



EXTENDING BEYOND

Being present on the journey

By Marisa Smucker, executive director



As I write this, it's February, and I am eagerly preparing to assist with Menonite Mission Network's next Civil Rights Just Peace Pilgrimage, alongside members of the Indiana-Michigan Menonite Conference. This marks my first Just Peace Pilgrimage, and I am glad to be doing so with individuals from my home conference. As I prepare for this trip mentally, physically and spiritually, I am reminded of the 2022 Youth Venture trip I co-led with Arloa Bontrager, Mission Network's North America regional director for short-term programs.

That trip focused on immigration, in partnership with Menonite Central Committee. We were hosted by Shalom Menonite Fellowship,

which supports a Menonite Voluntary Service unit in Tucson, Arizona. Our group included two leaders and approximately 10 teenagers and young adults from Ohio, Pennsylvania, Texas and West Virginia. That trip was more like a pilgrimage, with participants feeling a wide range of reactions and emotions from disbelief and anger to laughter and compassion, as we learned about the realities of those seeking to cross the border from Mexico to the U.S. It was a life-changing experience for all of us, so much so that one of the participants donated all his clothes from his suitcase to one of the agencies we visited. We left with questions like:

- What now?
- What more can, or should, we do?
- How can we make a difference in our own contexts?

"Pilgrimage is a posture very different than mission. The goal of a pilgrim is not to solve but to search, not so much to help as to be present."

— *Reconciling All Things*, by Emmanuel Katongole and Chris Rice, 2008.

The Youth Venture 2022 Borderlands tour group stands at the border wall in Arizona. The group included Katherine Smith, Arloa Bontrager, Jabbar Thompson, Abby Nissley, Jackeline Fernandez Lambert, Isieny Calderon Miranda, Bethany Saravia, Jeifany Estrada, Shyane Strader, Luther Ser, Collin Pierce, Danilo Sanchez, Than Oo, Marisa Smucker and Juan Pacheco Lozano. Photo provided.

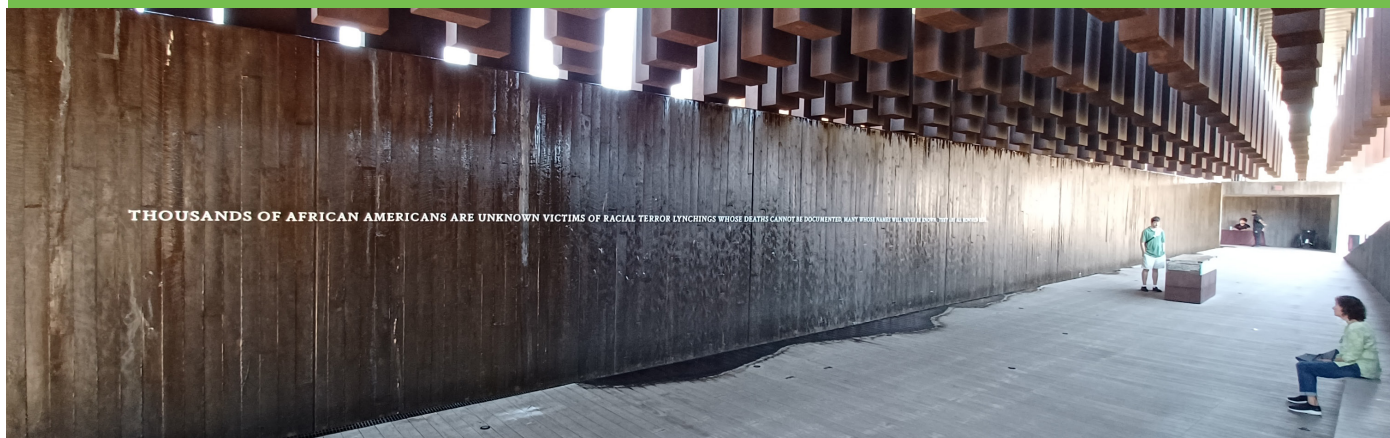
"Let us therefore make every effort to do what leads to peace and to mutual edification."

— Romans 14:19 (NIV)

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Just Peace Pilgrimage reminds couple to listen and learn



Top: The JPP participants listen to Anton Flores-Maisonet — in red shorts — during their time in Atlanta, Georgia. Bottom: Maribeth Kraybill takes a moment to sit and ponder the history of lynching in this country, during a visit to the National Memorial for Peace and Justice.

By Zachary Headings

“Mennonites, in particular, have this notion that they have to be useful,” said Art Stoltzfus, while discussing a Just Peace Pilgrimage that he and his wife, Meribeth Kraybill, attended. “We have to be able to fix something, to know the answers, to know what we can do,” he continued. “[These pilgrimages] help you realize you have to set that impulse aside.”

In 2022, Kraybill and Stoltzfus embarked on Chapter One of the Racial Justice Pilgrimage series, organized by Mennonite Mission Network. The pilgrimage took them across the southern United States, visiting historical sites that were significant to the Civil Rights Movement in Alabama, Georgia, Mississippi and Tennessee.

“One of the highlights, for me, was the individuals who helped us on this pilgrimage — [the local leaders] in the different cities [we visited],” Kraybill said. “They live [in those cities], and many of them grew up there. Hearing their own personal stories really impacted the experiences we had.”

In Atlanta, Georgia, Kraybill and Stoltzfus heard Anton Flores-Maisonet, of Casa Alterna, speak about the building of Atlanta’s Olympic Park during the 1990s. At that time, the city fast-tracked the immigration of thousands of people from Colombia, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras and Mexico, to act as cheap labor in the construction of the Olympic facilities.

“[Flores-Maisonet] did such a beautiful job of tying the history of civil rights to the history of immigration, particularly around the theme of labor,” Stoltzfus said.

The group visited the National Memorial for Peace and Justice, in Montgomery, Alabama, where more than 4,400 Black people who were lynched between 1877 and 1950 are remembered — their names are inscribed on more than 800 hanging steel monuments, each representing a county where at least one lynching took place during that period.

The Equal Justice Initiative (EJI) created replicas of each steel monument in the memorial, which lay in rows

around the monument, so representatives from each nation can claim their county's monument and use it to establish a memorial site in their homeland, as a way for communities to grapple with painful racial histories.

According to Dr. Gianluca De Fazio, associate professor at James Madison University, in Harrisonburg, Virginia, these monuments are not yet being given out, due to EJI still devising the proper procedure for claiming the pillars. However, Rockingham County — where Kraybill's and Stoltzfus' hometown of Harrisonburg, lies — has erected a monument in front of the county courthouse to remember Charlotte Harris, who was lynched in 1878, 13 miles southeast of Harrisonburg.

"What is powerful, to me, about the memorial is that it's not something that is just 'there,'" Kraybill said. "To have it connect back home shows how intentional [EJI] was in that project."

They said another significant moment from the pilgrimage occurred as they traveled from Montgomery to Selma, Alabama. Jake Williams, tour director of Montgomery Tours, who participated in the Selma to Montgomery marches of 1965 as a child, stopped the group's van near a small graveyard.

"He said, 'If you want to, you can stay in the van, or you can get out with me,'" Kraybill recalled. She said that Williams explained to them that some of his family members were buried in this place and that, originally, there had been very little in the way of grave markers, and so Williams had taken it upon himself to get markers to memorialize and honor his ancestors.

"It was meaningful to me that he invited us into something that was so personal and significant to him," Kraybill said. "In hearing his story, the place also became significant to us. We're honored to be a part of that."

Kraybill and Stoltzfus attended the pilgrimage with a group from Community Mennonite Church, their home congregation in Harrisonburg. They said they were both grateful to travel with people from their community. "When we returned home, we didn't feel alone," Kraybill said. "We could reflect on [what we had learned] together."

"This kind of learning, this kind of work, you don't do alone," Stoltzfus said. "You do it together. And you have to keep those relationships for the long run, otherwise you're not going to learn from the experiences you had together."

After hearing members from their church speak about the Civil Rights Pilgrimage, another group from Community Mennonite Church attended that pilgrimage in 2023. Additionally, a number of people from Community Mennonite Church who participated in the Civil Rights Pilgrimage in 2022 also traveled to South Africa for Chapter Two of the Racial Justice Just Peace Pilgrimage in 2024, including Kraybill and Stoltzfus. "One of the things that has been useful to me is this concept of 'pilgrimage,'" Kraybill said. "It frames [learning] in a different way. [As a pilgrim,] you engage with an openness to listen to stories and build relationships."

"We're not going to fix this on our own," Stoltzfus said. "We're not going to have all the answers, and it's going to make us uncomfortable. We have to be willing to sit in that space, to listen and learn." ■



Photo by Arloa Bontrager

Photo by Rene Hostetter

The 2022 Just Peace Pilgrimage group — Art Stoltzfus, Meribeth Kraybill, Betty Shenk, Rene Hostetter, Issac Witmer, Ruth Zimmerman, Keaton Shenk and Earl Zimmerman — stand in front of the Edmund Pettus Bridge, in Selma, Alabama. Right: Tour guide, Jake Williams, shares some of his family story with a Just Peace Pilgrimage group from Community Mennonite Church, in Harrisonburg, Virginia, as they toured Montgomery and Selma, Alabama.



Just Peace Pilgrimages offer opportunities to learn about what God is doing to bring about justice and peace in the world. You can support this program and others like it by visiting MennoniteMission.net/Donate!



Photo by Jennifer Murch



Photo by Andrew Suderman

2024 South Africa Just Peace Pilgrimage — Left: The group tours the Old Fort Prison Complex at Constitution Hill, learning about the historical figures who were held captive there, like Mahatma Gandhi and Nelson Mandela, among others. Right: The group experiences times of daily reflection on this trip. On this particular day, they are holding their morning Bible study outdoors, in front of Schoenstatt, the convent-run retreat center that the pilgrims are staying in in Cape Town.

Being present on the journey

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We didn't leave with answers but with a sense that we had just been on a journey, a pilgrimage.

This experience, among others, inspired Just Peace Pilgrimages. We learned that this journey together is crucial — a chance to listen, learn and be present with people. In September 2022, we launched our initial Just Peace Pilgrimages, focusing on racial justice through the Civil Rights Movement. In 2023, during the delegate session at MC USA's biennial convention, we shared more broadly about this program. To date, 13 groups have participated in Just Peace Pilgrimages, either focusing on racial justice or immigration. This spring, we are introducing our first Solidarity with Indigenous Peoples Pilgrimage.

I encourage you to consider how you might engage with these pilgrimages, whether you feel the call to participate or to support others in this opportunity to learn, grow and be transformed.

If you are feeling inspired to take the next step, please visit MennoniteMission.net/JustPeace. ■

Marisa Smucker

Marisa Smucker
Executive Director

www.MennoniteMission.net
Toll-free: 1-866-866-2872

Office locations:
Elkhart, Indiana
Newton, Kansas



Photo by Arloa Bontrager

Civil Rights Pilgrimage — Marisa Smucker joined members of the Indiana-Michigan Mennonite Conference staff on a civil rights pilgrimage. Back row: Marisa Smucker, Mary Kauffmann-Kennel, Rolando Sosa, Leighton Miller and Sandy Hostetler. Front row: Elizabeth Gingerich, David Janzen, Joanne Gallardo, Selma tour guide Kirk Carrington, Pat Massinari and Arlin Hunsberger

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