

# Mission Connections



A special issue of *Connections* focusing on the ministries of Virginia Mennonite Missions

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## The unfinished task

By WILLARD & EVA EBERLY  
VMM workers in Italy

“I’ve never heard of evangelicals before. What do they believe?” asked a university student studying English in Centro Koinonia’s “after-school” program. This student’s lack of knowledge surprised us since he comes from a cultured, educated family, his father a surgeon at Bari’s university hospital! It’s a reminder that Italy remains an “under-reached” nation! Consider with us some realities of the Italian setting:

- Bible-believing Christians in Italy were persecuted for 800 years. Italy never experienced reformation or major spiritual awakening as did northern Europe.
- The Bible was a forbidden book until recent years, but the mentality prevails that only clergy can understand and interpret it.
- Catholic statistics reveal that only 10% attend church, although most Italians have been baptized as infants and are Catholic in culture, indicative of secularism and post-modern mood that permeates much of Europe.



Willard & Eva Eberly enjoy fellowship with former *tranSenders*, Dino and Mara Colonna.



Willard & Eva Eberly, Fiorella Greco, Chris Riddle, Giovanni Greco and Melody Riddle share their visions for church expansion in Italy. Photos courtesy of authors

- The evangelical (“believers’ church”) movement still barely counts 1% of Italy’s population, of which Anabaptist/Mennonite is a tiny fraction.
- Only 1,500 of Italy’s 33,500 communities have an established evangelical witness.
- This witness is weak and divided. New churches often begin through splits rather than strategic church planting.
- Bari, a city of 500,000, has about 10-12 believers’ churches.
- Here, Islam is second only to Catholicism.
- Missionary attrition is 80-90% (meaning those not returning for a second term).
- A secular poll shows to whom Italians pray most frequently: Father Pius has first place, Mary is second, Jesus is third.
- Materialism, mysticism, spiritism and occultism oppress and darken the Italian mind.
- Leadership at all levels of society is in perpetual crisis. Even in the believers’ church movement there’s a notable dearth of mature, godly leaders.
- According to interdenominational experience, a minimum of 15 years is required to plant a believers’ church from 0 to national leadership.

Faith sees beyond this gloomy picture and envisions what God wants to do in this great nation! Although those of us serving long-term with VMM face the constant challenge of overcoming spiritual barriers and strongholds, the persistent hope of establishing viable, Christ-centered churches with Italian leadership propels us forward.

Little by little God is transforming this picture. A movement toward biblical faith is stirring among nuns and priests. The ordination of mature leaders in the Italian Mennonite Church this year encourages us.

In answer to much prayer, God added Giovanni & Fiorella Greco (Italian evangelist/church planters) to our missionary team in south/central Italy. The two Italian couples previously serving with *tranSend*, demonstrate continued growth and commitment. Others are being trained while collaborating alongside recognized leaders.

May these faithful leaders represent a growing army that the Spirit is raising up to continue the unfinished task of reaching Italy for Jesus Christ.

# Winds of the Spirit



**Loren Horst**  
President of VMM

The Spirit blows at will we are told. We do not fully know its direction nor can we ever adequately predict its affect. We can, however, see some of the results.

About 100 years ago, the Spirit blew Virginia Mennonite Conference westward into the highlands of Virginia and West Virginia. Later this same Spirit moved among the colony of Denbigh prompting witness in the neighboring cities. North Carolina, Kentucky,

Washington DC, Florida, Ohio, and Maryland would all become locations, at one time or another, where the Spirit moved Virginia Conference.

Then the Spirit blew even further. It always was blowing elsewhere, but eventually Virginia Conference got caught up in this movement of God's Spirit: in Italy, in Jamaica, in Trinidad, and today in more than 20 countries around the world. Sometimes we are left breathless by this Spirit! Where next? We'll pay attention.

A place to pay special attention is here in our own North America. We are told that regular church attendance, as one measure of spiritual fervor, is at a low point of 18%. I don't celebrate that fact even as I recognize that one single statistic is an inadequate measure of God's Spirit. Still, North America is resembling more and more the "mission field" that we once went far away to find. That may be precisely the place where one might expect the Winds of the Spirit to blow.

In April 27 persons from Virginia Conference and the Mennonite Church of Trinidad will attend Exponential, a large church planting conference in Orlando. Attended by several thousand people, leaders and observers of the Spirit who pay attention to where the Wind is blowing and try to learn better how to align our own efforts with God's. Small church and mega-church pastors and leaders reflect self critically but hopefully about the direction of the Spirit's Wind.

While not fully knowing the Spirit's direction or affect, we have been told what fruit to look for. We do well to continue to look for "love, joy, peace" as evidence of where the Spirit is blowing.

*Loren Horst*



# God is a rewarder!

By A FAMILY OF FIVE  
VMM/EMM workers in South Asia

We are amazed in the ways we see God working in our midst and around the world. Many people are speaking of these days as one of the most amazing times to be alive in all of history. We see God awakening people's desire for Him, to really know Him, not just know information about Him.

There is a lyric from a worship song that goes, "hunger is an escort into the deeper things of God." As that hunger is awakened, we realize that the more we seek Him, the more we find and the more we find, the more we love Him. God is not looking for people who are content with what they have attained so far in their knowledge of Him. He is looking for people that not only believe that He exists, but that He rewards those who seek Him.

This is our prayer not only for the Church, but also for Muslims. In Genesis 21:19, we read of God opening the eyes of Hagar (in answer to the cry of Ishmael, v. 17), and she saw a well of water...and she gave the boy a drink. In John 7:37-38, Jesus stands up and cries out, "If anyone thirsts, let him come to me and drink. Whoever believes in me, as the Scripture has said, 'Out of his heart will flow rivers of living water.'" Muslims are thirsty. We don't want to just give them a drink, but to see their eyes opened to the well, to drink deep of God's love for them, so that those rivers can begin to flow out from them as healing for their nations.

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# Miraculous turnaround experienced at Lezha Academic Center

By **JESSICA HEDRICK**

VMM *transSender* at Lezha Academic Center

*“When you walk through fire, the flames will not set you ablaze. For I am the Lord your God; the Holy one of Israel, your Savior.” Isaiah 42:3*

We have been through our share of fires this year at Lezha Academic Center. The first months of our ministry here were full of conflict. Struggles with communication and cross-cultural misunderstandings left us feeling frustrated and defeated. Each of us had days when we felt like throwing in the towel, but somehow we made it through.



Jessica Hedrick teaches Biology at Lezha Academic Center.



Students and teachers at LAC. Photos courtesy of Caleb Benner

No words can capture the miraculous turnaround we experienced at LAC. Relationships went from strained to supportive, and the future looks bright and promising. With God's help, we turned an empty building into a school and developed trust with students and their families. The loving community at LAC is unlike anything our students have previously experienced. It is amazing to see the way God's love in us is transforming the lives of the students. There have been significant changes in some of our

students, because for the first time they have teachers who care enough to invest their time, energy, and resources to help them reach their potential.

The people of Albania are starved for God, and we believe that God is going to use LAC to grow his

Kingdom here in Lezha. There are an abundance of opportunities for ministry in the context of a school. We recently started meeting with the mothers of our students monthly, for a time of fellowship, and we meet with students every other Friday in a youth group like setting. Our goal is to allow students and their parents to explore what it means to follow Christ in a safe and unthreatening context.

We don't know what the future holds for LAC, but I believe God used this year to refine and prepare us for what is coming. There will be more fires, and we will face them together, knowing that God is working through it all and that He will bring us through, just as He did in the past.

## A thirty-year round trip of mission

By **ALLEN UMBLE**

VMM worker in Lushnje, Albania

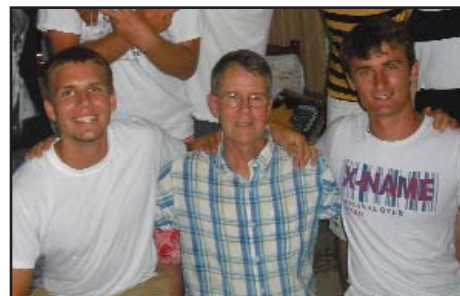
Thirty years ago this year, in the early years of Eastern Mennonite Mission's Youth Evangelism Service program, three other young adults and I loaded into a gigantic Buick and sailed from Pennsylvania to the YWAM base in Elm Springs, Arkansas, for three months of discipleship training. This was followed by a short term of service in Honduras as EMM's first YES team to that country.

That was 1982. On January 9, 2012, Jetmir Peci from Lushnje, Albania, flew to Harrisburg, Pennsylvania, where he is the first Albanian to participate in EMM's YES program. After three months of training at the Harrisburg Discipleship Center

he and two other team members plan to go to Honduras where they will be working with EMM's Matt Keiser in a mission to children who live and work in the city dump of La Ceiba.

Jetmir and I first met in Victory English School in Lushnje, Albania, where I worked part time as a volunteer English teacher after my arrival in this city in August 2008. We soon met again when Jetmir was on his work route in his free hours after school. Our friendship developed as he and his brother made visits to my home; they later began to attend home Bible studies that I direct.

From December 2010 to July 2011, a YES team lived and served in the Kemishtaj village area of Lushnje. They became good friends with Jetmir who was



Allen Umble (center) with Samuel Jablonski (YES team) and Jetmir Peci (right). Jetmir is participating in EMM's Youth Evangelism Service (YES) program. Courtesy of author.

inspired by their spiritual life and their witness for Christ. Out of Jetmir's own desire to know God more and to serve Him, he applied to EMM where he was accepted into their YES program.

Thirty years and the circle has come around complete. Only God knows what else will come around full circle in the next thirty years out of the obedience to the call of Jesus by His followers.



Norma Teles with the children at the Joshua Center.  
Courtesy of author

By **NORMA TELES**  
VMM/JMMI worker in Lezhe, Albania

It has been a cold winter here in Lezhe, but we have been blessed in a lot of ways. The work at Joshua Center is going well. I can see God working in a very special way in the lives of the little ones. In spite of the cold, attendance was very good during those three months of winter.

After one prayer his father asked, "Why thank God when I bought the food?" Elijon answered, "It was God who created everything."

Rose came to our church last November along with her sister. They were looking for a congregation. In

## Mission encouragements at the Joshua Center

The staff at the Center love to hear the parents talk about how their children are behaving at home. Elijon gives thanks for the food every time he

January Rose and I started to meet each Tuesday after she leaves work. She asked for a Bible and I suggested that we meet for coffee to talk about what she was reading. It has been very encouraging to see how much she has taken it seriously. In the first weeks she read all of the Gospels and had several questions. She is often talking about the feeling that she is part of a body, a spiritual family. One of her prayers is often on my mind. She is praying that she will never lose the sense of unity that she feels at church and that God would give her the strength to share it with others.

As much as God loves mission, some people do not. There are a whole host of obstacles that pop up and entangle themselves around our ankles as we minister to Albania's people.

## Lots of doors for ministry open through public schools

By **CHRISTOPHER L. RIDDLE**  
VMM worker in Italy

When we put our boys into the public schools four years ago, we had some doubts and fears about what would happen. We heard some pretty bad stories about the schools and in our four years we have seen some episodes that remind us, "These are not American schools!"

The schools that our boys attend have become major areas of ministry for us. In the beginning, we were more of a curiosity and people talked to us but the conversations were shallow. As people learned that we were evangelicals, some moved away and closed doors because we were "different."

Over the years though, there has been a shift. We have purposefully entered into the schools as volunteers and made it a practice to greet everyone with a smile. We wanted to show that being "different" was a good thing if it meant that you were following Christ's instructions. This "different" way of doing things has made an impact and we are seeing doors open.

We help teach English in the middle school. This has been an open door to talk to and be a healthy example to youth that have few good adult role models to follow. We strive to be Christ-like to every parent that we meet and talk with. Many accept us being "different" now. They are willing to listen to what we have to say and do not look away when we talk about our faith and how it plays a part in our everyday lives.

Demonstrating the love of Christ and allowing people to see it, makes a difference where little else will. Carbonara is a tight, closed community where outsiders are not made to feel

welcome. We have been allowed to enter not because of who we are, but because of who we have within us. Christ's love is opening doors.

Chris Riddle (upper left) and Melody Riddle (upper right) with students in the Carbonara school when their three children attend.



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In this photo, David Jost is surrounded by Dini & Klementina Shahini, co-workers and students at Lezha Academic Center as they pray a blessing for him. David returned to the US at the end of January for health evaluations.

# An accidental hair appointment?

By **TERRY WITMER**  
VMM/MMN worker in Colombia

*Come and see what God has done: his awesome deeds for humankind.* Psalm 66:5

Our time in Colombia has been, from the beginning, enveloped in relationship. Defined not by what we have done as much as who we have come to know, who has put down roots in our hearts, and who we cry for in prayer. God has sewn our lives inextricably into the lives of so many people here.

Marcela\* has two children at the school where we teach English. Her daughter Celmira is in our son Luke's class, and they have become playmates this year. Marcela has become a good friend and my accidental hair dresser. I first met her a year ago, when she was leading a somewhat explosive parent meeting with aplomb and wisdom. I felt drawn to her, and wished we could get to know each other better. Several months

later she began attending the women's Bible study that I led. Again, I was impressed by her gentle spirit, wisdom, and depth of faith.

After a few months she stopped coming, and I found out later that her attendance at church and the Bible study was exacerbating conflicts with her husband in the home. We continued to embrace when I saw her at the school, and I would tell her that I was still praying for their family.

This January I was surprised to see her and Celmira in church again. We set up a time to get together to visit several days later. When I arrived, she received me with joy in her beauty salon on the second floor of her house, and asked if I wanted to get my hair cut. Unsure of her expectations, I agreed, and over the ensuing hours as she rolled out all manner of treatments for my hair, we talked freely about



Terry Witmer (center right) with the women's group at La Mesa. Courtesy of author

our faith, families, children, and dreams for the future. I realized that there was nothing accidental about my being there that morning, or getting my hair done. God was at work in Marcela's life, and he was inviting me to join Him in the process, wherever it took me.

Today I met her husband for the first time, and he now is in my prayers. God continues to work, and continues to invite us to be a part of it.

\*To respect their privacy, the names of people mentioned in this article have been changed.

# "Gracias a Dios" for God's presence and every small miracle

By **PEYTON ERB**  
VMM *transSender* in Guatemala

The past year God has placed several amazing people into my life as friends, pastors, a support system and to stretch me as a Christian in Guatemala. One of

those people is Rigoberto, the guardian of SEMILLA. He's often the first worker I see in the morning, and the last one I see in the afternoon. He is always smiling, has a greeting, or asks about whatever week-end activity I had with the group we are



Peyton Erb (left) with members of her host family in Guatemala City. Courtesy of author

hosting. He is often the last one to eat lunch or *la refa*, the one running to the front door to open the portón to let a car in, and just a real servant. Though it's technically his job to be serving in SEMILLA, he does it so well. Everyone loves him because he is so kind, smiling,

and never in a foul mood. He embodies the person I would wish to be as a servant to others.

The Guatemalan people have been God's light in my life. They have taught me to take higher value in my relationships, to stop worrying about the hour and instead focus on the present, and to be hospitable in my home, on the street, or in the bus. Their everyday speech reflects their trust and faith in God with phrases like "Dios primero" for future activities that are uncertain, "Dios le bendiga" to the neighbor you pass in the morning, and "gracias a Dios" for every small miracle during the day. I have learned to look for God's presence in my daily life more than ever before. To this I respond, thanks be to God for sending me to a new place and a new cultural context so that while I reach out to others, He is also reaching out to me through the Guatemalan people.

# Chickens, pigs, and more at Maranatha School for the Deaf

By **EVE KNEPP**  
VMM worker in Jamaica

We have been blessed to be a part of the work at Maranatha School for the Deaf and the local Mennonite Church. It's awe-inspiring to see how God works in our lives and provides for us, the school, the church, and our friends.

The chicken operation at the school is in full swing and Rodney has plans to make it bigger! Right now, there are 36 layer chickens and we are selling out of eggs. We have 27 broiler chickens that will soon be butchered and a rooster that will become a father in the next month or two.

Rodney also built a pigpen with many of the older boy students and a few adults. It needs a roof yet and then will be ready for pigs! Thankfully the chicken operation is providing for the school and soon, we are looking forward to the pigs providing as well!

Eve continues to teach math, computer, and some P.E. while Rodney continues to work with the older boys in the workshop and around the school. We are pray-



Rodney Knepp (l) with older boys from the school and local men who spent a morning patching a road. Micah Knepp is on the right, held by Keron. Courtesy of author

ing that God continues to use us in those areas.

We felt like God was calling us to start to meet with the youth in the church, so we get together with them and have had some really good discussions. We pray that God will also raise up a Jamaican leader from within the church to come alongside of us in this.

We have also felt like God has been calling us to help create positive relationships between the community and school. More people from the community are buying eggs and coming to the school to do Zumba. Rodney, the older school boys, and some of the local men spent a morning patching up one of the roads. May God continue to use us!

## God is raising up a new pastoral couple: Ramon and Kamla

By **RICHARD & MARGARET KEELER**  
Sangre Grande Mennonite Church, Trinidad

In 2006, during the first baptismal service our congregation in Sangre Grande had after we were installed as the pastoral couple, I baptized a couple who had received Jesus as their Savior and Lord.

We quickly noticed spiritual growth in Ramon & Kamla. They were humble and teachable. Before long they began participating in Friendship Bible Coffee (FBC) studies, and later became leaders of these studies, both in and out of the church building.

They have accepted additional responsibilities in the church and it has been recognized that God has His hand on them. Early in 2011 they began attending Bible School about an hour's drive from their home. They are enjoying their studies and

putting into practice what they are learning.

We have been mentoring them since 2009. We meet with them weekly to encourage them, to discuss what they learned at Bible School that week and to work through concerns that have arisen in their lives. In October 2011 Ramon was commissioned as "pastoral mentoree," and given more responsibilities in the church. Both Ramon & Kamla deeply love the Lord, the church and His people. They have the caring hearts that true pastors have, and members of the congregation are increasingly calling on them and interacting with them in this role. Later this spring Bro. Ramon will be appointed "Associate Pastor" as a further step in preparation for pastoral ministry.

We were given two primary assignments when we were commissioned as the pastoral couple at the Sangre Grande



Ramon and Kamla Goodridge. Courtesy of authors

Mennonite Church—to identify and train someone from the congregation to become the future pastor, and to give spiritual leadership to the congregation. We rejoice and thank God for calling this couple to carry on spiritual leadership in our congregation. Our mission is coming to a close and we praise God for what He has done and is doing in our congregation.

# God is good and showing the way in the midst of trials

By **NANCY MARSHALL**  
VMM/EMM worker in Belize

Kristel Cajun, 14, is deaf. She likes to sign “God Is So Good” during worship at Jesus Deaf Church. It’s this song that came to my mind as I reflected on what God had done this year.

Manuel Tosh, 21, has grown in confidence and faith, and now knows with certainty that God has called him to pastor our church. He is reading his Bible and watching the American Sign Language Bible video tapes. He is calling me with Bible verses that he finds meaningful. He’s leading the other boys to spend time together and support each other, calling each other “brothers.” God has worked some miraculous events that Manuel witnessed, which deepened his faith and sense of call. Now we are preaching



Manuel Tosh and Nancy Marshall. Courtesy of author

together in a dialogue fashion and God is giving us His guidance. God will show the way. He is so good to us!

The devil was wreaking havoc among the deaf people a year ago when one of the men courted two women at the same time. When one, (“Beth”) had a baby, there was lots of tension when we

gathered. But God brought peace and forgiveness when Beth turned her eyes to Jesus and chose to follow Him. She in turn offered forgiveness to the man and other woman. God gives us peace. He is so good to us!

A mother of one of the deaf children that I teach was reluctant to have her daughter learn to sign. Many people prayed for this situation. By December, the four-year-old was signing about 300 words. In January the mother wanted to know what she was saying and asked to learn to sign. By February, she was using her daughter’s communication book to teach the rest of the family. God answers prayer. He is so good to us!

Thank you to everyone for partnering with us as we share the Good News in Belize. God is so good!

## Medical team helps hundreds

By **HAITI MEDICAL TEAM**

When our medical team arrived in Haiti in February, we had a difficult time getting through customs with 14 suitcases of medication. Officials checked expiration dates on the medications and asked many questions about what we were doing and what documentation we had. Fortunately, we were able to get through with everything we brought.

Friday morning, we had our first clinic at Payen. We saw about 150 patients who had a variety of complaints. They had interesting ways of describing their ailments, and it was often challenging to interpret their symptoms.

Saturday morning, we traveled by truck, boat, and foot to the clinic at LaRaquint. The medication suitcases were carried by motorcycle and mule. We saw about 140 patients at this clinic; lots of children with fungal skin infections received donated anti-fungal creams.

We saw about 780 patients in five days of clinic. Sunday afternoon we traveled four hours to Gilbert to be ready for clinic Monday morning. As we neared the church in Gilbert, children came from

everywhere and ran after our truck. They were so excited to see us! After unloading our supplies and having dinner at the pastor’s home, we had an evening church service with the congregation. The church was packed with standing room only and it was a wonderful time of singing, praying, clapping, drumming, and dancing in the aisles. Pastor Mark brought the message on true forgiveness. As the church service went on, people came in carrying banana mats. We wondered if they were bringing them for us or if they were staying the night with us. After church we learned the banana mats were for us, but lots of people were sleeping over in order to be first at clinic the next morning. We all spread out on the floor in the church, our team as well as about 30 Haitians. The night involved very little



Several members of the medical team see patients in Haiti. Courtesy of authors

sleep, with the sick children coughing, people snoring, shining flashlights, slamming metal doors, children giggling, people conversing, the blowing wind storm, and a very cold night. Needless to say, we were up early and started clinic at 6:40 a.m.!

Wednesday and Thursday we had successful clinics at Delonye and Tapion. Preparing to depart, we packed medicines for next year. We had a very productive and positive week. We all feel very blessed.



# Reflections on the city of rubble: a view through a bullet hole

By **HARRY KRAUS**

VMM/AIM worker in Kenya

Words do not come easily when I think of how to describe this city.

Contrasts abound. A quiet sorrow hovers, a faint memory of a city, once great, now reduced to rubble. As we traveled from the relative safety of a car with tinted windows, my host pointed at mounds of concrete, skeletons of the past with rebar arteries bleeding from their surfaces. Her voice carries a longing of someone who has lost a love. She points. "There is the hotel where I spent my honeymoon. On that corner, the ice-cream shop. There, the cinema. People vacationed at the beach, eating in outdoor cafes with ocean breezes." She sees through a lens of memory, now clouded with the blood, dust, and destruction of decades of war. She remembers more. I see only ruin.

Gunfire punctuates every hour. "Popcorn," my host calls it. "We don't hear it. We no longer duck our heads."



The people don't beep their horns to part the unruly traffic. "They fire their guns." It is the tenor voice that accompanies the base rumble of nightly mortar fire. But the city is thriving again. Cars have returned. Fruit, bread, clothing and qat stands line the streets in front of buildings pock-marked with bullet holes.

There is a guesthouse within the guarded hospital compound. I peer

through a hole in the front door. This bullet hole provides a window to inspect my surroundings. Around a table, we talk about their loved ones. "My mother was shot through the neck while sitting on the front porch." "My brother was killed." "My husband was suspected of being an extremist, so he was shot." Justice executed immediately

at the hands of someone with a gun. No police interrogation. No court. Only a man with a weapon.

But my soul was lifted. Christ in me, the hope of glory, has sent a call even into this dark place. There is an invitation to join and work to be healers of those the war has flattened. But there is risk. Will you pray?

Photo: Ramesh Jaimani

## Love causes Roberto to do an about-face

By **CHRIS RIDDLE**

VMM worker in Italy

When we first met Roberto\*, he was a man with a bleak outlook on life and had no use for God. "How can God be good when bad things happen to good people?" "I am a good person and do good things, and if there is a God, he will let me into heaven." This is what we heard as we met with him and his family regularly for meals.

For more than three years we have met with Roberto. In the last six months there has been a noticeable change in how he responds to what we say and how we react. In all the meetings that we have had, we have never once condemned him or what he thought. We continued to eat with him and his family and show grace. During our discussions, we continually responded with Scripture to explain how we approach difficult issues. Over time he was able to not only hear our

explanations, but see how we put into practice what we believed.

His wife and daughter were in the hospital for more than a week, and Melody and I were able to care for Roberto's son so that he could go to work and visit his wife and daughter in the hospital. We fed them meals and we showed love that they did not receive from their own families. It was a turning point in his life.

When his own family had let him down in a time of need, Roberto experienced the love that a church family can give. Since this event, he has read the entire Gospel of John! We are still having lunch with them on a regular basis and we study the Bible together. Through the grace of Christ, we have seen Roberto do an about face!

\* not his real name



VMM worker Richard Keeler received the *Award for Christian Excellence* at the National Academy of Performing Arts, Port-of-Spain, Trinidad, March 11. The Trinidad & Tobago Council of Evangelical Churches in collaboration with the Full Gospel Business Men's Fellowship International Trinidad Chapter commemorated TT's 50th anniversary of independence by recognizing leaders in various Christian fields. Congratulations, Richard, from your support base in Virginia and the United States! To God be the glory!

# When waiting for God's Spirit, who knows what might result!

By **MARK SCHOENHALS**  
VMM/EMM worker in Thailand

Several years ago, I was sitting in a seminary classroom listening to Lawrence Yoder tell a story of missionaries in Indonesia who spent years learning language and culture before beginning to tell the stories of the Bible. When they did, the Spirit of God moved powerfully, the Gospel was shared effectively, and a movement to Jesus was begun. I was amazed.



Mark & Sarah Schoenhals, daughters Heidi and Hannah, and members of the Life Enrichment Church. Courtesy of author

For years, the Life Enrichment Church (LEC), has been praying and waiting for youth to have greater involvement in the life of the church. A few months ago, seemingly out of the blue, a small group of young people from the church came forward with a proposal to the church council. They wanted to serve their very rural community and bear witness to the Gospel by teaching English and Thai classes for local children on Saturdays. With the intent of service and witness, a youth group was formed, by the youth themselves! God's Spirit is moving and breathing new life. Who knows what might result!

In the same way, for the last two years, Sarah and I have been waiting. We have been learning language and culture, waiting for the time when we

can communicate well enough to begin teaching and other more concrete tasks. I have sometimes become quite discouraged, wondering what in the world I have come to Thailand for. Will I ever be able to communicate anything? Will I have anything to offer?

Recently, we have been given the opportunity to share in village gatherings and to teach a Bible study for leaders of the LEC. Although our ability to communicate is still limited, these occasions have brought us great encouragement and renewed vision. The waiting has not been in vain and God has been at work, both in the church and in us. We pray that the Holy Spirit will move powerfully through us and the church as we serve and learn together.

Waiting is difficult, and in the midst of waiting it is hard to see the blessing. But wait for God's Spirit we must, and when we do, God receives the honor and the glory.

## net·work·ing *noun*

1. a supportive system of sharing information and services among individuals and groups having a common interest

By **EMILY GINGRICH**  
VMM/EMM intern in the Czech Republic, returned to the US in March

Networking. This is the one word that can sum up what my role in the Czech Republic has been this past year. Being the first mission intern in Prague for EMM and VMM means my primary role is networking. Networking is defined as the process or practice of building up or maintaining informal relationships, especially with people whose friendship could bring advantages such as job or business opportunities. You build relationships because you can see the potential for a partnership that will further the kingdom of God. In the process, you sometimes develop deep friendships that will leave a lasting impact.

I have had the joy of working in a country that thrives off of networking. Czech Christians used networking to band together during communism. They only

went half underground, forging together across denominations to spread the Word and support each other.

I have learned the importance of a team. Networking put me in contact with other missionaries, Czech Brethren churches, international churches, schools, and organizations who share a common bond: we want Czechs to know Jesus.

The bulk of my connections formed through English camps in the summertime. For five weeks I attended different camps as an English teacher with a variety of organizations working together to share their knowledge of English and Jesus. These camps are powerful and I was



Emily Gingrich (right) with students at Family English Camp. Courtesy of author

delighted to discover that in the months to follow, those relationships continued to grow deeper.

So for those who wonder what a "pioneer" does, the answer is they are really networkers. They are the ones laying the foundation work for others to come and add onto it. And I am truly grateful for the opportunity to help lay the ground work for future EMM and VMM workers in the Czech Republic.

# APRIL 2012

## Connections

## Prayer Calendar

### Sunday

**1** May we follow Jesus daily and heartily affirm his lordship in our lives with cries of "Hosanna! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!"

**2** Today marks the one-month anniversary of the tornado that destroyed the town of West Liberty, Ky. Please pray for the West Liberty Mennonite Church members who are active in their community during this *kairos* moment.

**8** Sing with all the saints in glory, sing the resurrection song! All around the clouds are breaking, soon the storms of time shall cease; we awaken in God's likeness, knowing everlasting peace.  
*Sing the Story #92*

**9** Today the members of Jamaica Mennonite Church hold Family Fun Day for all the congregations around the island. May this time of fellowship bind them together in love and witness.

**15** Join in Days of Prayer & Action for Colombia today and tomorrow and remember those who suffer human rights abuses in this country, especially armed conflict. See back page for more information.

**16** Maranatha School opens today after a two-week break. Pray for the teachers and students as they study academic subjects and the Bible. Ask for them to have insight and motivation to learn well for the future.

**22** In Staunton, Va., Signs of Life Fellowship is in the process of developing a mission statement. Pray for them as they seek the Spirit's guidance to clarify the purpose of their ministry.

**23** Agree in prayer for the VMC participants of the church planting Exponential Conference in Orlando, Fla., that they will be energized for God's mission in their own local communities.

**29** Hundreds of graduates receive degrees today from Eastern Mennonite University. As they serve and lead around the world, ask for God's clear direction and blessing in their lives.

**30** If you have reserved your space, attend the *Celebration of God's Mission* tomorrow in the EMHS dining hall. Myron Augsburger will share about the foundations of witness through tent evangelism and the witness in Jamaica.

### Tuesday

**3** In South Asia, Michael & Ruth continue learning and make progress with the Urdu language in listening and speaking, and ask for supernatural ability as they communicate with neighbors and cousins.

**10** Pray for Grace Schrock-Hurst in Southeast Asia as she walks with community members whose homes have been demolished. Ask God to strengthen her and the families who are coping with tremendous loss.

**17** Remember in prayer today Italian evangelist/church planters, Giovanni & Fiorella Greco, for effectiveness in mentoring young home group leaders and in ministering to broken, troubled lives.

**24** In Italy, new unreached persons are hearing the Gospel in Bible study groups meeting in homes. Pray that the Spirit will use God's Word to penetrate spiritual barriers and set these people free in Christ.

### Wednesday

**4** Pray for Destin and Luke Witmer in La Mesa, Colombia, as they balance going to school in the morning and doing homework in the afternoon. Also pray for their parents, Phil & Terry, as they guide their sons.

**11** Pray for comfort for the Jamaica Mennonite Church members and the Baker family as they grieve the death of Pastor Morris Baker. See back page for more information.

**18** Rodney & Eve Knepp serving in St. Elizabeth, Jamaica, have opportunities daily to be servants of Jesus. Pray for their health and stamina as the days are filled with demands. Thank God for their service.

**25** Shawn & Laura Green with little Lucas are preparing to join the church planting team in south/central Italy. Intercede that God's favor and blessing will be released upon them as they move forward by faith.

### Thursday

**5** Participating in a love feast on this Maundy Thursday helps us to be the body of Christ with others. May we be true servants to others, following Christ's example as He washed His disciples' feet.

**12** This month, Rafael & Solange Tartari and son Paulo returned to Albania to continue serving with the church there after being on home leave in Brazil for a few months. Thank God for their availability to serve.

**19** What may this day bring for Harry Kraus as he meets human need in Kenya and the neighboring country? Ask God to guide every encounter with health and wholeness.

**26** Pray for the four *from Senegal*—Caleb, Jessica, Kaitlyn and Kristina—who teach in the Lezha Academic Center, Albania, motivating teens every day who want a good education and reaching out with a touch of Christ's love.

### Friday

**6** Take some time today to sit quietly and ponder what Jesus did for you on the cross many years ago, and yet very current today. Thank God for this priceless gift of salvation.

**13** Join in prayer for Anabaptist Missional Project's Occupy Empire Event, April 13-14 at EMS—that common ground is found in the good news of Jesus Christ and creative ways for the church to engage our broken world.

**20** Give thanks that Loren & Earlene Horst and Rich & Laurel Horst visited Trinidad last month and did training for Sunday school teachers. Pray for the growth of the Mennonite Church of Trinidad & Tobago.

**27** In the Jesus' Deaf Church in Belize, Manuel is growing in his leadership of the group, and expresses his heartfelt call to this role. Thank God for his spiritual growth and for Nancy Marshall's careful mentoring of him.

### Saturday

**7** Reflect on the persecuted church members around the world who identify closely with Christ's suffering. Pray that they will be steadfast in their faith as believers in Christ.

**14** Pray for the annual "Women in Ministry" convention in Calabria, in the "toe" of Italy this weekend. Theme: *Building a Healthy Family for Effective Ministry*. Mennonite women from Sicily and Bari attend.

**21** Richard & Margaret Keeler hold a Bible study in Sangre Grande, Trinidad on Saturdays. Ask God to bless this congregation as they learn and grow together in every way.

**28** Eastern Mennonite Seminary holds commencement today. Ask God to bless and guide the graduates as they continue to serve Him.

This month's prayer calendar is sponsored by

**Galen & Gloria Lehman**

in honor of Richard & Margaret Keeler's untiring ministries in Trinidad, serving together since 1999 and retiring in late summer 2012.

"Like newborn babies, crave pure spiritual milk, so that by it you may grow up in your salvation, now that you have tasted that the Lord is good."

1 Peter 2:2-3 (NIV)



Connections (USPS 007-205)  
 Virginia Mennonite Missions  
 Virginia Mennonite Conference  
 901 Parkwood Drive  
 Harrisonburg, VA 22802-2498

## Announcements

**Prayer & Action:** On April 15 & 16 join Christians in the US and Colombia by praying, raising awareness and taking action for peace in Colombia. This year's Days of Prayer focus on the more than five million Colombians internally displaced due to ongoing internal armed conflict and the US's support of militarization there. Check with your congregation's Peace Advocate for more details or go to [washington.mcc.org/days](http://washington.mcc.org/days).

All women are invited to the Mennonite Women of Virginia **Annual Missions Day**, May 5, 9 a.m. - 12:15 p.m., at Grace Mennonite Fellowship, 209 Lacey Spring Road, Harrisonburg. Contact Pam De Young with questions at (757) 930-0002 or [de\\_young@verizon.net](mailto:de_young@verizon.net)

"Serve and Play" weekend, May 11-13, at **Highland Retreat** is intended for families desiring quality time through play and service. Lodging and Saturday meals are reduced or free (day guests welcome). Event includes evening worship and games and Saturday work projects for all ages. Visit [www.highlandretreat](http://www.highlandretreat) to learn more. Call (540) 852-3226 to reserve lodging and meals.

Virginia Conference women of all ages! Join your sisters on a new date at a new place! Mark your calendars now for the **Mennonite Women of Virginia Fall Retreat** on Sept. 21-23. This year the fall retreat will be held in a beautiful mountain setting at the Eagle Eyrie Baptist Conference Center in Lynchburg, Va. Prepare to be blessed by our guest speakers, Rhoda Keener & Carolyn Heggen, who will help us discover that "*We are God's Beloved Daughters*" and share the principles of

"*Sister Care: Equipping Women for Caring Ministry.*" Enjoy fellowship and fun as you connect with sisters in Christ from far and near and refresh your spirit. Additional information may be found at [vmconf.org](http://vmconf.org) by clicking on "Mennonite Women VA" tab. Photos of the retreat location may be found at [www.eagleeyrie.org](http://www.eagleeyrie.org). Questions may be directed to Kathy Zehr Rhodes at (540) 843-0763. Invite a friend and watch for registration brochures in August!

**Warwick River Christian School** in Newport News, Va., will be celebrating its **70th anniversary** September 22-23. Please contact the school office for more information at (757) 877-2941 or [mnelson@warwickriver.org](mailto:mnelson@warwickriver.org)

Join us for a "**Highlights of Italy**" trip from October 31 to November 10. Visit the waterways of Venice, the Leaning Tower of Pisa, art in Florence, stunning Amalfi coastline, ancient Pompeii, historic Rome, and more. Contact Ed Bontrager at [eebontrager@comcast.net](mailto:eebontrager@comcast.net) or (540) 438-8304.



In Kingston, Jamaica, Pastor Morris Baker died on February 15, 2012, after a five-month illness. He served as pastor of the Alpine Mennonite Church, Red Hills since 1995. He was appointed president of the Jamaica Mennonite Church in March 2011, and served in various capacities in JMC prior to that time. In 2006, he and his wife, Elaine, were the JMC delegates to Virginia Mennonite Conference assembly.

Pastor Baker is remembered as a well-respected member of the community where he grew up and where he provided persons with various forms of assistance. His life of faith and prayer impacted those around him and this left an indelible impression on all who knew him.

His funeral service was held March 10 at the Good Tidings Mennonite Church, Kingston, where 600 people attended and reflected on his life, praising our Heavenly Father for this man of God.

Pastor Morris and his wife Elaine have three daughters: Jennice, April and Stephanie.

Pastor Steven Hayle assisted by Bro. Dillon Sinclair are giving leadership to the Alpine congregation. Please hold up the Baker family, the Alpine congregation and the JMC during this time of grief.