

Rhizome

Updates from the Institute for the Study of Global Anabaptism

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A Day in the Life of the Global Anabaptist Church

Following up on conversations from the [Power and Preservation Symposium](#) in June 2019, ISGA has initiated a project to collect photos and videos of Anabaptist congregations around the world. According to ISGA director, John D. Roth, the project will help to preserve “a visual sense of the places and spaces of worship of our fellowship in different parts of the world. As this archival collection expands over the years, it could become an important source for future church historians.”

In early January 2020, the ISGA invited symposium participants to take part in a test run of the project on [MWC's World Fellowship Sunday](#) (January 19) by taking photos of their worship spaces, congregational interactions, and their order of worship or bulletin. Additionally, we asked for video clips of the church service including music, preaching, and short interviews with members.

Our first effort resulted in an enthusiastic response from all over the world, including Indonesia, the USA, the Democratic Republic of Congo,

Canada, Paraguay, and Kenya. The “Day in the Life of the Global Church” project reveals both our diversity as well as our shared convictions across the global Anabaptist-Mennonite church. “We hope sharing these ‘snapshots’ of our global family at worship will give us a deeper sense that we are all part of the Body of Christ,” Roth said.

Now that we have worked out the technical wrinkles, we are ready to promote the “Day in the Life of the Global Church” on a much broader scale. If you would like to participate in the future, send us an email at isga@goshen.edu. To see the photos and videos we have gathered thus far, scroll down the Anabaptistwiki.org web site and find the [“A Day in the Life” link](#).



Sunday worship at Bondeko Mennonite Church in Kinshasa, Democratic Republic of the Congo on January 19, 2020

Nurturing Global Connections

ISGA director, John D. Roth, continues to travel to various parts of the world in support of Mennonite World Conference projects or in response to invitations from local church leaders. In March, he will meet with city and church officials in Zurich, Switzerland to begin planning for a commemoration in 2025 of the 500th anniversary of Anabaptist beginnings. This event will take place in Zurich, site of the first adult baptisms in 1525. On March 28-29, he will be in Abbotsford, British Columbia to participate in the [MWC Renewal](#) event that the ISGA helps to plan each year. Renewal is an annual gathering--always in conjunction with meetings of the MWC Execu-

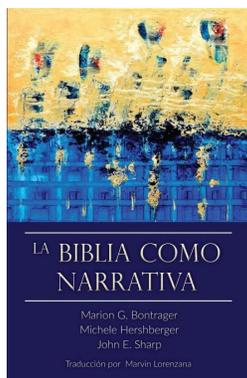
tive Committee or General Council--that celebrates the witness of the Anabaptist-Mennonite tradition in a different part of the world.

Further anticipated travels will depend on local health conditions related to the coronavirus. In early May, Roth is anticipating a trip to Indonesia to complete work on a guidebook to promote the 17th [MWC global assembly](#) scheduled to take place in Semarang, Indonesia on July 6-11, 2021. In early June, he will be a guest of the Mennonite Church of South Korea as an itinerant teacher, with a scheduled stop in Shanghai, China to share with the Christian Forum of Reconciliation in Northeast Asia.

New Uploads to BiDA

The [Biblioteca Digital Anabautista](#) continues to be active, making Spanish language material available on-line for seminary courses in various parts of the world. Recent new titles on the BiDA website include:

[Historia Menonita Mundial](#) series (including history volumes from [Africa](#), [Latin America](#), [Asia](#), [Europe](#), and [North America](#)), edited by John A. Lapp and C. Arnold Snyder.

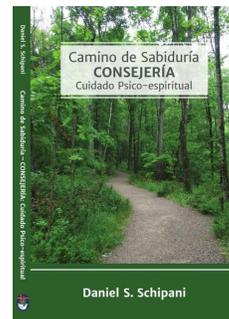


[La Biblia Como Narrativa](#), by Marion G. Bontrager, Michele Hershberger, and John E. Sharp.

[Camino de Sabiduría Consejería: Cuidado Psico-espiritual](#), by Daniel S. Schipani.

[Los salmos de lamentación: Implicaciones teológicas a partir de un análisis de su audiencia social](#), by Derek W. Suderman.

Based on the success of the BiDA project—and with additional financial support from the Schowalter Foundation—we are pleased to announce that the initiative will expand this year to create parallel French and Portuguese sites .



“A Day in the Life” Photos

Photos collected from around the world (from top right and clockwise): Members quilting at [River East Church in Winnipeg, Canada](#); Sharing a meal after the service at [Mennonite Peace Missions Fellowship in Ngong, Kenya](#); Front of [Gereja Injili di Tanah Jawa \(GIT\) Jepara in Central Java, Indonesia](#); and Worship service at [Manoah Mennoniten Gemeinde in Loma Plata, Paraguay](#).



Staff Transitions

SangMin Lee Granted Amnesty

by SeongHan Kim (MCC NE Asia Peace Educator)

It was Tuesday, December 31, the last day of the year 2019, when Sangmin Lee called me with excitement to report news of his amnesty. Early in 2014 Lee was sentenced to 18 months in prison for refusing, on the basis of his faith, to complete his mandatory military service. Although Lee was freed on July 30, 2015, after serving 15 months of his sentence, his criminal record for refusing to participate in military service made it impossible for him to find employment at many businesses and in government-related offices. I am so glad that Sangmin has been included among the more than 1,800 people finally restored their full legal status in Korean society. However, sadly, we now must prepare a bigger prison for the longer sentences imposed on prisoners of conscientious. Who will give them real amnesty or special pardon? Read more [here](#).



Grant Miller



Kristen Swartley

Following his graduation from seminary at [Anabaptist Mennonite Biblical Seminary \(AMBS\)](#), Grant Miller, who had previously served as the ISGA administrative assistant, accepted a full-time position as pastor at Kalamazoo (Mich.) Mennonite Fellowship. In November, Kristen Swartley became the new ISGA administrative assistant. Swartley recently moved to Elkhart, Indiana to start an MDiv degree with a concentration in Theology and Peace Studies at AMBS. Before that she had lived in Oklahoma City, OK where she taught and performed music (flute). Along with her studies at AMBS, Swartley enjoys experimenting with new recipes and spending time outdoors running and biking. She is looking forward to getting to know more about the global Anabaptist-Mennonite church.

LEARNING FROM AFRICAN THEOLOGY

By John D. Roth, director of the Institute for the Study of Global Anabaptism

In 1969 a young Kenyan Anglican priest and theologian named John Mbiti published a book titled *African Religions and Philosophy*. Mbiti had been raised in Christian family in eastern Kenya. A promising student, he eventually found his way to Cambridge University where he earned a PhD in theology before returning to Africa to teach at Makerere University, Uganda.

In the course of his theological studies in the early 1960s Mbiti frequently encountered Western writers who still referred to Africa as the “dark continent” and dismissed traditional African religions as demonic and anti-Christian. Haunted by those caricatures, he embarked on a massive study of proverbs, traditions, and religious practices across the African continent. The results of that study, *African Religions and Philosophy*, was one of the first texts to assert the coherence of African traditional religions—African religious beliefs, he argued, had a structure and logic that was just as complex and intriguing as the established theological tradition of the Christian West. Moreover, he argued, many Africans knew God—and indeed, were Christian—long before the appearance of European missionaries. “The God described in the Bible,” Mbiti wrote in 1980, “is none other than the God who is already known in the framework of our traditional African religiosity. The missionaries who introduced the gospel to Africa in the past 200 years did not bring God to our continent. Instead, God brought *them*.”

Mbiti’s work was controversial. Some African scholars resented that Mbiti

defended traditional religions within the framework of Western Christian theology. Others challenged the idea of an “African” understanding of religion, as opposed to an emphasis on the distinctive qualities of each particular belief system. And many Western theologians were stunned by Mbiti’s suggestion that traditional African religions had anything to teach them about Christianity.

Yet Mbiti persisted in his vision of bringing African, Asian and European theologians together into dialogue. As director of the World Council of Church’s Ecumenical Institute in Bossey, Switzerland, he hosted a series of highly-influential conferences in the 1970s on themes like “Confessing Christ in Different Cultures” and “Indigenous Theology and the Universal Church” that highlighted African and Asian contributions to contemporary theology.

“Mbiti frequently encountered Western writers who still referred to Africa as the ‘dark continent’ and dismissed traditional African religions as demonic and anti-Christian.”

Along the way Mennonite missiologists took note of Mbiti’s work, particularly his challenge to begin with the assumption that God was already present in the religious traditions they encountered. In a 1976 essay, Mbiti framed a pointed question that I have not been able to shake loose from my mind. “Theologians from the new (or younger) churches,” he wrote, “have made their pilgrimages to the theological learning of the older churches. We had no alternative. We have eaten theology with you; we have drunk theology with you; we have dreamed theology with you. But it has all been one-sided; it has all been, in a

sense, your theology. . . . We know you theologically. The question is, do you know us theologically? Would you like to know us theologically?”

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Today, Anabaptist-Mennonite churches in Africa comprise the largest percentage of our global family; and they continue to be among the fastest growing groups. According to Andrew Walls, the pre-eminent historian of global Christianity, “African Christianity is *the* representative Christianity of the 21st century. . . . What happens within the African churches in the next generation will determine the whole shape of church history for centuries to come.”

John Mbiti died on October 6 at the age of 87. Though many readers likely never heard of him, Mbiti’s legacy is profound. And the question he posed remains essential for anyone interested in the life of the church beyond our borders: “Do you know us theologically? Would you like to know us theologically?”

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