
Thorns, Seed, Sower, and Soil

MCC's Educational Partnership with the Chaldean Catholic Church

Nathan Hershberger

Teaching is like casting seeds to the wind. I tell myself this on hard days, when blank stares greet my every effort. My job is to plant seeds; the rest is up to God. This is my mantra now, teaching in a Mennonite high school in Virginia. And it was my mantra while serving from 2014 to 2017 with Mennonite Central Committee (MCC) in Iraq, where I taught in a high school, a seminary, and a refugee camp.

During that time in Iraq, I didn't know if I was making an impact. And looking back at MCC's two decades of education partnerships and teaching secondments with the Chaldean Catholic Church,¹ I don't know if we contributed something valuable. I can point to specific successes—funding for displaced children to attend a preschool run by an order of Iraqi nuns, dozens of short- and long-term English teachers from North America forging connections with Iraqi teachers and students, and more. But what fruit has this work borne? What has it all added up to?

Jesus's parable of the sower (Matt 13:3–9) captures the sense of promise and risk I feel when I think about teaching in general and MCC's education work in Iraq in particular. Like the farmer in Jesus's parable, I am to plant seeds; the rest is up to God. But one thing I have learned about Bible stories—parables in particular—is that it is never safe to think of oneself as just one character in the story. I am not only the sower but also the seed. Sometimes I am the good soil, and sometimes, perhaps, I am the thorns.

Sometimes the Thorns

MCC began partnering with Iraqi churches and organizations amid crippling US sanctions in the 1990s, and that work intensified after the US-led 2003 invasion.

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¹ The Chaldean Catholic Church is an Iraqi Christian church with roots in the second century.

Our partnerships have taken place under the shadow of US military, economic, and cultural dominance. By teaching English, I couldn't help but participate in that domination.

I remember experiencing my presence as a thorn as I was teaching a high school world history class at Mar Qardakh School in northern Iraq, one of three Chaldean Catholic institutions at which I taught. One student named Ninweh had difficulty choosing a topic for an independent research project. Despite her creativity and thoughtfulness, she kept returning to ideas in which she had no interest—the causes of the American Civil War, the role of women in the US Constitution. I expressed support but gently suggested thinking about a topic closer to her own interests and life. She worried, however, that the International Baccalaureate examiners were only interested in American history. Perhaps she thought the same was true of me. The thorn of cultural imperialism threatened to choke out her independent agency. I couldn't fully escape being an agent of that imperialism.

Sometimes the Sower

But the little successes kept and still keep me teaching.

One day when Ninweh half-heartedly suggested yet another topic in American history, I responded in exasperation, "Ninweh, do you *really* want to write about American history?" When she replied "No!" I asked, "What do you want to write about?" And she said, "The Assyrian genocide."

The Assyrians were targeted alongside Armenians and other Christians during the Armenian genocide in 1915 and suffered later attacks in 1933 from the Iraqi government and tribal groups because the British had used them as auxiliary troops in their occupation of Iraq after WWI. Ninweh told me she was afraid to write about this topic because it would show the British in a bad light. I helped her find sources that would ground the polemical side of her essay, and soon she began interviewing her grandparents about their early memories and started to write. She produced a moving and thoughtful essay about how her family experience intertwined with the Christian witness of the Assyrian church in Iraq.

In this situation, the seed I planted was merely the stimulation to help Ninweh follow her own confidence and drive. When I think about not only my time in Iraq but also that of dozens of other short- and long-term MCC teachers who served there, I imagine the multitude of such seeds sown and am encouraged.

Sometimes the Seed

We were not the only sowers. We ourselves were seeds transplanted from the United States, and our church partners planted us in the rich soil of Ankawa, a city that had become a magnet for Christian refugees from across Iraq.

Upon our arrival in our new home, my wife and I quickly realized that our placement could become very isolating. We could seek insular connections in small pockets of expatriates here and there, but that soil would not sustain us. We wanted to befriend Iraqi neighbors, and did, but the linguistic and cultural barriers were often high and the continuous effort exhausting.

We did not and could not plant ourselves, but with the surrounding community's support, we found ourselves taking root. For starters, MCC's long partnership with the Sisters of the Sacred Heart of Jesus, a Chaldean order of nuns, meant that when we arrived, platters of *dolma*—stuffed grape leaves, onions, and peppers—greeted us, along with an invitation to join a local choir. In addition, the students and rector at St. Peter's Seminary expected us to join them for Mass, a weekly meal, and soccer games. Friends and contacts who knew previous MCCers also reached out to support us again and again. Two decades of partnership sustained us. Like humus slowly accumulating on the forest floor, the rich earth of all those inherited relationships—especially through MCC's direct teaching secondments—nurtured our growth.

Sometimes the Soil

And sometimes we were that rich earth for others. MCC's presence in partnership with the church has been the soil in which other seeds grow. I think of one teacher from Winnipeg, Canada, who came to Iraq several times after an initial summer teaching stint. That presence blossomed into many different friendships with Iraqi teachers. It even allowed one particular displaced family in Iraq from Mosul to be sponsored by a Canadian church. Such sponsorships are not a primary goal of MCC's presence in Iraq,² but this connection between Canadians and Iraqis represents so many friendships borne out of this long partnership.

All of It Is Grace

While I celebrate the growth stemming from MCC's teaching partnerships in Iraq, I don't do so with a spirit of triumph. The questions that plagued me then plague me still: How can international English teaching avoid reinscribing Western cultural and political dominance? How can we relate well to our MCC partners when our goals come into conflict with theirs? Does today's lesson plan make any sense in the context of these young Iraqi students' lives? What growth might I be choking out?

But when I envision education along the lines of the parable of the sower, I am freed from one root of my worries—my desire for control. We do not author the

² MCC's primary purpose in Iraq is to strengthen local churches and civic organization to enable Iraqis to flourish once more in their native land.

parable; we are caught up in the plot, just as our partners are. Always the outcome is a little beyond us, caught up in the interplay between seed, soil, sower, and sun.

To us it falls simply to grow where we're planted, to see both our fruitful and weedy selves honestly, to nourish those we find around us, to scatter the love of Christ we have been given. None of it is a possession. All of it is grace.