



New images of Iran

Gwen Gustafson-Zook is an MCC Great Lakes regional associate who spent two weeks in Iran with an MCC learning tour.



Gwen Gustafson-Zook, MCC Great Lakes regional associate, spent two weeks in Iran as part of an MCC learning tour in January. Gustafson-Zook now carries new images of Iran: hospitality, intelligence, beauty and history. Here she is pictured in front of The Women's Mosque in Esfahan, Iran.



IIran. We hear the name with suspicion, fear, mistrust, conjuring up images of Mullahs and hostage takers. But too often the images come from a place of limited exposure: we know only what we hear in the news. So when I had the chance to visit Iran in January with an MCC Learning Tour, I welcomed the opportunity to create some new images – images ground in what I saw with my own eyes, what I heard with my own ears. I am keenly aware that the images I hold convey only a small part of the much larger canvas called Iran. “Two weeks is but a blink of the eye,” my fellow-traveler, Bertha Beachey, often said. And yet that blink is much better than keeping our eyes closed. So what images of Iran do I now carry with me?

Hospitality: Each meeting we attended, we were greeted with warm smiles and bowls of pistachios, plates of pastries or fruit. Hot tea was poured into china tea cups as our meetings began. There was a sense of being genuinely valued and respected. (After experiencing the hospitality of Iranians, it was not surprising to learn that Iran continues to host hundreds of thousands of refugees from the ongoing wars in Iraq and Afghanistan.)

Intelligence: Education is highly valued in Iran.

After meeting with many Iranian scholars, we visited two different libraries. In the English section of the library at the Iman Khomeini Research and Education Institute I was pleased – and a bit surprised – to see copies John Howard Yoder’s *Politics of Jesus* as well as T.J. Van Bragt’s *A Martyr’s Mirror*. We also visited a museum of ancient sacred texts. Included in the collection was a hand written, five inch thick, leather bound copy of *The Psalms of David*, transcribed around 500CE. The value and care given to these texts reinforced a perceived commitment to honoring that which is

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Annual gathering a success

People from across the Great Lakes region gathered together at our annual celebration on March 7-8, in Arthur, Illinois.

Participants enjoyed a range of activities during the two-day event, which was hosted by Arthur Mennonite Church, in partnership with Sunnyside Mennonite, North Vine Mennonite, Trinity Christian and Pleasantview Mennonite Churches.

During the Friday evening worship service, Tim Seidel, MCC U.S. Peace & Justice Ministries director, gave a message titled “Beyond the Language of Peace,” based on Luke 19:41-42. There was a dedication for the AIDS care kits that many participants brought as a special offering.

On Saturday, morning and afternoon workshop sessions were offered on topics including

water resources, meat canning and food resources bank. There were also two celebration sessions, where participants got the chance to learn about the current work of MCC and delegates voted to affirm plans for the upcoming year.

This year’s annual gathering was unique, as the meetings culminated in a dinner and program at Yoder’s Kitchen, in conjunction with the Arthur Relief Sale kick-off. Yvonne Diaz, MCC Great Lakes Executive Director, offered HIV/AIDS stories as part of the worship service program.

Overall, the event was a fun time of fellowship, worship, learning and looking forward to the future of MCC Great Lakes.

Check the MCC Great Lakes website for information about next year’s annual celebration gathering as it becomes available. ☺

SWAP season is just around the corner

As the weather gets warmer, it's getting to be that time of year again – SWAP season! Sharing With Appalachian People (SWAP) is a home repair ministry that serves low-income families in several counties of southeastern Kentucky and West Virginia.

Each summer, school, college, youth and inter-generational church groups come to one of the five SWAP locations and spend a week in service. Other volunteers will spend three months serving as summer staff.

With over 1,400 volunteers signed up to participate in 57 groups this season, SWAP staff have the tough task of making sure all the groups and projects run smoothly. Even if you're not one of the groups participating this summer, you can still play an important role in the SWAP ministry.

- The staff trucks need to be updated, as they are an average of 12 years or older, in need of repairs and have high mileage.
- SWAP is always in need of building material donations. (Gift cards from building supply stores in Appalachia are preferred.)
- The Elkhorn, West Virginia, site is in need of a meals/household staff person for this summer season. Contact Charlene and Keith Barr at (304) 862-3437 or swapelkhorn@mcc.org.
- SWAP may also need additional summer staff. If you have carpentry skills or experience and are available for at least several weeks, call (606) 633-5065 or email SWAPadmin@mcc.org.
- All types of tools are needed for construction, especially hand tools that need replaced yearly and batteries for power tools.
- Visit mcc.org/swap/ministryneeds for a detailed list of needs.

You can also be in prayer for:

- The Location Coordinators as they choose the homeowners to help this summer.
- Safety for the groups coming and safety on the job site.
- Spiritual growth for the groups and the staff.
- Good relationships between the home owners and the groups.
- Times of rest and reflection for the SWAP staff. ☺



A church group at the Harlan, Kentucky, SWAP site gathers for morning prayer before heading out to their work sites.

Interested in serving with a SWAP group next year?

Although the SWAP sites are full with groups this summer, we are already taking applications for the 2009 SWAP year. Groups may apply online at mcc.org/swap



MCC Great Lakes Regional Associates, Roy Jiménez and Les Gustafson-Zook, recently returned from a learning tour of MCC water projects in Laos and Cambodia.

These children are practicing brushing their teeth using water from an MCC sponsored well, along with toothbrushes provided in addition to MCC school kits. They are on the school grounds at Ban Kua in the Sangthong region of Laos.

For more pictures from the learning tour, visit the MCC Great Lakes website at mcc.org/greatlakes.

Peacemaking and resurrection in Egypt

Julia Gingrich is an MCC worker from Goshen, Indiana, serving a one-year Serving and Learning Together (SALT) term northwest of Cairo, Egypt.

My journey in Egypt began prior to the start of my SALT assignment in late August 2007. As a member of EMU's Middle East Cross Cultural, I spent two weeks in early 2006 discovering the gems that merit Egypt "The Gift of the Nile." Midway through our whirlwind tour of Egypt's ancient past and modern developments, we rested for a night at Anafora, the Coptic (Egyptian) Orthodox retreat center where I'm currently serving.

During our brief stay at the retreat center which I now call home, I was touched by the Christ-centered hospitality extended by the Coptic Orthodox community and by the spirit of monasticism pulsing in the silence and simplicity of the place. More poignantly, perhaps, I was gripped by the words of Anafora's visionary founder, Bishop Thomas, who described the Coptic Orthodox Church saying, "We see this as the incarnation: God came to us first of all as a peacemaker."



Julia Gingrich, MCC SALT worker in Egypt, chats with Bishop Thomas at the Diocese of Qossey where she is serving.

Through our conversations with Bishop Thomas, it was revealed that the historical distance, doctrinal divergences and cultural dissimilarities separating the Coptic Orthodox Church and Mennonite Church are now being bridged through the recognition of a shared conviction regarding the centrality of peacemaking to the gospel. It was my desire to further understand, and indeed to continuing nurturing, the Coptic-Mennonite peacemaking partnership that prompted my return to Anafora through a SALT assignment.

Over the past eight months, my understanding of the Coptic peace witness has evolved as I've joined in the daily rhythms of hosting, eating, working and praying that shape the life of our retreat center community. My days have been spent hanging laundry, peeling potatoes, washing dishes, pulling weeds, visiting with guests, eating community meals and attending evening prayers and Coptic mass.

The nature of my daily labor often draws me into a contemplative state of being. While washing plants coated with layers of desert dust, for example, I find myself repeating the following confession from the Coptic liturgy: *For You are the life of us all, the salvation of us all, the hope of us all, the healing of us all, and the resurrection of us all.* During my time of service with the Coptic Orthodox Church at

Anafora, my faith has been revitalized by witnessing how the community moves from proclaiming Christ's healing and transforming love to *embodying* it in concrete and tangible ways.

Committed to the restoration of God's Shalom, they move from confessing Christ's resurrection to the work of creating resurrected communities by lifting up those who have been silenced, marginalized and traumatized. In addition to the retreat center, the community runs an educational and training facility called Anastasia, the Coptic word for *resurrection* or *rising up*. While assisting with a women's empowerment and income generation program at Anastasia, I've seen delicate signs of resurrection emerging in the lives of women from villages in rural Upper Egypt.

All too often, women in rural villages are spiritually, emotionally, psychologically and physically wounded by a society which holds damaging views of women. By gathering women to a safe place where they are affirmed as beloved and valuable daughters of God, and encouraged to rediscover a lost sense of self and voice, it is hoped that these women will be restored to wholeness, and empowered to live transformed lives.

The recent actions of a few former participants in the women's empowerment program offers a hopeful sign that women are overcoming fear, breaking out of cycles of victimhood, and choosing to channel their energy toward healing and justice for other women. With the goal of raising awareness about the mistreatment of women in the work place, they are courageously seeking social change by first establishing a support group for women who have suffered sexual abuse in shops where they work for low wages.

The compassionate action the Coptic community is taking to uplift vulnerable women is just one example of how Egyptian Christians are initiating the reign of Shalom by embodying Christ's resurrection. Living in an Orthodox community that is rooted in its history and that turns to the legacy of their saints, martyrs and early church leaders for wisdom in discerning faithful discipleship in this modern world, I find myself ever more attuned to the teachings and examples of Anabaptists who have called for a peace witness of embodied love.

As I peel potatoes in the coming days, I'll revisit the familiar words of Menno Simons and work on integrating them more deeply into my core: *True evangelical faith cannot lie dormant. It clothes the naked, feeds the hungry, comforts the sorrowful, shelters the destitute, serves those that harms it, binds up that which is wounded, it has become all things to all people.* But that's not all. Rather than internally reflecting on these words, I'll offer them, along with other touchstones of Mennonite peacemaking, to my Coptic brothers and sisters for our mutual contemplation. Guided by the Source of Shalom, it is my prayer that we will continue to partner in the work of creating resurrected communities through the practice of embodied love. ☸

- Julia Gingrich

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sacred, in years past as well as in the present.

Beauty: It is impossible to travel through Iran without being impressed by the beauty that is a part of this ancient culture. Whether in intricately woven Persian rugs, meticulously painted tile work or the fine inlay work of chess boards and pencil holders, beauty is all around in Iran - not to mention the people themselves, who are very often strikingly beautiful.

History: Walking through the ruins of Persepolis, one is transported into a time 500 years before Jesus walked the earth; a time when the Gate of Nations greeted pilgrims who traveled to the palace of the Persian Empire for the annual procession, bringing gifts to place before the king. It is humbling to realize how many feet have trod these same steps, how much history has passed under these same arches. It is oddly mysterious to fathom that the God of Esther who was active in this place 2,500 years ago remains active in our world today.

I returned from Iran full of questions. But these questions come from a place of respect and appreciation for the Iranian people: their hospitality and friendliness, their intelligence, their beauty and their sense of history. There is a Persian proverb that states, "Build one

bridge to me and I will build thirty-three bridges back to you." MCC's work in Iran has been, and continues to be, about bridge building. The foundation of these bridges is built on love and respect. Nearly 2,000 years ago Jesus compelled his followers in this same region to love their neighbors, to be salt for the earth, to be peacemakers. These are all things that MCC is working at in Iran. For me, images of tea and pistachios have replaced my images of fear. Images of beautiful smiles on carefully veiled women have replaced my images of suspicion. And images of shared ancient texts have replaced my images of mistrust. I am honored to share these images with you. ☺

- Gwen Gustafson-Zook

*To learn more about MCC's work in Iran,
contact Gwen at gg@mcc.org or (574) 534-4133.*

**See more photos from Gwen's visit
to Iran at mcc.org/greatlakes**

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