**Spiritual Guides: Doris Janzen Longacre**

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**NPMC – June 13, 2021**

*Scripture: Micah 4:1-4 and Luke 14:7-14*

*Hymns: VT 467 - Taste and See*, *VT 476 - Eat This Bread, VT 477 - Seed, Scattered and Sown*

**Micah 4:1-4, NRSV:** In days to come  
    the mountain of the Lord’s house  
shall be established as the highest of the mountains,  
    and shall be raised up above the hills.  
Peoples shall stream to it,  
2    and many nations shall come and say:  
“Come, let us go up to the mountain of the Lord,  
    to the house of the God of Jacob;  
that he may teach us his ways  
    and that we may walk in his paths.”  
For out of Zion shall go forth instruction,  
    and the word of the Lord from Jerusalem.  
3He shall judge between many peoples,  
    and shall arbitrate between strong nations far away;  
they shall beat their swords into plowshares,  
    and their spears into pruning hooks;  
nation shall not lift up sword against nation,  
    neither shall they learn war any more;  
4but they shall all sit under their own vines and under their own fig trees,  
    and no one shall make them afraid;  
    for the mouth of the Lord of hosts has spoken.

**Luke 14:7-14:** 7When he noticed how the guests chose the places of honor, he told them a parable. 8“When you are invited by someone to a wedding banquet, do not sit down at the place of honor, in case someone more distinguished than you has been invited by your host; 9and the host who invited both of you may come and say to you, ‘Give this person your place,’ and then in disgrace you would start to take the lowest place. 10But when you are invited, go and sit down at the lowest place, so that when your host comes, he may say to you, ‘Friend, move up higher’; then you will be honored in the presence of all who sit at the table with you. 11For all who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted.”

12He said also to the one who had invited him, “When you give a luncheon or a dinner, do not invite your friends or your brothers or your relatives or rich neighbors, in case they may invite you in return, and you would be repaid. 13But when you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind. 14And you will be blessed, because they cannot repay you, for you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous.”

When I was a small child, my parents took our family on assignment to Chile as church workers. In a country which at that time had no Anabaptist-Mennonite churches, our ties to the Mennonite community took other forms. Among these, my parents’ use of Doris Janzen Longacre’s More-with-Less Cookbook was perhaps the most tangible. So, although I didn’t understand it then, as our family ate our Whole Wheat Buttermilk Pancakes, Curried Lentils and West African Groundnut Stew, we were in a sense in fellowship across the distance with our Mennonite faith-family as well. Years later, when I moved out of my parents’ home to attend Canadian Mennonite University, they gave me my own copy of the *More-with-Less* which my roommates and I used to learn how to cook for ourselves, including how to get enough protein as vegetarians, since our one roommate did not eat meat.[[1]](#footnote-1) My spouse Kris and I continue to use our now stained and splattered copy of *More-with-Less* as we feed our family, and my kids are even learning to cook some of its recipes now as well.

So what is it about this cookbook that’s so special? In a sea of almost infinite cookbook options, why is this one important? Well, it wasn’t until later, when I was doing research for my PhD, that I learned about the remarkable person behind this cookbook: Doris Janzen Longacre, someone who has become a spiritual guide for me. So first, a bit about her life: Longacre was born to a farming family outside of Newton, Kansas. After high school, in 1957, she chose to major in home economics at Mennonite colleges, attending first Bethel College and then Goshen College, where she graduated in 1961. As often happens at these Mennonite schools, she also met her husband, Paul Longacre, during her studies, and they were married in 1963. The young couple shared a passion for faith in action, so their early married life took them on international assignments with Mennonite Central Committee. They served in Vietnam form 1964-67 and Indonesia from 1971-72. They also welcomed two daughters into their family during this time. After their second MCC assignment, the family moved back to the U.S., to Akron, Pennsylvania, where Doris and Paul took on work at the MCC headquarters, specifically, at the Food and Hunger Concerns Desk. As part of her work of responding to the global food crisis of the time, Longacre developed the *More-with-Less Cookbook*,[[2]](#footnote-2) described as “suggestions by Mennonites on how to eat better and consume less of the world’s limited food resources.”

Published in 1976, the cookbook named some hard truths about food inequity and the growing gap between the rich and the poor, pointing out the global effects of North American excess, especially our overconsumption of protein and grains, sugar and overly processed foods, and its socio-economic and environmental effects.[[3]](#footnote-3) The recipes themselves, gathered from Mennonite households across North America and in international settings, focused on simplifying our cooking. Desserts with less sugar, vegetarian dishes (which would have been new for many), and recipes from different cultures, were all meant to invite North Americans into a different, more intentional way of looking at food than the one pushed by advertisers – one that was concerned about those who did not have enough, and one that cared for creation. Even the cover, the MCC cross-and-dove symbol made out of grains of wheat, Swiss cheese and black-eyed-peas—was designed as a clever reminder of the vegetarian combinations of diary with a grain or legumes/beans with a grain, that make up a full protein. As the more recent saying goes, this was a matter of “Living simply so others may simply live.” And it was firmly rooted in Longacre’s faith. One of the guiding Bible passages that’s mentioned in the cookbook is from Luke 14, quoted from the New English Bible: “When you are having a party for lunch or supper, do not invite your friends, your brothers [or sisters] or other relations, or your rich neighbours; they will only ask you back again and so you will be repaid. But when you give a party, ask the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind; and so find happiness” (v. 12, 13).[[4]](#footnote-4)

Despite going against the grain of North American consumer trends, the *More-with-Less Cookbook* was a major success. As of 2010, it had sold 860,000 copies, including a 25th-anniversary edition. Just two years after its initial publication, Longacre was already working on a second book. As she wrote to a colleague at MCC, “Having gained the attention of many people with a book on food, we have an opportunity to make another statement. What may be said next? What assets do we have for learning to handle food, energy, and other resources so that more may share their values? The thesis of the book here proposed is that the poor, those living on less, or those very people we try to help, are a resource for helping us.”[[5]](#footnote-5) This idea would become *Living More with Less*, a simple-living companion to the cookbook, that gathered crowd-sourced ideas for living simply and sustainably in all areas of life, from transportation to family celebrations to making and mending clothing. Longacre organized the book according to five life principles: “Do Justice, Learn from the World Community, Nurture People, Cherish the Natural Order, Nonconform Freely.”

These five life principles and Longacre’s explanations of them have even been even been identified by some as a theology, because they are clearly rooted in faith. For example, the first standard, “do justice,” comes from Micah 6:8: “What does the Lord require of you but to do justice, love mercy, and walk humbly with your God?” Theologian and Anabaptist Mennonite Biblical Seminary prof. Malinda Berry makes the case that Longacre’s work is a “more-with-less theology,” practiced or embodied in our everyday choices and practices of cooking, eating, and homemaking. “These five life standards chart a path of Christian discipleship that seriously *and* joyfully combines faith and action.” “In other words,” [says Berry, “Longacre’s standards of] doing justice, learning from the world community, nurturing people, cherishing the natural order and nonconforming freely are part of our ‘household code’ as Christians. In this age of globalization, when our world is both a vibrant village marketplace and a groaning ecosystem, such a household code is more necessary than ever.”[[6]](#footnote-6) All these years later, Longacre’s reflections on living simply and sustainably – in being “green” before that was a term – still resonate deeply.

I’ve talked about growing up with Longacre’s books, but my appreciation for her life and work has grown over the years. If I had to put into words the specific reasons why Longacre is one of my spiritual guides, I would narrow it down to these three. (1) For one thing, I appreciate her vision of faith as something lived out not just in our Sunday morning worship at the church building (or on our screens), but in our everyday decisions and routines around food, clothing, relationships, transportation. These things are sometimes glossed over as unimportant, in part because the work of parenting and homemaking has traditionally been women’s work. But Longacre is saying that they matter, that these are faith and discipleship choices, and that making these choices intentionally and well can be an act of love for God and our neighbour.

(2) Secondly, I admire the way that Longacre worked to empower other people, especially those who may not usually be seen as teachers. She practiced the upside-down kingdom or kin-dom of God in the way that she invited North Americans to listen to and learn from the wisdom of people living in other parts of the world. This flips the usual script we tell ourselves about “developed” and “developing” nations (Longacre called ours “*over*developed” or “*mal*developed” nations!).[[7]](#footnote-7) As someone who had worked with MCC in Asia, she had learned about living simply and sustainably and *joyfully* from people of other cultures and contexts – in ways that were actually less stressful and draining and more life-giving than the competitive drive for excess of her own, North American context. If you have less “stuff” to look after, you have more time for people and time in nature and time with God. What a gift! Before the rest of us had discovered the power of gratitude, Longacre was advising, “Practice contentment.”[[8]](#footnote-8) That joy was the “more” of her more-with-less theology.

(3) Third, I’m inspired by her work as a female theologian at a time when women were still mostly excluded from leadership positions in the church. In the late 1970s, women were just beginning to be ordained as pastors in Mennonite churches, but the academic world of universities and seminaries was still very male-dominated. Still, Longacre did not allow herself to be excluded from doing theology. As a home economist, MCC worker, homemaker, and mother, Longacre used her voice to reflect on what it means to live out one’s faith and to advocate for a more just world, and her work has been majorly influential. Matthew Bailey-Dick even argues that Longacre’s writings have been more influential than academic theology because they’re accessible to everyone. Mennonite food ‘happens’ multiple times a day, through the work of average people, creating what he calls “a sort of ‘kitchenhood of all believers’” that knits together food and faith.[[9]](#footnote-9) Through her books, many people were introduced to the Anabaptist-Mennonite theology of discipleship, community, and lived faith,[[10]](#footnote-10) a theology deeply rooted and inspired by biblical visions of peace, justice, and equity like that in our passage from Micah 4:

“they shall beat their swords into plowshares,  
     and their spears into pruning hooks;  
nation shall not lift up sword against nation,  
    neither shall they learn war any more;  
4but they shall all sit under their own vines and under their own fig trees,  
    and no one shall make them afraid;  
    for the mouth of the Lord of hosts has spoken.” (Micah 4:3b-4)

What a remarkable legacy!

Sadly, Longacre herself never saw the completion of her second book. After living with cancer for three years, she died tragically at only 39 in 1979, with most of the manuscript done. Her book was completed by her spouse, Paul, and he chose to include several of her final journal entries, which took the form of prayers about her family and her hope to complete her book. One from about a month before her death reads, “Enough for now, I’m tired. But Lord, these too are days of aliveness and I thank you for them. Keep my family in your love. Keep my book on your timetable. Keep me patient.”[[11]](#footnote-11) In his introduction to the book, Paul wrote that there was something fitting about the book remaining unfinished, and having to be completed by others: “The task of living responsibly is never finished,” he wrote. It’s a “holy frustration” with the status quo of how things are and a hope for a better world. It symbolized that “No one person is a final expert on the subject. We need help from each other.”[[12]](#footnote-12)

In her short life, Doris Janzen Longacre certainly offered what help she could to those of us trying to live out our faith in authentic ways in a complex and hurting world. Ultimately, says Malinda Berry, Longacre “practiced her profession in a way that recalls the biblical imagery of the One who lives with us in our homes, dines at our tables, and, in turn, brings us to a table set simply with bread and a cup.” She showed us, by word and example, that “God gives us homes, and how we make them matters.”[[13]](#footnote-13) Thanks be to God for this member of our cloud of witnesses. AMEN

1. See my article, “Cooking Up Discipleship: A More-with-Less Theology,” in *Canadian Mennonite* 19/19 (Sept. 23, 2015), <https://canadianmennonite.org/stories/cooking-discipleship> [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Malinda Elizabeth Berry, “‘This Mark of a Standing Human Figure Poised to Embrace’: A Constructive Theology of Social Responsibility, Nonviolence, and Nonconformity” (Ph.D. Dissertation, Union Theological Seminary, New York), 167-169. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Doris Janzen Longacre, “Less with More” in *The More-with-Less Cookbook* (Kitchener, ON: Herald Press, 1976), 12-18. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Longacre, *More with Less Cookbook*, 44. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Quoted in Rachel Waltner Goosen, “*Living More with Less* in Retrospect,” in *Living More with Less: 30th Anniversary Edition*, ed. Valerie Weaver-Zuercher (Scottdale, PA: Herald Press, 2010), 19. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Malinda E. Berry, “The Five Live Standards: Theology and Household Code,” in *Living More with Less: 30th Anniversary Edition*, ed. Valerie Weaver-Zuercher (Scottdale, PA: Herald Press, 2010), 35-36. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Doris Janzen Longacre, *Living More with Less* (Scottdale, PA: Herald Press, 1980), 31. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Longacre, *Living More with Less* (1980), 15, 25. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Matthew Bailey-Dick, “The Kitchenhood of All Believers: A Journey Into the Discourse of Mennonite Cookbooks.” *The Mennonite Quarterly Review* 79 (April 2005): 165. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Goosen, 24. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. *Living More with Less* (1980), 11. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. *Living More with Less* (1980), 12. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Berry, “Five Life Standards,” 36-37. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)