

May 2016: Not a Snowball's Chance in Hell

You'd have to be a fool to believe there's any hope left in Syria.

The five-year civil war has torn the country into bloody pieces, killing more than 400,000 people and uprooting more than half of the country's entire population—about 11 million people. More than four million people have fled the country and braved the dangerous sea and land routes to often unwelcoming destinations.* The Christian minority—about 10 percent of Syria's 18 million people at the start of the war in 2011—has been decimated and our partner church, the National Evangelical Synod of Syria and Lebanon, fears for its continued existence in the country.

It's hard to imagine things getting worse in that nation—for all Syrians, but especially for Christians. Yet over the past few years, despite the terrible suffering, I have continued to hear a call to undying hope from Syrian Presbyterians and our associates for ecumenical partnership, Elmarie and Scott Parker. In a recent blog post, Scott Parker shares an inspiring story of a Syrian pastor's welcome to Iraqi refugees that may surprise you:

“Our friend Faras is a pastor in Northern Syria, where extremists are strong. His city has been under siege for about four years. Although the Kurdish militia keeps the extremists from invading, life has been tough for Faras and his congregation.

The electrical grid was severely damaged a few years ago, so most of their electricity comes from fuel generators. Because the only thing available is cheaply made degraded fuel, air pollution has become an issue. Respiratory problems are rampant, with children and the elderly getting hit the hardest. Food is also in short supply because supply trucks are regularly hijacked by extremists. For this reason, families eat as little as possible because they never know when the next supply will arrive. . . .

Last year, Faras learned that a group of Yezidi people formed a camp in proximity to his city. Yezidis are a racial and ethnic group who live in Iraq's Nineveh province. They practice an ancient folk religion that borrows from many different religions, including Islam. Because of this, Muslim extremists (who are all about purity) have a particular hatred for the Yezidis. . . . When Faras and some elders saw the bleak conditions of the Yezidi camp, their hearts dropped. They realized that the Yezidis were in even rougher shape than they were.

So, they made some calls. Faras knew that relief money was coming from a U.S. partner. When asked where the greatest needs were, he said, "The Yezidis have no water." That relief money could have easily been poured into their own community and still be a drop in their bucket of need—but Faras' church made sure that part of the relief money went to drilling a water well for the Yezidi camp.

Faras and his people are under great pressure.

But they choose to not be victims.

They acted out of an attitude of *fullness*—not *scarcity*.^{**}

When besieged, Syrian Presbyterians set aside their own fear and suffering and dare to welcome the sojourner in their midst, it points powerfully to the God of hope:

"When the poor ones who have nothing share with strangers,
when the thirsty water gives unto us all,
when the crippled in their weakness strengthen others,
then we know that God still goes that road with us,
then we know that God still goes that road with us."

("When a Poor One," Presbyterian Hymnal, no. 407)

May the God of hope awaken us from our self-centered slumber to act out of fullness, not scarcity.

Notes

*The statistics on the Syrian civil war are from the United Nations High Commission on Refugees report, July 2015.

**Scott's regular updates and stories of Syrian, Lebanese and Iraqi Presbyterian witness can be found [here](#).

June 2016: The Rhythm of Partnership

Let it begin with me.

“You walk down a dirt path in a Haitian village and come to the edge of someone’s yard, called a *lakou*. It’s more than a yard. Much of life happens outside—washing clothes, repairing farm tools, cooking, eating. Walking directly into this space would be like barging through someone’s front door in Pittsburgh.

You call out, *Honé*, meaning “honor.” This announces that you visit with honor for them, their family, their property. You’re acknowledging their humanity, their dignity, their right of response. You’re confirming that it’s up to them whether you will enter and on what terms.

Respé, meaning “respect,” is the word you wait to hear. Perhaps the woman cooking a pot of rice in the cooking shack recognizes your voice and calls out without seeing you. Or maybe it’s someone you’ve never visited before and the person walks up without saying *respé* to inquire about the reason for your visit. Honor and respect are established as integral to your interactions moving forward.

The ritual slows one down to recognize there is a *you* and an *I*, to commit to the work of respect that is ahead. Best friends still call out *honé* and await *respé*.”

Quoted with permission from *Slow Kingdom Coming* by Kent Annan, Intermarsity Press, 2016.

Presbyterians do mission in partnership. Perhaps no other element characterizes our church’s shared understanding of what it means to engage in mission in the way of Jesus Christ.

Doing mission in partnership is slow: In the same way Jesus took 30 years to learn the language and culture of the people he was called to serve—to develop the deep relationships that Gospel-sharing requires—it takes time to do mission in partnership.

Doing mission in partnership means I don't always get my way: Though I may have an advanced degree or unusual spiritual wisdom or I just know how to get things done, doing mission in partnership requires that I allow partners to have the first word (if our shared work happens in their community, it is *they* who should initiate the work) and the last word (if they say “no” to my idea, or even respond to it with silence or “underwhelming affirmation”—and the essence of cultural proficiency is being able to read this vacuum—I need to consider the probability that the Spirit is leading us in a direction I had not anticipated.

Doing mission in partnership is NOT giving partners a blank check, passively acquiescing to their every recommendation, or stifling the questions that naturally arise when two people walk down the road together. If *domination* is always wrong in partnership relationships, so is the overly facile attitude of complete *deference*, where U.S. partners, aware of the temptation of controlling a mission relationship reduce that relationship to a funding relationship: “Whatever the partner requests, we'll support.” This attitude, often caused by our own sense of guilt for the inequalities that separate us from our global partners, makes a mockery of partnership in mission. True partnership requires that each partner bring their best gifts to the table—their best ideas, most earnest hopes and dreams, and their resources both monetary and in-kind. It also requires that, in a spirit of humility, each partner bring to the table their own needs, their experience of woundedness, their own brokenness. This is the table where Christ makes us one.

What happens when we do mission in partnership? Together, God's Spirit helps us change the world, one need, one injustice, one life at a time, beginning with our own life. Will you join us?[1]

[1] Our General Assembly in 2003 approved a beautiful description of what it means to do mission in partnership and provided some helpful questions we can use to test if our actions are consistent with our intentions:http://www.pcusa.org/site_media/media/uploads/global/pdf/presbyterians_do_mission_in_partnership.pdf

July 2016: 'Can You See It Yet?'

I'm standing in the middle of Peru's coastal desert, a million miles from anything, wondering what in the heck I'm doing here. Miles and miles of sand and broken rock frame the horizon. "It's just ahead, brother. Can you see it yet?"

"Definitely not," I think to myself.

Our church's One Great Hour of Sharing had asked me to visit the Haya de la Torre Association, a group of landless farmers who had been working together once a week for 16 years in an attempt to cut a 1.4-mile-long irrigation canal out of solid rock. The canal would irrigate 2,700 acres of parched land and provide the farmers with land for themselves and their children after them. With only 124 yards left to go, they had requested funds to rent the heavy machinery necessary to cut and cart away the rock. I took one look at the granite mountain in front of us and chuckled to myself. It looked like pure foolishness. But I guess I'd never really seen faith move mountains before.

A charter member of the association, 68-year-old Alicia Moraga, showed me the 1.3-mile ditch already cut and carefully lined with rock. Using ancient Incan technology, the community had coaxed water out of the Huara River, high above the arid lands, and brought it within reach of their goal. I looked at Alicia, perplexed. "Sixteen years? What kept you going, Señora?" I asked.

Now it was Alicia's turn to be perplexed. "But you should know about hope, brother! We want our children to have a better life than we've had, and they'll need land for that." Alicia said the association had bet that if they could bring water to the arid, unclaimed land overlooking the town of Humaya, they could obtain land—approximately 40 acres per family. All along Peru's bone-dry Pacific coast, the equation is simple: land + water = life.

I stopped in my tracks. The thought of dirt-poor peasants working for 16 years with picks and shovels made my definition of hope look pretty weak. They had already raised money for the hydrological study and had successfully battled both a mining company and the government to retain title to the arid land (once it became clear that the irrigation project might, in fact, succeed, you'd be amazed at who became interested in the project).

I would hesitate to send an absurd little project like this to most international development organizations—on paper, the whole thing just looks impossible. There is nothing “feasible” about this project, except that it is a community-developed response to a critical problem as defined by the community: a desperate need for arable land. I smiled as I suddenly realized our God's remarkable sense of humor. This is precisely where the church works best: sharing modest funding with poor and oppressed communities through community-initiated, community-managed projects.

And so in Humaya, Alicia Moraga and her small band of poor, landless farmers are opening up a small piece of God's Reign to provide hope and an inheritance for their children. And when they heard that the Self- Development of People program had agreed to fund the last 124 yards of their crazy dream, they asked me to thank you for having the faith to believe in them.

And I'm thankful to Alicia and her community because they have shared with me a faith that moves mountains.

As of this writing, the association members are still battling the local powers-that-be for control of the land that they worked for. But my money's on Alicia and her team because the God whose hand is on the arc of history continues to bend it toward justice.



Mission Matters

A monthly update from Presbyterian World Mission

Hunter's column talks about the impact of Presbyterian mission in the world and the issues that affect mission co-workers, the people we walk with and assist in service to God, and our partners around the globe.

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August 2016: The Source of Our Security

Rachel Yates, Associate Director of Program
Presbyterian World Mission

The panicked call might come at 3 a.m., or on a holiday weekend. The security breach may be conveyed in a coded email message. With nearly 140 mission co-workers serving in more than 50 countries, Presbyterian World Mission must be on alert 24/7 for medical emergencies, security risks, natural disasters, and other crises that require immediate response, intervention, and, possibly, evacuation. When I began serving as World Mission's associate director for program in January, I learned the protocols for being "on call."

I also began receiving daily security briefings. These news alerts and U.S. State Department advisories filter crises country-by-country. Their litany of dangers is nearly paralyzing, particularly where the violence is targeted at groups that include our mission personnel and the global partners with whom they serve. Safety is a top priority, and we build systems and processes to make mission service more secure.

And yet, in some ways, those very systems and processes set us apart from our global partners. In an emergency, we recall our mission co-workers to safety. For our global partners and their communities, this is often not an option. I have heard the deep angst of mission co-workers who had to leave behind colleagues and friends in war-torn countries, not knowing what their futures would hold.

Whether our global partners have been forced to flee or have chosen to remain, their despair and trauma can be severe. In places of violence and persecution, they fear for their lives. They mourn those who died needlessly. They grieve those who sacrificed their lives with purpose. They question how to begin again. But, despite their deep suffering, hope endures. Time and again, they find a way to start over. Teachers return to classrooms, small business owners stock their shelves, and Christians gather for worship.

It is more than human resilience.

In Tirgol, Ethiopia, just across the border from South Sudan, our global partners and mission co-workers gathered for a Synod meeting. Nearby, a United Nations refugee facility received people who were fleeing the violence in South Sudan. A woman stumbled onto the church grounds, carrying a toddler and leading two other children. In exhaustion, she collapsed under a tree. As people rushed to help her, they offered to accompany the family to the U.N. facility, where she could receive medical care and other aid. The woman protested, insisting that they be allowed to stay. "I came here,"

she explained and pointed, “because I saw the cross.” The cross on the church grounds stood as a beacon of hope that offered more than medical care and aid. The cross of Jesus Christ offered an enduring hope of peace and healing and restoration.

In the shadow of that cross, church leaders choose to stay in cities under attack because their proclamation of hope is needed now more than ever. At the foot of that cross, victims of rape and trafficking find solace. Lifting high that cross, courageous partners around the world speak out against corruption and extremism, even though their words make them a target. Their security is not created by well-designed systems and processes, but is found in the revelation of one who was himself targeted and persecuted, who suffered rejection and torture, and who died on that cross, so that all might be reconciled to God upon his resurrection. Our global partners stand as witnesses to the hope found in that resurrection, a hope that cannot be weakened through human atrocities. Our sisters and brothers in faith invite us to accompany them through the darkness that daily security briefings cannot begin to capture. In turn, as we struggle with violence, discrimination, and division in our own communities, may we find strength in their faithful witness.

Mission Matters Archives (<https://www.presbyterianmission.org/ministries/world-mission/mission-matters/mission-matters-archive/>)

“Out of the depths I cry to you, O Lord.” —Ps. 130:1

[Contact Us](#)

September 2016

Discerning a new call

Dear colleagues in Christ's mission,

This month marks for me 30 years of service to the Presbyterian Mission Agency. After being commissioned as mission co-workers in the summer of 1986, Ruth and I were sent to France for language study and then on to the Congo (then Zaire) to work at the Faculty of Reformed Theology of the Kasai (Ndesha) in Kananga. The experiences of these three decades are far richer than my words can express and so is my sense of thanksgiving. It was the way that Presbyterians engage in God's mission that brought me back to the church when I was in my 20s and I will always be grateful.

So it is with a heart full of gratitude and some sadness that I share with you the news that I am resigning as Director of Presbyterian World Mission as of October 14 in order to discern God's call for the next season of my life. I will be working with colleagues here to support Presbyterian World Mission to ensure a smooth transition into the future.

I am grateful beyond words for the chance to have served our church on four continents, in four languages, among colleagues in mission who have taught me so much—Congolese, Peruvian, American—and more nationalities than I can count! I look forward with great anticipation and hope to all God has in store for Presbyterian World Mission and for me in the coming chapter.

I am thankful for the grace you've shown me and for your partnership in God's mission and I look forward to continuing with you in that mission in new ways.

With you in Christ,

Hunter

[Read more.](#)

October 2016

The Crisis in Syria: Looking Toward the Future

“What is their future?” In response, the director of this church school for Syrian refugee children got a faraway look in her eyes. She slowly shook her head. “I don’t know,” she confessed.

Like nearly two million others in Lebanon who fled civil war and violence from extremists, the parents of these students are now restarting their lives—this group on rented land near Minyara, roughly nine miles from the Syrian border. Many had come before as farm workers. When the violence started, they moved their families to this agricultural valley. They assembled crowded, makeshift shelters, hoping again to find seasonal farm work and, now, refuge.

The Presbyterian church in Minyara, part of the National Evangelical Synod of Syria and Lebanon, watched the arrival of refugees, including hundreds of school-aged children, and stepped up to the challenge. The church converted an empty warehouse into small classrooms, painted the walls, and found willing teachers. Now, the students come in numbers greater than the church school can handle.

They come without knowing how to write or add or sit still. They come with the expectation that they will be beaten if they do something wrong, because that’s what happens at home. They come sporadically, with long absences because of work in the fields. The young girl in the dark blue head scarf is one of the brightest in her class. But last year, she stopped coming. After checking with her parents, the school learned she was picking potatoes. As a field hand, she earned about \$7 a day for the family, a more immediate and tangible benefit than education. Reluctantly, the parents accepted the school’s offer to pay them \$7 a day, so this promising student could return to her studies. This year, thanks be to God, she has returned to school again.

Yet, her future is uncertain. Her teachers know it. Her parents know it. It would be tempting to give up. But, each day, she practices her Arabic, studies ethics, and learns science and math. Without knowing what the future holds, she comes to learn, and the teachers come to teach.

At Presbyterian World Mission, we’ve seen changes this year, including [Hunter Farrell’s decision to step down as director](#), effective October 14, to accept a new call as director of the [World Mission Initiative](#) at Pittsburgh Theological Seminary.

The transition plan to fill this position is underway, but we don’t know who will lead us next. In some places, the life’s work of our global partners has been swept away by natural disaster. We can’t say for certain what their futures hold. In our own country, we see shifts in demographics and attitudes. Uncertainty surrounds us.

Despite this, we continue to live into a shared calling. Each day, we come to share the Good News of God’s love in Jesus Christ. We come to seek reconciliation in cultures of violence, including our own. We come to address the root causes of poverty, particularly as they impact women and children. Like the teachers and children in Minyara, we come because we have hope in a future that we cannot yet see. “For I know the plans I have for you,” declares the LORD, “plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future. Then you will call on me and come and pray to me, and I will listen to you. You will seek me and find me when you seek me with all your heart.” (Jer. 29:11-13).

For it is not whether we can see the future that compels us to act. Rather, it is trust in a God who has planned and knows our future that gives us confidence to act in the midst of uncertainty. As we go boldly into that unknown future, we invite you to join us in faith. Grounded in God’s promise of hope, we have much to do together.

November 2016—Winning and Losing: A Call to Reconciliation

Rachel Yates, Associate Director of Program
Presbyterian World Mission

The timing of this eNews is such that I wrote *Mission Matters* before the outcome of our national election. As I write this, I don't know who will win or lose.

But, I share the sense of many that one of our greatest challenges post-election will be the healing of a divided nation. Right now it seems that we are united only in our belief that others are wrong about their beliefs. We puzzle at how friends and family became downright stupid, a trait we'd never noticed before. It has become increasingly easy for us to discount views, "unfriend" colleagues, and withdraw from people of different political persuasions. Division, anger and violence have become the easy responses to disagreement.

But, they cannot be the responses of the Church. Last month, Presbyterian World Mission sent a letter to its global partners in more than 40 countries. We asked for their prayers.

Our partnerships are grounded in prayer for each other. We have been humbled to pray for our global partners as their countries experienced civil war, natural disaster and economic despair. In difficult circumstances, they have been faithful witnesses to the power of reconciliation found in Jesus Christ, and we have marveled at their courage and commitment. In Colombia, for example, we walked alongside our partners as they advocated for peace between the government and the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia—FARC), Colombia's largest guerilla group. In collaboration with the Presbyterian Peace Fellowship and others, the Presbyterian Church of Colombia worked for years on the proposed peace accord. Leading up to the popular vote, Colombian President Juan Manuel Santos requested a meeting with leaders of the Presbyterian Church of Colombia, and they in turn invited us to join them. Despite the rejection of the peace accord on October 2, we stand with our partners in prayer for peace and reconciliation. In his letter to our Colombian partner, Stated Clerk J. Herbert Nelson, wrote: "After 52 years of armed conflict, the vast majority of Colombians yearn for peace with justice, but deep divisions have led to disparate visions of the things that make for peace. ... Please know that you are not alone. We will continue to encourage our churches to lift the Presbyterian Church of Colombia and the Colombian people in prayer before the God who has worked for peace with justice throughout all of human history."

Now it's our turn.

In our recent letter to global partners, we asked them to pray for the United States that we might have a peaceful and a nonviolent transition of government. We asked them to pray for our ability to work together in positive ways for the people and our world, not divided along political lines.

Families will need to recall the ties of love that bind them; communities must forgive and come together. So, we also asked them to pray for the reconciling work and witness of the Church. Now more than ever, we give thanks for these partners who surround us with their prayers and encourage us by their example.

In Christ, there are no winners or losers. To begin the hard work of reconciliation, we must drop the language of victory and defeat and instead seek unity as sisters and brothers. It will require both conviction and gentleness. For the sake of our nation, let us begin that healing today.

Grounded in God's promise of hope, we have much to do together.

December 2016—Swift Devastation, Prolonged Recovery

Rachel Yates, Associate Director of Program
Presbyterian World Mission

Rev. Brad Dardaganian, pastor at Sugar Creek Presbyterian Church in Kettering, Ohio, went to Beirut in search of his extended family. Through research in Armenian history and genealogy, he wanted to learn more about the genocide that began in 1915, the scattering of his family and the lost pieces of their shared history. Connecting genealogical dots led him to distant family members who live in Lebanon—one of the countries that received an influx of Armenians during the genocide under the Ottoman Empire.

In September, as part of a larger group, Brad and I visited the Armenian Genocide Orphans' "Aram Bezikian" Museum in Byblos, Lebanon, a small but impressive facility memorializing the urgent attempts to rescue children of the genocide, as the scope of the massacre became known to missionaries and nongovernmental organizations.

The images still haunt me. Gaunt faces and listless eyes gazed at the camera. Skin stretched over bones. In the faces of these orphans, I confronted our inexplicable inhumanity—murder and starvation for the sake of political power and perceived security.

A century after the systematic massacre of 1.5 million Armenians that began on April 24, 1915, and continued into the early 1920s, families and communities are still separated. Because they fled their homeland or were forcibly deported, Armenians can be found today on all continents.

Two such emigrants, Rev. Haroutune Jinishian and Catherine Jinishian, came to America. Following a successful business career, their eldest son, Vartan, established an endowment fund in their honor, administered by the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) through Presbyterian World Mission. Today the [Jinishian Memorial Program](#) (JMP) offers medical, social and employment assistance to address the social, economic and spiritual needs of more than 40,000 Armenians each year in Armenia, Lebanon, Syria, Jerusalem Turkey, Georgia and Nagorno-Karabakh. Where governmental social services do not meet needs, JMP fills the gap by bringing resources and hope to vulnerable sectors of Armenian communities. Celebrating its 50th anniversary, the JMP continues the prolonged effort at recovery.

What took just over five years to destroy has already taken more than two generations to heal. And healing continues as we remember the atrocities and weep.

How do we count the cost of conflict? It's more than buildings reduced to rubble and immediate casualties. Survivors bear a heavy burden. Recovery is protracted as infrastructure must be rebuilt, businesses and schools reopened and communities reconnected. But even those pieces do not tell the full story of recovery. Trauma becomes the collective narrative of a people, told from generation to generation, until it intertwines with culture, religion, art and language. Healing, if it happens, takes many lifetimes.

The stewardship and foresight of Vartan Jinishian has enabled the JMP to change the future for Armenians and to create a new narrative. The generosity of Presbyterians continues his vision.

With help from the JMP Lebanon offices, Brad Dardaganian arranged to meet his cousins, Maro Yetimian and Rita Ferahian. Rita and her son, Shant, taxied Brad across Beirut to Maro's home in the largely Armenian suburb of Burj Hammoud. An impromptu invitation to dinner was sent to extended family members, and within minutes the beautifully furnished apartment bustled with eight cousins, all connected through ancestry to Hadjin, the Armenian village in Turkey that Brad's grandfather left in 1914, ahead of the genocide that drove the remaining family from their homes. Conversations about family history filled the air as the cousins showed pictures and exchanged stories about contemporary life and culture. People tried to recall names and places to make connections, but the genealogy was never precise. It didn't matter. As in Armenian communities worldwide, the connection was a larger one.

Soon a spread of Armenian and Lebanese food covered a table as the family gathered for a boisterous meal and more conversation. This reunited family shares a common, painful history. But just as important, they share a hope for the future, grounded in a deep Christian faith that reassures them their cries are heard and their prayers will be answered. That promise sustains Armenians worldwide who now endure the long recovery that violence needlessly imposed.