

# Addressing unseen disasters in Ethiopia | Building homes, bonds in Appalachia | A novel way to peace in Rwanda



## A Common Place



# A Common Place

Volume 30 Number 3 Fall 2024

## A way out of no way

ANN GRABER HERSHBERGER  
MCC U.S. EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR



*I am making a way in the wilderness and streams in the wasteland.*

(Isaiah 43:19 NIV)

As I read the stories on the following pages, my mind keeps returning to Isaiah and the promise that God makes a way where there is no way.

This is the hope that so many people hold to in the midst of peril, whether that peril is in a part of Ethiopia devastated by fighting and violence, or in an economically distressed area of the U.S.

I am struck by how conflict in Tigray, Ethiopia, often unseen for us in the U.S., claimed some 600,000 lives and left families struggling to feed their children.

In the U.S., I can't imagine what it would mean if my monthly heating bill regularly topped \$600 and despite putting scarce resources toward needed repairs, the winter chill still poured into my home.

In both Tigray and Appalachia, we see families grappling to find a way forward.

And, in both cases, God opened a way through local people who gave courageously of themselves and their time to meet urgent needs in their own communities supported by the resources that MCC could provide.

Empathize with Bizuayehu Abera, a pastor whose extraordinary efforts to bring help to his community in Tigray were so profound that he gained the nickname of Joseph, a nod to his dedication in a time of hunger and to his separation from family during the conflict.

Feel the joy that Kristin Overstreet, who was raised in Pike County, Kentucky, finds in working (from about dawn to dark during the summer) to help provide families in her home region of Appalachia with safe, warm and dry homes.

As I give thanks to God for them, I also give thanks for each of you and how your gifts of time, money and prayers support their efforts.

This is how it works—each of us called to our own way of giving that, together, gives us a powerful opportunity to co-labor with God in making a way where there is no way.

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Mennonite Central Committee (MCC), a worldwide ministry of Anabaptist churches, shares God's love and compassion for all in the name of Christ by responding to basic human needs and working for peace and justice. MCC envisions communities worldwide in right relationship with God, one another and creation. [mcc.org](http://mcc.org)

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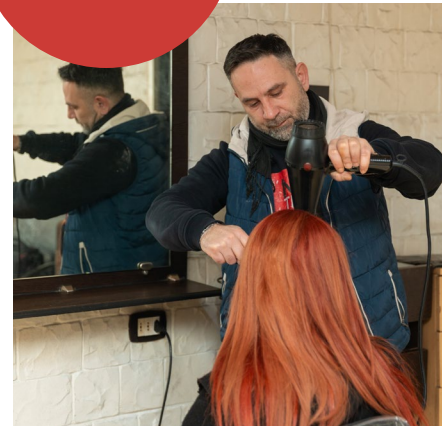
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Find more news at [mcc.org](http://mcc.org)



## Syria

### Boosting businesses

In 2023, the earthquakes in Syria destroyed hairdresser Masses Nishan's home, adding to the challenges of high energy and equipment costs he's faced as a small business owner amid the war. Through MCC partner Christian Hope Center's Micro-Projects, Nishan, who has three decades of experience, received a generator and new tools for his salon in Aleppo, Syria. This livelihoods initiative has also helped weavers, welders and other workers start or revitalize businesses and earn more income. Aleppo has long been an important economic center in the country, and as of mid-2024, MCC

and the Christian Hope Center had together assisted 44 businesses in the city. Explore more stories of resilience and entrepreneurship at [mcc.org/lifting-spirits-syria](http://mcc.org/lifting-spirits-syria).



## Bangladesh

### Languages and learning

At 17 schools in Bangladesh, Indigenous children like 3-year-old Jui Soren (pictured with teacher Marina Hasda) are preparing for lifetimes of learning. Multilingual education offered by MCC partners Shalom and MAASAUS provides lessons in students' Indigenous languages, while giving them Bengali and school skills they'll need in primary school.



## Ukraine

### Relief for families

During the war in Ukraine, MCC and its partners have shared God's love through essentials like the relief and school kits received by Tetyana (back), her children Veronika and Nikita (right) and her sister Hanna (left). (Last names not provided for security reasons.) The family, who was displaced to the city of Zaporizhzhia, hopes to one day return to their home village. In the meantime, relief items like soap and toothbrushes help them meet their daily needs where they are. Below, learn how you can assemble MCC relief kits for families around the world.

## Relief kits requested

The hygiene essentials lovingly packed into MCC relief kits help families stay clean and healthy in times of crisis and let them know that their needs haven't been forgotten.

### Contents (NEW items only)

- 4 large bars bath soap (leave in wrapper)
- Shampoo (1 or 2 bottles totaling more than 20 oz; place in a resealable plastic bag)
- 4 large bars laundry soap (such as Fels Naptha®, Sunlight® or Zote® brands)
- 4 adult-sized toothbrushes (in manufacturers packaging)
- 4 new bath towels (medium weight, dark or bright colors preferred; approximately 28 in x 50 in)
- 2 wide-toothed combs (6-8 in)
- 1 nail clipper (good quality)
- Adhesive bandages (minimum 40)
- Sanitary pads (THIN; 1 or 2 packages; minimum 28 pads total)

**Instructions:** Place contents in a box or bag and deliver to an MCC drop-off location. The kit will be re-packed in a new 5-gallon plastic pail with a lid. MCC will provide toothpaste.

Go to [mcc.org/kits/relief](http://mcc.org/kits/relief) to learn more or find drop-off locations. Or contact your nearest MCC office (see p. 2).



## Unseen disasters

Getting help across blocked borders in Tigray, Ethiopia, is just one way that MCC responds to emergencies that don't make the headlines.

STORY BY LINDA ESPENSHADE  
PHOTOS BY PAUL MOSLEY



These Tigray, Ethiopia, residents received cash transfers in March 2024. Their families used the funds to buy staples like beans, grains and oil.

### MCC is currently responding to over 20 humanitarian crises.

#### Conflict and displacement in:

- Burkina Faso
- Democratic Republic of the Congo
- Ethiopia
- Myanmar
- Palestine
- South Sudan
- Ukraine
- Colombia
- Chad
- Nigeria
- Egypt
- Lebanon

#### Flooding in:

- Kenya
- Burundi
- El Salvador
- Ethiopia
- Afghanistan

#### Drought and hunger in:

- Ethiopia
- Zambia
- Zimbabwe

**M**issiles and drones dropped bombs, and soldiers raided houses and assaulted men, women and children in Ethiopia's northernmost region of Tigray between 2020 and 2022. Tigrayans searched for safety, food and medicine to keep themselves alive.

They were caught in the crossfire as the Tigray People's Liberation Front fought against the Ethiopian National Defense Force in a struggle for political power. An estimated 600,000 people, military and civilian, were killed and the region decimated.

Within the first six months of fighting, MCC partnered with Meserete Kristos Church (MKC), a Mennonite church that has 1,462 congregations in Ethiopia including six in Tigray, to send food, blankets and hygiene supplies. It was the beginning of an ongoing response to a crisis that, during the pandemic, barely caught the attention of the Western world.

This is just one of the ways that MCC provides urgently needed help in the face of disaster or crisis—in Syria, in Ukraine, in Gaza and also in dozens of places that don't make the worldwide news.

In the case of Tigray, getting that assistance into the region was a steep challenge. After

MCC's first shipment, the Ethiopian military established a blockade that prevented travel to Tigray.

"We were without food, water, electricity or any banking services, which caused us immense suffering," says Bizuayehu Abera, Tigray relief project coordinator for Meserete Kristos Church Development Commission (MKCDC), the humanitarian arm of the church, and pastor of an MKC congregation in Tigray. (Read about him on p. 10.)

"They prevented even the smallest amounts of food from entering Tigray, leading to widespread starvation," he says. "People died from lack of food (and) medicines needed."

As MKCDC searched for ways to get supplies behind

**"I prayed, but I couldn't speak because I was filled with tears."**

the blockade, the primary support the church could give was comfort, says Desalegn Abebe, president of MKC, which is based out of Addis Ababa, Ethiopia's capital. He remembers a Sunday morning when a Tigray pastor arranged for him to preach to a congregation by holding a microphone to a cell phone.

"I prayed, but I couldn't speak because I was filled with tears," Abebe recalls. "And I tried many times, but I couldn't."

He apologized to the pastor the next week for being unable to deliver the sermon, but the pastor told Abebe that his tears allowed people at church also to weep and to feel his compassion. "They assumed that people who were not living in Tigray were



**Hadesh Hailemariam, a mother of four, purchased sorghum and barley with her cash. While families generally prefer teff, they have been opting for the cheapest grains available.**



**Milashu Teklay used her cash to buy food for her four children, including a 16-year-old daughter who was injured in the war.**



**Farmer and father of five Behihu Desalegn says that his cash transfer helped the family survive a devastating drought.**

against them, but this time God used that very moment (to show them) that God has somebody who felt their pain outside their context,” Abebe says.

Meanwhile Abera, who was stranded in Addis Ababa during the blockade, brought an unusual idea to then-MCC representatives Paul and Rebecca Mosley. Would MCC be willing to send cash on a United Nations (UN) airplane to fund an MKC response in Tigray?

“I have to tell you, suitcases of cash are not MCC style at all,” says Rebecca Mosley. But Abera knew that another international faith-based organization had successfully carried cash on a UN airplane, and the UN was the only nonmilitary agency allowed to fly (or otherwise travel) into Tigray.

As the Mosleys learned more about the process and discussed the idea with MCC leaders, this approach seemed to be the only practical way to get help to very desperate people. They approved the delivery.

The plan called for the Tigray Bureau of Labour and Social Affairs, MKC leaders and Tigray relief committees to identify the most vulnerable recipients: people who were widowed, elderly, ill, pregnant or nursing, and those who had large families.

In July 2022, Abera boarded a UN plane with the cash. The money would primarily be distributed through individual accounts set up at Tigray banks. But in Mek’ele, the bank was closed, so he delivered the money directly to the Mek’ele relief committee. They distributed cash to recipients, who would use it over the next three to four months primarily to buy food or medicine.

**“If you had not come to us that day, we would have died. We had exhausted everything we owned and were left with nothing.”**



**Atsede Tadesse purchased maize for herself and her five children, including Handeya Getet, 7.**

Abera remembers vividly the common responses he heard from those who received the cash: “If you had not come to us that day, we would have died. We had exhausted everything we owned and were left with nothing. But because you brought the aid promptly and urgently, our lives were saved.”

As shipments of cash continued every few months, people began to look forward to seeing and hearing the airplane. It was like “an angel of God,” said Tadelech Bogale, a widow, who spoke with Paul Mosley after the war was over. She told him the money saved her life and the lives of her two younger children during the worst four months.



A crowd gathers to withdraw their cash transfers from a Wegagen Bank branch in the small town of Tsigereda.

Her youngest daughter, Amen, then 6, had been showing signs of severe malnutrition. She sobbed as she recounted telling Amen and her sister, Ganaan, then 13, there was no more food.

A peace agreement in November 2022 allowed money to be transferred electronically to banks in Tigray. People no longer needed to listen for the noise of military aircraft, drones or helicopters so they could crouch on the ground, hoping not to be seen; they no longer would only light fires in caves to hide the light. But the suffering throughout Tigray didn't end.

Schoolteachers Alemtsehay Tadesse and her husband Araya Gebreselasie recalled

**“MCC and MKC worked together like ‘hand and glove.’”**

how they had just bought a small house together when the conflict started. They immediately lost their jobs and by early 2023, remained without work as schools were still not open. The food they were able to buy in the market with their cash helped to sustain them and their 7-year-old son Solomon.

To make matters worse, in 2023, drought devastated the region, meaning no harvest for farmers like 66-year-old Behihu Desalegn.

Droughts, which used to hit about every 10 years, now come twice as often. But in March 2024, Desalegn was ready to plant again. He came to the town of Gijet to buy fertilizer at a subsidized price and hoped to

plant his own teff, wheat and barley.

The cash that he had received, he shared, was part of what had helped him and his family survive the lean times.

MCC continued funding cash transfers through August 2024, giving short-term relief to about 5,000 families over three years.

The humanitarian response positively impacted the church and people's lives, as MCC and MKC worked together like “hand and glove,” says MKC leader Abebe.

Church members in Tigray gained a new appreciation for how the larger MKC church genuinely cared about them, even though many MKC members were opposed to the

Tigray People's Liberation Front. And the cash transfers enhanced the Tigray churches' outreach to their neighbors, Abera says, as they showed their compassion in practical ways.

“The community is now more receptive to hearing the good news of the gospel, due to the commendable work of MCC and MKC during these challenging times.” ■

*Linda Espenshade is news coordinator for MCC U.S. Paul Mosley, along with his wife Rebecca, served as MCC representatives for Ethiopia through July 2024. They now serve as MCC representatives for Kenya and Tanzania.*

### Give a gift – Where needed most

Across the world, MCC helps families obtain essentials like food in times of conflict, scarcity and climate change. Donate in the enclosed envelope, give online at [mcc.org/donate](https://mcc.org/donate) or call MCC U.S. toll free 888.563.4676. Or go to [mcc.org/christmas](https://mcc.org/christmas) to explore Christmas gifts of clean water, quality education and more.



Tadelech Bogale stands with children Amen, left, and Ganaan, right.

# Bizuayehu Abera

A relief project coordinator with Ethiopia's Meserete Kristos Church reflects on his efforts to bring urgently needed help to his home region of Tigray.

AS TOLD TO LINDA ESPENSHADE AND MCC STAFF IN ETHIOPIA

I have been the Tigray relief project coordinator for Meserete Kristos Church Development Commission (MKCDC) for the past four years. Because of this work, people gave me a new name. They called me Joseph, after one of the most renowned figures in the Bible, who saved his family and all of Egypt during the famine.

The war that broke out in Tigray has profoundly affected our lives. During the conflict, many people were killed by both the Ethiopian National Defense Force and the Tigray People's Liberation Front. In addition, many homes were intentionally destroyed using heavy artillery.

Families have lost their sons, daughters and homes, leaving them in a state of profound grief and loss. Among those who perished were my aunt's son, and also a Meserete Kristos Church (MKC) missionary, who I considered my spiritual son. (MKC is a Mennonite church and an MCC partner in Ethiopia.) The memory of these losses weighs heavily on my heart.

I grew up in the church, and I have served with various MKC churches and church plants for 16 years. Currently I am a pastor for the MKC congregation in Mek'ele, the capital of Tigray.

My primary interest lies in work that focuses on community development and growth. I have a bachelor's degree from Meserete Kristos College in peace and conflict transformation and a diploma in legal services. The expertise

and skill I have gained fuel my passion to assist those who require support and courage.

At the beginning of the war, I shared information about the situation directly with MKC's head office in Addis Ababa and via social media. Despite the inherent risks, I assumed the responsibility of being a voice for the people suffering from hunger in Tigray.

After MKC sent a first round of MCC-supported relief supplies to Tigray, I brought a relief report to Addis Ababa. But while I was there, everything went under blockade, and I was stranded for a year.

I had no means of communication with my family, like telephone or internet. I was completely cut off from my wife, child and other relatives.

I was worried about how they were eating. I was concerned that the war would cause many deaths, sickness and

much damage. I had internal anxiety, which I shared with nobody, that drone attacks in Mek'ele streets might kill my family.

While in Addis, I continued working with MKC's Development Commission. I proposed the idea to MCC representatives to bring cash to Tigray on a United Nations airplane to help my people. They studied the idea and then agreed.

When I arrived at the airport, I would board the plane, keeping the bag containing the money securely under my feet. Undeniably there was a fear associated with carrying a large amount of money.

**“In many ways, these experiences and questions tested the core of my faith, challenging me to find resilience and trust amid uncertainty and adversity.”**

In February 2023, Bizuayehu Abera reunites with his wife Senayt and daughter Medan in Ethiopia's Tigray region after a blockade had stranded him in the capital of Addis Ababa for one year.



The entire process was extremely stressful and filled with tension. But God never let us down.

We utilized the local bank in Wukro (another Tigray municipality impacted by the conflict), depositing funds through the local banking system to accounts set up for each recipient. In Mek'ele, we directly distributed funds to beneficiaries in the beginning, until we could work through its bank.

Whenever I arrived in Mek'ele, the people were full of hope. For instance, once a young girl saw me arrive and quickly ran home to tell her mother. Her mother responded, “Why didn't you tell me that Jesus has come? Don't you know that when Bizuayehu arrives, it means God has arrived?”

I felt my contribution was minimal, but the community's profound thankfulness led them to nickname me for the Joseph that we read about in the book of Genesis (who not only helped his people, but was also separated from

his family). This experience reminded me of God's past work in my life that prepared me for a time such as this.

Personally, these past four years stand out as a period where my faith was profoundly tested by the devastating impact of the war; the multitude of challenges and upheavals experienced by the whole nation and my family; and the uncertainty I felt when my movements were restricted in my own country.

My prayer life faced its own tests as I grappled with questions like why these events were happening despite my prayers, why God seemed silent and why intervention appeared delayed. In many ways, these experiences and questions tested the core of my faith, challenging me to find resilience and trust amid uncertainty and adversity.

When I finally returned to my family and children after the peace agreement, I was overwhelmed with tears of joy as I rejoiced in seeing them after

such an unforgettable war and situation. I wanted to stay with them, but I felt I needed to continue to travel back and forth to Addis Ababa for MKCDC.

Sometimes taking risks is necessary to effectively assist people who are vulnerable and disadvantaged. By taking these risks, I aimed to embody a life of service, prioritizing the needs of others above personal safety.

This initiative provided me with the opportunity to become a bridge of peace, love and compassion. It positioned me as an intermediary for the people of the country, especially those in Tigray, fostering understanding and unity. ■

*Bizuayehu Abera, who is based in Mek'ele in Ethiopia's Tigray Region, is a pastor in the Meserete Kristos Church and the Tigray relief project coordinator for MKC's Development Commission.*

# A novel approach to peacebuilding

## MCC-supported peace libraries help Rwandan youth foster a harmonious new chapter.

STORY BY SIENNA MALIK  
PHOTOS BY MCC/FAIRPICTURE/DENYSE KAMUGWIZA UWERA



At left, Sonia Uwikunda and Sonia Hakizimana Iraboneye select books at Gicumbi Children's Peace Library. At right, Francine Muhawenimana leads an English vocabulary activity.



they have conflict between them," which can lead to arguments, theft and even physical altercations in schools.

The organization she works for, MCC partner Transformational Leadership Center (TLC), saw an opportunity to rewrite this narrative.

Seeking to instill a culture of peace and a lifelong love of reading in children, TLC opened its first peace library in 2005. Today, the organization runs six libraries across Rwanda.

In addition to activities like these, children partake in peace debates. They are presented with a topic, and with a stance to take on it. They research the topic using library resources, and then practice public speaking skills when they state their case to their peers.

About 250 children and teens have also completed peer mediation training at the libraries. "In peer mediation, we study how children can help another child or her friend or her family," explains Ineza Kabera's classmate Sonia Hakizimana Iraboneye.

During the trainings, youth aged 8 to 15 learn about the root causes of conflict and practice mediation techniques by acting out scenarios, such as intervening when one classmate steals another's pen. When a similar situation played out in real life at school, Bienvenue Mugisha knew exactly what to do. He compelled a classmate to return items they'd stolen from a friend—and convinced the student they'd stolen from to forgive the theft. Students who undergo peer mediation training form peace clubs in their schools. Leaders of these clubs, including Ineza Kabera, teach their classmates about peace by hosting discussions, putting on plays or concerts, or—Ineza Kabera's favorite method—writing and performing poems about peace.

Since starting her role with TLC, Muhawenimana has seen firsthand the impact that library programming has on children. As they spend more time at the library, she says, children become more confident in reading and analyzing stories. As these literacy abilities grow, so do the young readers' peacemaking skills. "They learn different vocabularies, but also, they change their behavior."

Teachers, like Jeanne Clarisse Mukarunyange of G.S. Byumba Inyange, frequently express their gratitude to her. Mukarunyange says that her students are now better equipped to handle conflicts themselves, so she has to intervene less often. Local parents, like Epiphane Ujeneza, are like-

wise thankful for the peace libraries.

Ujeneza says that since her older child, Regis Miano Niyikiza, attended peer mediation training, he has argued less with his younger sibling, opting to resolve conflicts peacefully. Her son has also used what he's learned outside the home. She recalls a time that she was walking in their neighborhood and observed him breaking up a fight between other children.

Her younger child, Divin Ganza Niyikiza, also began taking books out of the library. Both children have made reading a central part of their lives. "They like to read when they come here," Ujeneza says. "Every time, they go home with a book, and they don't have time to waste," as they now spend so much time reading. She hopes that one day, all children in Rwanda can have access to a peace library.

So does Muhawenimana, who notes that a seventh peace library, near the capital of Kigali, is in the works, and TLC staff are building a digital library of e-books so they can reach a wider range of children.

Muhawenimana says that the transformation she's seen in local youth as they participate in the programs and change is what makes her job so rewarding. And she's happy to see that these young readers have embraced the collaborative nature of peacebuilding.

Muhawenimana views this collective action as essential. "It's together. We work together to build peace." ■

*Sienna Malik is managing editor of A Common Place magazine. Denyse Kamugwiza Uwera, a freelance photographer in Rwanda, supplied photographs through Fairpicture.*

“They learn different vocabularies, but also, they change their behavior.”

It is morning in Rwanda's Gicumbi District, Northern Province. Rays of sun stream through the windows of the Gicumbi Children's Peace Library, softly illuminating shelves stocked with colorful Bible stories, crossword anthologies and books on the environment. A plethora of works by African authors shares shelf space with titles like *Clifford the Big Red Dog*.

Children from G.S. Byumba Inyange, a local school, walk to the library with their teacher and sit in a row. Francine Muhawenimana, a coordinator at the library, hands them each a slip of paper with a single word written on it, in English, which the children study alongside the national language of Kinyarwanda.

As Muhawenimana asks the students to take turns using their words in sentences, Bruno Ineza Kabera is the first to raise his hand, crafting a sentence with the word "sister." His peers share sentences using words like "brother," "pot" and "friends." When a child is unsure of what their word means, the others assist.

Muhawenimana next projects the pages of a picture book—*Beloved Daughter* by Uganda-based teacher and author Ritah Katetemera—onto a screen at the front of the

room. The book is part of African Storybook, an initiative that publishes children's books by African authors in a range of languages spoken on the continent. She reads each page in both English and Kinyarwanda. The story, about a young girl who is comforted by a friend after her brothers break her favorite clay pot, features all the words used in the first activity. When the book ends, Muhawenimana leads the children in a short discussion about ways they can help their friends.

"It helped me to refresh my mind," says Ineza Kabera, and to learn the meaning of new words. But this and other activities also help children learn the value of peace—and how to foster it in their communities.

In the years after the 1994 genocide against the Tutsi—which turned neighbors against neighbors, friends against friends, and in which moderate Hutus were also killed—Rwandan and international organizations started various peacebuilding initiatives. They worked to repair the rift between ethnic groups that decades of colonial rule had deepened. These programs generally focused on reaching Rwandan adults.

But, as Muhawenimana explains, "Even the children,

### Give the gift of books for peace

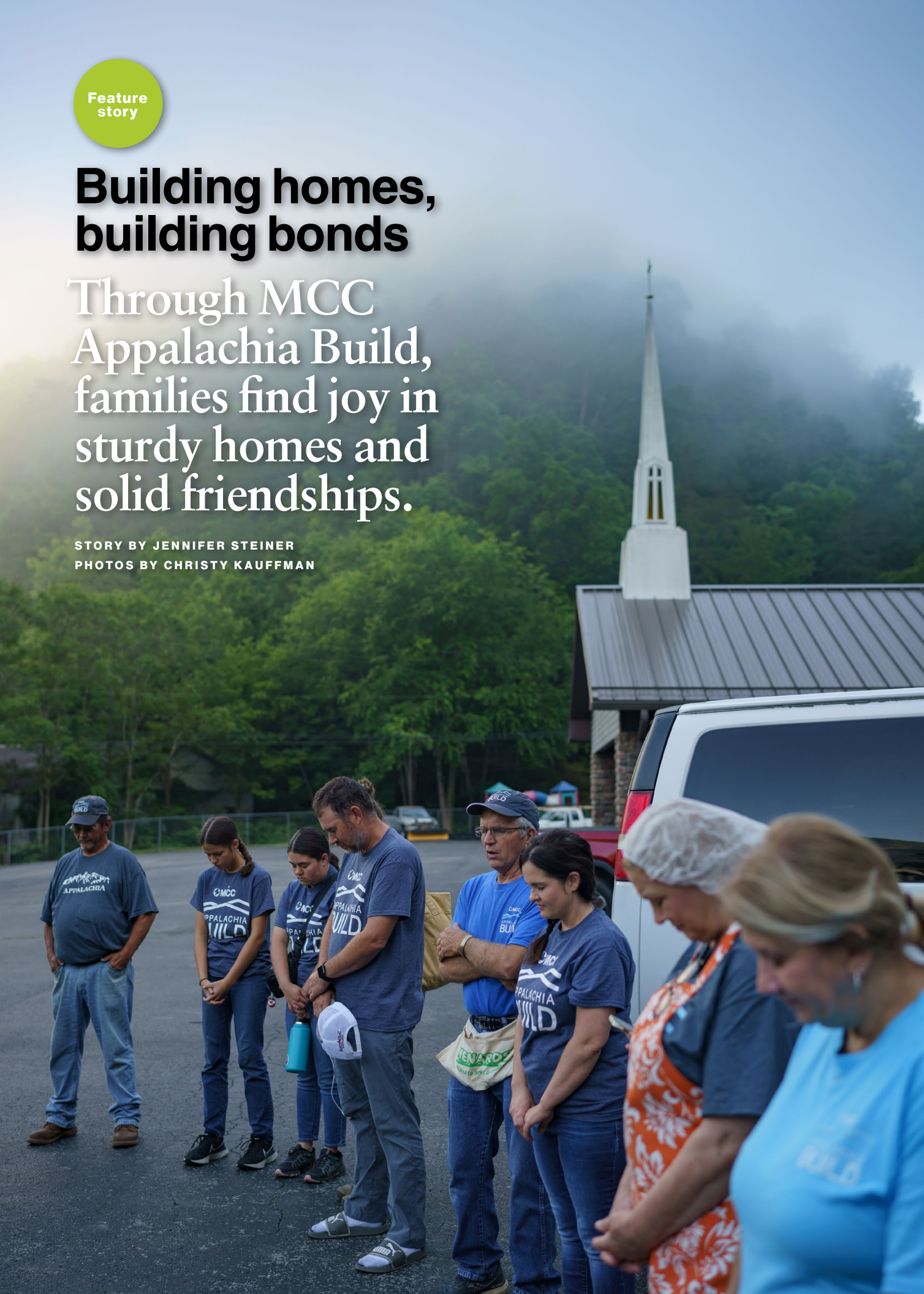
Through MCC Christmas giving, you can delight the readers in your life with a gift of inspiring books for children across the world. Visit [mcc.org/christmas](https://mcc.org/christmas) to learn more.



# Building homes, building bonds

## Through MCC Appalachia Build, families find joy in sturdy homes and solid friendships.

STORY BY JENNIFER STEINER  
PHOTOS BY CHRISTY KAUFFMAN



**H**elen Thacker used to wear three layers of clothing indoors during the winter to try to stay warm. The Thackers' heating bill for their home in Pikeville, Kentucky, regularly topped \$600. But there was no way to keep the heat from escaping through the rotted holes in the floor and the gaps where the walls didn't meet the ceiling.

While the family tried to make some repairs themselves, the extent and cost of the work was overwhelming. "I didn't know how long I could do it," Thacker remembers. "I just couldn't go on like this."

People encouraged them to move. But like many in Appalachia, Helen and her son CJ feel a deep connection to their family land. "I didn't want to move, because this is my home," she says.

"I've been here since I was a baby," adds CJ Thacker. "My mamaw and papaw had this house, and I was not going to ever leave this place."

In December 2020, the trailer where he and his fiancée, Linda Mullins, were living near the family house caught fire. CJ Thacker was able to escape, but his fiancée was trapped inside. Helen's husband, Arnold Thacker, tried to help, but both he and CJ's fiancée were killed.

CJ and Helen Thacker, both distraught, decided to live together in Helen's house.

Two years later, they got connected with MCC Appalachia Build (formerly Sharing with Appalachian People or SWAP), a home repair ministry that hosts volunteer groups to address substandard housing in Pike County, eastern Kentucky, and McDowell County, West Virginia, two of the most economically distressed counties in the U.S.

At first, Helen Thacker thought the offer of help was too good to be true. "I called my pastor to see if Appalachia Build was real," she laughs.

But this past winter, the Thackers were warm and comfortable—and their winter electric bills are down to around \$150—after Appalachia Build volunteers completed major renovations, including replacing the home's flooring, drywall, insulation, plumbing and electrical hookup.

Helen Thacker is radiant as she describes the cookies and peanut butter balls that she has resumed making at Christmas now that she has a new kitchen—for years, she had lived with a non-working stove and only had a microwave to cook.

And she loves returning home each day. "As soon as I come home from work, the animals are there meeting me. I sit down, me and CJ sit and talk about the day and have supper."



**“I didn't want to move, because this is my home.”**

**CJ and Helen Thacker, center, stand by their house with Troy Dylan Ayers and Joey McClarty, who led repairs on the home. On p. 14, Appalachia Build staff and volunteers pray together in Elkhorn City, Kentucky.**





**Appalachia Build volunteers from Alexanderwohl Mennonite Church's youth group join Dottie Fleming outside of her home in Pike County, Kentucky.**

This June, Dottie Fleming, a lifelong resident of Pike County, Kentucky, was just beginning to envision life in her rebuilt home.

As a first group of Appalachia Build volunteers from Alexanderwohl Mennonite Church in Goessel, Kansas, built additional tiers under the foundation to lift and stabilize the structure and installed insulation, she pictured where her kitchen would be, along with the living room, bathroom and small bedroom.

"I think about a bed," she says. "It's been almost three years since I've actually slept in a bed."

In 2021, she was with her husband, Timothy Fleming, who had been in the hospital for several weeks, when she got an early morning call that their house was on fire.

Their home was destroyed, and her husband died the following day.

In the midst of her grief, she gathered the insurance money. A local contractor promised to build a small house for the amount she had received, but after constructing a very basic shell of a building, the money ran out. The

price of building materials had skyrocketed during the pandemic, and some supplies were stolen from her property.

The new building had structural issues. Walking from one end of the building to the other, she could feel the unevenness of the floor. With her insurance money depleted, she didn't

have any choice but to move from family member to family member, sleeping on couches.

Connecting with Appalachia Build, she says, was an answer to prayer. "It's been a long three years," she

says. "God brings you through it. He brings you through a lot of things. You think you can't make it, but He provides the way."

And she is so thankful for the volunteers who have given their time and traveled from long distances. "To think that they'd give up their time and that much of themselves to go and help someone they don't even know. It's amazing."

**“To think that they'd give up their time ... to go and help someone they don't even know. It's amazing.”**

Giving homeowners a chance to form relationships with volunteers and staff is at the heart of Appalachia Build. What's being constructed goes beyond door frames and dry roofs into an avenue for learning and sharing.

It's been 15 years since Carol Dunn and her husband, Stanley "Pops" Isabelle, had the family home in Kimball, McDowell County, West Virginia, repaired through the program. But Dunn still cherishes the relationships she built with the volunteers. "We got really close, all of us did," says Dunn.

By the time Dunn and her husband found Appalachia Build, they had been turned away by several other organizations, who urged them to just tear the house—which was given to Isabelle by his mother—down. "We kept on patching and kept on doing our best to make it a home. And it was a home, because everyone enjoyed it. A home is love."

Appalachia Build groups repaired her floors, fixed her roof and added a handicap bathroom with a walk-in shower for her husband, among other repairs.

And she savored the chance to get to know the groups that worked at her house and to cook for them.

"It's my way of giving back," says Dunn. "Cooking is giving love and letting people know that you love them."

Dunn knows that Appalachian people are often portrayed negatively and that people come to the region with stereotypes. She's found that sharing with one another is key. "You bond and you hear other people's stories. And then they take back what they learned, and what I learned from them and their culture."

Over a decade later, she still gets letters and postcards from some of the volunteers. Several women have helped one another through tough experiences, including Dunn's heart attack and the recent death of her husband.

And she's continued to cook for groups that come to



repair other homes in the area. Volunteers rave about the cakes, pepperoni rolls and other food that Dunn prepares.

"I figured, if I can help someone, I will. I'm on a fixed income, but I can cook. I've been blessed, so why not bless someone?" ■

*Jennifer Steiner is MCC Great Lakes communications director. Christy Kauffman is multimedia producer for MCC U.S.*



**Lee Martin, an Appalachia Build staff member, and volunteer Isaiah Turley construct a wheelchair ramp on a home in Kimball, West Virginia. Above, Carol Dunn makes lunch for volunteers in the kitchen of Houston United Methodist Church in Kimball.**



“Appalachia is my home.... It gives me great joy to work in my community.”

MCC photo/Christy Kauffman

Lifelong Kentucky resident Kristin Overstreet sits in Breaks Interstate Park, which spans 4,500 acres across her home state and Virginia.

## Serving in Appalachia

**Name:** Kristin Overstreet

**Hometown:** Elkhorn City, Kentucky (Elkhorn Community Church)

**Assignment:** As a program director, I am responsible for the overall direction and supervision of MCC’s work in eastern Kentucky and southern West Virginia. The primary program is Appalachia Build (formerly SWAP), a home repair ministry that provides service and learning opportunities to volunteers. I am also heavily involved in the Dismukes Project, which highlights Black history in McDowell County, West Virginia.

**Typical day:** I try to be as involved in the day-to-day operations of Appalachia Build as possible. Spring and summer are very busy. I arrive at our Elkhorn City, Kentucky, location at 7 a.m. to share breakfast and devotion time with our volunteer groups. After groups depart for their jobsites, I am busy overseeing the many parts of the program and ensuring everything runs smoothly. I eat dinner with the volunteers and then conduct or coordinate evening sessions. During this time, I also visit jobsites, both here in Kentucky and in West Virginia. I enjoy meeting the homeowners and seeing the volunteers in action and the progress made to homes. The rest of the year is spent recruiting volunteers and preparing for the next busy season.

**Joys:** Appalachia is my home. I was born and raised in Pike County, Kentucky. I have spent my entire career (20 years) working in public service

here. It gives me great joy to work in my community and help provide people with safe, warm and dry homes.

**Challenges:** Breaking down stereotypes of Appalachian people! I’ve heard them all. We’ve been labeled and judged for over a century. I focus on showing Appalachia in a different light than what people might see on television or social media. My hope is that when people leave our program, they will have a whole different perspective of the people and place.

### FIND YOUR PLACE

MCC is always looking for people to join our work of serving others in the name of Christ. Go to [mcc.org/serve](http://mcc.org/serve) or [linkedin.com/company/mccpeace](https://www.linkedin.com/company/mccpeace) or contact your nearest MCC office to find MCC service opportunities.



Scan the QR code to learn more about the Dismukes Project.

for children

# hello A PRAYER FOR CHILDREN WORLDWIDE



As you celebrate this Christmas, give hope and share happiness by praying that all the children of the world...

Christmas is a great time for you to give to, and share with, other children. You may give your family and friends gifts in wrapped boxes or hand them cookies and candy canes. But prayer is another way you can give and share with other kids, even ones in faraway places.

Meet friends they can laugh with and lean on.



Sonia Hakizimana Iraboneye and Sonia Uwikunda; Rwanda

Can learn and grow through quality education.



Noyomi Tudu; Bangladesh

Have enough healthy and tasty food.



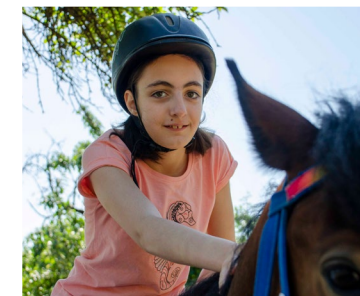
Deiver José Salgado Pérez and Leider David Salgado Pérez; Colombia

Have clean water at home and school.



Tsion Yoseph; Ethiopia

Find peace through nature or time with furry friends.



Vlada (last name not provided for security reasons); Ukraine

Have what they need to stay warm in winter.



Name not provided for security reasons; Syria

Know the joy and comfort of a loving family.



Ping Manet with her great uncle, Phean Sorn; Cambodia

### Write your own prayers!

After you’ve shared these prayers, see if you can think of other ways to pray for children. You might pray for a friend from school or church who is facing a challenge. Or think of something or someone you’re grateful to have in your life and pray that other kids can feel the happiness that you feel.

Write one or more prayers below:

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Mennonite Central Committee U.S.  
21 South 12th Street, PO Box 500  
Akron, PA 17501 U.S.A.

# Gifts of *comfort & joy*



**Give gifts  
that keep on  
giving.**

Help our neighbors around  
the globe this Christmas.

Find gifts like goats, wells,  
daycare and books in the  
Christmas Giving Guide  
(included in this magazine).

[mcc.org/christmas](https://mcc.org/christmas)

**New this year!**

Pair your gift with a  
fair trade handicraft from  
Ten Thousand Villages.  
Find pairing suggestions in  
the guide.