

January 2019

Being part of what God is doing in Latin America

In the last two years, three members of Central District Conference congregations have answered calls to serve in Latin America with Mennonite Mission Network. Deb Byler, member of Hively Avenue Mennonite Church in Elkhart, Ind., is in Guatemala, and Eric and Kelly Frey Martin, members of Silverwood Mennonite Church in Goshen, Ind., are in Colombia. They share here about the people with whom they work and the ways they see God at work in these contexts.

Other CDC members who serve with Mennonite Mission Network are listed on page 6.

Deb Byler: Empowering Kekchi women

I am blessed to be working with the women leaders of the Kekchi Mennonite Church here in Guatemala. I have had a year to get to know the women and learn what they are doing in their churches and communities. I had been here before, working with Kekchi women from 1984 to 1997, so the language and culture are not new to me. But much has changed since I was here last.

Though there are still some restrictions on what women can do, in general there is

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Deb Byler (left) and other women leaving a women's meeting in a home in Oquebha, Guatemala.

Deb Byler: Empowering Kekchi women (continued)

much more freedom and encouragement for them to use their gifts in their church and community than there was in the 1980s and 1990s. Many of the 140 Kekchi Mennonite churches have an active women's group that meets to pray, worship God, study the Bible and share together. They also take time throughout the week to visit the sick, those who are in need, widows and anyone who asks for a visit, including nonbelievers. Some have come to know Jesus through the love these women have shown them.

My work involves accompanying the leaders and giving studies, along with a Kekchi woman, in each of nine different regions of the church. In the studies I encourage the women to study the Bible in small groups to see what they can learn. Then each small group shares with the others. In this way I hope to empower more women to teach. The two women who share the teaching responsibilities with me are Julia Xol and Maria Chub.

Julia grew up in a non-Christian home. Her father valued his sons and sent them to school. But he did not send Julia and her sisters to school. However, Julia had a strong desire to study, so when she was in her teens she went to school on her own after her work was done. She completed sixth grade and was offered a scholarship to study for three years at the next level. When she asked her parents about

studying more, her father asked her if she thought she was a man. He said she didn't need to study more because her work would be in the kitchen. She was very disappointed that she could not continue studying. Julia still feels the pain of not being loved and valued by her father because she was a girl.

When Julia married, she and her husband were not believers. Her husband drank heavily and she considered leaving him. But someone shared the gospel with them and they became Christians. They joined a Mennonite church and her husband began to serve alongside the pastor in the church. When Julia's oldest child (a girl) was fifteen, Julia was freed to begin travelling to different churches to encourage the women in the church to form women's groups. She travelled frequently and continues in this role today. Her marriage improved greatly since her husband quit drinking. Both Julia and her husband are church leaders today.

Maria grew up in a Christian home. Her father was a pastor in the local Mennonite church. When Maria was in her early teens, her father encouraged her to accompany her mother when she visited people and to begin to lead singing. Today Maria is a leader in one of the regions. She is a gifted preacher, being one of the most dynamic preachers among the Kekchi that I have heard. Maria is one of three Kekchi women who is studying in the second level of the Bible Institute.

Maria and her husband have not been able to have children. Maria, who is in her mid-30s, feels pain about that and suffers the ridicule of some of her neighbors. However, she recognizes that because she does not have children she is free to travel and encourage women in the churches. The women value the counsel that Maria gives them and they invite her to speak in their women's groups and churches.

Maria suffers for being different in her community. People say that because she does not have children she must be a man. They harass her about travelling so much. In the fall of 2017 someone broke into Maria's home and cut up all of her blouses and skirts. She endures



Deb Byler and Petrona Caz work in Deb's home on a series of studies for the Kekchi women.

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Deb Byler: Empowering Kekchi women (continued)

a lot, but she finds joy in the ministry that God has given her.

It is because of women like these that I find joy in the work I am doing. I am challenged by their dedication to walking long distances

in the rain and mud or in the hot sun. I feel blessed by God to be able to be a part of what God is doing among the women here. May we in North America be as dedicated to serving God sacrificially as these Kekchi women are. 🙏

Eric and Kelly Frey Martin: Building Anabaptist leaders among youth

In late 2016, the government of Colombia signed a peace accord with the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) that signaled an end to more than 60 years of armed conflict in Colombia. While this agreement has offered a lot of hope to the Colombian people that peace is within reach, it also offers significant challenges. There is still plenty of work to be done between the government and other armed guerilla and paramilitary groups, and it is still to be seen if the current peace agreement with the FARC will be successful in creating a lasting and just peace.

It is within this context that we find ourselves working alongside the Mennonite Church here in Colombia through Mennonite Mission Network. The main work that we are involved in is youth and young adult ministry within the Mennonite church (here youth are considered to be anywhere from ages 13 to 30). Our work is to help empower leaders and provide opportunities for them to grow in their understanding of Jesus. We view our work as part of the

church's peace witness as we recognize that this generation of youth and young adults will be integral in creating a lasting peace within Colombia. While the Mennonite church in Colombia is relatively small, they have had a big voice in the past when it comes to speaking out against violence, injustice and war.

In our year and half so far of working alongside the Mennonite Church in Colombia, we have been fortunate to see a number of initiatives involving youth take off and we are excited about many more possibilities. We spend a lot of time traveling to the different regions where there are Mennonite churches and hosting workshops to motivate the spiritual lives of youth as well as challenge them to follow Jesus' example as seen in the gospels. Our most recent workshop focused on how we treat the outsider—a particularly pertinent topic as Colombia has seen more than one million Venezuelans enter through its border over the last year, fleeing the deteriorating situation in that country.



Kelly Frey Martin (center) participates with youth in a workshop in which they talked about discrimination.

One of the most exciting things that we are involved in right now is the partnerships we are creating with other Mennonite organizations to provide opportunities for youth. This past year we have formed a partnership with the Colombian Mennonite Biblical Seminary to offer a program specifically for youth. The program consists of six courses offered over a year and a half, focused on building Anabaptist church leaders. We are currently in the middle of our second course and have had more than 30 students signed up for


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Eric and Kelly Frey Martin: Building Anabaptist leaders among youth (continued)

each of our first two courses. It is exciting to us to be able to hear youth articulate their growing faith. Here is an example taken from a student’s response to a question on an assignment from our first course about why they would consider themselves an Anabaptist Mennonite:

Because I love our connection with God through our service to the community. Because I love that we all build a church together. Because we try to create spaces guided by fraternity and love towards the other, places where we can be different, peaceful, loving, and just. Because we do not settle for injustice and we get up to work for economic and social equality through peaceful movements. Because we accept the one who is different with love, because we revolutionize with our acts of love even in a violent context. Because we take action with our service and not only simple theoretical guidelines.”
- Andrea Ricardo Castro Serrano

While we are involved in other projects at the moment that we are excited about, the highlight of our year will certainly be the national gathering of youth that will happen at the

beginning of January. This year we expect to have more than 110 youth gather at a camp for a long weekend of worship, learning and fun. This year’s theme will be “El Reino al Reves” (The upside-down kingdom) where we will be looking at Jesus’ teachings from the Sermon on The Mount in Matthew and the alternative vision that Jesus offers for the world.
We have been very fortunate to be part of what God is doing here in Colombia. While the steps that the government has taken in the past few years do provide hope for a more peaceful future, we are filled with even greater hope as we work alongside the youth and young adults here in Colombia as we work together to live into Jesus’ alternative vision. 



Eric Frey Martin (right) leads team-building games with the youth.

Financial report

December 31, 2018

Year-to-date contributed support	\$127,527
Year-to-date plan	\$107,000
Difference between giving and plan . . .	+\$20,527
Year-to-date expenses	\$110,686
Year-to-date plan	\$117,254
Difference between expenses and plan	-\$6,568

Year-end congregational giving has resulted in a strong financial position for Central District halfway through the 2018-2019 financial year. Expenses continue to be comfortably within budget.

Report provided by Tim Lind, conference treasurer

Doug's Mug: Thick darkness

by Doug Luginbill, Conference Minister

There's a thick darkness in my mug. I'm not certain what it is or how it will taste. But I'm certain it is in my mug for a reason.

I've been reading through Exodus recently. It's all drama and miracle for the first 19 chapters as Moses is drawn out of the river,



is convicted of YHWH's call, leads the alien Israelite's from Pharaoh's grasp and heads into the wilderness where God provides and protects. Then in Chapter 20 you hit the law. The Ten Commandments seem clear enough but then you begin to swim

through a sea of laws regarding goring oxen, selling slaves, tabernacle construction and a multitude of obscure regulations that leave you scratching your head.

I was struck by a phrase that had escaped me before. Exodus 20 begins with the giving of the Ten Commandments upon the smoking, thundering, trumpeting mountain while the people stood trembling at a distance. Then verse 21 states, "Then the people stood at a distance while Moses drew near to the thick darkness where God was."

I confess that I'm more comfortable being drawn to the light, like the three sages drawn to Bethlehem by the star. We are "city on the hill" people and followers of the "light of the world." We like clarity and certainty in our mugs and in our lives. But Moses drew near to the thick darkness where God was.

What does it mean to be drawn to the thick darkness? Our theme for our Annual Meeting June 20-22 in Milwaukee is "Come Walk with Us ... To God Knows Where." As we say "yes" to God, we must confess that there is some uncertainty as to where the journey will lead. There is a certain darkness, mystery, and shadowy unknowing that awaits us "followers of Christ." Yet the darkness is not to be feared. Verse one of the hymn, "Joyful is the dark" (#233 in *Hymnal; A Worship Book*) confesses,

"Joyful is the dark, holy, hidden God, rolling cloud of night beyond all naming, majesty in darkness, energy of love, Word-in-flesh, the mystery proclaiming."

Fear of the dark, the unknown, the stranger, the edges, the outsider is a powerful force that causes us to build walls, pad our retirement accounts, purchase guns, chain wild dogmas and quench God's fiery Spirit. It's no wonder that the angels' first words are typically, "Do not fear!" We must get past the fear to hear the Good News.

Deb Byler said "yes" to God and found herself called to serve in Guatemala. (See pages 1-3) Eric and Kelly Frey Martin said "yes" to God and are serving in Colombia (See pages 3-4)

Of course we need not travel to far-off lands to say "yes" to God. Exodus 22:21-23 states, "You shall not wrong or oppress a resident alien, for you were aliens in the land of Egypt. You shall not abuse any widow or orphan. If you do abuse them, when they cry out to me, I will surely heed their cry." The cries of many today are rising up to God. Are we near enough to taste their tears?

The final verse of "Joyful is the dark" proclaims, "Joyful is the dark depth of love divine, roaring, looming thundercloud of glory, holy, haunting beauty, living, loving God. Hallelujah! Sing and tell the story!"

I'd like to think I can lift my mug and drink the thick darkness with joy. ☺

Florida congregation plans gala

Covenant Mennonite Fellowship, Sarasota, Fla., will host an evening Gala on Saturday, Jan. 26. Attendees will enjoy a full dinner and a time of fun and fellowship.

The Covenant Gala has become a tradition anticipated by members as a time of fun and fellowship each year. After a brief hiatus, the church's leadership decided to bring back the Gala this year as the faith community works to raise funds for permanent meeting space.

For more information or to donate if you are unable to attend the Gala, contact the church at covenantmennonite@gmail.com. ☺

CDC Christian mission workers serving with Mission Network

This issue features three CDC members who have begun international Christian mission assignments with Mennonite Mission Network in the last two years. Other CDC mission workers serving with the Mission Network are:

- **Michelle Moyer-Litwiller** and **Rudy Moyer-Litwiller** (First Mennonite Church of Champaign-Urbana), unit leaders for the Albuquerque, N.M., Service Adventure unit.
- **Hannah Thill**, (Paoli Mennonite Church), Mennonite Voluntary Service (MVS) in Alamosa, Colo.
- **Hanna Hochstetler**, (Silverwood Mennonite Church), MVS, Kansas City, Kan.
- **Jonatan Moser**, (First Mennonite Church, Bluffton, Ohio), MVS, Alamosa, Colo.
- **Irena Khari**, (Grace Mennonite Church, Pandora, Ohio), MVS, San Francisco.
- **Requiyah (Ricki) Johnson** (Hively Avenue Mennonite Church), Journey International, Benin.
- **Neal and Janie Blough** (Hively Avenue Mennonite Church), Paris, France. 

Isaac Villegas arrested while witnessing at ICE arrest

Isaac Villegas, pastor of Chapel Hill (N.C.) Mennonite Fellowship, was arrested on November 23, along with others as they accompanied a man who was to be deported from the U.S.

According to the news post on the website of *The Mennonite*, Samuel Oliver-Bruno was asked to report to U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services. When he arrived, he was arrested by Immigration and Customs Enforcement. Supporters gathered around the van in which he was being placed, singing and praying. Those arrested, including Villegas, were charged with failure to disperse and resisting a public officer. All were released but must appear in court on the charges.

For the full story, visit <https://themennonite.org/daily-news/mennonite-pastor-arrested-resisting-ice-arrest/> 

Regional Gatherings

January 26: CDC Central hosted by Open Table Mennonite Fellowship at Assembly Mennonite Church, 1201 S 11th St, Goshen, Indiana

February 9: CDC West hosted by Chicago Community Mennonite Church, 425 S Central Park Blvd, Chicago, Illinois

March 9: CDC East hosted by First Mennonite Church, Bluffton, Ohio

March 23: CDC South hosted by Berea Mennonite Church, 1088 Bouldercrest Dr SE, Atlanta, Georgia

Everyone is invited to attend one or more of the Regional Gatherings! These are not decision-making delegate meetings but gatherings for worship and getting to know one another. Each begins at 10 am and concludes at 3 pm.

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