

Invitation for All: Black Latina American's Perspective on Missions

By Celmali Jaime

And there I was. In the midst of a trial, in Nairobi, Kenya, surrounded by women trying to figure out who I was, where I was from, and where I was going.

"I'm American," I insisted. "Really." But it was to no avail. They peered into my eyes. Searched thoroughly through my accent. "Yes, but where are you from?" They were skeptical. "New York," I responded. They ran their fingers through my hair. Still they were unconvinced. "You are not American," they concluded. They had gathered overwhelming evidence. "You are African, like us. You are Black."

It is not everyday that this happens when you're trying to buy fruit along the road. But this was a typical occurrence during my time in Kenya. In 2009, I signed up to a year of service work through Mennonite Central Committee's SALT Program. SALT means "Serving And Learning Together," and learn, I did. There I was wrestling with my preconceived notions of the motherland and falling face first into an identity crisis. By no means did I fit easily into Kenyans concept of an American either. The path of learning was a two way street. People of color are

critically underrepresented in overseas missions. This is unfortunate, but I am honored to be one of the few. I've tried to find an answer to the simple



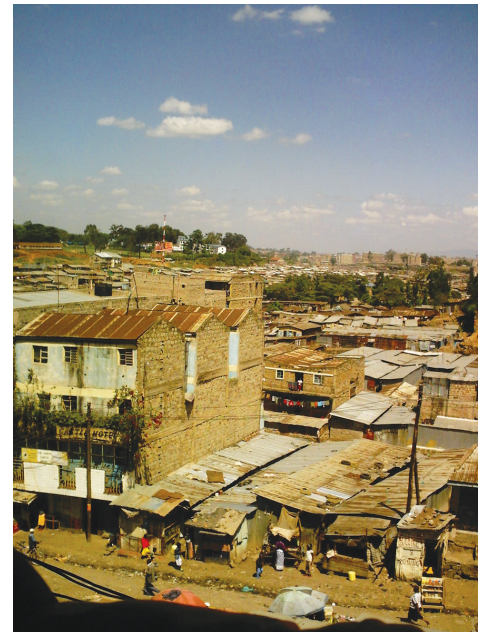
Celmali Jaime handing out pencils during a back to school celebration

question of "why?" but it is far from easy. One thing I can assure is that traveling to Africa as Black Latina American was definitely a cathartic experience. It was one of the toughest, and most rewarding experiences of my life.

I've been back to Kenya and several African countries since then. I continue my work in the slums of Nairobi, teaching arts and English language. When I am not in Kenya, I teach in New York City. My students ask me, "Are you from Africa?" I laugh inside. They are so much like the Kenyan women in the marketplace. If they only knew...

I encourage anyone looking for an opportunity to be used by God to look into missions work outside of their own culture. Be advised though, you will be stretched. For people of color however, the encouragement is twice as strong. It is an opportunity for amazing internal work on identity, race relations, self-awareness and healing. I have no regrets for opening myself to such a vulnerable experience. And so the invitation is for all. The next time I find myself in Africa, being asked "Why don't more of our brothers and sisters come along?" I can confidently respond, "They are on their way."

Celmali Jaime is a teaching artist and performance poet from Bronx, NY. She teaches theater and poetry in slums, schools, prisons, shelters, and ghettos across the United States, Latin America, and Africa. Her powerful performances include Whachagonnadu?, which toured extensively in the U.S., and Murdered Dreams & Ice Cream, hosted at the historical Freedom Theatre in Philadelphia. Her latest collection of poetry, 'She Sings in Swahili' showcases her time touring East Africa through an eclectic use of words and songs. Celmali Jaime earned her B.A. in Theatre Arts and Social Sciences from Stony Brook University, and her M.A. in Urban Studies and Arts in Transformation from Eastern University. For more information on Jaime's work, go to <http://she-speaks-poetry.blogspot.com/>.



Mathare Valley, Nairobi, Kenya where C. Jaime works

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Questions with Glen Guyton, Director of Finances & Convention Planning for Mennonite Church USA

The Director of Convention Planning role is still relatively new to Glen Guyton. He has a desire for the Mennonite Church USA convention experience to be one that is relevant to all in the church. Glen shares about his work and his hopes for the convention experience.

Share a little of your role as the Convention Director and your other role with Mennonite Church USA Executive Board Staff.

I jokingly say I am third in line to the throne. I am one of two associate executive directors for Mennonite Church USA. Marty Lehman is the other. We work very closely with the Executive Director, Ervin Stutzman. I work with our church budget, finances, the biennial convention, and information technology. Marty handles personnel, development, communications, and interaction with the agency CEOs. Having two associate executive directors frees Ervin up to provide more pastoral leadership and vision to the church, while Marty and I work with the nuts and bolts. We have a good team and Ervin makes sure that Marty and I know what is going on as he leads the church. So if, God forbid, anything ever happens to him, Marty and I can step in and keep the national church running until we find another Executive Director. I would pray that would happen pretty quickly.

When did you start with the convention office? August 2011 was when I took over the leadership of convention planning. I started working with convention during the Pittsburgh 2011 event. I was Rachel Swartzendruber Miller's supervisor. After Miller accepted the role of Vice President of Admissions for Hesston College and after her transition, I assumed her duties full-time. That also meant that Iris DeLeon Hartshorn took on my Intercultural Relations responsibilities. It was a good transition since I originally replaced Iris in the role. Iris and I are sort of playing job tag I guess you could say. I am just happy we have two people of color working on the cabinet. I think it provides good balance and Iris and I don't have to carry the full burden of trying to advance the anti-racism priority in the church.

Share a little about your passion and what you really like about your work. I have always loved working with finances and knowing what goes on behind the scenes in an organization, so this role fits me. I really like the variety of my work. Being the finance person I get to work with all parts of our Executive Board staff process. Like my mentor Bishop Francisco always says, "Salvation is free, but everything else costs." So I get to help the whole team think about their ministry priorities and how they fit into the overall budget.

Now the thing I am really passionate about is the youth convention. I am and always will be a youth pastor at heart. Being a part of helping young people develop spiritually just excites me. Planning worship and seeing the impact it has on youth is just an amazing thing.



Glen Guyton leading a Phoenix 2013 convention planning meeting.

Few African-Americans attend the convention. Some feel that it's not really relevant to their ministry. Share some values in attending. What would encourage African-Americans to attend? It saddens me that more African-Americans and other people of color don't attend convention. We really want to change that. We made some headway in Pittsburgh and we want to build on that in Phoenix. I am working with our seminar committee to make sure we have

relevant seminars. I am particularly excited about our urban ministry track which will be led by people who are successfully doing that work. We hope to have additional bible studies that will be geared more toward a style that will connect with African-Americans or those who are familiar with a more urban gospel experience. I personally plan to work with AAMA and the other Racial Ethnic groups to plan more relevant ministry opportunities for people of color in Phoenix. For our young people we are changing our schedule so that youth can attend the AAMA gathering and we are hosting a gathering for urban youth. We definitely are getting more intentional about networking opportunities for people of color. We want everyone to feel at home during convention.

If we want to shape the future church we have to show up and be present. I encourage people to email me with their ideas, hopes, and dreams for convention. I get a ton of suggestions from the dominant culture but not from African-American leaders. In fact I have many opportunities to speak in predominantly Anglo Mennonite congregations and hear from them, but I don't get many invites from our predominantly African/African-American congregations. Part of my job with Mennonite Church USA is to connect with congregations. I welcome more input from AAMA and its leaders. We want to have more African-American seminar leaders, youth musical/dance groups, and volunteers.

One final thing to note is that there are scholarships available, especially to youth and young adults. Just ask.

What are some highlights people can expect at the Phoenix convention? Some of the highlights will be the focus on public witness and the education seminars. Because of the debate around the Arizona law, a lot of effort has gone into making sure we pay attention to making people more aware of racism in our church. We will have extended learning blocks and more interactive training. I also think that AAMA churches will enjoy some of the new things we are trying for bible study. Many people enjoyed the People of Color dinner we had last year and we are hoping to build on that energy with some special worship options that will be offered during some of our seminar blocks. For our young people we are hoping to offer an evening at one of the local waterparks for a fun and cool activity. One thing we are doing differently is our joint worship. We will actually have two worship halls set up where youth and adults can worship together. We are calling it shared worship because we are featuring a more interactive use of technology where we will not only connect with participants in separate worship spaces, but we will connect via internet with people back home. If you are into twitter and facebook you will enjoy the many new ways you can interact with convention goes online.

Glen Guyton and his wife, Cyndi, serve as campus pastors of C3 - San Antonio in San Antonio, Texas, in addition to his role as an Associate Executive Director with Mennonite Church USA. Before his employment with Mennonite Church USA, Guyton served as a youth pastor for about 12 years.



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