Learning to lead through relationship in Colombia
Lessons from IVEP | Reading the Bible in Mexico
Cover story

Learning to lead through relationship

In Colombia, MCC workers are developing leadership skills and empowering young people to make a difference in their communities.

First person

Alejandra Arboleda reflects on her time in MCC's Seed program.

Features

Lessons from IVEP help grow hope

MCC's International Volunteer Exchange Program (IVEP) provides experience and insights for farming in Lesotho.

Reading the Bible in Mexico

A participant in MCC's Serving and Learning Together (SALT) program reflects on how a new context leads to new insights on Scripture.

Departments

MCC news

Find more news at mcc.org

Summer Service

"Summer Service was an engaging opportunity that gave me space to think through how my faith and my profession would intersect. Wrestling with that helped me to know I wanted to offer my gifts to a faith-based organization," says Hyacinth Stevens about her MCC-supported Summer Service program.

U.S.

Peace and leadership

In the Lao People's Democratic Republic, volunteers with an MCC partner Mittaphab (meaning friendship) hold peace camps for youth, such as these in Vientiane Province. Peace camps bring together youth from different backgrounds and help volunteers develop leadership skills.

Sewing kit

In many places where MCC works, sewing skills open doors to new possibilities, including additional income that can help a family make ends meet.

Contents (NEW items only):

- 3 spoons white thread (all-purpose; cotton/poly or 100% polyester; min. 250 yds.)
- 3 spoons black thread (all-purpose; cotton/poly or 100% polyester; min. 250 yds.)
- 1 metric fabric tape measure (plastic or fiberglass; 150 cm; inch marking optional)
- 1 thimble (metal; medium size)
- 1 dressmaker shears (good quality)
- 1 package needles (min. 25; assorted sizes)

Haiti

Legal assistance

Haiti's prisons are notoriously overcrowded, and people who are arrested can wait months for a preliminary hearing. MCC supports a network of volunteer lawyers, including from left Simeon Jean and Simeon Valet (shown with pastor Venel Lundy), who provide pro bono services, prioritizing single parents accused of nonviolent offenses. The idea grew out of the experience of former MCC worker Ted Oswald, who before joining MCC was an attorney with a Christian legal aid clinic in the U.S. "There, lawyers were counselors and defenders, and ministers of the Gospel," says Oswald. The idea spread as he talked with Jean, a Haitian pastor finishing legal studies, and Valet, a lawyer becoming a pastor.

Strange and coufrever, which is a phrase used for people who are waiting in line for something and can’t wait to get their hands on it. The phrase is a combination of the French words “frais,” meaning “cost,” and “d’attente,” meaning “waiting.”

MCC news

Find more news at mcc.org

In Jordan, MCC's sewing kits provide quality tools that help Syrian refugees like Hana earn income they need to support their families. In Syria, Hana’s husband was a skilled tailor. When the couple received an MCC sewing kit, Hana was determined to increase her sewing skills. Now, with instruction from her husband, she is earning money as a tailor and hopes to design clothes and have her own shop in the future. Hana, her husband, and their four children also received an MCC hygiene kit and six comforters. (Hana’s last name and names of other family members are withheld for security reasons.)

Lao PDR

Peace and leadership

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- 1 dressmaker shears (good quality)
- 1 package needles (min. 25; assorted sizes)

1 pkg straight pins (min. 80; round plastic heads preferred)

1 dressmaker shears (good quality)

Shirt-style buttons (12: black or white; size ½–1 inch; place loose buttons in a resealable plastic bag)

Sew-on snaps (min. 20; assorted sizes)

Safety pins (min. 10; assorted sizes)

Sewing kits are distributed in a useful double drawstring cloth bag (11½in x 16½in). You may sew the bag yourself, request bags from a drop-off location or donate contents that we will place in a bag. For bag instructions or drop-off locations, contact your nearest MCC office (see page 2) or go to mcc.org/kits.

A Common Place

Volume 24 Number 3

Summer 2018

Preparing for lives of service

J. RON BYLER

MCC U.S. EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

Whoever serves me must follow me . . . (John 12.26)

In this issue, you’ll read stories about remarkable young adults. In Libertad, Colombia, Seed participant Lani Pickard worked with Osmery Tejedor and others to rebuild trust after years of armed conflict.

Rorisang Moliko, from Maphutseng, Lesotho, strengthened his faith and his professional skills during his IVEP assignment in Abbotsford, British Columbia. Quinn Brenneke’s SALT assignment in Mexico has prepared him to read the Bible with fresh eyes.

When we talk about MCC’s young adult programs, we often stress the service component as part of our Christian witness. Since 1950, more than 3,800 young adults from 79 countries have spent a year of service in Canada or the U.S. through IVEP, and since 1981, more than 1,200 young adults from Canada or the U.S. have served internationally through SALT.

But it is easy to overlook that MCC’s young adult programs are also about leadership development. About mentorship and learning more each day about what it means to follow Jesus.

“Jesus said follow me and serve others,” says Ricardo Esquivia, Mennonite peace activist in Colombia and founder of MCC partner Sembrandopaz. As we read about young adults listening, learning and building relationships with communities around the world, each of us can also learn about growing in our own faith and about loving God and loving our neighbors.

Thank you for your faithful support of MCC. Together, we are touching lives in communities all over the world and we are preparing young adults and others for lives of service and witness.
Learning to lead through relationship

In Colombia, MCC workers and MCC-supported programs strive to develop leadership skills that mirror Anabaptist values of service grounded in listening and learning.

STORY BY MARLA PIERSON LESTER
PHOTOS BY COLIN VANDENBERG

As a teenager raised in the tension and fear of Colombia’s years of armed conflict, Osmery Tejedor loved to hear people talk about the time before. She soaked up stories of how people in her small coastal community of Libertad used to leave their doors open late into the night and how, if someone was planting yuca or rice, others would come to help.

She and other youth longed to see the community rebuild that trust and togetherness, and they began to meet to see how they could help make that happen.

But even meeting was difficult. For years, residents of Libertad lived with the terror that expressing opinions or sharing views could spark a threat against their lives by an armed group. And that feeling lasted long beyond the most direct dangers to the community.

In 2014 when Tejedor, then 16, and others started forming a youth group, 10 years had passed since Libertad had regained independence from the armed group that had occupied it. Yet a deep fear remained.

“We were scared of sharing with people we didn’t know,” she says.

As if this didn’t make meeting hard enough, Tejedor and others had no experience leading or even being part of group activities. That’s where MCC came in.

Around the world, MCC partners with local organizations, communities and churches in projects that empower and equip people to work for change for themselves and their neighbors.

So when MCC worker Lani Pickard was invited to Tejedor’s group, her role was not to take the lead or set objectives, but to ask questions and provide resources that would help Tejedor and others move the group forward.

“I didn’t do things for them, but I helped them know the route,” recalls Pickard, who is from Excelsior, Minnesota, and was living and serving in Libertad through MCC’s two-year Seed program.

Tejedor and others who formed Organización Juvenil Fomentadora de Paz, or Youth Organization for Promoting Peace, had big aims. They knew they wanted to help reweave the social fabric of trust that had been torn by the conflict. But how?

Support from Pickard and Sembrandopaz (Sowing Peace), the Colombian MCC partner organization that Pickard worked with, was critical. “They were the base of our own formation,” Tejedor remembers.

Sembrandopaz works throughout the region in communities affected by the armed conflict and emphasizes discussion, reflection, grassroots projects and advocacy. Pickard helped youth look at their strengths and challenges and decide what tangible actions the group could take to bring people together and improve Libertad.
Today, four years after forming, a core group of 10 young people continues to meet about once a month, carrying out projects from community cleanups to partnering with the local police in establishing a recycling program. The group has sent letters to universities and the government entity for technical and career training, asking them to bring educational opportunities to Libertad.

“Now we’re creating our own processes and projects we can carry out as youth,” Tejedor says.

With this group, as with other youth organizations that MCC workers and Sembrandopaz have encouraged throughout the region, the lessons run deeper than activities or plans. MCC and its partners are striving to build the kind of leadership that mirrors Anabaptist values of respect and care for others, of service that is grounded in humility and dedicated to listening and learning.

“This is really the essence of Anabaptism—how we can serve with humility,” says Ricardo Esquivia, Mennonite peace activist and founder of Sembrandopaz. “Jesus said follow me and serve others.”

Through years of war, Esquivia says, Colombia has seen heads of armed groups, narcotraffickers and others impose their own paths on communities and put themselves over others.

“That’s why we need this type of leadership that is humble and comes from the community itself,” Esquivia says. “With MCC we share the same ideology.”

Building the skills of others, along with listening and reflecting individually and as a group, are cornerstones of MCC’s Seed program.

Seed brings together teams of young adults, ages 20 to 30, from around the world to live in local communities and serve with churches or MCC partners such as Sembrandopaz for two years.

In a world where tangible tasks and goal-setting are prized, Seed asks young people to

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with as few expectations as possible—to not assume they know what is best for the community or even what is most needed—and to spend the first few weeks investing intense effort in listening, learning and building relationships with local people.

“There are many ways that can look. It can sometimes feel like it’s beneath you, like it’s not part of the work. But that’s part of your job too,” stresses Giles Eanes of Harrisonburg, Virginia, a former Seed participant and co-facilitator for the Seed program in Colombia from 2015 to February 2018.

Workers live as part of the community. The families of Libertad don’t have regular access to running water. So neither did Seed participant Albin Sanchez as he lived and served in Libertad from 2016 to February 2018.

As he returned to his Mennonite Brethren church and community of La Cumbre, Colombia, he carried with him lessons from this time—from how to treat others with deep respect to seeing how people maintain hope even in the face of steep challenges.

“Thinking in a spiritual way, I can see Jesus in the people—a humble, simple Jesus that can relate to anybody,” he says. “Even though I’m from the outside, they welcomed me as a son. I see Jesus reflected in this warmth.”

Like other MCC assignments that include living in a community or with a host family, service in Seed is holistic—encompassing aspects of life far beyond a job description.

Take Pickard. A fan of the sport of Ultimate and longing to be more active, she began taking out a Frisbee™ and inviting others to play. Ultimate doesn’t have a referee and requires players to work with each other to figure out how to resolve conflicts, which, she recalls, at first provoked a lot of yelling and frustration.

But the tools needed to work through conflicts on the field were the same ones that Sembrandopaz was promoting to sow peace in communities—whether respect, teamwork, honesty and responsibility or an emphasis on gender equality and including all.

Ultimate became a creative way to start conversations about deeper values, and some of
Give a gift — Where needed most
Whether responding to a disaster or working in agriculture or peace, MCC workers and partners strive to nurture leadership skills and empower people to work for the good of their own communities. You can help. Give in the enclosed envelope, donate online at donate.mcc.org or call your nearest MCC office (see page 2).

Marla Pierson Lester is managing editor of A Common Place. Colin Vandenberg is a photographer in Winnipeg, Manitoba.

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As part of MCC’s Seed program, Albin Sanchez of La Cumbre, Colombia, lived in Libertad and supported the work of MCC partner Sembrandopaz from 2016 to 2018.

the youth attracted by the sport then went on to become involved in other initiatives to improve their communities, such as Tejedor’s group.

Additional teams formed in other communities. And as Pickard and youth from Libertad taught others how to play, they incorporated the lessons they had learned in resolving conflicts and respecting others. Today, youth continue to spread lessons in both Ultimate and peacebuilding to new communities, and an annual tournament brings players together.

Last year, Pickard was visiting another community in the region when some young people, seeing a foreigner, called her over and offered to teach her how to throw.

“That was great,” she recalls. It’s exactly the aim: The tools brought through MCC are put to work by entirely different groups of people.

And as Tejedor and others use what they’ve learned, they continue to work to build opportunities not just for themselves but for all.

“I know that the problems that I have are not only my problems, but most of the youth in the community have the same problems,” says Tejedor. “The way I look at it, it’s better if we can bring opportunities to the community so everyone can take advantage of them instead of looking for single opportunities outside the community.”

As part of MCC’s Seed program, Albin Sanchez of La Cumbre, Colombia, lived in Libertad and supported the work of MCC partner Sembrandopaz from 2016 to 2018.
Alejandra Arboleda

A participant in MCC’s Seed program reflects on her journey.

AS TOLD TO MARLA PIERSON LESTER

What I didn’t like was that they weren’t meeting. With others in the community, we gathered an assembly and talked about how to get groups going.

The reconciliation group, at first, didn’t seem very important. It was just planning parties. As I got to know families, though, I learned there was a lot of resentment because of links to different armed groups. Parties were a way of making visible what they believed, and of the community meeting together. We celebrated Mother’s Day, Father’s Day. This helped relationships to flow a little bit better.
Lessons from IVEP help grow hope

Experience gained in Canada and the U.S. sparks new ideas and opportunities for farmers in Lesotho.

STORY BY RACHEL BERGEN
PHOTOS BY MATTHEW SAWATZKY

Rorisang Moliko backs a truck into a covered shed storing maize and beans and hooks it to a tractor to restart the battery. Later in the day he’ll check on vegetables in the fields to make sure there is enough straw covering them to conserve water.

Moliko is the demonstration farm manager at Growing Nations Trust, an MCC partner in Maphutseng, Lesotho, whose staff research different methods of agriculture and teach people in the community about ideas and techniques they can use in their fields.

Each day in his job, he uses the skills he honed during a year in Canada through MCC’s International Volunteer Exchange Program (IVEP). “It helped me a lot to go to Canada,” he says.

In 2012-2013, he served as a volunteer with Willow View Farms in Abbotsford, British Columbia, a farm that grows apples, plums, pears, pumpkins and vegetables.

Before Moliko left for IVEP, he worked at Growing Nations as a gardener, primarily weeding and carrying out similar tasks, and didn’t have a guaranteed job upon his return to Lesotho.

His experiences in Canada, though, gave him the skills he needed to become the demonstration farm manager at Growing Nations.

Moliko refers to his work at Willow View as a mentorship. He learned to farm apples and winter vegetables and also how to work on equipment. “Now I’m able to drive the tractor, I’m able to fix it when it has a problem, I’m able to fix pipes and electricity. I can’t say I’m a professional, but when there are some problems, I can fix them,” he says.

Like many people who have taken part in IVEP through the years, Moliko says his time in Canada shaped how he lives out his faith, including his prayer life. “I learned that talking to God was like talking to your friend,” he says.

Moliko isn’t the only IVEP participant to bring new skills in agriculture back to Lesotho and Growing Nations Trust.

Moliko Lekhera, general farm manager for Growing Nations, was in IVEP in 2011-2012. He says his year at Fry Road Nursery in Albany, Oregon, developed his interest in farming innovation, marketing and agricultural economics.

Inspired by that experience, he went on to get additional training and education in Lesotho and Zimbabwe, which he used to help Growing Nations begin to produce local seeds to sell to farmers.

Most seeds used in the area are grown in the neighboring country of South Africa, often in areas with a different climate. “We are just one of a few people producing seeds in the country,” he says.

IVEP also played a role in growing his faith. “I was lonely sometimes and I had to rely more on God,” he says. “I believe God helped me finish IVEP because farming is what I want to do.”

Lekhera notes that most people separate their work in agriculture and their Christianity. But at Growing Nations, he’s bringing both his farming knowledge and his faith together as the organization promotes an approach called Farming God’s Way, which encourages conservation agriculture by using biblical language and principles of caring for God’s earth.

Through the years, a number of Growing Nations staff members have been to Canada or the U.S. through IVEP, and several have been to Willow View Farms.

Cheryl and Murray Siemens of Willow View began having IVEP participants serve on their farm in Abbotsford after Elmer Stobbe, a fellow church member at South Abbotsford Church, a Mennonite Brethren congregation, completed a short-term MCC assignment at Growing Nations.

Coming to Willow View Farms—with its variety of fruits and vegetables including some like pumpkins and squash that are grown in Lesotho—provides skills and experiences that can be more easily used.
back in Lesotho than, for instance, a large-scale chicken or grain farm. “What they would learn would be transferrable,” Murray Siemens says. That’s worked well for Thabang Mpokathe.

Down a bumpy, hilly road in the town of Mohales Hoek, Mpokathe owns and operates Qalakheng Evergreen Farms with his wife, Tlalane. In 2011-2012, he was at Willow View through IVEP. “I came to Willow View Farms and it really changed my perspective as to how to perceive farming as a business,” says Mpokathe, who had also learned about farming through Growing Nations. “We worked hard there. I met people there who played a role in my life. They really changed my life.” He also got an idea for a business. Mpokathe saw Murray Siemens start his plants in a small greenhouse, and then plant the seedlings out in the fields when they were strong enough. Lesotho can get quite cold and windy, so Mpokathe thought that vulnerable plants like tomatoes could benefit from being started in greenhouses — relatively uncommon structures in Lesotho. He even started on the idea while at Willow View, working with Stobbe to develop a business plan and the steps needed to carry it out.

In 2013, the plans became reality. Mpokathe secured a loan to build a greenhouse, and he dedicated part of it to growing tomatoes to harvest and another part to starting vegetable seedlings to sell. “I saw huge growth in the seedling business,” he says. Soon, he dedicated his entire greenhouse to seedlings, starting pepper, tomato, potato, lettuce and spinach plants to sell. He says people have come all the way from Maseru, the capital of Lesotho, to buy his product and he has contracts with local supermarkets that sell his plants. With this business growth, Mpokathe has been able to hire local laborers, helping to benefit the economy. He’s also helped others build their own greenhouses.

“IVEP played a remarkable role in this project,” he says.

Rachel Bergen is a writer for MCC Canada. Matthew Sawatzky is a photographer in Winnipeg, Manitoba.

Give a gift — Youth leadership skills
Your gift gives young people new chances to develop leadership skills and serve in the name of Christ. Give in the enclosed envelope, donate online at donate.mcc.org or call your nearest MCC office (see page 2).

IVEP: A world of connections
Since MCC’s International Volunteer Exchange Program began in 1950, some 3,802 young people from 79 different countries have spent a year serving in Canada or the U.S. (Today, IVEP has about 60 new participants a year, representing more than 25 countries.) They live with host families, worship in local congregations and serve in volunteer assignments such as at a farm, a school, a retirement home or an MCC Thrift shop. In each setting, Anabaptists in Canada and the U.S. have a chance to learn from and share with IVEP participants. And participants take what they have learned back home, enriching their home churches, communities and organizations such as Growing Nations. Many have become leaders in their congregations and denominations.

IVEP participants by sending country

1–50

51–100

101–200

200+

During IVEP in British Columbia, Thabang Mpokathe saw how greenhouses protected young seedlings. He brought the idea back home, and he and his wife Tlalane Mpokathe now run a seedling business out of their greenhouse in Mohales Hoek, Lesotho.
A participant in MCC’s Serving and Learning Together program reflects on how a new context led to new insights.

STORY BY QUINN BRENNKE

PHOTO BY ANNA VOGT

Reading the Bible in Mexico

As a teacher in South Texas before I joined MCC’s Serving and Learning Together (SALT) program, I noticed patterns as my students learned to understand and think about the stories we read in class. Life experience, or background knowledge, matters a lot when one reads. I will always remember a student who thought it was strange that a character in our book wore a “fleece.” She asked me, “Why would he put fleas on himself?” In the hot climate of south Texas, my young student thought first of “fleas” rather than “fleece.”

Living in Mexico for SALT has given me a lot of new background knowledge. Like my student who heard “fleas” instead of “fleece,” I am finding that I hear and read things differently than I did before. Particularly when I read the Bible, I have found new understanding and clarity in many passages.

You shall also love the stranger, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt.
(Deuteronomy 10:19)

Among the many commands that God gives Moses in the book of Deuteronomy, several have to do with how to treat non-Israelites who migrate to and through Israel — in other words, immigrants.

These commands are mixed together with multiple stories of migration. Take for example the biblical stories of Sarah and Abraham, Naomi and Ruth, Joseph and Mary, or the apostle Paul. Even Jesus and his disciples did quite a bit of migrating during their lives. Throughout Scripture, God is clearly present in the lives of these migrants, keeping them safe and using their movement to accomplish God’s plans.

Based on my experiences in Mexico, I now come to these stories with new questions. Did Sarah and Abraham ever get mixed up speaking a new language? Did Naomi and Ruth ever get lost on their way to the market in Bethlehem? Did Joseph and Mary like Egyptian food? Did Paul have to wait for hours in customs in Rome?

I imagine that immigrants in the U.S. and Canada will come to these stories with other questions based on their particular experiences, too.

Perhaps they might ask, did any of these biblical migrants feel unwelcome? Were they ever mistreated? Was migrating their only option to escape violence or poverty? All of these questions will bring readers into deeper understanding of the text, and for Christians, a deeper understanding of God.

Imagine all of the insight that is missed when Bible readers don’t take time to listen to the migration stories of immigrants in their own communities. How much more will Christians understand God when they embrace immigrants as their neighbors with love, hospitality and justice!

Wait for the Lord…
(Psalm 27:14)

The Spanish verb esperar means “to wait” and “to hope.” I’ve been paying attention to these translation details because I sometimes translate documents at work and I help my host sister with her English. “Wait” and “to hope.” How does one explain the difference between waiting and hoping?

Words like these present a challenge in translating biblical passages — and an opportunity for understanding them better.

In pondering this, I realized that, for me, waiting for something means I know it will happen. The text instructing me to, “Wait for the Lord,” also now speaks to me as, “Know that God is going to act and allow time to prove it true.”

This shapes my understanding of how I am called to wait for God. Both in the challenging work in migration I see here in Mexico and in all my life, God will move, no doubt.

Through MCC’s Serving and Learning Together program, Quinn Brenneke is serving in Chiapas, Mexico. He works with migration issues, lives with a host family, worships in a local congregation and often visits his favorite coffee shop, Frontera.
The International Volunteer Exchange Program (IVEP) is an annual program coordinated by MCC Manitoba. Every summer, young people from around the world come to Canada and the U.S. to volunteer alongside local MCC workers and service members. The program provides opportunities for participants to learn about Canada and the United States while engaging in meaningful service projects.

For more information about the IVEP, including how to apply, visit serve.mcc.org or contact your nearest MCC office. Follow @servemcc on Twitter to learn about current service opportunities.

**Gracias Señor por el pan** (Thank you Lord for bread)

This prayer is common in Colombia and is often sung in Spanish before meals by MCC workers and MCC church partners in Colombia. Fill in the word that goes in the blanks below.

Thank you, Lord, for . Give to those who are hungry.

And a hunger for justice to those of us who have .

Thank you, Lord, for .

We invite you to pray this prayer at your dinner table or with friends or family and talk about what it means to you.

**Colombia**

**My name is Sharol Osuna Salinas.**

**Age:** 7

**Lives in:** El Progreso, Soacha, Colombia

I live with my mother, my grandmother, my aunt and three younger cousins in an area outside Bogotá, Colombia’s capital city.

I wake up at 6, eat breakfast and walk to school with my mother. At school, we study math, Spanish, English, writing and reading, geography and other subjects. We read Bible stories and talk about them. On Fridays, we go to the computer room.

Our school (which is supported by MCC and Colombia’s Mennonite Brethren Church) meets in the same space as a church. For break, we go into a large room and play games. Tag is my favorite. Then we go back to study. At noon, we wash our hands and eat lunch. Then we leave for the day.

After school, I play with my cousins and do homework. I help my mother sweep the floor or dust. I like to play with dolls.

My name is Sharol Osuna Salinas.

**My favorite food:** pasta

**My favorite subject:** math

**What I want to be:** doctor

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**hello COLOMBIA**

**How do you say hello in Spanish?**

**hola**

(Say “OH- lah”)

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This prayer is common in Colombia and is often sung in Spanish before meals by MCC workers and MCC church partners in Colombia. Fill in the word that goes in the blanks below.

Thank you, Lord, for . Give to those who are hungry.

And a hunger for justice to those of us who have .

Thank you, Lord, for .

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