

# A mutual reach beyond the oceans

## Reflecting on mission 'sending' and 'receiving' in the life of the church

Raafat L. Zaki

Since 1984, the Mission to the U.S.A. (MUSA) program has connected the Synod of the Covenant in Michigan and Ohio with international clergy and lay leaders through fellowship, hospitality, mutual sharing and awareness. MUSA, which was initially co-sponsored by the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) for about two decades, has helped each mission partner break down cultural barriers and truly become brothers and sisters in Christ.

As Presbyterians, we affirm the unity of the church and the oneness of the global community of faith. We celebrate that over the centuries the gospel has spread from Palestine to the ends of the earth, arriving in North America through Africa, Asia, Europe and Latin America. Given the history of missionary efforts, many Presbyterians tend to underestimate the interdependent nature of mission and our commitment to doing mission in mutuality and partnership. The mission of the church thrives on continuous exchange and is nurtured by active involvement and intentional fellowship and hospitality.

The Synod of the Covenant's MUSA program affords congregations and presbyteries the invaluable opportunity to host and share fellowship with international mission partners (IMPs). Hence, in addition to sharing the gospel through sending mission co-workers and funding mission locally and globally, congregations can also nurture mission locally by experiencing the gospel as a mission field. The sending church is equally a receiving church.

The Synod of the Covenant's MUSA program is a reverse mission based on the interdependent nature of mission. Through MUSA, the synod helps facilitate the listening to and discernment of God's call beyond the obvious institutional or organizational needs. Anxiety and divisions often prevail when the church is focused inwardly and distracted by the ego, property/building and resources. However, mission thrives where the church addresses human suffering, violence and injustice in society; that is, where congregations are focused outwardly, serving community and neighborhood, which are often impacted by global realities. The objectives include fellowship, hospitality, awareness and mutual transformation.

Since the MUSA program's inception, the Synod of the Covenant has committed to improving and developing this missional and experiential program. For more than three decades, we have recognized that we have much more to learn and to accomplish. The program originally started by sending delegations from the synod to visit churches overseas, but soon we realized the limited impact of only sending mission co-workers and visiting delegations. Though it is essential to send co-workers and other church representatives to serve and visit with partner churches, we have come to also value and appreciate receiving international mission partners to visit with one congregation for the duration of their service in order to maximize the impact of fellowship. We have also come to appreciate the reverse-mission aspect



Synod of the Covenant

Dr. Leonard Chrysostomos Epafras, an international mission partner from Indonesia, speaks during the seminar on Indonesia and Christian-Muslim relations at the synod assembly.

of the program, whereby the church that was previously known for sending out missionaries has become, and in fact has always been, a mission field. The church cannot grow mission and develop partnerships in a one-way direction — welcoming missionaries by the sending church is also critical to the health of the church and continuity of mission both locally and globally.

Transformation requires multiple and ongoing encounters and conversations in an atmosphere of genuine hospitality. Originally, the program was designed for six weeks, and was later reduced to four, but it was recently reduced to three weeks due to practical challenges.

In 2013 MUSA began focusing on themes and regions, beginning with the Confession of Belhar and South Africa. This was followed by a focus on the Middle East (2014–16). Currently, the focus is on Christian-Muslim relations (2017–19).

We are still listening, learning and practicing. Every year we start and close the program with orientation and debriefing sessions, and every year participating congregations and synod commissioners are blessed by these encounters, and by intentional fellowship and genuine hospitality.

### What does it take?

It takes commitment as well as time, effort and resources to build and nurture healthy relationships to bridge cultures, and to interpret the context of the gospel even among members of one body of Christ. We knowingly but prudently take many risks and do much planning and preparation in order to repent, reconcile and journey in unity as disciples of Jesus.

IMPs itinerate with one or two congregations and are hosted by one or more church families. This helps cultivate discipleship and hospitality, as well as the application of genuine fellowship, despite the cultural and socioeconomic diversity of the global church.

The demonstration of genuine love and teachings of Jesus enrich congregations, mid councils, disciples and the global church. These concrete visits and encounters also transform our awareness and widen our horizons as we journey together across oceans and beyond political borders, and cultural and socioeconomic boundaries. Given the history of violence and militarism by the U.S. and the unjust interdependency of war and trade, the church must demonstrate peaceful alternatives to war and greed and continue to witness to the hope in Jesus Christ for a lasting, just peace.\*

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*The Rev. Raafat L. Zaki is synod executive of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)'s Synod of the Covenant, which includes 11 presbyteries and nearly 700 congregations, mostly in Michigan and Ohio.*



Mission to the U.S.A. (MUSA)

The Rev. Dr. Jozef Hehanussa, an international mission partner from Yogyakarta, Indonesia, who was hosted by First Presbyterian Church of Tecumseh in Michigan, adds his country to an image of the world painted by a member of the congregation.

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