



Bringing the gospel of peace to Bosnia



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Duane and Gloria Beachey are currently serving as MCC Appalachia Program Coordinators in Whitesburg, Kentucky.

In October, Gloria and I went to Bosnia on an MCC Learning Tour to see the work MCC was doing there. What struck me was that MCC's biggest contribution to rebuilding after the war isn't our relief supplies, but the rebuilding of relationships.

Fifteen years ago I had seen news about the war in Bosnia Herzegovina, Serbia, Croatia, and several other countries or regions in what had been the former Yugoslavia. I expected to find MCC doing relief and service work related to the devastation of the war. Indeed during and following the war MCC shipped many containers of canned meat, blankets, school kits, and other relief supplies to these countries. Some relief work is still ongoing, but the focus of MCC's work has shifted to the deeper devastation of the war—broken people and broken relationships.

The biggest contribution Mennonites have to offer is a peace theology. What gives the most hope to the people we met are our ideas about reconciliation and peacemaking. We met with ten different partners that MCC works with. Over and over they expressed how vital and important the message of peace is to their country and their people.

At various times in Bosnia's history, parts or all of the country have been controlled by Ottoman Turk Muslims, or by Croatian Catholics, or



Vahidin Omanovic (left) and Mevludin Rahmanovic (right), two young Muslim clerics who the Beacheys met in Bosnia, posed the question, "How can anyone who prays to God five times a day then go out and kill people?"

Photo by Gloria Beachey

by Serbian Orthodox Christians. By the time Yugoslavia was coming apart, Catholics, Orthodox, and Muslims all lived together in Bosnia,

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Annual gathering in Ohio: February 27-28



The MCC Great Lakes annual gathering on February 27-28, will highlight the work of MCC around the world.

Make plans now to attend the annual Celebrate MCC gathering for MCC Great Lakes. Friday and Saturday, February 27-28, people from all over the region will gather at Central Mennonite Church (21703 State Route 2) in Archbold, Ohio.

Come hear stories about MCC's work, both locally and around the world. There will be a keynote speaker, workshop sessions, worship services, music and plenty of time for fellowship with fellow MCC supporters.

See the brochure insert for more information and to register, or go online to mcc.org/greatlakes to download a registration form.

We look forward to celebrating the work of MCC together! ☺

“Just war” and middle school students

“Just war” and the United States’ relationship with Iran aren’t the first subjects that come to mind when you think of middle school conversations. But middle school students at Eighth Street Mennonite Church in Goshen, Indiana, took on these tough issues in a recent youth group activity.

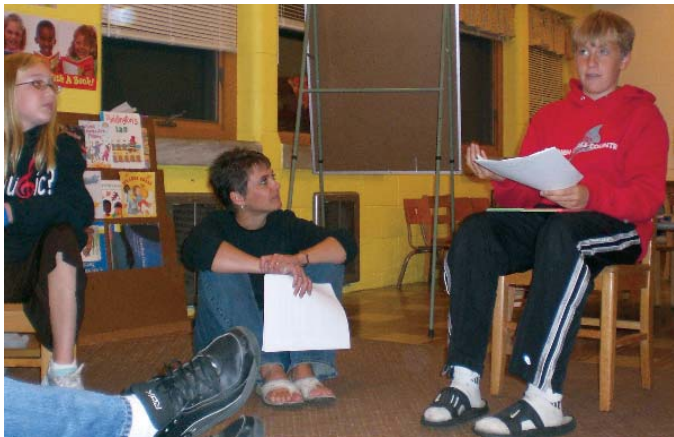
Following a congregational worship series on “dis-eases,” things that people are not at ease with, the youth leaders wanted to continue conversation with their sixth through eighth grade students on the topic of “just war.”

According to Brenda Sawatzky Paetkau, one of the pastors at Eighth Street, the recent controversy over MCC co-sponsoring a dialogue meeting with Iranian President Ahmadinejad was a timely connection. “It gave us a real life scenario which we could use as a tool for the discussion,” she said. “Basically we wrote our own ‘simulation.’”

In the simulation, the eight students in attendance were asked to imagine that they were part of “Fourth Mennonite Church” in “Smalltown, America.” Their church was just contacted by MCC to ask for use of their building to host talks with representatives from Iran, including President Ahmadinejad, and American peace-church representatives.

“The structure was about their participation,” said Sawatzky Paetkau. “The beauty of simulations is that it’s not about adults talking, but about kids processing and figuring out what their response will be.”

The youth were divided up into two different groups, where they were to represent two very different positions. Armed with the background information on the tensions over Iran wanting to enrich Uranium and the U.S. resistance to that, the groups argued their posi-



Ben Wiebe, a middle school student, presents his case during a youth group activity at Eighth Street Mennonite Church in Goshen, Indiana. Pastor Brenda Sawatzky Paetkau (center) and Lily Nussbaum (left) listen attentively.

Photo by Allison Brenneman



Lauren Graves (right), Sarah Miller Rush (center) and Peter Paetkau (left) vote whether or not they think their church should host MCC talks with President Ahmadinejad and other Iranian representatives.

Photo by Allison Brenneman

tions from the point of view of their assigned group.

One group, the “Just War” group, argued from the position of people opposed to using their building; people who would support alternative/military ways to deal with Iran. Another group represented “Non-resistant Mennos” who would support using their building and encourage dialogue with Iranian leaders.

Peter Paetkau, an eighth grader at Goshen Middle School, was the spokesperson for the “Just War” group. “It was a new way to think about the conflicts in this country, and others and I found it interesting to look at the issue from the ‘just war’ point of view,” he said. “All of my life, I have been taught that war is strictly evil and it was good to see the reasons why other people agree to it, even if I don’t like their opinion.”

For the youth leaders, it gave them a chance to help their youth think critically about an important topic. “The students were able to think through what they would decide if a big decision like this was up to them,” said Allison Brenneman, one of the youth sponsors. “It’s good for youth to recognize they are already a part of the church and a part of the denomination.”

After all the groups presented their arguments, the students voted whether their simulation church would host the meetings. “When asked their real opinions, every one of the youth said it is a good opportunity to talk with President Ahmadinejad and shouldn’t be turned down,” said Brenneman.

According to Sawatzky Paetkau, the activity helped the youth to clarify and take ownership in their own peace positions. “This gave them the opportunity to articulate their thoughts about peace into a real life situation,” she said. “It was very encouraging to see some of our peace emphasis has taken a hold on them.” ☺

Time to start thinking about summer!

Sign up your group now for the SWAP program in Kentucky and West Virginia.

mcc.org/swap

Connecting and reflecting in China

Eric Eberly, from Cornerstone Mennonite Church in Hartville, Ohio, is currently serving with MCC as an English teacher in Sichuan, China.

In nearing my three-year mark in Sichuan, China, I've slowly become accustomed to winters without sunshine, taxis that hug the white line – in the opposite lane – and the furtive whispers which bounce between locals as I approach on the sidewalk. Being the only blonde head among hundreds of black and gray-haired parishioners lining the pews on Sunday has slowly lost its novelty. Bargaining for vegetables no longer seems the chore it once was, and a little culturally-appropriate self-denigration in response to the vendor's compliments on my Chinese now flows unthinkingly from my mouth.

In spite of the comfort I've achieved in going about my daily life here, I still get self-conscious about the impression I may make on my first-year students, many of whom have never spoken with a foreigner before meeting me this semester. These students have studied my language for six years or more, slogging through textbooks and memorizing dialogues. Suddenly, the language is humanized, in the form of me, standing at the front of their class. It can be a very humbling experience.

During this semester, students have relayed to me the gamut of human emotion and experience, from losing family members in the recent Sichuan earthquake, to dreams of traveling the world. It can be difficult to know how to respond in some instances, but I'm coming to see that many times the best approach is to simply listen. The Leshan Teachers College, where I teach, educates young Chinese men and women who will likely become teachers themselves, in high schools, junior highs and elementary schools. Many will return to the rural areas of their upbringing and provide what support they can to their parents, many of whom are farmers or migrant workers somewhere on the coast of China.

Thus, the effect of my teaching here may be multiplied hundreds and thousands of times over, as my students eventually have students of their own. I'm learning that it is not how much grammar I can

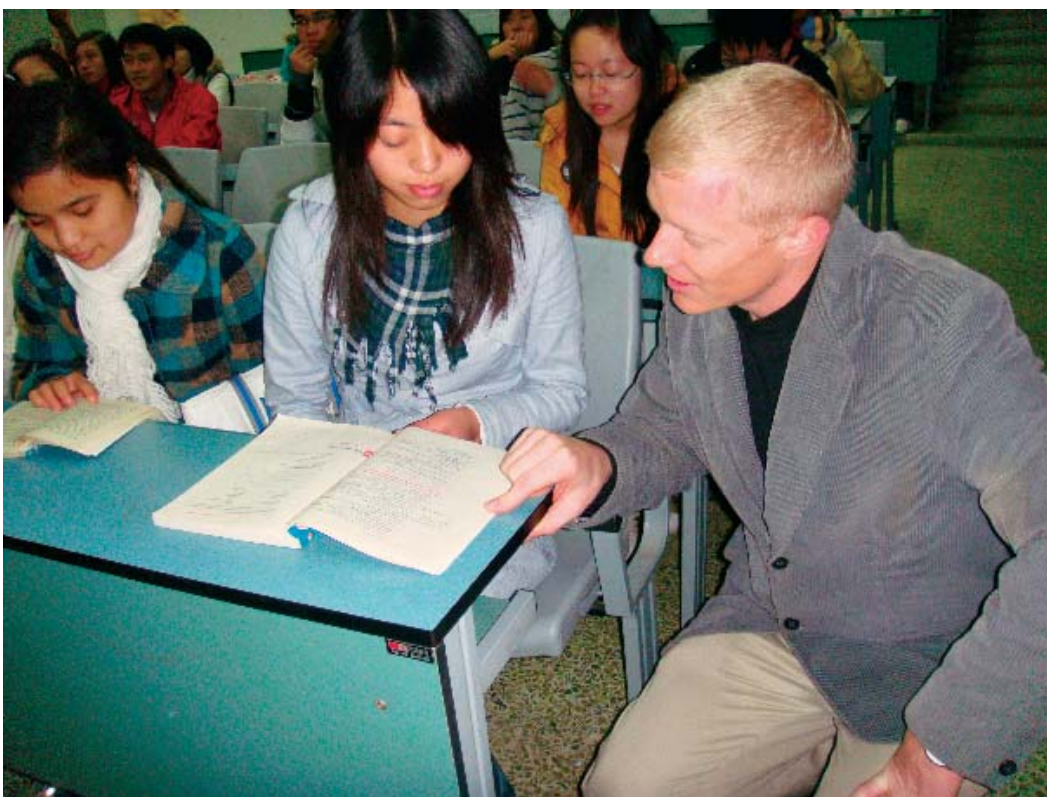
teach them or what poems we dissect in class, rather it is with what dignity I treat them and how much empathy I can demonstrate toward them.

In October, an MPC (Mennonite Partners in China) sponsored learning tour of 18 people from Pennsylvania, Virginia and my native Ohio came to this college. Mixing my students with 18 Americans who were likely as naive about Chinese culture as my students are about American culture undoubtedly resulted in more than a few misunderstandings. Yet in talking to both groups after their "English corner," as they are called here, I heard only tales of fascination with how universal human experiences are uniquely enacted within each locale.

As the governments of my home country and host country go toe-to-toe over political and economic issues, perhaps what we need are more citizens of each country who will try to look each other in the eye. My prayer is that we may look long enough to see that there is a little bit of each of *us* reflected in the eye of the *other*, and that with patience, what once was *forbidding* can grow to become *familiar*. I'm finding that as I attempt to build

peace *through* understanding between Leshan and my hometown of Hartville, Ohio, and between China and the West, the Lord is granting me the peace that *passeth* understanding. ☺

- Eric Eberly



Eric Eberly, an MCC worker in Sichuan, China, helps two of his students, Qun Yangxiao (center) and Xia Zhaoxiao (left), in his English class at the Leshan Teachers College.

Photo courtesy of Eric Eberly

You may have noticed the new volume and issue numbers at the top of each page. These numbers will help us keep better records for archival purposes. The MCC Great Lakes newsletter is in its 21st year of sharing stories and information!



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speaking the same basic language, having the same surnames, and even inter-marrying. Some Bosnians were no longer sure anymore which religious/ethnic group they belonged to.

But when nationalist leaders, in order to further their own ambitions, exploited feelings of nationalism, patriotism, and fear of other groups, suspicions and resentments from events 50, 100, and even 500 years before came to the surface. When the wars and the ethnic cleansing finally ended in the mid 90's, the former Yugoslavia had become six different countries, but the country of Bosnia Herzegovina was itself divided into Serb, Croat, and Muslim sectors. The country had three presidents who rotated in order to share power between these three sectors!

When neither the Christians nor the Muslims of the region have taught the message of peace inherent within their faiths; when the believers from two Christian traditions and the Muslim tradition could fight and kill each other for God and country, and people who had been friends and neighbors for years suddenly became bitterest enemies, then religious faith has failed to be relevant. It is one thing to be attacked by strangers from a foreign nation, but imagine the betrayal experienced when one's own high-school teacher or family doctor betrays your family and your faith community to Serb armies.

In the face of such pervasive hatred and anger some people of faith are asking how this could have happened. Two young Muslim clerics we met asked how anyone who prays to God five times a day could then go out and kill people. How could Islam, which they define as striving to be obedient to God, cause anyone to hate? The same questions can certainly be asked of Christians.

As these two young Muslims thought about the kind of world they wanted to leave to their children, they were called to work for peace and reconciliation, even with those who had murdered their own families. Otherwise the violence would just continue into the next generation.

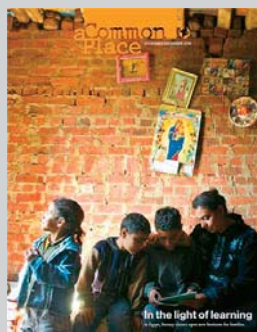
MCC is working in partnership with organizations from all faiths

who are promoting reconciliation. Some are working with families and children, some with communities and some even with former soldiers suffering from post traumatic disorders. The partner organizations we met all realize the need to see those outside their own ethnic and religious group with new eyes. They are talking together and working together to rebuild their countries on a foundation of understanding, acceptance, reconciliation, and peace. ☺

- Duane Beachey



Mevludin Rahmanovic conducts a peace camp in the summertime. This poster showcases their work with promoting reconciliation and peace in Bosnia. Photo by Gloria Beachey



Read more about MCC's work in Bosnia in the November/December 2008 issue of *a Common Place* magazine.

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