A publication of Mennonite Central Committee

Fleeing violence, gaining education | Created by the same God | New chances for children with disabilities
The kind of worship that God desires

Is not this the fast that I choose: to loose the bonds of the unjust, to untie the yoke of oppression, to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke? (Isaiah 10:2)"%

“Now I am looking toward a future for my children,” Matthieu Ksanula’s mother shares in this issue.

What better endorsement could there be for MCC’s Global Family education program?

This issue of A Common Place features two Global Family projects I have personally visited—one in eastern Democratic Republic of the Congo and one in Burundi.

In Eastern Congo, the ongoing conflict between armed groups has resulted in more than 2 million internally displaced people.

When I visited Mubimbi, a camp for displaced people, a year ago, MCC was sponsoring 2,200 children and youth like Matthieu. MCC provides school kits and pays school fees. MCC also is assisting the parents in the camp to grow their own food.

In the Mutaho region of Burundi, the children of the marginalized Twa people are able to attend the MCC-supported Hope School. Some walk up to three hours to get there.

The school significantly reduces the discrimination the Twa people face in the majority Hutu and Tutsi community. Almost half of these children traditionally would not have received any education. The principal of the school told me, “You are God’s footsteps. The hope we have is because of MCC.”

The prophet Isaiah tells us that the kind of worship God desires is worship rooted in care for the poor, people who are hungry and without a home.

With your help, MCC’s ministries support people in need around the world. This is the kind of worship, the prophet says, that will result in our lights rising in the darkness.

J RON BYLER
MCC U.S. EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

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Relief for displaced people

With more than a million people forced from home by conflict, MCC and its partners in the Ukrainian cities of Zaporozhzia, Zhytomyr and Nikopol are helping meet the needs of displaced people with rent assistance, shelter materials, MCC hygiene kits, comforters and food. In Nikopol, MCC and its partners offer warmth and welcome in short-term housing that MCC partner New Life offers to displaced people such as Valentina Pavlenko. MCC has committed more than $1.5 million to the effort, including an $800,000 grant from the Canadian government.

India

New water and crops

Before MCC supported a project to install an irrigation pipeline, Maheshwar Pujari and other farmers in remote parts of the Indian state of Orissa rarely had the water they needed to grow crops during the dry season.

Hygiene kits

KEEPING CLEAN IS AN IMPORTANT PART OF REMAINING HEALTHY, BUT FAMILIES WHO HAVE FLED THEIR HOMES BECAUSE OF DISASTER OR WAR OFTEN STRUGGLE TO AFFORD THESE NECESSARY SUPPLIES.

Colombia

Message of peace

In Cali, Colombia, where tensions surrounding gang violence, drug use, domestic problems and soaring unemployment spill into students’ lives, peace lessons taught through a project of MCC’s Global Family education program are taking root—so much so that new teachers take note.

“Whenever I arrived at this school a year ago, I found students that promote peace and workshops that develop their skills and knowledge towards that end,” says Luis Esteban Estupiñan Mosquera, who has 13 years of teaching experience. “It was both surprising and relieved. Furthermore, I found that the teachers also received training to promote a culture of peace and were very supportive of each other.”

Today, water gushes through a pipeline and into furrows that have been dug in the fields, allowing farmers to cultivate a variety of vegetables. Interested in donating to MCC’s water projects? Explore the Christmas Giving supplement mailed with this issue of the magazine, or find Christmas Giving online at mcc.org/christmas.

Zimbabwe

Loving care

Volunteer Patricia Sibanda bathes 1-month-old Victor Ncube at Isaiah’s Baby Home, an MCC partner in Bulawayo, Zimbabwe. MCC funds help cover nutritional, medical and staff costs at the centre, which cares for abandoned or orphaned babies and children. The goal is to have children adopted by new families within two years of coming to the home, which can accommodate about 20 children.

Hygiene kits are distributed in useful, double-drawstring cloth bags (11 in. x 16 in). You may sew these bags 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.
Fleeing violence, gaining education

Despite being chased from home by armed groups, youth in the Democratic Republic of the Congo are finding new chances for learning, thanks to the support of MCC.

STORY BY LINDA ESPENSHADE
PHOTOS BY MATTHEW LESTER

Sunlight from an open window spills across the front-row desk Matthieu Kisanula shares with three other seventh graders and illuminates the chalkboard where the teacher writes names and dates prominent in the history of the Democratic Republic of the Congo.

Matthieu’s white shirt is replicated around the room, where at least 40 students sit shoulder to shoulder, writing notes in worn tan notebooks, top to bottom, side to side—not willing to waste a corner. At 15, he’s a head taller than most of the other students who started school at an earlier age.

In spite of the chatter, squeals and giggles of children playing outside Divine Grace Secondary School and the nagging teacher’s voice broadcasting through gaps in the clapboard wall shared with the eighth grade class, Matthieu focuses on King Leopold II of Belgium. Leopold personally claimed Congo as his own property in 1884, killing more than 2 million Congolese people and pillaging the country’s resources for his own profit.

Today, instead of Leopold, armed groups from within Congo and from neighboring countries rule many areas of Eastern Congo. They fight each other and the Congolese army to defend or to gain land, resources and power; terrorizing and killing villagers in the process.

Matthieu knows what it’s like to be one of those villagers.

“Keep going... if we stay here, we will die.”
armed group that invaded their village of Nyakabasa. As he ran amidst gunshots, he saw people killed around him. Their house had already been destroyed, remembers his mother Jacqueline Naburusu, who carried a baby on her back as they fled. With her husband and his first wife (it’s not uncommon in some parts of Congo for men to have more than one wife), Naburusu urged their children onward for the next several days, without food and with little sleep. “Keep going,” she told them. “If we stay here, we will die.”

In the months that followed, Naburusu and her husband separated. On her own with three children, she eventually found her way to Mubimbi Camp in 2009.

The year before she arrived, other people forced from their villages had cleared the brush from a valley outside the town of Minova to make way for a growing flock of small thatch huts, covered in plastic to keep out the rain.

She joined the many displaced adults who labored in farmers’ fields or did household tasks to earn enough money to feed their families one meal a day—if they could get consistent work.

Paying school fees was not possible. But through the support of MCC’s Global Family education program, Matthieu is in school.

For the past six years, Global Family, through partner Église du Christ au Congo (Church of Christ in Congo or ECC), has provided assistance for every primary student living in Mubimbi and Shasha, two camps for displaced people in Eastern Congo.

Global Family also supported secondary students for the past two years. All students in both camps—311 in 2014–2015—receive locally purchased school supplies from MCC at the start of each year.

For parents who have lost everything, education is vital—providing children with a safe space now and building skills that eventually could lift the whole family out of poverty.

“Because of the wars in Eastern Congo, children are likely to enter armed groups or get married at a young age,” explains Fidele Kyanza, director of ECC’s Ministry for Refugees and Emergencies, which oversees the Global Family program. Without activities in the day or a way to earn a living later, youth may become street children, begging for food, work and shelter and vulnerable to abuse.

“Thanks to Global Family, all these children are in school and the results they are getting are encouraging,” Kyanza says.

Last year, 63 of the 64 sixth graders passed the national exams. The student with the top score was 14-year-old Emerance Children gather for morning assembly at the Ruchunda Primary School near Mubimbi Camp.
Namihumba, whose parents both died after the family arrived at the camp. A friend of Emerance’s mother has taken her in, encouraging Emerance to study and to read by the light of a paraffin lamp after dark, just like she did for her own children. (Read about Josué Bakeka, whose mother took Emerance in, on page 10.)

“I want to avoid being a street girl,” Emerance says, explaining why she stays regularly after school and reviews her notes with her friends.

At Divine Grace Secondary School and Ruchunda Primary School, which share a campus and are less than a quarter mile from the camp, teachers earn just enough to feed themselves and maybe to buy a chicken or goat to raise. They are chosen because of their heart for the children, says Danny Dunia Miteja Wamatungulu, who founded the primary school in 2008 when displaced people began to arrive.

Fourth grade teacher Bushashire Musengetsi leads her class through a French lesson at Ruchunda Primary School.

Fourth grade teacher Bushashire Musengetsi is well aware that the children from the camp come with trauma from their past and from their current poverty. She meets individually with each displaced child in her classroom to listen and to encourage.

“I have so much love for these children,” says Musengetsi, whose energy and affirmation earn her the attention of 54 children who repeat sentences in French class and vie for the opportunity to conjugate verbs on the board. She encourages the children to rub their hands together and give a single clap when any student gets the right answer.

The money MCC provides for school fees allows schools to budget for paying teachers and improving their buildings. The primary school, for instance, started as temporary shelters made of tin. Now five buildings made of wood with tin roofs are on the campus.

A separate, three-year project, funded through MCC’s account at the Canadian Foodgrains Bank, helps to address hunger in the camps, providing residents with rented land, training, tools and seeds to grow their own food. (See this story online at mcc.org/acommonplace for a link to more on the food project.)

Together, the support helps lay a foundation where children can pursue a future very different from the chaos they’ve endured.

Without a chance for education, Matthieu says, “I could have been a bandit. I could have gone to the market to steal. Now I am expecting to complete my studies and be someone in life.”

As his mother thinks about all that has happened in her life, she says she feels good to see her children growing and going to school. “What was lost was lost. Now I am looking toward a future for my children.”

Give a gift that changes lives around the world
This Christmas, give a gift of education, food or peace. Explore MCC’s Christmas Giving supplement, mailed with this issue of A Common Place, see Christmas giving projects online at mcc.org/christmas or contact your nearest MCC office (see page 2).
Josué Bakeka

A teen in eastern Democratic Republic of the Congo talks about how support from MCC helped him stay in school rather than join an armed group.

AS TOLD TO LINDA ESPENDSHADE

Josué Bakeka, 17, is a resident of Mubimbi Camp, which shelters displaced people from villages in eastern Democratic Republic of the Congo. His school fees were paid through MCC’s Global Family education program for fourth through seventh grades. He’s in a boarding school now and credits Global Family as helping him at a critical time to continue his education.

For the first years of my life, I lived in Kamoubi village, an area you can only reach by walking at least 8 miles from the nearest road. Each family had several houses or huts made of clay and branches. Because it is so remote, many armed groups stayed in the hills near my village.

Sometimes the armed groups burned villages, from the first house to the last one. When you see the neighbor’s house burning, you start moving.

One night, they burned our houses. My mom and me, my three brothers and two sisters ran into the bush, to the fields where we worked. I was scared because when they were burning houses, sometimes they were burning people inside.

I helped to rebuild the houses. As young as 6 years old I knew how to help build houses. It was normal for young boys to work in teams to build a house for people who couldn’t build their own.

My father had left my mother when I was 2 or 3 years old. I grew up with my mom, but I always wanted to find my father. Once, when I was 9 years old, I walked more than 50 miles with a friend to look for him. Even today, I’m discouraged I cannot find him.

Sometimes the armed groups tried to recruit boys in my village. They did not make me join, but some of my friends joined. They saw the opportunity to steal chickens or whatever they want. If I am walking with a gun, even though you are older than me, I can tell you, “Kneel down.” My mother wanted to leave because she did not want me to be recruited.

One day women from Minova came to buy peanuts from my area. When the armed group came again to our village, we ran with the women into the bush. They convinced us to come to Minova with them where there was a camp for displaced people.

I remember thinking on the three-day journey to Minova that the armed groups would burn my house again. I was thinking, I’m going to miss my friends. I don’t have a house; where will I get one? I didn’t know how my life would be.

For me, the first month in Mubimbi Camp in Minova was good because I met many people from my area, and they welcomed me. One of my friends helped me to cut sticks and to build a house in the first week.

I went to school three miles away for a couple of years until I had to stop. Even though an organization was paying school fees, after class I had to go to a job, where I cooked meat. Mom was sick, so I was the one looking for food.

Then ECC held a meeting in camp to tell children they could register for Rachunda Primary School. It was very close to camp and ECC would pay the fees. My sister, Naomi, and I went for fourth, fifth and sixth grades.

I became serious about school. My mother, Sifa Bitasimwa, encouraged me too. Every night she bought paraffin for the lamp, so my sister Naomi and I could do our studies. At the end of sixth grade, I had the second highest scores in the class and Naomi was third.

When I finished sixth grade, ECC and MCC did not know if they would continue supporting students for secondary school.

I was disappointed. If I could not go to high school, what else could I do with my life? I thought it is better to join the national army.

Today, my dream is to be a doctor. A doctor is someone who helps much when people are suffering. I have a strong faith that I will complete my studies. When I do, I may help my family with funding or pay for my brother’s education. If possible I will build a house for my mom and go look for my father.

My mother cried when I told her, but I was still holding my strong position, when two people from ECC and MCC told us we could go to secondary school.

It was like angels came to me. For me it was a miracle, a wonder.

Naomi was very happy too because our mother said she no longer had to marry the man who had offered a dowry of six goats for her hand in marriage.

Today, my dream is to be a doctor. A doctor is someone who helps much when people are suffering. I have a strong faith that I will complete my studies. When I do, I may help my family with funding or pay for my brother’s education. If possible I will build a house for my mom and go look for my father.

Josué Bakeka
Feature story

Created by the same God

Education not only gives opportunity to individuals. In a Burundi village, it’s building acceptance and striving to change the future for a marginalized ethnic group.

BY LINDA ESPENSHADE
PHOTOS BY MATTHEW LESTER

When Twa people in the village of Nyangungu, Burundi, talk about being discriminated against and ostracized, they talk mostly about the way life used to be in their village. “Our children, even though we sent them to other schools, our children were teased and chased away. Other people said they stink because they are Twa,” says Christiane Gakobwa, a mother of eight children, standing outside her red clay brick house.

She says she couldn’t give food to her neighbors who were from the majority Hutu and Tutsi ethnic groups because they would refuse it. They believed she would poison their porridge because she was Twa.

The Twa faced pervasive discrimination—no eating or drinking alongside people of other groups, no socializing. Twa avoided passing a Hutu garden because Hutus believed the garden would be cursed.

Hutu, Tutsi, Twa. All lived by a common understanding—the Twa would be treated as inferior people.

That was before the people of Nyangungu saw the impact of Hope School.

At the MCC-supported Hope School—the first school in Burundi established to give Twa children a place to study where they wouldn’t be ridiculed—Twa children are excelling. Alongside Hutu and Tutsi students, who have become their friends, Twa children are learning French, mathematics and more, showing themselves and their community that they are truly capable.

That is what Béatrice Munezero and her husband Innocent Mahwikizi, educators who are both from the Twa ethnic group, were striving for when they started the school in 2001 with two levels of preschool.

“I always wondered how my community could evolve like other communities,” says Mahwikizi, who kept his Twa ethnicity a secret as he pursued his education.

Today the school, which MCC has supported since its founding, has three levels of preschool and 10 grades. Seventy percent of the 315 students are Twa and the rest are Hutu and Tutsi, whose parents send their children to Hope School because they have come to appreciate the education and vision of the school.

Over the years, funds from MCC’s Global Family education program have helped make education affordable for the mix of students, and MCC workers have served at the school. Global Family has paid for school supplies, salaries and teacher trainings, including workshops on peacebuilding and human rights.
Teachers use what they learn in the trainings to encourage equality among the students, and administrators reinforce mutual respect when they meet with parents.

“We learned that Twa, Hutu and Tutsi have been created by the same God,” says Twa 10th grader Jean Sinzinkayo, who made his first Hutu friend, Libert, in second grade. They are still close friends today, studying and playing soccer and volleyball together.

“Now we live together. We share everything. There is no longer discrimination. Sometimes we have sleepovers to study for examinations,” Jean says.

The reason perspectives changed among students, says Claudine Twagirayeru, a 10th grade Hutu student, is because students who would not have been allowed to associate outside of school are becoming friends in school.

“First we sit together; we chat. If someone gets something to eat, we share. This contributes to the changing of our minds,” Claudine says. “Also, here we have teachers who help us to live together, helping us to change our minds and to help our societies evolve.”

Twa, Hutu and Tutsi parents too are meeting socially, sharing food, visiting each other and attending parties together, says Gakobwa.

So far, Munezero says, the teachers are Hutu or Tutsi because few Twa people have enough education yet to be teachers, but she expects that to change as more students graduate from Hope School.

Changing students’ prospects for education is a critical step in addressing the deep poverty stalking many Twa families.

Traditionally, Twa people lived by hunting and gathering in the forest. Then deforestation, loss of wildlife and consequential environmental protection laws pushed them into villages where the Hutu and Tutsi set the societal norms.

They took their place in the economic fabric of the community as day laborers and traditional makers of clay pots. They traded the clay cooking pots, made with mud from the river and fired over campfires, to their Hutu and Tutsi neighbors in exchange for food or a little money. But today demand for the pots is declining as people buy more durable metal cooking pots.

Salathiel Nzibariza, husband of Christiane Gakobwa, struggles to feed his family of eight children one meal a day by selling the pots his family makes and farming.

“Our parents lived by hunting, searching for what’s in the forest. But now times have changed. When we were growing up, we made pots. Now we realize that it will be better if we send our children to school to prepare for their future,” Nzibariza says.

Nzibariza and Gakobwa celebrate their children’s joy in school and the relationships they are forming.

“Thanks to this school, now our children can share everything with Hutu and Tutsi children,” says Gakobwa.

“Our children go to school happy and come home happy. This is a big change.”

Where the majority of Twa children once dropped out by third grade, weary of taunts from both students and teachers, today some Hope School graduates are beginning to proceed into grades 11 and 12, prerequisites for university or teacher’s education.

Acceptance of Twa in Burundi may be slow, but it is happening, Mahwikizi says. Laws are now in place in the country to include Twa representatives in government and in all organizations.

Hope School is helping to provide educated, qualified Twa candidates to fill those roles, Mahwikizi says.

“The discrimination the Twa underwent from (the time of) their grandfathers is now being transformed generation to generation.”
New chances for children with disabilities

In Mexico, MCC’s Global Family program makes it possible for children with disabilities to get the specialized education and services they need.

BY EMILY LOEWEN
PHOTOS BY NINA LINTON

When Silvia Haythana Díaz Luna gets to choose the activity in her play therapy session, she pulls out a red and blue plastic cash register. She sets up a grocery store, featuring empty bottles of shampoo and laundry detergent, then steps into the role of a clerk.

Teacher and pretend customer Maribel Guadalupe fills a plastic shopping cart, reminding Silvia, “Tell me how much I owe and I will pay you.” Once the bill is settled and change is given, they clean up together.

It isn’t just a fun game. This is play therapy—one part of the program at Aulas de Desarrollo y Esperanza (Classroom of Development and Hope), a school for children and youth with physical or mental disabilities in Santiago Tepatitlán, Mexico.

For Silvia and other students, specialized support at the school, which is supported by MCC’s Global Family education program, makes a tremendous difference—both in achieving basic education and in gaining the skills they need to take care of themselves.

During play therapy, students choose the activity, and the therapist integrates individual lessons into the game. By playing shopkeeper, Silvia uses math, learns to ask for help when she needs it and practices social interactions.

"The most important thing is that we see people who are excluded," says Guadalupe.

"The goal of play therapy is to offer our students a trajectory to accomplish being independent people," Guadalupe says.

Around the world when families are struggling to meet basic needs, young people with disabilities may be left out of school or lag behind in public school systems that aren’t set up to meet specialized needs. In Mexico and other countries, such as China, Jordan, Syria and Tanzania, Global Family supports efforts to help these students learn and achieve.

Before Aulas started in 2009, there was no school for children with disabilities in Santiago Tepatitlán. Parents who could afford an expensive private school could send their children to study in other cities. But many other children simply didn’t go to school.

Jimmy Jared Antonio, who has cerebral palsy, is attending school at Aulas for the first time at the age of 13. Previously, his mother kept him home because she was worried he would be made fun of or physically bullied. Now he has a welcoming school with personalized attention from a teacher and psychologist. “He was really, really hungry to learn and so come to school,” Guadalupe says.

Some students attend Aulas all four days a week that it’s open. Others, including Silvia, also attend public school, and the lessons at Aulas help them keep up with their classes. Parents do pay a small fee each month, but the 500 pesos ($32) per month is low compared to the nearly $100 to $400 that other schools charge.

With MCC support, the school can still offer small classes and provide each of the 11 students with an individual lesson plan based on their abilities and needs. Students learn social skills, such as respecting boundaries, personal space and working in groups. Each child gets an hour of one-on-one play therapy per week.

“The time that we offer each child is unique,” says Guadalupe. “Being able to provide specialized education that is high quality and affordable is what made Guadalupe want to work at Aulas. Though she had a higher paying job before, she didn’t like that her services were so expensive for families.

“The most important thing is that we see people who are excluded,” she says, “I believe that my greatest payment is seeing the kids happy.”

Emily Loewen is a writer for MCC Canada. Nina Linton is a photographer in Charlottetown, Prince Edward Island.
Teacher in Iraq

Name: Nathan Hershberger
Hometown: Harrisonburg, Va. (Community Mennonite Church)
Assignment: I teach English at three church institutions in Erbil, Iraq: a seminary, a church center for people displaced from other parts of Iraq and a private high school.

Typical day: Most mornings I plan lessons or tutor students at the high school. In the afternoons and evenings, I teach English classes at St. Peter’s seminary or Mar Elia Church, which hosts about 170 displaced families from the area around Mosul.

Joys: It is a great joy to feel like I can contribute something—teaching English—that many people here want. It is an even greater joy to develop friendships with students and colleagues here and feel like my presence is valued and affirmed for who I am, not just what I can do. A good day is a day when I connect with people. I also love the food. (See this story online at mcc.org/acommonplace to read more about Nathan’s experiences.)

Challenge: Being with people who have suffered incredible hardship and feeling unable to do much about it. How do you respond when someone tells you they’ve lost their family, their home, their career? Anything you can say is going to feel like not enough, inadequate to the depths of the suffering. And every conversation reminds me that all my needs are taken care of and I have a safety net a continent wide ready to pick me up if I fall. That creates a lot of anxiety to do more for the people here who don’t have those benefits. A bad day is when I feel like I’m not contributing or connecting with anyone.

Find your place
MCC has workers in Africa, Asia, Europe, Latin America and the Middle East, as well as in Canada and the U.S.

Go to serve.mcc.org, contact your nearest MCC office or follow @servemcc on Twitter to learn about current service opportunities.

MCC workers are expected to exhibit a commitment to Christian faith, active church membership and biblical peacemaking.

Draw a shelter
At Mubimbi Camp, families build shelters out of materials they find nearby. How would you build a shelter out of these objects?
SHARE THE JOY OF GIVING

But when the fullness of time had come, God sent his Son, born of a woman... (Galatians 4:4)

This Christmas, as you celebrate God’s gift to us, consider honoring family and friends with gifts that change lives around the world.

We invite you to explore the Christmas Giving booklet that came with this issue of A Common Place, or go to mcc.org/christmas to see Christmas giving options online. When you donate, you can request cards to send to your loved ones explaining the gift you’ve given in their name.

mcc.org/christmas