

January 2018 — Intersectional, Yet Faithful

*Tamron R. Keith Sr., Associate Director
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I have been thinking about “intersections” lately — an odd point of contemplation, you might say. This perspective is countercultural in a society where we are most often focused on the “destination” rather than the intersections in between. And, it is important to note, in the context of moving objects, that intersections are places that must be negotiated carefully, for need of avoiding a collision at all costs.

Acts 6:1–7 (NLT), describe some interesting “intersections.” The first two verses describe the scenario quite well. *“But as the believers rapidly multiplied, there were rumblings of discontent. The Greek-speaking believers complained about the Hebrew-speaking believers, saying that their widows were being discriminated against in the daily distribution of food. So the twelve called a meeting of all the believers. They said, ‘We apostles should spend our time teaching the word of God, not running a food program.’”*

In this passage we encounter, at minimum, a three-way intersection: two racial-ethnic groups of people clashing with one another over a perceived bias; those who proclaim the word of God intersecting with those called to address the social needs of the community through the church; and church leaders intersecting with laity.

Verses 3–7 summarize how this three-way intersection was traversed by ecclesial leaders of the church who clearly articulate the issue threatening the future growth of the church. Laity respond by developing a trustworthy process to select deacons who can serve the church by addressing some of the social needs of the community, among other things. Seven deacons are selected by the congregation. The apostles ordain the deacons who begin serving food faithfully and equitably to all who are in need. The apostles continue preaching the word of God, and the church continues growing significantly.

This sounds so orderly. Yet, I wonder if this three-way intersection was really able to be navigated without anyone’s vehicle getting damaged. It seems so from the scriptural account. From this, we who serve in the church have much to learn.

Acts 6:1–7 begs that we consider present-day intersections in the church and the mission of the church, such as those who proclaim the word of God versus those who serve the social needs of disadvantaged people through the church; those who want to establish relationships with different racial-ethnic groups in their community versus those wanting relationships with different racial-ethnic communities around the world; congregational engagement in local mission versus engagement in global mission; creating ministry connections within the church for younger generations versus connections for older generations; those wanting to address medical needs in Africa or Asia versus those wanting to address the health care system in the U.S., and the list goes on.

Whether pastors, missional leaders, congregations and mid councils see these aspects of mission as *competing priorities* or *intersections ripe with opportunity* to be traversed so that no one's vehicle gets damaged will determine whether the church grows or declines.

Acts 6 provides a model worth replicating if mission truly matters.

Please be in touch with us in Presbyterian World Mission to explore conversations on how we can partner with you like the Acts 6 church to traverse your mission intersections faithfully.

February 2018 — Creating Space for Reconciliation

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If no space is provided for words to be spoken, for grief to be expressed, for remembering to be encouraged, then how does reconciliation happen? Can reconciliation occur if opportunity for healing is denied? If the names and the faces of those lost or victimized are not acknowledged, then how can there possibly be closure? Where is the hope?

Presbyterian World Mission wrestles with the challenge of putting into practice the values inherent in the initiative Reconciliation in Cultures of Violence, Including Our Own. We recognize that reconciliation is at the heart of the gospel message and that we are called to build ministries of reconciliation in our broken world. But what does that look like for communities impacted by war? How does reconciliation happen when not everyone is willing to admit that atrocities happened? We know healing doesn't happen overnight — maybe not even in our lifetime. Perhaps, though, we start by standing in the gap and hearing the voices of those long silenced. We work hard to create places where memorials may be held, and we provide spaces for tears that must be allowed to flow. Each space reflects the truth that every community has a culture of its own that needs to be respected. In that space there is no attempt to replace or exchange cultural beliefs with those of others, such as replacing African cultural views with European views or assuming that American views can be superimposed on South Asian views.

The civil war in Sri Lanka officially ended in 2009. But the new regime has declared it illegal for public memorial services to be held and for monuments to be erected that account for the atrocities or commemorate the dead. Throughout the conflict many also went missing. Some were abducted, and others just disappeared. To this day, there is no way of tracking what happened to each of those individuals. While dialogue between factions and sects is encouraged, public discussion about any of this is not allowed, and history is written in ways that give no accounting of these horrific events.

Around the world entire villages are decimated, tribes are eradicated, and people groups are destroyed, and nothing is done to recognize the lives lost or the souls crushed. Sometimes the United States bears the responsibility of having been the perpetrator in different parts of the world. In some instances, we refer to it as collateral damage; in other instances, it was a matter of hitting our target and meeting our end goal.

Of course, within the bounds of our own country, we're also guilty of having done this to our own. For too many years, this country was in the business of treating people like chattel, buying and selling, abusing and dehumanizing individuals, families, tribes and communities in every way possible. And, while some gestures have been made over the years to acknowledge the enslavement of black-skinned people in the U.S., the systemic undergirding that supported this practice continues under a different rubric without confession, apology or reparations. Similarly, treatment of indigenous persons in this country continues to be marginalizing at best. History has been rewritten again and again, erasing entire populations with a few strokes of the pen.

As long as we rebel against God and violate the image of God in others and ourselves, reconciliation will elude us. Let us pray for the day when we truly embrace the promise that the Spirit of God justifies us by grace through faith, sets us free to accept ourselves and to love God and neighbor.

March 2018 — Journeying Through the Wilderness

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Presbyterian World Mission*

As we follow the footsteps of Jesus on his journey to the cross, we, too, are confronted with trials and tribulations on our way to Jerusalem. It was through perseverance and directly facing the opposition that Jesus overcame all that confronted him.

Whether God calls us around the corner or around the world, there is usually an air of excitement and eager anticipation that marks the occasion of commissioning as we embark on an adventure of mission and ministry. Dedicated and intentional planning has been invested into the effort, and we just can't wait to see all that God has in store for us.

Somewhere along the way, though, we find ourselves faced with a myriad of challenges. Sometimes, there may be people who are unhappy with the manner in which the project is being carried out; other times, there are circumstances, perhaps beyond our control, that become part of the scenario and are contrary to all of our carefully outlined goals, objectives, outcomes and impacts.

A church group from a U.S. congregation joined the large numbers of short-term mission workers who ventured into Mexico for a spring break construction project. The plan was to build a structure that would serve the surrounding community. Teams of people from both sides of the border met for months, putting together logistical details as well as plans for the structure. Everything went well, including the completion of the building and a concluding candlelight worship service that blessed everyone and everything. Three days after the church group returned to their home, the call came letting them know that the entire building had been completely dismantled and all of the materials absconded.

Here's another example from the other side of the world. News arrives that rebel forces have seized a village. Hostages have been taken and the school burned to the ground. Despite all efforts to create a nonviolent and welcoming atmosphere for all those who might venture in, the church is struggling to maintain safe space. All attempts to reach out to the state for help are being thwarted as the country's government responds from a weakened posture and the international community is hesitating to get involved.

In each of these situations, there is reason to pause. The typical questions of "How did this happen?" and "Where do we go from here?" are warranted. Adequate opportunity needs to be set aside to work through explicit and implicit conversations. When all of the analyses are completed, though, there also must be ample time to reflect on what is at the root of the mission to which we have been called (Eph. 4:1). Perhaps what God is facilitating is the relationships that are established, nurtured and given expression to flourish. And, maybe it is that God is calling us to be amid the struggle, shoulder to shoulder, weeping and rejoicing in a chorus of the *imago Dei*.

Let us pray for one another so that as we kneel in Jerusalem, we are strengthened to stand strong in the face of the trials and tribulations.

May 2018 — Christ is at work on the border

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“When Pentecost Day arrived, they were all together in one place. ² Suddenly a sound from heaven like the howling of a fierce wind filled the entire house where they were sitting. ³ They saw what seemed to be individual flames of fire alighting on each one of them. ⁴ They were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages as the Spirit enabled them to speak.” — Acts 2:1–4, Common English Bible

The disciples were gathered together in fear when they were surrounded and filled with God’s Holy Spirit, enabling them to speak in other languages and giving them ears to hear each other’s voices in their own native tongues. The Holy Spirit had arrived to break open their hearts and minds to see that God was present in all people, that they should not limit God’s works, presence or message to one place, one context, one culture or one language.

Mark Adams and Miriam Maldonado Escobar serve as mission co-workers with Frontera de Cristo at the U.S.-Mexico border. Part of their ministry is with U.S. groups that visit the border to “come and see,” spending time with Mexican brothers and sisters at and across the border. In their [April 2018 Mission Connections](#) letter, they share many stories of U.S. church folk and students who are transformed by their experiences in U.S.-Mexico border ministry. “In a fear-filled world,” they write, “crossing geographic, cultural, social, economic and religious borders in the spirit of faith, hope and love to share meals, worship, laugh, cry and serve with people on the other side is a radical act of discipleship.”

We as Christians are called by God to cross borders, to let the Holy Spirit break open hearts and minds to see Jesus in those who are “on the other side.”

Where and how do you cross borders? With whom have you entered into a “radical act of discipleship” simply by being in relationship with them, and they with you?

Mark and Miriam describe how, as one presbytery group prepared to leave the border this year and return home, a Frontera de Cristo delegation facilitator, Isaac Badachi, challenged group members to bring stories and lessons home to share them and put them into practice. Isaac encouraged them to “take the reality of God forming community across political, economic and cultural borders and open yourself to that reality in your own communities.”

My prayer is for all people — and especially those of us on the “side” of power or privilege — to be open to the movement of the Holy Spirit guiding us, pushing us to cross borders that will take us beyond our fears and help us see the “other” as the one who will accompany and shape us in our journey as disciples. My prayer is that we will bring lessons we learn from these radical relationships of discipleship back into the city in which we live.

Mark and Miriam aptly write, “Our goal is not for delegations just to come and have a mountaintop experience. Our prayer is that they also follow Jesus back down ‘the mountain’ into the suffering and division of their own communities to be instruments of God’s healing and transformation.”

April 2018 — Encountering Christ on the Road

*Mienda Uriarte, Asia-Pacific Area Coordinator
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Just as the disciples encountered Christ on the Road to Emmaus, we also find ourselves in need of seeing clearly and with understanding. It is only when we shift our focus or change our perspective so that our eyes are opened can the person of Christ be revealed. Luke 24 is often seen as a model of the journey that Jesus makes with many of us today, as he opens our eyes and reveals himself along life's walk as the resurrected savior and lord. For many, the passage becomes clear testimony of Christ among us on a lonely, dirt road.

Of course, who wouldn't want someone to walk beside us as Jesus did with his disciples on that road to Emmaus? How often do we long for someone to interpret Scripture for us and tell us how to apply it in any given moment during our everyday lives? We ponder the words and read interpretations by the experts because we long for spiritual nourishment like water for a thirsty soul.

For so many of us the highways and byways of life run in a million different directions and at such a rapid pace. As we push through life at our breakneck speed, it's not hard to imagine that our attention might be misdirected from the meaningful moments in which God intends great things. But, discernment can be tricky. On the one hand, there are the demands that our lives seem to have embedded in them: expectations, deadlines, tasks, goals, errands and chores; and don't forget the needed impacts and outcomes.

At the same time, another aspect of life breaks through, the church calls and we go running. We might find ourselves on the road to that monthly scheduled meeting only to be interrupted by someone desperate and in need of sanctuary from threats of imprisonment, deportation and separation from family. Or perhaps our carefully outlined retreat for strategic planning is confronted, instead, with crowds of overseas workers and other migrants imploring us for refuge and rescue as they find they have been waylaid and betrayed with nowhere to turn. And then there's always that parishioner interrupting our quiet time because they've just received a life-altering diagnosis, and their own path is headed down a road they never wanted to go.

And so we're faced with decisions and compromises and sacrifices that must be made. We all know it's not necessarily that only one option is the clear choice; we might end up meeting all those demands as well as the needs of those entrusted to our care. After all, it is in both the explanation of historic documents as well as in the blessing of bread that Christ is revealed, and Jesus is made known. Perhaps it is in each of those moments when our eyes are first kept from recognizing (Luke 24:16) and then they're opened, and we recognize the Christ in our midst (Luke 24:31).

June 2018 — History, people and hope in the Middle East

*Philip Woods, Area Coordinator, Middle East and Europe
Presbyterian World Mission*

So much is said and written about the Middle East that inevitably it all becomes a blur. Indeed, the very term “the Middle East” for some seems to equal all the world’s problems and threats. This does a grave disservice to its many peoples and rich cultures. At very least it is a misleading term, lumping together a region that is as rich and diverse as any continent. Furthermore, not everyone, least of all the people in the region, view it from the same Western perspective that we do. For some, the region we call the Middle East is known as West Asia, a more geographically accurate description of its location. And because of the pejorative overtones that “the Middle East” now echoes with, the term “West Asia” liberates us from such assumptions.

I will stick with the familiar, though, and try to open up as simply as possible some of the issues that have come to characterize for us the Middle East today. But I invite you to learn more through the stories of our partners and mission co-workers in the region, which go far deeper than this simple look into this [complex region](#).

To start with the obvious, Christianity began in this region and spread out from here, ultimately to the whole world. We know this, but when we talk about the Middle East, we often forget its rich Christian heritage, which continues to this day. Islam arrived in the region in the period 632–655 AD. Prior to this, Christianity was the dominant religion in the region. In fact, some communities in modern-day Syria have been continuously Christian since the first century, with churches that date back to the beginning of Christianity. This is part of the rich fabric of the Middle East that we should not overlook.

While the region became predominantly Islamic, it was not always at the expense of Christians and Jews. At different stages in history there have been places in the Middle East where Christians, Jews and Muslims have coexisted peacefully. It is no more a region caught up in endless strife than Europe, which has its own tumultuous history marked by seemingly endless religious wars, even in recent times (remember Northern Ireland).

Indeed, some conflicts that we too easily characterize as eternal are in fact quite recent (at least in terms of the grand sweep of history). The struggle over Israel and Palestine dates back only 70 years, if we return to the *naqba*, the expulsion of

750,000 Palestinians in 1948 that paved the way for the creation of modern-day Israel (not to be confused with biblical Israel, although we frequently do, which quite wrongly gives us this sense of eternal struggle). Even if we go back to the Balfour Declaration, the British declaration that offered a homeland in Palestine for the Jewish people, the struggle dates back only 100 years.

These perspectives are important because they color how we see, hear and read the stories that are continually before us. Christians feel overlooked, because while being only a minority today, they are still a significant presence in the region, with their own history and stories that are quite distinct from the “Middle East equals Islam” story that we are presented with today. So within the Palestinian community, there are still many Christians, who inevitably are our closest partners in this troubled land.

By the same token, not all Israeli Jews support the policies and actions of the Israeli government. Indeed, not all Jews are religious — many are secular — and not every Israeli supports Zionism. Yet often we believe that to speak against the actions of the Israeli government is to be anti-Jewish. Are we anti-American when we criticize the policies and actions of our government? I know that some today would say so, but the reality is that when we get exercised on such matters it is because we have a different vision of what society should look like. Labeling and demonizing are no answer to the diversity of opinion that exists in any society and across the world.

So deep down we know that not all Arabs are terrorists, but rarely do we delve deep enough to consider that they are people like you and me, going about their lives as best they can, sometimes in far more trying circumstances than we could ever imagine. Consider these two street scenes in Damascus. Sure, there is a military checkpoint in one (actually a rather informal one, not like the ones I remember from the Belfast of my youth), but there is a war going on; if you were there, you could hear it in the background.



Because they are people like us, they are also doing the things that we would do in the same circumstances. They want to protect their families and seek a better future for them, so given the opportunity — or all too unfortunately, the necessity — they leave. Research by Diyar, one of our partners in the Middle East, shows that roughly equal percentages of both Christians and Muslims would like to leave the region to make a better life for themselves. What would you do in those circumstances?

This makes our militarized answers for the region's problems all the more questionable, because they only drive more people to leave and more people into the hands of extremists. The extremists use our actions to bolster their ugly narratives, and their own actions force more people to want to leave. This is a senseless, destructive spiral that is doing tremendous damage to the region, creating fear and uncertainty all around, and not just in the places most directly affected.

Take Lebanon, for example, sitting between Syria and the Mediterranean and stretching north from the border with Israel. While not currently directly affected, it sits at the epicenter of the region's woes. Home to a refugee population of Syrians and Palestinians equal to over half of its population, it is also the home of Hezbollah, the Shia political and military organization, many of whose leaders are proud of the education they received in the schools of our partner church, the National Evangelical Synod of Syria and Lebanon. Hezbollah, an ally of Shia-dominated Iran, is feared by Israel, just as Iran is by the Sunni Muslim nations led by Saudi Arabia. Lebanon, though, is also home to a sizable Sunni population. In addition, Christians make up about a third of the population. Such are the nuances of the region that our sound-bite culture often glosses over. Today the Lebanese celebrate their diversity. It is a rich and vibrant society that knows the perils of sectarian conflict and does not want to return there. But events and actors beyond their control could undo all that they have achieved since the end of their disastrous civil war.

In hoping for peace and stability they are not alone. The peoples of the region are like us; they want the best for their families and themselves. Please pray for them and follow their stories of the joys and woes of life in the Middle East.

August 2018 — Experiencing God in the hope of Africa

Debbie Braaksma, Area Coordinator Africa - Presbyterian World Mission



Nigerian author Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie has gained considerable renown not only for her novels and short stories but also for her TED talk, “The Danger of a Single Story.” In this talk, which we have used in mission co-worker orientation, Adichie challenges the misrepresentation of various cultures that occurs when we tell “a single story.”

The “single story” for Africa is often very negative. I was privileged to attend the recent All-Africa Council of Churches meeting in Kigali, Rwanda, where the newly elected General Secretary the Rev. Dr. Fidon Mwombeki pushed back on this caricature in his acceptance speech, stating, “I am aware of the bad image Africa has sadly among Africans and beyond Africa. It is identified with poverty, death, dirt, diseases, conflict, totalitarianism, refugees, illegal migration, etc.; for some it is a lost continent which needs pity [from] the rest of the world. ... My perception of Africa is different. Africa is to me a continent of hope. ... I want to contribute to changing the narrative about Africa by focusing primarily on

great achievements and opportunities available every day in Africa, while not ignoring the challenge and problems we are facing.”

As a Presbyterian engaged in mission in Africa, I am challenged to take the words of Adichie and Mwombeki to heart. I have had the privilege of serving in Africa mission, either as a mission co-worker or administrator, for a span of more than 30 years, and I have experienced the hope of Africa, the vibrancy of the African church, and the warmth and hospitality of her people. But much of the work that Presbyterian mission is engaged in involves accompanying the church in the “hard places,” because whether we are in the U.S. or Africa, that is what mission is about, isn’t it? We are called to follow Christ to be in ministry to and with the most vulnerable. As our church partners ask us to accompany them in their work of addressing extreme poverty or working on issues such as human trafficking, we need to tell the stories of our mutual work very carefully, to avoid presenting a single story of Africa.

Mission co-worker Janet Guyer and I recently presented a workshop at the Churchwide Gathering of Presbyterian Women on Preventing and Responding to Violence Against Women and Children in Africa. We prefaced our presentation by talking about violence against women and children as a global phenomenon that exists in each of our communities, not just Africa. And we strove to tell the story through a lens of hope, focusing on what brave, resourceful African Christian women are doing to combat such violence, and how their faith in Christ strengthens them for their work, emphasizing that such violence is not the whole story of Africa but one story that our African sisters have specifically asked us to tell. It’s a journey they have invited us to accompany them on.

Janet’s accompaniment of the Church of Central Africa Presbyterian Women’s Guild in Malawi is so very important to them, and it reminds me of the danger of a single story in terms of mission co-workers. The first President of Kenya, Jomo Kenyatta, shared one narrative about missionaries. He said, “When the missionaries came to Africa, they had the Bible and we had the land. They said, ‘Let us pray.’ We closed our eyes. When we opened them, we had the Bible and they had the land.” And this is one true story. In many contexts, missionaries colluded with colonial powers and it was ugly. We need to listen to that story, acknowledging that we have a history of colonialism that we must constantly be on guard against, being mindful of issues of power and privilege that can warp our relationships.

But, it is not the only story. In the book *Protestants Abroad: How Missionaries Tried to Change the World, But Changed America*, David Hollinger tells another true story. In his historical review, Hollinger writes that mainline Protestant missionaries were “precursors of the most defensible aspects of multiculturalism. Although missionaries often are represented as ‘mono-cultural,’ interested only in getting others to adopt their own opinions, I encountered numerous cases of missionaries pushing their fellow Americans to renounce the provinciality of their own society.” The book shares how mainline Protestant missionaries shaped American foreign policy in their work as diplomats, writers, social activists and church leaders who stood against racism and imperialism.

While not forgetting the other true story, which isn’t pretty, neither should we forget the story of missionaries as agents of justice nor try to fit all aspects of global mission or mission workers into a box of colonialism and cultural superiority, because many just won’t fit into that box! In addition to stories of colonialism, mission history also includes stories of standing against slavery and standing with liberation movements. In the African context, the PC(USA) has mission co-workers who were on the cutting edge of the anti-apartheid movement, and who are deeply involved in peace and reconciliation work. Others are engaged in raising awareness of conflict minerals and gender justice and are involved in community organization training and encouraging mutual mission in which the American church is on the receiving end: learning from and being ministered to.

Africa is complex — a single story does not describe her, nor does it describe the work of cross-cultural mission. Let’s continue to share the many stories of God’s mission in Africa and learn from them.

September 2018 — Peacebuilding by God's Grace

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Photo Credit 1: Hanae Togami

The students asked, "What kind of theology are you going to teach?" They knew that many church leaders had betrayed their congregations, allowing perpetrators to enter the church buildings where people had gathered in hopes of sanctuary. Tens of thousands were killed on church grounds over the 100 days of genocide in Rwanda in 1994.

"We'll see together," answered the Rev. Dr. Elisee Musemakweli. Together with his students, he began to regain their trust by discussing the church's call to wage peace. Rev. Elisee (pastors often go by their first names in East Central Africa) restarted the theological school that had been closed during the genocide, and currently serves as vice chancellor of the Protestant University of Rwanda, a joint project of our partner church, the Presbyterian Church of

Rwanda (EPR), and four other Protestant denominations.

Presbyterian World Mission made plans to gather all of the denomination's mission personnel serving in Africa for a conference in Rwanda in April 2017. [Kay Day](#), the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)'s mission co-worker in Butare, Rwanda, recommended that we hear about the lingering pain and separation felt by genocide survivors and how the church has responded.

The Rev. Jerome Bizimani Nkumbuyinka of the EPR received his training from Rev. Elisee. Because of the foundation he received at the Protestant University of Rwanda, he felt that to follow in the way of Jesus the church needed to provide a way for reconciliation. He and other ministers realized that until one could forgive one's enemy and attempt to reconcile with him, one could not fully heal and live an abundant life. Survivors needed to forgive, but perpetrators also needed to learn to confess their crimes and ask for forgiveness. Since communities were made up of both survivors and perpetrators, Rev. Jerome, one of the PC(USA)'s 2018 International Peacemakers, took this foundational thinking and formed the ministry of the [Light Group](#), an organization composed of genocide survivors and perpetrators. He brought members of the Light Group to share with our assembly. For privacy, only first names are used for Light Group members.

Celestin, a Light Group member, confessed to killing people during the genocide. He said, "When I was in prison, I thought that when I got out I would go to the forest and live like a wild animal. I felt like I was no longer human. But many chaplains came to talk with us about God and convinced us that even we could be forgiven. I couldn't believe it then, but now I do. Still, I ask for God's forgiveness every day, and will for the rest of my life."

Asterie is a survivor whose family members were killed by Celestin. She said, "I joined the Light Group because I felt that although I was walking around, I was really dead inside. This was my last chance to

live my life. Now I can share in meals with others in the Light Group. We can celebrate with each other when there are marriages and new babies born. I give thanks for Pastor Jerome's leadership. The only reason we can do this is because of the power of God's love."

After the gathering in Rwanda, two colleagues and I joined our mission co-workers who live and serve in South Sudan for a short flight to the capital of Juba, where another PC(USA) partner, the Presbyterian Church of South Sudan (PCOSS), struggles to continue providing education for hundreds of children, teens and adults who attend their schools. The South Sudan Education and Peacebuilding Project, developed by U.S. Presbyterian churches, provides needed support for the schools. [Nancy Smith-Mather](#), one of our Presbyterian mission co-workers serving with the project, noted that the church still strives to make education one of its top priorities in spite of the fact that South Sudan's economy is struggling, and it has been declared by the United Nations to be in a pre-genocidal state.

[Leisa Wagstaff](#), our Presbyterian mission co-worker in Juba who works to support the PCOSS schools, took us to visit the "school at the end of the runway." After several classes welcomed us with singing and dancing, the young head teacher told us that their students' fathers are mostly members of the military, but they haven't been paid for months. So the families can't afford to pay school fees. This means that most of the teachers have not been paid for a long time. They do it for the love of the children, and out of hope that if they are educated, there will be hope for their future. Many of the teachers spend their days volunteering in the PCOSS schools, and work overtime in other jobs to make enough money to live and support their own families. Such dedication was humbling to witness.

Making our way across the bumpy, unpaved roads to the office of the Women's Desk, our partner church's counterpart to Presbyterian Women, the Rev. Pasca Aciya welcomed me and my Presbyterian Mission Agency colleagues into a small room with a single fan oscillating overhead. The temperature that day was close to 95 degrees Fahrenheit, a cool day for Juba. We Americans were happy for the cover from the hot sun and the cold water the women provided. One woman brought a watering can of clean water and a dab of liquid soap and, as she stood before each of us, we washed our hands in preparation for the noon meal they had prepared. As the water ran from my fingers into a bucket below, I couldn't help but think of how Jesus washed his disciples' feet, and I felt her ministry to us. Hand sanitizer wouldn't do for this meal, because we would use our right hand to form the soft dough into a pocket to pick up the potatoes and greens, and to eat the whole lot together. The meal was simple, yet nutritious and filling, and we were well fed.

"What keeps you going when things are so difficult here?" one of us asked. In unison they said, "The love of God." Their resilience and resolve left me convinced again that you truly cannot predict what a small group of committed people can do with the help of God.

My flight itinerary brought me back to Kigali, Rwanda, for an overnight before returning to the U.S. I found myself sharing a car ride from the airport to the hotel with a psychologist from Juba, coming for a conference on trauma care. When she asked me for suggestions of places to visit, I told her of two memorials to the genocide victims, one being quite graphic with skulls, bones and clothing of mostly women and children who had been killed when they thought they were safe inside a church compound. We began to talk about the importance of these memorials to prove to naysayers that the genocide did occur, and to send a clear message that we must make sure this never happens again. My seatmate, an employee of the hotel, asked me, "Yes, but what about Juba? It's happening again there." I couldn't deny it had begun.

Presbyterian World Mission's partnership with our brothers and sisters in Rwanda and South Sudan speaks to our commitment to walk alongside partners in word and deed, to help the church be the church in those nations. To support Presbyterian World Mission's ministries of development and peacebuilding in Rwanda and South Sudan, visit [Mission Connections pages](#) for PC(USA) co-workers. Read the latest news from the [South Sudan Education and Peacebuilding Project](#).

Join us in praying for peace.

Valdir França, Area Coordinator, Latin America and the Caribbean
Presbyterian World Mission



Valdir França, World Mission's area coordinator for Latin America and the Caribbean (left), with the Rev. Dr. Darío Barolín, executive secretary of the Alliance of Presbyterian and Reformed Churches of Latin America (AIPRAL); Catalina Charris, member of the Board of the IPV's school, the Colegio Americano in Caracas; and Elder Talía Castillo, director of the Colegio Americano

At their synod assembly in April 2018, the Presbyterian Church of Venezuela (IPV) tackled the delicate question of how to position the church in relation to the difficult and deeply divisive problems facing the country.

When the Rev. Sarah Henken and Dennis Smith, mission co-workers in the region, paid a pastoral visit to Venezuela in 2016, they noted that Venezuela was experiencing "deep political and economic polarization" and that the IPV, an integral part of Venezuelan society, had also experienced such polarization within its membership.

Henken and Smith said the Venezuelan church expressed that it deeply valued its more than a century of partnership with the PC(USA,) and hoped to strengthen that relationship during this difficult time. They indicated the IPC seeks to maintain its own unity and testimony of hope and pastoral accompaniment to the people of Venezuela.

Since that visit in 2016, the economic and social situation in Venezuela has not improved. I visited the country in 2017, along with the Rev. Dr. Darío Barolín, executive secretary of the Alliance of Presbyterian and Reformed Churches of Latin America (AIPRAL). AIPRAL is a regional body related to the World Communion of Reformed Churches (WCRC) and it, too, is committed to walk with the Venezuelan church during these challenging times of economic crisis and extreme food insecurity.

The Presbyterian Church of Venezuela traces its history to schools and churches established with help from U.S. Presbyterian missionaries at the close of the 19th century. In 2016, after more than a century of partnership, Presbyterian World Mission and the Presbyterian Church of Venezuela established the Venezuela Mission Network. This network seeks to encourage mission partnerships between U.S. and Venezuelan congregations, through such activities as praying for one another, sharing faith stories, and exchanging pastoral visits and resources. (Photo by Yohariys Zarahy Cribeiro Bracho)

When the IPV Synod met in April 2018, representatives crafted a bold pastoral letter, assuming "a prophetic voice of proclamation and denunciation." The letter begins by proclaiming: "Our goal is to transcend mere discursive critique and simple catharsis and engage in a solution-oriented and transformative way that aligns with our understanding of the citizenship we are called to practice in this land of grace where we dwell and where the Presbyterian Church of Venezuela ministers."

The letter concludes with a call to prayer from 1 Thess. 5:17, along with a reference to the Spirit of God in the work of creation in the first two chapters of Genesis: "To pray without ceasing, with all prayer and supplication, in full awareness that, even in the current time of chaos, the Spirit of God moves over the face of the waters. And above the chaos, God calls into existence that which can give form to all that is amorphous, that which can shine light into the darkness, placing all in its proper place, in the time and space where life springs forth and is revived, to the glory of God."

This is our common future: to accompany our sisters and brothers in Venezuela in this difficult time — as they are committed to accompanying us — and together to create spaces for encounter that can, in the words of the letter, "re-dimension the present moment, understanding it as Kairos, God's time, called by sacred scripture and through a proactive understanding of our reality to exercise our role as emissaries of peace, bearers of the message of reconciliation. 'So we are ambassadors for Christ, since God is making his appeal through us; we entreat you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God' (2 Cor. 5:20 NRSV)."



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November 2018 — Where do you go when you don't know where to go?

*Rev. Richard Williams, Coordinator, Young Adult Volunteer Program
YAV alum 1999–2001, Philippines, Nashville
Presbyterian World Mission*

“Yes, that opportunity seems great for those folks that know exactly where God is calling them. But me? I don't have a clue ...”



I hear her question, knowing that just as she asks it, there are many, many more young adults asking it alongside her. She's just heard about the opportunities through the Young Adult Volunteer (YAV) program, and while interested, doesn't think she'd fit into a program like that. She feels it is too churchy — only for those who have known all along they will be pastors; or only for those who have all their faith and beliefs figured out; or only for those who are white and traditionally educated.

A core belief in the YAV program is to work to be a place where each person who wants to serve belongs, and where all of each person belongs. There aren't pieces of your story that you need to hide to be a part of an intentional community of service and justice. It doesn't matter whether you have strong faith or many questions, whether you're a longtime member of the church or a new disciple, whether you're part of the white majority in the U.S. or a person of color wondering if this program truly is a place for your voice — the YAV program seeks to be a place for all of these.

A colleague of mine says it well: “If you know exactly what you will be doing with your life, a YAV year is a good place to deepen that commitment. If you are unsure of where God might be calling you, a YAV year is a great place to explore some of the many options before you.” Working with young adults as they discover their place in God's mission, and in our church, is a joy and encouragement. God is always calling leaders to join in God's works that are transforming this world. Is there a young adult you'd like to invite into that journey?

The Young Adult Volunteer (YAV) program is an ecumenical, faith-based year (August to August) involving placement in sites around the world and across the U.S. YAVs accompany local agencies working to address root causes of poverty and reconciliation while exploring the meaning and motivation of their faith in community.

Program benefits include a **regular stipend, housing, transportation** and student-loan assistance through the duration of the service year. For more information, visit the FAQs tab on the YAV homepage and, follow @yavprogram on social media.

Important YAV application dates

March 1 — Round 2 — (Final date to apply to international sites)

June 1 — Round 3 — (National sites only, limited spots available)



December 2018 — Good news of great joy for shepherds and cab drivers

Rev. John McCall, Mission Co-worker in Taiwan
Presbyterian World Mission

Luke 2:8–18

I was in a cab headed to the high-speed rail station, on my way to preach at a Taiwanese wedding. While the groom is a Christian, he had told me that his parents were not. The vocabulary we use in Taiwan, when preaching to Christians, can often be language that non-Christians don't understand. As soon I got into the cab, I saw that the cab driver, Mr. Jwang, had a small statue of Buddha on his dashboard. So, I thought to myself, it might be good if Mr. Jwang could listen to my sermon and tell me which parts he did not understand. That way I would be sure that the groom's family was able to understand.



So, I explained to Mr. Jwang and asked if he would be willing to listen to my sermon and tell me if there were parts he did not understand. Over the years the Taiwanese people have helped me in many ways, and most of the time they are very obliging. Mr. Jwang replied, "Sure." Driving all day could get boring, I thought, so perhaps hearing an American use Mandarin to preach a sermon might actually be interesting.

In the half-hour cab ride, I shared my wedding sermon with Mr. Jwang, and he patiently listened. He stopped me when I said something that he didn't understand. When we got to the train station, I thanked him for his willingness to help. And he replied in polite Taiwanese fashion, "Your sermon really moved me!"

As we said goodbye, I wondered if my wedding sermon had indeed touched Mr. Jwang's heart or if he was just being polite. Then my attention turned to other cab drivers waiting for fares, playing mahjong, a kind of Taiwanese checkers, while they wait. It occurred to me that on that first Christmas, the angels came to unlikely folks tending their sheep. Shepherds were people without status, with a lot of time on their hands. If Christ was born in Taiwan this year, the angels might just appear in front of the high-speed rail station to these waiting cab drivers. "Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom God favors."

Originally the groom's father didn't want to attend his son's wedding in a Christian church. But because he loves his son, he finally was willing to attend. I noticed that when his son said words of thanks and blessing to his parents as part of the wedding service, that his father got very emotional.

This Christmas I give thanks for the privilege of living in this land of Taiwan. Each day I am blessed by folks like Mr. Jwang and the groom's father. And I know that the good news that came on that Christmas morning, in the form of Jesus, is also meant for the people like them. Good news of great joy to all people. May that good news fill your days and your lives as Jesus moves into our neighborhoods.