

Nutana Park Mennonite sermon, March 6, 2016

Forward slides at **bolded RED text**

On screen as sermon begins:

1 my mom painting

Proverbs 31: 31

Honour her for all that her hands have done,
and let her works bring her praise at the city gate.

I am in Saskatoon because of a project that honours Mennonite women.

This painting is of my mother the day before she passed away in 2005. A few days prior, I had traveled in the ambulance with her from the Menno Home in Abbotsford to the palliative care unit in Langley, BC. Two months before, I had flown to Abbotsford from Winnipeg with no return ticket. I told mom that I was moving in with her. I brought the internet into her room so that I could work. I slept on her couch. We sailed out of her life together.

A few years later I was asked to be part of the *Invisible Dignity* project, an exhibit about marginalized and forgotten people. One of the paintings I created was of my mom on her deathbed. I stamped Proverbs 31: 31 onto the painting.

Honour her for all that her hands have done,
and let her works bring her praise at the city gate.

My mother had been sick, several times near death, throughout most of my life. She was an incredible person. She was a strong, unwavering person of faith. She was unfailingly supportive and respectful. She was my mother, my friend. She freely gave up her sons to working overseas, even though she and dad knew they may never come back. If health had allowed she wanted to be a missionary, either as a nurse or a teacher. Her sons were doing what she had often wished for herself.

2 gallery image

I am the curator at the Mennonite Heritage Centre Gallery in Winnipeg. The gallery is a self-funded ministry of Mennonite Church Canada. That means I have to raise 100% of the budget. The Mennonite Heritage Centre also includes our national archives, which is partially funded by Mennonite Church Canada. Korey Dyck is the director.

The gallery is an institution of the church that says artists should be accepted as God gifted and that those gifts should be used and celebrated in the church. It is, also, a place where artists of different Christian traditions and of different faith and cultural backgrounds can come together and get to know each other in a respectful and safe setting.

The gallery runs a fulltime exhibition schedule. It, also, has projects which are often happening outside the gallery. I am here because of the *Along the Road to Freedom* project. Others, such as *In the Spirit of Humanity* and *Leap in Faith*,

3 school workshop have put me in schools and English as an Additional Language programs

4 EAL group where I have led workshops with thousands of students along with Hindu artist, Manju Lodha, and Muslim artist, Isam Aboud.

5 me, Manju, Isam inset With the support and encouragement of Manitoba Education, we go into classes together as people of faith. One artist of faith would not be allowed to do that.

6 Manju, Isam, me But together, representing our increasingly multicultural, multi-faith society, it is possible, even sought after. The Manitoba government asked Manju and I to work on a project that is directly related to faith. It is called *Leap in Faith*.

7 Leap in Faith images This DVD is an introduction to eight different faith traditions now commonly found in Canada. We are about to begin working on a related book, sponsored by The Winnipeg Foundation and with the support of Manitoba Education.

8 last assembly exhibit I am a responsible for organizing exhibitions at Mennonite Church Canada assemblies. The next assembly, as you know, is here in Saskatoon this summer. If you know of artists, or are one yourself, and would like to know how to make a submission to the exhibit, I can be e-mailed at rdirks@mennonitechurch.ca or you can go to the Mennonite Church Canada website and look for information on the assembly page.

9 Abbotsford I was born and raised in Abbotsford and lived in BC until I was 27. In the summer of 1982, Katie's and my life together took an unexpected turn. Katie saw a notice – which I had missed – advertising a volunteer position for a graphic artist with Mennonite Brethren Missions in Kinshasa, Zaire. With a laugh, Katie asked, “Do you want to live in Africa?” Without hesitation I responded, “Yes.” Katie was more than a little taken aback.

10 Kinshasa

We left everything we owned with my parents in Abbotsford, including our car. We fully intended to return to BC.

It is now 2016 and we still haven't returned.

After leaving Kinshasa I became a freelance artist, illustrator and designer in Winnipeg, Katie's hometown.

11 Winnipeg In 1990 I added curator to the list. Until 1998 what I did most was curate exhibits of contemporary African art which toured throughout North America. In early 1998,

12 gallery space I walked into the office of then Mennonite Heritage Centre director Ken Reddig and asked if I might be given the chance to turn a largely unused, in need of renovations but dramatic and potentially beautiful space into a professionally run fulltime gallery. The Heritage Centre was part of the General Conference, now Mennonite Church Canada. It is located on the campus of Canadian Mennonite University. Ken asked the leadership what they thought. They said, great idea so long as I would raise 100% of the budget myself.

So, in 1998 I became something I never wanted to be, a fundraiser.

13 IGI cover In 2000 I began working on a project called *In God's Image: A Global Anabaptist Family*. It included art and stories from the lives of ordinary people from 17 countries broadly representing every major

region of the world. I traveled to those countries, asked to stay with ordinary families, documented their everyday lives and met with artists. There was an exhibit, which toured in Africa, Europe and North America, and a book, which was sold and distributed throughout the Mennonite world.

The global Mennonite Anabaptist family has grown far beyond its roots in Europe nearly 500 years ago. The wish to celebrate that fact and recognize the global Mennonite family of faith was behind the *In God's Image* project.

14 Shearamma painting Shearamma was an elderly widow in Andhra Pradesh, India. Her husband had been the local Mennonite pastor. When he passed away, without enough money among members to pay a new pastor, she took it upon herself to keep the church going. Her tiny village was a mix of Hindus, Christians and Muslims. She was held in high regard by all communities. Some years ago Werner Kroeker from Fresno, California contacted me to let me know Shearamma had died. He said, "A Mennonite saint who should not be forgotten has passed away."

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15 Mama Kadi painting Mama Kadi is from the Democratic Republic of Congo. She is an ordained Mennonite pastor, a widow, a businessperson, who supports five grown children unable to find work in a country where the vast majority are under-employed or unemployed.

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While celebrating the fact the Mennonite world now includes more Africans than Canadians -- that it is found around the world, we should also honour our roots, those people from whom this worldwide community of faith originated.

Mama Kadi is a Mennonite. Shearamma was a Mennonite. My mother was a Mennonite.

I am in Saskatoon this weekend to honour Mennonite women from another era,

16 Along the Road to Freedom painting women featured in the *Along the Road to Freedom* exhibit, which is now at the Diefenbaker Centre. There is an opening event at 2PM this afternoon. Please, join us. My talk this afternoon will be entirely different than this sermon. There'll be no reason to say, "I already heard that story."

Along the Road to Freedom honours and remembers Mennonite women of courage and faith who brought, or tried to bring, their families out of the Soviet Union to freedom and peace in Canada. The exhibition includes 26 large, collage-like watercolour paintings. They are journeys through women's lives, many filled with unbearable sadness and despair, yet, they are also filled with faith, love, family, even forgiveness.

17 Along the Road painting The exhibition was initiated when four people, all who had been brought out of the Soviet Union when they were children, came to see me in 2008. I will go into greater detail about the project when I speak at the exhibit this afternoon.

Three of them had been led out by mothers who had been widowed, their husbands having been taken by the state and killed some years earlier. All four came out on the Great Trek when 35,000 Mennonites attempted to flee from the Soviet Union in 1943, following the retreating German army during World War 2.

18 Along the Road painting They were among the 12,000 who actually made it, eventually either to Paraguay or Canada. 23,000 did not escape.

The four -- Nettie Dueck, Henry Bergen, Wanda Andres and John Funk -- wanted to initiate something that would honour Nettie, Henry and John's mothers and Wanda's grandmother while they -- Nettie, Henry, John and Wanda -- were still alive. They feared their mothers, grandmother and others like them would be forgotten. Certainly, that will more easily be the case once the last of those, the children who had been led to freedom beginning in 1943, pass away.

19 Along the Road painting The exhibition, *Along the Road to Freedom*, is the result. It is a collection of sponsored paintings. Families, for donations to the MHC Gallery, could determine who would be featured in a painting. The exhibit has been touring for two years already. But, it was just completed less than a week ago. I finished the final painting last Monday. It was taking me so long to work through all the paintings that I decided to begin the tour before I was finished. So, Saskatoon is the first stop where all the paintings can be seen.

A coffee table book of the exhibition and the women's stories will be available later this year.

20 MWC 23 of the 26 paintings were at the global assembly of Mennonite World Conference in Harrisburg, Pennsylvania last July. Many viewers, including people who have no personal links to Mennonites whose family journeys include Russia, were powerfully moved,

21 MWC often to tears. These stories, as those of Shearamma, my mom and Mama Kadi are all part of our greater Anabaptist family story.

22 Bergmann event In 2013 a family gathering took place at the Mennonite Heritage Centre Gallery in Winnipeg. About 30 descendants of Anna Dick Bergmann got together for the unveiling of the painting honouring Anna.

Following are some blended excerpts from Anna's story as written by her grandson, John Wieler:

23 Anna Bergmann painting Anna was born on April 7, 1880 on Rosenhof estate in south Russia.

In 1901 Anna married Abram Bergmann. They settled on his family estate. Anna gave birth to ten children. Six survived. The estate prospered.

While some Mennonite businessmen had bad reputations among the locals, Abram was well liked and respected by his employees.

Then came the revolution, bandits and anarchy. Abram's father, a member of the Russian parliament, became a sought after person by the revolutionaries. In January 1919 he was caught and murdered. Shortly thereafter, Abram, along with a brother and a friend, fled but were also caught, jailed, stripped, beaten, then shot and dumped into a well.

Months later Anna received the terrible news of her husband's fate. At the invitation of her widowed uncle, she moved to the Steinbach -- Steinbach in Russia, not Manitoba -- estate with her six children. In 1921 they were

evicted and again forced to move, this time to very primitive facilities, an old granary. In August 1922 another move was made back to Steinbach and in the spring of 1924 yet another, this time into an old sheep barn which was still full of manure when they arrived.

In 1922 famine proved to be very difficult for Anna and her children. They had few possessions. Starvation was rampant. Many times Anna expressed her thankfulness for the help received from Mennonite Central Committee. Had it not been for the "brothers in America," as she put it, she did not know how the family would have survived.

In late summer of 1924, Anna and her children were able to leave Russia for Canada. After ten days on a freight train, they finally made it out of the old country. They arrived in Altona, Manitoba in the fall. The day after arriving, the two young boys aged 14 and 16, were placed on farms where they would work for board and room. The oldest daughter found work in Winnipeg as a maid. Anna stayed in Altona with three daughters, one an invalid. While life was very difficult, they were now free and thanked God for deliverance.

The next year the family was settled on a farm in Glenlea, Manitoba. Initially several other families also occupied the simple, weathered house. Farming in Canada with two young sons was an ongoing challenge for Anna. The earnings were extremely meager. The only farm income was a small cream cheque. That together with the paltry earnings of the oldest daughter constituted the total cash, really insufficient to meet the family's needs. Yet ten percent was conscientiously set aside for the Lord's work. Those were very tough years, and the conditions on the farm most primitive.

When a family decided to sponsor an *Along the Road to Freedom* painting, I would get together with family members and talk about the woman who was to be depicted in the artwork. I'd ask for old photos, diary entries, identity documents, stories, anecdotes – things that would mesh in my mind to form the nucleus of a sketch which would eventually become the painting. I asked them to supply a Bible passage or a song that was important to the woman who will be at the heart of the artwork. Anna's family gave me Psalm 103: 1, 2 and 13. Listen while thinking of Anna's story.

Psalm 103: 1, 2, 13

¹ Praise the LORD, my soul;

all my inmost being, praise his holy name.

² Praise the LORD, my soul,

and forget not all his benefits—

¹³ As a father has compassion on his children,

so the LORD has compassion on those who fear him;

Praise the Lord? Anna's life turned from one of great privilege to one of almost total deprivation. She lost four children. Her husband and, ultimately, all male family members over 18 were murdered.

Forget not all his benefits? Her home changed from a lavish estate to a manure drenched barn.

John ends his grandmother's story,

"Anna never spoke hatefully or with revenge. She was a forgiving woman, generous and loving, deeply rooted in her faith. Her love extended far beyond her family. Her legacy was one that drew the best out in people. Her thankfulness for the Lord's graciousness to her and the family and to others, was testimony to that abiding faith, and a vivid reminder of what she had experienced, namely that the Lord indeed is the Father to widows and orphans."

At one point during the unveiling, John asked if anyone in the audience remembered Anna having been angry.

Silence.

Then, someone piped up with a story well known in the family. With everyone laughing, the evidence was shared. One day a stranger had shown up at Anna's door. He was filthy. Anna had told him, quite sternly, that he needed a bath.

In Glenlea, Anna took it upon herself to be mother and grandmother to any and all children who were without a grandmother. Several children, to their surprise, only found out she was not really their grandmother after she had passed away.

As I met with John Wieler and his wife Betty to talk about Anna, I flipped through an old, yellowed photo album. In it was a handwritten note penned by Betty many years ago for her children's sake. Betty was one of those unrelated children taken under Anna's wing. Betty wrote, "We all called her grandma, too. She treated us like her own grandchildren. She was one of the sweetest, gentlest people I've ever known."

All that horror. All that loss. Yet, what is she known for? Love, gentleness, kindness, forgiveness. What a testimony. What a legacy.

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24 multiple images I'm thrilled that today well over half the people worldwide who identify as Mennonites do not have European roots. We are now broadly rooted.

Along the Road to Freedom comes from a time when we were more exclusive. That is no longer the case and that is good, is how it should be. However, that does not lessen the importance of the stories of these women. They should be remembered. As the church changes, why run from the roots? These stories, these examples, these testimonies, should be with us, as should those of Shearamma, Mama Kadi and my mom.

Instead of jettisoning or hiding our heritage, let's embrace it and also those stories of the newer Mennonites among us. There should be room for all.

These stories, too, while specifically Russian Mennonite are universal and timeless. As new refugees seek refuge, we need to remember we, or our ancestors, were once doing the same. Not long ago, after looking at the paintings, a Congolese woman came to me and said, "This is my story." A Kurdish Muslim woman said the same.

I want the *Along the Road to Freedom* paintings to be notes like the one Betty Wieler wrote to her children about Anna Bergmann. Remember her. Remember she brought your grandmother here. Without that having happened, you would not be here enjoying a good life. Remember not to seek revenge. Remember not to be angry for generations over what was lost. Remember not so you can someday take back what was stolen. Remember in spite of all she went through, all she lost, the example she left was one of faith, love, kindness, even forgiveness.

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Ray Dirks, March 3, 2016