



Mennonite Women Modeling Jesus

The late afternoon September sunshine burned through the big windows at the Wichita airport. I remember the waiting room was bathed in light when the Laotian family stepped off the jet way and into their new life in Kansas. Several families from First Mennonite in Hillsboro were there to greet them, including my own. Three generations of the Wong family stood staring at us, and we at them. Without translators, there was little we could say to each other, and so hand motions — like, “come this way” — would have to do.

Instantly transfixed, I insisted on riding back to Hillsboro in the conversion van carrying these new people. In the days before seatbelt regulations (or even seats, for that matter), we all sat on the shag-carpeted van floor, and the grandfather produced an instrument — a wooden pipe of some sort that he played for us. We smiled and clapped along, though we couldn’t tell what the song meant to convey, whether celebration or lament.

Once in Hillsboro, we helped the family get comfortable in their new home, an older two-story rental a few blocks down Main Street from the parsonage, where I lived. Over the next two years, walking to “the refugee house” became a regular part of my life. I enjoyed spending time with the daughters, who attended middle school with me; having sleepovers, sometimes disrupted by the rooster they kept in the backyard and playing with the family’s two toddlers, who rode tricycles up and down the sidewalk, wearing only t-shirts, no underwear preferred.

When I think about all the work that went into welcoming strangers to our small town, what I remember most is several women in our church who invested their time and their hearts to make the refugee family as comfortable as possible in their new home. It took tremendous courage for a family to set down roots in a town that was white, Mennonite and wholly foreign in its geography, its weather, its customs. And it took courage for women in my church to step outside their own comfort zones to interact with people who did not share a language or a culture.

I was too young to recognize this courage at the time, but now — given our current conversations about refugees — I can easily imagine that helping the refugee family made these women susceptible to public censure and scorn, especially in a small Mennonite town where everyone looked, acted and talked the same. In fact, I know the women had to navigate criticism from their community, given how many others in our large congregation decided, emphatically, to stay away.

The Wong family arrived in Hillsboro in 1980, fleeing war and a communist regime. My mom, alongside several other women in the church, became a bridge between the family and the community, helping the kids enroll in school, taking the adults shopping and to doctor's appointments, visiting them all in the home. Though neither a nurse nor a doctor, Mom still visited the Wongs several times a day in order to help the family with prescriptions, doling out doses of pills to those who needed it. This effort required a significant dedication of time, energy and patience, as my mom tried to navigate language and cultural barriers to help them be well.

The women in my church normalized what might have seemed completely unusual in Hillsboro at the time — encouraging their daughters to become friends with the family and modeling just what that friendship should look like. As a result, it never seemed unusual to have a sleepover with girls whose language we didn't really know, or to play backyard whiffle ball with boys who had never played the game or to share a meal with a family whose food customs were completely foreign to me.

From the Wongs, I learned a great deal about culture and hospitality and friendship. But I was also learning tremendous lessons from the women in my church — both those who expended significant energy in befriending the Laotian family, and those who made dedicated efforts to stay away. One person especially, a woman named Carolyn Penner, modeled for me a kind of selflessness and kindness in her friendship with the Wongs, and I somehow knew she was doing holy work, even if I could not at the time have articulated why or how.

So far as I remember, Carolyn wasn't a regular Sunday school or vacation Bible school teacher; she wasn't a youth leader or on the pastoral staff. In her relationship to the refugee family, though, Carolyn taught me more than any other adult at First Mennonite, save my own parents, about what it means to follow the life Jesus has called us to.

Even now, several decades later, I think about Carolyn and several other women in our church, and of the extraordinary gift they gave to me. Some adults in the church taught me about the Bible and about my Mennonite heritage and its rituals. But there were two or three women in the church who showed, in thought and in deed, what it meant to be a servant to the marginalized, a friend to our neighbors, a follower of Jesus. And for this I am grateful.

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