

The joy of sharing a common faith: **visitors from Winnebago Presbytery in Wisconsin (Steve Shive, Rachel Reeves Schwab and Lucy Rupe), with new friends at Iglesia Presbiteriana La Samaritana (Samaritan Presbyterian Church) in Carepa, Colombia. Their visit in December 2003 was the second trip the presbytery has sponsored.**



COURTESY OF WINNEBAGO PRESBYTERY

In praise of partnerships

COVENANT RELATIONSHIPS BETWEEN
GROUPS OF U.S. AND OVERSEAS CHRISTIANS
ARE A GROWING EDGE OF PRESBYTERIAN MISSION

By Pat Cole

Gazing at a classroom full of Ethiopian women, Peggy Roberson wondered if she had traveled 7,000 miles for nothing. An experienced educator, she had taught elementary school in Staunton, Virginia, for many years. But this was different.

She was supposed to teach Bible, planning skills and stewardship to women from a different culture, who spoke a different language. She worried that communicating through an interpreter would be too cumbersome for effective classroom dialogue.

But as soon as she and her

teaching partner, Presbyterian minister Lynn Connette, began to speak to the women, their fears were allayed. They found eager learners who hung on every word.

“We were told not to expect verbal responses from Ethiopian women, because they are taught to be quiet,” Roberson says. “Whoever told us that was wrong. They loved the activities they did. They participated fully.”

Profound spiritual kinships

Roberson is one of a growing number of U.S. Presbyterians

involved in international mission partnerships. Nearly two-thirds of presbyteries, a handful of synods, and countless congregations have formed links with Christian groups in other nations.

Roberson’s three-week experience in 2000 grew out of Shenandoah Presbytery’s partnership with the Illubabor Bethel Synod in Ethiopia. She had gotten to know visiting Ethiopian Christians and occasionally hosted them in her home. Her invitation to teach in Ethiopia came during a conversation with Yadeta Kirita, now the president of Illubabor

“...In this country we have the gift of material blessings.... When we go to Third World countries like Malawi, they have little in terms of material possessions, but in terms of faith they are far richer than we are. These people rely on faith every single day of their lives.”

Mark Plumb,
co-chair, Pittsburgh Presbytery's
Malawi Ministry Team



COURTESY OF SHENANDOAH PRESBYTERY

A larger church in a smaller world: **above left**, children from a congregation in Jimma, Ethiopia, with members of First Presbyterian Church in Harrisonburg, Virginia, **from left**, Jean Kilby, Bill Kilby and Howard Simmons; **above right**, panoramic view of a village in Malawi where Presbyterians have formed meaningful partnerships

Bethel Synod, during one of his visits to Shenandoah Presbytery.

In 2003 Roberson returned to Ethiopia for a month long teaching experience, and she continues to be active in the partnership. Her Ethiopian friends and their nation are part of her everyday consciousness. “God puts that place in your heart,” she says, “and you never want to forget about it.”

Other mission partnership participants say the common faith they share with Christians overseas

transcends political, cultural and geographical barriers. Many testify to experiencing profound spiritual kinships with believers in other countries.

“I tell people that the world has become smaller in one sense and bigger in another,” says Dave Carver, pastor of First United Presbyterian Church of Crafton Heights, Pennsylvania. “It is much easier for me to make decisions about faith and life when I realize I am a part of the larger Body of Christ.”

Make sure it is mutual

Mission partnerships are based on long-term relationships and should not be confused with short-term mission projects. Carver, the immediate past co-chair of Pittsburgh Presbytery's Malawi Ministry Team, says the presbytery struggled in its partnership with Malawi Presbyterians until moving away from a project-driven model.

“There is so much temptation to use American money and ideas to fix African problems,” Carver says.



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Shortly after the partnership began in 1991, the relationship suffered from what Carver terms “the cancerous effect of indiscriminate giving.”

For example, some monetary gifts were sent to specific congregations, which created jealousies in congregations that did not receive contributions from the United States. Another thing the Pittsburgh team learned, says Carver, was “that when we rush in and build a building or develop a site or fund an initiative, we may develop an infrastructure that the local church cannot sustain.”

Now leaders in both countries

agree on any project. “When we recommitted ourselves to the partnership in 2000,” Carver says, “we took a long hard look at making sure it was mutual.”

Since then Presbyterians in Malawi and Pittsburgh have joined together to build a dormitory for nursing students at Mulanje Mission Hospital. Pittsburgh Presbytery has sent about 200 people to Malawi and received approximately 250 Malawians as guests. Shared prayers, Bible studies, worship experiences, and visits have helped strengthen the bonds between the two groups.

Political involvement

In the past 25 years these formalized partnerships, based on a covenant relationship and long-term commitments, have become increasingly common in the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.). Since 1988 the number of synod and presbytery partnerships has grown from about 25 to more than 100. Meanwhile, many congregations have developed overseas partnerships or sister church relationships as part of a presbytery partnership.

“As we encounter Christ’s incarnation in people and churches

First there were mission partnerships, and now— MISSION NETWORKS

Presbyterians involved in mission partnerships are finding mutual support and useful information through participation in mission networks. These networks are composed of Presbyterians with a common interest in a particular country, people group or issue. Most networks meet yearly and draw people from across the country.

“Mission networks facilitate helpful and healthy partnerships,” says Les Sauer, coordinator of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)’s Ecumenical and Mission Partnerships Team. “They are places to share learnings and coordinate efforts.”

Networks are in place or are being planned for 13 countries: Congo, Cameroon, Colombia, Cuba, Ethiopia, Ghana, Guatemala, Kenya, Malawi, Nicaragua, Sudan, South Africa and Thailand. Another network has formed around a people group, the Kurds, and still another around a programmatic emphasis, global education. Sauer expects the number of networks to continue growing in coming years.

The Sudan Network, which began in 1996, is the oldest of the networks. David Dawson, executive presbyter of Shenango Presbytery in Pennsylvania, says participation in this network has strengthened his presbytery’s longstanding partnership with the Sudan Presbyterian Evangelical Church. “It is very critical for Shenango’s partnership,” he says. “Otherwise we would live in isolation in the partnership. This gives us a lot larger view.”

For more information on mission networks, call the Ecumenical and Mission Partnerships Team at (888) 728-7228, ext. 5292 or ext. 5256.

around the world, our faith is stretched and encouraged and empowered,” observes Will Browne, the PCUSA’s associate director for ecumenical partnership. This makes sense, he adds, since Christianity is a religion founded on a theology of incarnation.

In successful partnerships participants’ concerns invariably grow beyond immediate needs to the overall welfare of people in the partner’s country, says Les Sauer, coordinator of the PCUSA’s Ecumenical and Mission Partnerships Team. Presbyterians across the United States have lobbied their Congressional representatives on issues that came to their attention as a result of a mission partnership: the Cuba trade embargo, the civil war in Sudan, the African AIDS crisis, among others.

When Winnebago Presbytery in Wisconsin began a partnership with Presbyterians in Colombia, Lucy Rupe, Winnebago’s executive presbyter, asked people in the

presbytery to inform themselves about the social and political situation in Colombia. She knew Colombia’s human rights record, political violence and controversial U.S. military aid are part of an intense public policy debate swirling around Washington and the South American nation.

Yet Rupe has urged the presbytery to enter the political discussion with much caution. “I would always take the lead from the international partner,” she says. “We try to educate ourselves as much as possible. We have people across the spectrum of politics. Anything that we do corporately I would always want to check with leaders in Colombia.”

Action vs. reflection

Partnerships thrive when there are commitments to mutuality, long-term relationships, dialogue, trust and transparency, says Homer Rickabaugh, who headed the PCUSA’s Office of Synod and

Presbytery Partnerships from 1988 until his retirement in 2000. For Americans, however, the natural tendency is to think of mission involvement in terms of immediate action. “Most want to go and do something quickly—build a clinic or put a roof on a school,” Rickabaugh explains. “They put a lot of work into it for a year or two and when the project is done they’re done.”

Americans may not see the benefit of Bible study and worship with partners until they have actually participated in these experiences, Rickabaugh adds. Yet the affirmation of such endeavors is nearly universal among people who have participated in partnerships. One such participant is Pix Mahler, a hunger action enabler from the Presbytery of the Peaks in Virginia, which has a partnership with the Central America Evangelical Center for Pastoral Studies in Guatemala.

“Theological reflection from a Central American vantage point is very different from what we have in

DO'S AND DON'TS

For a more effective international mission partnership

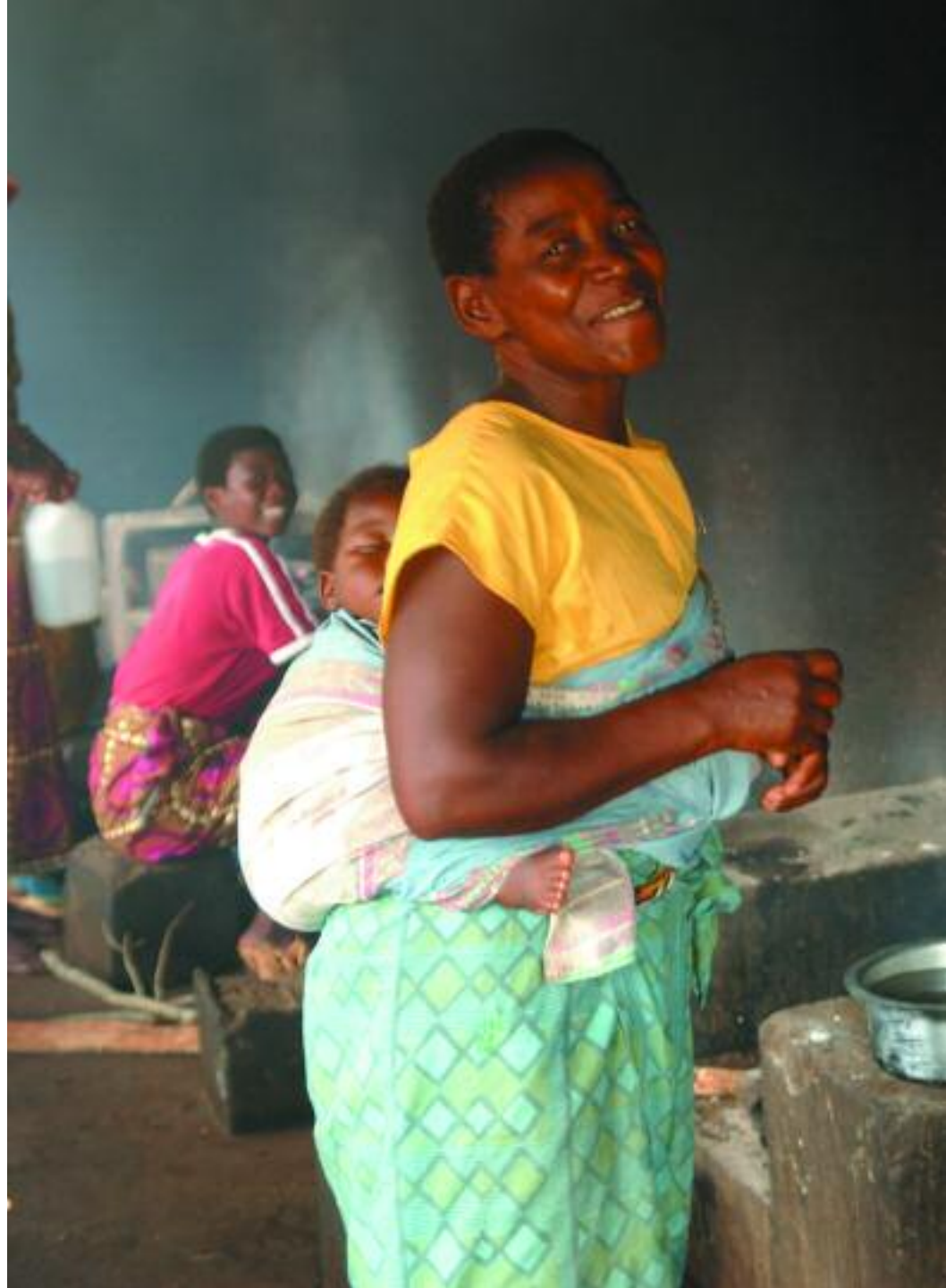
Do:

- ▶ Remember that both partners have gifts to offer the partnership.
- ▶ Develop a covenant that details the expectations of each partner and defines the length of the partnership.
- ▶ Learn from the faith experiences of the partner.
- ▶ Consult with the Worldwide Ministries Division's Ecumenical and Mission Partnership Office as you begin this process. Call (888) 728-7228, ext. 8185, or e-mail: PartnershipsTeam@ctr.pcusa.org.

Don't:

- ▶ Make projects the focus of your partnership.
- ▶ Mislead the partner by making promises you cannot keep.
- ▶ Begin a project without the partner's approval.
- ▶ Neglect the personal relationships that form as a result of the partnership.

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the States," she says. An example, she notes, is the Central American perspective on the Christmas story.

"We've coated it so much with irrelevance, secularism and consumerism," she says. "They talk about the liberating and true hope of the world and what impact that can have on the world."

Mark Plumb, co-chair of Pittsburgh Presbytery's Malawi Ministry Team, says the depth of faith embodied by Presbyterians in Malawi has challenged him. "While

in this country we have the gift of material blessings, in many ways our faith is very immature," he says. "When we go to Third World countries like Malawi, they have little in terms of material possessions, but in terms of faith they are far richer than we are. These people rely on faith every single day of their lives." □

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Joining together to meet a need: a Malawian woman and child in a dormitory for nursing students at Mulanje Mission Hospital, built by Presbyterians in Malawi and Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. Pittsburgh Presbytery has sent about 200 people to Malawi and received approximately 250 Malawians as guests. Shared prayers, Bible studies, worship experiences, and visits have strengthened bonds between the two groups.