

Blessed and challenged as partners in Christ

A United States and a Beninese perspective

In 2003, Waterford Mennonite Church (WMC) entered into a formal partnership with Benin Bible Institute (BBI), located in Cotonou, Benin. We are now in the fifteenth year of this partnership, which involves regular exchanges of people and prayers, and significant financial support from Waterford.

Neil Amstutz

I arrived as new pastoral team leader in the second partnership year, but already it was on strong footing.

My predecessor in my Waterford pastoral role, Joe Miller, was gracious enough to share some of his reflections about the beginnings of the partnership. He wrote:

- 1. We didn't create this possibility. It was a gift of the Holy Spirit using existing relationships. God was at work long before we thought of this possibility. Our part was recognizing and exploring the potential.*
- 2. As a congregation we were committed to not doing a partnership on our own. We very much wanted Mennonite Mission Network to walk with us and to serve as a counselor and mentor. We also agreed with MMN and BBI that MMN would address the financial support we offered as a congregation. That kept MMN as a place to ask hard questions about money.*
- 3. Along with the leaders of BBI, we acknowledged the imbalance of financial resources. Together we agreed that Waterford would cover most of the costs, but we also agreed to keep attentive to not allowing this to take away the true partnership.*
- 4. We also knew our African partners were wealthy spiritually and we North Americans were in need of them sharing*

their spiritual wealth. Of the two, we recognized that we were the poorer partner!

For fifteen years now, we have had the pleasure of hosting thirteen men and three women from Benin—BBI graduates, faculty, administrators, and board members. In the fall of 2018, three more guests will strengthen the

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partnership with us by coming to Goshen. At least thirty Waterford people have also had the chance to visit BBI in person. What follows is a brief attempt to summarize some blessings and some challenges our congregation has experienced through this partnership.

What blessings has this global partnership provided for Waterford?

First are some general blessings related to broader awareness of the global church. The BBI partnership has put the small country of Benin on the map for Waterford attenders. Because all the BBI constituent churches are evangelic-

al, and none of them are Mennonite, the partnership has increased our awareness of and appreciation for some global church bodies that are not Mennonite. In addition, the regular cycle of delegations coming from and going to Benin disrupts our North American assumption that the church as we know it really is *the* church.

Other blessings are particular to our congregation and to BBI and the Beninese context. The experience of people praying together aloud simultaneously and enthusiastically has made us more expressive in our oral prayers, or at least given us a greater tolerance for such expressiveness. We have also been blessed with the gift of greater openness to the language of spiritual powers and spiritual warfare. Another blessing has come through being challenged to greater dependence on the Holy Spirit, and to live less by the clock. And new biblical insights have come in seeing texts through the eyes of African sisters and brothers.

More and more people within the congregation have personal BBI connections. Some have visited Benin, and others have been lodging or meal hosts here in the United States. From these guest and host encounters, unforgettable relationships have developed with Beninese church leaders. They have left with us indelible impressions that are greater than

any theological lessons we have learned from them. Sometimes there have been unexpected missional serendipities as one set of experiences has an unforeseen impact on another. Our congregation also supports the work of Jerrell and Jane Ross Richer with Indigenous Christians through MMN in Ecuador. Because of that relationship, we began to explore the possibility of connecting established Beninese Christians with struggling Indigenous Ecuadorian believers, for some South-to-South resourcing.

With blessings in global partnerships also come challenges. Over time, questions arise out of in-house competition for resources, including money and energy. People wonder what our investment in this partnership is really “buying” us. They ask, What else could we be doing for God’s



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kingdom with all that money? Also, over time we may be lulled into what I call a global awareness complacency: we feel good, perhaps even a bit smug, about our congregation’s global engagement, and we risk having our responsiveness and our openness to transformation replaced by a sense of self-righteous sufficiency about our level of global awareness. Alternatively, our global awareness can morph into paralyzing guilt about our many privileges in the world.

Language barriers are not easily overcome when the lingua franca of the partner’s country is not widely spoken in our own congregation or locality. Long-term sustainability can also be a challenge, particularly when the experiences, giftedness, and language skills of one or two persons among us become central. We also face temptations related to hidden forms of racism and/or colonialism: We may cut corners in our communication patterns with our partners, for the sake of supposed efficiency. Or we may fail to test assumptions we make, in decisions that will affect partners. We may attach new conditions or expectations to new donations. And we may fail to see instances of our own limitations and neediness, and fail to ask for counsel from our partners.

A good problem to have in the long term is the challenge related to knowing when and how far to push boundaries of mutuality with partners. For example, when do we simply receive gratefully the reports of our partners’ strategic visioning processes, and when do we humbly suggest

possible blind spots in those processes, which we hope we have earned the right to name, in Christian love? In a complex world of diverse support networks and funding sources, how do we navigate our relationship? How do we avoid making our international partners curry favor with other partner congregations and nongovernmental organizations?

Bruno Gansa

Our partnership with Waterford Mennonite Church helps us to have a truly excellent curriculum at Benin Bible Institute.¹

Seeing how Christian faith is lived out in another context gives us an expanded knowledge of the Bible. The Bible tells us that without knowledge we cannot please God. In addition to knowledge, we learn practical aspects of how to live our Christian life. We learn principles of how to lead our churches more effectively. Rather than seeing disagreements as something undesirable, we learn how to manage conflicts and how to grow stronger and more Christ-like *because of* dissent in our congregations.

For those of us who are married, we learn how to better relate to our spouses. Those who are not yet married learn what to look for in a partner that will help them to live together as a team really able to do God's will.

What is really special about Benin Bible Institute is that we go beyond just training evangelists and pastors. With our agro-pastoral program we offer an education that prepares people for all aspects of life.² This program teaches our church leaders ways to feed their families and to be more self-sufficient. We expand the resources available to our pastors. We no longer have problems without solutions. Together, we find solutions to our problems.

The partnership with Waterford broadens our horizons with ideas about new ways that congregations can bless their members. Because we collaborate with Waterford, we learn new ways of collaborating among different denominations here in Benin.

On a personal level, my visit to Waterford church showed me what love in action looks like. I learned new ways to show Jesus's love to other people. In the United States, I learned how to lessen the boundaries built between social classes. I re-examined many of our taboos, such as ones

1 Visit the Institut Biblique du Bénin website at <https://institutbb.wordpress.com/>.

2 Lynda Hollinger-Janzen, "Tending Mind, Body and Spirit," Mennonite Mission Network, February 25, 2015, accessed July 12, 2018, <https://www.mennonitemission.net/blog/>.

about who can eat with whom. In the United States, 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.

Living in the homes of Waterford members, I also learned about how God wants me to live with my wife. I saw how husbands and wives help each other. Jesus's love also breaks down the distinct lines between husbands and wives.



Even rich people in America work with their hands. I was so impressed with people's gardens where they grow their own fruits and vegetables. When I came home, I planted vegetables in my flower beds. My wife and I enjoy talking together in the evening when we water our plants.

Even the rich people in America work with their hands. I was so impressed with people's gardens where they grow their own fruits and vegetables. When I came home, I planted vegetables in my flower beds. Now my wife and I enjoy talking together in the evenings when we water our plants.

Because of this partnership, we have people in the United States praying for us every day.

Over the years, this partnership grows deeper and more meaningful. No one is labeled "giver" or "receiver." We

all give and receive. This partnership gives us so much and helps us live for Christ. I want to start a club of all the Benin Bible Institute people who have had the opportunity to travel to Waterford, so that we can keep reminding each other of what we learned through the partnership and find ways to implement that in our churches here in Benin. This partnership helps us progress further in God's will.

About the authors

Neil B. Amstutz is pastoral team leader at Waterford Mennonite Church, Goshen, Indiana, which since 2003 has had a formal partnership with Benin Bible Institute, arranged through Mennonite Mission Network. This partnership includes mutual exchanges of people in the USA and Benin, in alternating years. Neil was in Benin on one of these visits in 2006. Bruno O. Gansa is a retired public school inspector and served on the BBI board of directors when he visited Waterford in 2013 as part of a BBI delegation. He wrote these reflections (translated by Lynda Hollinger-Janzen) a year after his visit to the United States. Gansa's reflections were first published by Mennonite Mission Network on August 13, 2014.