

14 Mennonite Brethren Women in Mission

Doug Heidebrecht (*compiler*)

The stories of Mennonite Brethren women in mission are rich and varied. These stories are about people who not only heard God's call but responded with a willingness to serve despite tremendous sacrifice and hardship. The following stories were originally published in the Profiles of Mennonite Faith series and are used by permission from the Mennonite Brethren Historical Commission. See www.mbhistory.org for the complete collection of *Profiles of Mennonite Faith*.

United States of America

Magdalena Hergert Becker (1878-1938)

(by *Luetta Reimer*)¹

Through the dark night two figures scurried toward the house. The man carried a lantern slightly ahead of the woman, who clutched a small bundle, a seriously ill Native American child. After three days of patient and loving care, the child died in the arms of the reservation's "mother," Magdalena Becker.



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**Magdalena Becker, center front row,
A.J. Becker, second left back row**

Preparations began immediately for the child's funeral. Magdalena's husband, Abraham Jacob (A. J.) Becker, went to his shop to build a tiny wooden casket. Magdalena prepared the body for burial. Together they padded the coffin, lining it with soft white cloth. Magdalena worked late into the night, beautifying the little box with a border of fringe. While she worked, she heard the traditional Native American mourning – a haunting wail that expressed the depth of their sorrow. Magdalena tried to comfort them with assurances of God's love. Some believed in Jesus, but many found it hard to give up their traditional fears of death.

The family of the child sat weeping while the Beckers told them of eternal life, and wept again as they viewed the body. Finally the time for tears was past. As was their custom, members of the immediate family dried each other's tears. Each became instantly silent, and the mourners moved to the cemetery. When the coffin was lowered into the grave, several of the women took off their beautiful shawls, draping them over the box. This custom was a token of love and respect for the dead.

The reservation women were willing to give sacrificially to honor the dead, but Magdalena Becker gave sacrificially to help the living. Magdalena and A. J. had come to the Post Oak Mission in 1902. This first Mennonite Brethren "foreign mission field," though located in Oklahoma, was begun in 1896 when Henry and Elizabeth Kohfeld moved to the Post Oak station. During her 37 years at Post Oak Magdalena participated in more than six hundred funerals. She taught first aid, hygiene, sewing, and cooking to the Native American women. For 28 years she also served as a Field Matron for the Indian Service of the United States government, clarifying land ownership, keeping records of government allotments, negotiating rental contracts and distributing government checks. As a government agent she was permitted to

promote Christian practices because the government thought it would contribute to Americanizing the Native peoples.

But Magdalena never lost sight of her first calling – to share the message of salvation. Discouragement came often. From the establishment of the mission in 1894 until 1907, not a single Native American had chosen to openly identify as being a Christian.

Each year the Comanches from the reservation territory camped at Pesenadama, or “Rotten Village,” for a month-long government payday. The Beckers packed supplies and followed, setting up a tent for gospel meetings. Unfortunately, interest was low, and there was no response to the call of Christ.

Magdalena missed the three small sons she had left at Post Oak; she was physically and emotionally exhausted. One day she quit trying to restrain herself and went into the woods near the camp to cry. “Why are you crying?” asked Wi-e-puh, a curious woman who had quietly followed her. Surprised by the question, Magdalena spoke from her heart. “I would not care about how we suffer, but your Indian people are trampling my God with their feet; they do not want to be saved.”

The Psalmist says that “he who goes out weeping, carrying seed to sow, will return with songs of joy, carrying sheaves with him” (Psalm 126:6). Magdalena undoubtedly knew the verse, but she probably did not expect the dramatic fulfillment of God’s promise that night.

It had been a simple tent meeting, with A. J. Becker sharing the story of Christ so clearly that a child could understand. Magdalena sat near the front silently praying for evidence of God’s power. When the audience was invited to come forward for prayer, she was overcome by the large group that knelt near the altar. One or two persons accepted Christ and were baptized each day from that evening until the end of camp. God’s promise had been fulfilled. A Comanche Mennonite Brethren Church had been born!

In 1938 when Magdalena Becker became ill a group of Comanches maintained a constant vigil on the hospital grounds. Following her death, local newspapers reported that over 1200 persons attended services in her honor. The inscription on Magdalena Becker’s gravestone is a beautiful and accurate description of her life:

*Who at all times and every place
gave her strength to the weak,
her sympathy to the suffering,
her substance to the poor,
and her heart to God.*

India

Katharina Schellenberg (1879-1945)

(by Neoma Jantz)²

Dr. Katharina Schellenberg looked about helplessly. Where could they find room for yet another patient? But the Muslim who had brought his critically ill wife to the Mennonite Brethren hospital in Shamshabad was persistent. "If she doesn't recover under your care, then let her die under your care." She stayed.

The trust in the doctor was no surprise: the small foreigner had already spent twenty years in India taking in the ill of all castes and working medical wonders. The ill woman probably noticed that the first person up in the morning to check her was the doctor, and she was the last to make the rounds at night. The patient probably didn't realize how unusual it was for a woman doctor to have been sent abroad by a small denomination as early as 1907.

Katharina Schellenberg was born in the small village of Tiegerweide in South Russia. As a young child she was uprooted as her family moved to North America. Katharina was only fourteen when her mother died and she had to assume care for three brothers and three sisters. Her father, Elder Abraham Schellenberg, more than any other single figure, shaped the Mennonite Brethren church during its first decades in North America. The Elder's world was large. He resided in Kansas, kept in contact with Mennonites in Russia and nourished a new generation that would take up mission posts around the world.

At the age of nineteen Katharina made her first commitment to Christ and joined the Buhler (Kansas) Mennonite Brethren Church. As a young adult she worked in an orphanage and then in two hospitals. When she volunteered for missions she was advised to take a four-year homeopathic medical course. She completed the course before leaving for India in 1907. On the eve of her departure she remarked to a friend that "a woman who goes to the foreign field by herself should be very sure."

It was that sureness that sustained her in very difficult circumstances. Katharina worked as the only American medical doctor in the India Mennonite Brethren mission territory from 1907 to her death in 1945. During those thirty-eight years she took only two furloughs, in 1914 and 1923. For the first twenty years she worked in several locations demonstrating to Indians that the medicines could be trusted. The task was far from easy. In 1917 she wrote her father that "the problems are so severe that one can hardly stand it, and one does not know where it will end. But God sees and knows all, and He can change things!"

With the 1928 completion of a hospital in Shamshabad, she had a more permanent home. During the first year the hospital was open 8,519 patients were treated. They came with all kinds of illnesses, some having waited too long to be helped. Often she worked a seven-day week, making do with limited equipment and medicines.



**Dr. Schellenberg at left with patient.
Photograph from the Center for MB Studies, Fresno.**

Since much sickness was related to poor living conditions or hygiene, the doctor tried to stress clean water and adequate sewage. Many cultural differences regarding diet, medicines and methods of health care had to be negotiated. Perhaps her most grateful patients were Muslim women who would not be seen by a male, but could now be cared for by a woman.

Dr. Schellenberg's concern included the emotional and religious needs of her patients and staff. Each morning the hospital awoke to a devotional time for everyone in the facility. On Sunday afternoons the doctor would play her autoharp and sing with the patients. She joined in weekly meetings with co-workers and instructed them in things far beyond medicine.

Beside all of her medical work, Dr. Schellenberg took in homeless infants, supervised a girls' residence for five years, kept a fine fruit and flower garden, raised chickens, turkeys and milk cows and did some farming. She explained that these diversions were like a holiday and she therefore didn't need the annual rest trip to the hills that was customary for many missionaries.

On January 1, 1945, suddenly and without warning, her work was over. John L. Lohrenz, who presided at her memorial service wrote that "I have never been at a funeral where there has been so much weeping. . . . There was much sobbing and lamentation. Strong . . . men who had been helped through her ministry wept like children."

The inscription on the memorial stone in the St. George Cemetery at Hyderabad, India, accurately reflects the life of Katharina Schellenberg:

*She lived for Christ
She served others
She sacrificed herself*

China

Paulina Foote (1891-1968)

*(by Valerie Rempel)*³

When Paulina Foote was invited by the Mennonite Brethren Board of Foreign Missions to serve as a missionary teacher in China, she accepted the assignment as confirmation of her own sense of God's calling to serve in a foreign land. During the summer of 1922 she gathered her belongings and prepared to say good-bye to family and friends in Oklahoma. She was eager to go, but uncertain about what God was calling her to do. Her home church was preparing to put up a large tent for an ordination service and farewell festivities, but what would it mean for her to be ordained as a minister of the gospel?



Paulina Foote

Paulina recalled those days in her memoir, *God's Hand Over My Nineteen Years in China*. She wrote:

“The thought of an ordination gave me struggles. Women in our conference do not preach. Why should I be ordained if I could not proclaim the Gospel to those who had not heard it? Women were permitted to tell the Gospel to women and children. What if men would come to my women's and children's meetings? Should I stop proclaiming the Gospel message? Did not the men have a right to hear the Word of God? The church had asked Pastor Jacob Reimer of Bessie, Oklahoma, and Elder Johann Foth of the Ebenfeld Church . . . near Hillsboro, Kansas, to officiate at my ordination. Both were considered to be of the most conservative in the whole conference. What a surprise to me when Elder Foth in his sermon at the ordination proved with Scripture passages that women should preach. He spoke about Mary Magdalene, who had followed Christ to the cross, who also took note of the place where he was buried while the disciples left Him. Peter had even denied Him. She was the first of Christ's followers who was at the grave on the resurrection morning. She was the first to tell the greatest story of all stories that Christ had arisen from the dead. Christ Himself commanded her to carry the news to the disciples, the men, and to Peter who had failed Him. My problem about the ordination was solved. My later experience proved that this was of the Lord.”

Paulina Foote spent nineteen years in China preaching the good news of the resurrection. During the first few years she worked primarily as a teacher for the missionary children, but that changed when many of the missionaries were forced to leave their work. The political situation in those years was often difficult. When missionaries faced opposition from communist forces in 1927, she was one of three Mennonite Brethren women who stayed in China when other missionaries were evacuated. Even after the other missionaries returned, Paulina continued her work with the Chinese people. Paulina studied hard to learn the difficult Mandarin language so that she could teach and preach more effectively. She even adopted Chinese dress so that people would not be distracted by her Western clothes. As she traveled from village to village to conduct meetings, she would often ride on rickshaws or sit on top of a large wheelbarrow that held her supplies and bedroll. When Paulina and her companions, often a local Bible woman or evangelist, would arrive in a village, they would ask the children to let their parents know there was going to be a meeting. Then they would start singing. Men, women and children would gather to hear them tell the good news about Jesus. Paulina would ask them questions after her message to make sure that they understood what she was saying. Many people were converted in these meetings and many small churches were begun.

During World War II, the missionaries were caught in the turmoil between the opposing Japanese and Chinese armies. Many of them were put in detention camps. Paulina escaped capture, and for many months helped manage the mission affairs and wrote letters on behalf of the missionaries who were being held. Eventually she decided to go to a part of China where she would be safe. The trip was often difficult but she made it safely and began to work in the mission field there. When the soldiers threatened to disrupt this work, Paulina moved again. This trip took her eighty-three days as she moved through the countryside, trying to stay out of the way of the soldiers. Wherever she went, she found Christians willing to hide her and help her escape. In turn, she held meetings and encouraged people in their faith. God kept her safe and wherever she went, Paulina Foote faithfully preached the gospel message.

Democratic Republic of Congo

Anna Bartsch (1897-1989)

(by Elizabeth and David Giesbrecht)⁴

Three countries were home to Anna Bartsch. She was born in Ukraine, made Canada her adopted land, and served as a pioneer missionary in Congo. In her parents' household was a bookcase filled with volumes by the evangelists Spurgeon, Moody and Finney. Anna was an avid reader, occupying her mind with Scripture memorization as well as the literary masterpieces available to her. As a ten-year-old

girl she also discovered missionary magazines, through which she learned of the spiritual needs of people in distant lands. Her young mind could not have imagined that a tangled web of events would eventually land her in the heart of an emerging mission field.

Anna's hunger for knowledge led her to attend the Mennonite Brethren Bible School in Tschongraw, Crimea, where she studied with A. H. Unruh. However, the devastating civil unrest in Russia and growing concern for the family's safety convinced her father, Johann Funk, to consider emigration. Facing an uncertain future at best, thirty-year-old Anna fervently prayed for three requests – a passport to Canada, the possibility of continuing her Bible training, and a marriage partner.



Anne and Henry Bartsch, 1935 ⁵

Twenty-five days after leaving her homeland Anna found employment in Canada. The first fall in her new homeland she enrolled in the Winkler (Manitoba) Bible School. The following spring she received a marriage proposal from Henry Bartsch, an aspiring young preacher. Following their marriage in 1928, the young couple settled down to farming in Saskatchewan. During a church service they heard Aaron and Ernestine Janzen, veteran Congo missionaries, appeal for additional workers. The next day, feeling an irresistible call to ministry, the Bartsches knelt in their humble kitchen and committed themselves for missionary service.

In late fall 1930 Anna and Henry left Saskatchewan in their Model T Ford en route to Winnipeg before leaving for Congo. Nearing the Manitoba border they encountered a blinding snowstorm. When a policeman stopped and inquired about their destination in this kind of weather, Henry replied that they were off to Africa. The officer was baffled. "Well Mister," he responded sarcastically, "in that case you better keep driving. You've still got a long way to go."

By 1933, Anna together with her family, were finally at home in Bololo, Congo. In short order they established a church, a school, a farm and a medical clinic. Scarcely a year later the family received word from Ottawa that their Canadian passports were about to expire. The Bartsches considered three options: allowing their Canadian citizenship to lapse, thereby becoming stateless; ending their mission work and returning to Canada; or, for Henry to return alone in order to renew their citizenship. The family chose the latter, and so Henry started walking west on September 23, 1934.

Meanwhile, Anna continued with monumental courage not only parenting their growing family, but at the same time giving leadership to the mission work. Her days were filled with translation, music, church leadership, supervision of the school, medical work and nurturing her three children. During these difficult days she was often sustained by recalling the words of her beloved teacher, A. H. Unruh, "First work yourself to death, then pray yourself to life."

It was now almost a year since she had seen her husband. Her Congolese neighbors began to surmise that Henry had been unfaithful, or perhaps had even died. In any event, they felt that he would not be returning to Africa. How much longer could Anna hold out on her own? Three hundred and sixty days after setting out for Canada, a tired but jubilant Henry returned to his mission post with renewed citizenship papers in hand.

The demanding routine and difficult tropical climate took their toll on Anna's health. By 1937 she was so exhausted that a doctor advised urgent medical leave. He suspected that in her deteriorated condition, Anna had contracted cancer as well. Weary and disappointed, the entire family left for Canada.

In 1942, at the height of the Second World War, Henry returned to Africa upon request of the Canadian MB Conference. The understanding was that Anna and the four children were soon to follow. The Bartschs' support group in Winnipeg was busy raising funds and assisting with preparations for the long, arduous trip. Anna, however, was becoming increasingly uneasy about these plans. After yet another sleepless night she decided to cancel the trip. Her friends in the church community were stunned and disappointed. A few weeks later the *Sam-Sam*, the ship on which she and the children had been booked, was torpedoed by a German U-boat.

Anna never returned to Congo. But many years later she discovered from another missionary, Herman Lenzman, that in an unreached area the children were singing, "Jesus Loves Me." The local Congolese leader explained that Anna Bartsch had taught him this song. Anna was satisfied that she and her family been instrumental in pioneering Mennonite mission work in Africa. The seed that they had planted had grown and was beginning to bear a rich harvest.

Paraguay

Myrtle (1917-1996) and Robert (1921-1998) Unruh

(by Gerhard Ratzlaff)⁶

“Robert and Myrtle Unruh were the right people in the right place at the right time.” This is how the Mennonites in the Chaco of Paraguay sum up the 33 years of service that the Unruhs gave from 1951 to 1983. Their service has had a permanent impact on all the Mennonite colonies and churches in Paraguay.

The Unruhs came to the Chaco from the United States under the auspices of Mennonite Central Committee. They were graduates of Bethel College in North Newton, Kansas, and had grown up on farms in the Midwest – Robert in Montana and Myrtle in Kansas. Robert had a science degree and Myrtle had a degree in home economics. In the Chaco Robert served as the head of the agricultural experimental station and Myrtle as an expert in the areas of nutrition, family education and home economics.



Myrtle and Robert Unruh

Visitors to the Chaco today often marvel at the prosperity of the Mennonite settlements in a place once referred to as the “green hell.” Today, in this seemingly inhospitable steppe in the interior of Paraguay, the 15,000 residents of three Mennonite colonies produce half of Paraguay’s milk and dairy products and 90% of the peanuts for a country of approximately six million people. Thousands of beef cattle feed on well-maintained pastures. The Mennonites who raise beef cattle report with rightful pride that theirs is the tastiest and most nutritious beef in all of Paraguay. This beef is also popular on the world market. Today these agricultural products are the main source of income for the Mennonites in the Chaco.

This was not always the case. In the 1950s the Mennonite colonies in Paraguay experienced extreme poverty and agricultural production was barely enough to sustain their existence. A milking cow produced a mere liter of milk per day, whereas today cows typically produce at least 17 to 18 liters. Robert Unruh wrote in 1984 that in the 1950s it took five to six years to raise a cow to 400 or 500 kilos in the Chaco. Today less than half that time is required. In the 1950s farming was carried out exclusively with horses and manual labor. Today everything is mechanized.

These changes took place largely due to the efforts of Robert and Myrtle Unruh. On the agricultural experimental station set up by Mennonite Central Committee in the Fernheim colony, Robert conducted hundreds of experiments with many different types of grasses for grazing and in the process discovered buffalo grass. Originally from Africa, this grass was ideal for the hot, dry Chaco. He imported hundreds of different breeding calves to improve the local milk and beef varieties. He also pioneered developments in many other areas including field crops, fruit trees, vegetables, flowers and decorative bushes. In order to find help for these tasks, Robert worked closely with research institutes around the world. This was also the case in his fight against diseases and insects detrimental to plants and animals.

Myrtle Unruh's contributions and accomplishments lay in teaching high school, planning and building a school of household management (home economics) and working with native Indian women. She developed cooking classes and wrote a cookbook that remains popular to this day. Always a quiet reservoir of strength and ability, Myrtle developed her full potential in Paraguay. Her cousin described her as "a jewel waiting to be uncovered." In order to keep the memory of Myrtle's exemplary service in nutrition and family education alive, a monument was erected in her memory next to the school of household management after her death.

In all their work, Robert and Myrtle's guiding principle was to help the Mennonites to help themselves so that they in turn could assist others. Their exemplary attitude of Christian service had a positive effect on the churches and their mission as well as on the economic life of the Mennonite colonies. The Unruhs participated fully in the church. Robert sang in the choir, took part in Bible studies and was involved in the missionary settlement projects among the native Indians.

The Mennonites in the Chaco view the Unruhs not just as two Americans who helped the residents adapt to a strange land and climate, but as a sister and a brother in the Lord who gave their all in service to others. Edgar Stoez, who was their Mennonite Central Committee director said, "Bob and Myrtle Unruh deserved the word Christian – Little Christs (Acts 11:26c). With their humble spirit of selfless service, they exemplified what being a follower of Jesus is all about."

Due to health issues the Unruhs returned to the United States in 1983, earlier than they had anticipated. Myrtle died in 1996 and Robert in 1998.

Shortly after the Unruh's deaths the Paraguayan Mennonite paper, *Mennoblatt*, stated: "Robert and Myrtle Unruh will not be forgotten in the German settlements of the Chaco. They simply belong to us."

Notes

¹ Luetta Reimer, "Magdalena Hergert Becker (1878-1938)," *Profiles of Mennonite Faith*, no. 2, Winter 1998, www.mbhistory.org.

² Neoma Jantz, "Katharina Schellenberg: Continuously on Call," *Profiles of Mennonite Faith*, no. 7, Spring 1999, www.mbhistory.org. Adapted from Neoma Jantz, "Katharina L. Schellenberg," *Mennonite Brethren Herald* (June 22, 1984).

³ Valerie Rempel, "Paulina Foote: Under God's Hand," *Profiles of Mennonite Faith*, no. 21, Summer 2002, www.mbhistory.org.

⁴ Elizabeth and David Giesbrecht, "Anna Bartsch (1897-1989)," *Profiles of Mennonite Faith*, no. 9, Fall 1999, www.mbhistory.org. Based on Anna's autobiography, *The Hidden Hand*.

⁵ Photo taken from www.gameo.org. Used by permission.

⁶ Gerhard Ratzlaff, "Robert & Myrtle Unruh: Agra-missionaries," *Profiles of Mennonite Faith*, no. 38, Summer 2007, www.mbhistory.org. Translated by Linda Huebert Hecht.

Study Questions

1. What are some common character traits of the five women that are featured in this chapter?
2. As you consider the journey of faith and service of each of these women, what aspects of their lives can you identify with?
3. What are some of the obstacles that these women overcame to become heralded servants of God?
4. Did the stories of these women remind you of similar women that you know personally? If you are in a group, share these contemporary stories together.