

“We give thanks for you often” by Bruce Guenther

Psalm 100; I Thessalonians 1:2-10; Colossians 1:3-8

Grace and peace to you from God our Creator.

Thank you very much for inviting me to speak at Nutana Park today. It is always great to be back in my home church and to see friends. And thanks to the many people in the congregation who support the work of Mennonite Central Committee in various ways – by volunteering at the relief sale, serving on committees, sewing blankets, and donating money – your support is greatly appreciated and needed. Thank you.

Today, I want to share a few stories from my work with MCC, particularly stories where MCC, in partnership with the local churches, is responding to people affected by conflict.

I invite you to listen to these stories and to give thanks for the witness of the church around the world. To give thanks for these churches, just as the apostle Paul did in his letters to the church. I invite you to keep these churches in your prayers: to pray for that they may be strengthened in their faith, grow in patience and continue to show love to others. Let us pray that they may be imitators of Christ and that their good works would bear fruit.

Paul writes to the early churches: We always give thanks to God for all of you. We have not ceased praying for you. We remember your faith, love and hope in our Lord Jesus Christ. Last November I have the privilege of visiting Syria. While I have travelled to other conflict and disaster affected areas in my role I was certainly more anxious than usual. What would we see? Would we be in danger? What would we do if I was in the wrong place at the wrong time? It is a trip that you only tell your parents – and your worrying twin brother about – after you land in back in Winnipeg. Fortunately, MCC has long history of church partnerships in Syria with partners that were eager to host us and ensure we were kept safe. They were keen for us to hear the stories of people affected by the 7-year war and to see for ourselves how MCC’s support was making a difference.

After a few days in Damascus, our group travelled to the city of Homs which has seen devastated by the war. On the first day, we met Sister Valentine, an 85-year-old Catholic nun

who works at a seniors' home run by the Evangelical Presbyterian church. When we arrived at the home, Sister Valentine was scurrying around, moving tables and serving us coffee and sweets. The seniors' home had been through a difficult time when that area of Homs had come under the control of a radical opposition group. Most people had fled the neighbourhood but the elderly home continued to operate. At one point, supplies were not able to come into the area for over 3 months. The needs at the home had increased as people fled Homs and left their elderly parents behind.

During the time the fighters controlled the area, they insisted on entering the seniors home claiming that the home was hiding weapons and government soldiers. Sister Valentine repeatedly refused to let them enter the building. She never backed down and eventually they left her alone.

And then in early 2017 the residence was on the front line – right in between the Syrian government army and rebel fighters. While we were at the home, we went up to the roof and they showed us how the battle unfolded. We looked down into the school yard on one side where they Syrian army had been, and looked into the street on the other side that had under control of the opposition. We saw the bullet holes in their laundry room on the roof and they pointed out the turret a few blocks away where the snipers had been. Residents of the seniors home lived between intense fighting for three days.

Sister Valentine told us how she and others stayed put throughout the fighting. They boarded up the windows and tried to keep people in the hallways so they wouldn't get shot. To protect other staff she insisted they stay inside while she went out to get food with just one other person. When the siege was over, she gathered all the staff together and asked them to decide if they wanted to stay or go. She gave them a whole five minutes to decide. After those five minutes were up she came back in and said, "I decided to stay, and I will stay even if there is no one with me." They all decided to stay with her and the home remains open today.

MCC has worked with the church in Homs, Presbyterian and Orthodox, since the beginning of the conflict, supporting children's education, providing cash allowances and food baskets to

displaced and vulnerable families. In winter, the church also provides heaters and fuel for families. These churches have reached out beyond their own to support all who have been affected by the conflict.

After our day of visiting the work of the church in Homs, we gathered in the late evening for a huge feast hosted by the bishop in a recently renovated restaurant in the old Christian quarter of Homs. We celebrated that we were finally together in Syria and for our shared work. The bishop insisted on keeping the wine flowing. Together with local churches, the response to the crisis in Syria has become MCC's largest disaster response since the second World War.

Let us give thanks for the witness of the church in Homs. Let us mention them in our prayers often giving thanks for their faith and steadfastness in the midst of great suffering.

Syria is one of many places where MCC is working in partnership with local churches that are affected by conflict and displacement. MCC has worked with the Mennonite church in in Colombia and Ecuador to respond to people displaced by decades of conflict in Colombia. These churches have provided food baskets, hygiene items, clothing as well as support for children's education and trauma healing activities. As peace agreements have been signed in Colombia, the work of the churches in this context have shifted.

For both church in Colombia and Ecuador, they are now using the capacity they have built over many years to respond to the thousands of Venezuelans that are now migrating to Colombia and Ecuador following the collapse of the Venezuelan economy. The inflation rate in Venezuela is projected to reach 1 million percent in 2018.

In Ecuador, the small Mennonite church in Quito, is reaching about 100 families per month. In addition to practical relief items, they approach their work in a pastoral way, sitting and interviewing each family to hear about their needs and experience. They also conduct workshops on peacebuilding with children and hold weekly gatherings with women to share their stories.

In addition to receiving refugees from Colombia and Venezuela, the Quito Mennonite Church has also been serving refugees from places such as Syria, Iraq and Afghanistan; they have had to adapt the food baskets they provide and are also offering Spanish language classes. About 50-60% of the congregation in Quito is now made up of refugees.

Alexandra Meneses is on the pastoral team of the church and coordinator of the project. She says the church's work with these refugees is "the hands and feet of Christ. We are living out the gospel message."

Let us give thanks for the witness of the church in Colombia and Ecuador. Let us pray for them without ceasing giving thanks for their love, faith and good work. May they continue to be imitators of Christ.

Over the last year and half, MCC has focused efforts and resources toward the Kasai region of the Democratic Republic of Congo. The conflict erupted in the Kasai region in August 2016 between local militia group and national security forces following the killing of a hereditary chief. The conflict has escalated and now involves multiple militia groups and the Congolese army. The fighting has increasingly fostered divisions along ethnic lines and exploited historic tensions between groups. At the height of the conflict 1.4 million people were internally displaced because of violence in the Kasai region. While some individuals have been able to return home, almost 900,000 people are displaced.

Pictured here is Agnès Ntumba. She recounted to MCC the day her husband and seven children had to flee the violence that took over their village. "I saw people being killed. They were coming to kill us, and we had to escape," she recalled.

Together with her family and others from the village, Ntumba ran into the bush where they walked two days to reach safety. Now her family is staying in a small village, Kabwela, with another family that is hosting them. There are no formal camps for displaced people in Kasai.

With the additional nine people from Ntumba's family, there are 20 people living together in the same house.

Ntumba says "We eat once a day. It is not enough. . . We are suffering." Many other people also fled to the small village of Kabwela. MCC together with the Evangelical Mennonite Church in Congo has been providing assistance to over 180 families. There are no other agencies providing assistance in this area. Despite the huge needs in the region overall, I continue to be surprised by that paltry response from the international community.

The Kasai region is home to one of the largest Mennonite population in the world. The Mennonite Church of Congo and Evangelical Mennonite Church have been directly affected by the violence – entire villages have been burned, schools and medical clinics have been destroyed. And the Mennonite Brethren Church of Congo has also seen a large influx of displaced people into the area where their churches are based. For MCC, it is a priority to support the work of these churches as they reach out to those who have been affected by the conflict.

In partnership with these three different Mennonite denominations, MCC has been providing humanitarian assistance including food, hygiene items and supporting children's education. MCC has allocated over \$1 million to the response so far – as of today, MCC is providing food for over 1,000 families who have been displaced in Kasai. This includes providing aid to the village of Kabwela. Ntumba was one of the participants in the project. "We are going to change how many times to eat," she said "We will be eating in the morning and evening too. Before we were eating once a day. We believe that our life will change with this aid." Most of the families who have fled to Kabwela indicate that they will likely never return to their home village.

The response has not been easy. The security and logistics challenges have been significant – it has been very frustrating. And on top of that the three different Mennonite church groups responding have a history of conflict and mistrust between them. When I met with the different Congolese church leaders together in Kinshasa, we spent time recounting how their church has

been affected – church members killed, displaced and many who do now know what has happened to their family. We spent time together learning about humanitarian action and peacebuilding and planning the next phase of the response.

But the most important time we spent together was in prayer. Despite the challenges and conflict within the church we prayed together for each other and for what we have been able to do together.

Let us pray for the witness of the church in the Democratic Republic of Congo. Let us mention them in your prayers often giving thanks for their good works in the midst of suffering.

I want to conclude with another story from Syria. Since the beginning of the conflict, MCC has been working in partnership with various groups in the Qalamoun valley which is on the road to Damascus from Homs. MCC has been supporting an ongoing food assistance project in partnership with the local churches and local Islamic charities. The churches and local Islamic charity implement the project together. The area is home to a primarily Sunni Muslim population and a minority Christian population. Many displaced people have fled to this area because people in the region are known to be welcoming to guests. During our trip in November, we were able to meet together with the representatives of all of the local groups – the Islamic charity in the town Dier Attieh, the Syrian Orthodox church and local evangelical church. The leaders spoke of the challenges they continue to face and the many families that continue to arrive in the area now 6 years later.

Three years ago, a now notorious opposition group attempted to gain control of the area from the Syrian regime taking control of key villages along the road. When the presence of the armed Islamist groups made it risky for non-Muslims to evacuate the area, the Muslim community utilized their vehicles to evacuate the Christian communities to other villages. At one point when the militants moved through the village of Dier Atieh, they attempted to enter the local Syrian Orthodox church. Upon entering the building the armed persons were shocked to find a member of the Muslim community standing in the church sanctuary. As the armed men approached, the Muslim residents of the area indicated to them “If you wish to defile this

church and harm these people, you will have to kill us first.” After hearing this, they left the building.

About one year later, a family of 9 were displaced after their home was destroyed by shelling in northern Syria which killed one of their girls. On their way to Dier Attieh, the family stopped in Hafar, a Christian Syrian Orthodox community. They were exhausted and could not travel the remaining 30km to Dier Atieh.

The people of Hafar brought the family to the local church centre. They gave them shelter and food. Children of the village brought the kids shoes and t-shirts. Women gathered clothes. Some blankets of a recent MCC shipments were also given to the family. They also started to share about the painful experiences they had been through.

Eventually the father of the family asked where he could find Abu Khalil in Deir Atteih, the head of the Islamic Charity. Within an hour, he and others from his organization arrived including the priest of the village. In front of the people gathered there, Abu Khalil stood up and said:

“You people of Hafar are our big family and we are yours too! This war and fighting have made us all suffer and become displaced in one way or another. Today you hosted a Muslim family that was coming to us and proved that we are all one and as human beings, children of God we are all one. . . We stand together as Muslims and Christians to face the cruelty of the war and when peace comes we will celebrate together and remember how we have been coexisting and living together.”

Let us pray for the witness of the church in Syria. Let us remember them often in our prayers, thanking God for their faithfulness and good works. Let us pray for peace, without ceasing. Please pray with me.

God our Creator, we give you thanks for the witness of the church around the world. We praise you and give thanks for the church in Syria, Ecuador, Colombia and Congo. Give them wisdom,

patience, and joy in the midst of hardship. Strengthen their faith so that the love of Christ may bear fruit through them. Amen.