Missio Dei

Exploring God's work in the world

From Kansas to Kenedougou ... And Back Again

Donna Kampen Entz

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Mennonite Mission Network

Missio Dei is published by Mennonite Mission Network to invite reflection and dialogue about *God's mission* in today's world. Some features in the series focus primarily on the biblical and theological foundations of the mission task. Others present ministry case studies or personal stories of attempts to be faithful to Christ's call. Perspectives represented reflect the passion and commitment of the agency: to declare in word and demonstrate in life the whole gospel of Jesus Christ, *"across the street, all through the marketplaces, and around the world."*

Mennonite Mission Network, the mission agency of Mennonite Church USA, exists to lead, mobilize and equip the church to participate in holistic witness to Jesus Christ in a broken world. With offices in Elkhart, Ind.; Newton, Kan., and Harrisonburg, Va.; the Mission Network supports ministries in more than 50 countries, 31 U.S. states and six Canadian provinces.

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I grew up in Saskatchewan, Canada, as a tomboy farm girl, very happy when my older brother left for school and I was chosen to help outside instead of doing housework. I loved all of the many community and sports activities of my town, and my moments of greatest anguish were when there was a scheduling conflict, forcing me to choose between events.

I remember the summer when I was finally old enough to go to summer church camp. I loved the counselors and the kids. At that time in our Mennonite camps, there was usually a daily altar call. Our camp pastor preached, and all I heard was hellfire and brimstone. I trembled. I responded by crying and crying. For a very sensitive 8-year-old, away from home for the first time, it was a most unsettling experience. The counselors did everything they could, but finally had to call my parents to come and get me. Already in those early years, I knew deep down that there must be some better way for people to know and experience their need for Jesus.

At camp, all I heard was hellfire and brimstone. I knew there must be some better way for people to experience their need for Jesus.

In high school I was the kid who managed to smoke a cigar only once ... and get caught by my boarding school staff on the very first try! I got into enough other minor troubles that my counselors encouraged me to start over somewhere else, where my "potential could be realized." So instead of going on to college, I signed up for an assignment with my church's Voluntary Service program. There I worked with various minority groups, but was also involved in the Jesus movement and other renewal movements. Unit members with whom I lived prayed as though their spiritual lives were important, and as I reconnected with God, I really made a new start. I felt a deep desire for other people to understand what was happening to me and what it was that had made such a difference in my life.

Preparation and training

Soon after, I found myself with four Mennonite Central Committee workers, recruiting young adults for possible assignments overseas. It was during this time that I realized I could no longer resist the challenge of overseas service.

At Hesston (Kan.) College, embraced and nurtured by the Anabaptist faith family, I began preparing for such a service assignment. It was there, as well, that I learned to think critically and understand more fully worldwide dynamics. Though many around me at that time rejected evangelism as a valid form of witness, I was compelled to find sensitive ways of sharing my faith.

It was at seminary that I came to understand, not just the stories of the Bible, but The Story as a powerful means of evangelism.

Through MCC connections, I met Loren Entz during this period and, together, we began planning our future overseas. After marriage we were off to seminary for training. There, a class in cultural anthropology was most significant for me, not only for its explanations of how different cultures work, but even more so in allowing me and other students to critique our own culture, and ultimately ourselves. This is the single most important learning, I believe, for someone preparing to do culturally sensitive evangelism.

It was also at seminary that I came to understand, not just the stories of the Bible, but "The Story." It also became increasingly clear to me that this Story could, in and of itself, be a powerful means of evangelism. Instead of the emotional appeals, finely tuned arguments, or fear tactics used by many in evangelism, I began to see the strength of simply bringing people into contact with the Story of the Bible and letting the Bible speak for itself. It was my growing conviction that the Bible would be far more culturally flexible than I could ever hope to be.

Identification and lifestyle

For the first half of the 1980s, Loren and I gave our full energies to a start-up ministry for Africa Inter-Mennonite Missions in the Kenedougou province of Burkina Faso, West Africa. In 1986 this ministry took a new turn when we began a partnership with Wycliffe Bible Translators to

work among a Muslim ethnic group, the Samoghos, who until then had no contact with evangelical witness.

In the village of Saraba, the local people built us four mud huts with grass roofs. The next year we put up two additional tin-roofed mud houses with foundations and floors of concrete. All six buildings were constructed in a circle around a beautiful large shade tree. Our visiting, eating and family activities happened there under that tree. The courtyard was built in a similar enough fashion to those in the village that people felt free to wander in and out for specific needs or simply to visit. Choosing this layout and design greatly facilitated the important task of building a strong relational base with our neighbors and friends in the village. It also put our three children right in the middle of our informal ministry and gave them a high level of ownership in the work.

Our courtyard was built in a similar enough fashion to those in the village that people felt free to wander in and out for specific needs or simply to visit.

The people of Saraba were all subsistence farmers. We tried to be creative in hopes of avoiding the problems created when one person working for the expatriate is the richest villager. We took the following suggestions to the village elders. Instead of hiring one man full-time, we offered to hire one teenage boy per year, to wash dishes, fetch water, sweep the courtyard and do other courtyard maintenance. For his wages he would earn a bicycle at the end of the year, just as if he had spent one year as a migrant laborer in neighboring Ivory Coast. The elders loved the idea. Their sons could do our work early morning and late afternoon while keeping up their family work in between. This also addressed the problem of too much discretionary money being available for spending on drugs or drink.

For laundry, the older women assigned one married woman at a time to do three tubs-full of wash for us. The clothes were washed out in a stream close to the village, making use of handmade soap. Upon completion of the assignment, each woman would earn a certain sum of money, set by the elders.

Because our children already loved the staple food of the area, we decided not to train a cook. Instead, we asked a family in the village to make larger quantities of their own food each noon and bring a portion to us. The cost of grain we paid for directly. But otherwise, we "paid"

families for this service by bringing extra varieties of sauce from the larger market town, helping with medical needs in the family, or providing gifts of cloth for the women. For dinner in the evening we made our own Western-style food. (Without that, our children would not have become familiar with North American flavors and textures.) By asking the older men and women to make decisions about various aspects of our life, we created a system of reciprocity where help was flowing both directions and we were respecting local authority structures.

The children were deep into language learning before we got our house fully functioning. Our son was said to be as fluent as the other village 5-year-olds after one year. Our youngest daughter sang the music of her first sentences before she could say the consonants. That phenomenon only happens in a language characterized by tonal patterns. Our preschool and then school-age children ran free until sundown. They could leave with whomever for wherever as long as they carried their own drinking water with them. The villagers never betrayed our trust. And our children trusted people completely.

By asking the older men and women to make decisions about various aspects of our life, we created a system of reciprocity where help was flowing both directions and we were respecting local authority structures.

Learning language and preserving culture

As we learned the language of the Samogho people, we came to a point where we could do cultural study as well. A friend of mine, Nanji, was a tremendous source of information. She would always stop by to explain the latest rituals happening in the village. She was thoroughly immersed in the local traditional worldview.

We recorded our experiences and the folk tales we heard on audiocassette. Folk tales had traditionally been a powerful form of informal education in teaching basic values. My best friend had no brothers for many years, and so as the oldest child, she spent each evening with her father as he told stories. Many of these were about the need to think of others first or to put people before money, and how to make and keep peace with others. With this exceptional training from her father, my friend became an insightful and wise woman. The custom

of storytelling was gradually dying out in the village, we discovered, and the need, therefore, to preserve stories was becoming a more urgent task with each passing day.

The village musical traditions were very strong, and anyone with a natural talent was free and encouraged to make use of his or her musical abilities. There were special songs for virtually every occasion. Wedding music was particularly impressive, it seemed to us, but the deep philosophy of the people, we were to discover, was actually embedded much more in the funeral songs. Funeral singing, however, had been banned 30 years before when the Islamic faith was widely adopted throughout the region. The young people no longer even knew these songs. Again we felt compelled to collect and record what we could. We came to believe, in fact, that perhaps one of our most important contributions was preserving the cultural identity of the Samogho people as we collected their songs and stories.

Covenant — a ritual called "drinking blood" in the Samogho language — takes place between two extended families, often from different ethnic groups.

The biblical story of God's faithfulness on cassette

Inspired by the importance of "story" in this oral society, we began work on 80 lengthy Old Testament narratives that we arranged to have recorded on 15 one-hour audiocassettes. These narratives told the story of how God worked with his people. We envisioned people learning to know God in a natural way with the cassettes, like a friendship unfolding. We wanted people to be drawn into the drama of the whole biblical message. To complete the scriptural account, we added the entire gospel of Luke and the story of the early church found in the first chapters of Acts. Our "evangelism stories" eventually filled a total of 22 full-length cassettes.

The common theme chosen for tying together the biblical narrative was that of covenant. It was after we were already finished with our official cultural study that we became more aware of the enormous significance of covenant-making among the Samoghos.

Covenant -— a ritual called "drinking blood" in the Samogho language — takes place between two extended families in conflict, often belonging to different ethnic groups. In the new relationship of honor and

respect established between groups, participants agree to help each other in hard times, and celebrate marriages and funerals together.

Covenants are sealed when the two oldest men, representing the two families, drink blood together. First, two feathers are pulled from a live quail and given to the men. Each of the elders then slits the top of the back of their hand until they draw blood. The quail feather is wiped in that blood and dipped by the feather into a common dish of sorghum beer, the traditional drink of the area. When the blood is washed off of the feather into the beer, each man in turn drinks of that beer containing the blood. This seals the pact. After the ceremony, the two extended families gather and eat a meal of celebration together.

The Samogho people understand God as a God of love because they understand deeply the meaning of "covenant."

In God's covenant with Moses, following the giving of the Ten Commandments, Moses splatters the blood of the sacrificed animals on the altar and then onto the people. Following this, the elders go up on the mountain to eat and drink with God, a most solemn experience. It is clear that God had chosen a ritual — the covenant — as the most binding ritual possible to reveal his love to the people of Israel. The Samogho people understand God as a God of love because they understand deeply the meaning of "covenant."

Spiritual connections with Islam

Before our arrival in Burkina Faso, we were told that because many of the people were Muslim, we might be obliged to do some sort of development work in order to earn a hearing for the gospel message. What, in fact, we experienced was that people loved to talk about their religious beliefs, and we could be very open as well in talking about our relationship with God. We learned that Africans were spiritual in all aspects of life. Ironically, had we gone with the idea that it was wrong to share our faith with these brothers and sisters, we would almost certainly have been cut off from any deep relationship, especially with our Muslim friends and neighbors.

As we began working with Muslim people among the Samoghos, we realized that there was a connection right in the Qur'an to the biblical

material. The Qur'an refers to Christians and Jews as "the people of the book," and says that their Holy Books are good counsel. Many proper names of people and places are also common to the Qur'an and the Bible. Building on these connections helped us to be sensitive in our proclamation.

Studying and understanding God's word in the Samogho context

Our Muslim village friends were absolutely delighted to listen to cassettes of Old Testament stories in their own language and then discuss them with us. I will never forget the day when an elderly hunter laughed so hard at silly Jonah that the tears ran down his cheeks.

We soon came to the realization that the Samogho people, though largely illiterate, understood the deep meaning of the Bible stories better than many North Americans do. One possible reason for this seemed to be that the Hebrew culture of the Old Testament was closer in many respects to that of African culture and worldview than to North American.

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The main image of the Muslim God, Allah, is that of judge, based on the fear of God's judgment when a person dies. So the village elders were touched time and time again, in hearing the biblical stories, at the patience and love of God who continually gave his people another chance, even after they had failed him so miserably.

Among the Samoghos, the blood-drinking covenant needed to be respected at all costs. If the covenant were ever broken, special animal sacrifices would have to be made. In a way remarkably similar to the Samogho covenant, Jesus also became a sacrifice in order to renew the covenant disrespected, misused and abused by the covenant breakers.

In fact, we are all covenant breakers. This is the way the Samoghos understand it when they translate the words of Jesus at the Last Supper on the evening before his death: "See, this is my body, which will be given in sacrifice in place of your evil. ... See, this is my blood that will be shed in place of your evil. This blood will repair anew the covenant that

was broken earlier" (Luke 22: 19-20). Not surprisingly, the good news of Christ's sacrifice bringing reconciliation between God and human beings is a theme picked up and celebrated in one of the earliest hymns composed by Samogho believers for use in worship.

The powerful impact of the translated word

We have attempted in our work among the Samogho to show respect for both the African traditional worldview and the Muslim faith. The division between these two religious realities in village life is felt most vividly in the generational conflict created because the elders, born before Islam was adopted in the region, are more closely tied to the traditional worldview. We have worked hard in our ministry to build relationships with people of both age groupings — with Kwekpiri, for example, the area's oldest elder, who has served as a "tester" of the Biblical materials being translated, as well as with our neighbor, Sunji, a serious student of the Qur'an and a member of the community representing those under 50 years of age with no memory of life before Islam.

Both the official head of the Muslim community and our Muslim neighbor expressed great pleasure that we would offer to teach their people about God.

Our policy, before ever beginning the teaching program with the all-Muslim elders group, was to ask permission of the Muslim leadership. We visited the official head or *imam* of the Muslim community, as well as our Muslim neighbor, Sunji. Both expressed great pleasure that we would offer to teach their people about God and showered us with blessings for the assignment. We knew that Kwekpiri was already in agreement. And we also knew that the elders were largely disillusioned with the changes introduced in recent years by the teachings of Islam.

One evening during this same period our neighbor, Sunji, and the local Muslim teacher called to pay us a visit. Their heaviest burden for the village, they told us, was that the elders continued to do sacrifices to the village fetishes. They felt that their repeated preaching from the Qur'an about worshipping Allah alone had been totally ignored by the older people. And they had great hopes that perhaps our teaching could help the elders to change their ways. After they left, Loren and I commented

how ironic it was that Muslim leaders would assign to us, as Mennonite missionaries, a religious role of this nature!

One day some time later, while the grass roof on our house was being repaired, Kwepkiri and I set up our work station under the courtyard shade tree with a cassette recorder and a text from the gospel of John. We were studying while the young men were working to fix the roof. Sunji came by to help, but couldn't work due to back problems. Kwekpiri suddenly stopped his work to report to Sunji something very important that he had discovered. He told him that because of the stories about God on cassette, he was no longer eating any meat offered to fetishes. With this new stance, the blessings offered to us by the Muslim leadership were finally fulfilled.

In the neighboring town where our Wycliffe and national colleagues have continued work on the Bible translation project, the two Samogho translators, both from Muslim families, have made commitments to Christ. These men have been truly transformed. They have become Bible teachers, evangelists, and even hymn composers as they set translated psalms to local music. Today, there are in that village about 10 baptized believers and a group of 25 middle-aged people meeting for worship in a somewhat evangelical style, but using their own language for teaching, singing and praying.

In the neighboring town, the two Samogho Bible translators, both from Muslim families, have made commitments to Christ.

"Loving enemies" as a form of witness

A man named Byema has recently joined this group of believers. He is older than either of the translators, and has become a sort of elder mentor for the two of them. Byema was attracted to Christ through our Wycliffe colleague many years ago. He was part of a group that made a commitment to follow Christ after seeing the "Jesus film." With time, Byema decided he really wanted to worship God in his own language and was thrilled to find a faith community where he could do just that.

One day in May of 2001, Byema was busy working in the fields when his younger brother attacked him from behind with an axe. Byema realized just in time what was happening to him and was able to sidestep the brunt of the blow, though it still caught him in the shoulder blade.

That evening, the elders called the two men together in order to

mediate the conflict. Byema's brother gave a variety of reasons for his action, none of which were judged acceptable by the elders. The brother essentially blamed Byema for every problem in his life, though it was eventually revealed that coinciding with Byema's decision to follow Christ, the brother's traditional powers had been severely weakened. At this disclosure, Byema simply announced that he would give the field to his brother and look elsewhere for his farming needs.

Byema healed quickly. He did have some problems finding a new field, but it was all finally worked out. Byema's sacrifice was truly a remarkable one. Not only did he resist the pressure to confront his brother violently, he also had to fight the temptation to use sorcery against him — a more typical way of pursuing retaliation in Samogho culture. It is interesting to note once again that among the first songs composed by Byema's faith community was one encouraging the believers, "Love Your Enemies."

It is the church's challenge in every time and place to be faithful to Christ's call. For our brother Byema in West Africa, that will mean one thing. For believers in North America, it might mean quite another.

From Kansas to Kenedougou ... and back again

It is the church's challenge in every time and place to be faithful to Christ's call. For our brother Byema in West Africa, that will mean one thing. For believers back in North America or elsewhere around the globe, it might mean quite another.

While contexts differ greatly from place to place, there are nonetheless certain principles of gospel communication across cultures that can and must be adapted and applied over and over again. It is my hope that in recounting a few of my experiences living and working with the Samogho people of Burkina Faso, I have demonstrated some communication principles — proper preparation, adapting to local patterns and customs, lifestyle choices, language acquisition, cultural sensitivity and respect — and have stimulated in the reader the need for further reflection and conversation about faithful witness in the place where God has called them.

People engaged in ministries overseas have for years pondered the issues addressed in these pages. As North Americans gain more awareness of the need to live and share the good news of Jesus in their own context, it will become increasingly necessary for them to ask many of

the same questions with which we grappled in a very different part of God's world. A few such starter questions are provided at the end of this booklet to get the process going.

Finding creative and culturally appropriate ways of sharing one's faith never comes as a well-defined road map that simply falls out the sky. It is much more like a journey, requiring trial and error, prayer and discernment, and the flexibility to change directions when the path we have taken doesn't seem to be getting us to our destination.

The journey itself, however, is not in question. It is one to which we, as God's people, have been called. It is my prayer that these few reflections from our journey in West Africa can provide signposts for other travelers along the way.

Bon voyage!

Questions for Reflection and Discussion

1. What life experiences have shaped your attitudes about faith sharing and evangelism?

2. What opportunities do you have to increase your understanding of the different cultures, social structures, religions and value systems present in your community?

3. Where do the people who live around you hear the stories that shape their worldview? For most Americans, it is likely either from person-to-person contact or from some form of mass media. What does this mean for how we share the story of God's faithfulness as found in the Scriptures?

4. How do the ways you arrange your daily living — your choices about housing, transportation, shopping, schools, recreation, meal times, etc. — impact your ability to build relationships with people who are not part of your church or family group?

5. Entz writes: "While contexts differ greatly from place to place, there are nonetheless certain principles of gospel communication that can and must be adapted and applied over and over again — proper preparation, adapting to local patterns and customs, lifestyle choices, language acquisition, cultural sensitivity and respect." Do you agree? If not, why not? How would taking this counsel seriously change the way you or your church work at relating to the community in which you live?

6. Are there stories of redemption, covenant or forgiveness that grow out of the cultural setting of your community? Could these be used in some creative way to build a bridge to people who have never experienced God's love?

7. Entz states that, over the years, "we came to believe that perhaps one of our most important contributions was preserving the cultural iden tity of the Samogho people as we collected their songs and stories." How does this line up with your understanding of the role that gospel communicators should play when living in a culture other than their own?

8. The story of Byema recounted on pages 9-10 corresponds to some recent research indicating how important the theme of "loving one's enemies" was as an evangelistic strategy for the early church. Do you find this teaching from Jesus to be significant for you personally or for your congregation as you seek to share your faith?

For Further Reading

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From Kansas to Kenedougou ... And Back Again

Donna Kampen Entz

This is the story of how one North American woman, Donna Kampen Entz, and her family lived and worked among the Samogho people of Burkina Faso, West Africa.

But it is more than that. At a much deeper lever, it is the story of how the gospel travels across cultures — how it begins in the hearts and minds of people living in one cultural setting and eventually finds a home in a vastly different context, thousands of miles away.

How does this happen? The author of this booklet provides some clues. "While contexts differ greatly from place to place," writes Entz, "there are nonetheless certain principles of gospel communication that can and must be adapted and applied over and over again — proper preparation, adapting to local patterns and customs, lifestyle choices, language acquisition, cultural sensitivity and respect."

These principles will no doubt sound familiar to people serving in "overseas" locations. But Entz is correct in pointing out that "as North Americans gain more awareness of the need to live and share the good news of Jesus in their own context, it will become increasingly necessary for them to ask many of the same questions with which we grappled [in West Africa]."

This journey, then, "from Kansas to Kenedougou … and back again" is not limited to those in preparation for ministry in West Africa. It is, rather, for all gospel communicators committed to building a bridge from the good news of Jesus to the particular place in the world where God has planted them.

Donna Kampen Entz, along with her husband, Loren, began ministry in Burkina Faso with Africa Inter-Mennonite Mission in 1978. Initially working to help organize the emerging Mennonite church there, they later moved to the village of Saraba and shifted their focus to building relationships with the mostly Muslim Samogho people living in the surrounding area. Donna and Loren have three children: Zachary, Mariam and Aisha. Since 2002, Mennonite Mission Network has been a sponsoring partner of the Entzes' ongoing ministry among the Samoghos.

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