



**Mennonite  
Mission  
Network**

The mission agency of  
Mennonite Church USA

**Missio Dei**

Exploring God's work in the world

# 3-D Gospel in Benin

Beninese churches invite Mennonites  
to holistic partnership



BY NANCY FREY AND LYNDA HOLLINGER-JANZEN  
WITH PREFACE BY AUGUSTIN AHOGA

*Missio Dei* is published by Mennonite Mission Network to invite reflection and dialogue about God's mission in today's world. Some features in the series focus primarily on the biblical and theological foundations of the mission task. Others present ministry case studies or personal stories of attempts to be faithful to Christ's call. Perspectives represented reflect the passion and commitment of the agency: to declare in word and demonstrate in life the whole gospel of Jesus Christ, "across the street, all through the marketplaces, and around the world."

Executive Director/CEO:	Stanley W. Green
Editor:	James R. Krabill
Editorial Content:	Karen Hallis Ritchie
Design:	Cynthia Friesen Coyle
Consulting Editor:	Paula Killough

Copyright © 2015 by Mennonite Mission Network, PO Box 370, Elkhart, IN 46515-0370. *3-D Gospel in Benin: Beninese churches invite Mennonites to holistic partnership*, Nancy Frey and Lynda Hollinger-Janzen.

Mennonite Mission Network, the mission agency of Mennonite Church USA, exists to lead, mobilize and equip the church to participate in holistic witness to Jesus Christ in a broken world. With offices in Elkhart, Indiana, and Newton, Kansas, Mennonite Mission Network supports ministries in more than 53 countries.

Mennonite Mission Network is committed as an agency to providing relevant resources for the church. *Missio Dei* is such a resource, inviting reflection and conversation about God's mission in 21<sup>st</sup>-century contexts. It is offered free of charge to nearly 1,000 pastors and lay leader subscribers. Additional copies may be purchased for \$3.95 each, or \$2.95 for quantities over 100.

ISBN 1-933845-38-4

Materials appearing in *Missio Dei* may not be reprinted or otherwise reproduced without written permission.

*Printed in the United States of America.*

# A successful model of integrated mission

By Augustin Ahoga

History is generally defined as a recital of past events, but here is an account of historical happenings whose wheels continue to roll forward. While we wait for a Beninese author to write from an authentically African perspective, Nancy Frey and Lynda Hollinger-Janzen dove into the water and tried to swim upstream into the past, even though they were not present at the beginning of this partnership. And none of us can imagine what lies downstream in the future, because the fruits of the Mennonites working alongside Beninese brothers and sisters have only just begun to ripen.

Despite the limitations, these two women have written a history that stirs emotions because they both lived in Benin as true biblical, non-paternalistic missionaries. They, with their colleagues, worked in the African context and tried, as much as possible, to make these realities their own. We hope that readers, removed by geography and time, will be able to discover what God has done for the church through redeemed lives in Benin, Europe and North America.

You have the story of a true partnership. In my ministry with *Groupes Bibliques Universitaires* (Intersarsity Bible Fellowship), I have worked with many missions. Through my experience of working with Mennonites, at least in the context of Benin, I believe they are among those who have best captured the biblical understanding of “missionary.” They have

affirmed our humanity as brothers and sisters. They have confidence in us and our capacity to succeed. The result was not long in coming: Not only do we have the four ever-developing institutions (Benin Bible Institute, Bethesda Hospital, with its community health program and community bank), but

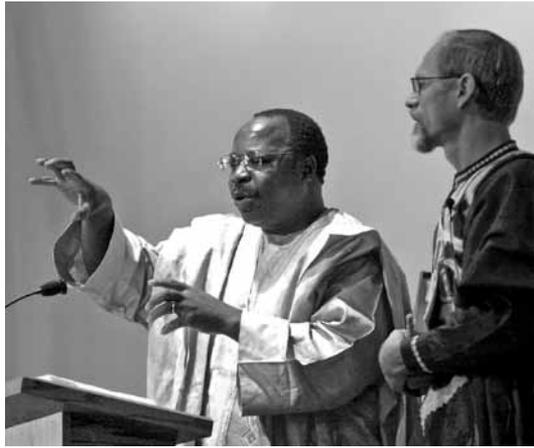


Photo by John Yoder

Augustin Ahoga preached at Waterford Mennonite Church and helped to lay the foundation for the partnership with Benin Bible Institute. Rod Hollinger-Janzen translated.

these institutions are reproducing and expanding throughout Benin and neighboring countries.

Bethesda and its affiliate institutions, along with Benin Bible Institute, are models of a successful partnership between a mission from the north and African churches. The Bible institute invests in the spiritual development of Beninese church members. Bethesda takes care of their physical needs, helps develop a blossoming community, and empowers the community through financial assistance.

We must consider the partnership of Mennonites and the churches of Benin as a successful model of integrated mission, a history of biblical partnership to be shared widely and replicated.

*Augustin Ahoga holds a Master's degree in Old Testament Studies from the University of Cheltenham in the United Kingdom, and a Master's in Bible and Theology from Vaux-sur-Seine Evangelical Seminary in France. He is a doctoral candidate at South African Theological Seminary and currently serves as Groupes Bibliques Universitaires director for French-speaking Africa. He and his wife, Jocelyne, have a young adult daughter.*

# 3-D Gospel in Benin

## Beninese churches invite Mennonites to holistic partnership

By Nancy Frey and Lynda Hollinger-Janzen

Edwin Weaver's ability to listen and his deep respect for a culturally sensitive approach to mission attracted the attention of Harry Henry at the Pan-African Church Conference held in Abidjan, Côte d'Ivoire, in 1969.

How could Henry, president of the Methodist Church in Republic of Dahomey (today's Democratic Republic of Benin), and Weaver, serving with Mennonite Board of Missions (a predecessor agency of Mennonite Mission Network), have imagined that within three decades, the fruit of their conversation would include an internationally accredited Bible school, one of the nation's premier hospitals, a globally renowned community health initiative, and a highly successful micro-finance bank?

### Partnership begins with shared vision and an invitation

Henry invited Weaver and the Mennonites he represented to visit Benin and help churches to pursue their vision of holistic witness to Jesus' message of love and church unity. While many Beninese members of mission-planted churches regarded those who attended African Initiated Churches<sup>1</sup> as backward, or even less than Christian, Henry had respect for AICs. A leader in world ecumenical circles,

---

<sup>1</sup>Churches founded by Africans for people living within an African worldview.

Henry recognized that AICs responded to the African reality in ways that Western churches and mission agencies did not.

Henry also observed that AICs would be cautious about receiving training from a financially powerful denomination because of their experience with “sheep-stealing,” luring people into leaving one church for another with promises of education or material goods. In order to build trust, the Mennonites would have to refrain from planting Mennonite churches and build up the capacity of AICs, Henry said.

## Partnership grows out of long mission involvement

With more than 30 years of mission experience in India and West Africa, the Weavers were also acutely aware of how Christian culture that is not rooted in a local context can distort Jesus’ essential message of love for God and neighbor. With Nigerian church leaders, the Weavers formulated a new mission strategy to empower AIC leadership through biblical and theological studies without the trappings of Western doctrines and denominational identity. They also hoped to build bridges of greater understanding and respect between AICs and mission-planted churches. The Weavers worked in Nigeria for almost nine years before the Biafran War forced expatriates to evacuate in 1967.



In 1987, Harry Henry spoke on missiology at the Mennonite Board of Missions office in Elkhart, Indiana. David Shank translated.

## The Bible as foundation of partnership

Mennonite collaboration with AICs took root in Dahomey with two week-long seminars, in April 1970 and in October 1971. Encouraged by the response to the seminars, the Beninese churches renewed their call for resident mission workers.

After two visits to Africa, David and Wilma Shank, who had served with Mennonite Board of Missions in Belgium from 1950–1973, were ready to respond to a call to minister among AICs in French-speaking West Africa.

However, after a military coup in 1973 installed a Marxist-Leninist regime that officially closed the door on religious expression in Dahomey, the Shanks determined that God was calling them to Côte d'Ivoire to work with another AIC, *L'Eglise Harriste* (The Harrist Church).<sup>2</sup> In the early years of the Marxist dictatorship, communication between the fledgling leadership training committee in Dahomey and the Mennonites became almost non-existent.

## Partnership embraces whole gospel

In 1983, the Shanks introduced Ron Yoder, then Mennonite Board of Missions Africa administrator, to church leaders in Benin.<sup>3</sup> Henry informed the Mennonite delegation of a slight thaw toward Christian institutions. The government accorded one parliamentary seat to “the Protestant voice.” As a result, the *Conseil Interconfessionnel Protestant du Bénin* (Inter-confessional Protestant Council of Benin) was formed with Henry as president.



Photo by Lyndia Hollinger-Janzen

Council members Michel Dossou, Harry Henry, Abel Dossou, Pierre Togbé, Samson Assani, and Rod Hollinger-Janzen during the first certificate presentation ceremonies in Porto-Novo, Benin, in 1991.

<sup>2</sup>*L'Eglise Harriste* is founded on the ministry of William Wadé Harris. Though Liberian, his evangelistic message had the most dramatic impact in Côte d'Ivoire from 1913 to 1915.

<sup>3</sup>The country's name changed to People's Republic of Benin in 1975.

Henry invited the Mennonites to join the council to help Benin move into wholesome urbanization through a three-pronged vision that included:

1. Biblical training.
2. Community health.
3. Agricultural development.

Henry's presentation resonated with Yoder, who had a development orientation and a holistic approach to mission. The Mennonite delegation was also impressed with the AIC leaders' commitment to this vision. One head of a church gave the Mennonites about \$20 for seed money to begin "the Bible school fund."

These conversations led to a new series of seven annual seminars for church leaders in Benin, held from 1983–1989. After the first seminar in this series, David Shank reported on Henry's feedback: "You have become part of the Inter-confessional Council and worked within our structure. You have eaten with us and not committed any scandal in doing so. You have taught from the Bible without taking doctrinal positions. The door is open to you."

The teaching pattern of the seminars was designed to encourage listening and interaction between church leaders. After a teaching session, there was a time of small-group discussion to digest the input, and then each group shared their findings in a plenary session. At the end of the day, the lecturers would synthesize what they had heard to help the church leaders adapt what they had learned to their specific contexts.

## **Relationship required for true partnership**

However, church leaders desired deeper relationships with mission workers who would live and work alongside them. The Inter-confessional Council asked Mennonite Board of Missions to send workers with expertise in agriculture, health, and Bible teaching. These workers would resource all of the churches in Benin, and would agree not to plant Mennonite churches or to favor one Beninese denomination.

In response to the Council's request, two missionary families arrived in 1987: Lynda and Rod Hollinger-Janzen from North America in February, and French Mennonites Daniel and Marianne Goldschmidt-Nussbaumer in August.



Photo by Wayne Gehman

Papa Michel Dossou, one of the founders of United Evangelical Association and leader in the Council, served as a mentor to Mennonite mission workers.

## First steps together: sharing in worship and meals

Once Mennonites arrived in Benin, Michel Dossou—one of the founders of the *Eglise Evangélique Universelle* (Universal Evangelical Church) and vice president of the Inter-confessional Council—served as advisor to the Mennonites. Widely respected in Benin for his wisdom and faithfulness to Jesus, he was known as Papa Dossou. Papa Dossou spent nearly every Sunday of 1987 introducing the Mennonite couples to the 30 different denominations that made up the Council. He made the rounds first with the Hollinger-Janzens, and then six months later, began a second round with the Goldschmidt-Nussbauers.

On Sundays, mentored by Papa Dossou, the Mennonite couples took the pulse of each denomination. After worshiping together and sharing a sumptuous meal prepared by the women in the congregation, the Mennonite couples would listen to the dreams and challenges of the leaders of the denomination they were visiting.

Dossou said that he gave himself to this ministry because he saw that Mennonites had the capacity to bring churches together in studying the Bible. Before the biblical seminars, many Beninese churches were

suspicious of using commentaries or other biblical study helps. This was seen as undermining dependence on God's Spirit. So, through his presence, Dossou wanted to promote Mennonites' credibility and offer them a chance to be heard.

"God gave you, Mennonites, powerful ways of working with all churches. Before your arrival, we did not work together. Each church worked in its own little box. [I gave of my time] because I didn't want the churches to say, 'The white people have come to dazzle and trick us,'" Dossou said.

The two couples began responding to requests to teach and preach in churches. They also began a community health initiative in the village of Gbeko. This was a day's journey by four-wheel-drive vehicles, *pirogues* (dug-out canoes), and motorcycles.

Paul Akoyi, founder of the *Eglise Messianique Universelle* (Universal Messianic Church), had been praying for Christian brothers and sisters who shared his understanding that Jesus' salvation wasn't just a ticket to heaven after the struggles of life on earth were over. Akoyi was one of the first church leaders to understand the importance of community health and development, so he led the Mennonite team's immersion into exploring best practices in this area.

## Sustainable partnership must adapt to changing contexts

When the Berlin Wall came down in 1989, communist regimes around the world began to crumble. In Benin, the national health and educational systems closed their doors when workers didn't receive their salaries for 13 months. Chaos reigned.

Advised by the Catholic bishop, Isidore de Souza, the Marxist president, Mathieu Kérékou, convoked a national conference of more than 500 grassroots leaders as well as political dissidents who had taken refuge outside the country. These courageous people came—representing religious groups, nonprofit organizations, market women, and students—despite the real possibility of being slaughtered in their seats as armed "security guards" patrolled the meeting hall with guns and bayonets. Many dissidents had "disappeared" during Kérékou's regime. However, in the end, Kérékou turned his back on violence and followed de Souza's counsel. Laying aside his written speech, Kérékou knelt before the national assembly in a televised session and asked

forgiveness of the Beninese people for all the atrocities committed during his presidency.

## **Partnership perseveres through adversity**

In some ways, the church unity achieved through the Inter-confessional Council was artificial in that it was dictated by the government. With the arrival of democracy, new mission agencies from Europe and North America flooded into the country. Individual church leaders were free to form alliances with expatriate institutions any way they chose, and interdenominational collaboration splintered. The Council that invited the Mennonites no longer had relevance.

Some Beninese church leaders pushed for change, eager to create new structures. These progressive leaders wanted more organized Bible seminars, leading to a diploma. They urged the mission workers to help open a health center that could provide regular medical treatment, rather than expending human and financial resources in community health initiatives. Other leaders were cautious and wanted to move more slowly. This tension, along with the different approaches favored by the mission workers, led to complex interpersonal conflicts.

## **Partnership responds to health needs articulated by community**

Although there was almost no bloodshed attributed to the political change from Marxism to democracy, many people died from starvation and untreated illness. Lines formed outside the Goldschmidt-Nussbaumer living room as people desperately sought medical attention from Daniel, a doctor, and Marianne, a midwife.

The volume of need surpassed the capacity of one couple. The Goldschmidt-Nussbaumer knew they had to act quickly to provide more adequate medical facilities when a child died from causes that could have been treated in a hospital.

This needless death led Daniel Goldschmidt-Nussbaumer to side with the agents for change. In 1990, with Daniel's encouragement and promise of ongoing support, the Inter-confessional Council's Health Commission made the decision to create Bethesda Health Center with about \$2,000 in start-up funds from French Mennonites. At Bethesda's inauguration, Harry Henry noted—with exasperation



Photo by Dale Schumm

A Bethesda patient (name withheld for confidentiality) talks with Marianne Goldschmidt-Nussbaumer at the newly opened health center in 1990.



Photo by Phil Richard

Véronique Lawson, a Methodist pediatrician and president of the Health Commission, later became Benin's national Minister of Health. Daniel Goldschmidt-Nussbaumer takes notes during a Health Commission meeting.

due to so much conflict, and grudging admiration for such selfless service—that Bethesda was the result of the “stubbornness” of the Health Commission.

The Goldschmidt-Nussbauers negotiated with European organizations for donated medications, and helped to organize unemployed Christian medical personnel who volunteered their services to treat patients. The five doctors, along with nurses and lab technicians, worked for little remuneration for three months in a few rented rooms. Given the volume of patients, each paying about 25 cents for a consultation, Bethesda was able to begin paying its personnel and to rent more rooms and, then, more houses in one of the most under-served neighborhoods of Cotonou, Benin’s largest city.

### **Working through crisis, partnership blossoms**

Fighting among Council members grew toxic and, in 1991, Mennonite Board of Missions decided to send the Hollinger-Janzen family to North America as a reprieve from the intrigues of church politics. The Goldschmidt-Nussbaumer family stayed in Benin to continue to walk alongside the rapidly growing health ministry, while Beninese Christian medical personnel served as advocates when ecclesiastical roadblocks were erected against the fast pace of developments.

After six months of rest and spiritual discernment that God was calling them back to Benin, the Hollinger-Janzens returned to Cotonou. Rod worked with leaders who were pushing for more formal biblical and theological studies that would lead to a diploma. Lynda plugged into health ministries that linked congregations with Bethesda, and eventually helped to launch a community health department at Bethesda.

In 1994, a number of churches withdrew from the Inter-confessional Council to create the *Fédération des Eglises et Missions Évangéliques au Bénin* (Federation of Evangelical Churches and Missions of Benin). Those churches that remained with the Inter-confessional Council renamed it the *Conseil des Eglises Protestantes Évangéliques au Bénin* (Council of Evangelical Protestant Churches of Benin).

With all the changes, Mennonites also applied for an independent legal status, becoming *Service Mennonite au Bénin* (Mennonite Services in Benin). This enabled the expatriates to work with all the inter-church councils.

## **Partnership responds to churches' desire for biblical training**

Mennonite Services in Benin continued to work in the direction laid out by the Bible Commission that had been appointed by the Inter-confessional Council. In 1994, Mennonite Services in Benin launched a 24-course curriculum that would be taught over three years. In September, the first cohort of about 130 students from more than 40 denominations began their biblical and theological studies in a city hall in Cotonou.

Week-long courses were taught every six weeks, allowing church leaders to remain in their communities and to immediately put into practice what they were learning. West African professors taught most of the courses, with expatriate Mennonites teaching about one-fourth of them.

An accelerated weekend version of each course was taught in French for lay leaders who worked in secular professions during the week. Then, Monday through Friday, the same course was repeated with translation into an African language for church leaders without formal educations, who needed to be in their congregations on Sundays. Within days of new biblical learning, church leaders returned to their home communities and became teachers, multiplying the impact of the training far beyond the persons enrolled in the program. This student-led initiative gave birth to the Theological Education by Extension program.

## **Partnership moves toward local leadership and sustainability**

In 1996, Augustin Ahoga, a Baptist pastor and national director of *Groupes Bibliques Universitaires* (Intervarsity Christian Fellowship), led a reflection committee in beginning to envision a sustainable future for the leadership training program. He insisted on ownership by local congregations, and on moving the program as quickly as possible to being led by Beninese administration and teaching staff. Mennonite mission worker Steve Wiebe-Johnson, who had just arrived in Benin with his wife, Dorothy, joined Rod Hollinger-Janzen to represent Mennonite Board of Missions on the reflection committee. Wiebe-Johnson's background in international development enabled him to be a valuable consultant to all the partnership programs.



Image from Mennonite Church USA Archives in Goshen, Indiana

Rebecca Assani, Lynda Hollinger-Janzen, Daniel Goldschmidt-Nussbaumer, and Saturnin Afaton prepare for a river crossing on a community health trip.



Image from Mennonite Church USA Archives in Goshen, Indiana

Jocelyne Ahoga, Baptist architect and construction supervisor, reviews plans with foreman Jean Yéhouéou, member of United Evangelical Association.



Image from Mennonite Church USA Archives in Goshen, Indiana

A team of Mennonites from Europe and North America worked with Beninese Christians to lay the foundation of Benin Bible Institute in 1997.

In 1997, legal identity was established and the program was named *Institut Biblique du Bénin* (Benin Bible Institute). Three of the school's top students were chosen for further study, in order to form the nucleus of the future teaching staff, and Marcellin Danhondo was appointed to work with Rod Hollinger-Janzen in administrative duties.

Also in 1997, construction was begun on a building to house the Bible Institute. Architect Jocelyne Ahoga, wife of Augustin, drew up the plans for a two-story structure, and supervised the laying of the foundation. She gave her time and competencies as a gift. During three weeks, two work-fellowship teams composed of Mennonites from Europe and North America worked side-by-side with Beninese Christians to launch the building project.

The following year, the reflection committee elected a board of governors that included four representatives from the inter-church councils (two from each council), three graduates of Benin Bible Institute, two members of Mennonite Board of Missions, and two members-at-large, with Ahoga as chairperson. From that point on, the board became the decision-making body for Benin Bible Institute. Supporting churches were invited to a yearly consultation to give advice and support the work of the school. This annual assembly continues to give a voice to supporting churches and has grown to include 70 denominations.

### **Authentic partnership preserved through accountability**

In addition to close and constant collaboration with Beninese partners, the Mennonite Services in Benin team met weekly for worship, fellowship, and to report ministry updates. The trust and respect between team members allowed them to give and receive counsel. This prevented a “lone-ranger mentality” that can turn mission into a personality cult. Given the wide range of working styles, training, perspectives, experience and natural gifts, the Mennonite team provided checks and balances for each other.

### **Partnership transitions: institutions flourish under Beninese leadership**

As expatriates stepped back from day-to-day ministry in Benin, the institutions they helped to plant blossomed. Due to Beninese leaders whose lives are deeply and sacrificially committed to Jesus, people



Photo provided

Bruce Yoder, Nancy Frey, Bonaventure Akowanou, Rod Hollinger-Janzen, Théophane Boko, Joe Miller, and Toussaint Akwéson during the covenant-signing by the Waterford Mennonite Church with Benin Bible Institute in 1994.



Photo by Lynda Hollinger-Janzen

Colombe Dandonougbo is taken under the wing of Dr. Barthélemy Dossou-Bodjrenou, ophthalmologist and coordinator of Bethesda Hospital, who tries to convince all young people to become doctors. At right is Colombe's father, Abraham, a hospital employee.



Bonaventure Akowanou and Jean-Baptiste Hounmondji discuss new Development in Four Dimensions projects. Hounmondji is the national president of the Universal Evangelical Church and the founder of D4D.

who are dedicated to worshipping God through ministering to their “least-served neighbors,” grassroots initiatives have grown to have a far-reaching impact and have attracted international acclaim.

By the time the Goldschmidt-Nussbaumers returned to France in 1993, Bethesda, with the administrative expertise of Barthélémy Dossou-Bodjrénou, was fully self-supporting and able to subsidize a community development program, *Développement Communautaire et Assainissement du Milieu* (Community Development and Environmental Sanitation). Dossou-Bodjrénou has provided continuous leadership at Bethesda, with the exception of spending several years outside the country to specialize in optometry.

In 1993, Raphaël Edou was hired to lay the foundations for the community development program. During Dossou-Bodjrénou’s study sabbatical, Edou assumed coordination of all Bethesda’s operations. In 2011, because of Edou’s success in mobilizing and giving voice to communities, Benin’s president appointed him to a post in the national government, Minister of Decentralization and Local Governance. Two years later, he became Minister of the Environment, a post that he still holds. Victor Gbedo, who helped build the community develop-

ment program from the early days, continues to oversee the extensive ministries that touch people's lives in all of Benin's 12 provinces.

In 1999, when Marcellin Danhondo assumed leadership of Benin Bible Institute, he professionalized and streamlined administrative procedures. In 2002, Bonaventure Akowanou, a Bible Institute graduate, gave up a lucrative industrial position to become the school's administrator. Over the past 12 years, Akowanou has led in building a Beninese faculty, in the accreditation of the school, and in the development of an agro-pastoral project that promotes improved and locally appropriate agricultural practices, and gives church leaders means to feed their families. This project is also designed to provide another source of income to move the Bible Institute toward greater financial self-sufficiency.

Nancy Frey and Bruce Yoder arrived in Cotonou in February 2000 to serve as liaisons, carrying on relationships between Beninese leaders and the mission agency in North America.

## The Bethesda group promotes integrated development

The Christian leaders who established Bethesda Hospital understood that many factors influence health. They made efforts to meet these needs and taught about the importance of a clean living environment, good nutrition, and education. They also realized that for people to take charge of their lives, they needed employment. The community development program grew from a Mennonite Board of Missions' grant of \$40 in 1993 to a multi-million-dollar enterprise that includes garbage collection and recycling that has been replicated in all of Benin's cities and throughout the West African region. Bethesda personnel help the people they serve find healthier lives through job creation, training, internships and research, a health insurance agency, and a community bank, *Promotion d'Épargne-Crédit à Base Communautaire* (Promotion of Community-based Savings



Photo by Lynda Hollinger-Janzen

Héloïse Clédjo helped Bethesda to lay the foundation for training church-based health workers, and continues to work at integrated health care.

and Loans). Under the leadership of Pascal Tamegnon, the community bank grew from \$2,000, given by Mennonite Board of Missions as a start-up fund, to an institution with assets of more than \$8 million. This micro-enterprise bank now has 23 branches that serve all the provinces of Benin.

Today, Bethesda is one of most respected hospitals in the nation and includes some innovative services that integrate psychological, social and spiritual healing into its curative and preventive care, paying special attention to families affected by HIV/AIDS. This program grew out of work done by Héloïse Clédjo and Dorothy Wiebe-Johnson in training health workers in congregations to meet the needs of their communities.

## Community Development and Environmental Sanitation receives awards

Under Edou's leadership, Bethesda's community development program was recognized by the World Bank and received awards from the United Nations, Global Development Network, and, in 2006, African Social Award for the best nongovernmental organization in Africa.

Now, Edou views his influence at the national level as a God-given opportunity to share his Christian testimony as he works for transparent leadership that serves the common person.



In a Dubai ceremony, Albéric Ahoyo, mayor of the part of Cotonou where Bethesda Hospital is located, and Raphaël Edou, receive United Nations awards for their work in community development.

“There is a huge gulf between government leaders and people operating at a grassroots level. We have to bridge that gulf,” Edou said. “Our small beginning at Bethesda helped us to grow step-by-step. In this way, we stayed in touch with the people. Bethesda's staff fears God and avoids corruption. They don't merely work for a salary. They want to serve God by reaching out to people in need.”



Image from Mennonite Church USA Archives in Goshen, Indiana

François Okoumassou (dark shirt in center of photo) leads a community health discussion with members of the Dassa Union and North American visitors on a fellowship and learning tour. Phil Lindell Detweiler is on the left with son, Nathan.



Photo provided

Gloria, Abdel-Aziz and Marina welcome Neil Amstutz, pastor of Waterford Mennonite Church, during a partnership visit to *La Casa Grande*.

## Community health in rural settings

In 1994, Christine and Phil Lindell Detweiler arrived in Benin after civil war made it impossible to continue their community health ministry in Liberia. They observed that much of the Mennonite Services in Benin work was centered in the largest city, Cotonou. After a year of travel to observe what initiatives were already in place, they were drawn to the Dassa region, located in the central part of the country, where a group of pastors from three denominations were working together to respond to the physical needs in their communities, as well as spiritual needs. This organization, *Union Associative des Eglises Evangéliques pour la Promotion Sociale* (Union of Evangelical Churches for Social Promotion), interested the Lindell Detweilers because it shared many aspects of the Mennonite vision: the desire to work together beyond the confines of denominational self-interest, and the understanding that Jesus' good news calls believers to minister to the least-served in holistic ways.

Building relationships and raising community awareness were at the base of the Lindell Detweilers' work. Ernest Gnonlonfoun, a Christian professional with a degree in administration, devoted himself to working with Dassa Union. Together, they created a community



Photo by Emiles Baidevou

Janet Stucky presents Mozart Djengue with his diploma for completing the FASE program, a congregation-based training in community health interventions.

banking program that complemented the health ministry already in place. While the formal organization of the union dissolved after a decade due to interpersonal and church politics, those who were trained continue to use their skills in community development.

François Okoumassou, one of the trainees, has become a leader in community development. He said that what he learned from working alongside Mennonites served as a foundation that permitted him to receive specialized training. Okoumassou continues to serve the communities of the region with AIDS prevention, early childhood nutrition, and empowering people to address their own health and development needs.

“With support of [the Lindell Detweilers], we opened five village health posts. Two of these continue to function. One was so successful that the government upgraded it and provides health personnel. Because their faith forbids them to go to traditional spiritual healers, many Christians come to me.”

Okoumassou continues to combine Christ-centered spiritual healing and medicinal arts in a way that is meaningful to the communities he serves.

In 1998, another community health project in the southeastern part of Benin, *Développement en Quatres Dimensions* (Development in Four Dimensions), took its inspiration from Luke 2:52, which describes how the child Jesus grew physically, intellectually, socially and spiritually. Jean-Baptiste Hounmoundji, a Benin Bible Institute graduate and a leader in his church and community, had a deep concern for the high rate of infant mortality. He called for each congregation in the area to send a man and a woman to be trained as community health workers with a special emphasis in well-baby clinics. This organization is not as dynamic as it once was, but does continue to work on wellness as health workers are able.

## **Second generation of mission responds to children in difficult circumstances**

Burgos Mennonite Church in Spain<sup>4</sup> is a fruit of Mennonite mission efforts that began in Spain in 1981. This congregation is now sending

---

<sup>4</sup>Now, *Comunidades Unidas Anabautistas* (United Anabaptist Communities).

out their own missionaries. When a Burgos delegation came to teach a course at Benin Bible Institute in 1997, they met Marie Sagbohan, a member of the Health Commission. Sagbohan was caring for about a dozen children whose parents had died, and for whom the extended family had disintegrated in the urban context. However, Sagbohan was encountering more needs than she alone could handle. By 2000, Annette and Francisco (Paco) Castillo, members of the Burgos congregation, responded by creating *La Casa Grande* (The Big House), a home with an open door, to welcome children with nowhere else to go. *La Casa Grande* has become a village in Allada, about an hour north of Cotonou, where children are prepared to minister through schooling and apprenticeships. When the Castillo family returned to Spain due to illness, Paulin Bossou and Esther Zingbe, became *La Casa Grande*'s administrators. They are raising 50 children to respond to community needs in the areas of health, education and development.

“We do everything on the basis of the love of Christ. We are trying to make sure these children can grow up in a Christian environment so that one day they may also reflect the Lord’s love to others, because we have the firm conviction that the world can change with the love of God,” Bossou said.

Steve Wiebe-Johnson, now Mennonite Mission Network’s director for Africa, said that *La Casa Grande* is one more example of how God unites the global church in mission in Benin.

“Our friends from Burgos saw the need and began to pray about that need,” he said. “They began to network and, now, there is a multi-directional partnership between the City of Burgos, the Evangelical congregations in Burgos and Benin, Canadian congregations, the municipality of Allada, and Mennonite Mission Network.”

## **Benin Bible Institute**

The Bible Institute expanded under the leadership of the Beninese professors who gradually assumed teaching roles between 2002 and 2006, as they received their degrees from African theological schools in Chad, Central African Republic, and Côte d’Ivoire.

During this period, the Frey-Yoder couple served as administrative support staff, teachers and advisors to Beninese leaders. In 2004, the Bible Institute added a full-time degree program, and in 2008, opened a satellite program in Parakou, a city 450 km (280 miles) north of Cotonou.



Photo by Steve Wiebe-Johnson

Paulin Bossou, Steve Wiebe-Johnson, Bonaventure Akowanou and Bienvenu Kadja at *La Casa Grande*.

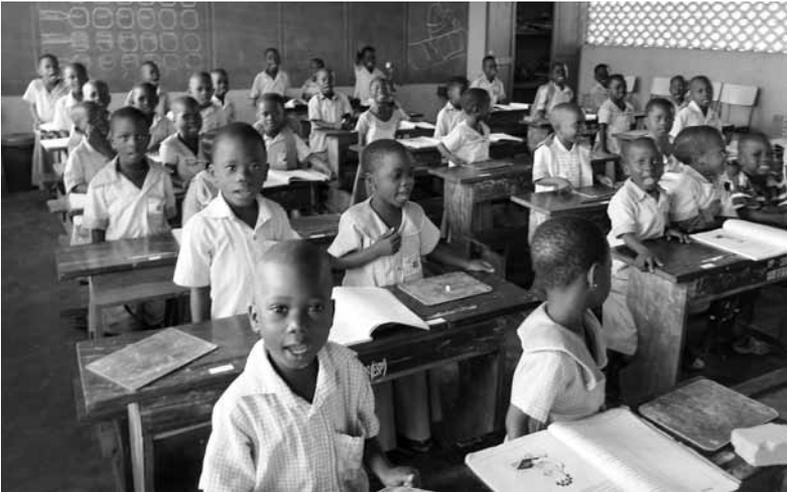


Photo by Steve Wiebe-Johnson

Children at *La Casa Grande's Les Leaders* (Leaders) School.



Photo by Steve Wiebe-Johnson

A community volunteer uses wood-working equipment sent by the municipal government in Burgos, Spain. Grace Woodworking is part of the *La Casa Grande* enterprise where children will be taught trades through apprenticeshs.

In the past quarter-century, Benin Bible Institute has trained more than 1,000 graduates who serve 70 denominations and other institutions throughout Benin. The last graduation was attended by 4,000 people, including two national government ministers.

## Mutual relationships continue to bless all participants

From 2009 to 2013, there were no expatriate Mennonites living in Benin. However, relationships continued through fraternal visits between Benin and North America. Occasionally, Benin Bible Institute invites European and North American Mennonites to teach a course as a guest lecturer.

In 2003, Waterford Mennonite Church in Goshen, Indiana, formalized a partnership with Benin Bible Institute, and four years later, St. Jacobs (Ontario) Mennonite Church in Canada made a similar covenant. Through regular cross-cultural visits, both congregations and Benin Bible Institute personnel grow in their faith.

“Since we first came into contact with Benin Bible Institute, our congregation’s understanding of the worldwide church has been enriched,” said Beth Metzger, one of the members of the St. Jacobs delegation. She added that an additional bonus has been increased fellowship among other southern Ontario churches and the Waterford congregation, as all worked together to strengthen their relationships with Benin Bible Institute.

Neil Amstutz, a Waterford pastor, said of the partnership, “A spiritual spark ignited the possibility for increased faithfulness at Waterford.”



Photo by Lynda Hollinger-Janzen

Robert Hounkpevi and Bruce Yoder teach a class at Benin Bible Institute.



Photo by James R. Keabill

During the 2012 graduation, Murielle Calixta Abiassi (foreground), a midwife, gave a testimony about how her Benin Bible Institute education enhances her to integrate her faith and her profession.

After his visit to North America, Bruno Orobiyi Gansa, a retired public school inspector and vice president of Benin Bible Institute’s board of directors, said he discovered new ways of living out Jesus’ love.

“I learned how to lessen the boundaries built between social classes. I re-examined many of our taboos, like ones about who can eat with whom. In your country, the lines aren’t so distinct between rich and poor. This is what the gospel teaches us, but I had to see it concretely before I could understand it.”

Gansa also said that the partnership grows deeper and more meaningful over the years. “No one is labeled ‘giver’ or ‘receiver.’ We all give and receive.”

In February 2013, Mennonite Mission Network sent Janet Stucky to work with Bethesda Hospital on a nutritional research project to improve the health of women and children.

Steve Wiebe-Johnson said that the partnership has also been a blessing for Mission Network.

“There are massive differences in the African and North American contexts we live in, but the place where our lives meet is at the cross of Christ,” Wiebe-Johnson said. “There we see past the fluff of our differences and find that we gain new perspectives as we enter each other’s lives and become more whole.”

## **Timeline of partnership between Benin and Mennonite Mission Network**

- 1969** Harry Henry extends invitation to Mennonites during Pan-African Church Conference in Ivory Coast; two months later, Edwin and Irene Weaver and Marlin Miller visit Dahomey
- 1970** First Mennonite seminar taught in Dahomey
- 1973** Marxist-Leninist regime restricts religious practices
- 1987** Hollinger-Janzens and Goldschmidt-Nussbaumers arrive in Benin
- 1990** President Mathieu Kérékou asks forgiveness during National Assembly
- 1990** Bethesda Hospital opens doors
- 1991** Nicéphore Soglo democratically elected to presidency
- 1993** Bethesda inaugurated community development program (DCAM)
- 1994** Inter-confessional Protestant Council divides
- 1994** Lindell Detweiler family arrives
- 1994** Mennonite Services in Benin is legally recognized
- 1994** First cohort of students begin systematic study at Benin Bible Institute
- 1995** Augustin Ahoga leads Benin Bible Institute's first reflection committee
- 1995** Wiebe-Johnson family arrives
- 1995** Union of Evangelical Churches for Social Promotion created
- 1999** Nancy Frey and Bruce Yoder arrive
- 2003** BBI partnership with Waterford Mennonite Church formalized
- 2007** St. Jacobs Mennonite Church formalizes partnership with BBI
- 2013** Janet Stucky arrives

## Questions for reflection and discussion

1. Did the reading of *3-D Gospel in Benin* give you new ways of thinking about mission? If so, name them.
2. What surprised you most as you read this booklet? Describe one insight that might impact your life or the life of your congregation.
3. What contributed to the fruitful ministries that emerged in Benin?
4. After reading *3-D Gospel in Benin*, imagine some ways your congregation might engage in holistic mission. Who is inviting your congregation to cooperation? With whom do you share a vision for ministry?
5. Have you had personal encounters with Christians from other cultures? If so, how have these encounters shaped your faith?
6. With what other churches does your congregation share a vision for ministry? With what churches are you cooperating or creating partnerships to reach that vision?
7. In order to work with integrity and transparency with different denominations in Benin, it was necessary for Mennonite workers to relinquish the possibility of planting a Mennonite church. Was this approach a wise strategy or a missed opportunity?
8. When unity is emphasized in interdenominational ministry, do we gain increased understanding about God and God's mission in our world, or do we "water down" the gospel to the lowest common denominator?

## For further study

- AULT, James, producer, *African Christianity Rising*, two-volume DVD on churches in Ghana and Zimbabwe (James Ault Productions, 2013). Available at [www.jamesault.com](http://www.jamesault.com).
- BORN, Bryan; NUSSBAUM, Stan; ODURO, Thomas; and PRETORIUS, Hennie, *Mission in an African Way* (Christian Literature Fund, 2008).
- GRANBERG-MICHAELSON, Wesley, *From Times Square to Timbuktu* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2013).
- HOLLINGER-JANZEN, Rodney, “A Biblical Teaching Program by the Interconfessional Protestant Council of Benin with Mennonite Cooperation,” in *Ministry in Partnership with African Independent Churches*, ed. David A. Shank (Elkhart, Indiana: Mennonite Board of Missions, 1991), pp. 161-170.
- KALU, Ogbu U., *African Christianity: An African Story* (Trenton, New Jersey: African World Press, Inc., 2007).
- KRABILL, James R., ed., *Nos Racines Racontées* [includes an extensive overview of Benin churches] (Abidjan: Presses Bibliques Africaines, 1996).
- KRABILL, James R., ed., *What I Learned from the African Church: Twenty-Two Students Reflect on a Life-Changing Experience* [No. 11 in the *Missio Dei* series] (Elkhart, Indiana: Mennonite Mission Network, 2006).
- LINDHARDT, Martin, ed., *Pentecostalism in Africa* (Boston: Brill, 2015).
- SHANK, David A., “What Western Christians Can Learn from African-Initiated Churches,” in *Mission from the Margins*, ed. James R. Krabill (Elkhart, Indiana: Institute of Mennonite Studies, 2010), pp. 219-230.

## The *Missio Dei* series

- No. 1** Calvin E. Shenk, *Understanding Islam: A Christian Reflection on the Faith of our Muslim Neighbors* (2002).
- No. 2** James R. Krabill, *Does Your Church “Smell” Like Mission? Reflections on Becoming a Missional Church* (2003).
- No. 3** Donna Kampen Entz, *From Kansas To Kenedougou ... And Back Again* (2004).
- No. 4** Alan Kreider, *Peace Church, Mission Church: Friends or Foes?* (2004).
- No. 5** Peter Graber, *Money and Mission: A Discernment Guide for Congregations* (2004).
- No. 6** Craig Pelkey-Landes, *Purpose Driven Mennonites* (2004).
- No. 7** James R. Krabill and Stuart W. Showalter, editors, *Students Talk About Service* (2004).
- No. 8** Lynda Hollinger-Janzen, “A New Day in Mission:” *Irene Weaver Reflects on Her Century of Ministry* (2005).
- No. 9** Delbert Erb and Linda Shelly, *The Patagonia Story: Congregations in Argentina and Illinois Link “Arm-in-Arm” for Mission* (2005).\*
- No. 10** *Together in Mission: Core Beliefs, Values and Commitments of Mennonite Mission Network* (2006).\*
- No. 11** James R. Krabill, editor, *What I Learned from the African Church: Twenty-Two Students Reflect on a Life-Changing Experience* (2006).\*
- No. 12** Ryan Miller and Ann Graham Price, editors, *Together, Sharing All of Christ with All of Creation* (2006).\*
- No. 13** Michael J. Sherrill, *On Becoming a Missional Church in Japan* (2007).\*
- No. 14** Alicia Horst and Tim Showalter, editors, *BikeMovement: A Mennonite Young Adult Perspective on Church* (2007).\*
- No. 15** Jackie Wyse, *Digging for Treasure in Your Own Backyard: Reflections on Missional Experiments in the Netherlands* (2007).\*
- No. 16** Alan Kreider, *Tongue Screws and Testimony* (2008).\*
- No. 17** Conrad L. Kanagy, *No Purse, No Bag, No Sandals: A Profile of Mennonite Church Planters, 1990-2005* (2008).\*
- No. 18** Palmer Becker, *What Is an Anabaptist Christian?* (2008). Revised edition (2010).\*
- No. 19** M. Daniel Carroll R., *Immigration and the Bible* (2010).\*
- No. 20** Matthew Krabill and David Stutzman, editors, *New Anabaptist Voices* (2012).\*
- No. 21** Steve and Sheryl Martin, *For God so Loved Afghanistan: Journal Selections from 16 Years of Family Living in a War-torn Land* (2013).\*
- No. 22** *Walking Together in Mission: Following God’s Call to Reconciliation* (2013).\*
- No. 23** Nancy Frey and Lynda Hollinger-Janzen, *3-D Gospel in Benin: Beninese Churches Invite Mennonites to Holistic Partnership* (2015).\*

\*Available in Spanish.

# 3-D Gospel in Benin

## Beninese churches invite Mennonites to Holistic Partnership

The engagement between Christians in Benin and Mennonites in Europe and North America reported here was built on initiative that originated in Benin. Further, it was nurtured through an investment on three continents to building meaningful relationships. This commitment provided the bedrock for developing partnership arrangements that respected the subjectivity of each of the partners and advanced the dignity and accountability of all those involved.

The fruit of this engagement has bolstered the faith of all who had the privilege of sharing our modest gifts, and reminded us that we must never “despise the day of small beginnings.” Every engagement in relationship and in the journey of building authentic partnership can (and most likely will) grow to bear fruit that may someday surprise us. No investment we make today, however modest, is insignificant.

—Stanley W. Green

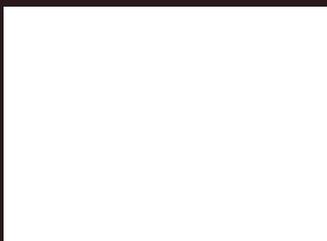
*Executive Director of Mennonite Mission Network*



**Nancy Frey** continues relationships with ministries in Benin from her home in neighboring Burkina Faso, where she serves through Mennonite Mission Network with her husband, Bruce Yoder, and their two children.



**Lynda Hollinger-Janzen** stays in contact with ministries in Benin through her work as writer for Mennonite Mission Network. She lives in Goshen, Indiana, with her husband, Rod.



Toll-free: 1-866-866-2872  
[www.MennoniteMission.net](http://www.MennoniteMission.net)



**Mennonite  
Mission  
Network**

The mission agency of  
Mennonite Church USA