

# A Cooperative Sustainable School Garden for Peace

ELIZABET GEIJLVOET<sup>1</sup>

My name is Elizabet Geijlvoet. I am from the Netherlands. As I write this, I am sitting in a very small garden shed of a member of my church, surrounded by the lilac trees this village is famous for. I feel very blessed to work in the ministry of the Mennonite church here, the Doopsgezinde Gemeente (the Dutch Mennonite church). Besides being a minister of the Mennonite church in Aalsmeer, I am a mother of two children: Rojda and Hozan. The name of our daughter refers to sunrise and the goddess of spring, and followed by the hope of Newroz—the celebration of freedom and peace in Kurdistan. The name of our son refers to the singing of ballads, not only of pain and grief but also of hope and times of change, because a song can be stronger than any lethal weapon. I am also the wife of Kamal of the house of Khouja, a well-respected peace family in Afrin, Kurdish Syria.

I am telling you this because Syria is where I began my pilgrimage toward a “garden of peace.” The seed God planted in me was small, barely noticeable at first. It was the seed of the dream for a garden of peace. The dream was given to me by the same Spirit of God that gave us the dream of a land of justice and peace: the Promised Land. The same Spirit that carries in her the dream of the Garden of Eden, of a past wherein there was a natural communion of people, trees and plants, animals, the earth, and God.

## Old soil, fertilized to become—once more—the garden of paradise

Let me tell you about Kaxere, a little village in Syria in the north, at the border of Turkey. The inhabitants would say they are living in Kurdistan.<sup>2</sup> The Kurd-

---

<sup>1</sup> Elizabet Khouja Geijlvoet is Minister of the Mennonite Church of Aalsmeer the Netherlands and is married to a Kurdish Syrian refugee. Through visits to her husband's home village for the past 20 years, she has gotten to know the situation of the region and its lovely inhabitants, and her heart aches because of the war and the ecological situation there.

<sup>2</sup> If in 1916 the Middle East had been divided differently by the French and British in the Sykes Pico Agreement, there would have been a very large country called Kurdistan. As it is, the Kurds are now one of the world's largest peoples without a nation state.

ish people are very sociable; they respect all human beings in fellowship, live in close harmony with nature, and have a great love of nature. In this little village in Syrian Kurdistan, people used to grow olive trees, harvesting the olives and pressing them into olive oil. They also grew fruit trees, tended sheep and goats, and had some land for wheat and lentils and so on. Every household had a big kitchen garden.



***The author with her daughter in Syria.*** IMAGE PROVIDED.

Times changed, resulting in better and worse years, but overall there was always more than enough to eat. In the past decennia, however, the climate has changed, and for 15 to 20 years, there has been very little rain in this part of Syria. The rain that has fallen has been hard and has washed away the thin top layer of earth, causing further erosion by wind and rain. Following this, a drought burned the crops in the fields. The country has not been able to support all of the newly impoverished families, and the rural people have gone to the cities to live uprooted lives. Layered on top of these harsh realities is a political system that has excluded many people who were very active in the community, leaving them to live in fear and desolation. Unfortunately, this multi-layered humanitarian situation is not unique to Syria but is, rather, a recognizable worldwide problem.

Each time we've gone to the village of Kaxere, we have seen the effects of the situation worsen. With each passing year, people have grown more des-

perate. The young people have lost belief in a future that could hold a place for them, and their despair has led to their disinterest in everything that one would normally associate with life and prosperity.

Because of the youth's lack of interest, the knowledge of keeping kitchen gardens has nearly been lost. People have stopped growing food to sustain their bodies and families, and they no longer preserve food; they have stopped making pickles, syrups, and dried nuts and fruits. As a result, they've lost not only the feeling of being able to pay a tribute to their own future but also their trust in the life-bringing God—the trust and belief that what one sows will grow into something good in time. They only believe in their reality of grief and despair.

As I started thinking about these realities, I wondered how I could address this profound despair. How could I bring back a notion of hope and the courage to sow the seeds of faith in a life-bringing God? How could I sow the seeds of belief in a future of just peace?

## The Tools of the Mennonite Peace Tradition to Work the Garden of Peace

Our church in Aalsmeer has about 500 members and is one of the three biggest Mennonite Churches in Holland. The Doopsgezinde churches tend to be rather small, perhaps because of their ethical beliefs in the biblical message of nonviolence and restoration of all that is broken and wounded. Not everyone feels at ease with this mission of peace and nonviolence; this is true for those outside the churches as well as for many people inside the churches, even Mennonite churches. Quite often we can feel very ill-equipped for the big issues of climate change, wars far away and nearby, refugees and other immigrants, gender issues, and other hot topics we'd rather not burn our fingers on. Still, there are many brave Christians who want to answer the call for peace in their own human way.

We hold on to the belief that we have a call—for healing and binding and bringing together people in peace and justice. And we, the churches with this old peace tradition, call this *bringing people together in the healing presence of God*, who can be found amid his people, especially among the suffering. Here, I think of the words of the declaration in Kingston, Jamaica, of the Decade to Overcome Violence. There, the gathered peace workers spoke of the following:

We understand peace and peacemaking as an indispensable part of our common faith. Peace is inextricably related to the love, justice and freedom that God has granted to all human beings through Christ and the work of the Holy Spirit as a gift and vocation. It constitutes a pattern of life that reflects human participation in God's love for the world. The dynamic nature of peace as gift and vocation does not deny the existence of tensions, which form an intrinsic element of human relationships, but can alleviate

their destructive force by bringing justice and reconciliation.<sup>3</sup>

In the world outside the churches, we speak in more secular terms of addressing social and environmental issues, well-being, and inclusiveness in speaking and acting in our community. We want to be on speaking terms with others who likewise want to work on these issues. They usually don't speak the language of the churches, but we assume they understand the language of love and compassion, because we share our common ground of being part of humankind.



*The village of Kaxere.* IMAGE PROVIDED.

In the latest decennia in our church, we have tended to speak in terms of “just peace”—a term used by professor Fernando Enns, who lectures at our Mennonite Seminary in the Netherlands. Just peace calls to us from across the broad spectrum of life, bringing together the aspects of peace between people in the community (including people of different ethnic, cultural, and social backgrounds) and peace with creation. Through the idea of just peace with cre-

---

<sup>3</sup> World Council of Churches, “Glory to God and Peace on Earth: The Message of the International Ecumenical Peace Convocation,” Overcoming Violence: Churches Seeking Reconciliation and Peace, accessed February 7, 2018, <http://www.overcomingviolence.org/en/resources-dov/wcc-resources/documents/presentations-speeches-messages/iepc-message.html>.

ation, we can come to an understanding of what we need as human beings for our well-being and for wholeness in our communities and our world. Gardens of peace bind all these aspects of just peace together.

### Fertilizing the dream: gardening models

This dream of a garden in Syria has been fertilized by people I've met who are working with community and school gardens. First, I met Bert Ydema, who for decades has been the teacher of the school garden project of the city of Amsterdam where generations of children have had a little garden plot. He came to our church and told us about his gardens and how he educates city children about gardening, cultivating especially their sense of pride and feeling for nature.

Then I encountered others with visions for gardening. I saw a program on permaculture in Jordan by Geoff Lawton at the Jawaseri School Garden Project; the Mennonite Central Committee workers wanted to visit this farm and were thinking of projects like its school garden. In our own village in the Netherlands, a restaurant started a biological greenhouse project to grow their own vegetables, and a school there has a garden in it as well. I also met a Mennonite woman in nearby Utrecht who is a farmer and who, until last fall, had a big biological vegetable farm called *Groene kans*, "Green chance." The ecumenical council in our town started a food bank for people on welfare who depend on social aid, and the *voedselbank*, as we call it, has found a greenhouse to grow fresh vegetables for the food boxes. Many people who are dependent on the food boxes like to work as volunteers for what is called *OostOQgst*.

We nearly started a school garden in Kaxere, but then the war started. Despite this, I have learned a lot about garden projects, and I want to share some important aspects of these projects that can be used in future gardens in Syria.

### Peace Dreams for My School Garden in Syrian Kurdistan

How will this garden of peace in Syria grow? Although more than five years of war continues to tear the country apart, we are thinking of projects of restorative justice for the future. After the war, the feeling of despair will be even worse, and the damage of a war with a scorched-earth policy might even seem irreversible. For the sake of agriculture as well as for the people of Syria, we must consider how to bring back together neighbors who now are divided through questions of guilt and distrust and grief.

Projects of reconciliation will be needed, but the needs won't stop there. Projects will also be needed to address environmental issues, to build a new society with room for justice, peace, and the abundant grace of our loving God. Thus, I would like to sow a little seed in your hearts, too—the seed of a dream for gardens of peace for Syria.

When I think of peace restored for the kids, I first imagine a school garden like the project of Bert Ydema. I envision a schoolteacher taking the children out to a plot of ground where each of them have their own square meters to sow. And I hear the teacher telling the children about what plants need to grow, how the earth must be fertilized in a way that respects the needs of the earth and the people at the same time. Organic planting and protecting the earth would be not only a part of the lessons of letting food grow but also a metaphor for respecting life and its vulnerability. My hope is that this could restore the children's faith in general as well as in their own lives specifically and make them feel entitled to ask for care and attention for themselves.

Another aspect of this future garden project would be re-owning the inheritance of Kurdish culture and ground. So many times the farmers in that village have faced the threat of their gardens being destroyed or taken away from them by the government; if the Kurdish people could be the rightful inhabitants of their own villages, it would give them a feeling of rootedness.

The first step of the project has already taken place. We have talked to some people who are enthusiastic about the idea, and we have determined that there are enough plots in the village for the school to use. The second step also is taking place—because of the war. Since the government is no longer in charge of the schooling system in the region, the Kurdish people have created their own schooling curriculum for teaching the children about freedom and equality of gender, as well as for giving more attention to the arts. Some of our cousins are actually now teaching at the school. Very idealistic young people are teaching in their mother tongue, and they are open to new ways of schooling the youth about hope and peace.

The next step would be, after peace occurs over the horizon of time, to school some young people in the agricultural ideals of permaculture. The school project in Jordan has an educational program that would be very helpful in building the knowledge needed for this school garden project.

Peace education is another important step (Mennonite Central Committee and Christian Peacemaker Teams now have similar projects in Iraq), and of course the kitchen garden project to deliver the actual seeds would be very helpful.

What can we, far away from Syria, do to help build this dream? We can be part of garden projects in our own communities, and maybe we can start educating the garden workers of tomorrow. Then it could become reality—a school garden for peace in Syria.