

Hidden in plain sight

At a recent Sunday morning in my home congregation, Elijah and Priscillah Metekai, longtime members of our church, invited everyone present to a enjoy hot tea and a few other traditional Kenyan delicacies during the fellowship hour following the worship service. For nearly a decade, Elijah and Priscillah have been working tirelessly, alongside their regular jobs, to support villagers from their home community of Kimuka in Masaailand, Kenya. The primary focus of their efforts has been on education, especially assisting needy students with school fees, helping women learn skills that can supplement their incomes, and strengthening the rich cultural traditions that have long been part of Maasai identity. Every Saturday morning, Elijah and Priscillah can be found at a stand in the local farmers market, where they sell beaded jewelry, handcrafted by Maasai women, to support their friends and family. Priscillah has expanded the retail effort to a small shop open during the week in a busy shopping center.

In many settings during the past years, Elijah and Priscillah have shared with our congregation stories from their village: reports of drought and celebrations of rainfall, concerns about ethnic tensions during a national election, the completion of a well, pictures of joyful schoolchildren who had just received their new textbooks.

Over time, our congregation has developed a sense that in some small but tangible way, we are connected with Kimuka. Clearly, we are not experts in Kenyan history, politics or culture, and we have no grand vision of responding to all of the challenges the people in Masaailand are facing. But Elijah and Priscillah, along with their two children, are deeply embedded in our community—we care about Kimuka, in part, because they care about Kimuka. They are a bridge that has opened up a part of the world to us that we otherwise would never have known.

And we are joined to other parts of the global church as well. Right now, four young people associated with our congregation are serving in three separate assignments in Bolivia. Another young man has been working with Jubilee Partners in Comer, Ga., in a special outreach to newly arrived immigrants. International students, retired missionaries and former service workers in our congregation remind us of a dozen other connections to the world.

But the amazing thing is that my congregation

is not unique. A survey conducted by the Institute for the Study of Global Anabaptism at Goshen (Ind.) College in 2014 revealed that 40 percent of congregations in Mennonite Church USA have some kind of special relationship with a sister congregation outside the United States. Seventy-nine percent of the respondents have members in their congregation who have served with Mennonite Central Committee; 55 percent have members who served with a Mennonite mission agency. According to the survey, 59 percent of MC USA pastors have studied, served or lived abroad. On any given Sunday, Mennonite churches in the United States will hold worship in at least two dozen different languages.

Our connections with the global church are also evident in local conferences—not just on the east and west coasts, where immigrant Mennonite congregations are flourishing, but also in the Midwest. In the mid-1990s, for example, the Illinois Mennonite Conference collaborated with the Iglesia Evangélica Menonita Argentina in a partnership called Arm in Arm. Initially the focus of the partnership was to support Mennonite congregations in the Patagonia region of Argentina that were eager to embark on an aggressive program of church planting. But as relationships deepened over time, participants in the Patagonia Mission Project began to ask whether the mission-minded Patagonians could help inspire a renewed commitment to local missions back in Illinois. So in 2004, Arm in Arm invited Juan and Amaris Sieber to spend time with the churches of the Illinois conference, encouraging and equipping them in a sustained initiative focused on church planting.

Separated as we are by geography, culture and language, it is sometimes easy to think of the global church as a distant abstraction. Yet traces of the global Anabaptist fellowship are all around us.

In the coming weeks, I challenge you to make a list of all the individuals in your congregation who have had a significant connection to a country outside North America. Create a space in your worship to name and to honor their insights and experiences. Ask them to reflect on similarities and differences in worship style, interpreting Scripture, collecting the offering, sharing testimonies or simply bearing witness to the good news of the gospel.

The global church is already here, hidden in plain sight. **TM**



John D. Roth is professor of history at Goshen (Ind.) College, director of the Institute for the Study of Global Anabaptism and editor of *Mennonite Quarterly Review*.

On any given Sunday, Mennonite churches in the United States will hold worship in at least two dozen different languages.