

# Across the Border

## Unique Sister-Link and virtual roundtable

by Sylvia Shirk

*timbrel connects today's Mennonite women in all our diversity by sharing our stories and perspectives. Through our conversations with each other, we seek to walk more closely with God and to show greater love for self and neighbors near and far.*

*The perspectives expressed in this publication do not necessarily represent the views of MW USA, timbrel, or the board of MW USA.*

Theologian Malinda Berry valued the partnership between North American and African women theologians, the Sister-Link, a program of Mennonite Women USA, as a way to live out her identity as a global Christian (for more information about other Sister-Link projects see <[www.mennonitewomenusa.org/Ministries/Pages/Sister-Link.aspx](http://www.mennonitewomenusa.org/Ministries/Pages/Sister-Link.aspx)>). "It also provides moments of transcendence, and helps relativize some of the problems I work with, with my students." She saw powerful potential in the partnership. "We could have conversations that disrupt colonial patterns!" said Malinda.

Professor Mary Schertz described her participation in the Sister-Link with Kenyan theologian-pastor Rebecca Osiro as "a reparations ethos." "I feel blessed to have this education, to be in a place where I can do theological reflection and teaching. It's very clear to me that I have opportunities women in Africa have not had. In some ways this is a way to share the blessing, to say, 'I'm privileged and I know it,' and to care about other women in other settings having opportunity to teach, reflect theologically, to express, to write theologically," Mary reflected. "It has been life-giving in so many ways."

Malinda, Mary, and six other US, American, and Canadian Mennonite women seated at an imagined round table were discussing this unique Sister-Link, sponsored by Mennonite Women USA. The partnership experience had been difficult, the obstacles formidable. But the rewards of the partnership deepened their understanding of their sisters' reality and profoundly inspired their faith.

From 2005 to 2009, the North American women each pledged to pray for an African sister and to reach out to build friendship with her across geographic distance and cultural difference. The eight African participants were the leaders of African Anabaptist Women Theologians (AAWT), a continental network of women from Mennonite World Conference churches which formed in 2002, to promote women's ministry and theological training. The AAWT group

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had invited international partners to support them.

The North American women around the table were African American and white; they were pastors, Bible and theology teachers, and leaders in denominational women's advocacy.

All of the North American women noted the obstacles to good partnerships between themselves and their African sisters. They reflected critically on past partnership models using the writings of AAWT leader Swana Sidonie of Congo, and Botswana theologian Musa W. Dube. Round table participant Rhoda Keener, Executive Director of MW USA and coordinator of the Sister-Link, described the challenge she faced in the partnership as a North American white woman. "Our wealth and white skin feel like blocks," she said. Linda Gehman Peachey participated in raising scholarship funds for AAWT women studying theology. "We can't get away from colonialism," she lamented. "The fact that we in the U.S. and Canada are providing funds is one dynamic in the partnership. But the decision about who gets the funding is made in Africa, which is one way to address some of the power dynamics."

Liberating interdependence in the Sister-Link, said Malinda Berry, "offers each other the encouragement that women are listened to, our concerns taken seriously. Everyone is being re-oriented to the way things should be." Nina Lanctot described liberating interdependence as "being more aware of our interconnectedness in a way that moves toward the path of life, rather than the path of death."

Several women around the table named justice within the North American church as a stepping stone to liberating international friendships. Regina Shands Stoltzfus has devoted much of her career to anti-oppression work in the Mennonite Church USA. "White women in the United States and Canada who do partnership with women of color in other countries need to also be partnering with women of color in the US," she said. Michelle Armster acknowledged the difficulty North Americans face. True partnership with African sisters, she said, would mean "owning the power and privilege and then being willing to give it up...and believing that by giving it up one is richer; not only the relationships with the (African) sisters, but also the relationships with the Lord would be richer." Amidst the challenge of managing their privilege, participants around the table found true riches in the Sister-Link. 