



EXTENDING BEYOND

Community is the center of our lives

By Marisa Smucker, executive director



I am one of the thousands of people who have chosen to do a year of service — often referred to as a gap year. During my senior year of college, I was thinking about what would be next. I chose the PULSE program (Pittsburgh Urban Leadership Service Experience). This program connected me to other young adults who were ready to learn, serve and explore the city. It also connected me to a church and local communities where I lived and worked. That one year of service led me to stay in those communities for 11 more years, having found meaningful work and life, and truly a place to belong.

Today, people are constantly on the move, traveling or relocating. I do a lot of national and

international travel, and I have also experienced moving to another state and another country. Each time, whether I go for a short stay or settle into a new home, I find myself searching for where I can truly belong again. Sometimes, this

means looking for a connection with the land or the geographical context. More often for me, this means looking for a social context, or as my niece would say, “finding my people.” As a single, cisgender, ethnic Latina, who was raised in the Midwest by white Mennonites in their 50s and who has been influenced by a variety of cultures and is often traveling from place to place, I sometimes wonder, “Who are my people?”

To me, this question of “finding my people” is about finding places of belonging. I experience belonging when I encounter people caring for others and compassionately

“Jesus is the center of our faith.

Community is the center of our lives.

Reconciliation is the center of our work.”

— Palmer Becker,
What is An Anabaptist Christian?

Women find connection, support and community as they participate in the *Movimiento de Mujeres Anabautistas Hacindo Teologia desde América Latina* (MTAL, Movement of Anabaptist Women Doing Theology from Latin America). Photo by Linda Shelly.

“... that there may be no dissension within the body, but the members may have the same care for one another. If one member suffers, all suffer together with it; if one member is honored, all rejoice together with it.”

— 1 Corinthians 12:25-26 NRSV

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Photo by Travis Duerksen

Leigha and Christian Stoltzfus, Emily Keefer, Mir Knego and Schyler Entz participated in a panel discussion during Follow Jesus '25. Scan the QR code above to see the entire interview on the Mission Network website.

A year in service demystified

By Jane Morrow

Mennonite Voluntary Service (MVS) participants and Service Adventure leaders were brought together by Mission Network for the panel discussion, “A Year of Serving,” at the Mennonite Church USA Follow Jesus '25 convention in July. The panelists shared their personal service journeys of encountering new places, people and experiences, revealing how a year of service reshaped their lives. The panelists included:

- **Christian and Leigha Stoltzfus**, Service Adventure leaders, Colorado Springs, Colorado
- **Emily Keefer**, MVS, Alamosa, Colorado
- **Mir Knego**, Service Adventure leader, Anchorage, Alaska
- **Schyler Entz**, MVS, Tucson, Arizona
- **Alex Mace**, program director for MVS, moderator

Service Adventure

Christian and Leigha Stoltzfus opened with a heartfelt account of leaving their demanding teaching careers to lead the Colorado Springs Service Adventure unit. After struggling with their home-work balance as teachers, coaches and mentors, they realized their favorite work time was spent interacting with their students in the extra curriculars. Now, living alongside young adults, ages 17-20, they enjoy a slower and more rewarding pace of living.

“Service is more a mentality than action,” Christian said. He said he found that service is really the way someone thinks about what they are doing and the meaning and values they bring to it.

“I’m not the most important person here. I’m here to find a way to make myself useful. My work is valuable in ways that are not defined by how much money I make. It’s about looking at the challenges that society faces and thinking about how these can be addressed.”

Christian said that living on a small stipend and cohabitating with peers encourages participants to grow beyond familiar support systems. They have to learn how to budget and share. Working for local nonprofits can be a catalyst for learning, in many ways, like experiencing new schedules, cultures, skills, transportation modes, etc. He also noted that the host congregations for the units have no history with these participants, so they are treated like adults and individuals, instead of children. Leigha added that congregation members invite the unit participants into their homes, as well as to church activities. These are often the participants’ first encounters navigating social settings as adults, which they get to experience in a supportive environment.

Mir Knego, unit leader for the Anchorage Service Adventure unit, shared that leading the unit was just as transformative for him as for the members of his unit. He chose this opportunity after a disappointing experience in the workforce. While he hoped for spiritual guidance, he felt he got that and much more. He now sees service as a posture of living and approaches situations with that posture.

“Living in community, your needs are covered. You are living simply, on a small stipend. You’re not in a position to gain or lose a lot of wealth, so it makes you focus on being in the moment.”

Mennonite Voluntary Service

Emily Keefer served with MVS in Alamosa. She brought a poignant perspective. At 23, she joined the one- to two-year program for adults over 20, finding a placement with a restorative justice initiative. She learned about restorative justice in school but wanted to experience it in a work setting. Feeling a little trepidation moving to a new community and living alone, she said she appreciated the support system offered by MVS and the decades of relationships the placement organizations have had with Mission Network and other Mennonite organizations. What she didn’t expect was her ability to jump right into high-level work through her MVS placement — work that would have been out of reach for her otherwise, having been fresh out of school.

“There is no way I could have been hired anywhere to do the level of hands-on, on-the-ground restorative justice work that I’ve been allowed to do with my [MVS placement] organization .”

Schlyer Entz, an MVS participant in Tucson, offered a fresh viewpoint, as a 21-year-old navigating her first year of service. When she was growing up, her congregation’s youth typically left to do service as part of their spiritual lives. She said living with housemates and engaging with the local multi-cultural Mennonite church showed her a new way to worship, and the proximity of the unit to the Mexico-U.S. border and issues of immigration in her community opened her to new ways of evaluating societal issues.

“I grew up with a lot of people doing a service year. I knew it was always an option for me. So it made me understand what service was from a young age.”

The panelists agreed that the blend of community living, nonprofit service and church connection was a key

Colorado Springs Service Adventure unit

Christian Stoltzfus, Elizabeth Daudey, Alea Sagert, Hannah Smith, Sadie Sherman, and Leigha Stoltzfus, with daughter Naomi.



Anchorage Service Adventure unit

Armando Perez, Samuel Landis, Bria Nyveldt, Mir Knego and Avi Setiawan.



Alamosa, Colorado MVS unit

Joshua Kennell and Emily Keefer.



Tucson, Arizona MVS unit

Patrick Webb, Hannah Lehman, Schlyer Entz and Zing Bawi Ken.



part of the experience. “It’s not just about doing good — it’s about living differently, living your values,” Mace summarized, noting how programs like MVS and Service Adventure adapt to participants’ needs, offering student loan assistance and a variety of placements. ■



You can help young adults live out this call to “live differently” by supporting programs like Service Adventure and MVS. Visit MennoniteMission.net/Donate to get started!

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- ☐ **A Sunday school class**, searching for a learning experience, like **Just Peace Pilgrimage**?



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sharing God's love; through those who are open to learning from and pouring into the newcomer — whether for a brief time or for years; and through communities that open their doors to welcome the stranger and accept each person as they are. I have experienced belonging, and I have found my people in those who have made community the center of their lives.

I would like to extend a special thank you to the communities and partners that have welcomed our service workers, service leaders and participants, providing them with a place to belong. ■

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