

Spirit of



connection

Mission networks multiply the impact

BY ELLEN SHERBY

Tom and Jan Sullivan from Evanston, Illinois, returned from a mission trip to the Democratic Republic of the Congo overwhelmed with the need they saw and unsure how to best help. They knew God had been calling them to mission in the Congo, but they hadn't been sure what it would look like or how they might get started.

The Sullivans then discovered the Congo Mission Network (CMN), a group of people whose hearts and resources were with the ministry being done in the Congo. CMN is one of many mission networks connected with the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) that bring together people to do ministry in a specific area of the world or among a specific group of

people.

"CMN was the place we could talk with people who understood the Congo's ministries and how to work with them," Jan says.

Through the network, PC(USA) mission co-workers, and church partners in the Congo, the Sullivans discovered that the Presbyterian Community of Congo and the Presbyterian Community of Kinshasa (known by their French acronyms, CPC and CPK) were administering almost 1,000 schools and education for 240,000 students—and they needed some help. As a result of the support and information they gained through the network, the Sullivans' engagement deepened.



Alice Wyatt, left, receives a gift from pastor Berthe Kalombo Nzeba. Nzeba is believed to be the first female Presbyterian clergyperson in the Democratic Republic of the Congo.

Collective empowerment

“We thought it would be helpful to have a group of people within the network who focused on schools,” Jan says. The Sullivans traveled again to Congo—this time with Jeff Boyd, a PC(USA) mission co-worker, and Denise Drane, a Northwestern University professor. Once there, Joseph Mulumba, head of the CPC, organized a meeting for them with

Congolese educators. Together the group developed a strategic plan to strengthen the schools.

“We only facilitated the planning,” Jan says. “We did not tell the Congolese which goals to choose; the plan was all Congo-based.”

Upon their return to the United States, the Sullivans shared the Congolese churches’ goals with the mission network, which galvanized

individuals and congregations across the network to support the schools with prayers and funding. Build Congo Schools was born, empowering Congolese Presbyterians to construct nine new school buildings in nine years. These buildings serve 15 primary and secondary schools with both morning and afternoon sessions.

With network support, Congolese church volunteers also repaired other school buildings and provided much-needed educational resources for students. Today, at least 4,000 Congolese children and youth are getting higher-quality education because of Build Congo Schools’ partners.

Stronger witness and impact

Charlotte White grew up in the Congo as a child of mission co-workers. She moved away when she was a young adult, but today lends her firsthand experience to the Congo Mission Network.

“We can do so much better as a network,” she says. “We can do bigger projects and have more ambitious long-term goals.”

In addition to its educational ministries, the Congo Mission Network works with mission partners to strengthen health care. They also discuss advocacy issues that shape US church policies as well as

PC(USA) MISSION CO-WORKERS SERVE AS ‘BRIDGE PEOPLE’ WITH MISSION NETWORKS

PC(USA) mission co-workers are vital connectors when working with different cultures. Mission co-workers (formerly known as missionaries) are known as “bridge people” because they bridge barriers such as language, culture, or conflict that can get in the way of a meaningful ministry relationship. Mission co-workers help Presbyterians in the United States and people in the global church connect in context-appropriate ways because they know both realities, both contexts, both cultures.

They are called mission co-workers rather than missionaries to emphasize the mutual learning and inspiration that

take place between partners in Christ’s church. Today’s mission co-workers don’t parachute in to do mission for objects of their goodwill. Rather, they stay and engage, working as colleagues with—and under the direction of—global church partners. They do ministry with others, despite the differences in language, culture, and even theology. They seek to partner in ways that are mutually beneficial and focused on real changes according to the partner churches’ objectives. The spirit of change flows in both directions.

government and corporate practices that impact the country.

Anne Crane, convener of the Congo Mission Network, says that networking as churches can make a lasting difference in initiatives like Build Congo Schools. “The churches in the US and in the Congo are able to accomplish these great ministries because they are centered in God,” Crane says.

A broader perspective

Mission partnerships are not limited to the Congo. The PC(USA) has mission partnerships in over 60 countries across the globe. As relationships grow and information is shared, mission networks cultivate a deeper understanding of God, people, and politics.

Reinerio Arce, professor at the Evangelical Theological Seminary in Matanzas, Cuba, says this is the gift of mission.

“I think we’ve helped the brothers and sisters who come to visit,” Arce says. “They always tell us that they grow in their faith and in their commitment as they see how the Cuban church works. We’ve been able to contribute to the mission of the US

churches with which we’ve maintained a relationship.”

Networking also means that the lessons of mission are not confined to one congregation.

“If one church has a partnership with a church in La Havana, they can share their experience with all the churches in the network,” says Cuba Partners Network convener Glenn Dickson. The entire network can learn from one group’s experience.

Since each US church may have a relationship with a different Cuban church, the network gets to see different expressions of the Cuban church—not just the people and ministries of one congregation.

Dickson says he has learned volumes about Cuba by networking with other congregations and mid councils involved with church partners there.

“My church in Gainesville set up a partnership with First Presbyterian Church in Havana back in 2000. Thanks to the Cuba Partners Network I’ve learned far more about the current situation of the church in Cuba. I’ve learned more about the history of the Presbyterian Church in Cuba and how our denomination

has related since the beginning. That has been enormously helpful, to learn more about how our sisters and brothers in Christ have worked together.”

Learning about each other

Network connections happen both between the two countries and within each country. Even churches within the same country benefit from networks as they learn more about one another. Networked churches develop relationships with congregations within their own borders that may not have happened otherwise. Pat Metcalf, also with the Cuba Partners Network, says this is an added benefit.

“Being in the network allows church denominations and individual congregations to know each other better and keep in touch. I found that quite surprising but very enriching,” Metcalf says.

Mutual support is at the heart of the network’s purpose, and ministry activities are grounded in personal relationships.

“In the deepest sense it’s a way for Christian brothers and sisters to be in relationship with each other across



Congolese teachers explain to the US Build Congo Schools team what it is like to teach with very few books or teaching resources.



The US Build Congo Schools team dines with the education leaders during their planning meetings to improve education opportunities.



Members of the Syria Lebanon Partnership Network visit a school for Syrian refugee children in the Bekaa Valley in eastern Lebanon.

cultural, political, and international boundaries,” Metcalf says. “If we are invited to help, we will. But we don’t go down to refurbish their kitchen or paint their walls and then leave. The idea is to know each other. When I walk in the door, they say, ‘Pat!’ And I know them by name. It’s wonderful.”

Unity in diversity

Mission networks can also allow congregations to find a new focus. Tim

McCalmont, pastor of Presbyterian Church of the Covenant in Costa Mesa, California, and co-convenor of the Syria Lebanon Partnership Network, says mission can give a church new sense of purpose and cultivate unity.

“There can be some really redemptive things that might never happen if we were to try it alone. The church comes together by doing mission together,” he says.

“The network maintains a unity of purpose and of enhancing life,” adds mission partner Mary Mikhael of the National Evangelical Synod of Syria and Lebanon. “All congregations are informed of all needs and projects. They learn from each other and gain richness and creativity. But most of all, we cooperate together.”

McCalmont says the last trip to Syria and Lebanon brought together

LEARN MORE

To learn more about World Mission-related networks, visit pcusa.org/missionnetworks or contact Equipping for Mission Involvement in Presbyterian World Mission: ellen.sherby@pcusa.org or 1-800-728-7228, ext. 5612. Find resources for mission committees, short-term mission trips, mission partnerships, and more at pcusa.org/missionresources. Learn more about mission co-workers, where they serve, and how to support them by visiting pcusa.org/missionconnections.

not just people of different cultures, but also people within the same cultures, even the same church, with very different views on the issues that are troubling the church in the United States. As the trip went on, they came together out of a joint concern for the brothers and sisters in Syria and Lebanon.

“We were actually able to assist and come alongside them at a time when they’re looking at life-and-death issues,” he says.

Joseph Kassab, general secretary of the National Evangelical Synod of Syria and Lebanon and network partner, says the relationships are meaningful both during times of crisis and times of peace.

“It’s a channel where we can live and deepen our common faith and heritage,” Kassab says. “Our partners know the situation and the challenges of our church.”

Multidimensional networking

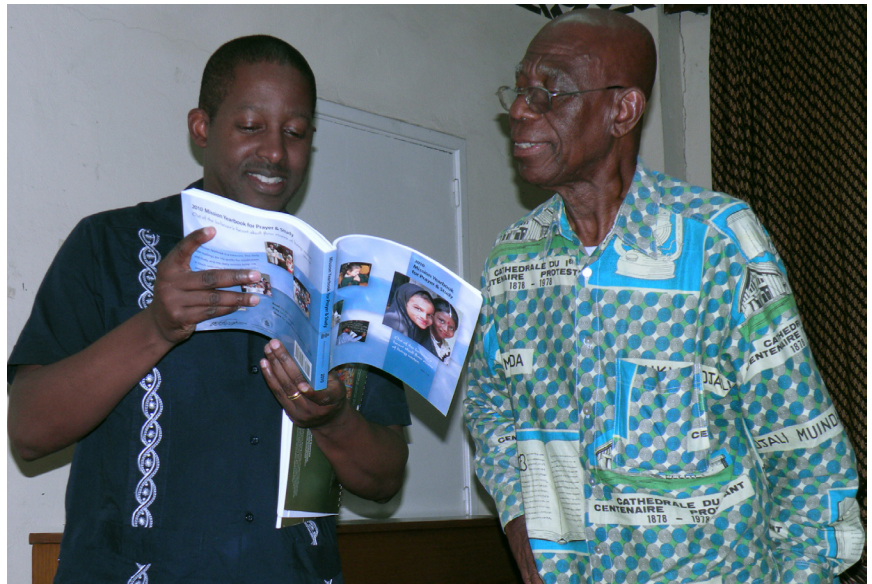
PC(USA) congregations and presbyteries lead World Mission-related networks. However, many of the networks are open to organizations or friends of the church who have the same passion for mission.

“Our Syria Lebanon Partnership Network is open to members and friends of the PC(USA) who support the goals and the vision that we have,” says McCalmont. “It also includes affiliates, other Christian groups, or even people of other faiths that support our mission.” Affiliate members have a voice but no vote in network meetings.

Networks can also learn a lot from one another. White, of the Congo Mission Network, encourages participants to participate in more than one mission network to get ideas. She calls it cross-pollination.

“Some of the best ideas I’ve gotten for the Congo Mission Network I’ve taken from the Kenya Mission Network,” White says.

Networking in mission expands what it means to be the connectional



Byron Wade makes connections on a World Mission/Presbyterian Women trip to the Congo.

church. Networks demonstrate the kind of breadth and depth of ministry that can be accomplished by going outside the walls of one church or presbytery.

Ellen Sherby is the coordinator of Equipping for Mission Involvement in Presbyterian

World Mission through the Presbyterian Mission Agency in Louisville, Kentucky. She served in Nicaragua for 11 years, nine of those as a PC(USA) mission co-worker with the Nicaraguan Council of Evangelical Churches, mostly working with short-term mission trips and partnership groups.

SNAPSHOTS OF NETWORKS MENTIONED IN THIS ARTICLE

The Congo Mission Network focuses its shared work on development, education, evangelism, healthcare, and advocacy issues related to US foreign policy and corporate practice in the Congo. It has three loosely formed subcommittees: one focused on education, another on advocacy issues, and a third on preventive and curative healthcare. Build Congo Schools focuses on building durable schools, providing resources and training for teachers, and improving girls’ enrollment and retention. Learn more at buildcongoschools.org.

The Cuba Partners Network makes the current priorities articulated by the Cuban church a centerpiece of each annual meeting. The network’s

member churches and mid councils have pledged to support partner projects and PC(USA) mission co-workers. Prayer, tangible support to churches and members in need, and work on Cuban-US advocacy issues are also important.

The Syria Lebanon Partnership Network focuses on mutual prayer, listening to and learning from one another, advocacy and awareness-raising, and fundraising for partner projects and PC(USA) workers in the region. An emerging network focus is on providing education to Syrian children in refugee camps and on connecting with and supporting Syrian and Iraqi refugees in the United States upon their arrival.