



Mennonite  
Mission  
Network

# Missio Dei

Exploring God's work in the world

## Sister Care International

Becoming "God with skin"  
for each other



BY CAROLYN HOLDERREAD HEGGEN AND  
RHODA SHENK KEENER

*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.”

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# Sister Care International: Becoming “God with skin” for each other

*Written and edited by Carolyn Holderread Heggen  
and Rhoda Shenk Keener*

## Introduction

On a March afternoon in 2012, Rhoda Shenk Keener, from Pennsylvania, and Carolyn Holderread Heggen, from Oregon, were sitting at Keener’s kitchen table when the phone rang. It was Meme Yang, a leader of Hmong Mennonite women in Minnesota, asking, “Will you come to Minneapolis and teach Sister Care for the Hmong women in the United States?” It felt like a biblical Macedonian call (Acts 16:9).

Two years later, Keener and Heggen went to Minneapolis to teach Sister Care. In the following years, Yang often spoke of her desire to share Sister Care in Laos and Thailand. Her passion for providing healing and resources for Hmong women in Asia grew from her childhood as a refugee



Photo by Rhoda Keener

Meme Yang volunteers to share her life timeline at the 2014 seminar in Minneapolis.

in Thailand. Because her father had helped American soldiers during the Vietnam War, they, like thousands of other Hmong, needed to flee from the threat of retaliation in Laos after the war. She sadly remembers her younger siblings who died because of that flight; they were given opioids so they would not cry as they escaped through the jungle from Laos to Thailand and died because of the effects of the sedatives. Yang's family came to the U.S. as immigrant refugees when she was 8 years old. She is married to Jonah Yang, a Hmong Mennonite pastor. Both have studied at Anabaptist Mennonite Biblical Seminary and have been called to mission work in Southeast Asia.

Supported by their church and others, Meme Yang traveled to Laos and Thailand and taught Sister Care for several women's groups. Now, she and Jonah Yang are teaching Compassionate Care, the co-ed version of Sister Care. Local leaders are assisting them and also becoming trained as teachers. They find the central image of Sister Care, becoming God with skin for each other, to be a powerful metaphor that touches the hearts of those they teach.

## Theological foundation

Becoming God with skin for each other developed into the central image of this healing ministry. It resonated effectively with all the cultures where Sister Care was shared. In the first unit of the manual and early in each seminar, we share the story of a young girl who was terrified by thunder and lightning storms. After she repeatedly awakens her parents, seeking comfort in the stormy nights, they remind her that God is with her wherever she is, including in her own bed. However, a few nights after this important theological lesson, the girl once more awakens her parents, and her mother asks, "Don't you remember that God is with you in your own bed?" to which the wise child responds, "Yes, I remember, but I need God with skin!"

Another theological emphasis of this ministry is God's equal regard and love for women and men. Early and repeatedly in this ministry, women shared stories of cultural practices reinforced by religious teachings that made them feel that women are less valued by God than men. One participant said she had never before heard that God loves women as much as men. It was a new and empowering idea for many to hear that the domination of women by men is a result of sin and not God's desire for human relationships. God became human



Photo by Carolyn Hegggen

Ruth Mariet Trueba Castro and Indira Herrera Gutiérrez share the closing blessing in Havana, Cuba.

## God with skin

“The series of workshops led by Rhoda and Carolyn in three visits to Cuba form a demarcation of ‘before and after’ in the work of the Women and Gender program of the Cuban Council of Churches. They talked openly and personally about something that has always been difficult to address in our faith communities — sexual abuse. This has been a pain that has always stayed hidden in the hearts of violated women. But this was the first time that it was talked about openly, the first time that things were addressed which directly apply to women’s actual lived experiences. This has changed the very nature of our work with women.

Their visits have filled us with light as we are going through some very difficult experiences as a country and are lacking food and the very basic necessities for living. The time with them filled us with hope and happiness. They have truly been ‘God with skin’ for us as we have learned from them. We thank God for their lives and ministry and for the indelible marks they have left on each woman’s heart.”

— Midiam Lobaina, Cuba

in Jesus, and we can know how God feels about women by looking at the way Jesus treated them. Using his encounter with the Samaritan woman, we noted how Jesus knew about her difficult past, yet treated her with a graciousness and care that surely changed her life.

## Sister Care content

The purpose of Sister Care is to help women heal the pain of their own lives and use what they have learned to help others heal. Heggen and Keener say: “The content grows out of our own journeys and our desire and commitment to see the church become a more effective place of healing. We believe that the material and approach is based on good theology and good psychology.” After participating in a Sister Care seminar, one long-time church leader, Sara Lind, said that she had never heard such an effective and practical synthesis of theology and psychology in the church.



Photo by Carolyn Heggen

Elizabeth Soto Albrecht shares her life timeline at the seminar in Aibonito, Puerto Rico, where she and Carolyn Holderread Heggen taught.

The workshop materials are divided into four units. The **first unit** is “I am God’s Beloved Daughter.” What we believe about our own personal worth and identity makes a difference in how we care for others. If I am not feeling loved and precious to God, it is hard for me to care for others and help them feel beloved and precious in God’s sight. As women we need to understand that God loves us and

values our lives and contributions as much as God loves and values men. The Bible is full of stories about ordinary people doing ordinary things when God intervenes in their lives. These are sacred stories. When we take our own life’s story seriously and look for signs of God’s activity, this too is a sacred story.

The **second unit** is “Caring for Myself and Others.” It is physically and emotionally costly to care for others. The helping professions now have a name for this: compassion fatigue. It is important to set



Photo by Carolyn Hiegren

Hmong women dress in traditional clothing at Sister Care in Thailand.

### Comments on the first unit

A leader in Southeast Asia said, “Women need to know how much God loves them and that they are loved the same as men. Women tell me they feel ‘so low’. They are blamed for everything. If a woman’s husband dies, she is blamed. If she is beaten by her husband, people blame her. Even though they are Christians, they do not believe they are important to God. This teaching from the first unit is foundational.”

A leader in Central America said, “I remember the tears of my sisters as we studied unit one and they heard that they are beloved daughters of God, after experiencing lives filled with humiliations and hurtful offenses.”

limits and nurture ourselves as we minister to others in our homes, congregations, and communities. The body, mind, and soul God gave us need to be carefully tended, or there will be sad consequences. As Mother Teresa often said, “If we want to keep our lamps burning, we must keep filling them with oil.” Even Jesus recognized the need to take care of himself so that he could continue being effective in his healing ministry (see Mark 1:35-45).

“Listening That Heals” is the **third unit** of Sister Care. If we want to touch someone in healing ways, we must know what’s in that person’s heart, and we learn that by listening well, with both our ears

### Comments on the second unit

Teaching about the need for self-care was much needed, according to feedback received from participants. One church leader said that, while many parts of the seminar resonated deeply with her, the unit on self-care spoke most significantly to her. She wrote, “I realized that I needed to learn more about self-care and how to set boundaries to protect my tender heart. I felt that many other women in Africa needed to learn to do this, too. In gatherings that followed the workshop, we started discussing ways we can take care of ourselves as we care for others.”

A woman from Central America said, “I first attended a Sister Care seminar at a point in my life when I didn’t know what was happening to me. I had pain in various parts of my body, insomnia, forgetfulness, inability to concentrate, dizziness and other problems. I prayed a lot and sought medical help but nothing helped. Listening to [the leaders] teach, I learned that we can experience stress, anxiety and depression not only from serious problems in our lives but also from the accumulation of many small problems that accumulate and become a heavy burden on us. How freeing it was to learn that what I was experiencing was very common among women and that I wasn’t alone but one of millions of women who experience this. The strategies shared with us have been very helpful to me.”



Photo by Carolyn Heggen

Indonesian women dramatize the story of women taking their paralyzed friend to Jesus for healing.

and heart. One measure of our love for others is how well we listen to them. Those who are suffering emotional pain often don't need an expert's help. Sometimes they need a friend who can give them their full attention and listen compassionately. Compassionate listening is spiritual work that can help transform brokenness and grief.

The **final unit** is "How to Help a Grieving Friend." Everyone who has been given the gift of life will at some time experience loss and grief. Healing from profound loss is possible and often happens in the context of a caring group of people who have done their own healing work, have learned from their experiences, and have grown in compassion for others. Times of tragedy and loss can help people grow in faith and may be an invitation to new life and ministry. Each person needs others to help transform tears into energy to heal others and make our community and world a better place. As Mennonite leader Meghan Larissa Good says, "Together we can push back the night for each other and bring down the power of despair."<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> From a sermon at Albany Mennonite Church in Oregon.

## Sister Care background

In the 1990s, Mennonite Women USA changed from being primarily a local “sewing circle” to an organization that began to build stronger connections with Anabaptist sisters around the world. The financial support and connections of North American women with international women who wanted to study theology and prepare for ministries in their congregation and community was an important step in this evolution.

As these relationships continued to grow, it became apparent that women around the world faced many similar challenges —concerns about physical and sexual safety, challenges to self-esteem because of patriarchal teachings and practices in their churches and communities, getting through times of loss, and finding time and support to care for themselves as they juggled their many responsibilities.

Women carry similar questions in their heart, no matter where they live or what language they speak: Am I really a beloved child of God? Does my life really matter? Is it possible to find healing for my own deep wounds? How can I find time to take care of my own needs when there are so many other demands? How can I set healthy boundaries and appropriate limits?

## Sister Care beginnings

The seeds of what became the Sister Care seminar germinated in south central Pennsylvania, when a small group of women joined Keener, the executive director of Mennonite Women USA (MW USA) at the time, to imagine together how the church might become a more transforming place of healing for women. Those discussions led to a 2008 pilot seminar in Virginia, which was attended by 90 women who drove on icy roads to attend. That number doubled at a 2009 Pennsylvania seminar. It was clear from these responses that there was a deeply felt need for and interest in experiencing the church as a place of healing. Keener asked the MW USA board for help to further develop resources.

Ruth Lapp Guengerich, MW USA board chair; Heggen, West Coast representative; and Keener met for two days in February 2010. They asked, “What healing tools are most needed?” and, “If we had a few days with women and wanted to share with them resources for personal healing and for helping and caring for others, what would

be most important and useful?” By spring, with Heggen’s leadership, they had written a 64-page manual, “Sister Care: Equipping Women for Healing Ministry.” Using this manual, within three years Sister Care had been taught in every conference of Mennonite Church USA (MC USA) and in two Canadian provinces.<sup>2</sup>

## Emergence of Sister Care International

The Sister Care material was first shared internationally in 2012 with 325 women in Cuttack, India, at the All-India Mennonite Women Conference. Although the response was positive, the limitations of communicating and interacting with a large group confirmed that teaching small groups of women leaders would be the most effective model.

This was the beginning of a 14-year journey of sharing Sister Care International with over 1,600 women leaders in 22 different countries and making the manual available in 23 languages. In some countries, the manual was needed in multiple languages. It was translated into Spanish, Kekchi, Low German, Portuguese, Hindi, Nepali, Tamil, Bangla, Telegu, Marathi, French, Swahili, Kinyarwanda, Korean, Indonesian, Vietnamese, Thai, Hmong, Ukrainian, Russian, Mongolian, and Arabic.

In February 2013, Olga Piedrasanta, pastoral care professor at SEMILLA (Latin American Anabaptist Seminary) in Guatemala City, Guatemala, and coordinator of the Movement of Anabaptist Women doing



Photo provided by Sister Care

Rhoda Keener, Olga Piedrasanta, and Carolyn Heggen meet at SEMILLA.

Theology from Latin America (MTAL), hosted the first Sister Care leadership training workshop. Sixty-one women from seven Latin American countries attended. Heggen was able to teach and converse

<sup>2</sup> See Anita Hooley Yoder, *Circles of Sisterhood: A History of Mission, Service, and Fellowship in Mennonite Women’s Organizations* (Harrisonburg, VA: Herald, 2017), 199-216.

in Spanish, so relationships with the participants formed quickly and made follow-up possible.

Before the seminar in Guatemala, the Sister Care manual was translated into Spanish and 1,000 copies were printed. Following the seminar, Piedrasanta distributed 800 manuals for attendees to use in teaching others in their home countries and compiled a record of participants in these seminars.



Photo by Rhoda Keener

Deusilene Milhomen, Brazil, leading worship at a seminar.

A year later, these leaders had taught 953 additional women through 41 seminars.<sup>3</sup>

All subsequent Sister Care International seminars followed this model of teaching and resourcing leaders, who would then teach others. Deusilene Milhomen, a Sister Care leader from Brazil, said, “This train-the-trainer model was used throughout Latin America and the Caribbean. At first, the

coordinators tried to keep a list of workshops and participants, but after reaching 4,500 participants, the count was lost, as the growth had become organic.”<sup>4</sup>

In 2015 Heggen wrote a 48-page international manual replacing all North American stories with globally understood examples and using language that would enable greater clarity and ease for translators. Participants were given full permission to photo-copy or reprint the Sister Care manual as needed. Other pertinent resources including Linda Gehman Peachey’s booklet *Created Equal: Women and Men in the Image of God* and Carolyn Holderread Heggen’s book *Sexual Abuse in Christian Homes and Churches* were shared at each seminar in English or Spanish.

3 Olga Piedrasanta, correspondence with authors, Feb. 17, 2014.

4 Movement of Anabaptist Women Doing Theology from Latin America (MTAL), *Women: 20 Years of Paving the Way between Dreams and Hopes*, Missio Dei, no. 32 (Elkhart, IN: Mennonite Mission Network, 2023), 17.



Ofelia García and Olga Piedrasanta extend God's love through teaching Sister Care workshops as part of their ministry with the Movement of Anabaptist Women Doing Theology from Latin America (MTAL).

## Testimony from Latin America

"The Sister Care workshop in Curitiba in 2015 was a dividing of the waters for us, transforming our vision of how to care for each other. We began to understand that healed women can help others heal and learned how to be God with skin for each other. We have now taught more than 1,800 women in six regions of Brazil."

— Elizangela Fernandes, Brazil

"The first time I attended a Sister Care workshop was in Guatemala. It was an enriching experience to participate. Carolyn and Rhoda presented the material in a clear and effective way, and I realized immediately how valuable these materials would be for our pastoral ministry in Chihuahua. I could see how beneficial it would be to bring this to the women of our community, regardless of their social standing, age, or marital status. We all need to experience the compassion and love of Jesus, which these materials help instill.

"We presented this workshop more than 25 times in different churches, and each experience was unique. There are so many stories I could tell! Sharing this material has been a big blessing!"

— Ofelia García, Mexico



Photo by Carolyn Heggen

Ofelia García, of Mexico, and Midiam Lobaina, of Cuba, attend the Sister Care Enrichment training in Guatemala.

At that time, Linda Shelly, Mission Network’s regional director for Latin America, connected women leaders throughout Central and South America with Sister Care International. When it became obvious how many Sister Care seminars were being led in Latin America, Keener and Heggen developed additional materials and activities to deepen and expand the teaching

of the original seminar and workbook. These included more dramatizations of Scripture, teachings on ambiguous loss and grief, and lessons on finding one’s life purpose and mission. The Sister Care Enrichment seminars held in Guatemala, Colombia, Argentina, and Cuba offered additional training and materials, networking support, and an opportunity to share ideas and challenges with other leaders. Shelly’s knowledge of and meaningful relationships with church leaders

### Testimony from Latin America

“The impact of Sister Care has been profound in my life. In my congregation, a group of women decided to keep studying the materials and concepts presented in Sister Care. We call our group ‘Taking Care of Each Other’ and meet every two months to talk about topics, like gender violence, that are not addressed from the pulpit. The book, *Sexual Abuse in Christian Homes and Churches*, written by Carolyn Heggen and available in Spanish, has been a key resource. An average of 80 women from Anabaptist churches and other faiths participate in these bi-monthly gatherings. Thank you to each of you who had the original idea and wrote these materials and to those who continue teaching the workshops and to the people and organizations who support this important ministry.”

— Alix Lozano, Colombia

in this region, in addition to her feedback to us, was vital in developing further resources and support for Sister Care leaders. Shelly said,

“I certainly appreciate all that Sister Care has done in Latin America — as well as other parts of the world! Sister Care has had a huge impact in the development of the Movement of Anabaptist Women Doing Theology from Latin America (MTAL). The Latin American women who participated in seminars with Carolyn and Rhoda were leaders, ready to take what they had learned and facilitate workshops with other women. The content connected deeply with the life experiences of women in the region, so interest was very high. This contributed to meaningful engagement with thousands of women already in the early years of MTAL. Even more important than the numbers are the stories of women who experienced healing in their own lives and now see themselves as people who can support others in their healing journeys.”

In 2016, Esther Muhagachi, a Tanzanian church leader, opened the door for Sister Care to be taught in East Africa. She translated the manual into Swahili for seminars in Kenya and Tanzania. Muhagachi observed: “This movement didn’t stop with just these two countries; it spread to Uganda and Rwanda, as well.” Four women from West



Photo provided by Sister Care

From left: Carolyn Heggen, Patiencey Tumuramye, Rhoda Keener, Alberta Isack, Happy Kimonge, Esther Muhagachi, and Hellen Bradburn gather in Tanzania.

## Testimony from Africa

“The great thing about Sister Care is that it helps women open up and talk about their wounds and challenges, which helps them get healed. This sharing helps other women know that they are not alone in their struggles.”

— Febronie Mukarunyange, Rwanda

“My husband, Patrick, attended Mennonite World Conference in 2015 and saw a Sister Care manual at the Mennonite Women booth. After explaining that it was for his wife, he was given a manual. It was at a Sister Care conference in Kisumu, Kenya, that I first experienced this workshop. It was there that I met my dear sister, Esther Muhagachi, from Tanzania. We quickly bonded and realized our meeting was God ordained. Since then, we have journeyed together across East Africa, leading this workshop for both women and men. Nothing previously had prepared me for this spiritual and social journey! I thank God for the way He has brought together sisters across the East Africa region through the Sister Care ministry.”



Photo by Rhoda Keener

Women dance and sing in worship to begin the Sister Care seminar in Kenya.

— Pamela Obonde, Kenya

Africa attended the seminar in Kenya, accompanied by Nancy Frey Yoder, a Mission Network worker, who interpreted the seminar into French for them.

Sister Care returned to India and Nepal in 2017 to teach leaders; then, it expanded into a number of additional Asian countries between 2018-2024. Gerry Keener, of Eastern Mennonite Missions, introduced Sister Care to Tran Thie Diep, a women’s ministry leader in the Evangelical Church of Vietnam, who planned seminars in Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City. Sun Ju Moon, the director of the Korea Anabaptist Center in South Korea, organized a seminar for 35 women

leaders in Chuncheon, South Korea. Pastor Wara Widurii and Mennonite Central Committee (MCC) worker Anielle Santoso helped provide a seminar for 89 women in Yogyakarta, Indonesia.



Photo by Rhodia Keener

Women in Dnipro, Ukraine, listen to Sister Care teaching.

In 2019, Mary Raber, a Mission Network worker in Eastern Europe, connected Sister Care to Ukrainian church leaders in Dnipro and Zaporizhzhia, which led to two workshops. Many of the attendees talked about the tolls of wars — World Wars I and II, as well as a conflict in the 1990s, when the Soviet Union broke up and Ukraine gained independence from Russia, and the 2014 Russian invasion.

### Testimony from Europe

“Things are very difficult in Ukraine now, and self-care is essential. The Russian soldiers are five miles away from our region. When you live under regular air raid sirens, hear the news, and read about atrocities and the numbers of people injured and killed, you don’t get enough sleep. I think everyone is suffering from PTSD.

“I remember the story Carolyn shared about the boy in the Andaman Islands who tried unsuccessfully to save his grandfather during the tsunami. He felt like he had failed his grandfather and was a bad person, but she told him, ‘You did your best!’ I need to go through the Sister Care manual again so that after the war, I can better help others.”

— Oksana Nadielina, Ukraine

Memee Yang traveled with Keener and Heggen to Khung Klang, Thailand, in 2020 and served as the interpreter for 55 Hmong participants, 20 of whom traveled from Laos to attend the seminar. She later introduced Sister Care to Tom and Christine Poovong, from Mennonite Church Canada Witness, who work with the Thai people. They organized workshops in Roi Et and Chaam, Thailand, which Heggen and Keener taught.

## Testimony from Asia

“After studying unit one, some women changed their perspectives on themselves. They no longer felt inferior or shameful, but they are grateful to God for all that God has blessed them with in life. They began speaking



Photo by Carolyn Heggen

Small group sharing at a seminar in Southeast Asia.

positively about themselves, their appearance and their abilities. They also encouraged others to think rightly and give thanks to God.

“We have used the Vietnamese Sister Care materials for small groups, studying one lesson each week. These materials were also used in training classes for women who are pastors’ wives or leaders of women’s ministries in remote areas. The Hmong manual, translated by Memee Yang, was used to train women leaders who, then, went back home to teach small groups in their communities. It’s slow, but effective, and they are very happy to learn together.”

— Tran Thie Diep, Vietnam



Photo by Rhoda Keener

Participants gather at the Sister Care worship altar in South Korea.

“Our Sister Care workshop was organized entirely by women. I had never experienced such a woman-organized event before. It was exciting to witness, and many of the women said they felt greatly empowered with new self-confidence. Personally, I was greatly helped by the teaching on compassion fatigue. I came to understand that God is a compassionate God who wants us to also care for ourselves while caring for others.”

— Sunju Moon, South Korea

## Testimony from Asia (continued)

“I was blessed to translate the manual into the Mongolian language and was able to familiarize myself [with the materials] prior to the workshop. I had been grieving the passing of my mother for over two years. These materials helped me understand how my experience can be a blessing to others who are also grieving. I also learned to be careful when using Scripture with people who are hurting and learned new ideas for how the church can become a place of healing.”

— Munkhtuul, Mongolia



Photo by Munkhtuul

Munkhtuul, Rhoda Keener, and Carolyn Heggen visit the traditional ger (yurt) home of a Christian friend.

Sister Care went to Mongolia in 2024 through the help of Mission Network worker, Laura Schlabach, who provided a connection to a women’s Christian ministry leader, Munkhtuul.<sup>5</sup> She organized a seminar for 50 women leaders, all of whom had become Christians since the Soviet Union collapsed in 1990.<sup>6</sup>

In 2025, Heggen and Keener taught three seminars in Cairo, Egypt.

<sup>5</sup> Traditionally, Mongolians use only first names.

<sup>6</sup> Carolyn Holderread Heggen and Rhoda Shenk Keener, “Women Share Joy of Faith as Christianity Gains a Foothold in Mongolia” in *Anabaptist World*, November 8, 2024, <https://anabaptistworld.org/women-share-joy-of-faith-as-christianity-gains-a-foothold-in-mongolia/>, accessed October 6, 2025.



Photo by Rhoda Keener

Memee Yang prays for Song Vang at the Sister Care seminar in Khung Klang, Thailand.

John Lapp and Sandra Shenk Lapp, MCC representatives, hosted a seminar for Egyptian Christian women. Lori Lawson, president of Petrescue Bible Institute, organized a seminar for refugee women and a shorter workshop for refugee men.

## Compassionate Care

In almost every Sister Care seminar, the question arose, “What about the men? They have many emotional wounds and need healing too!” Some women said, “I wish my husband could get this training!” Although reluctant to divert from the primary mission to women, Sister Care leaders led several co-ed seminars in the USA. We named these seminars Compassionate Care but included most of the same content as in Sister Care. Many assumed that the Sister Care manual would be rewritten to eliminate the feminine language. Instead, this was used as an opportunity for the men to grow in their understanding of what women often experience. Heggen would introduce the material saying, “Because the seminar and written materials were designed for women, the manual uses feminine pronouns and language. While we will be inclusive in our speaking, I encourage you to use this opportunity to experience the exclusion that young girls and women often face when reading the Bible, singing hymns and hearing the spoken word. May this be an opportunity for you to grow in compassion and sensitivity.”

In 2019, with the help of David B. Miller, an Anabaptist Mennonite

Biblical Seminary (AMBS) teaching associate, a Compassionate Care seminar for international student couples at AMBS was offered. Six couples attended, representing India, Kenya, Tanzania, Thailand/USA, and Germany/USA. Following this training, participants Esther Muhagachi, Pamela Obondi, and Miller taught a Compassionate Care seminar in Uganda for 26 women and men. Hegggen, Keener, and Miller taught a Compassionate Care seminar in Vietnam; Esther and Amos Muhagachi taught one in Tanzania; and Memee and Jonah Yang taught seminars in Laos and Vietnam. In addition to helping men address their own wounds and learn new ways of walking with others, Memee Yang noted, “Many of the Hmong women in Southeast Asia can’t read the manual. It is helpful for them if their husbands also participate.”

One of the activities used in Compassionate Care asks women to imagine how their lives would be different had they been born male and asks the men to imagine the differences they’d experience



Photo by Rhoda Keener

Hoang Van Thu anoints David Miller at the Compassionate Care workshop in Vietnam.

had they been born female. Jonah Yang wrote, “This exercise often evokes discomfort or unease as participants realize the differing societal expectations and responsibilities. This exercise is a powerful tool to foster empathy and understanding between genders. Men come away with a more profound respect for women’s burdens, especially in cultures where women’s roles are undervalued or strictly defined. It encourages participants to re-evaluate their attitudes toward respect, equality, and responsibility.”

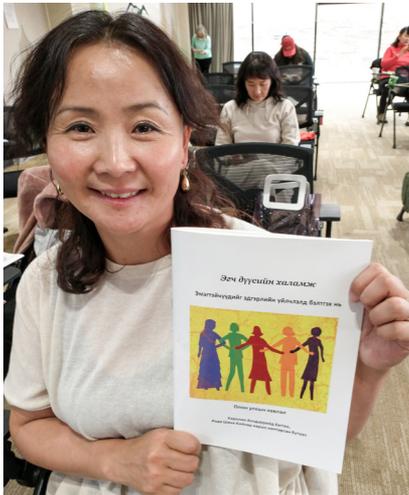


Photo by Carolyn Heggen

Munguntsetseg holds her Mongolian Sister Care manual.

## Impact of Sister Care International

Why has Sister Care International been so effective and why has it spread and continued to grow around the world? Heggen and Keener believe this truly has been a “God thing.” They say, “We never could have foreseen the many lives that have been touched and we continue to be amazed at the way God is using the materials and seminars to heal people. We came to this ministry with our own

histories of looking for healing in the church but too often finding it was not a helpful place. We felt committed to developing materials and a seminar that would provide tools for personal healing, and motivation and resources for helping others.”

Participants often share how meaningful it is to have materials written by women, for women, and taught by women. They express appreciation for not having to mentally change masculine language into words that describe them. Mission personnel have expressed appreciation for resources specifically created for women.

As Sister Care director, Keener relied on people working with mission agencies and other church-related organizations to connect them with gifted women leaders in each of the countries where they have taught. Their guidance in helping to plan the seminar and then

oversee the ministry was an essential component in the success of Sister Care.

Feedback from participants has confirmed the importance of starting these teachings with the fundamental belief that all are precious and beloved children of God. Until one can believe personally that she or he is precious in God's heart, it is impossible to convince others of the love of God and walk with them toward healing.

Sadly, many participants have shared that they have not felt beloved by God. Others have shared that they have not experienced love from other humans. One leader said that, while teaching the first unit, "I am God's Beloved Daughter," she heard a woman softly crying. When gently approached, she said, "I am crying because this is the first time I have heard that God loves me, a woman." A leader



Photo by Carolyn Heggen

Refugee women in Cairo, Egypt, anoint each other in the Sister Care closing blessing.



Photo by Rhoda Keener

Kekchi women Petrona Caz Xo and Eva Luvia Cuc Teni participate in the final blessing ritual in Carcha, Guatemala, in a seminar organized by former Mission Network worker, Deb Byler.



Photo by Rhoda Keener

Women in Cuttack, India, anoint each other in the closing blessing.

from South America shared that a participant, with tears in her eyes, said “I have never before heard that someone loves me. I don’t love myself and, in my family, I never heard that they loved me. Today I discovered that, yes, I am loved!”

Heggen and Keener say: “In Cairo, Egypt, we heard many painful stories from Sudanese and South Sudanese refugee women – stories of war, violence, relocation, and the difficulty of surviving in a new country. Each Sister Care seminar ends with a ritual that gives women permission to remember and feel their loss and grief in a safe place. Women first anoint themselves with water, representing their tears and the tears of those they love; then, they anoint another participant with water, representing Jesus’ healing living water. As these refugee women remembered and acknowledged the pain of their lives, we saw an outpouring of grief and tears greater than any we have witnessed before in our Sister Care ministry. Having heard their stories and the stories of many other memorable women during this 14-year journey, our lives will never be the same.”<sup>7</sup>

<sup>7</sup> Rhoda Shenk Keener and Carolyn Holderread Heggen, “Amid tears, Egyptian refugee women move beyond fear, trauma.” *Anabaptist World*, November 2025. <https://anabaptistworld.org/amid-tears-egyptian-refugee-women-move-beyond-fear-trauma>, accessed November 24, 2025.

People often ask who will continue the Sister Care teaching now that Keener and Heggen are retiring. Their answer: “the women leaders around the world, many of whom have already been sharing this material.” Even as they conclude their part of this work, the Yangs are in Vietnam teaching Compassionate Care, women in East Africa are meeting to plan an ongoing Sister Care ministry, and in Latin America, and other parts of the world, the work is continuing. They have released this ministry to these inspiring people who they have been privileged to learn to know.



Photo provided by Sister Care

Participants gather at the Sister Care seminar for Sudanese and South Sudanese women in Cairo, Egypt.



Photo by Carolyn Heggen

Kekchi women join Sister Care in Carcha, Guatemala.



## Sister Care (SC) International Timeline

*All seminars were taught by Keener and Heggen, unless otherwise noted.*

**2012:** SC topics presented at the All-India Mennonite Women Conference, Cuttack, India; and SC workshops in Tansen and Kathmandu, Nepal.

**2013:** SC model of “training the trainers” used in Guatemala City and in all subsequent seminars; SC in Bogotá, Colombia by Heggen and Elizabeth Soto Albrecht; and in Santa Cruz, Bolivia.

**2014:** SC in Aibonito, Puerto Rico, by Heggen and Soto Albrecht; and in Asunción, Paraguay; Bragado, Argentina; and St. Helena, Trinidad.

**2015:** Heggen completed the international version of the SC manual; SC in Curitiba, Brazil; and Camagüey and Havana, Cuba; SC workshops at Mennonite World Conference (MWC) Assembly in Harrisburg, Pennsylvania.

**2016:** SC in Kisumu, Kenya, and Dodoma, Tanzania; and the first SC Enrichment seminar in Guatemala City.

**2017:** SC Enrichment seminars in Buenos Aires, Argentina, and Bogotá, Colombia; SC in Nagpur, India, and Kathmandu, Nepal.

**2018:** SC Enrichment in Havana, and SC in Palmira, Cuba; SC in Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam.

**2019:** SC in Yogyakarta, Indonesia; Dnipro and Zaporizhzhia, Ukraine; and Chuncheon, South Korea; Compassionate Care (CC) by Heggen, Keener and David B. Miller for international student couples at AMBS in Elkhart, Indiana.

**2020:** SC in Khung Klang, Thailand, for Hmong women.

**2022:** SC in Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam for Hmong women; CC by Heggen, Keener and Miller for Vietnam Mennonite Church leaders; SC in Carcha, Guatemala, for Kekchi women; and SC and CC workshops by Heggen, Keener and Miller at the MWC Assembly in Indonesia.

**2023:** SC in Roi Et and Cha’am, Thailand, for Thai women; and Tenglo Island, Chile.

**2024:** SC in Palmira and Havana, Cuba; SC in Terelj, Mongolia and workshops in Ulaanbaatar, Mongolia.

**2025:** SC seminars and CC workshop in Cairo, Egypt



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## Questions for reflection and discussion

1. Have you experienced the church as a place of emotional healing? If so, how did the church help you? If not, how could it have been more helpful?
2. What are the needs of women in your church and community? How do you think these are similar or different for women around the world?
3. Have you found the insights of psychology and theology to be in conflict or mutually enriching? Share examples.
4. If you were raised in a Christian home and church, how did your understanding of God impact your sense of self-worth?
5. Have you been inclined to think that it is selfish to set limits on what you do for others, particularly in the church?
6. A spiritual director once told Heggen, “For you, ‘no’ can be a spiritual word.” Are we, as Christians, tempted to wear our busyness and exhaustion like a badge of honor and a sign of our deep spirituality?
7. Is it harder to say “no” when asked to help in the church than in our secular jobs or community?
8. Have you experienced the healing power of having someone just sit with you, listening in silence and with love and compassion? Have you done that for others? Was it hard to just listen and not give unsolicited advice?
9. Can you think of examples of people who have turned tragedy and great loss into motivation for new ministry? How did their tears become energy for helping others?

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# Notes

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\*Available in Spanish.



# Sister Care International: Becoming “God with skin” for each other

“Sister Care is something that has impacted not only my life but the lives of thousands of women around the world. I will never forget when my friend Carolyn told me that they were willing to come to Guatemala to share this workshop. I didn’t know then what a blessing this would be for the women leaders of Latin America. This first workshop was so inspiring and enriching for the participants that they each went home and reproduced it in all their countries from Mexico and Central America.”

— Olga Piedrasanta, Guatemala



**Rhoda Sherk Keener** retired in 2025 after 25 years with Mennonite Women USA; first as executive director, then co-director, and for the past 12 years as Sister Care director. Her background includes work as a psychotherapist and teacher. She says, “Learning to know women from around the world has been a profound privilege.”



**Carolyn Holderread Heggen** has been a university professor and psychotherapist, specializing in trauma recovery. She has lived in Puerto Rico, Pakistan, and Nepal, and is grateful for the way her international experiences and friends have enriched her life. Teaching Sister Care seminars brings together many of the things she most values and enjoys.

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