



# EXTENDING BEYOND

## God's children dream for a better Botswana

A message from Stanley W. Green



In anticipation of the post-Pentecost mission of his followers, Jesus trained and prepared his disciples. He instructs them with these words before he sends them:

*"When you enter a house, first say, 'Peace to this house.'*

*If someone who promotes peace is there, your peace will rest on them; if not, it will return to you. Stay there, eating and drinking whatever they give you, for the worker deserves his wages. Do not move around from house to house. When you enter a town and are welcomed, eat what is offered to you. Heal the sick who are there and tell them, 'The kingdom of God has come near to you.'"*

Based on Jesus' instructions, the content of the good news (or the gospel) is the gift of peace embodied in the reign of God. Our mission in the world is to announce, and advance, the possibilities of peace that are the promise of God.

After five years of serving in Gaborone, Botswana, with our partners there, Nathan and Taryn Dirks will soon return to North America. The legacy that they will leave is one of God's peace, shaped through their partnership with the Spiritual Healing Church. They shared the following observation: "... We've been exploring how to enact God's teachings, to serve in creative, loving, unexpected ... ways."

Their expression accurately describes the roots of their interest and the nature of their particular commitment to their work. It is a description of the posture that Mennonite Mission Network has been pursuing for several decades now. Grounded in strongly held biblical convictions, we are deeply committed to the outcome that communities of believers and followers of Jesus Christ emerge, or are strengthened in their witness, as a result of our work in every place where we are engaged. We are also

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Above: Children enjoy a safe place to play—the fruit of partnership and community in Bontleng, Botswana. Photo by Nathan Dirks.

*"Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of God belongs to such as these."*

*—Mark 10:14*



Photo by Nathan Dirks

Youth play futsal in the newly created park in Bontleng, Botswana.

## Value and potential, within a child's reach

In the middle of Bontleng, Botswana, was once a playground with colorful plants, swings, and shiny new slides. Over the years, the flowers were trampled into dust, the swings broke, and rust took over the slides. The space was crisscrossed with people coming and going to the barber, a car wash, or just sitting in the shade of the lone tree. “This park [was] not safe at night,” said Wame Chiepe, who lives beside the park and works with the Pula Sports Development Association (PSDA). “People [got] robbed; some [got] stabbed. It [was] quite dangerous.”

While Botswana has “amazing infrastructure,” Nathan Dirks explained, poverty often leaves children and young

adults without many options and at risk to alcoholism, vandalism, drug abuse, and other negative social behaviors, he said.

Nathan and Taryn have a heart for children of all ages. “In a culture and time that did not necessarily hold children in high regard, [Jesus] took the time to provide children with individual attention, and encouraged his followers to learn from them,” Nathan said.

**Together, with PSDA, they planned to turn this rough part of town into a park for sports, environmental awareness, education, and community gatherings.**

In addition to Bible studies, the Dirks couple knew that they needed other ways to support their young adult friends. Together, with PSDA, they planned to turn this rough part of town into a park for sports, environmental awareness, education, and community gatherings.

### Confirming the call

After much prayer and discernment, members of PSDA felt God remind them of the image of Jericho: Joshua leading the people of Israel to the Promised Land. “The park, a place known for vandalism, drunkenness, conflict and crime, was a spiritual stronghold,” wrote Nathan. “Like Jericho, it was surrounded by formidable walls. So, like the Israelites, we knew that we had no chance in this place unless God led us through the barrier.”

They decided they would prayer-walk around the perimeter of the park every day for seven days. They prayed.



Photo by Nathan Dirks

### Walls of healing

As both a symbol of the transformation to come and as an environmental effort, the park's walls are made with recycled beer bottles worked into beautiful designs.



They listened for discernment. On the second day in the park, Nathan and Taryn noticed a 10-year-old boy who they had never seen before. The boy asked if the rumors were true, if the park would be built.

“In Botswana, conversations about God and spirituality are not seen as strange,” said Nathan. “So we told the boy that we were not yet sure whether the park would be built or not, and that we were asking God to show us what to do.” After hearing their plan for discernment, the boy nodded thoughtfully and agreed to join in the walk around the park’s perimeter.

“As he turned to begin the walk, I realized that we had not learned the name of our new friend,” Nathan said. “Surely, it was Thabo or Kagiso or Lesego—names common in Gaborone. But rather, it was a name we had never heard in Botswana before or since.”

“My name is Joshua,” he said. And with that confirmation, believed to be from God, they moved forward with the park plans.

### Community gains wholesome recreation and food

At first glance, the *futsal* court resembles a cement soccer field for a team of five players. In Botswana, futsal is the reigning game, with basketball and netball also popular. So when the park was designed, they made sure it was equipped for all three sports.

The Dirkses worked with young Botswanans from PSDA to create a permaculture landscape that contains rainwater, prevents erosion, and allows for maximized soil fertility, said Nathan. On what was once a dry and dusty lot, they’ve recently planted dozens of indigenous trees. “[It] will eventually result in a microclimate within the park, an area that is cooler than the surrounding region,” he said.

“Our work at the park has allowed us to see some of the ways that God quietly brings people together, and keeps them together through differences and difficulties when they’re willing to stay focused on him. ... A part of the calling was the opportunity to trust in God and learn to work through these issues together,” said Nathan.

### Building community

Beyond the allure of fast-paced competition and lush green space lies a deeper reason for the Bontleng Futsal Park. In the rough neighborhood, the park provides a constructive environment that stands in stark contrast to the bars that surround it.

“There are wonderful opportunities for [youth] in Botswana,” said Nathan. “And we hope that with the right encouragement, which we are working to facilitate in a number of ways (educational, social, sporting, environmental, agricultural), they will be able to seek these opportunities without being side-tracked.”

While the futsal court and gardens are already completed, the vision hasn’t stopped. The young adults at

### Sustainable gardens in a dry land

The 7,200-square-foot court will drain more than 100,000 gallons of rain water each year into an underground cistern. That’s more than enough to water the community gardens on site. Along with traditional gardens, the community is trying out several aquaponics gardens, where fish and vegetables grow together. (The fish waste provides nutrients for the plant’s soil, and plants filter the water for the fish.)



The community gardens in the Bontleng park pictured above are watered using the run-off rain collected in underground cisterns next to the futsal court. The photo below shows how the cisterns were constructed.



Photos by Nathan Dirks

PSDA plan to host a market space for local artisans, an outdoor fitness park, and an eco-café (with Wi-Fi) to sell local food and provide a space for after-school tutoring programs. The best part: These gathering spaces will be completely self-sufficient and sustainable, thanks to bio-toilets and solar panels.

“I want to say thank you for your support, back home,” said Wame. “We’re almost done with the park, thanks to God. Thanks to you people. If we could work like this throughout the world, that would be great!” ■

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pledged to work in loving, respectful and creative (rather than stereotypical) ways with those among whom we seek to share the good news of the peace of Christ.

We believe that the incarnation of Jesus calls us into solidarity and identification with those among whom we seek to share the message of Christ's kingdom. This posture of solidarity requires that we are deliberate, and disciplined, in making sure that we do not impose our vision and priorities for what ministry and mission look like in other contexts.

Mission workers have always sought to follow Christ through faithful witness, even when their actions appeared to be in line with western expansionism. Today, our commitment is to point to Jesus, and to listen to our hosts about what they discern will be most effective in their context as they make their witness credible and attractive. Whether it is a coffee shop in Kathmandu, Nepal (Dale and Bethsaba Nafziger); a water project in Uyo, Nigeria (with our partner, Mennonite Church in Nigeria); supporting women in a craft project in Bayanhongor, Mongolia (Laura Schlabach); or a futsal park in Gaborone, Botswana—we are pledged to work in creative, incarnational, and supportive ways that extend our partners' effectiveness in sharing the good news of Jesus Christ in their context.

By their witness for peace through Jesus Christ, Nathan and Taryn and their partners transformed a dreaded space into one that came to be illumined by the light of Jesus, and infused with possibilities for the peace of Christ to prevail. Through this project, God's people came together to bless their neighbors in Gaborone. In many other places on each of the continents, in creative, loving and unexpected ways, women and men and families are sharing Christ's peace and making a difference for healing and hope. They are able to be there, and are sustained in their witness, because of your prayers and your generous sharing.

**Thanks for sharing the light and expanding the possibilities for the peace of Christ to transform situations of fear, hopelessness and despair in every place. ■**



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## Meet our workers and partners:



**Nathan and Taryn Dirks** serve through a partnership with Mennonite Church Canada and Mennonite Mission Network. They will conclude their service in June. For the last five years, they worked with young adults in the African Initiated Churches

in Botswana. Their ministry was focused on empowering youth to reach their full potential spiritually, educationally and socially. They've sought to do this through youth Bible studies, forming friendships in a local prison, and helping to create a sustainable community park.



**Asher and Lindsay Fast** began serving in Botswana in February 2017. They will continue to empower youth by working with African Initiated Churches and the Mother Theresa Resource Centre.

While ministry is often re-shaped through experience, they currently plan to mentor and tutor youth, develop a community garden, and collaborate with local congregations' prison ministry and refugee work. Please pray for them as they adjust to life and work in Botswana.



**Pula Sports Development Association (PSDA)** began in 2013 by five

young adults in Gaborone. They realized they were working individually toward the same goal: "Using sports to create spaces of peace in underdeveloped areas for young people to be able to realize their potential," states the website.

