

Side by side

Celebrating 20 years of the International Missions Association

By Richard Showalter



By 1995, the Holy Spirit had raised up more than half a dozen new circles of churches outside the United States through the witness of workers sent by Eastern Mennonite Missions (EMM).

At that time, there were more than 150,000 members in those churches, ten times the number of members in Lancaster Mennonite Conference (LMC). These circles of churches were located in East Africa, Latin America, and Asia.

As a mission agency of LMC and neighboring Mennonite groups, EMM had cultivated relationships with them since their beginning. A major gathering of these EMM-related churches was held at the Mennonite World Conference (MWC) in Winnipeg, Canada, in 1990.

EMM's new president (1994–2011), Richard Showalter, along with his spouse Jewel, began visiting these churches in 1995.

He observed that they had begun developing new mission agencies and strategies of their own. EMM had a lot to learn from them. Why not develop a global group of peers in mission based on their historic relationships?

As a result, the International Missions Association (IMA) was born on January 9, 1997, on the campus of the MWC assembly in Calcutta, India.

The founding members were the mission arm of the Meserete Kristos Church of Ethiopia; the mission board (PIPKA) of GKMI, one of the three Mennonite conferences in Indonesia; the mission leaders of Amor Viviente in Honduras; and EMM in the United States.

In Calcutta, these founding members envisioned themselves as “organized Anabaptist international mission efforts representing our respective circles of churches, desiring to pray for each other, learn from each other, and partner as God leads in cross-cultural missions to the unreached peoples of the world.”

They were excited. **This was not a North American mission board relating to the overseas churches it had planted. Rather, it was a peer group of Anabaptist mission leaders from four continents.**

The first IMA meeting was held six months later in Tegucigalpa, Honduras, in August 1997. LMC leaders Samuel Lopez, Ervin Stutzman, Keith Weaver, and Carlton Stambaugh accompanied EMM staff. Sixteen people came to Honduras from around the world.

Their major goal: to sit at the feet of Amor Viviente leaders and learn from them. These first IMA participants learned a lot about Amor Viviente church planting, discipleship training, and evangelistic outreach. This time of learning became known as a Global Mission Study Seminar (GMSS).

The purposes of the GMSS were:

1. as North Americans, to observe and learn firsthand from the Anabaptist churches of Latin America, Africa, and Asia.
2. as EMM, to help create an integrated framework for understanding the 21st century in missions.
3. as an international group, to underscore and explore our peer relationships in missions — north, south, east, and west.

Later that fall (November 1997), Richard Showalter, the IMA's president for the first fourteen years, described IMA's core convictions as **“prayer, dependence on the Spirit, the centrality of the Great Commission in our missions, and taking the good news to those who have not yet heard.”**

The following year (1998), the IMA traveled to Addis Ababa, Ethiopia. Again, the goal was to learn from the Ethiopian church, the largest Anabaptist circle of churches in the world. They vividly showed the importance of prayer and dependence on the Holy Spirit. IMA participants were awed by their rapid growth. It was the second GMSS.

The next IMA meeting was prevented by civil unrest in Indonesia, but in 2000 the participants made it to Indonesia and learned from PIPKA for the third GMSS. IMA members were amazed at their outreach in Muslim communities, and moved by their joy in celebration and hospitality. The IMA celebrated the 35th anniversary of PIPKA.

In 2001, the IMA came to Salunga, Pa., for the first meeting in the United States. Two new members were added — the mission arms of the Integrated Mennonite Church (IMC) of the Philippines, and the Tanzanian Mennonite Church (KMT) of Tanzania. EMM was the teacher for the fourth GMSS. The Twin Towers of the World Trade Center in New York City had just fallen, but EMM's mission partners from around the world got an inside peek into the inner workings of a visionary North American mission program.

By now the IMA was beginning to grow in numbers. From 16 international guests at the first meeting in Honduras and 20 at the second in Ethiopia, the group was rapidly expanding to 50–60 guests at the yearly meetings. The IMA decided to employ a coordinator.

Tilahun Beyene of Ethiopia became the IMA coordinator in 2002. He brought a world of new energy and focus to the gatherings.

The GMSS of the first four years became an annual Holy Spirit in Mission Conference in Ethiopia in 2003. Many sessions were, and continue to be, open to the public. These inspirational meetings, which include a day of prayer and fasting, have been high points of fellowship, networking, and personal commitment ever since.

“IMA energizes the church for mission wherever we meet,” said Tilahun. And the meetings continued

In Dar es Salaam, Tanzania, in 2002, at the end of a Tanzania-wide church-planting venture ...

In Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, in 2003, for the first Holy Spirit in Mission Conference and the beginning of weekend mission teams composed of IMA participants to surrounding ministry locations ...

In Tegucigalpa, Honduras, in 2004, celebrating Amor Viviente's 30th anniversary and hosted by both Honduras Mennonite Church and Amor Viviente ...

In Semarang and Jakarta, Indonesia, in 2005, celebrating PIPKA's 40th anniversary ...

In Lumban, the Philippines, in 2006, where the IMA enrolled in the “University of the Holy Spirit.” There were public rallies and a parade through town ...

In Bechterdissen, Germany, in 2007, hosted by Mennonite congregations; leaders were inspired by input from Chinese house church leaders ...

In Delhi, India, in 2008, in conjunction with a World Missions Institute missionary training ...

In Thika, Kenya, in 2010, in conjunction with the Multi-Nation Anabaptist Profile ...

In Sumatra, Indonesia, in 2011, where mission leaders experienced one of PIPKA's mission destinations ...

In Hawassa, Ethiopia, in 2012, with huge public rallies, a mobile mission school, and teaching on Islam ...

In Changi Cove, Singapore, in 2013, celebrating the 20th anniversary of Asia Pacific Mission, Ltd., and Bethany International University; Peter Xu from China and Muharrem Gunduz from Turkey spoke inspiring words ...

In Columbus, Ohio, in 2015, hosted by Rosedale Mennonite Missions ...

In Bonn, Germany, in 2016, hosted by the Free Evangelical Church, which was opening its arms to millions of new refugees ...

And in Salunga, Pa., in 2017, celebrating IMA's 20th anniversary with EMM.

For only three years of the past 20 was the IMA unable to meet — in 1999, because of civil unrest in Indonesia; in 2009, because of high costs in Israel; and in 2014, because of visa problems in Honduras.

IMA has served as a think tank and hotbed for mission vision, strategy, and practice since the beginning.

Guests from Kenya and Nepal visited the meetings, were inspired to begin mission programs back home, and later joined the IMA as members.

Kenya invited Ethiopian leaders to visit their country to teach on the Holy Spirit.

Indonesian Christians gave substantial financial gifts for ministry in partner churches at various times.

EMM invited a small group of IMA leaders to come to Salunga to audit and critique its programs, no holds barred.

A series of World Mission Institutes for missionary training were held in Africa and Asia, inspired and initiated by IMA partners.

Through the IMA family, lifelong international friendships have been formed and life-changing decisions have been made.

Yesaya Abdi of Indonesia became the second president of the IMA in 2010. The other current members of the Executive Committee are from Africa and Asia.

Perhaps the words of EMM Discipleship Ministries Director Keith Blank at the end of the first Ethiopia IMA meeting in 1998 best summarize the influence of the IMA: "Words could not express what we heard and learned during these three days. These leaders modeled humility, gentleness, boldness, passionate prayer, uncompromising reliance on the Holy Spirit, and much more. Our hearts were stirred to press in to God even more."

Tan Kok Beng, the extraordinary mission leader from Singapore who has trained and sent thousands of missionaries through Asia Pacific Mission, Ltd., once remarked, "**I have attended many international mission meetings, but I never quite felt I was accepted as a peer of the western leaders until I came to the IMA. Here we all stand side by side and shoulder to shoulder.**"

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