The subject of women in mission has been linked with my personal journey in inextricable ways, both negatively and positively. As recent as last month, when I was visiting with my mother (now 87), I heard for the umpteenth time my mother’s lament that when she was a young woman and felt the call to mission, she was denied involvement based on her gender. Sixty years later, she still lives with the pain of a dream denied. I lament the years of negative impact that she has lived with because of that denial. Thankfully, there is also a positive outcome for me, and hearing her tell it, for her also. She takes great delight in the fact that one of her children entered into ministry and mission even if she was rebuffed. She recounts for me, every time she tells this story, how when she was pregnant with me, she laid her hands upon her swollen abdomen and committed the child growing in her womb to the service of the Lord, much like Hannah of old did with her unborn son, Samuel (1 Samuel 1:11).

The women who followed Jesus were indispensable in the mission of the early church, as Christianity spread so rapidly from Jerusalem into the wider Mediterranean world. It is compelling to me to observe that when Jesus speaks these words in John 20:21, “I am sending you,” he was undoubtedly looking at all those present in that room—his disciples, friends, and also the women. Nowhere is there any suggestion that any were excluded based on race, gender or education. Furthermore, with reference to Galatians 3:28 (“... there is neither male nor female ...”), F. F. Bruce, in his book, The Epistle to the Galatians: A Commentary on the Greek Text (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1982), pp. 185-186, makes this telling comment: “It is not their distinctiveness, but their inequality... Continued on the back page.
In 1 Corinthians 12, Paul describes the gifts of the church as a human body—each playing its own part. Linda Shelly is Mennonite Mission Network’s director for Latin America. “I’m the ligaments!” she says leaning in with eyes wide open.

Anyone who has met Linda knows that she is an expert connector.

Fifteen years ago, Mennonite World Conference (MWC) initiated a Global Gifts sharing project, and called on Linda’s gift of connecting. Linda gathered a group of Latin American facilitators to coordinate regional workshops to share the idea that God has given gifts to everyone. We’re a stronger global family when we share these gifts.

For Linda, this meant a global family of the north and south. Of both brothers and sisters. The facilitators were mostly women who gave the time and accomplished the work. “These women had strong gifts that were under-utilized,” said Linda. When they had an opportunity to serve, their gifts became evident, and this led to invitations for some to travel to MWC in Zimbabwe.

Linda’s connections for the Global Gifts project recognized the spiritual gifts of Latin American women. This paved the way for the Movement of Anabaptist Women Doing Theology in Latin America.

“Bringing people together can have an impact far beyond what one expects.”

Angela Opimi, Azucena Velásquez, Mabel Castro, and Viviana Machuca serve communion at an MTAL gathering in Guatemala in 2014.

Be a ligament.

Be the Gospel.
Be a leader.

By Kelsey Hochstetler

It was winter in Zimbabwe. The white plastic chairs in the seminar were cold. But that didn’t stop women theologians from gathering at Mennonite World Conference in 2003. A group of African women theologians offered a workshop.

“Let’s go,” said Linda. “I’ll translate.” We listened, and afterward went to talk with the African women. They didn’t have much time right then, but we agreed that we would set up a separate time to meet [at the conference].

Setting up the meeting became my task, perhaps in part because I knew both English and Spanish, and in part because I had a sense of how important that meeting would become. As I think back to all the details involved in finding a time and place and notifying participants, what comes to mind is walking. We didn’t have access to e-mail or cell phones, and the meeting area was quite large. My walking was filled with energy and hope, and often I was amazed and grateful to God for the times I found just the person I needed to find in the midst of the crowds!

The appointed hour came and women started arriving, first two talking together, then a cluster, and finally we were together from across Africa and Latin America. We didn’t have any translation equipment, so everything needed to be said in three languages: English, French and Spanish.

Just the introductions were amazing as we learned a little bit about each woman! We soon realized that most of the African women present had more theological studies than the Latin American women, while the Latin Americans held more leadership roles within their own conferences. The Latin Americans were inspired that the Africans had organized. We realized we had gifts to share across continents. We concluded with a powerful time of prayer, and many of the women exchanged addresses.

“It was clear from the beginning that this was to be a movement, not a carefully defined group,” said Linda. While studying theology is encouraged, the active work of doing theology is also recognized. Women teaching and preaching in their churches can be part of Movimiento de Mujeres Anabautistas haciendo Teología desde América Latina (Movement of Anabaptist Women Doing Theology in Latin America), whether they have academic degrees or not.

The movement has taken root. Since then, regional groups of Anabaptist women have met across Latin America and around the world. Together, they work to understand God’s call in the Bible to both women and men, to develop leadership skills, prevent family violence, and provide pastoral care for each other and other women.

And the timeline continues…

The women listed here are only a handful of the women who touched lives in mission, across the street and around the world. Their spark, stamina, and gifts continue to inspire hundreds of women to rise and follow God’s call wherever that may lead.

When you give to Mennonite Mission Network, you support women in mission leadership around world.
of religious role, that is abolished ‘in Christ Jesus.’” Bruce argues that, if leadership may be given to Gentiles and to slaves in the church fellowship, then why not to women?

I also feel drawn to present the overwhelming data that substantiates the incredible contribution that women have made in the global mission movement. That, however, has already been so amply demonstrated by scholars and historians like Dana Roberts (Women in Mission: A Protestant Tradition). She reminds us that even though the world’s attention was focused on the celebrated 1910 World Missionary Conference in Edinburgh, Scotland, in 1910 (where only a handful of the 1,200 delegates were women), committees of church women were planning interdenominational gatherings in cities and towns across the United States. She reminds us that the Woman’s Missionary Jubilee of 1910–1911 celebrated 50 years of women’s missionary activity that preceded Edinburgh 1910.

The Jubilee celebrations, she points out, were held in 48 major cities and many smaller locations. Across the country, local women gathered for missionary teas, pageants, and luncheons to hear Jubilee speeches by a traveling team of female mission leaders. They celebrated the achievements of what was then the largest women’s movement in America—women organized for world mission. These celebrations were significant in that Jubilee participants included 3 million dues-paying members of more than 40 denominational women’s societies. She notes that “women’s mission societies held regular circle meetings at local churches. They raised money for missions through church fairs and other activities. Many societies published their own magazines about missionary work among women and children around the world.” They recruited and sent female missionaries (from among their own) as well as supporting indigenous “Bible women” evangelists.

What I’d rather do is simply to celebrate and give thanks for all the women, unheralded often and frequently disregarded, who labored with such remarkable devotion and bore such impressive fruit. In our own Mennonite story, many, many names of women come to mind like, Blanche Sell, Florence Nafziger, Lena Graber, Ruth and Rhoda Ressler, Erma Grove, Frieda Erb, Miriam Krantz, Lois Barrett, Alma Doering, Lodema Short, and Marilyn Miller. If space permitted, I could name countless others in the past, and the present, whose contributions in global mission are truly impressive.

I am, furthermore, very pleased and honored to be associated with someone on our own staff, Linda Shelly, whose investment in Latin America particularly, has had such great impact. Linda’s dedication and indefatigable labors to resource, connect, and encourage the ministries of our partners in Latin America have greatly bolstered the witness of the churches to which we relate in that region. (I have several communications from our partners that substantiate this.)

We have so much to be thankful for—that despite the resistance, and often in the face of lack of recognition, women have taken seriously the call of God and invested their lives in mission. The story of the mission movement is at least half, if not more, their story, too. “Neither male nor female…” Yes! Both male and female—thanks be to God!

Stanley W. Green
Executive Director