

In memory of Glen Lapp

On June 30, airstrikes by Afghan and U.S. military forces killed at least 73 Taliban insurgents in an eastern province of Afghanistan known as Nuristan. Ordinarily, my eyes would have momentarily lingered on the headline and then moved on in search of a news story closer to home. Even though my country has been at war in that region for 15 long years—a war that has cost our nation more than \$750 billion, plunged an already impoverished country into economic chaos and led to the deaths of some 2,400 U.S. soldiers and at least 26,000 Afghan civilians—Afghanistan still has the feel of a mythical planet in a distant corner of the solar system. According to a *National Geographic* survey, more than 90 percent of Americans between the ages of 18 and 24 could not locate Afghanistan on a map. I could easily be one of them.

But in this instance I stopped to read the article, my attention snagged by the reference to the province of Nuristan. Six years ago, Glen Lapp, a 41-year-old Mennonite Central Committee volunteer from Lancaster, Pa., was working in the rural villages of Nuristan as part of a mobile international medical team that specialized in the treatment of eye diseases. The team was sponsored by International Assistance Mission (IAM), a highly regarded partner organization of MCC, which has provided medical assistance in remote regions of Afghanistan for nearly 50 years.

On Aug. 5, 2010, Lapp and nine other colleagues were passing through the northeastern province of Badakhshan, returning to the capital city of Kabul. The exact details of what happened on that Thursday afternoon remain unclear, but in the end, 10 civilians, including Lapp, were shot and killed. He was three months from completing his term with MCC. The Taliban claimed responsibility for the massacre.

When I think about the life and witness of Glen Lapp, my first inclination is to frame his death within the long tradition of the *Martyrs Mirror*. Like most MCC volunteers, Lapp was a Christian who regarded his work in Afghanistan as an expression of his faith. Like MCC, IAM does not use weapons for security. In a report filed with his supervisors, Lapp described his motivation as one of “treating people with respect and love and trying to be a little bit of Christ in this part of the

world.” His story is an inspiring reminder that the commitment to follow Christ can still exact a cost today.

But that, of course, is not the only way to think about what happened on Aug. 5, 2010.

Every event has a context. Whether we are aware of it or not, our identity always extends beyond our personal commitments, intentions and decisions, particularly when we enter new cultures. Another part of Lapp’s story is the country of Afghanistan—its natural beauty, cultural richness and renowned hospitality, as well as its complex history of internal ethnic rivalries, immense poverty and a legacy of tenacious resistance to outside powers such as the British and the Soviet Union. In addition to being a nonresistant Christian, Lapp was also a U.S. citizen—inextricably associated with the global political tensions that brought the United States into Afghanistan in 2001 to retaliate against

Osama bin Laden for the attacks on 9/11. And then there is the bitter rage of men and women, driven by a sense of powerlessness and extremist ideologies to commit lethal acts of violence and terror. Or perhaps merely the petty viciousness of local people seeking status through a dramatic gesture of violence against foreigners.

Our lives are interconnected in so many layers—the gifts and burdens of multiple identities and historical memory.

In the end, though, we are left with the individual and a thousand decisions that shape the contours of an individual life. By all accounts Lapp was a kind, thoroughly decent person, whose ordinary life was made extraordinary by his love of travel and a deep desire to serve others. In addition to hiking in Nepal, Lapp volunteered for relief efforts following hurricanes Katrina and Rita; he served as a nurse on a reservation in Arizona, and he had come to deeply love the languages, cultures and people of Afghanistan.

On this anniversary of Lapp’s death, pause a moment to ponder the marvelous complexity of our world. Offer a prayer of lament for the families of the 73 Taliban fighters killed on June 30; pray for peace in a war-torn country, and lift high the memory of Glen Lapp, whose life and death bear witness to the power of love in a hate-filled world. **TM**



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