



**MISSION EXPERIENCES OF  
COMPASSION, CHALLENGE AND HOPE**

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Living compassionate lives in our search to know God as we journey to the cross



## Putting faith into action in the season of Lent & Easter

### MISSION EXPERIENCES OF COMPASSION, CHALLENGE AND HOPE

#### *Living compassionate lives in our search to know God as we journey to the cross*

Lent is a time of penitence and soul searching, following Jesus to the cross and on to his crucifixion and resurrection. It is a time to take refuge from the world's distractions in order to connect with the deeper resonance of God.

The following is a series of reflections prepared by 47 people who share their stories in the light of the Biblical passages for this season of Lent, 2022. The writers are fellow missionaries, family members, friends, clergy and lay persons, all of whom have shared their lives in service with others. We are grateful to each writer for sharing personal experiences and lessons learned, often in the midst of great pain.

These good folks have been gathered much like a flash mob, brought together for a onetime performance, a onetime action of grace for all, to surprise you with their music, like you have never heard it before.

We share our testimonies to encourage all to follow the path and passion that we see in Jesus. All of life is changing, the world and the church are changing. And God is moving. We long to walk with God and God's people, in the midst of these changes.

**God of justice, may we be aware of others and all life, especially in their pain and struggles. May we be willing and open to give and receive love, to forgive and be forgiven.**

To God be the glory.

*Ardell Graner*

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## March 2, After the Mission Experience

**Isaiah 58: 10-11** If you open your heart to the hungry, and provide abundantly for those who are afflicted, your light will shine in the darkness...The LORD will guide you continually and provide for you, even in parched places. He will rescue your bones. You will be like a watered garden, like a spring of water that won't run dry. (Common English Bible)

What is on my mind this Lent relates to the “after-mission experience” that comes in the months and years that follow a profound engagement with people of another land, culture, and language.

I had the joy of experiencing a mission immersion in 1997-99 when I served as a volunteer through the United Methodist Church in Cochabamba, Bolivia. I had recently graduated from seminary, was ordained, and yet felt that God had more to teach me outside of the library and classroom. I needed to learn with my hands, heart, eyes, and stomach.



John Wesley had his conversion experience at Aldersgate after he was already an ordained clergyman. I could relate to this when I had my own experience of transformation in Bolivia. I experienced the Lord at work and heard the voice of the Spirit while sitting, listening, playing, singing, and praying with people in countries where life is very hard, in constant jeopardy, and nothing can be taken for granted. It is in these places where God taught me to “open my heart to the hungry” and “provide abundantly for those who are afflicted.” I hoped my light was shining in the darkness and I felt with certainty that I received light in my own hours of darkness.

I returned to the US to serve as a pastor. For the last fifteen years I have served in Miami where the great needs and the great gifts of the immigrant population are daily present. How has my experience in mission years ago impacted my current ministry and life? As the prophet Isaiah says, the Lord has continually provided for me in the parched places. The Lord has rescued my bones. The Lord has, somehow, made me to be like a watered garden, like a spring that won't run dry. This is the gift of mission in my life.



This summer my fifteen-year-old daughter and I had the opportunity to be a part of a volunteer team in the Dominican Republic where we built and distributed solar ovens, educating people about their usefulness and efficiency in that great nation of sun. I see God “watering” my daughter's teenage life now that she is back home through the mission experience she had this summer. It changes us, it draws us closer to our creator, and it sustains our lives.

**Mission action for today:** Make note of a way you feel God has “rescued your bones.” Then make note of how you feel God is calling you to help rescue another by watering their life.

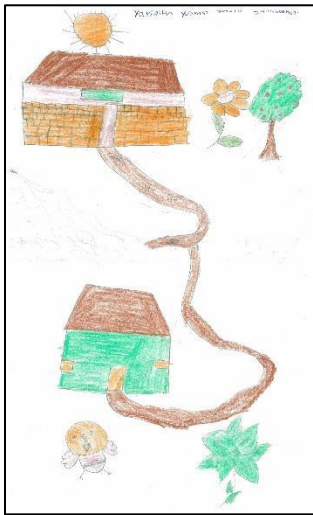
**Dear God, grant us the gift of a never-ending mission experience. Rescue us. Amen.**

Cynthia D. Weems, Florida Conference of the United Methodist Church, Volunteer Missionary to Cochabamba, Bolivia and the Dominican Republic

### March 3, Mission and Children's Future

**Deuteronomy 30-19-20:** "...Choose life so that you and your children will live. And love God, your God, listening obediently to him, firmly embracing him..."

The agency I have served with in Nicaragua focuses on women, children, and adolescents. My participation as a missionary dentist is to bring dental health services to remote areas of the country. Often the children who come for treatment are supported with small scholarships and material support to access education. Teachers are important stakeholders in the community volunteer network and government ministries collaborate with development projects such as school health programs, making it possible to reach this young population. At one such mobile clinic, I had a chance to talk with Yarielka Sotelo, age 10 and in the third grade in a small village in Matagalpa, who has received workshops on children's rights. Not long ago, due to lack of teachers, resources and political will, a young person from this region could not dream of studying past the sixth grade. Today, thirty-five young people receive scholarships each year in elementary and secondary education with a few that have even achieved a university degree.



Yarielka told me, "My life so far is filled with happiness because I've learned many things in school, and my opinion is taken into account and my rights are respected. I love to play and dance, and what encourages me is that I have the support of my parents and siblings. Even though my parents are poor, they want me to succeed. My dream is that even with these difficulties, I can continue forward step by step to get out of poverty and become someone important in the future and support society and my community.

I want to continue studying to be a leader and help those who need support with projects that benefit our community like the dental clinic that is helping me with my teeth. I have seen how my parents struggle to give us the best. I feel I am important to them, but other children I know do not have the same chances; their parents deny their rights or abandon them.

Thank God my scholarship really helps me because I can buy some of my school supplies and medicines for when I am sick. My dream is to be good at my studies and work with my community, caring for and enjoying the natural resources that enhance our country."

Yarielka joined other children to draw a picture of their community. Yarielka drew the path from her house to her school, the two places that are giving her life and faith in God. In mission together we can support the dreams of young people like Yarielka whose determination to succeed depends on the actions we take today.

**Mission Action for Today:** Choose to support initiatives in health and education that help children.

**God, thank you for the gift of knowledge and providing us with brains to think and question the world around us. I pray that Yarielka and children around the world enjoy good health and learn well and flourish. May they discover their unique talents and gifts and have opportunity to develop them. Let us choose life so they may thrive. Amen.**

Belinda Forbes, Global Missionary from the United States to Nicaragua

## March 4, God's Chosen Fast

**Isaiah 58: 6** "Is not this the kind of fasting I've chosen; to lose the chains of injustice and untie the cords of the yoke, to set the oppressed free and break every yoke."

Fasting is a practice that I tend to avoid. To deny oneself food for a meal, or a day, or longer seems like a religious ritual best left to the ascetics. I know it is a means of self-denial which seems to still have a place in our world of materialism and self-indulgence.

**Isaiah 58: 1-9** gives us a sharp contrast between the fast chosen by the people of Israel and the fast chosen by God. The people's fast is a matter of humility, self-abasement style, lying down in sackcloth and ashes in order to gain God's favor. The fast chosen by God takes the emphasis away from the personal (just me and God), and redirects it to our commitment to do justice with others who suffer the consequences of oppression, especially when it comes from our own hands.

It is self-deception to seek God's favor and approval for our personal acts of piety while at the same time turning a blind eye to the hungry, naked, and homeless who cry out to God for justice. Justice cannot only be a theoretical matter to be addressed by study and meditation. It must be practiced in person with those who bear the weight and the sorrow of a worldly system that dominates them for profit. To be present with those who suffer is the beginning of knowing with empathy and may be a primary path, a narrow way to the heart of God.

Mission has been an opportunity to go beyond theology and enter into personal relationships among peoples who have been tied to the yoke of oppression. For me a life in mission has opened the door to relationships with people who live daily with the consequences of injustice. However, the great irony is the same people who suffer the grind of daily poverty also emanate the presence of God most profoundly. A second irony is that I, the 'missionary' who seeks to untie the thongs of the yoke for others, finds that they have loosened my bonds.

José-Rafael is a gifted sociologist and theologian whom we worked with at a national church office in the Dominican Republic. He shared his education and wisdom with us daily to open our eyes to the corruption and injustice in his own country; the complex history of the Dominican Republic with Haiti; a Dominican's perspective on their culture and social reality; his own personal journey of faith; his gifts of language and editing; and his faithful friendship, always ready to help out. José-Rafael is a gifted professional but lives with a paltry salary. Like the majority of Dominicans, he often cannot afford the necessities of life, yet gives his life away. He helped us to feel at home and to build a solid foundation for mission.



**Mission action for today:** The path that leads to abundant life is before us, give us courage to walk the path that our neighbors walk, to seek them and to know them. There is the kingdom of God.

**Oh God, forgive us for segregating ourselves, for creating social hierarchies that separate us from our neighbors who must inhabit the places where we fear to go.**

Gordon Graner, retired missionary Bolivia and the Dominican Republic

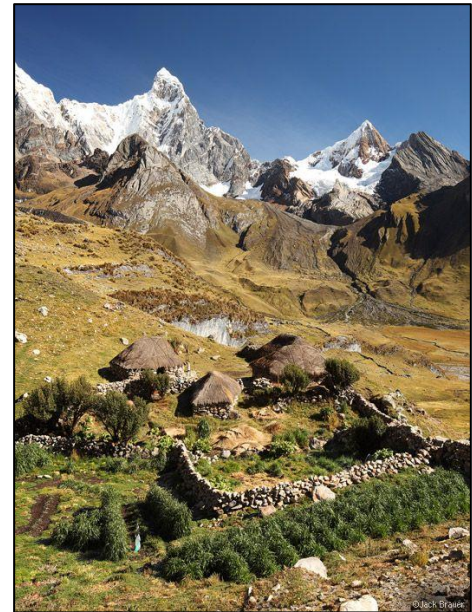
## March 5, Cry out to God

**Isaiah 58: 9a** “Then you will call, and the Lord will answer; you will cry for help, and He will say: Here am I.”

This is a story of two women crying out to God. It is a story of their brokenness and their weakness. It is a story of His strength, His provision, and how He allowed them both to enter each other’s lives.

My own heart needed hope that God would fulfill my dreams. Another mother at the same moment needed hope that God would fulfill her dreams for her baby. Her part of this story I could only imagine. I imagined this baby before I met her, so small and so beautiful. I imagined her mother’s pain at not being able to feed her because of the cleft in her mouth. I imagined this baby’s frustration and pain at not having her tummy filled.

I imagined this baby lovingly wrapped in an aguayo, securely held in place by her strong mother, not willing to see her waste away from hunger but seeking to save her life. I imagined this bright-eyed baby, at two months old, peeking out from over her colorful, wool carrying blanket, and wondering at the sights and sounds of the bouncing journey on the back of a produce truck. Together, they travelled over the rutted, dirt roads, from a small harvesting community, through the Cochabamba valley, into the city of Cochabamba. I imagined the mother’s determination. Her sadness at her plan to relinquish her precious daughter. Her fear at leaving her other children behind while she took that long, arduous journey: eight hours on foot to meet the truck, and another eight hour ride to the city.



The other half of this story, I do not have to imagine: my joy at receiving the phone call from the adoption agency; my dream fulfilled; my nights that now included listening for my daughter; my days that found me practicing to carry her in my own aguayo; my son’s doe-eyed love upon seeing her; and my husband’s protection of her (once when out with her alone, he was asked suspiciously by a shopkeeper, “Is she REALLY yours?? She doesn’t look much like you!?” He replied, “She looks JUST like her mother!”)

I still imagine her birth mother. I imagine she wonders what her Camila is like. I could tell her she is strong-minded, faithful to friends and family, full of compassion and justice. I imagine she wonders whether she knows about her birth mom. I could tell her that Camila knows all we know: the story of her journey from a village on a truck to a city, proof that she too was strong-minded, faithful, full of compassion and justice.

I pray for the birth mother’s restoration. I pray for her salvation. I pray that one day she will see her baby, ‘our’ daughter, and know that God answered her cries for help at the same time that He answered mine.

**Mission action for today:** Be aware and sensitive to someone who is crying out to God; support, encourage and pray for this person.

**Faithful God, help us to cry out to you and trust that you long to hear us and reveal yourself to us.**

Lynda Malcolm, missionary to Bolivia and primary school educator



## March 6, Incarnational Mission

**Romans 10: 8b** “The message is close at hand; it is on your lips and in your heart.”

The arrested look on our neighbor Doña Balbina’s face as she listened to a gospel passage read from the Quechua Bible transformed the whole group of people gathered for her husband’s memorial service. We were seated on colorful handwoven blankets over low benches along each wall in the largest room of her home. My husband Steve asked permission to read the story of Lazarus to the neighbors and her two mentally challenged adult sons. It was the first time Balbina was hearing the Bible in her own language, not in Spanish.

Doña Balbina’s husband died while being treated for cancer in another city. At the time of his death, Bolivia was in a strict lockdown because of COVID-19 and Balbina couldn’t travel to his burial. At this memorial months later we wanted to share how Jesus experienced his friend Lazarus’ death as recorded in John 11.



The Quechua people are descendants of the Inca Empire before the Spaniards came on the scene. There are millions of them throughout the Andes mountains of Ecuador, Peru and Bolivia. Most are bilingual in Quechua and Spanish, but many like Balbina speak only Quechua.

We struggled to learn Quechua. After 33 years working among this generous, industrious, earthy people, our effort to communicate in their language brought great joy that day both to us and to Balbina and her family. God’s Word in the mother tongue spoke anew with creative and

renewing power, read by someone very unlike her and her family.

To minister incarnately is to honor and respect the language, culture, and context of the people.

**Mission action for today:** Look for the person least like you and share God’s love in word and action.

**Dear Lord, bless the refugee, immigrant, or underprivileged neighbor you bring across my path through my Christ-like attitude in words and acts of kindness.**

Mary Hawthorne, Missionary to Bolivia, Serving In Mission (SIM) USA

## March 7, Holy to the Lord

Leviticus 19:2 “You shall be holy, for I the Lord your God am holy.” (NRSV)

Every few months while I was living in Rukum district I would travel out to Khadi village, several hours walk up and over an 11,000’ pass in the hills of western Nepal. One rainy season we didn’t arrive until almost 11pm because I was having difficulty making it down the muddy path. We were there to visit (to check in with) the village school, child club, mothers’ groups and other community groups that are learning and acting together. The church youth are following a Bible study curriculum called “Sangasangai” which translates as “togetherness.”



There is no hotel or guest house in Khadi, so I would stay in the home of Mun Kumari, a single mother, and her teenage son who live next to the school. Mun Kumari always gives up her bed for me and sleeps on the floor as I am usually the only female visitor on these trips. So I am very aware when, like most Nepali women, Mun Kumari wakes up around 5 in the morning to sweep the packed dirt in front of the house, feed the chickens, chop the wood and start a fire so that the rest of us can have tea at 6am. Then she gets started on the morning meal of dal

bhat, putting on the lentils in a pressure cooker over the small flame, picking fresh mustard greens from the garden, cooking the rice, grinding the spices for fresh achar (relish) and finally cooking the vegetables. There is only one flame so each item has to cook sequentially and the pots gather around the stove to stay warm until around 9 am everything is ready and we are called to eat. My attempts to participate are rebuffed, perhaps due to my incompetence or because I disrupt her morning routine.

Sitting in a Bible study with church members on another day we were discussing, “What does it mean to be holy as God is holy? This passage is full of the mundane tasks of life, ensuring that the thirsty have a cup of tea, hungry people are fed, that the tired have a place to rest. We discussed how it is through these everyday actions that we serve God by serving those in need around us.

I am not the “least of these” by any metric of this world, and yet when I am in Khadi village I am humbled by my helplessness. Ostensibly, I am there to support development work in Khadi village, but Mun Kumari uses the everyday items of her life to minister to my needs in a strange place.

In church we made stickers from masking tape that said “holy to the Lord” and put them on the everyday items that we use in these simple acts of kindness. On the broom, the tea cup, the garden hoe and that jar for fetching water from the well. It reminds us that every action can be one of service and thus made holy to the Lord.

**Mission action for today:** Make stickers that say “ holy to the Lord” and put them on everyday objects around your house to remind you that every task you do is holy to the Lord.

**Loving God, help us to be holy in our lives every day just as you are holy. Amen**

Katherine Parker, Missionary in Japan, Iowa, Cambodia and Nepal



## March 8, God's Path for us is Beyond our Imagination

**Isaiah 55:8-9** "For my thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways, my ways, says the Lord. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts." (*New Revised Standard Version*)



When I was 16, I decided to be baptized together and alongside my Methodist Bolivian brothers and sisters in my favorite place in the Cochabamba valley, Tiu Rancho. This decision was the foundational spiritual decision of my life, bringing God's unending love, peace, compassion, and understanding to every decision I have made since. On that glorious sunny day, with full awareness, I opened my heart and life to God, dedicating myself to following God's path, to those ways higher than what I could have ever thought of myself. God's guidance spoke to me again and again over the coming decades, even in the midst of my own misinterpretation.

I experienced God in Madagascar, in the midst of mourning my grandfather's death and suffering from African tick bite fever. God's kindness and love came to me through my now life-long friend, Kathryn. As I completed university and started my career, I continued to actively search for God's will for my life. And for a while, I was certain that my own shallow understanding of my journey with God was aligned with my own perception of what a good life could be. I applied to fancy grad schools and was rejected; I applied to prestigious jobs and was turned away; I was convinced that society's definition of success was what God wanted for me. After years of working in an unfulfilling management position, I accepted a humble, short-term position in Ecuador. The job was a disaster, and I wasn't sure I could finish the project, but I knew from my previous experiences that God's ways were higher than my ways, and that somehow things would turn around.

At the end of the short-term stint in Ecuador when I felt lost, I felt a pull to go to Europe to celebrate my 30<sup>th</sup> birthday. Two days before leaving Ecuador, I met a smiling, kind man named Robert. Three months later, we got together in Munich for coffee and a tour of his city. Shortly thereafter, I went to Taizé, a spiritual retreat center. It was here when I felt God's quiet blessing: return to Munich. Two years later, Robert and I were married. As I write, I am in the midst of working on my thesis for graduate school, with my twins dancing inside me, eager to come into this world.

My journey with God has been rich, challenging, and often included struggles. God repeatedly asked me to leave my comfort zone, but always accompanied me when I fell. Thankfully and beautifully, God's path has always been beyond my own imagination or dreams: all I had to do was to have enough faith to follow, taking one step at a time.

**Mission action for today:** If you feel God calling you somewhere, even somewhere down the street, somewhere you are not comfortable, go. God walks next to us in every step we take. Next to God, there is nothing to fear and everything to gain, beyond our wildest imaginings.

**Dearest Christ of all life, may I be open enough to listen and hear you, ready to follow wherever you may lead, knowing your ways are higher than any of our ways.**

Jenny Graner, United Methodist missionary kid from Bolivia

## March 9, Praise

**Psalm 51:15** "O Lord open my lips and my mouth will declare your praise."

Thinking about my time among the people in Bolivia, I smile when I remember our celebrations with the small church of Sapecho in the jungle of the Alto Beni. We had planned a Christmas celebration with the children. With a few things like decorations made of branches of the palm trees, the church was ready. At 7pm my companera and I walked around the village with our homemade cookies to invite people. We shared, "Buenas Noches, you are welcome, please join us in the church for singing and celebrating."

There were many happy faces because of the cookies and this was our mission!

Although the electricity went out that afternoon, we brought our own lantern, which gave us just a little bit of light. The candles had to save us with some more light to be able to read. But every small Bolivian store sells candles; no problem.



The people arrived and there were many children! This is what we loved; a full church with happy faces, ready for the fiesta!

The Christmas play with the angels and the shepherds was meaningful, thanks to its simplicity.

Their faces were lit by candles. Their songs were not all well practiced, but it did not bother anyone.

And after the celebration we shared hot chocolate and bread. In the meantime, I sang "Glory to God in the highest."

Here in this place, I felt the peace of the little child of Bethlehem. And now in these days of reflection in Lent, I realize that the praise continues. Not only with Christmas do we sing Glory to God, but also during these days of Lent.

**Mission for today:** After David confessed his sin Psalm 51, he experienced the cleansing and is longing for a pure heart. Listen and meditate to the beautiful song, "Create in me a clean heart O God." <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=b7Hk3WFUMvo>

**This is also our prayer for today, that we may receive a clean heart and may praise God!**

A. Vercijs, Dutch Protestant Church, volunteer Iglesia Evangelica Metodista en Bolivia

## March 10, Showing Compassion to Your Community

**Matthew 7: 7-12** “Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives; the one who seeks finds; and to the one who knocks, the door will be opened. Which of you, if your son asks for bread, will give him a stone? Or if he asks for a fish, will give him a snake? If you, then, though you are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give good gifts to those who ask him! So in everything, do to others what you would have them do to you, for this sums up the Law and the Prophets”.

When I think about this verse I automatically think about an incredible group of children in Kenya. This group of children is part of a nonprofit called Zoe empowers. Zoe Empowers works with orphaned and vulnerable children living in extreme poverty who are abused, sick, and isolated from their community. They are equipped to overcome poverty with their own efforts—for good—within three years. When the pandemic began my mind quickly went to the vulnerable people all around the world. I quickly thought of the children that I have been privileged to have a relationship with in Kenya through Zoe Empowers. I thought about their well-being and if they would make it through this. I thought about whether their businesses would survive or not. I thought about them going back into isolation and how hard that would be. I had just left Kenya where I saw how hard they were working to get themselves out of poverty. Then I received news of their well-being. It quickly reminded me of Matthew 7: “So in everything, do to others what you would have them do to you.”



When the world shut down, these children did not shut down; they started to serve their community and take care of the vulnerable in their community. They took care of the elderly by fetching them water, firewood, and food. They took care of other orphans. They put up handwashing stations all over their community, made masks, hand sanitizer, and soap for their community. They could have chosen to only care for themselves, but they did to others what they would have wanted to be done for themselves.

They chose to live as Jesus did during this time of uncertainty and care for everyone. I have personally seen them sacrifice so much to take care of the vulnerable in their community even while they are extremely vulnerable. Every day I am inspired by their stories of showing compassion and kindness to their communities. They live each day choosing to treat others as they want to be treated. A group of extremely vulnerable did what we all should be doing in our communities.

**Mission action for today:** Go do an act of kindness in your community without their knowledge. Heavenly Father, may we wake up each day and live a life for others. Serving them, and caring for them as we want to be served, and cared for.

Molly McEntire, Florida Conference UMC, Mission Training and Volunteer Coordinator



### March 11. A Just God Forming Just People

**Ezekiel 18: 25, 29:** “Do I hear you saying, ‘That’s not fair! God’s not fair!’ Listen, Israel. I’m not fair? You’re the ones who aren’t fair! [...] And yet Israel keeps on whining, ‘That’s not fair! God’s not fair.’ I’m not fair, Israel? You’re the ones who aren’t fair.” (*The Message*)

Moving from North to South can be a humbling, confusing experience. We have so much while others have so much less. Not just stuff but security, control, options, and some degree of certainty. The recent pandemic has highlighted these stark inequalities. But it has also levelled the uncertainty playing field with questions like: Will we be able to visit that dying family member? Attend that wedding? Hold the new grandchild?

As people in the North have been part of this shift from certainty to uncertainty which is always an uncomfortable place, we may find ourselves saying, “That’s not fair!” and possibly adding, under our breath, “God’s not fair.”

We’re visiting Sucre, Bolivia’s “White City.” Picture white-washed colonial houses and churches; red-tiled rooftops; cool, shady courtyards, purple and pink bougainvillea. We’re tourists, so we’re observing, appreciating, relaxing. We learn that Sucre is known for its intricate weavings, handwoven on wooden looms, skills passing from generation to generation. As a Christian, my heart is stirred by the concept of God as Master Weaver, my life lovingly woven. We visit a weaving museum where we learn how the wool is selected, dyed, spun, and how the weaver will work for months to produce a unique work of art. The weavings are beautiful, and we are captivated by the details, the imagination, the stories they tell.



And, of course, I want one! The museum shop is selling some beautiful weavings. But since it works with local artisans to promote sustainable livelihoods and respect for their labor and creativity, the textiles come with hefty price tags, far more expensive than the ones in the local street stalls. And so, after some mental gymnastics, self-justification and slippery thinking, I buy my weaving from a street seller at a fraction of the price and am, at least fleetingly, extremely pleased with my bargain.

No matter where we are from in the world we can listen to our neighbors, hear the deep promptings of our hearts and ask our just God to guide us in every situation, to live and act fairly in our lives. In this way we reflect God’s justice, harmony and peace.

**Mission action for today:** Identify a situation where you could be fairer by paying a fair price, giving a fair wage, or treating someone fairly.

**Loving God, help us to reflect your justice in our daily lives, choices and attitudes.**

Maggie Anderson, currently Scottish Baptist

*Photo credit: from ASUR Indigenous Art and Textile Museum*

## March 12, Walk in Obedience to the Lord

**Deuteronomy 26:17a** “You have declared this day that the Lord is your God and that you will walk in obedience to him....”

If we confess that we are God’s people, we ought to obey God’s leading. Our obedience to God, no matter how small, brings joy and blessings because God is pleased to work through our obedience.

When we moved to Atlanta after serving as missionaries in the Philippines for 18 years, we had several wishes. One of them was to form an intimate fellowship with a Korean congregation. When in-person worship finally and cautiously resumed in 2021, we began to visit the Korean United Methodist Churches (UMC) in the Atlanta area. During those visits, we were able to learn that many Korean immigrants were stressed from various factors such as discrimination and language barriers which they would bring to the church. Many churchgoers express that such social pressures lead to tension in the church. There was one Korean UMC in particular that was on the brink of splitting up. We prayed for the church in Christian solidarity, but sadly, the lead pastor of the church and many members went out and established a new church.



On one Sunday morning, a week after the split happened, we felt that God seemed to tell us to attend the service at the original church. The large sanctuary, once full of people, looked almost empty with people sparsely sitting. When the praise and worship ended, the worship leader made an appeal to the congregation to volunteer for the worship team. Right at that moment, the Holy Spirit touched our hearts and said, “respond and help.” We registered right after the service. Since then, we have been serving as the members of the worship team.

Later, the worship leader told us that the day before we responded to his invitation, the worship team had fasted for new members. The worship team rejoiced that their prayers were answered; the church members were energized by praise and worship led by the worship team that had new members, and finally our wish for belongingness was fulfilled in this unexpected way. The fasting of the worship team and our obedience to the voice of the Holy Spirit were God’s work of comforting and recovering the church. We remember that we don’t know what our small obedience really entails until we actually obey.

**Mission action for today:** Pray for someone in your family, friends, neighbors, and church and do what God inspires them to do in loving obedience.

**My Lord, Jesus, I want to grow in imitating your obedience day by day.**

Grace and Jay Choi, Missionaries in Residence, General Board of Global Ministries of The United Methodist Church

### March 13, Offering Companionship in a Time of Distress

**Psalm 27** "The LORD is my light and my salvation; of whom shall I be afraid?"

The LORD is the strength of my life; of whom shall I be afraid?"

Among the effects generated by the Covid-19, we find anxiety, fear, anguish, and uncertainty about the future. These are human emotions, and it was possible to find them in this situation due to the novelty of the appearance of the SARS CoV-2 virus.

During the pandemic I visited a sister from church who lives alone. She is a good friend of my parents and was my high school teacher. Despite the years she continues her work as an educator in one of the church schools and maintains a special charm of beauty and youth. The afternoon I visited her she was very nervous, restless, fearful, anxious. Even when she was alone inside the house she wore a mask and protective glasses. She, who takes great care of her appearance, looked a little neglected. When she saw me, she became excited and asked me not to come closer which surprised me. Then she stretched out her arms to the sky and with a worried tone asked me: "Are we going to die? What can you tell me in the middle of this situation?" At that moment I did not know what to say to my teacher who for years often had the answer to many of my concerns.

Then I remembered Psalm 27:1. I told her that we should not be afraid because Jesus Christ is the Lord of our lives. I pointed out to her that what she was feeling is normal as we face situations that make us insecure, and that we should be confident in the God who is our strength at all times. But in situations like the one she was going through, our anguish is so real that at times we feel that we are overcome by loneliness, that the Lord is so busy, that he does not see us. However, the Lord in his omnipresence always sees us on every occasion. After my words we had a moment of prayer; then Sister became quiet.



This afternoon I went out with a new mission purpose: to accompany my brothers, sisters, friends and relatives, whether they reside alone or in company. The anguish and anxiety generated by Covid-19 is real. We can accompany people through a conversation over the phone, through the digital means at our disposal or with a face-to-face visit as I did with my dear teacher and friend. That afternoon I understood that it is not a lack of faith to feel fear or anxiety in the face of a risk; it is a human feeling. Let us remember Jesus on the

Mount of Olives. There he went aside with three of his disciples to pray (Luke 9:28). When a person is in distress, we must accompany him or her.

**Mission action for today:** Let us accompany our older adults who live alone and need sincere friendship.

**God of love, thank you for being at our side in difficult moments; allow us to accompany people who are in times of distress and anxiety. Through Jesus Christ. Amen.**

Rev. Betania Figueroa. Pastor of the Dominican Evangelical Church, Dominican Republic



## March 14, Love for Enemies

**Luke 6: 27 & 31** “ But I say to you that listen, love your enemies, do good to those who hate you. Do to others as you would have them do to you. ” (New Revised Standard Version)

It was 1968. I was 13 years old. My family was holding a summer garage party with our neighbors in our small town of McHenry, North Dakota. An official army vehicle drove onto our gravel road and stopped in front of our house. Two men dressed in full formal army uniforms walked up to my parents. In that minute, my family’s lives changed forever.

God says, “love our enemies.” Who are our enemies? I associate my enemies with fear. Whom do we fear? Hatred seems to accompany fear. When I think about fear and hatred and enemies, I can only think about differences. But what makes us different? Harvard University Graduate Schools Arts and Sciences says that all humans are 99.9% genetically the same. If we share 99.9% of our DNA together, why do we base our lives on this fraction of difference?

My husband and I lived in Chicago in 1984 on the 3rd floor of an apartment building that was surrounded by signs of poverty and violence, gang graffiti, broken glass, burned out cars and gunshots. We had a hide-a-bed couch in the small living room, Jenny slept in a bassinet in the closet and 2 years later Samuel in one of the dresser drawers. Gordon came home from work one day and asked if a young man could come and live with us--Thông Ba Dinh, 19 years old, a refugee who had tried to escape his country three times while almost drowning--an escape from Vietnam. My heart skipped a beat, and I realized that I hated Vietnam. I knew nothing about the people except that they were different than I was: the shape of the eyes, the slightest difference in color of the skin, a different language, different food preferences, different traditions and beliefs. Weren’t the Vietnamese people my enemy? Didn’t I have to honor my oldest brother’s death? Wasn’t my only weapon hatred?



God’s tremendous grace in my life was to help me go deeper than the fears in my mind. My heart said, “Yes” and God worked a healing miracle in my life. Thông (pronounced Thom) became a part of our family and eventually so did his wife, his children and his parents. A relationship that continues to the present. That 0.1% can be a terrifying chasm for us to cross. Learning and listening with our hearts rather than to the chatter of our minds can open a new world for us. **Luke 6: 38** “Give, and it will be given to you. A good measure, pressed down, shaken together, running over, will be put into your lap!”

**Mission action for today:** See beyond your fears. Listen with your heart today and open your door to one person or family who is a “stranger” to you.

**Almighty God of the universe. We are all part of your creation. Give us courage to let you break down the walls we have put up around our hearts and lives. We invite You to help us to see and hear the people around us with your eyes.**

Ardell Graner, Retired missionary from Bolivia and the Dominican Republic

## March 15, Walking Together

**Isaiah 1: 2-4** We hear the prophet's stern rebuke against the sins of Judah: ***"The people are unmerciful and practice injustice!"*** Isaiah's prophetic indictment implies that because of Jerusalem's lack of concern for suffering people -- the poor, widows, and orphans -- Yahweh's punishment will be meted out! Who are the suffering ones in our midst today? As a Canadian, I have become increasingly aware of the ongoing anguish of our *"First Nations"* brothers and sisters [i.e., *"Native Americans"* in the USA]. I am also more sensitive to the direct role that we as *settlers*, and our Churches (including my Anglican denomination), have played in perpetrating historical injustices upon First Nations in Canada, including here in my adopted province of BC.

In May, 2021, Canadians woke to the disturbing news that 215 unmarked child graves were located (using ground-penetrating radar) at the site of a former Residential School (RS) near Kamloops, BC. In July, we were shocked by a second discovery of 751 unmarked graves near the site of another former RS in Saskatchewan. Although both findings were at former Roman Catholic school sites, my own Anglican denomination also participated in the Canadian government's policy of *"forced assimilation"* of Indigenous children. Numerous observers have described Canada's RS policy as *"a deliberate strategy to kill the Indian in the child!"* As a former National Chief remarked: *"It was a breakdown of self; the breakdown of family, community and nation!"*

A fuller picture of the dehumanization inflicted on First Nations' children in RSs, and the resulting *"intergenerational trauma"* emerged in 2012 when the Canadian government launched a national *"Truth and Reconciliation Commission"* (TRC) to hear the stories of Indigenous peoples -- Aboriginal, Metis and Inuit -- who were victimized by our nation's policy of forced assimilation of between 1874 and 1996. Anglicans participated fully in the TRC, publicly acknowledging responsibility for its role in RSs across Canada, including St. Michael's at Alert Bay on Vancouver Island. Indeed, the final TRC Report in 2015 concluded that *"cultural genocide"* was a product of the RS system. Of the 94 TRC Calls to Action, several pertained to the four Church denominations which operated RSs. The TRC process and report had a huge impact on Canadian Christians, Anglicans included. Our Bishop in the Diocese of B.C. embraced the need for joint healing with our Indigenous brothers and sisters. He attended the demolition ceremony at the St. Michael's facility (closed since 1975), and in 2016, walked from Victoria to Alert Bay (351 kms.), in a powerful, symbolic act of repentance. Along the way, he asked for permission from First Nations to cross their unceded territories. On this pilgrimage, our Bishop not only demonstrated remorse for our Church's role in the RS *"legacy of intergenerational trauma"*, but pledged Anglicans to an on-going journey of reconciliation.



In a new era of respect, engagement and social justice, difficult and challenging days still lie before us. Support for *"decolonization"* in my own inner-city Victoria parish of St. John the Divine moves ahead in the firm hope that our common *Creator* will one day make us true and equal neighbours. To this end, we initiated a symbolic reconciliation project in 2017 which established the *"Walking Together Chapel"* -- A Place for Truth-Telling -- where Anglican *"settlers"* and local First Nations could safely dialogue in a spirit of openness and trust. The project commissioned a West-Coast aboriginal artist to decorate the space using traditional designs. Before all parish gatherings, including worship, St. John's offers a *"territorial acknowledgement"* which honours our on-going relationship with First Nations on the lands we jointly call our island home: *"We acknowledge with respect the Lək'wəḡən-speaking peoples on whose traditional territory we work, play and worship, represented today by the*

*Songhees and Esquimalt Nations."* Such symbolic actions and rituals are only a beginning. Reconciliation is complicated, but it is our chosen road towards a more just future for all people living in BC.

**Mission action for today:** As a *settler community*, how do we best bear witness to the grief and anger of our aboriginal neighbours? During Lent, Jesus' powerful words remind that our Biblical faith compels us to create a new world in which authentic inter-human relationships are an imperative: ***"The greatest among you shall be your servant; whoever exalts himself shall be humbled; and whoever humbles himself shall be exalted."*** (Mathew 23: 11-12)

**Creator God, Humble us! Make us merciful and just! *"Keep sending us back to love and serve our most vulnerable neighbours!"*** (Shared by a wise diocesan theologian to our congregation)

Murray Luft, Victoria, BC, Canada, retired development worker and community educator, spent 15 years in Latin America with Mennonite Central Committee, Save the Children-Canada and Catholic Relief Services

### March 16, Values of God's Reign, A Restorative Justice Inmate Circle Group

**Matthew 20:25** "So Jesus called the disciples together. 'Do you want the Kingdom people, but God the Father doesn't play by the Romans' rules'. (Translation from VOICE New Testament) Jesus identifies for his disciples an undesirable ruling structure, one that values domination, abuse of power, and exploitation. But he goes on to tell them about the values of God's reign."

In 2020 I was living on the Border and working in a refugee immigrant ministry. When Covid shut everything down, another volunteer organized a weekly Zoom discussion group based on the book, "Universal Christ." In one session, a part of the meeting devoted to one-on-one sharing, I was partnered with a woman who lived in Terre Haute, Indiana. She told me she belonged to a group of people devoted to visiting the Federal Prison death row inmates. The former U.S. Attorney General had begun executing these inmates after a 17-year hiatus, and 13 prisoners were to die. She had recently experienced the execution of a prisoner she had become close to after many years of visits. Trained as a clinical psychologist, she was able to speak clearly and precisely of her feelings and emotions, those of her fellow visitors, the inmates and their families. Their clear understanding of the racism, classism, politicization, and financial profiteering that permeates the system only deepened the suffering.

I was moved by the conversation and motivated to learn about capital punishment in our country. I had recently returned from 25 years in South America. No Latin American country has state sponsored executions, and I had thought little about it for many years. On my computer I learned about the abuses and injustices, but more importantly, through YouTube videos, I listened to today's heroic advocates like Bryan Stevenson, Michelle Alexander and Helen PreJean.

In a two-week online workshop, I found out about a movement developed mainly out of Eastern Mennonite University called Restorative Justice. It is motivated by Jesus' vision of love, compassion, and forgiveness which seeks the healing of both the victim and perpetrator. As a reason for the executions, the former AG said, "Retribution is an important goal of society." Restorative Justice seeks to bring truth to a "big lie" embedded in our culture: the only way to defeat violence is with more violence.

**Mission action for today:** Spend some time learning a bit more about the Restorative Justice Movement.

**Jesus, you suffered and died unjustly at the hands of those in power who feared losing domination. Soften the hearts of those of your followers who today still seek to follow those practices.**

Brian Vetter, Xaverian brothers, USA  
Bolivian ministry, border ministry





## March 17, People Can Change: The importance of sharing and working together as community.

**Luke 16: 30-31:** The Rich Man and Lazarus, “‘I know, Father Abraham,’ he said, ‘but they’re not listening. If someone came back to them from the dead, they would change their ways.’ Abraham replied, ‘If they won’t listen to Moses and the Prophets, they’re not going to be convinced by someone who rises from the dead.’”

I have to say that I don’t like this passage. It’s a parable used to teach. But it is really awful and without any hope for redemption. The rich man who goes to hell even comes up with an idea to try to get his relatives to change but is not allowed to carry it out. And it clearly teaches that those who suffer in this life will not suffer in the next. I also don’t think much of this idea.

The Jesus I know wants everyone to have a good life here on earth. He wants us to be community and share so that we all enjoy an abundant life now.

Jesus shows compassion, forgiveness and understanding in so many parts of the New Testament that the lack of compassion for the rich man here just doesn’t seem right.

I can’t think of any major change I’ve seen or experienced in my life as a missionary that is as Christ-like as what has taken place in the little country of Nicaragua in Central America since 2007.

The focus of this society now is on eliminating poverty and making sure that everyone has a good life with the basics covered. Poverty has been cut in half. Extreme poverty and maternal mortality by well more than half. Health care and education through university are free. Since 2007, 23 new modern hospitals have been built. Every aspect of cancer treatment and renal failure is kind, effective and free



and in nice surroundings. Tens of thousands of homes have been built and many people now have a dignified home. Ninety-nine percent of homes have electricity. People who are still poorer receive subsidies for paying electricity and water. Public transportation is subsidized for all. Recreation is now a right and every neighborhood has a nice park often with a soccer or basketball court and free Wi-Fi. Sports is encouraged with investment in facilities, teams and travel.

Photo: New school in a village of the Caribbean Coast where many were destroyed by hurricanes in 2020.

I could go on for a long time. The things they have done to make life better for everyone is truly a miracle. And the population is active in volunteering to help with all these good things. I believe that when people want to follow Christ’s example and show it to others, they can help bring about miracles.

**Mission Action for today:** Wherever we are we can be part of a life-giving project in a community that is working together and is trying to put their faith into practice and make life better for everyone.

**Dear Jesus, help us to be community, to care about each and every person.**

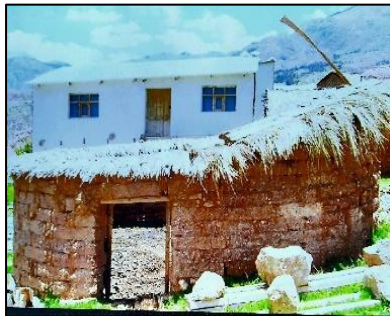
Nan McCurdy, Global Ministries missionary in Mexico, United Methodist Church

## March 18, Hope When There Is No Hope

**Genesis 37: 21-22** But when Rueben heard it, he delivered him out of their hands saying, “Let us not take his life”. Rueben said to them, “Shed no blood; throw him into this pit here in the wilderness, but lay no hand on him . . .”. V26 Then Judah said to his brothers, “what profit is it if we kill our brother and conceal his blood? Come, let us sell him to the Ishmaelites and not lay our hands on him, for he is our brother, our own flesh.”

It was a spectacular day as we made our way from Cochabamba, Bolivia, into the mountains of the Capinota district to the Quechua village of Chimboata. We traveled over rough roads and no roads with breathtaking views and at one point over a road which had just been prepared by the village residents.

We were greeted by the people in a moving ceremony including singing and flowers and explanations of the plans for a new future. The dreadful Chagas disease impacted the lives of almost all residents, but there was a plan to save future generations.



Chagas is carried by the Triatomines beetle which bites people as they sleep and causes life-long impact on vital organs. There is no known cure. The insects live in the thatched roofs and adobe walls of the houses. The new plan would involve plastering the exterior and interior of the adobe and replacing roofs with metal, creating houses safe from the infecting beetles.

The partnership we established between churches in Connecticut and New York and the villages of the district enabled the construction of hundreds of these houses. Thousands of dollars were raised to match the sweat equity resources of the villagers. Our volunteer in mission teams helped, making adobe and working on houses side by side with our sisters and brothers.

In a world so plagued by strife this experience has been a sign of renewal.

The story of Joseph was ultimately one of remarkable survival and forgiveness and hope. As we face these days of lent, remembering the suffering of Jesus, a story such as this story of the villages of the Capinota region is also one of hope.

**Mission action for today:** Send a message to someone suffering from disease.

**Holy God, open my eyes and my heart to participate in the hope you offer.**

Jane Allen Middleton, United Methodist Church, USA, Retired Bishop, Susquehanna and New York Conferences

## March 19, Offer Them Hope

II Samuel 7: 9-11,15a “I’ve been with you wherever you’ve gone, and I’ve eliminated all your enemies before you. Now I will make your name great—like the name of the greatest people on earth. I’m going to provide a place for my people Israel, and plant them so that they may live there and no longer be disturbed. Cruel people will no longer trouble them, as they had been earlier, when I appointed leaders over my people Israel. And I will give you rest from all your enemies...But I will never take my faithful love away from him. “Common English Bible

We met him on the street about 12 years ago. There are days when his inner demons take control and, as he says, transform him into what he most hates about himself.

One day he was at the door of our church totally distraught. He said he was coming from a revival meeting at a local church. While preaching the evangelist pointed at him and said, “God hates drunks. Drunks are going to hell. “

Grabbing Teri’s arms he begged,

“Tell me, tell me, am I going to hell?”

I love God! If I’m going to hell then there is no hope for living.”



I have seen broken spirits in my lifetime but nothing compared to this. I’m still angry.

**Mission action for today:** Stand up to support or defend vulnerable people. Our actions may be someone's last grip on hope.

**Lord, there is nothing higher, stronger or greater than your faithful love. Our hope is in you.**

Evelyn Erbele – Retired Global Ministries Missionary United Methodist Church

First City Homeless Services, First United Methodist Church of Ketchikan, Alaska



## March 20, Obedience to the Commandments of God

**Deuteronomy 30:16** “If you obey the commandments of the LORD your God that I am commanding you today, by loving the LORD your God, walking in his ways, and observing his commandments, decrees, and ordinances, then you shall live and become numerous, and the LORD your God will bless you in the land that you are entering to possess. “

God has given us commandments to live by, both in the Old Testament and in the New Testament. In the Old Testament we have the Ten Commandments and the Great Commandment in Deuteronomy 6: “You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might.” In the New Testament we have Jesus adding to this Great Commandment that “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.”

When we first came to serve as missionaries in Ecuador, we became reacquainted with a Methodist pastor living and serving in her small rural town high in the Andes mountains. We had first known her when she was studying theology at the Latin American Biblical University in Costa Rica. The university is located in a large urban Central American city in the midst of all the hustle and bustle, comforts and problems that we associate with modern city life.

Visiting and working with Pastor Blanca in her community, I couldn't help thinking of the above passage from Deuteronomy and God's commanding us to walk in His ways, observing His commandments, decrees, and ordinances in the land we possess. One of the first times we visited Pastor Blanca we found her in the fields planting crops with her aunt. When one of her urban pastor colleagues criticized her getting dirty in the fields she replied “and how can I serve my congregation if I don't work side by side with them and put my hands in the same dirt that sustains us all?”



Walking in His ways means walking with our community, sharing our lives, our resources, our gifts, and our knowledge. Pastor Blanca shares all of this with her community, serving on the local water board, visiting the elderly who are unable to leave their homes with food and prayer, observing God's commandments in her daily life.

**Mission Action for today:** Seek to be involved in the community around you obeying God's commandments.

**Dear God, help me to know your commandments and to seek to carry them out in my daily life as I walk your creation each day.**

Dakin Cook, Retired United Methodist Missionary to Latin America

## March 21, Great Expectations Headlines

**Psalms 42:5-6** “Hope in God; for I shall again praise him, my help and my God.”

Daily news headlines capture the main events happening in the world, showing us the political, social and religious tensions of our times. As mission partners in La Paz, Bolivia, we would pay attention to The Prensa: ‘Political Unrest as Minors March to La Paz’ and ‘Cost of Living Soars.’ Such headlines would impact everyone but more so the indigenous poor in society. The cost to the breadwinner who protests could mean the loss of life and limb. Economic headlines could negatively influence the reality of poverty.

Local and world news seeps into us, creating a variety of emotions and expectations.

Today we look at the headlines generated by the biblical passages and see how down the ages people have faced similar challenges.

Samaritan Times: ‘Military Leader Disrespected by Religious Official’ (**II Kings :1-15b**).

Naaman was furious that the prophet did not meet him and perform a religious ritual of healing. Similarly, The Nazareth Times run reports of how people turn to violence when they do not get what they expected:

‘Jesus is threatened by death because he refuses to perform the miracles reported in other areas of the country.’ (**Luke 4:23-30**)

However, we have a contrast in The Jewish Times (**Psalms 42:1-7**). Although the headlines ‘Believers Persecuted and Taunted’ resulted in the Psalmist being depressed, he clings on to what he knows of God and in faith hopes that there will be a time when he will praise God.

My general experience of the Bolivian Methodist Church was that it responded in faith and action, bringing hope to many who were in despair.

**Mission Action for today:** In God’s presence name the emotions we experience as we read daily news headlines from around the world. Note one small way which you could realistically share hope with fellow Christians at home and abroad.

**Dear God, help us lay down our expectations as to how you should manifest yourself in our lives and in our world. May we be open to our daily experience and see you at work in unexpected ways, through unexpected people and in unexpected places.**

Deacon Sarah Bruce,  
Methodist Church in Great Britain – Mission Partner, Bolivia  
1990-1997



## March 22, Missionaries Need Forgiveness Too

Matthew 18:21-35 and Psalm 25:6-7

When I reflect on Jesus' parable of the ungrateful servant, my first response is "How could anyone forgiven so much be so blind and unforgiving?" Then, I 'remember my youth'....



Many years ago, as a missionary in Nigeria, I served in multiple roles, including director of the agricultural development program for the church as well as a teacher and vice-principal in a lay evangelist training school. After being closed for several years, students were invited to return but had to feed themselves and their families while attending. We established a rice farm of one-acre plots for each of the 36 students to grow their own food. I secured funds and provided seed, fertilizer and plowing as a loan to each student. All went well the first year until a drought during a critical growing period caused

great losses; some could not even recover the seed they had planted. I carried the loans over into the next growing season.

The next season I was anxious to make sure that the student farms succeeded. I sent the tractor to plow and soon went to check on how the work was going. Much to my dismay, I discovered the tractor was not plowing student farms. I went to confront the principal who I was sure had diverted the tractor to his own farm. I was wrong. The tractor was plowing the teachers' farms. While I had prioritized plowing student farms, the principal prioritized teachers' farms. He was the principal, but I was the agriculture program director. We were at loggerheads! I was furious because I thought the students should come first – not the principal or teachers who all earned salaries, meagre as they were. As it turned out, the land was all plowed, and a great harvest produced. And yet, I do not recall asking forgiveness for my anger toward the principal. Now, decades later, I remember this conflict as still unresolved.

When too much time passes, we are left to fall back on the words of scripture: *"Be mindful of your mercy, O Lord, and of your steadfast love.... Do not remember the sins of my youth or my transgressions; according to your steadfast love remember me, for your goodness' sake, O Lord!"* (Ps 25:6,7)

I am both challenged and assured by Jesus' words to Peter: Forgive: "Not seven times, but, I tell you, seventy times seven" – not a literal 490 times, but an unlimited number of times. Yet, I often find it easier to forgive than to ask for forgiveness, as I failed to do so many years ago. If I had had the humility to ask for forgiveness for my misplaced anger and had given the principal a chance to forgive me, I am sure our relationship would have been strengthened and our witness stronger to both students and teachers alike.

**Mission action for today:** Let us go to that person who (in our minds) offended us to resolve lingering conflict.

**May the love of God which we know best through Jesus the Christ heal our broken relationships and strengthen us to be more compassionate servants of those we have neglected in our communities. This is my prayer for me, and for you.**

Jim Gulley, Broomfield, Colorado; Clergy member of Mountain Sky Conference  
Service: Sierra Leone, Nigeria, Cambodia and Haiti



## March 23, Mission and the Kingdom of God

**Deuteronomy 4:1** "Give heed when made aware of an opportunity to engage with God in Kingdom blessing."

**Matthew 5:19** "Engagement with God in Kingdom blessing God's beloved in the world brings a touch of eternal blessing to them and to us." (both verses are paraphrased)



In mission assignment as School Chaplain and Ecumenical Church Pastor in India, our church received a request to engage with a Lutheran Sunday School group in Colorado. One of their Sunday School classes collected donations sufficient to purchase a cow so that a widow in our community could have fresh milk for her family.

Contact with a Pentecostal pastor enabled us to identify a local widow, Kamada Mary, with 3 young children. Contact with a local veterinarian enabled us to connect with a farmer who had a cow and calf he was willing to sell.

Our church agreed to partner in this challenge to participate in adding God's salt and light in our local setting. We prepared our Confirmation Class to be present at the home of the widow and to participate in the gifting of the milk cow. The moment when the farmer arrived with the cow was poignant. The local veterinarian was also present. He and the farmer prepared a small space beside the house to secure the animals. The widow was provided with instructions about what would be required for the animal's care. The Confirmation class presented her with a bag of feed. We offered a prayer of thanksgiving and blessing for the animals and the family.

The long-term Kingdom vision we had for this involvement was for the family to have fresh milk to drink and use in cooking. Beyond their needs it was anticipated extra milk could be sold thus augmenting the family income.

It turned out that the widow did not know enough about cow care. Her children were too young to be able to help. She worked in town as a day laborer from early to late each day. When she came home, feeding her children and tending to their needs was all she had energy for. The animals needed grass to eat. To do that required walking to the edge of town and spending an hour or two cutting grass. Then the cow got sick. The veterinarian was called. There was a bill for his services. Ultimately, we learned that she sold the cow and calf to cover expenses.

While called to engage with God in the Kingdom way, we are not the instigators of the Kingdom, we are short term participants in which God has invited and called us to engage in the divine perpetuation of the Kingdom.

**Mission action for today:** Be aware and responsive to God's prompting of love and compassion to a neighbor today.

**Father, continue calling me to action in the Way of your Kingdom, I pray.**

Mark Garrison, United Methodist Church USA, 4<sup>th</sup> generation retired missionary in Pakistan and India.

## March 24, May it be well with you

**Jeremiah 7: 23** “But this command I gave them, “Obey my voice, and I will be your God, and you shall be my people; and walk only in the way that I command you, so that it may be well with you.” NRSV

**Psalms 95: 6-7** “So come, let us worship: bow before him, on your knees before God, who made us! Oh yes, he's our God, and we're the people he pastures, the flock he feeds. Drop everything and listen, listen as he speaks”. NRSV

When I was 15 and attending school in Cochabamba, Bolivia, I went through a dark and rebellious period where I was experiencing pain and confusion as a result of relying solely on myself and having little faith and spirituality in my life. Thankfully in those times God never left my side and never has.

I was friends with someone who was also experiencing a lot of pain and confusion. She was about to go on an ill-fated camping trip that would alter her life. When I heard of this camping trip, my self-will reacted and I replied, “Yes, sure, I'll come along”. God spoke to me through my intuition and my family, clearly saying, “Don't go, my love.” I am immensely grateful for that guidance and protection that has never ceased to this day.

I have struggled in my adult life with debilitating anxiety, panic attacks, depression and a full-blown eating disorder. Thankfully in my times of desperation with all these painful experiences, I was able to seek out help. God led me to a 12-step recovery program specifically for eating disorders and meditation. I am walking the path of healing and transformation and am grateful for this ‘middle path’, a humble life without extremes.



I first heard about a specific type of guided meditation called Vipassana from a dear friend years ago. The seed was planted a few years later when I was hiking in Nepal. I was staying at a hostel when one day ten other foreigners came into the hostel. It is difficult to describe the amount of compassion and peace that they emanated for one another and towards everyone else in the hostel. When I asked one of them what they had done to obtain this peace and grace they told me they had just finished a 10 day Vipassana course, which involves, ‘sitting with God’ and is a purification of the mind. I am grateful to God that I met them and heard of their experience. I proceeded to attend the same course a few weeks later in Lumbini, Nepal.

I am eternally grateful for the healing and liberating spiritual practices of daily meditation and prayer, knowing with deep conviction this is the only way to fill the void inside of me, as I yearn to perceive and follow God. God can transform our lives if we listen and receive God's grace that is provided every day. I am truly free and taken care of when I live mindfully and listen to God.

**Mission action for today:** Drop everything and listen, listen as God speaks.

**God, grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, the courage to change the things I can and the wisdom to know the difference.**

**May all beings be happy, be peaceful and be liberated.**

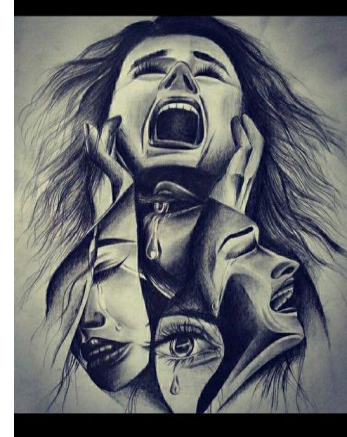
Hannah Graner, missionary kid who grew up in Bolivia

## March 25, Women are Favored of God

Luke 1: 28b "Rejoice, you who are favored, the Lord is with you".

Today we are witnesses in our societies of the suffering of women whose rights are violated by an unjust system of life: the patriarchal system. Prejudices and macho attitudes treat them as inferior, and so they end up being victims of male power and the laws of institutions that represent it.

The pain, the impotence, the indignation of women are images that have become every day, and we ask ourselves why so much injustice, violence, rape and death of women? Today we raise our voices crying out to God, and we pray for those who are disadvantaged by human societies.



In the midst of so many tragic stories, I remember the story of a woman who married here in Cochabamba and was blessed with two sons and a daughter. From being a courageous woman in defense of the rights of women domestic workers, her life changed completely to being a submissive and subordinate woman to her husband, a man who was not only sexist but violent.

The constant physical and psychological violence destroyed her self-esteem and led her to see her reality as something that could not be changed. It was unthinkable to her the possibility of getting out of the darkness in which she was living.

She came to me as a friend and pastor to share her anguish and ask for advice on how she could resolve the situation. We had several meetings based on the Word of God, reflecting on how she could empower herself in the Spirit of God.

I also met with her husband with the purpose of making him aware of the damage he was causing in his family with his attitudes. But in the end, nothing changed until she reported him to the Administration of Justice. She asked me to be her witness together with two other women who knew about the situation. Of course, we agreed to be witnesses to denounce the injustice suffered by this disadvantaged woman. I remembered God's words:

"Rejoice, favored one, the Lord is with you."

At the court hearing, justice was done; she was granted the custody of her children. We all rejoiced and hugged each other, and I personally thought: "This woman is favored by you Lord and she will live with her children which are the blessings that you gave her." As I left the hearing, the man was waiting for me. He tried to hit me and was yelling at me, insulting me. I knew it was the cost of defending God's favored ones.

I was able to say to that woman that day, "You are favored of the Lord, because God opened a new path of life for you and your children."

**Mission action for today:** We must collaborate and commit ourselves to the underprivileged, so that the joy of hearing that they are God's favored ones may reach them.

**I cry out to you, God of fullness of life and justice, for all disadvantaged women. Pour love and justice into their lives and may they truly feel that they are favored of you, Lord.**

Gustavo Loza Machicado, Evangelical Methodist Church "El Salvador", Cochabamba – Bolivia



## March 26, God, Have Mercy on Me

**Luke 18: 9 &13b** “To some who were confident of their own righteousness and looked down on everyone else.... “God, have mercy on me, a sinner”

Mercy is a strange word and I rarely hear it used outside of church circles. It is one of those words I grew up hearing but was never sure what it meant and how it was any different to grace, which was another of those words I wasn't sure about! So just in case you are like me, but too embarrassed to say, mercy is choosing to offer compassion or forgiveness, despite having been wronged. The act of kindness is undeserved in other words. *Undeserved*. That word made me think.....and think.....um.....examples of mercy? I could think of plenty of examples of kindness and compassion but the word 'undeserved' was causing me a problem.

I decided that mercy, whether in Bolivia, where I was a missionary, or in England, where I live now, was and is rare. In Bolivia there was much 'looking down on' from the wealthy to the low income, from the white to the not-so-white, from the professional to the uneducated, from the missionary to the local.

Jesus' teachings turn the world upside down. The humble tax collector becomes the hero. And then I got it! Suddenly I had an example of mercy.

The Bolivians who receive us missionaries into their country, show mercy. As missionaries we often go to help, to convert, to change, to introduce...in short, we are confident of our own righteousness. Our attitude is like that of the Pharisee 'I thank you that I am not like them.' Instead of sending us back with a lecture on condescension, as we might well deserve, the local people we go to welcome us in, they offer us endless hospitality, patience, and enthusiasm. On some level, whether consciously or subconsciously, they understand that it is us, the missionaries, who need them, rather than the other way around. We need their compassion and their forgiveness.

You may have heard a missionary say “the one most changed by my time in ...was me”

Yes! We were shown mercy and that is how we were changed. Changed by their kindness, compassion, spirituality, and humility.

Maybe to understand mercy we need to look to the marginalised, to those without power and to those discriminated against? To those who have been wronged time and time again? To those who humbly keep living and giving to others who don't even recognise their wrongdoing?



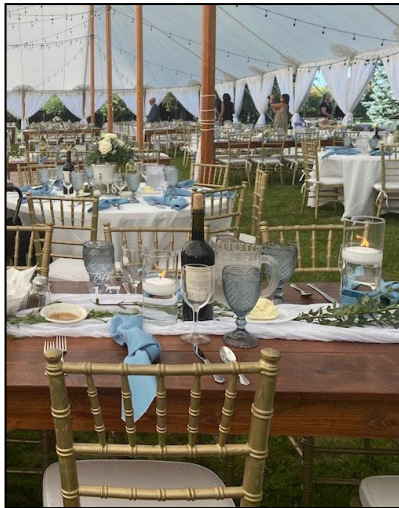
**Mission action for today:** Bring to mind someone who you look down upon and ask for forgiveness. Bring to mind someone who has wronged you and find a way to offer them kindness.

**God, have mercy on me.**

Andrea Parker. Community worker in Birmingham, UK. Former missionary with Latin Link in Bolivia. All Saints Anglican Church

## March 27, A Meal with Misfits

**Luke 15: 1-7** “Now all the tax collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to him. And the Pharisees and the scribes were grumbling and saying, “This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them.” So, he told them this parable: “Which one of you, having a hundred sheep and losing one of them, does not leave the ninety-nine in the wilderness and go after the one that is lost until he finds it? When he has found it, he lays it on his shoulders and rejoices. And when he comes home, he calls together his friends and neighbors, saying to them, ‘Rejoice with me, for I have found my sheep that was lost.’ Just so, I tell you, there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance.”



The last two weddings I attended had assigned seating for the wedding meal. Each person finds their card with their name and table on it. Most of the time I am so grateful to not have to worry about where to sit and who I’m going to sit with that evening.

However, at the last wedding, my friend and I were assigned at the misfits table, a new experience for me. No one at the table knew any of the other people; we were all connected to the bride and groom in different ways. At first, I was nervous, but soon everyone at the table was taking time to meet those seated next to them through stories of meeting the bride and groom and taking time to ask one another questions. It ended up being the best wedding dinner experience I’ve ever had.

Luke’s verse begins with the Pharisees “grumbling and saying, ‘this fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them.’”

They make it a point to mention a meal. Can you believe this guy named Jesus? He even eats with sinners?

All the stories in Luke 15 are about relationships and where better to start one than over a meal. At a table, everyone is seated at an equal height and typically with a similar meal. There is time to look up, ask a question, take in a story, make a connection and build a relationship.

**Mission action for today:** How can we join the misfit table more often? Where can we choose to sit at the table where conversations might begin a little awkwardly because we are unfamiliar with one another? Who can we sit, listen, and engage with even if we seem to have nothing in common?

**Dear God, let us follow your example of sharing a meal with all people, even those we’d rather not sit by. Surprise us with the fruit that grows out of those conversations. Amen.**

Sarah Maslowski, St Stephen Lutheran Church ELCA

### March 28, Bed-Bound Praise

**Psalm 30: 11-12 (12-13 if using the Catholic Bible):** “You turned my wailing into dancing; you removed my sackcloth and clothed me with joy, that my heart may sing to you and not be silent. O Lord my God, I will give you thanks forever.”

One of the many blessings of being a VIM team leader/coordinator is being able to watch as our team members are witnessed to by those we seek to serve. One of the most vivid examples of such devoted witness came from an older woman who was bed-bound with a dislocated hip which had been out of its socket for over 3 years. Every morning her family would carry her from the house to the yard so she could enjoy some time outside. When they discovered we were in town, they asked two of our physicians to make a house call to see if they could get the hip back into place and help her regain mobility.



Our physicians reported using as much force as they could muster without success. (Three years is just too long to go for a non-surgical manipulation.) Despite the profound discomfort they were causing her while attempting to manipulate her hip, this woman continued to praise God for their presence and thanked them profusely for coming to her and trying.

As the physicians shared their encounter with our team, we all marveled both at her constant witness to the love and glory of our God as well as to the devoted care given her daily by her family. Her life had changed dramatically 3 years ago and yet there was no bitterness in her. Her entire being resonated with the real knowledge that God was with her, loved her and would watch over her. She freely and lavishly shared the richness of God’s love with all she met – from her bed.

**Mission action for today:** Make eye contact with someone helping you or serving you today and tell them how blessed you are by their work and efforts.

**Loving God, may I praise you each day knowing that the gifts of your love and peace are not dependent on my circumstances.**

Julia Jones, First United Methodist Church of Pierre, SD, VIM Medical Missions to Dominican Republic



## March 29, Providing Support so that Jesus can Heal

**John 5:1-18** “One [of the blind, the lame, the paralyzed] who was there had been an invalid for 38 years.”

As missionaries living in Zimbabwe, we have been privileged to form close friendships with a variety of people who were born and raised here. One family in particular has become close, and watching their children grow up has been exciting, especially their eldest daughter who has grown tremendously in her faith. Margaret’s husband Thomas has been a successful businessman, but recently a tragic accident left him paralyzed from the chest down. There is still hope that healing of his spinal cord will take place. As I write this, Margaret sends daily updates on the WhatsApp messaging service, and there are plans for him to start rehabilitation soon.

Since they live four hours away, we have not yet been able to visit them, but we provide daily assurances that we are praying for strength for her and healing for Thomas. Margaret’s mother is helping care for their three young children while Margaret spends time with Thomas and deals with doctors and other immediate needs.



I am reminded of the lame beggar in John 5. The gospel doesn’t tell us about his living or family circumstances....but SOMEONE must have cared enough for him to help him get to the pool and back home again...for thirty-eight years. I hate to think of how discouraging the task must have been as year after year passed with no healing. Yet someone didn’t give up.

The doctors cannot provide assurance that Thomas will ever walk again, but Margaret remains steadfast in her faith that they are in God’s hands. For now, even getting into a wheelchair is a major effort, but the prayer is that eventually he will be able to leave the wheelchair behind.

We pray that we can continue to provide encouragement and prayer support, even when we are too far away to assist in other ways.

**Mission action for today:** Every community has people needing assistance and encouragement. You cannot help EVERYone- but you can help SOMEone. May you be the hands and feet of Jesus to those whom you can help.

**Lord, you healed the lame. Thank you for the friends that you blessed us with. Please give us a generous, untiring spirit in reaching out to those who need our help, and guide and strengthen those in healing ministries.**

Larry Kies, United Methodist Church at Africa University, Old Mutare Zimbabwe

### March 30, God Knows My Name

**Isaiah 49:15** “Can a mother forget the baby at her breast and have no compassion on the child she has borne? Though she may forget, I will not forget you!”

I have very few dreams that I recall with much clarity save one. It was the recurrent dream of my childhood, a nightmare of tornadoes. The dreams started after the untimely passing of my Dad. I was seven. The dream tornadoes reminded me of that loss. I didn't tell anyone. I only hoped they would end. I finally admitted the fear of these dreams to my brother, two years older, only to find that he had dreamt of tornadoes, too.

The nightmares ended with a climactic dream that I experienced as a young adult. In that dream I was in a glass house, just one room. I could see multiple tornadoes swirling above me, threatening me from all sides.

One of the funnels snaked its way toward the glass house. It burst through the glass in a flash of light that congealed to an oval shape. That oval settled on the table in the middle of the room where it transformed into a glow stone. It was a beautiful color, one I can't match, though I remember it as magenta-like with white letters that spelled out my name: S T E V E. After I recognized my name on the stone, I looked up to find all tornadoes gone. The sky was clear and I felt peaceful warmth. God knew my name.

My dream experience inspired me to examine the scriptures, looking for names on stones, for proof that this dream was speaking to me. I found this Revelation: <sup>17</sup> Whoever has ears, let them hear what the Spirit says to the churches. To the one who is victorious, I will give some of the hidden manna. I will also give that person a white stone with a new name written on it, known only to the one who receives it.



More searching. I found this in Isaiah: “Can a mother forget the baby at her breast and have no compassion on the child she has borne? Though she may forget, I will not forget you!” The idea of attachment to God exploded from this verse. Like my beloved mother, God holds me, feeds me, protects me...and knows my name.

My attachment to my own mother was powerful; she would never forget my name. Now I was being told that even if she did, God never would....never could... forget my name, my new name etched on his glowing stone.

**Mission action for today:** Ask one person today what her/his name is, repeat it out loud, and then let them know what a beautiful, strong name that is. Represent the loving God who knows their name better than their own mother.

**Dear God of all names, remind us to be confident in your loving connection that goes beyond even the most intimate human connections we have been blessed to receive.**

Steve Graner, Education consultant and retired middle school teacher

## March 31, Don't Forget to Always Remember

**Psalm 106:19-23** “At Horeb they made a calf and worshiped an idol cast from metal. They exchanged their glorious God for an image of a bull, which eats grass. They forgot the God who saved them, who had done great things in Egypt, miracles in the land of Ham and awesome deeds by the Red Sea. So he said he would destroy them—had not Moses, his chosen one, stood in the breach before him to keep his wrath from destroying them.”



*Students perform Chile's national dance, the cueca, at the Methodist secondary school, La Granja.*

A few years ago, I went to Santiago, Chile, to visit mission sites with the Chilean Methodist Church. We arrived in Santiago but were going to fly to the southern city of Temuco very early the following morning for a few days to see their ministries in the region. The plan was to leave our main suitcases in Santiago and only take a carry-on bag for this short trip. While I was rearranging my belongings into the appropriate bags, I placed my passport in my larger suitcase and then forgot about it. The next morning, our driver dropped us off at the airport and we headed inside to the ticket counter. I suddenly remembered my passport was in the minivan, speeding away from the airport! I was in a real bind. I quickly called my friends in Chile to see if one of them could reach the driver and ask him to return to the airport. In the end, it all worked out. The driver

returned to the airport; I got my passport, checked in with the airline, and boarded the plane with minutes to spare.

Distractions cause us to forget what is most important. The Hebrews became distracted on their way to the promised land and forgot God. Are we any different today? We are still easily distracted by heated voices, polarizing factions, daily struggles, and just life in general. We forget to listen to God and follow His path. Yet, when we remember what is most important—to love God with all our hearts and to love our neighbor—we stay on the right path. When we feed the hungry, visit the sick and lonely, welcome the migrant, or care for the planet, we remember God. When we live out His plan for us, distractions no longer cause us to forget to listen to God and follow Him.

**Mission action for today:** Seek out organizations in your community that work with the forgotten and marginalized populations and learn how you can partner with them.

**Dear God, help us keep our focus on You and guide us along the life path you have set for us. May all honor and glory be yours forever and ever. Amen.**

Karen Distefano, Oklahoma Conference Secretary of Global Ministries UMC

## April 1, The Lord Comforts Our Spirit

**Psalm 34:17-18** “The righteous cry out, and the LORD hears them; he delivers them from all their troubles.

The LORD is close to the brokenhearted and saves those who are crushed in spirit.”

Since the early days of the pandemic, my heart has been filled with extreme sadness, a pain that does not go away; I feel the pain of everyone entered me, and I could not go on anymore.

Ecuador was one of the first countries in Latin America that was first hit hard by Covid. The hospitals and funeral homes in the city of Guayaquil were totally saturated in the first months: the pain and horror was felt even at a distance. At the peak of the crisis in early 2021, due to a lack of oxygen and intensive care centers, we lost friends here in Ecuador and at home in Bolivia.



But in the midst of the pain, we could see God’s comfort through the people in the Church. His spirit moved His people to sustain one another, through churches and sister organizations abroad, and through small local churches. We came to know churches that together bought oxygen tanks to help families struggling to survive; churches in the countryside that prepared medicinal herbal tea for their communities; smaller churches in the mountains prepared and sent bags of vegetables and potatoes in solidarity to their neighborhoods in the city; and other churches on the coast sent bananas and yuca to be shared with fellow urban members. The women's

organizations were able to share small funds to support productive ventures to help survive the economic crisis.

After the last big earthquake which hit Ecuador in 2016, the Methodist Church began a volunteer training program to respond to natural disasters, specifically to accompany people living in crises and family grief, which also included creating collective spaces for listening and mutual aid.

Amid anguish and pain during the worst months of quarantine and isolation, we were able to help with health and prevention information. We started virtual meetings of listening and accompaniment, with pastors, families, and volunteers. We thank God for opportunities to learn to calm distressed spirits; we learned that people often just need to talk and empty their hearts, to have someone to pray with. We thanked God for cell phones and zoom.

**Mission action for today:** Even today the world needs consolation. Dare to call, visit, and listen to the pain and anguish of people: people who need to feel that they are not alone, that they are important to someone, that they are important to God.

**Lord may your presence continue to nourish us with the gift of consolation, that comes from you. You set an example for us through the giving of Jesus Christ, and we want to respond when you say to us: just as I have comforted you, so go and comfort others.**

Sara Flores, United Methodist Global Ministries Missionary, serving God together with the Evangelical United Methodist Church of Ecuador



## April 2, Mission in the Midst of Enemies

**Psalm 7:6, 8** "Rise up, O Lord, in your anger; lift yourself up against the fury of my enemies [...] Judge me, O Lord, according to my righteousness and according to the integrity that is in me." (*New Revised Standard Version*)



I was assigned as a Mission Intern (forerunner to the Global Mission Fellows program) to work with campesinos in a small town in the Dominican Republic. I was a community organizer working with farmers, coffee growers, students, women's groups, and teachers advocating for civic and economic rights, including the right to education, the right to health care, and the right to a living wage. I was in a small town, made good friends, and had an experience of mission that changed my life.

Hurricane David had passed over the country the year before I arrived and had damaged the local elementary school. Eight months later the school had still not been repaired. The team I worked with met with parents and teachers who were concerned the children were not receiving their education. Why wasn't the school being repaired so classes could begin again? The team decided to send a delegation into the capital to meet with the Minister of Education. One of our colleagues was a university professor who helped set up the meeting. We took a *gua-gua* (mini-bus) into Santo Domingo. I made the journey but because I was not Dominican, did not join the meeting. I later heard the story: as it happened, the Minister thought the repairs had already been made because the money had been spent. By the end of the meeting, they knew that the check had been written to the local congressman, and learned that the engineer who had been hired for the repairs had been fired, and no one else was lined up to take the job.

When we got back to the small town, word spread like wildfire that the congressman in charge had done nothing about the problem. Two nights later, three men showed up at the house of a teacher who had been on the trip. They intimidated her to the point that she immediately packed her things, left and never came back. Later that night, there was a knock at my door. Two men stood outside when I opened the door grabbed my shirt, pushed me up against the door frame. "Who do you work for?" they sneered. "Jesus," I answered. "Jesus who?" they wanted to know (note: Jesus is a common name in Latin countries). The next day the police called me in for questioning.

I reflected on how scared I felt (even though my nationality gave me some protection) and how threatened the beloved teacher must have been, who was only acting on behalf of the children. That incident provoked the townspeople into developing a holy anger about this injustice. This Psalm stood out to me, as it could have been in the mouths of parents and teachers, "Rise up in your anger, O Lord, against our enemies." This prayer was also spoken by me, thinking of the congressman and his henchmen doing his dirty work.

One final note on mission in the midst of enemies: the Psalmist doesn't end with only that thought. Just two verses later, the prayer continues with a posture not of arrogance but of humility, "Don't just judge them, but judge me, O God, and see if I am a person of righteousness and integrity." Though the intimidation didn't stop, the work on the school began and by the beginning of the next school year, students were back in class and the people celebrated this moment of speaking truth, in love, but still speaking truth to power.

**Mission action for today:** Identify a place where advocacy is needed and lend your support through writing a letter or attending an action.

**Dear God, grant me humility to move with your love and grace into places of systemic injustice and be a voice for the broken and oppressed. Amen.**

Clarke Campbell-Evans, United Methodist Church, USA, Director, Missional Engagement, Florida Conference

## April 3, Carrying New Life

**Psalm 126:6** “Those who go out weeping, bearing the seed for sowing, shall come home with shouts of joy, carrying their sheaves.”

When we first read the words “carrying new life,” we may be likely to think of a woman who is pregnant, carrying a new human life within her womb. We might wonder if the title of this Lent devotional might be better suited for an Advent reflection. But when we reflect on the meaning of the Scripture verse from Psalm 126, we see that the new life being carried is not a baby but a different kind of life-affirming bundle—that is, a bundle of grain. Sheaves of grain were revered in the Bible and throughout ancient cultures, as such bundles represented and affirmed hope for sustainable living.

When I read this verse, a vivid picture immediately came to mind from our church’s mission trip to the Dominican Republic in 2019. It is a picture of a couple mounting their motorcycle and carrying home a solar oven that had been assembled by our team, together with the local Dominican mission team. I wish you could have been with us and heard the shouts of joy and appreciation as the people prepared to return home carrying their bundles of new life.



The new life created by the solar oven project is a great example of how missions are to make concrete, practical differences in peoples’ lives, and in our world. During our mission trip we learned about the damaging effects of deforestation on our environment, and how families struggle to get potable water and to cook safely and affordably. Solar ovens replace smoky wood and charcoal fires with healthy and safe solar cooking. This is not only important for the health and security of these families but replaces a way of cooking that is a health menace to our global environment.

Along with these benefits, the solar oven project brings together people of faith from across cultures to learn from one another, to serve others, to worship and break bread in Christ’s love. I will always cherish the connections our Minnesota group made with the Dominican team. While we started out as two teams, we soon became one team, as we worked together to assemble 170 ovens; as we rode and shared songs on a crowded van to distribute the ovens; and as we shared jokes and reflections each evening after enjoying a delicious Dominican meal prepared by local church members. As our mission team departed on our last morning, we, like those we had served, knew that we were returning home with songs of joy, and that our lives had been enriched forever.

**Mission action for today:** As we consider ways to put our faith into action during this season of Lent, I invite you today to go online and look up “Solar Oven Partners” to discover how you can be of support, including financial gifts and volunteer opportunities within and outside your church. You could also choose today to be a partner in prayer by taking a few moments to lift up all the families in the Dominican Republic and around the world who struggle with food and water security.

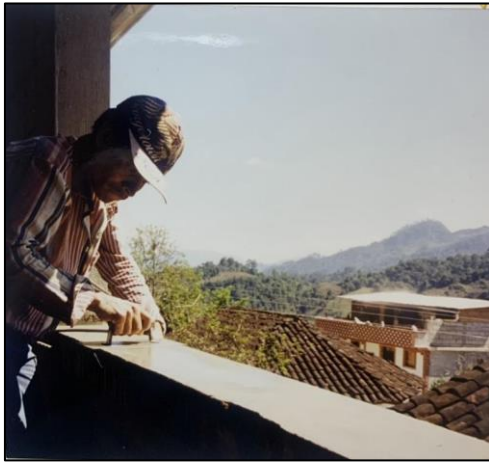
**O loving God, thank you that you hear the cries of your people. May your Spirit continue to unite us in mission that transforms weeping into songs of joy. In Christ’s name. Amen.**

Rev. Randy Johnson, First United Methodist Church of the St. Cloud Region, Minnesota  
FUMC Mission Trip to the Dominican Republic, February 1-10, 2019

## April 4, EVEN IF!

**John 8:14** - Jesus answered, "Even if I do bear witness about myself, my testimony is true, for I know where I came from and where I am going,"

I think I sang, or whistled, or hummed a song every day while we were in Guatemala. Every day except for one. Monday night we had a song fest. I went to bed with singing in my head and my heart. As I woke up the next day, I remember very distinctly that God told me not to sing, hum or whistle; which was very hard for me to do. But God had placed silence upon my heart that morning. I was so quiet that everyone thought I was sick or that there was something wrong. But I knew I had to be quiet so God could tell me something.



We were doing construction in a Methodist Church, and as I stood in the window of the church doing cement work, I paused for a moment to look out the window. I looked out across the beautiful landscape of lush green mountains, and it happened! I saw the face of God in the people we were working with and on the street below. The beauty was overwhelming to me and the simple way of life was very humbling. It was in that moment that God spoke to me in my silence.

Even if your life is busy, God reminds us to take time to remember that He calls each one of us to bear witness to Him; for our testimony is truth to others! Even if you'd rather have a song in your heart, be still long enough to let the Lord work; for the world is loud and the Lord whispers!

I stood in the church window while tears dripped off my face onto the cement. Through the faces of my Guatemalan brothers and sisters, God simply and quietly used my mission trip to Guatemala to gently remind me that even if it seems too far, even if it seems too expensive or even if it seems too radical, GO! Not only will you be a blessing to those you meet, they will bless you far more than you could ever imagine!

**Mission action for today:** Even if you think you don't have time, listen to the Lord whisper to you. Let him whisper who you should reach out to and follow through by doing an act of kindness for them today. Let your testimony of the Lord's whisper be the truth you share with them.

**Holy & Gracious God, I pray that in this season of Lent that I can turn "what if" questions into an "even if!" witness and proclamation for the Lord's work! Let my actions and my testimony be truth that points others to you!**

Shannan Cloud, M.Div.

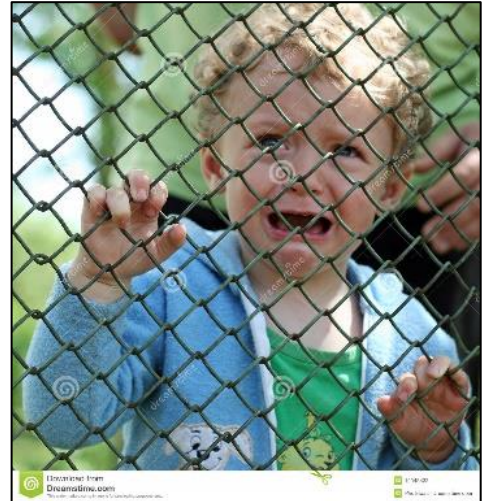
Missionary and Writer disguised as a 4th grade teacher, Elk City, Oklahoma

## April 5, Even in the Darkest of Time, Don't Give up Hope

**Psalm 102:17,18** "He will answer the prayer of the abandoned, he will not scorn their petitions. Put this on record for the next generation, so that a race still to be born can praise God."

I was working in a children's home in Bolivia. Most of the children had been abandoned or they had been removed from their homes because of neglect and abuse.

One day I heard a child in the yard crying, "Daddy, Daddy, Daddy!" She was running from corner to corner of the fenced-in yard because she realized that her dad, who had brought her there, had left her. At first her cry sounded scared, maybe desperate. "Daddy!" And then a final, plaintive cry, a Daddy-how-could-you-do-this-to-me cry. I wondered if the dad was near enough to hear her. Was his heart broken? Mine was.



Another day I saw a little boy standing at the front gate looking out at a woman walking away from him. She was about a half block away. On her arm she carried a basket of bread that she was trying to sell to make a living. She was walking slowly with a bad limp and her head hung low. Her child cried, "Mommy, Mommy," until she was out of sight. The child stopped crying and put his hand on the padlock, which was larger than his little hand, a last futile attempt to get to his mother. More broken hearts.

And in another story, familiar to all of us, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"

Always, always in the midst of such pain and suffering God is present with us and is hearing the pleas, and lovingly asking us to have trust and hope.

I have seen the "end" of some of these stories, and there were adoptions and other loving parents.

And Resurrection. Even in terrible darkness, God asks us to trust and to hope.

**Mission action for today:** Pray for someone who feels abandoned.

**God, give the comfort, hope and healing of your loving presence to those who feel abandoned.**

Sister Joyce Schramm, Sister of the Most Precious Blood, Missionary to Bolivia



## April 6, Facing the Unknown with Faith

**Daniel 3: 16-17, 28a** “Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego answered the King. ‘O, Nebuchadnezzar, [...] if our God whom we serve is able to deliver us from the furnace of blazing fire and out of your hand, O King, let him deliver us.’ Nebuchadnezzar said, ‘Blessed be the God of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, who has sent his angel and delivered his servants who trusted in him.’”

It’s just not the right time. I’m too busy. I’m not sure if I want to spend that much money. I don’t know what I’m committing to. I don’t know anyone else on the team or anything about the country. Do these statements sound familiar? I know I probably used several of them during the first international mission opportunity that came my way, and I let my fear of the unknown win. A few years later, another Volunteer in Mission opportunity in my church presented itself and again, the doubts came. But one Sunday in church, while singing the hymn “Here I am Lord, is it I Lord,” I was overcome with emotion and tears started rolling down my cheek. I knew it was God giving me a much-needed push, letting me know He would be with me on the journey, and that I needn’t fear the unknown. I signed up for the team and before long I was on my way to Bolivia: from then on, I was hooked. I’m now preparing for my tenth international mission trip and have also participated in several local mission trips.



On that first trip to Bolivia, Pastor Gustavo Loza spoke to us and talked about how we all live in the same house. You may live in the kitchen, and I may live in the bedroom, and someone else may live in the dining room, but we all live in the same house. Whatever happens in one room of the house affects the entire house. We need to move from one room of the house to another to learn about the whole house and the people who live in each room, their needs, their struggles, and their hopes.

I think his story nicely sums up mission. It is important to travel to new locations, meet new people, and learn about other areas or cultures, and the struggles of other people. In doing so you will meet new friends, have the opportunity to work with people of other cultures, and learn, laugh, and pray together. Just as Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, we need to trust God and go out of our comfort zone. Take risks—life changing experiences await you.

**Mission action for today:** Take a risk, look for a way to learn about or be in mission to someone or somewhere new.

**Dear God, support me as I take risks and venture into the unknown to show your love to all your people, wherever they may be, with whatever they may need.**

Carol Knodle, Flame of Faith UMC, West Fargo, ND, Mission Team Chair & past VIM team leader

## April 7, Seek the Lord and his strength

As our human frailties are forever before us, we have this wonderful promise.

“Seek the Lord and his strength; seek his presence continually,” **Ps 105:4**

Webster’s definition for “continually”

1. repeated frequently in the same way; regularly.
2. **without interruption; constantly.**

I cannot honestly say that I have experienced something which I have done “continually” up until this point in my life. Of course, I consistently love God or “Tunkashila” as my Nakota/Dakota/Lakota people say, I love my husband, I love my children, I love my grandchildren and there are several other consistent things in my life. However, my life was suddenly and horribly changed on November 2, 2019 when our 14-month-old grandson, Easton, was murdered by his noncustodial mother.

NOW I know “continually” in a way I have never known. Easton’s murder was ignominious and unjust. There are no other words to describe the unbelievable, the unimaginable. How could a mother drown her baby in a bathtub? For this entire year I cannot believe someone could do that to their own child. It’s inconceivable to me, as a mother of three and grandmother of six.

Now there is a “continually”

I open my eyes upon awakening and there it is “Easton was murdered”. My last thoughts as I drift off into a restless night “Easton was drowned in a bathtub.” And yes, my thoughts are of Tunkashila as I continually ask for strength and healing for myself and my family.

I wish I could tell you honestly that after each one of those thoughts was the thought of God’s goodness.

“Remember the wonderful works he has done,  
his miracles, and the judgments he has uttered,” **Psalm 105:5**

Although as time passes, I am able to “remember the wonderful works” as I see healing in my son, my eldest son, my daughter and the rest of my family. I witness “his miracles” as we are able to gather and laugh once more together.

So yes, “continually” has new meaning for me. And perhaps that is the power of scripture, the ability to speak to us no matter race, geographic location, language or religious upbringing.



**Mission action for today:** Reach out to someone outside of your “religious” circle and be open to their connection to Spirit, honoring your different paths to the same destination.

**Tunkashila, help us to continually read your word and remain open to your loving guidance and inspiration. Fill us today with your power, transforming us into the people the world needs to see.**  
Rose Bazemore, Oncological massage therapist, grew up and served as a missionary in Brazil

## April 8, The Work Hour

**John 10:37-38a:** “If I am not doing the works of my Father, then do not believe me. But if I do them, even though you do not believe me, believe the works...” (*New Revised Standard Version*)

Several years ago, I participated in a spiritual retreat in Mendoza, Argentina at the Albert Schweitzer School, a pre-K through secondary Methodist school that offers quality education at an affordable cost. The retreat was held on a Saturday and Sunday in late winter, and we were fortunate to have sunny days that permitted us to meet in small groups outside. The retreat scheduled was patterned on Christian Ashrams that the missionary-evangelist, E. Stanley Jones, held in India, and later, in countries around the world. We opened our hearts to one another about our spiritual and earthly needs. We read and studied scripture, worshiped, shared meals together, and on Saturday, set aside an hour to work together on a project that would help the school.

There is a popular English idiom, “The proof is in the pudding,” that would have us remember that there is nothing like tangible acts of work that prove our beliefs. The retreat Work Hour gave us an opportunity to do something for others—in this case, for the children of the pre-K classes.

The gospel of John records a dialogue between Jesus and religious leaders on the day when Jesus himself asks them to see the proof of his calling as Son of God in the works that he does. I like Eugene Peterson’s rendition of the encounter when he quotes Jesus: “If I don’t do the things my Father does, well and good, don’t believe me. But if I am doing them, put aside for a moment what you hear me say about myself and just take the evidence of the actions that are right before your eyes” (*The Message*, by Eugene H. Peterson, **John 10:37-38**).



People want to see the proof of our Christian beliefs in what we Christians do. E. Stanley Jones’ format for our spiritual retreat set aside time when we painted chairs for the Albert Schweitzer pre-school. The prayers we lifted up that weekend, the small group conversations, the worship, and the singing were complemented by a time of putting our faith into action through the simple, but helpful task of painting children’s chairs.

What action will you do today that can serve as tangible proof of your faith in Christ? Perhaps you can call some friends or fellow church folk and do a project together to help someone in your neighborhood or church.

**Mission action for today:** Find a tangible, hands-on project to help someone today.

**Help us, O God, to put our faith into action as proof of our faith in Christ.**

Douglas Ruffle, United Methodist Church, USA, Mission Interpreter for Encounter with Christ in Latin America and the Caribbean

## April 9, God Dwelling Amongst Children

**Ezekiel 37:27** “My dwelling place will be with them. I will be their God and they will be my people.”

What does it mean for God to dwell amongst us? At times, God dwells in the Shade and Fresh Water after-school projects in Brazil. One of these projects is in Liberdade, a working-class community just outside of Belo Horizonte, Brazil’s fourth largest city. After weeks of record-breaking rain, I telephoned Leia, the Christian educator, saying, “Leia, it’s probably going to rain again, do you think the kids will come?” She responded, “Of course! They don’t miss honey!”



Before Covid, a new policeman in the neighborhood discovered the “honey” on his first visit to the project. He asked one boy what he liked about it. “Everything!” the young boy responded. A bit surprised, the policeman asked, “Isn’t there anything you don’t like?” “Yes,” the boy replied, “I don’t like the days when the project is closed.” The “honey” is both fun activities and the relationship the kids have with the educators.

Poor Brazilian neighborhoods have little for kids to do. Four-hour school days mean no extra-curricular activities. Schools are all *reading, writing and arithmetic*, with homework piled on. Kids return to empty houses while their parents are at work, but often stay in the streets where drugs are easily available; here, drugs and petty crime are rampant. Broken families plus “nothing to do,” is a formula for taking **the wrong path**. There are plenty of store-front churches, but they only offer evening Bible study for adults and worship on Sundays. There is no “honey” for kids to feel loved or valued, key ingredients to help them DO something positive with their lives.

The Shade and Fresh Water projects are where kids **want to be** because they are places where they can BE someone. Even in poor neighborhoods there are cellphones with games and fantasy to escape boredom, but Shade and Fresh Water offers a place to learn music, play sports, have friends, and discover the world’s problems.



Shade and Fresh Water projects do not offer a trouble-free space: kids have space to argue. Each year, the project starts with the kids dreaming about how the project could be the best place on earth. They make rules and a pact to make it a promised land for everyone. When tempers fly, the educators take them back to their pledge to find a solution. During an argument between two kids, as an educator tried to calm tempers, one boy shouted, “Well, I am NOT Jesus Christ!” As he calmed this young man down, and the educator patiently helped him agree to “give another chance” to the other boy. Upon doing so, both boys renewed their pact for the project to be the best place for everyone.

The “honey” leaves lifelong marks. Recently, one man posted a picture of himself in front of the project on Facebook. He grew up in a very difficult family, but now is a cabinet maker in a prominent European company. Under the posted picture was the caption, “This is the place where I began to believe I could be someone.” God can dwell in the hearts of children. What a great gift it is, to be with them in this journey.

**Mission Action for Today:** Find a way to support a child or young person to become an agent of change for promoting a better world for themselves and others.

**Dear God help me to hear young people’s said and unsaid words.**

Gordon Greathouse, Retired United Methodist missionary still working in Brazil



## April 10, Mission with Humility and Service to the Least and the Last

**Philippians 2:6-7** “Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage; rather, he made himself nothing by taking the very nature ‘of a servant,’ being made in human likeness.”

When I was a young seminarian in the 1980s, a group of professors and students—including myself—were dedicated to collaborating with two humanitarian projects with impoverished and underserved people who lived on the streets of São Bernardo do Campo and in São Paulo, Brazil.



The “Street Boys and Girls Project” assisted children and teenagers who were homeless and gathered in the neighborhood square to protect themselves and spend the night together. The project provided those children with a little hope, education, and food, seeking to support them with their most basic needs, and rescue their dignity. Many of those children were victims of violence and, on the streets, they found themselves surrounded by more violence and drugs.

The other project, “Street People Community,” brought together homeless people in the heart of São Paulo, under the Glicério viaduct, to provide them with hot food, clothes, personal hygiene materials, along with the offer to read the Bible and pray with them and listen to their stories. It also supported them to claim their human rights and rescue their citizenship by, for example, helping them renew documents and forward them to a potential job opportunity or decent housing.



I will never forget the many faces of those children, teenagers, young adults, and older people, saddened and frightened, with almost no sign of hope and sometimes angry at their circumstances. These faces marked my pastoral ministry and my life in God's Mission—they evangelized to me. They were almost always capable of letting a smile full of gratitude emerge from their thin and suffering faces when one of us offered them a gesture of affection and care, whether it was for a piece of bread or a glass of water we shared, or that we listened to their stories and questions, or that we sat next to them, and offered a hug.

Serving God and collaborating in his Mission implies assuming the posture of Jesus of Nazareth, who was on the side of the poor, who healed the sick and taught the least and the last; he washed the feet of his disciples, and on Palm Sunday he entered in Jerusalem on a simple donkey. “In response to God’s Mission for him, Jesus [...] poured himself out in servanthood for all humanity and emptied himself of divine privilege, assuming the trials and risks of human limitation. Jesus identified in compassion with all humanity and lived in radical faithfulness to the will of God” (*The Mission Theology statement of the Global Ministries, UMC*).

**Mission action for today:** Identify homeless people in your neighborhood or city and demonstrate God's love and concrete compassion for them.

**Oh Lord, have mercy on the people who are abandoned on the streets and send me to show your love and compassion for them, while I collaborate in your Mission.**

Rev. Luis Cardoso, Methodist Church in Brazil, São Paulo, currently serving as a Global Ministries missionary with the Methodist Church in Uruguay

## April 11, Flames Fanned Brightly Through Service

**Isaiah 42: 6** “I am the LORD, I have called you in righteousness, I have taken you by the hand and kept you; I have given you as a covenant to the people, a light to the nations.”

A circle of strangers came together from across both coasts of the United States and from all edges of the Dominican Republic through friendship with the Graners. As I reflect upon the connectional thread as a member within family, vocation, community and world, I am humbled at the disconnect of places and people by time, land, and oceans. Simultaneously, this brokenness is also the same reason we, as humans, are bound together as one family, under one sky, who reside upon one floating marble contained in an infinite universe.

Each time I have gone on a mission, at home and abroad, I heard a faint whisper or “call,” which led me to a conscious choice to *see*, *feel*, and *listen* as a willing participant. In hindsight, all that was presented to me was already designed and organized. The act of being chosen by God when one does not *feel* prepared, or feel *seen* as worthy or *heard* in voice, causes us to doubt or ask *why me?* When we let go and trust the process, when we give our personal flame permission to be fanned by God’s whisper, to say yes! to whatever an experience may bring, our dim light transforms into boldness and strength beyond our understanding. Being together uplifts us and discourages our doubts. Through our coming together, we illuminate a path that shows those present all our commonalities, despite what may appear as our many differences. In this practice of coming together, we tap the source of abundance to be able to grow our light and extinguish our darkness. Together, we share Ruach, the breath and spirit of our God. In community we spread love, as He, who created and stretched the heavens and earth, shared with us.



The brilliance of our collective illumination allows others to **SEE** us sharing our call, to **FEEL** the light from the service in mission in the Dominican Republic, to **HEAR** our solar oven stories, as we reflect upon how we worked with those who have limited resources to feed their families cleanly and safely. In that moment, all of us around the circle of softly lit candles had said “yes,” had showed up, initially as strangers. Though after it was over, we emerged as friends who fanned each other's flames through unconditional love, a love which God shared with us across nations, lands, oceans, time, and space.

**Mission action for today:** Take an opportunity today to *listen*, *see* and *feel* the light of God’s spirit and have gratitude in the subtlety or grandness of the experience.

**May I have the ability to sense God’s spirit (Ruach) in around and through my body, mind and soul, today and every day.**

Monica Bruesewitz, United Methodist Church, Reno Nevada USA, Missionary to her local community, Bolivia, Haiti & Dominican Republic

## April 12, The Word of the Cross: Love!

**I Corinthians 1:18** “For the word of the cross is to those who are perishing foolishness, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God.”

Jesus was bruised, spat upon, and crucified. Yet, the power of love remained. His first word from the cross was, “Father, forgive them.” PRAISE YOU, DIVINE LOVE!

“How can I give chance to that which has happened and is happening within me.” Allow me to paint a few modest, word pictures. First, in my early adult years, a surprising moment occurred when I became a member of the covenant group in our church. We agreed to stop each day at noon to pray. One day, while praying, head lifted upward, eyes closed, I saw a cloud floating forward about my head as though I was being invited to follow. I was startled and mystified by it, yet joyful.

Second, after feeling such joy in working with our church group, in time, I began to feel empty, spiritually dry. While I continued to attend church, it seemed as though I was there in body only. Have you ever felt lost and wondered about the direction your life was taking? I shared my dispirited feelings with a friend. Later, I chose to join a spiritual training group. During the last of ten seminars, I was captured by a powerful experience. As a result, my life was changed forever. As I participated in a guided, imaginary mediation, I heard a voice saying, “There’s nothing real in the world except love.” I opened my eyes expecting to see someone standing there. There was no one. Subsequently, over time, through prayer, listening and wondering about those words I had heard, I was led to ordination in the United Methodist Church. PRAISE YOU, TRANSFORMING LOVE!



Finally, I remember reading that, “Love that has given Himself to us must flow out to others in as perfect a way as is possible in this life.” So, along my spiritual journey, I felt led to counsel women who were recovering from drugs and alcohol. As I drove home one day, an inner sadness came over me and I began to cry. I was struck by an awareness of how closely their childhood stories paralleled my own. My parents were poor. I too had experienced dysfunctional episodes. So humbly, I asked God, “Why have you chosen me for this work?” I did not receive an answer to my “why” question. Yet I vowed to find ways to make a difference in the lives of suffering women. With God’s help, I created a nonprofit company and worked with women in recovery for fifteen years. And the journey continues. PRAISE YOU, SENDING LOVE!



**Mission action for today:** Pause! Look! Is that a cloud beckoning you forth onto the path of LOVE? **Loving God, grant to us the grace to live our lives to which gives glory to Him. Amen.**

Dorothy M. Williams, Retired Clergy in the United Methodist Church

## April 13, Run the Race with Perseverance

**Hebrews 12:1** “...let us also lay aside every weight and the sin that clings so closely, and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us.” (*New Revised Standard Version*)



The Guarani women came from deep in the Amazon River basin rain forest to sell their colorful handwoven baskets and bracelets at the festival in Misahualli. At night, needing shelter, they slept on the portico of the local Methodist Church of Ecuador, and it was there where the woman pastor met them one morning. Knowing that health care for this minority ethnic group was inadequate, the faithful brothers and sisters of the church committed to an ongoing mission with them. Now a United Methodist medical team from Mississippi was accompanying the church members to the remote Guarani village.

Beside the dirt road sat a small, one-roomed, red-framed church building where the missionaries set up their clinic and got to work. On the porch, patients waited their turn—elderly men and women with back aches from years of hard labor, young mothers with children with stomach parasites from unclean water, and others with skin conditions and a variety of ailments. All had come with hopes for relief and care. They began singing in the Guarani language songs of their faith. A smiling young man began the chorus, “Demos Gracias al Señor,” one I’d learned in Spanish decades earlier in Bolivia. “Let’s give thanks to the Lord for his love. In the mornings, the birds sing their praises. And you, friends, why don’t you sing praises to Christ the Savior.” How perfect the song fit this setting!

As we sang in different languages, I was deeply moved by our connection through Christ. Others had run the race before these believers, establishing this simple church and nurturing new believers in the faith. Fellow Christians from Ecuador and the US, together with UM missionaries had come to serve. Despite meager fundamental services, poverty and isolation, these believers were praising and thanking God, seeking the spiritual strength to stay on the path before them and persevering. Their joyful witness inspired and challenged me, then and now, to put away distractions and “sins” that weigh me down and stay focused on Christ’s claim on my life.

**Mission action for today:** Give thanks and sing praises to God today for his care for all his children.

**Creator God, I praise you for your love and steadfast care in all of life’s circumstances. Make me worthy of your faithfulness and sustain me in following the ways of Christ.**

Dianne O’Neal, Main St. UMC, Hattiesburg, MS, Volunteer-in-mission Ecuador, Bolivia and the Dominican Republic



## April 14, Contemporary Discipleship in Argentina

**John 13:15** "I have set you an example, that you also should do as I have done to you."

Jesus and his disciples were in Jerusalem to celebrate the Passover, commemorating the independence of the Hebrew peoples from slavery (see Exodus Chapter 12). These words of Jesus follow his action of washing his disciples' feet. During his ministry there were many instances of unprompted acts of kindness for his disciples to see and of course, to inspire us.

During our ministry in Argentina in the early 1980s, a tyrannical regime persecuted people from the opposition and thousands of Argentinian citizens simple vanished. Later a slogan was popularized to memorialize this time that read, "Never Again."

During our pastorate in Tucuman, Argentina, our son/a young man, Oscar was visiting from his studies at the university. He became an energetic member of the congregation. At that time Argentina was recovering from the dark times of the "disappeared." Some of their orphans were in Tucuman, under the care of grandparents or other relatives. The Church offered its facilities to give remedial school lessons after school hours.



Oscar discovered that some of these orphans were homeless squatters on the banks of a canal on the outskirts of the large city, and he was moved to visit them in this undesirable setting. On Saturdays, he would take them some goodies, used clothing, and perhaps a toy or two. He led them in gospels songs, ending with prayers of praise and thanksgiving.

In this way, Oscar's kind gesture, along with support from the congregation, expressed their Christian discipleship.

**Mission action for today:** With the ingenuity, time, and energy, God's people today can find ways to follow in Jesus' footsteps.

**Dear Lord, may our eyes be open today to see the opportunities to express our discipleship and be inspired by Jesus' example. AMEN**

LeGrand Smith



## April 15, Good Friday, WHAT IS TRUTH?

### John 18, The Passion of Jesus

That immortal question from the mouth of Pontius Pilate heard every year in our different celebrations of Good Friday reverberates in our time as perhaps in no other. Similarly, Jesus' reply takes on added meaning as truth again has become a disposable and some would say an "inconvenient truth." It is no exaggeration to proclaim that the meaning of truth has become at best a distraction and at worst a casualty. To reply as Jesus did that he has come to bear "witness to the truth" carries a great risk if not ridicule before the skeptical crowds of our world.

Yet, on this day in processions and gatherings large and small I can recall vividly from my nearly fifty years among the peoples of Peru and Bolivia mostly in reenactments of the Passion and Death of our Savior and Redeemer in remote towns and villages. The words of the Gospel passage from John are ones we cannot easily avoid or ignore if understood in today's context of disbelief, widespread relativism and escapism. Truth we might say has become ever more expendable, disposable and inconvenient for the women and men of our time accustomed to such phenomena as "false equivalence." I dare say to preach, teach or proclaim truth as Jesus did in his life can incur the wrath and rejection of many in our society.

Jesus' short confrontation with Pilate invites us to look closer to read the "signs of the times" in our age and in our individual and communal lives, namely to hold them up as a mirror on our daily existence. Many of us sent to mission by our communities to the far reaches of the earth and across borders and boundaries of one sort or another face truth or its absence and its consequences in myriad ways. Whether through pervasive regimes of repression and outright hostility but more often in more subtle ways of a culture of indifference that would subvert the truth we find ourselves into a deeper identification of the Jesus who faced down Pilate in the Praetorium of first century Palestine.

To dwell and walk in the truth as one of our contemporary prophets, the late playwright and president of the Czech Republic Vaclav Havel boldly proclaimed in the waning years of the harsh rule of the Soviet regime before the fall of the Iron Curtain we are called to do likewise today in our witness to truth.

On this Good Friday we must ask ourselves to what extent do we "live and dwell in the truth" at a time in history when truth is relativized or dismissed as obsolete? What are those situations and existential dilemmas that call for truth telling in our communities and churches no less in civil society? How many times in the course of any day do we ignore or resist standing up for truth? Taking today's Gospel passage as a road map may not win us instant popularity or fifteen minutes of fame, but it could become a pattern for a more authentic and holistic existence.

As we ponder the sometimes-illusive answers to questions like these we may enter more fully into the spirit of our Holy Week observance that propels us forward to embrace the meaning and application of the Paschal Mystery for God's people in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Good Friday can then become an enduring reenactment of the drama of Jesus' final hours on earth remembering the wisdom of the saying that the truth will always set us free!

**Mission Action for Today:** Reflect on a recent opportunity I had to "live and dwell in the truth" of a difficult situation in my daily life or in the life of my faith community. How then did I discern the meaning of speaking "truth to power" despite my fears and anxieties of the potential consequences of standing up for truth?

**O merciful and loving God give me the strength and the will to always seek to follow the path to truth as a guiding principle in my desire to please and serve you!**

Stephen P. Judd, M.M. MaryKnoll Missioner, Los Altos, California

## April 16, And He Descended into Hell

**Job 14:10-13** "But mortals die, and are laid low; humans expire, and where are they? As waters fail from a lake, and a river wastes away and dries up, so mortals lie down and do not rise again; until the heavens are no more, they will not awake or be roused out of their sleep. O that you would hide me in Sheol, that you would conceal me until your wrath is past, that you would appoint me a set time, and remember me!"

It is well known that John Wesley had certain doubts about the originality of the phrase "and he descended into hell" in the Apostolic Creed. That is the reason why the phrase was not always present in our Methodist rituals. One day a dear brother from the congregation I pastored asked me with great passion: please, do not stop including that phrase in the creed that we affirm in each service. He was very clearly stating, when I myself was in hell, the Lord visited and stayed with me.

This dear brother was kidnapped, tortured, and humiliated for more than forty days during the Civil Military Dictatorship in my country. Through this experience, he bears witness to the companionship and presence of Christ at the lowest levels of human suffering.

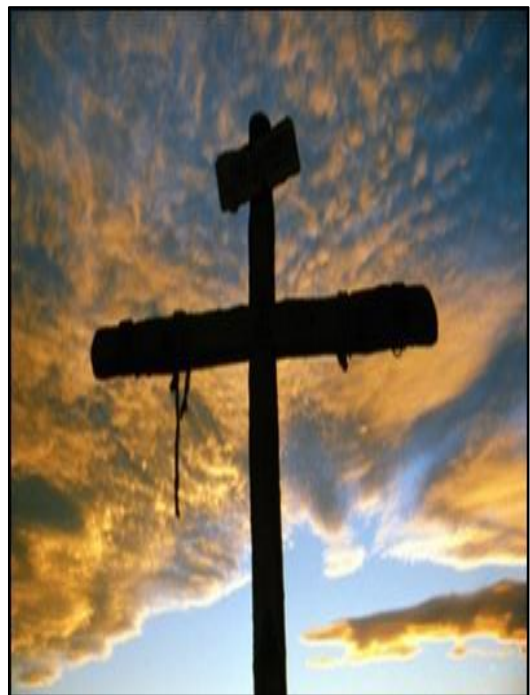
Holy Saturday is the day we remember the Lord's dead and descending into hell. That is why today we would like to remember each person who is living their daily hell of injustice, pain, fear, and inhuman suffering. And tell them, and affirm to them, that even in the most terrible circumstances of life or death, **nothing**, nothing can separate us from the love of God in Christ, because Christ also descended into hell. Even when we are lost, overwhelmed, or abandoned, we are not alone.

Thanks be to the Lord for his constant faithfulness. The Lord who died and rose again, descends with us into our daily hell. This is what we have lived. This is what we preach. This is our faith!

**Missionary action for today:** Accompany a person who is going through a difficult or traumatic time, so that your silent presence may reflect the loving presence of Christ.

**Dear God, when we find no way out and lose hope, we cry out for your presence. Stay in our midst: we need you. Amen**

Rev. Juan Gattinoni, Buenos Aires – Argentina



## April 17, The Risen Jesus

Luke 24:5 “Why do you look for the living among the dead? He is not here, but has risen.”



The gospel is about life and death. And mission is about life and death. My most vivid experiences of Jesus have occurred in the very settings where he lived on this earth—Jesus feeding the multitudes, Jesus healing the broken, Jesus welcoming the stranger. Our most basic human needs—to be nourished, to be well, to have shelter—are about life and death. To be present at the place of need is the call to be in mission. And mission can be surprising and even unsettling.

When mission happens, there is resurrection. My own faith in the living Jesus, risen and among us, has been renewed in experiences of mission—on construction teams in Bolivia, on medical teams in Haiti, with a teaching team in El Salvador, in the sharing of meals with families experiencing homelessness. I have not found my way to an Easter faith through a rational logic or a linear thought process. It has come more often in seeing life in the midst of death and hope that overcomes despair.

In the most seemingly desperate of situations, I have learned through ordinary people what our best theologians have taught us: God is always on the side of life. Sometimes this looks like justice. Sometimes this looks like compassion. Often there is a mutuality of giving and receiving.

Holy Week is a reminder of our poverty and God’s gifts. In my worst moments of ministry, I assumed I was the one coming to bring about change, hope and even salvation. And inevitably I would come to some kind of impasse, or even failure. This is of course the betrayal of Maundy Thursday, the suffering and death of Good Friday, and the descent of Holy Saturday.

If we are truly called to be in God’s mission, with God’s people, we have likely experienced this along the way. And yet God is about life, the tomb is empty; the women are asked, “why do you look for the living among the dead?”. And then they remember his words, and how those words resonated with all that he did while he was with them.

And surely, they were able to see that, all along the way there were resurrections: when the hungry are fed, when the sick receive medical care, when the homeless have shelter.

Mission is Easter and Easter is mission. Today we see the risen Jesus, alive and among us, in the places where he has always been. And he invites us to join him.

**Mission action for today:** As I live into God’s mission, I will imagine that I am becoming a part of the active ministry of the risen Jesus, who wants to use my gifts in bringing life out of death.

**Risen Jesus, alive and among us: give us the vision to see you, and the will to follow you as Easter people. Amen.**

Ken Carter, United Methodist Bishop, Florida and Western North Carolina Conferences, USA



## *Thoughts & Prayers*

*...Jesus himself arrived  
and joined them on their journey.*

**Luke 24: 15**  
Common English Bible

