Preventing the flames of violence in Nigeria | Healing from trauma | Bearing a message of peace in Bangladesh
A Common Place

Volume 24 Number 1 Winter 2018

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Cover story

If it is possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all. (Romans 12:18)

In a trauma healing workshop in Mubi, Nigeria, sponsored by MCC, Gabriel Vanco heard the stories of people whose families were killed by Boko Haram, an Islamist extremist group, and were still ready to bring their pain to Christ.

Because people who had suffered greatly were ready to forgive, this became a moment of change for Vanco, challenging him to choose forgiveness over revenge.

That network has helped to start peace clubs for Muslim and Christian youth in 51 schools. Students learn that conflict is normal, but that the violence they’ve grown up with is not. They learn ways to resolve and prevent violence.

Anthony believes peace is a part of every person and each of us needs to embrace it. “In so doing, you will grow to affect others around you,” he says.

When you support MCC, you are helping to affect others for peace in Nigeria, in more than 50 countries around the world and here in the U.S. and Canada. Thank you for your support.

J RON BYLER

MCC U.S. EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

Grace and peace to you,

J RON BYLER’S EMAIL ADDRESS IS RONBYLER@MCC.ORG

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

Disaster response

Meeting urgent needs

From hurricanes in the Caribbean to earthquakes in Mexico to flooding in South Asia, MCC is responding to multiple disasters. Osama Jomnrits and his family were awakened in the middle of the night as water rushed into their home in the mountains of La Chapelle, Haiti, and covered them in their beds.

Less than 48 hours after Hurricane Irma hit Haiti in early September, MCC distributed comforters, water purification tablets and relief kits to 90 families, including the Jomnritses. Learn more at mcc.org/disasters.

Find more news at mcc.org

MCC news

Uganda

Peace and police

In Uganda, MCC representative Muigai Ndoka of Ashburn, Va., and a team from MCC partner Africa Leadership and Reconciliation Ministries created a peace curriculum to be used to train police officers nationwide. At this workshop, for instance, 67 police trainers and 106 police trainees used the curriculum to explore conflict resolution, servant leadership, mediation and restorative justice. This is part of an effort to strengthen conflict resolution skills and build relationships for police officers and boda-boda drivers, drivers of motorcycle or bicycle taxis. The project also includes dialogues with officers and drivers and events like a peace concert.

Cambodia

Reading resources

Around the world, MCC strives to improve the quality of education. In Cambodia, MCC provides four rural primary schools with reading resources and teacher training to help boost literacy. Here, student Sopal Kantha reads a passage while her speed and accuracy are recorded, part of a baseline study to measure students’ progress.

Palestine and Israel

A Cry for Home

A Cry for Home offers stories, videos and fact sheets from MCC on Palestine and Israel. Hear the voices of Palestinians and Israelis, including a Palestinian pastor. To learn more, visit mcc.org/cry-for-home.

Jordan

Countering hate speech

In Jordan, an MCC-supported project is helping media workers such as Aseel al-Fasatla to be more aware of hate speech and narratives used to promote violent extremism. The project of MCC partner I-Dare also encourages participants to produce stories showing how people are building community resilience and contributing to a culture of peace. “Our country needs people who accept and respect each other and who are working together toward changing their country to the better,” says al-Fasatla.

Comforters and blankets

Comforters bring warmth and a tangible message to people that their needs are not forgotten.

Use new or nearly new material

Single/twin size preferred (approx 60 x 80 in); double/full size accepted (approx 82 x 90 in)

Winter weight preferred (please use new quilt batting)

Knotted with crochet cotton (not more than 4–8 in apart)

Purchased blankets (twin or full size) and new, flat twin sheets (for hospitals, schools and orphanages) also are needed.

Go to mcc.org/kits/comforters to find a link to more detailed instructions. For drop-off locations, contact your nearest MCC office (see page 2) or go to mcc.org/kits.
Preventing the flames of violence

In Nigeria, MCC supports the work of peace clubs and a network of trained volunteers who respond to conflicts.

STORY BY LINDA ESPENSHADE
PHOTOS BY MATTHEW LESTER

The insults against Christianity and against Islam that the two teenage boys aimed at each other were an instantaneous call to arms.

Other teens stripped branches from trees to use as weapons as they hurried toward the verbal skirmish going down on the outskirts of Mangu Halle, Nigeria. Eight boys from Christian families gathered around one of the teens, and five from Muslim families joined the other. Each group was ready to fight for the honor of Jesus or Muhammad.

Before the first blow could fall, Nasiru Musa stepped between the boys, who like him were freshmen at Mangu Halle Government Secondary School. Musa, a leader in the school’s MCC-supported peace club, recounted the incident that happened last year.

"Please and please," Musa recalls saying to both ringleaders. "Stop this thing you are doing."

In this region of Nigeria, where even a skirmish between schoolmates could ignite simmering tensions, Musa’s decision to intervene had the potential not only to stop the impending fight but also to help prevent violence from spreading to Christians and Muslims in the community.

Incendiary violence was common in Plateau State, where Mangu Halle is located, from 2001 to 2011 when Muslims and Christians clashed over issues of political and economic control. This animosity often degenerated into violence that periodically spiked into days of death and destruction.

In this tinderbox, just one spark—a rumor that a Christian had been killed or a Muslim had been robbed—could set off waves of violence as people of different religions took revenge on each other, says Boniface Anthony. He is a peacebuilder with MCC partner Justice Development and Peace Caritas (JDPC) Commission in Jos, Plateau State’s largest city.

“Something would begin on this side of the city, and before you can say ‘Jack Robinson,’ the other side is already in smoke,” remembers Anthony.

Widespread violence has subsided in the past seven years, Anthony says, but the risk of it is still there. So is the mentality that “you can only achieve things using force”—a message many Nigerians have internalized by living through 30 years of periodic military rule since Britain withdrew in 1960, says Matthew Tangbun, a Nigerian and the MCC representative for Nigeria.

Nigerians have learned not to show
Boniface Anthony is program manager for MCC partner Justice Development and Peace Caritas Commission in Jos, Plateau State’s largest city, and was instrumental in founding Emergency Preparedness and Response Team (EPRT). This MCC-supported network responds to conflicts to help prevent violence. See page 10 to read more about his firsthand experiences with violence in Nigeria and how he has worked for peace.

EPRT is an MCC-supported network of 17 local, volunteer teams, including the Jos North team shown here. As part of a new effort that began in 2017, Memuna Ikwuta-Adah, right, and others are teaching peace club skills to adults in hopes that they will be peace ambassadors — “to preach peace and to ensure that everywhere they go, they are able to pass across pointers of peace,” she says.

A phone can be a powerful tool for peace. WhatsApp group texts or messages through a closed Facebook group alert EPRT network members to potentially violent conflicts so they have the information they need to dispel rumors in their own communities.

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Then EPRT members use the information to act for peace in their own communities.

When the man who was stabbed died, Usman and the youth leaders shared the news with his family. The youth leaders promised to help ensure a peaceful funeral, and the family agreed not to take revenge as long as the tea seller was in police custody.

“We were just praying to God,” says Mai Kudi Usaini, one of the youth leaders. “We are traveling with God. He’s the one who helped us to calm down, and we didn’t have any uprising.”

As EPRT members gain increasing acceptance in their communities, they are looking for more ways to spread the message of peace.

So far, with funding from MCC, they have started peace clubs at 51 schools, including the one that Musa attends. Teachers are trained and supervised by EPRT leaders and introduced to peace club curriculum created through an MCC-supported program in Zambia.

Students begin by learning the basics—conflict is normal, but the violence they’ve grown up with is not—and progress to ways to resolve and prevent violence.

In 2017, EPRT began a program to teach adults the skills students learn in peace clubs.

Students already are quite effective teachers for adults, says Dalyop Mafeng Andrew, an EPRT member. “By the time these peace clubs begin to imbibe the virtues of tolerance, they will take this message home.”

At Mangu Halle and other schools, students told story after story of how they use their conflict resolution skills with their brothers and sisters, their friends, teachers and parents.

Some have chosen to hold their tongues instead of talking back, causing parents to ask why their behavior has changed. Others have confronted their parents when they are unkind to them or to other adults.

Students also are learning practical ways to encourage tolerance among Christians and Muslims.

Through peace club teaching, Musa knew when he came upon his schoolmates fighting that he needed to control his own temper and to separate the boys from the group so he could address them privately.

“I will hit you,” one boy threatened when Musa first intervened. “You are a Muslim. Get away from this place.”

The other boy scolded Musa for not joining his side.

“They are abusing Muslims in front of you, and you don’t take any action?”

Undeterred, Musa begged them both to step aside and listen to what he had to say. Eventually the boys begrudgingly obliged.

He appealed to the boys from both faiths to acknowledge that all people are created by God and urged them to remember that both religions call their followers to turn the other cheek when someone hits them, rather than strike back.

“Please, stop this thing you are doing.”

The boys shook hands, and the fight never took place.

Linda Espenshade is news coordinator for MCC U.S. Matthew Lester is a photographer in Lancaster, Pa.
Boniface Anthony

A peacebuilder reflects on his efforts to bring Muslims and Christians together in Nigeria to prevent violence and work for peace.

AS TOLD TO LINDA ESPENSHADE

I should have been history by now. In 2001, I was caught in a Muslim community with one man on one side who wanted to kill me because I am Christian and the man on the other saying, “He hasn’t done anything to us.” Let us not kill an innocent man.”

While they were debating, two other Christians driving by were shot. I said, “God, I surrender all. Take me; here I am.”

Then a nearby photo laboratory began exploding. All of us took to our heels. The men started running in the same direction. Somewhere it dawns on me that I could take a different direction. I turned and walked another way.

There was a reduction of tension by 2003 when I began working for MCC as a MCC representative in Nigeria who is now an MCC peacebuilder in Gopar Tapkida (an emergency preparedness and response team, EPRT) of men and women, Team (EPRT) of men and women,

I attended meeting after meeting as JDPC trained those leaders in conflict resolution and management. Although I was the secretary, I also became committed to peacebuilding.

Peace is part of every person. Whether you like it or not, you must embrace peace and you must adapt peace to be part and parcel of you, to have in your personal growth and transformation. In so doing you will grow to affect others around you.

Then in 2004, ethnic and religious conflict flared again. We lost so many lives. “All this work and all this training; yet this thing took place,” I said to myself. “It’s not worth it … There’s no point in discussing with anybody from the opposite faith as mine.” I was fed up.

But the magic behind the whole thing is that I never lost contact with our trainers.

When I wrote to Gopar to say I was really upset with this work, he told me, “No. I have been in this work before you joined me. If I have not thrown in our trainers.

So, in 2004, with the support of Catholic Relief Services and MCC, helping with peacebuilding and relief materials, I managed the relief distribution for 35,000 people south of Jos, who were displaced by violence.

The majority in need after the crisis were Muslim. Their perception was that their property was destroyed by Christians. We feared our response would not be accepted. We managed to bring a Muslim group from Jos with us to administer relief to our Muslim brothers and sisters. Some were still not talking with us, but they were more open.

From this cooperation, I helped develop the proposal to form an Emergency Preparedness and Response Team (EPRT) of men and women, Muslims and Christians. We used a step-down training model (where the trainers train others who train others) so that many people in each community would know how to respond to emergencies more effectively.

By 2008, MCC was supporting EPRT and training teams on conflict resolution and management, peacebuilding and how to monitor conflict indicators. Today I look at the fruit of this effort and labor. Sometimes something will happen within the community, and Muslims and Christians will be able to contain it without anybody hearing about it or without any other part of the state erupting. For me this is a big achievement.

In 2010, I had reason to say no to senseless violence between Christians and Muslims myself. A Muslim man had packed his family in the car, fleeing the latest wave of violence, but unknown to him the route he took went through a Christian area. His car was stopped and people from the neighborhood pounced on the man and were about to stone him.

I said, “No, you can’t do this while I’m here.” I turned the family over to the police and military for their safety.

One day when I retire, I will say I have run the best race, fought the best of all battles because it was not easy, and I am waiting for my crown!”

Boniface Anthony of Jos, Nigeria, is program manager for Emergency Preparedness and Response Team, an MCC-supported program of Justice Development and Peace Caritas Commission.
Letting go

MCC-supported trauma healings help Nigerians address the pain and loss Boko Haram brought to their region.

STORY BY LINDA ESPENSHADE
PHOTO BY MATTHEW LESTER

Kolo Adamu holds a photo of her daughter Naomi, who was abducted by Boko Haram, an Islamic extremist group, in 2014 along with more than 200 other girls from the Government Secondary School Chibok. Many, including Naomi, grew up attending congregations of Ekklesiyar Yan’uwa a Nigeria (EYN), the Church of the Brethren in Nigeria.

Feature story

Cradling a faded school picture of her daughter, Kolo Adamu sits on the front porch of the Church of the Brethren meetinghouse in Chibok, Nigeria. She recalls the months after the teen was abducted by Boko Haram, an Islamist extremist group known for its brutality. “At first I cannot do anything,” Adamu remembers. She could only agonize, moment by moment, over what might have been happening to her daughter. “When I ate, I wondered if my daughter was eating or not. I was her daughter. “When I ate, I wondered what might have been happening to her daughter, Naomi, along with more than 200 girls; yet, even as this issue with their lives.”

Adamu’s daughter, Naomi, along with other six children the way she did before. Because of the emotional distress Adamu and her husband endured, they ultimately separated. At times, Adamu says, she considered killing herself. “I will go to the well and drop myself inside.” Adamu is far from alone in dealing with trauma inflicted by Boko Haram, which intensified its attacks in northern Nigeria in 2013 and 2014. According to Zakariya Amos, assistant general secretary of EYN, as of May 2017, 700,000 of the 1 million people who attend the denomination’s churches had been displaced by the group’s violence.

Boko Haram took over the town of Mubi, where EYN’s headquarters is located, in October 2014. EYN leaders and other residents ran for the bush through gunfire, stepping over dead bodies and getting separated from family members in the chaos to get to a safer place. Early in 2015, after regrouping about 370 miles southwest in Jos, where MCC’s office is located, EYN leaders participated in a trauma healing workshop sponsored by MCC.

Then, MCC sent a team of EYN members to Rwanda to learn about Healing and Reconciling Our Communities (HROC), a communal trauma healing program created after the Rwandan genocide. That team returned to Nigeria, set up a system to train workshop facilitators and started to offer workshops that continue to be supported by MCC and others, including the Church of the Brethren in the U.S.

Gabriel Vanco attended one of the early workshops, even though he was in the process of organizing a violent reprisal against his Muslim neighbors. Boko Haram forced Vanco and his family from their home in Uba during the same 2014 offensive that displaced Mubi. He lost friends, relatives and property, and he and his friends were bitter that some of their Muslim friends and neighbors never left. “They didn’t run, so it gave us the belief they supported Boko Haram,” Vanco says.

The first day of the trauma healing workshop, Vanco learned about what trauma is, its causes and symptoms—anger, depression, anxiety, sickness, isolation, regret, fear and guilt. He began to feel uneasy about his plan. On the second day, he listened to others in the training share what they went through.

“This person, his father was slaughtered in his presence. His wife and children were taken to Sambisa Forest (site of Boko Haram’s headquarters), but he still has the mind to say, ‘Yes, I want to bring this pain to Christ.’ What about me? I have no reason to keep these things in my heart.”

That was the moment of change, Vanco says, because people who had suffered greatly were ready to forgive. Forgiveness is a topic that EYN leaders added to the HROC curriculum to fit with the denomination’s teachings. It’s one way that people can move on with their lives.

“Forgiveness is a choice. Nobody told me to,” Vanco says. “It comes from the heart. If I don’t… it’s a burden on myself alone. They (Boko Haram and their supporters) can go ahead, do whatever they want to do. It is me that is carrying the burden.”

In 2015, Adamu attended a workshop at her church and still holds onto a message from it. “‘All things, leave to God. He is the creator, He knows everything about what he created.’ From there, I just left everything to God. If not God, nobody could do it.”

Coming to this place of healing took time, more than two years, she acknowledges, but she is grateful to the workshop for helping her to let go and to forgive. “If not for the healing,” Adamu says, “I would have gone mad.”

Her energy began to return after the workshop so that she could care for her family. She began to volunteer at church and started eating regularly, bathing and dressing well, she says. In May 2017, Boko Haram released Adamu’s daughter, Naomi, along with 80 other girls; yet, even as this issue went to press, 100 of the Chibok girls were still missing.

For Vanco, moving on meant convincing the other youth that revenge didn’t run, so it gave us the belief they supported Boko Haram.”

If not for the healing, I would have gone mad.”

Linda Espenshade is news coordinator for MCC U.S. Matthew Lester is a photographer in Lancaster, Pa.
Bearing a message of peace

Finding creative ways to build skills for peace and reconciliation is woven into MCC’s work in Bangladesh.

In addition to funding peace projects, MCC supports activities such as this multiday restorative justice training for MCC partners, staff and staff of other nongovernmental organizations — spreading skills for peace to more people and communities than MCC could reach alone.

In Rangpur District in northern Bangladesh, Monira Akter plays on the swings of a peace playground, built to help bring together children and parents of different faiths and backgrounds. In this region, MCC’s primary work focuses on food security for Indigenous families and encouraging people to plant kitchen gardens and to compost. But improving life also means healing divisions between Indigenous people and other community members and striving to bridge the gaps between people of different religions.

MCC worked with the Garopara Catholic Church to build this peace playground, which is next to the Garopara Mission School but open to all children in the community. Murals on the school wall depict peace leaders from around the world including Dorothy Day, Nelson Mandela, Mahatma Gandhi and Rabindranath Tagore. (MCC photo/Dave Klassen)
Peace is an ongoing process, so we have to work for this always.”

-Punya Patricia Ritchil, coordinator, Shanti Mitra

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Peace is an ongoing process, so we have to work for this always.”

-Punya Patricia Ritchil, coordinator, Shanti Mitra

Public events, including this march to commemorate International Peace Day on September 21, 2017, bring the message of peace out into the streets. Students in school uniforms join other children and adults in the community of Baromari for a day of activities organized through a project that MCC supports through the Baromari Catholic Church. Peace marches often are paired with speeches and programs such as dancing or singing, helping to draw in community members and underscore the importance of and need to work for peace. (MCC photo/Dave Klassen)

Can something as small as a puppet help build peace? As part of its peace program, MCC partner Shanti Mitra Social Welfare Organization holds puppet shows in three high schools in Mymensingh, Bangladesh. Here, puppeteers Akrumula Islam Ripon, Robin Mish and Sabir Hassan Prokash put on a show about a conflict between father and son that talks about managing anger and learning to apologize. Bangladesh is made up of different religious and ethnic groups and Shanti Mitra, which means “friends of peace” in Bangla, works to build fellowship between youth from different backgrounds.

Shanti Mitra also organizes community activities including a peace festival, and publishes books on peacemakers. MCC supports the peace activities and also provides some funding for education for 10 students active in Shanti Mitra’s work, including Ripon and Prokash. (MCC photo/Colin Vandenberg)

Mohammad Selim and Tondrea Dibe participate in a role play at a community relationship building training led by MCC Bangladesh program officer Kamal Hossain. Skits like this one, where a couple deal with a conflict over a dowry and physical abuse, help participants see resolutions to the kind of conflicts they face in their own homes and community. MCC also provides sessions on restorative justice and conflict transformation to Arbitrators, local government officials who resolve disputes. (MCC photo/Colin Vandenberg)
Serving and Learning Together

**Name:** Robert Thiesen  
**Hometown:** Yarrow, B.C. (Yarrow Mennonite Brethren Church)  
**Assignment:** Through MCC's Serving and Learning Together (SALT) program, I'm part of Dandelion Community, a small, rural Christian community in the Republic of Korea (South Korea).

**Typical days:** Include feeding chickens, collecting eggs, weeding, planting or picking vegetables for the community and studying Korean. We share meals as a community and take turns cooking.

**Why I chose SALT:** To put peace theology into practice. I studied philosophy in graduate school and have preached and taught some in my church on peace theology. Basically, my church made me realize that what I was talking about cannot merely be a theological position, but must be part of a life of discipleship.

**Explores SALT**  
Through MCC’s Serving and Learning Together (SALT) program, young adults from Canada and the U.S. are immersed in another culture for a year as they serve in fields such as education, agriculture, peacebuilding and more. Know young adults between the ages of 18 and 30 who might be interested? Send them to mcc.org/salt to learn more.

**Joys:** Friendship with fellow workers at MCC and Dandelion Community, lots of good humor and downright laughter.

**Challenge:** At home, I often spend free time alone to relax or work on my own projects. As part of a community, though, I might be called on to share my opinion in a meeting, help prepare a meal or just spend quality time with those around me.

**Conflict is...**
You can explore some of the ideas that peace clubs teach about conflict. Circle T for true or F for false and check answers below.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>T</th>
<th>F</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Normal</td>
<td>T</td>
<td>F</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. When people cannot agree on something</td>
<td>T</td>
<td>F</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. The opposite of peace</td>
<td>T</td>
<td>F</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Can be dangerous</td>
<td>T</td>
<td>F</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Can lead to new ideas</td>
<td>T</td>
<td>F</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**My name is Jeremiah Pam.**

**Age:** 12  
**Lives in:** Jos, Nigeria

I am in the sixth grade, and I live with my mother and father and older brother and sister.

Before I go to school in the morning, I fetch water so that I can mop the house and my mother can make breakfast. When school ends in the early afternoon, I fetch water my mother uses to wash my uniform. I eat lunch at 2:30, do my assignments and rest.

When I play with my friends, I play soccer. I like to play defender. Sometimes I go with my father to play golf at a park near my house. I also like to read.

At school I go to peace club where we learn to live in peace with our neighbors and anyone around us. One of the ways to make peace is to share something. For example, if two students are fighting over a pencil, if I have an extra one, I can share it.

**My favorite food:** vegetable soup  
**My favorite subject:** English  
**What I want to be:** a pilot

**NIGERIA**

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

**sannu**

(Say “sah-NEW”)

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**Conflict is...**
You can explore some of the ideas that peace clubs teach about conflict. Circle T for true or F for false and check answers below.

T F 1. Normal  
T F 2. When people cannot agree on something  
T F 3. The opposite of peace  
T F 4. Can be dangerous  
T F 5. Can lead to new ideas

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**Through peace club lessons, as well as through skills and group discussions, Jeremiah Pam and others in his school can learn more about topics like bullying, violence and how to solve conflicts.**

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mcc.org/hello
Hardaye Ramjit of Lee Heights Community Church in Cleveland, Ohio, isn't afraid to dig into the details of a legislative act or take time to call a lawmaker’s office. Through MCC’s Washington Office, Ramjit, third from right, joined others from her church in attending Ecumenical Advocacy Days in Washington, D.C. As she learned more about legislative issues, advocacy became one way she lives out her faith. “God is a God of justice,” she says. “If you truly love people, you need to understand how the law will affect your congregation members.”

Think a phone call won’t make a difference? Ramjit disagrees. “It is the little things. I’m not going to complain and talk about it if I’m not doing anything. That’s not me.” Even if calls don’t sway a certain vote, she’ll continue to speak out for what she believes in. “And if I can inspire some along the way, that’s a beautiful thing.”

For Marie Schmidt of Salt Lake City, Utah, shown with her husband Glen at the Bridge of Peace in Tbilisi Georgia, donating to MCC is a way to help build a more peaceful world. “I’ve always been interested in peace and MCC’s work in different countries,” she says. As she became a mother and then a grandmother, her belief in the importance of peace and peacebuilding grew stronger. By giving to MCC she can live out that conviction. “It’s an organization I’ve known about all my life,” she says. “I know that if I give my money there I can trust they’ll do good by it.”

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“If you truly love people, you need to understand how the law will affect your congregation members.”

making a difference for peace