

timbrel

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2011

WOMEN IN CONVERSATION TOGETHER WITH GOD



Global Sisters

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THE PUBLICATION OF MENNONITE WOMEN USA

Global Sisterhood



Patricia Burdette

Cover: Hisako (left) and her global sister, Jennifer, (see story page 7).

Courtesy photo


All scripture references are from the New Revised Standard Version unless otherwise noted.

Not long ago a friend remarked that when our family gathers it is “like the United Nations.” His comment was in reference to the global spouses several of our children have married. In many ways my bilingual daughters-in-law have facilitated relationships between their mothers and me. In a way, these women have become my global sisters.

In addition, in 2009 I was honored to be able to travel to Paraguay to the Mennonite World Conference (MWC) in Asuncion where I met several global sisters who were part of the African Women Theologians (AWT), a former Mennonite Women USA Sister-Link. I also met many Latin American global sisters at the Latin American Women Theologians gathering who were inspired by the AWT to begin their own movement. And finally, I was part of the MWC Indigenous Tour in the Chaco region where I met many, many Indigenous global sisters. The women I met, whether Paraguayan, European, Anglo, African, Latin American, or Indigenous, were empowering as they demonstrated their leadership skills. Many of the women were former or current recipients of Mennonite Women USA’s International Women’s Fund scholarships for church leadership. I was pleased to be a part of the women’s organization that made scholarships available so that it was possible for so many women to have the educational qualifications needed to be accepted by church leadership in their contexts.

In this issue of *timbrel*, Laurie Oswald Robinson, former editor of *timbrel*, writes about Alina Itucama and several others who are now leading the broader Mennonite church. Jennifer Bartsch illustrates how she has developed global sister relationships with immigrants from Asia and Latin America. Our summer intern, Mary C. Roth, also has a contribution concerning the Mennonite Church USA Women in Leadership Audit and the Women in Leadership gathering in Pittsburgh. In addition, the Afrikana Madonna, poetess, shares a poem written in commemoration of the ordination of Addie Banks. Whether across the ocean or in the US, these are all our global sisters.—pwb

Sister Question for November–December

In preparation for the next issue of *timbrel*, which will focus on Women in Leadership, consider: **How does having women included in leadership positions affect the church?** Send your response to <PattyB@MennoniteWomenUSA.org>. 

timbrel is the official publication of Mennonite Women USA, a ministry of Mennonite Church USA. *timbrel* provides a place for women to share diverse perspectives and stories and express our prophetic voice as we seek to follow Christ.

The views expressed in this publication do not necessarily represent the official position of Mennonite Women USA or the board for Mennonite Women USA.

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Afrikana Madonna, poetess, Laurelton, New York, is also known as Barbara Bethea. She is the first African American Registered Poetry Therapist certified by the National Federation for Biblio/Poetry Therapy and licensed by the state of New York. She is a published poet and author, and has performed and written for various venues both nationally and internationally. She has completed a CD with poems for empowerment that speak out about violence against women, and co-authored a book, *Writing Away the Demons*, edited by Dr. Sherry Reiter.

Jennifer Bartsch, Butler, Ohio, lives with her family on an organic farm which includes a small herd of cattle, a flock of chickens, guinea fowl, one llama, one dog, numerous cats, and a large garden. She is married to Bryan, and they have three young children. She works part-time for an environmental consulting company.

Heidi Martin, Strasburg, Pennsylvania, is a 2007 graduate of Bluffton University, Bluffton, Ohio, with degrees in English Literature, Writing, and Wellness. Heidi is a freelance writer who enjoys baking and bicycle riding.

Laurie Oswald Robinson, Newton, Kansas, is founder of her own communication business, *Tales of the Times*. She is also the author of the book, *Forever Family*, a chronicle of her family’s love and loss of a foster child. She lives in Newton with her husband, Al.

Mary C. Roth, Goshen, Indiana, is a third-year student at Goshen College, currently studying English Writing. She is a writer and editor for Goshen College’s newspaper, “The Record,” and is this year’s Horswell Publishing Fellow. She enjoys bird-watching, reading, and playing guitar.

Marietta Sawatzky, Taipei, Taiwan, and her husband, Sheldon, were career missionaries with Mennonite Mission Network in Taiwan. They continue a special assignment with the Taiwan Mennonite Church as MMN Mission Associates. Marietta teaches English Bible classes.



“We want to rise up”: International Women’s Fund empowers the global church

by Laurie Oswald Robinson with MW USA staff

When Alina Itucama (right) of Panama asked 50 women from five churches what they dreamed could happen in their churches and how they would make those dreams reality, they responded, “We don’t want to continue just sitting on our chairs in the sanctuary. We want to rise up and do something with our God-given gifts.”

Itucama, an Indigenous Wounaan woman, received a scholarship from Mennonite Women USA’s International Women’s Fund (IWF) for theological training. Recently Itucama reflected on the impact of this funding, “The scholarship is important to train sisters who have few economic resources,” she said. “Many women in remote areas of Panama cannot get to a classroom for

Mennonite Women USA has expanded this program and since 2001 has awarded about \$74,000 to 57 women.

appropriate training for ministry in the church.”

Itucama serves on the pastoral team of her home congregation, Iglesia Emaús, and also helps coordinate the national Bible institute, Iglesia Evangélica Unida. In both arenas, she models for women what it means to embrace one’s spiritual gifts.

Rhoda Keener, co-executive director for Mennonite Women USA says, “I often hear stories of the impact of women receiving theological training in Latin America, Africa, Asia, and North America. Our relatively small scholarships of \$500–\$1,000 have empowered women in 18 countries on four continents since 2001.”

IWF recipients include Elizabeth Soto Albrecht of Lancaster, Pa., who was the first Hispanic person to be called as moderator-elect for Mennonite Church USA. Recipient Sandra Campos, who coordinates the Costa Rican Bible Institute, was recently appointed as a Latin American representative to the Mennonite World Conference (MWC) Executive Committee. Rebecca Osiro, also a recipient, was the first woman to be ordained by the Mennonite Church in Kenya. Recipient Rachel Bagh is developing circles of support for theologically trained women in India.

International scholarships for women to study theology began in the late 1970's through the Women in Mission organization. Mennonite Women USA has expanded this program and since 2001 has awarded about \$74,000 to 57 women. Referrals are made by Mennonite Church USA agencies, and recipients are chosen by the Mennonite Women USA board of directors. Keener says, "By faith, the board recently raised the IWF fund from \$7,000 to \$10,000 per year."

Nancy Heisey, past president of MWC and undergraduate dean at Eastern Mennonite University in Harrisonburg, Va., testifies to how IWF has strengthened the entire church. Heisey says:

"The global church consists of both women and men, and in fact, women in many places around the world carry the bulk of the work and are the most present and ongoing in the life of the church in terms of social ministries and evangelism.

"There has been a disconnect between church male-dominated leadership and what happens in congregations. By bringing women into the realm of theological and biblical training, they are being brought into leadership levels in the church in all kinds of ways."

Keener added, "Even as recipients provide congregational leadership, they have also helped to develop counseling services for women in Chile, address economics for women in Africa, provide empowerment for lay women in India, and tackle human trafficking in Asia. Often, they are helping women in crisis – and when they help women, they help the entire community."

Linda Shelly, Mennonite Mission Network's director for mission relationships in Latin America, who identifies Latin American applicants for IWF, is grateful that Mennonite Women USA is growing the fund because many more women are seeking



Alina Itucama, an IWF scholarship recipient, sings a praise song in her Indigenous language, Wounaan. She is on the pastoral team in her home congregation, Iglesia Emaús, in Panama City, Panama.

Photo by Linda Shelly

training and need financial assistance.

Itucama echoes this thought: "In thankfulness, I want to encourage Mennonite Women USA and other related organizations to continue encouraging the spiritual growth and leadership gifts of women."

editor's note:

As part of the Mennonite World Conference (MWC) which met in Paraguay in 2009, I also attended the Women Theolo-

gians gathering in Asuncion before the conference and the Indigenous tour following the MWC. Elizabeth Soto Albrecht, Sandra Campos, Rebecca Osiro, and Alina Itucama (along with women from many countries) were also in attendance at the Women Theologians gathering along with



several other former and current IWF recipients. It was an honor to meet each of them and to see their leadership skills in action as they serve the church.

In addition, Alina and I, along with other Indigenous people and some non-Indigenous church leaders, were privileged to be a part of the Indigenous tour which took us to several Mennonite schools and churches in the Chaco region of Paraguay and Argentina. We visited the Nivaklé, Enlhet, and Toba people. It was in this context of experiencing the generous hospitality of Indigenous people that I came to see and experience Alina's joyful faith. Although we did not share a common language, we were able to communicate, sharing our common faith and affection for one another.

When it was time for us to part, Alina gave me a gift—the skirt she is wearing in the photo on page 5. This gift will always hold a special meaning for me. Alina blessed my life with her generous and joyful spirit, and she continues to bless the church with her leadership gifts. 📷

Alina Itucama (center) visits with two Indigenous elders in the Chaco region of Paraguay following the Mennonite World Conference in 2009.

Courtesy photo

My global sisterhood

by *Jennifer Bartsch*

I've always been fascinated by other cultures and languages, but I have never had the privilege of traveling outside of North America. However, this has not stopped me from meeting and befriending people from other cultures right here in the USA. From learning snippets of their languages, sampling their culinary creations, and appreciating their religions, worldviews, and art, my sisters from other cultures have taught me much about how to celebrate life, no matter the challenges.

I have a deep respect for the way my friends from other cultures have met the trials in their lives with such dedication, grace, and gratitude. I met my friend Hisako, from Japan, at Goshen College, Goshen, Ind., when she needed a tutor for our English literature class, Romanticism and Criticism. I was amazed at her commitment to learning, as she struggled to understand the often-difficult language of nineteenth century poetry, essays, and novels, as well as various critical approaches to literature. The margins of Hisako's Norton Anthology were filled with exotic-looking Japanese writing, and her dictionary was her constant companion. It took her many hours longer than the average student to complete her assignments, yet she did so with amazing dedication and quality.

I connected at our Mennonite church with my friend Kay, from Laos, and we often visited each other's homes for playgroup and piano lessons. I admired her friendliness and openness with everyone she met, despite the closed-minded attitude toward immigrants of some in her small town. Neither did she hesitate to celebrate her heritage, displaying Asian art in her home, inviting friends and neighbors over for Lao feasts, and consistently speaking to her daughters in Lao so that they will grow up bilingual. Displaced by the Vietnam War as it spilled over into their country, her family had left their home and lived in a Thai refugee camp before immigrating to the United States when Kay was nine years old. Although she endured such adversity at a very young age, she is one of the most positive, resilient people I know. A true extrovert, Kay's graceful way of turning an early life of difficulty into a



*Jennifer Bartsch's
Laotian "sister,"
Kay, with her
daughter and Jen-
nifer's son.*

*Photo by Jennifer
Bartsch*

life of service, hospitality, and friendliness is inspiring.

I met Araceli, from Mexico, through volunteering at a church English as a Second Language class. Although the class no longer meets, Araceli and I continue to meet to practice her English and my Spanish while our daughters play together. Her stories of grow-

A true extrovert, Kay's graceful way of turning an early life of difficulty into a life of service, hospitality, and friendliness is inspiring.

ing up in a rural Mexican village remind me of stories many of us heard from our elders about the Depression years, and similarly provide me with perspective on my own, relatively minor, hardships. She tells how her husband walked miles, crossing several creeks, to get to school (only when he was not needed to help with the family farm). He found it difficult to concentrate at school, however, because he was hungry, and spent much of his energy trying to convince other kids to share their lunches. Once on the way home, heavy rains moved into the area and he was stranded on the wrong side of a creek for some time. (I often think of this story when I take my children to school and notice that many parents will not even drop their children off more than 20 feet away from the door!)

Araceli, too, could attend school only after finishing her chores at home, which included helping in the family cornfields, carrying heavy bags of seed corn, fertilizer, water, and even a pesticide sprayer on her early-adolescent back. I know that she misses her family in Mexico, especially her ailing mother, and struggles very hard to learn English and make connections in our small-town community, yet she is grateful that she has the opportunity to live in the United States where her daughters can learn English, go to school, get medical care when they need it, and have enough food to eat.

These wonderful friends of mine have not only illustrated how to face life's difficulties gracefully, but more than that: to celebrate life with all of the color, flavor, rhythm and joy we can muster. I've been treated to feasts of homemade tamales, spring rolls, fried rice, sushi, empanadas, and more. I've admired artwork in my friends' homes and have been the recipient of their gener-

ous gifts: gleaming sculptures of Buddha, delicate handmade Japanese cards and origami, protective necklaces of the Virgin Mary, a gold-accented kimono, and traditional Lao clothing.

Hearing a story face-to-face is a different experience from hearing a story on the news. Every day in the news we read of people suffering—displaced or starving by war or natural disaster, crippled by disease and poverty—but when we hear it directly from a friend, we are unable to dismiss it; we must respond with words and acts of compassion. And when we can also respond to life with laughter, music, beauty, celebration—it’s in this place where compassion and joy intersect that friendship is born. Circumstances may bring people from different cultures together, but when we are open to the spirit of love, compassion, joy, empathy—the Spirit of God—we allow the miracle of friendship to happen. No matter who we are, or where we are from, with the presence of the Spirit, friendship happens. ☑

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MCC US Peace and Justice
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and soul—a gift
for all seasons!*

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Advent Poem

*For the Ordination of Minister Addie Banks
Submitted in Love by Afrikana Madonna
June 18, 2011*

*I commend unto you, Addie,
a woman who walks by faith,
who hearkens to the word of God,
whose life is saved by Grace.*

*This day a celebration
for all good works she's done,
for the harvest is ripe with labor,
for the countless souls she has won,
for the effectual fervent prayers,
for the ministering to those in need.*

*We salute this woman of God,
for her labor and good deeds.
For knowing when to abase, abound,
for a meek and humble spirit,
for being a vessel used, empowered
by God's word as she hears it.*

*A woman with a vision
to build walls torn down by sin,
for offering her life in service,
ushering the spirit of love within.*

*Now consider with me Mary's life
The mother of our Lord and Savior
The challenges she had to face
with humility and sound behavior.*

*To heed the unction of God's word
as unto her was spoken,
In the face of fear and doubt
to stand on promises, unbroken.*

*Consider with me, Hagar
Cast out, forsaken, no place to dwell,
wandering through a wilderness
yet God opened her eyes to a well.*

*Ruth followed Naomi,
declared your God will be mine
Esther saved her people
Rahab, placed in the royal blood line.*

*Lydia, a seller of purple
whose heart the Lord had opened*

Addie Sanders Banks, pastor at King of Glory Tabernacle in the Bronx, is the first African American woman to be formally ordained for ministry in New York City by Mennonite Church USA.

Banks is the third woman in 100 years to be ordained for ministry in New York, following Ann Allenbach in 1911, and Arlene Pipkin in 2002. She was ordained June 18, 2011 at Riverside Church, New York City.

Advent Poem

whose household became obedient
attended to things by Paul were spoken.
The Daughters of Zelophehad
gained an inheritance through the Lord
The spirit of their testimony
was written into law

See God has used women in service
to implement His will
by which great things have happened
and His purpose has been fulfilled.

Our minister and sister
embodies these character traits.
Strength and honor are her clothing
as she watches daily at God's gates.
Minister Addie Banks stands before us,
a servant ordained by God,
endued with the fruits of the Spirit,
baptized, in-filled and blood-washed.

I commend unto you, Addie,
Our sister in the Lord,
that we continue to assist her,
in the charge of which she's called.
May we greet her with thanksgiving,
May we stand with her in love
when the storms or tides are risen
may we anchor her with the word.
May we pray and seek God's power
in all that she has need of.
May we promise to uphold her
With respect, support and love.
The Lord bless you and keep you
This day and forevermore.
The Lord make his face shine upon you
Peace over all you are purposed and called.
The Lord lift up His face to you,
keep you in perfect peace
May you prosper abundantly,
may your territory be increased
Now unto Him who is able
to keep us all from falling
Minister Addie Banks, we charge thee
go forth boldly in God's calling. 🙏



Afrikana Madonna, poetess, also known as Barbara Bethea.

Three Windows Three Women

Global sisters

*Esther Koontz, 34
North Newton, Kansas*



I met Sister Mary as she was stacking up bunk beds purchased with MCC funds. She reminded me of the story I heard Peter Dyck tell about how he and Elfrieda assessed the new quarters for the Mennonite refugees in Berlin. I was just a child, but I remember how they used mathematical calculations to estimate how many beds they could pack in by stringing wire across the room. Like Elfrieda Dyck, Sister Mary is a great pragmatist with a servant's heart. With the new beds, she was able to welcome ten new girls to the Fowler House Orphanage.

But the bunk bed scheme didn't work out as she had hoped, and Sister Mary wasn't afraid to admit it. "The girls are stacked up like animals," Sister demurred. "They have no privacy; they have no head space; this is no way to live." So she cut the beds apart and conspired to rent an additional floor above the orphanage. This involved more fund-raising and a careful study into staffing issues. As Sister's plan unfolded, she was able to add yet more girls, sometimes even before the rooms were ready.

As I watched Sister's orphanage burgeon from a group of ten girls to over thirty girls, all in the span of my three years with MCC Egypt, I sometimes felt like things were getting out of control. How could she afford to take on more girls?

Where would she find the money, the space, the necessary supervision? But Sister reminded me time and time again, "God provides." She laid the challenges out in the open, before God and before God's people, and she never neglected an opportunity to recount the stories of God's goodness.

Each time I visited Fowler House, I looked forward to my check-in with Sister after my tutoring duties were over. In her

office, she asked me about the girls' progress, she shared about her current concerns, and she told stories of resurrection living: how God was giving new lives to these girls, one day, one bed at a time. Whether by providing furniture for a girl about to be married, piano lessons for a girl with a crippled back, or French tutors for Egypt's poorest daughters, God was at work pouring out his oil of anointing on Sister Mary and her girls. Surely, her cup ran over into mine. ☑

*Rebekah Fisak, 29
Chambersburg, Pennsylvania*

I had just arrived home from a long day at the office when there was a knock at my door. As I opened the door I discovered my downstairs neighbor bearing a tray full of delicious home-made treats.

I was living and serving with the Mennonite Central Committee in Bangladesh and had unexpectedly been adopted by the two families who lived in my apartment building. During Ramadan, the Muslim month of fasting, I could expect my neighbors to deliver a daily tray of sweets and snacks just before the sun set. The hospitality of my neighbors was not limited to the Ramadan breaking of the fast. I was always welcome to spend the evening with these women as they prepared dinner and waited for their husbands to return home to eat.

Our evenings were spent chatting in fluent English or broken Bengali. We occasionally watched a Bengali show, the evening news, or a Hindi movie. If I could stay awake, I would sometimes stay for dinner which was served around midnight. In Bengali culture it was not customary for women to be outside unescorted after dark. As the lone foreigner in the city in which I lived, I'm not sure how I would have occupied myself without evenings spent with these women.

The hospitality of my neighbors made me feel like I was a part of their family. I was as comfortable in their house as I was in my own. When we were together glaring cultural differences were ignored, and my neighbors became my family. ☑



Editor's note: This column is a forum for women to share perspectives on the current timbrel theme. It introduces women spanning their 20's-30's, 40's-50's, and 60's and above. If you are interested in writing for this column, please contact editor, Patricia Burdette, at <PattyB@MennoniteWomenUSA.org>.



*Nanette Bergen, 48
Moundridge, Kansas*

No matter how much time has passed, it always feels like coming home again. I am greeted with hugs from all my sisters: “young” like me, and older ones; those with backgrounds in Russia, Uruguay, or Paraguay; those who are staunch Prussians; those who sang with me in the choir; those who worked with me leading the Jr. High Youth; some married and some single—all of them daughters of Christ.

Shortly after I graduated from college, I was blessed to spend several years of my life in Neuwied, Germany when I accepted a Mennonite Central Committee (MCC) assignment in the MCC Europe office. Of the four Mennonite churches in Neuwied, I felt most comfortable in the congregation that worked at accepting everyone, no matter what their background. They took me in without reservation, an “Ami,” and treated me as an equal. They also welcomed a young lady from India who married one of their members. When I married a young man from this congregation, I gained a mother-in-law who had been born in Russia, started her family in Paraguay and had moved back to Germany with them. I acquired a sister-in-law from Switzerland, a couple of “resettler” sisters-in-law from Russia, and a sister-in-law who had spent her formative years in Paraguay.

I grew in my Christian faith as we worked, prayed, cried, and sang together. But most of all, I felt the truth of the scripture from Galatians 3:26–28: “So in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith, for all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus” (NIV). In the end, our stories are Christ’s story and we are all united as sisters of the faith, which makes those hugs even more special. 📖

***MW USA Mission
and Vision:***

Our mission at Mennonite Women USA is to empower women and women’s groups as we nurture our life in Christ through studying the Bible, using our gifts, hearing each other, and engaging in mission and service.

Mennonite Women USA invites women across generations, cultures, and places to share and honor our stories, care for each other, and express our prophetic voice boldly as we seek to follow Christ.

Grapevine

Sommers heads Sister-Link for MW USA and MDS

Eloise Yoder, Archbold, Ohio, completed her term of service with the Mennonite Women USA (MW USA) Sister-Link wall hanging program and turned over her files of history and stories to Rebecca Sommers, Goshen, Ind., who is assuming leadership of this program.

Sommers, a delegate to the board of Mennonite Disaster Service (MDS), is familiar with the needs to which MDS responds following natural disasters. "This program has grown to be more than we imagined in the beginning. It is a much bigger gift to homeowners than what we gave ourselves credit for," she explained. "The quilted wall hangings are labors of love," said Sommers. "They are 'threads of faith and hope.'"

MW USA's Sister-Link program provides networking to build women-to-women relationships locally and globally. Sister-Link connects hands and hearts through praying, letter writing, resource sharing, and face-to-face visits. The wall hanging Sister-Link with MDS has captured the hearts and creativity of women across the church as it invites fabric artists to create wall hangings for homeowners who lost their homes during disasters such as hurricanes or tornadoes. 📷



Eloise Yoder (left) shows Rebecca Sommers some of the wall hangings she has received recently.

SISTER CARE SEMINARS

South Central and Western District, Nov. 11–12, 2011,
Hesston Mennonite Church, Hesston, Kansas

Pacific Southwest, January 13–14, 2012,
Indonesian Christian Fellowship, Northridge, California

Portland Mennonite Church (co-ed), "Member Care,"
experimental seminar using Sister Care materials for women and men
January 20–21, 2012, Portland, Oregon

Gulf States, February 17–18, 2012,
Pine Lake Camp, Meridian, Mississippi

New York, March 16–17, 2012, Rochester, New York

Eastern District and Franconia, March 23–24, 2012, eastern Pennsylvania

For information on how to register, or to schedule a Sister Care seminar in your area, contact <office@Mennonite-WomenUSA.org>.

Across the Border

God leads us into treasure with Isaiah

by *Marietta Sawatzky*

“I’m ready to quit! The lessons are too hard,” said a distressed Jennifer. With her short black hair slicked down, this Taiwanese woman spoke English quite well. Her distressed words pulled at my heart, and I made a point to speak to her at the end of our small group fellowship.

Both Jennifer and I were enrolled in a large interdenominational English Bible study of courses that followed a cycle. This year it was the book of Isaiah. Imagine a person who had hardly studied the Bible at all beginning with Isaiah, and that, in a language other than Mandarin. I empathized with her feelings since Isaiah was even difficult to understand for me, a native English-speaker.

As our small group disbanded that day, I approached Jennifer and inquired if there was another class member living close to her who could help her with the study. She knew of no one. Little did I anticipate that, in the end, I would offer to help her with the lessons. With elation, she jumped at the invitation to come to my home for a “preparatory class” one day before the weekly large group Bible study. Immediately Shirley, a recent believer, joined our conversation too and asked if she could also come.

Despite the fact that Jennifer had to ride public transportation for one-and-a-half hours to get to my home, she was not deter. In fact, on the way she stopped at a local coffee shop for an hour or more to review her completed lesson before showing up at 9 AM. I had never met such an avid Bible student.

Each Tuesday we had a lively discussion on the lesson’s material as well as questions that Jennifer raised. From Isaiah, she grasped the attributes of God: God’s love, faithfulness, hatred of sin, and forgiveness. She readily looked up other verses that

Across the Ocean

helped her understand the broader picture of God's history of salvation.

Before long, Jennifer was sharing how her life was in the process of change. Instead of being indifferent when passing a person in need, she now would stop and ask, "How may I help you?" Her angry temperament mellowed and her husband noticed a difference in her life. He wondered about the many hours she was absorbed in her Bible study, but he did not oppose her.

Encouragement came from Jennifer's two daughters studying in the United States. Both were PhD students soon to graduate from a prestigious Ivy League university. Using their scientific analytical minds, they had studied the Bible and accepted its truths while on the university campus. Her daughters encouraged Jennifer to "keep on" in her search for truth. In turn, she discussed her spiritual journey with them.

As the year progressed, several other women joined our "preparatory class." We grew together as we shared, prayed and plodded through this prophetic book.

The year ended, and I knew God's message of hope and salvation had penetrated Jennifer's heart. Yet it still is not always easy for her to declare her Christian faith. One fear remains: How can she tell her family of her new-found belief?

Jennifer knows her 84-year-old mother would be greatly distressed to know that her daughter had turned away from the traditional folk religious practices and would no longer pray to the ancestors after her mother's death. An answer to our prayers was that in an amazing way, Jennifer's husband excused her from the rituals of burning incense and paper money at his family's grave site for this year's annual Tomb Sweeping ceremony. In time, I believe that God's perfect love will cast out Jennifer's fear.

How many times Jennifer reminded me, "If you had not offered to help me, I would have quit!" Thank God for leading us together into the treasures of God's word. 📖



Jennifer Peng in Taipei, Taiwan, September, 2011, with Bible study book in hand.

Courtesy photo

Women in leadership gathering spurs further work

by *Mary C. Roth*

The ongoing conversation about Women in Leadership in the Mennonite Church took on new energy during a gathering on July 7 at the Pittsburgh Convention of Mennonite Church USA (MC USA). Following a 2009 Mennonite Women USA Strategic Planning Retreat which initiated the discussion of an apparent decline of women in leadership positions, MC USA called for further investigation of this concern. After a 2010 Women in Leadership Audit (WLA) identified a number of areas in which gains in women's leadership have eroded over the years, church leaders searched for fresh ways to bring light to these issues.

One person closely involved with these efforts, Joanna Shenk, Associate for Interchurch Relations and Communication at MC USA and the WLA coordinator, shared her concerns. "We realized that there were a number of gaps with women's involvement in higher leadership roles. In order for the church to move forward," she insisted, "we need to understand the gendered components that factor into our institutions."

In light of these findings, Beth Martin Birky, Professor of English and Women's Studies at Goshen College, Goshen, Ind., and Janie Beck Kreider, current student at Associated Mennonite Biblical Seminary, joined forces with Shenk to plan a Women in Leadership gathering at Pittsburgh framed around the theme "Circles of Solidarity."

Following opening remarks by Elizabeth Soto Albrecht, moderator elect of MC USA, more than sixty attendees divided into eight different discussion groups according to topics of interest. Topics included Women's Leadership and Labels, Women and Worship, Women in Mennonite Media, Women and Mennonite Education, Women and Bicultural Leadership, and Intergenerational Mentoring for Women Leaders.

Martin Birky described these "circles of solidarity" as a way to offer women meaningful, challenging, and supportive networks of resources. "In some ways, it felt like a return to early consciousness raising," Martin Birky said. "It was immedi-


ately clear that these issues are relevant to Mennonite women and their sense of identity in the church. My group barely got past the first question!"

In the past number of years, women have typically been absent from higher institutional positions such as Agency Directors, Board Chairs, or Governance Councils. Shenk, Martin Birky, and Beck Kreider chose topics of discussion that addressed women's leadership roles at the institutional as well as the congregational level, encouraging involvement in both settings.

"It was wonderful to witness so much energy and passion around these issues," Martin Birky said. "My hope is that these conversations will continue to happen all over the country, not just at larger church events like Pittsburgh, but in a range of settings, weaving between generations."

In light of the continued work of the Women in Leadership Audit, the Women in Leadership gathering in Pittsburgh, and based on interest from women across the country, Shenk is forming a volunteer taskforce. This taskforce will take the lead on projects that have been suggested for the WLA.

The Women in Leadership Taskforce (WLT) will be made up of women who vary in age, location, ethnicity and occupation, each with a commitment to empowering women within Mennonite Church USA congregations and organizations.

The WLT will also work in collaboration with Mennonite Women USA. "As Mennonite Women USA works primarily to empower women in Mennonite congregations, the WLT works primarily with women leaders. Both types of work are deeply important!" observes Shenk. 



Beth Martin Birky



Joanna Shenk

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Basking and believing

by Heidi Martin

I am one of those readers who does not visit the library for my next page-turner. Instead, I schedule a visit with a friend with the intention of perusing her bookshelves. In fact, this is how I discovered all three of my recent readings which, coincidentally, fit well with the theme of this issue of *timbrel*.

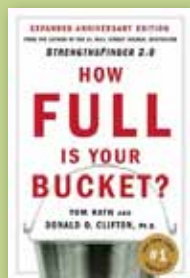
In the last issue of *timbrel* I wrote about *At Powerline & Diamond Hill: Unexpected Intersections of Life and Work*. I often return to Lee Snyder's musings as the first woman president of Bluffton University because certain passages keep resurfacing in my thoughts.

Tom Rath and Donald O. Clifton, PhD are the authors of the #1 *New York Times* bestselling book *How Full Is Your Bucket: Positive Strategies for Work and Life*. This short, easy read is full of stories and research that prove positive interactions increase health, productivity, and longevity. The concept is simple: each human has a bucket and we can use our words and actions to fill up buckets or empty them.

The Help, by Kathryn Stockett, has graced *The New York Times* bestseller list for months; the story recently hit the big screen. It is easy to fall in love with best friends Aibileen and Minny, two women doing their best to make a living as maids in the white community of Jackson, Mississippi in the early 1960's. The story takes a turn when these courageous women agree to share the truth about the people they work for with Eugenia "Skeeter" Phelan—a white woman who is a writer.

In reality, I am most likely not going to become the president of a university, or the author of a *New York Times* bestseller, or take action in a way that will completely reverse the cruel injustices in my hometown. But I can join our global sisters in doing something for this world and the people in it. So I'm practicing the leadership characteristics described in these books.

I dare to ask questions. Big questions, small questions, significant, and insignificant. I dare to ask because of this passage from Snyder's book which I cannot help but come back to: "[My father-in-law] demonstrated unswerving loyalty to the Mennonite church with its set of rules and regulations. He was strict. He was also stubborn, his son would say. One day in a conversation



about some finer point of church doctrine and his own beliefs, he asked, ‘What if I am wrong?’ Suddenly the world seemed a finer and more compassionate place” (75).

I ask because I do not know. Asking enables growth. I ask because asking tells others that I know I am not always right. Asking develops humility. I ask because I desire new ideas. Asking inspires me. I ask because I want to know what others think and feel and believe. Asking gives me compassion.

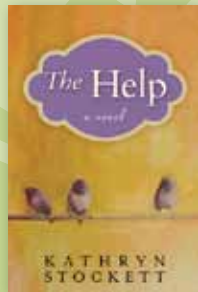
I fill buckets. Our daily lives are filled with interactions. We interact with others while getting groceries, attending school events, going to the office, driving, and so forth. These interactions are seldom neutral experiences. More often, they are either positive or negative. As these interactions add up all day long, they affect us in either positive or negative ways. Our buckets fill up or empty.

We each have the power to influence these interactions for better or worse. I am choosing—though sometimes against my instinct—to interact positively. This gives honor and strength and joy to another, and it refreshes my spirit as well.

I act with courage. In *The Help* when Skeeter first approaches Aibileen, asking her to help write a book about working for white families, Aibileen answers with a fierce, “No!” She would not risk her job, home, or life. But God changed her mind during church one Sunday morning, and Aibileen slowly revealed the truth about working for the white community. She feared and trembled when talking to Skeeter, as did Minny and all the other women who shared, but fearful Aibileen told the truth with courage.

I am not brave. Like others, I worry and stress and let my fears get the best of me. But I am determined that these apprehensions will not keep me from doing what is right. So I face those fearful moments with anxiety, with trepidation, and with courage.

As this is my last article for *timbrel*, I want to thank you for your faithful readership of this small but mighty magazine. I leave you with the powerful truths that Aibileen whispered to her three-year-old charge when the little girl woke each morning: “You is kind. You is smart. You is important.” Think on these words. Bask in them. Believe them. Act upon them. And, Sisters, watch the world change because of them and because of you. 📖



Stirrings

Response to Sister Question:



Gloria Lehman

Editor's note: Each issue, we print responses to our Sister Question. The question for **Nov.–Dec.** was: **How do our global sisters enrich our own lives as well as enrich the life of the church?**

Gloria Lehman, Singers Glen, Va. responded: I'm thankful for the privilege of visiting church sisters in the Caribbean region several times a year. Talking with them in their settings is heart-warming, and sometimes heart-rending. Babe, a woman in Trinidad, shares about interacting with Muslim neighbors while demonstrating making roti or pelau; the light of Christ shines through her acts of kindness. Liza, also in Trinidad, is a lay leader in her congregation and a gifted preacher. I am enriched as I observe their consistent Christian witness.

The women in Jamaica impact me with their enduring patience. Janet, a trained counselor, meets young adults and encourages them to use their gifts in outreach. Her spiritual depth inspires me. Lydia, a diminutive woman in physical stature, has a strong spirit. She enters slum areas with confidence, taking food to hungry families and inviting the children to activities at the church. Even though she has challenges of her own, she consistently serves the needs of others.

When I may think that my life is too demanding or too difficult, I reflect on these sisters and remember that I'm enormously blessed. ☑

Cup of Water

Whoever gives even a cup of cold water to one of these little ones in the name of a disciple—truly I tell you, none of these will lose their reward (Matthew 10:42).

Each year MW USA awards scholarships to international women for church leadership training through our International Women's Fund (IWF). The story on page 4 about Alina Itucama represents one of many women receiving leadership training. Elizabeth Soto Albrecht, Sandra Campos, and Rebecca Osiro represent a few of the many women who are serving the broader church thanks to the church leadership training they received with the help of MW USA's IWF (see story p. 4–6 in this issue and the story in *timbrel* January/February 2009, p. 4–6).

Your gifts are needed to fund these scholarships. You may designate gifts for "IWF" to help support women receiving training for church leadership. Send your check to MW USA, 718 N. Main St., Newton, KS 67114-0347. See our website <www.mennonitewomenusa.org> for more information. ☑

ON THE ROAD WITH RUTH AND RHODA

A great role model

by Rhoda Keener

This column features two of our Lydia Circle donors. Thanks to all who make MW USA's ministry possible through your gifts of prayer, time, and finances. —Rhoda Keener



I first learned to know Phyllis Baumgartner through the knitted scarves she gave to her daughter, Barbra Gant. While planning a Sister Care seminar two years ago, Barb asked for prayer for her mother who was very ill. She said, "I plan to wear one of Mom's scarves every day until she's well." Six months later, Barb arrived at the Sister Care seminar wearing a scarf. "Mom is fine now, but I wanted you to see the scarf," she explained.

Recently I visited with Phyllis and Barb in Berne, Indiana. I also knew Phyllis' daughter Joyce Hall and daughter-in-law Omie Baumgartner through MW USA. I asked Phyllis to share how her faith journey connected her to women's needs and ministry in the church.

"Women in Mission was one of the ways I experienced the larger church," she said. Other leadership avenues emerged when Phyllis served as one of the first women on the Menonite Biblical Seminary board and on the Central District Conference board.

The conversation circled back to God's healing power. Phyllis remembered, "When I was 13, I was near death and prayer healed me. I was given to God and my life was spared. I felt I needed to follow the call of God, whatever that was."

She continued, "It's not what you do; it's how you do it, and how you reach out to others that matters."

Barb added, even as her scarf gave testimony to her words, "Mom gave us a great role model. We didn't have a lot of role models of women in leadership. She showed us what was possible for a woman to do." 📷



Barb Gant, wearing a "prayer scarf" and Phyllis Baumgartner

Ruth Lapp Gueng-erich (left) and Rhoda Keener are co-executive directors of Menonite Women USA.

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MW USA's Sister Care Manual Now Available in Spanish Translation

Wanda Gonzalez Coleman (pictured left in photo) has completed the in-context translation of Mennonite Women USA's Sister Care manual. It is now available for use in Spanish.



Elizabeth Soto Albrecht served as a consultant and Milka Rindzinsky served as the proofreader for this translation.

Gonzalez Coleman is pictured with Linda Gehman Peachey, Mennonite Central Committee's Women's Concerns office, at a Sister Care seminar in Franklin conference. For the upcoming Sister Care seminars in English see page 15 in this issue of *timbrel*. 

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