

Transforming

Stories of making disciples in the way of Christ

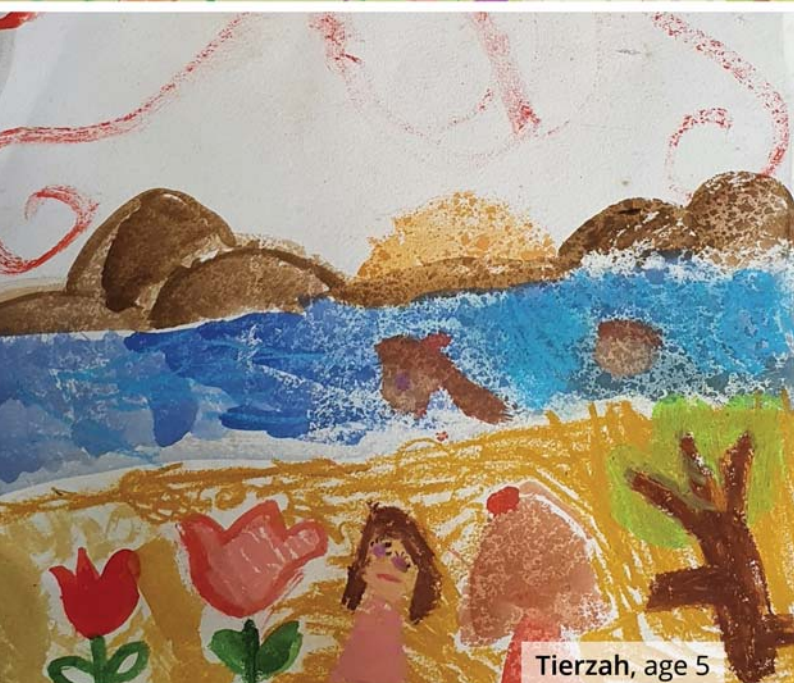
Spring 2022
VOLUME 8 • ISSUE 1



Anjali, age 11



Hannah, age 10



Tierzah, age 5



Maia, age 12

The Future That God Sees

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Stays Standing

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for Central Asia

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 **VMMissions**

From the President

Putting on God's Glasses

BY AARON M. KAUFFMAN

Where there is no prophetic vision the people are discouraged.
Proverbs 29:18 (ESV, alternate reading)



My son got his first pair of glasses a few months ago. Only a week or two into the school year, the teacher told us he was straining to see the words on the board. The eye doctor confirmed the diagnosis. Within weeks, my wife took him to pick up his new lenses. When he put them on for the first time, he beamed with delight. "It's so different. There are so many details. I've been missing this!" Suddenly, the world around him came into much clearer focus.

In leading a 103-year-old mission agency, I confess it can be hard to see where we're headed sometimes. We do our best to craft careful plans informed by Scripture, current mission thinking and practice, global trends, the distinct callings of people and partners, and the leading of the Holy Spirit. Too often, especially over the past two years of the pandemic, these plans end up on the shelf or in the trash can. What was all that work for? If we're not careful, we can end up discouraged and disillusioned.

To see the present clearly and make sense of it, it helps me to put on the lenses of God's future. Scripture is full of such prophetic visions of where history is headed. Revelation 7:9-10 and 21:3-5 are among my favorites:

After this I looked, and there before me was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, tribe, people and language, standing before the throne and before the Lamb. They were wearing white robes and were holding palm branches in their hands. And they cried out in a loud voice: "Salvation belongs to our God, who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb."

And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, "Look! God's dwelling place is now among the people, and he will dwell with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God. 'He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death' or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away." He who was seated on the throne said, "I am making everything new!"

Disappointment clouds our vision. But in the light of God's eternity, we can see that no effort is wasted. One day, people from every culture will gather before the throne of Jesus in worship. God will heal every hurt and right every wrong. And God will dwell with us forever.

That's not an excuse for inaction. Rather, it's a reason to act with utmost courage in the present. We know the end of the story, no matter the obstacles we may face in the short run. Let's put on the glasses of God's future so we can pursue that vision with confidence today.

Cover montage: Visions of *Imagining God's Future* from VMMissions worker children serving internationally. Top left: Anjali Horst, Thailand; top right: Hannah Schoenahls, Thailand; bottom left: Tierzah Horst, Thailand; bottom right: Maia, South Asia. Artwork courtesy of Carol Tobin.

Read artist statements and see the artwork close up at vmmissions.org/imagine-future

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Financial Report

Reporting: 09/01/21 to 02/28/22

Special Projects \$871,677	Special Projects \$693,252
Mission Fund \$529,040	Mission Fund \$445,439
Income Total \$1,400,718	Expenses Total \$1,138,692

Mission Fund: undesignated giving by households and churches, **Special Projects:** giving to specific workers or ministries.

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● News+Events

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VMissions Opens New Category for 'Marketplace Workers'

Since the early Christians fled Jerusalem “preaching the good news wherever they went” (Acts 8:4), believers have understood their work as an expression of worship and witness to Jesus. VMissions has created the “marketplace worker” category to support and equip believers to “live out God’s kingdom in every sphere of life.” This category enables persons employed in trades or professions—both domestically or internationally—to receive coaching toward fruitful ministry in the workplace, and to network with other Christians who see their work as ministry.

In particular, VMissions hopes to support persons who desire coaching in evangelism and church planting.

One U.S.-based couple has already stepped into this new opportunity: **Ben and Risa Yutzy** are ‘making disciples who make disciples’ among the Spanish-speaking farm workers with whom they work in Timberville, Virginia. As a couple, they are happy to invite VMissions to help them learn as much as they can about how to bear witness to Christ and nurture simple, multiplying expressions of church among the many unchurched persons with whom they relate.

VMissions Announces Recently Appointed Mission Workers

Paulo and Ana Silva (names changed) were appointed to serve in a Central Asian country (a sensitive location) to focus on mentoring new workers. They spent 17 years in the region prior to this assignment, serving as team leaders of multinational teams. They have extensive experience and expertise in organizational management and speak four languages.

Jason and Jenny Wagner were recently appointed together as Associated Workers. Jason has stepped down from his role at the Rockingham-Harrisonburg Regional jail to accept a full-time position as chaplain at the Augusta Correctional Center with GraceInside, a Virginia-based ministry that serves 30,000 imprisoned men and women across the state. He and his wife Jenny anticipate the blessing of ongoing connection with VMissions. They envision renewal coming to the broader church as people work together on behalf of those impacted by incarceration.

Ken Wettig is serving as the initiator and director of SLAQ (Servant Leader Quest), a program that combines outdoor adventure with faith formation to raise up servant leaders from diverse backgrounds for the next generation church.

● A Church That Stays Standing



As Steve and Laura Campbell bring closure to their assignment, Steve reflects on the vision for the future Montenegrin church that has guided them in their ministry.

BY STEVE CAMPBELL

Our call in 2009 was very clear: God wanted us to encourage and equip the church, and we were to do this in Montenegro, a country in Southeastern Europe the size of Connecticut.

With only 350 evangelical believers, this is a place where the cultural landscape is dominated by the Serbian Orthodox Church and where evangelicals are seen as a heretical sect. Of those 350 evangelical believers, only 50 would identify themselves as Montenegrin. Others are more recent arrivals from Serbia, former Yugoslavia, and the Americas. Into this challenging context, we came with hearts ready to announce the kingdom of God and point people to Jesus.

Our hope has been to plant Christ as the seed so that a Montenegrin church could grow. Thankfully, the success of our work is measured in Kingdom terms; we have worked for the Lord, not for people. This has been both rewarding and intensely draining. We have labored, knowing that it is the Spirit working in us who alone can bring about the birth. We like the picture in Revelation 4 of the elders casting their crowns before the throne of the Lamb. We lay down all that we have done and failed to do that our attention would be riveted on God and God's glory.

As we now prepare to leave, we expect to see the church standing on its own. This is because we have viewed our presence as scaffolding that can be removed to reveal not a splendid cathedral but something that in human terms might seem flimsy and flawed: a structure of Spirit-breathed relationships that will carry forward the witness of the gospel long after we leave. Early on, we asked local believers in Podgorica about their vision for the church—what they saw and hoped for the church of Montenegro. Based on what we heard, we have worked as God instructed us to encourage and equip them to move toward that vision.

One hope they carried was to form small groups, like a cell church. And as of last fall, small groups were launched for the whole church. We've used the Discovery Bible Study (DBS) structure, starting with a few people and then continuing to present the idea to the larger church body. Discipleship training is built into DBS, so each member can learn how to guide Bible studies with contacts that they have. A focus on small groups can help with the vision these believers carry for forming more churches in Montenegro.

There was a vision to have more opportunities for children during the worship hour so Laura began a Sunday School program. There was a vision to have more Montenegrins involved in the church service itself, so I have been training men how to structure preaching and meditations.

There was also a vision to move from a single pastor to an eldership team, so I agreed to help move in that direction and to bring some balance and administration to that group. One significant success in our context is to now have a Montenegrin serving as an elder.

There is another young Montenegrin with whom I have been working. He is learning to preach and is now planning to go to Bible school. He is committed to coming back to Podgorica when he completes his studies in order to serve the church for at least three years. He could be a future elder, enabling the church to take another step toward being locally led.

The local believers also envisioned a comprehensive discipleship program that rests on deep personal relationships. The Bible studies have been a large part of that deepening, but we added a baptism class and prayer ministry (using Freedom in Christ material) to our already existing membership class and spiritual gift discernment materials. We have discipled/mentored many folks in the church. One time we were at a prayer meeting where perhaps a dozen men were present. Looking around the room, Laura said,



Steve describes his family's relationship with church leader Lazar Simonovic and his family as life on life. "We have done life together and have grown closer to God and one another."



The Podgorica congregation with whom Steve and Laura Campbell serve celebrates baptisms at a local river.

All photos courtesy of Steve Campbell.



When Montenegro became an open country, it started to be more attractive for missionaries. Some of them came and started to pursue their own agendas, sometimes not even wanting to connect with existing churches in the country. This was not the case with Steve and Laura Campbell.

When they came, their view and profile was very different from others. They came to serve. They were satisfied even though their work was not publicly visible or praised. I am afraid that these kinds of people are disappearing from this world; but actually, these kinds of people are the most needed for the kingdom of our Lord.

—Vladimir Cizmanski, mentor and church leader (pictured left with Steve Campbell)

"You have at one time or another disciplined every man in this room!"

Another vision was that the church become a sending agency for missionaries. One man that I mentored has moved with his wife to do mission work in the coastal town of Kotor. One final thing that I have worked on has been to help people share their faith journey and to invite others into the story of God. Being able to develop skills in listening, teaching, administration and relationship building has been a privilege, and has challenged me toward the holy life that God desires for me.

I see hopeful signs for the coming years of evangelical witness in Montenegro. When we first came to Montenegro in 2008-2009 on a short-term tranSend assignment, the hearts of so many people were hard. When we came back in 2012, we sensed ground being broken. Our many chats with taxi drivers, waiters at coffee shops and neighbors reveal an increasing hunger for God. As traditional sources of hope come up empty, they are more ready than ever before to dig deeper for answers.

I am encouraged to see the eyes of Montenegrins opening to the ways that God wants to use them to reach their nation. I still recall what felt so significant to me following a prayer

walk through our community. I had asked the participants if God had shown them anything new as they prayed. One Montenegrin spoke up. "This is my town. I am born here and so often I have viewed my fellow citizens as lost. I have had no hope for them. But God showed me how he views these people. This broke my heart: to pray for my fellow citizens as God sees them."

As we leave Montenegro, our kingdom hopes remain the same. We want to be obedient to God's call for the next step. Maybe it means helping a local body in the States to start over with biblical discipleship. Or maybe it means forming new communities of disciples who will be ambassadors of reconciliation. Of course, as central as any of these hopes are is the hope that our daughters come to accept Jesus as their personal Lord and Savior and serve him all of their lives. As we continue to grow in our identity in Christ, there is freedom in knowing that we are not measured by the world's standards.

We are not responsible for growing the kingdom, but only for pointing people to God. This is our offering—the crown we cast at the feet of Jesus!

Steve and Laura Campbell and their daughters Ruth and Esther have served in Podgorica, Montenegro, since 2012 and are completing their assignment this summer.

● What God Sees For Central Asia

What does it feel like to stand on the brink of that *for-such-a-time-as-this* moment in one's life? Em shares how for years she and Jay have been propelled toward a future that will emerge because God loves the people of Central Asia.

BY CAROL TOBIN, AS SHARED BY EM AND JAY (NAMES CHANGED)

Our story has been unfolding over decades. From the time we were children, we were both exposed to and engaged with a world of missional opportunities; our families prompted us to gaze far beyond the borders of our comfortable communities.

We met at Eastern Mennonite University; our first class together was Anthropology and Christian Mission. Our degrees and inclination toward teaching made it easy for us to picture ourselves teaching at an international school somewhere. But, first things first: after we married, Jay took a pastorate and I focused on beginning our family. We didn't know much. Serving overseas—wasn't that what missionaries did?

Jay's first exposure to Joshua Project materials at an Eastern Mennonite Missions board meeting he attended lit a flame within him. I remember him coming home, excitedly declaring to me that he knew exactly where God wanted us to go. We were to work with a group of people living in the "10-40 window," that broad swath of the globe barely touched by gospel presence—hundreds of people groups, millions of people caught behind language, cultural and/or governmental barriers. Our second child was one. This was not something I was going to step into quickly!

We needed an invitation, and by the time the invitation came several years later, I was ready to think about something other than

raising babies. A young family serving in Central Asia invited us to join their team. They were looking for people with a teaching background who had children the same age as theirs. We were ready to say yes. We assumed we were walking into the fulfillment of all of our hopes and dreams. Finally, we would be exactly where God wanted us to be. But, within six months, our teammates' visas were denied, and we were all forced to shift gears.

Having begun to invest in language study and wanting to hold onto the hope of working with this specific group of Central Asian people, we moved to another country in Central Asia where there was a minority percentage of these people living. Because Jay had minored in business administration, he was able to secure a job at a university teaching international business. The father of one of his students was keen for us to move to his village 45 minutes away from the city. This invitation put us in a position for everything that would come next. God knew how much we needed such an invitation!

This man's certainty that we would be a blessing in his community paved the way for overwhelming expressions of hospitality. In the course of our first month in the village, 14 evenings were spent enjoying meals in the homes of 14 different neighbors. Even as introverts, something was blossoming within us as we soaked up the warmth of people who lived with a rich understanding of extended family and community relationships. Their deep desire to honor God made them seem tantalizingly close to receiving the revelation of Jesus. Yet they had an equally deeply ingrained conviction that Christians had it "wrong." As we formed friendships, we fervently prayed that that mindset could be dismantled. Would God give us "bridge people," who like Cornelius, would be a conduit for the gospel into whole new cultural networks?

Our deep desire was to have ways of being a blessing within our new community. There were many requests for me to teach English on the side. Instead, Jay came up with a business plan for a language school. Then for a software company. As time went on, these businesses did remarkably well. Given our stable business visas, we were able to invite other expats to team up with us in these ventures. Working together with local colleagues, sharing leadership, focusing on empowerment, as well as actively participating in community life combined to create a rich context for gospel witness and discipleship. Our aim was to provide a model for



Central Asia is in the 10-40 window, an area of the globe which is home to the greatest concentration of people groups with little or no access to the gospel. Stock photo by PxHere.



Mosques like this one reflect how Islam is deeply embedded within Central Asian culture. Stock photo by PxHere.

what it would look like for local people to live as followers of Jesus.

We noticed that neither we nor the friends who were meeting Jesus were viewed with suspicion. This stood in contrast with how workers who seemed to lack a legitimate reason to be present were viewed. “Who are they? Where do they get their money? How can they just sit around and drink tea?” Worse still was the backlash meted out on converts who were supported in ministry by non-local Christian NGOs (non-governmental organizations). But as business people, we were valued and contributing members of the community. The people being influenced toward faith in Jesus were well-integrated and well-respected; they were not prone to be ostracized for their faith.

During this time, we honed our leadership, business and teaching skills by pursuing more education. But after seven years of vital connection in this location, a transition needed to happen. The rigors of village life, the cold winters, and the lack of peers and educational opportunities for our children were taking their toll. Our children needed more than what could be provided.

God opened the door for us to move to a major urban center which met the needs of our family and allowed for ongoing access to and oversight of the businesses in Central Asia. We stepped into significant leadership roles in a large international school and found ourselves networking with a newly expanded set of like-minded ministry partners. During these years the desire to be living again in Central Asia stayed with us.

Finally, changes in government meant that the door toward the West that had been closed throughout the many years of our loving this people group was finally opening to businesses and professionals. Our connections positioned us well to consider establishing an English medium school

in the region. However, while exploring that option, we found ourselves being called upon as consultants for others who shared similar hopes. As a result of our shift of focus to consulting, we are supporting not just one but four schools with Christian leaders.

So, this is the direction in which we have moved. We have a registry in Central Asia for a consulting business. God has given us favor in Central Asia along with a plethora of relationships all over the globe. In three or four years, our vision is that we will see 40-50 persons welcomed into Central Asia as engineers, teachers, and computer programmers. Our particular passion is to mobilize young workers, especially from the Global South. Those who lack professional training can be encouraged to earn degrees at universities in Central Asia. We are already working with interns from the Philippines, Columbia, Brazil, Cuba and India. This wave of workers will result in a wave of relationships built within real life work contexts. These relationships will serve as seeds for new churches in new places.

And we are praying that in 20 years, we will see locally-led congregations that are not dependent on funds from outside sources as is the case presently, and an emerging church that is a natural part of the community—productive, well-integrated, and self-sustainable.

We sense that we are on the brink of a breakthrough that God wants to bring to this region. For me there is exhilaration edged with nervous anticipation. For Jay there is vigorous and contagious confidence, a beautiful sense of clarity as to what we are to be doing. And how about you? Are you too being called to use the professional skills God has given you for God’s missional purposes, at such a time as this?

Jay and Em (names changed) are Associated Workers with VMissions preparing to relocate to Central Asia later this year.

● A Vision for Creating Community

In an age of fragmentation, David and Rebekka Stutzman have opened a community center in Mannheim, Germany, and are finding surprising success.



BY DAVID STUTZMAN

Here in Mannheim, Rebekka and I are very aware of recent dramatic shifts in what community means and how it is experienced. We see it becoming reduced and fragmented as communities increasingly inhabit online space. Underlying questions and challenges appear as its place and scope in our daily lives shrinks. How is community built when no one has time and people are reluctant to commit because they are chronically overcommitted? And over it all, the ever-compelling question: What does it mean to belong?

Those of us for whom church has always been a part of life share language, identity, practices, commitments and rhythms that in today's parlance would quickly be recognizable as a lifestyle. Yet, all this is so implicit within us that we have a hard time recognizing its singular significance. People around us are longing for community, but they are not turning to the church for this community. The offer must be made; we have to learn how to invite participation.

This has been our challenge over the course of the past few years. As church workers focused on starting and creating a new community in Mannheim, we have come to recognize the weight of these questions as, over the course of the past few years, we have invited people to participate in community. It is hard to build community!

But tucked away in the northwest corner of a poor and immigrant-dense part of Mannheim, in a small building next to the Protestant church is the Villa. This 2021 experiment of ours has turned into something that no one has expected: a community center bursting at the seams with life.

Under the motto "the living room open for everyone," the Villa hosts a family cafe, game night, and outdoor program for children. It is a partnership between the Protestant Church and Kinderreich, the non-profit organization with which we have worked for the past few years. It is supported through donations, grants, and a network of volunteers associated with social services and neighborhood organizations. The Villa is open Thursday afternoon through Saturday morning, with other groups using it throughout the week: musicians, senior citizens, nursery care groups, and the Arab cultural club.

It is hard to explain why it has worked. It is "neutral space" even though it is adjacent to the church building. This proximity to and association with the church lends a certain familiarity and credibility. More significantly, many parish members have been catalyzed to help out and bring

people to the Villa. The donation basis means a visit isn't a commercial transaction, rather an experience akin to hospitality. Because of the open nature, homey feel, and kid-friendly atmosphere, people feel free to invite their neighbors and extended family members to enjoy the space. Word of mouth has been sufficient to keep it bustling.



David Stutzman plays a board game at the die Villa community center. Photo courtesy of David Stutzman

We are very pleased to be enjoying this partnership with the Protestant church. One appreciative member of the church recently noted that apart from the Villa, the church could be forced to close their doors in the coming years. Indeed, a new young reverend has started at this parish, drawn specifically by the community engagement he sees happening through the Villa.

We are grateful for these unexpected glimpses of renewal. The success we are experiencing demonstrates that it is possible for church communities to become engaged in building community for the community, where ultimately, the invitation is to a life with Jesus Christ and life in Christian fellowship. My hope is that we can start seeing community building and hospitality as part of our church life—natural ways of forming relationships, being present, and learning how to be missional in everyday spaces.

David Stutzman serves with his wife Rebekka and three children as networkers and church planters in Mannheim, Germany, in partnership with Mennonite Mission Network and the South German Mennonite Conference.

● The Ultimate Adventure Story

Ken Wettig explains the vision behind SLAQ (Servant Leader Quest), a discipleship experience for young people.

BY KEN WETTIG

He has also set eternity in the human heart; yet no one can fathom what God has done from beginning to end.

—Ecclesiastes 3:11

Anyone who is meaningfully connected to children, whether as a parent, teacher, grandparent or mentor, gets to observe something quite universal: the sheer love of an adventure story. Whether through books or movies, children seem to have an insatiable appetite for a good story.

But somewhere along the way, children and adults alike risk losing sight of something quite profound: the fact that stories are more than a consumer product. All adventure stories display a basic universal pattern: An *invitation* to accept a *challenge* that offers an inherent *promise* of a meaningful *reward* which transcends mere survival. Every good story is actually and ultimately an invitation and a challenge to make a good story out of one's own life.

In partnership with VMissions, SLAQ is dedicated to finding creative ways to inspire youth to discover "life as adventure." While the biblical word for life [the Greek word *zoe*] is one whose meaning can be grasped through a quick glance at a concordance, seeing the concept of adventure in the Bible is like asking a fish to see the water in which it is swimming. For truly, the entire Bible is an adventure story that would challenge any trite co-opting of the concept achieved by Disney or Netflix.

The adventure pattern plays out nowhere more succinctly and dramatically than in the story of Abraham. We read in Genesis of Abraham's adventure. He is invited to take up the challenge of leaving everything he has ever known to grasp instead the promise of a "very great reward." This reward is embodied in his son Isaac.

Thus, Abraham binding his son—his own deeply-longed-for reward—upon a sacrificial altar becomes a dramatic display that mere survival is not the meaningful reward being sought. This begs the question: What did Abraham see as the reward in the adventure he had embraced?

I envision SLAQ serving as an invitation into life and relationship with God which is as exciting and as eternally significant as the story of Abraham.

My passion is that young people would recognize that life is not reducible to the deterministic biology of genes



Ken Wettig (left) leads a SLAQ group through Frostburg, Md. Photo courtesy of Ken Wettig

wired for self-preservation or the cultural dictates of viral memes. God, who has "set eternity in our hearts," invites us to find meaning in life beyond mere survival. And yet we know that no heroic self-sacrifice, neither Abraham's nor ours, can surmount the challenge of freeing us from the reign of death in which we are caught. Only Jesus through his death and resurrection can bestow the gift of righteousness by conquering death and thus enabling *zoe* to reign once again.

I would contend that the greatest threat to youth in America is not material survival but meaninglessness. My response in launching SLAQ is akin to that which has animated the church throughout all of history—the quest to discover new and creative ways to welcome the next generation into the reign of life.

I want this next generation to embrace the challenge leveled at all of humanity in the life of Christ: the challenge that those who wish to be the greatest must be the servant of all. My hope is that SLAQ would be an invitation for young people to be apprenticed to the one person in human history whose Spirit is still present with us today—the one person we can speak of as a true servant leader and the one person from whom we can receive the *zoe* of God: Jesus of Nazareth.

This is the why of the story. The nuts and bolts of SLAQ are a whole other story, one that is still unfolding.

I invite you to join us on this journey. Pray for us; become a participant in this vision of youth and young adults embracing the adventure of reflecting the *zoe* of God in the unfolding good story of their lives.

Ken Wettig serves with VMissions as the initiator and director of SLAQ (Servant Leader Quest). He resides in Harrisonburg, Va.

Call to Prayer: Reminding Ourselves of God's Future

BY RUTHY HERSHEY

*Do you feel the world is broken? (We do)
Do you feel the shadows deepen? (We do)
But do you know that all the dark won't
stop the light from getting through? (We do)
Do you wish that you could see it all made
new? (We do)*

*Is all creation groaning? (It is)
Is a new creation coming? (It is)
Is the glory of the Lord to be the light within
our midst? (It is)
Is it good that we remind ourselves of this?
(It is)*

(Excerpt from "Is He Worthy"¹)

I love this song, and find it so fitting, especially in this time. It is good that we remind ourselves of God's future. It is good for us to dwell on the fact that he is Alpha and Omega, the beginning and the end. He is the author of the whole story and he will accomplish all that he has planned. He will not fail, indeed, he cannot.

One day we will look and see "a vast crowd, too great to count, from every nation and tribe and people and language, standing in front of the throne and before the Lamb...shouting with a great roar, 'Salvation comes from our God who sits on the throne and from the Lamb!...Blessing and glory and wisdom and thanksgiving and honor and power and strength belong to our God forever and ever! Amen'" (Rev 7:9-12 NLT).

God means for us to rejoice in the new heavens and new earth that he will create, "...the sound of weeping and of crying will be heard in it no more... they will build houses and dwell in them; they will plant vineyards and eat their fruit...the wolf and the lamb will feed together and the lion will eat straw like the ox" (Isaiah 65:17,19,21,25 NIV). God wants us to imagine it and rejoice even now, in its coming.

So often, our prayers reflect our present sorrows, weariness and broken hopes. Our Father God wants to hear those things, for he cares deeply about us. But, God also wants to speak to us about what he wants to do.



Imagining God's Future by Anjali Horst and Bethany Tobin. Courtesy of Carol Tobin.

When we lived in India, we were surrounded by sorrow and crushing need. It would have been easy to feel defeated and overwhelmed. Right across the street from us, there was a tent community where hundreds of people set up make-shift homes for their families under tarps and cardboard, whatever they could find. Many others overflowed out onto the road, sleeping on the median strip of grass at night, begging along the same busy road during the day. We spent much time building relationships with them and praying in this area.

One day, as we were worshiping in the morning and asking God what God would like us to pray for that day, we saw images of that area. Instead of being oppressed, haggard and full of trash, there were jasmine trees growing in that strip of grass, their flowers bringing beauty and fragrance to the area. We drew the images and hung them in our prayer room. We

prayed for old things to be made new. We prayed for his living water to flow through that place. We prayed for fresh life, healing and restoration. Then we headed out to pray onsite.

When we arrived, we were amazed to see a big truck, full of small trees that were being planted right there in the median, just as we had prayed. It was God's confirmation to us that we were on the right track as we prayed. How exciting, encouraging and powerful our prayers can become when God shows us his dreams and plans. We are then able to praise God for what will be.

¹ "Is He Worthy" Andrew Peterson | Ben Shive
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Ruthy Hershey is a VMissions worker serving with Immerse International in Millersville, Pa.



Photo courtesy of Andressa Coutinho

Worker profile: **Andressa Coutinho** **Service program:** tranSend **Serving since:** 2021

Assignment:

My assignment consists of cultural and linguistic learning as well as support of the church planting ministry of Albanian leaders and VM Missions workers Rafael and Solange Tartari. We are currently serving in northern Albania in the city of Shkodra. I am involved in the prayer and multimedia ministries of the church. I also connect specifically with the women and youth. Glory to God: the church has grown, in new converts, but also in the knowledge of the holy scriptures and in fellowship.

Biggest challenge:

My biggest challenge is Albanian language learning. Although I see significant advances in these five months of language study, I have a long way to reach fluency. I pray that the Lord will help me to be patient and persevering in this process, and that every day God will enable me to grow and develop in learning the language. This is because my heart's desire is to be an instrument to communicate the good news of Jesus in an intelligible, contextualized and scripturally faithful way.

Biggest joy:

One of my greatest joys is being part of a Bible study group for church girls—all of whom are college students and new to the faith. These meetings often take place in our homes. We study the Bible, share, eat and pray together. Each meeting has been a precious opportunity to see these young women—former Muslims or orthodox Catholics—grow to know and love our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

The meetings have also been an important space to develop and strengthen relationships. I myself feel very blessed in this regard, as I also have many opportunities to cultivate new friendships and learn more about the Albanian language and culture. They are very thoughtful to help me. They rejoice with every advance and always encourage me to persevere. I pray that the Lord will continue to help these young women grow daily in their faith in Jesus and be used powerfully among their families and friends, most of whom are Muslims.

A typical day:

My weeks are generally very busy with church activities and with my studies of the Albanian language and culture. Saturdays are rest days in which I do different things to distract myself and relax. The others are very busy. I usually start my day with breakfast and devotional time: Bible reading and prayer. Then I dedicate myself to studying the Albanian language course. At noon, I take a break for lunch, and then start getting ready to go to the language school. After my class, I go to a café, where I make observations for my descriptive (ethnographic) study of the culture. Toward the end of the afternoon, I go to church to support the ministries. In the evening at 7:00, I have dinner and set aside time for Bible reading and Christian books. On days and times when I am not studying or taking Albanian classes, I try to spend time with Albanians. I usually meet girls in cafés to chat—as this is something very common in the culture—or I invite them over to my house.



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