teaching, discussing the teaching together and praying with each other. Because of the pandemic and life changes, we are continually revisiting our rhythms of life, especially our work/life balance, knowing that God invites us to both rest and work.

## Motorcycles go the distance for Missions



On September 11-12, 24 motorcycle riders covered 419 miles in support of the ministries of VMMissions, raising more than \$12,000.

(Top to bottom) Tyler and Kendra Yoder shared with riders about their church planting work in Richmond, Va. VMMissions workers Dan and Mary Hess participated in the ride before returning to Albania. Riders pray for a safe journey before heading out. Departing Powhatan Mennonite Church for Staunton, Va.

Read article at [vmmissions.org/blog](https://vmmissions.org/blog)



## Riders pedal in memory of Steve Leaman



**Bicyclists get ready for the five mile ride.** Photo: Carol Tobin

On a crisp, sunny September morning, the largest number of riders in Bike Shenandoah's 22-year history rode in memory of Steve Leaman, a beloved former principal, educator, and VMMissions staff member. The 133 total riders chose among four rides between 5 and 62 miles to raise money for six non-profit organizations, including VMMissions.

Many of Leaman's family members, friends, former students, and colleagues rode in his memory. Because Leaman was a staff member of Virginia Mennonite Missions at the time of his death on April 5, 2020, VMMissions received an extra share of the proceeds, some of which is designated for the Stephen R. Leaman Memorial Endowment for Missions. The ride raised a total of just over \$25,000, of which VMMissions received \$6,416.

Read article at [vmmissions.org/blog](https://vmmissions.org/blog)