



Menonite
Mission
Network

Missio**Dei**

Exploring God's work in the world

Women

20 years of paving the way
between dreams and hopes



MTAL

Movement of Anabaptist Women

DOING THEOLOGY FROM LATIN AMERICA

Missio Dei is published by Mennonite Mission Network to invite reflection and dialogue about God's mission in today's world. Some features in the series focus primarily on the biblical and theological foundations of the missional task. Others present ministry case studies or personal stories of attempts to be faithful to Christ's call. Perspectives represented reflect the passion and commitment of the agency: to declare in word and demonstrate in life the whole gospel of Jesus Christ, across the street, all through the marketplaces and around the world.

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Mennonite Mission Network, the mission agency of Mennonite Church USA, exists to lead, mobilize and equip the church to participate in holistic witness to Jesus Christ in a broken world. With offices in Elkhart, Indiana, and Newton, Kansas, Mennonite Mission Network supports ministries in 45 countries and 26 states.

Mennonite Mission Network is committed as an agency to providing relevant resources for the church. *Missio Dei* is such a resource, inviting reflection and conversation about God's mission in 21st-century contexts. It is offered free of charge to more than 1,500 pastors and lay leader subscribers. Donations are welcomed to cover costs for additional copies.

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Prologue

Welcome to the celebration of the first two decades of the Movement of Anabaptist Women Doing Theology from Latin America (MTAL)! This booklet is the product of the collaboration and commitment of many Anabaptist women.

Inside, you will discover a brief account that traces the history of MTAL's first 20 years, as well as a timeline that highlights some of the significant events along the way, illustrating the journey over the years.

You will also find theological reflections that bring to light interpretations of Scripture from female perspectives. The titles of the reflections in this booklet were chosen from the themes that MTAL has focused on over the past 20 years:

- “Discovering and using our gifts.”
- “Go and tell them! Leadership and the liberating message of Jesus.”
- “We are beloved daughters of God.”
- “Healthy boundaries in power dynamics and sexuality in the church.”

The photographs on these pages are visual witnesses. We would have liked to include photos of thousands of sisters who have participated in MTAL activities!

On the following pages, you will see the names of the authors of the reflections. It bears mentioning that they were supported by Zarái Gonzalia, who motivated and coordinated the preparation of the theological reflections, and many other sisters, who offered their ideas, wisdom and editorial gifts. The introduction was written by co-coordinators Mary Cano and Angela Opimi, who also organized a series of testimonies and other aspects of the publication.



Photo by Linda Shelly

Rebeca González, of Mexico, guides a planning process during an MTAL meeting at the MWC Assembly in Harrisburg, Pennsylvania.

MTAL expresses its vision and mission this way:

- **Vision:** To be a Movement of Anabaptist Women Doing Theology from Latin America who seek to transform their contexts, based on Jesus' life and teachings, contributing to building God's kingdom values with their gifts.
- **Mission:** We are Anabaptist women who, inspired by the gospel of Jesus, do theology from our contexts, for the advancement of the kingdom of God.

On behalf of Mennonite Mission Network, it has been a great privilege to walk with MTAL for the past 20 years, since its beginning at the Mennonite World Conference Assembly in Zimbabwe, in its pilgrimage to impact the lives not only of women but also of the churches in Latin America and the global church.

Linda Shelly
Regional Director for Latin America, Mennonite Mission Network

Introduction

Twenty years ago, several visionary women came together with a common purpose: to create a supportive group that strengthens and promotes the formation, leadership and fellowship of women in Anabaptist churches in Latin America — to hear the voices of women, recognize their value and nurture their talents. Out of this vision, the Movement of Anabaptist Women Doing Theology from Latin America (MTAL) was born. We are infinitely grateful to God for what we have achieved so far. God’s faithfulness and mercy have been constant, and we have been witnesses of God’s love, which renews, transforms, strengthens and inspires us to continue being a dynamic movement for God’s honor and glory.

Through our **vision**, we seek to transform our contexts, based on the example of Jesus, using our gifts to foster the values of the kingdom of God. We fulfill our **mission** by doing theology, inspired by the gospel of Jesus, from our own local contexts, to advance the kingdom of God. When we look around us, we feel affirmation that our vision and mission have become courageous and active realities,



Photo by Rebeca González

Mary Cano and Angela Opimi, MTAL co-coordinators, display the MTAL banner at the 2022 MWC Assembly in Indonesia.

through which we continue to shape and reassess ourselves.

In the 20 years since MTAL began, we have expanded our reach. Our simple structure seeks to include representation from various countries on the American continent. We have four regional representatives — Southern Cone, Andean Region, Central America/the Caribbean and Mexico — and two general co-coordinators, all of whom help us maintain communication with the women from the different Anabaptist conferences. We also have the support of three advisors, a communications team and two internal commissions that include women from multiple countries:

- The Prayer and Action Commission aims to strengthen unity and mutual support, through concrete actions, based on prayer and guided by a faith centered on Jesus — his life, teachings and work.
- The Education and Materials Development Commission promotes formal and informal training and develops biblical and theological materials from an Anabaptist perspective, cultivating learnings from local contexts to enhance the leadership of women.
- The Communications Team facilitates the sharing of information related to MTAL and other connections, using a variety of tools to ensure that communication is effective.



Photo by Linda Shelly

Women from the Southern Cone celebrate MTAL's 10th anniversary in 2013.

We thank God for those who have pioneered this movement and the dedication of those who have walked this path. Today, we celebrate the 20 years of work and commitment of the many women who have given years of their lives to this vision, embracing, without hesitation, the mission they have decided to live out. We are equally grateful to the men who have been allies in our journey and to all the people and institutions that have believed in our vision. More than an organization, MTAL is the sum of people who share a common dream of service to transform lives.

There is still a long way to go to reach the reality we dream of. God is our guide, as we face challenges and overcome obstacles, allowing us to build a strong, diverse, colorful fabric, capable of containing us and propelling us toward unity in diversity.

Today, we celebrate not only our past achievements, but we also renew our dedication to the cause that unites us. We are opening roads and moving toward peace, justice and equity, so that the voices that denounce injustice and announce hope are heard in our towns, churches and local communities, as a testimony of Anabaptist women following Jesus.

It is with great pleasure that we share, through this edition of *Missio Dei*, our past 20 years of dreams and hopes. To God be the glory!

Mary Cano and Angela Opimi
Co-General Coordinators of MTAL

Sowing history

“And afterward, I will pour out my Spirit on all people. Your sons and daughters will prophesy, your old men will dream dreams, your young men will see visions. Even on my servants, both men and women, I will pour out my Spirit in those days.”

— Joel 2:28-29 (NIV)

God gave us a dream. The day we heard our sisters, a group of African women theologians, sharing at the 2003 Mennonite World Conference (MWC) Assembly, the Sower began to prepare our hearts for the beginning of what would become a movement of thousands of women throughout the Latin American continent for God’s glory. But how do the dreams that God places on the hearts of God’s sons and daughters become a reality?



Photo by Laurie Oswald Robinson

Latin American and African women pray for one another after a time of sharing their experiences and challenges, during a dialogue at the 2003 MWC Assembly in Zimbabwe.

At the beginning of MTAL, the dream was interwoven with the movement of the Spirit and the presence of our Lord Jesus, who never made a value judgment between men and women; nor between Black, White, Mestizo or Indigenous women; nor between one nationality or another; nor between pastors, congregants, elders, young women or girls. We have all been called into God's kingdom, and we have all been given gifts. These gifts, we have found, are like precious seeds, which we have been able to cultivate into existence, thanks to God's power. The history of this movement resembles the cycle of sowing and harvesting. Like in the parable of the sower (Mark 4), the seed must fall on good soil and be willing to transform itself, so that a beautiful plant may grow and bear fruit. When the first harvest ends, it does not remain the same; it leaves new seeds to be sown again.

Our beginning, as a seed, was not easy. The terrain was a bit hard and arid. We had to gain the trust of others in the Latin American ecclesial environment and overcome fears that the movement would change or replace some of the familiar models. We also had to work against the narrative that this was the beginning of a rebellious and disruptive movement. But the dream was clear from the beginning: strengthen the identity of Latin American Anabaptist women as followers of Jesus, be fruitful with our gifts for the growth of the kingdom and work side-by-side with our brothers. We also wanted to strengthen the biblical and theological training our sisters received. Big dreams, little seed! Who gave you such dreams?

It was God's inexhaustible grace, which came like fresh rain, that made this newly planted seed grow, as the Scripture says: "The kingdom of God is as if someone would scatter seed on the ground, and would sleep and rise night and day, and the seed would sprout and grow, he does not know how" (Mark 4:26-27, NRSV).

One of the first times our seeds were sown was in 2004, when women met in the context of the Andean Encounter, a regional church gathering, in Venezuela. From then on, MTAL has continued holding meetings and capacity-building workshops for mutual accompaniment in various Latin American countries. The Lord has allowed us to get to know one another and deepen our sisterly relationships in an atmosphere of respect and solidarity.

God's grace broke open the seeds for us to become plants that took root and sprouted leaves, through the inclusion of other women leaders, who were sustaining growth through their gifts and participation in various spaces. At the 2009 MWC Assembly, we met with our African sisters again. That meeting gave rise to the harvest of 2010: our first publication, titled: *El mensaje liberador de Jesús para las mujeres hoy* (The liberating message of



Photo provided

Women from the Andean Region meet during their 2004 regional church gathering in Venezuela. This is the first of more than 20 regional MTAL meetings. One result has been the enrichment of church events with a balanced participation of women and men.



Photo provided

Women from throughout Latin America meet at an MTAL gathering before the 2009 MWC Assembly in Paraguay. African sisters join the group on the final day.



Photo provided

Women from Central America, Mexico and the Caribbean meet in Honduras in 2018.

Jesus, for women today).

But no seed is the same in the next harvest. The inspiring power of the Spirit, the power that makes the dreams God gives us come true, challenged us, again, to grow a little more. Through the Prayer and Action Commission, we accepted new challenges, including creating prayer liturgies for all ages, with socially relevant themes.

The field became even more fertile as the women who prepared the ground led the way for other sisters to be appointed to MWC commissions (<https://mwc-cmm.org/en/commissions>), and their contributions continue to be valued.

From 2020-2021, during the COVID-19 pandemic, we were challenged, again, to use new communication technologies, with the purpose of fostering unity, prayer and hope. It was in this context that the Spirit inspired us to write and publish our first devotional book, which brought 309 women writers from different countries in Latin America together and has allowed us to welcome new leadership, recognize gifts and bring about new organizational approaches.

The fruit has been beautiful, abundant and full of juice. Some who were pioneers of this dream are retiring and recognizing the new seeds being planted. And the Spirit, Sower par excellence, continues to give us dreams: adding more emphasis on education and theological training, generating support networks, protecting children, and preparing ourselves to take better advantage of technological tools, among other dreams.

After 20 years, we thank the God of life for seeing that we have sheaves full of more seeds to be sown and fruits to be enjoyed and celebrated. We recognize all those women who have been part of the past and present of the movement, and we rejoice in the promise of others being added in the future. With humility, we recognize that not only have we changed, but the



Photo by Josué Cruz Soto

Lyneska Fernandez, from Puerto Rico, records the January 2021 devotional reflections from the first MTAL devotional book. The third book is ready for 2024.



Photo from Zoom

During the pandemic, MTAL sisters creatively come together, through Zoom, to foster relationships among women from different countries.

church and the male leadership, who recognize us as co-heirs of grace and encourage sisters to participate and develop their gifts, have also changed. We thank all the organizations that have accompanied us and that, at some point, have opened doors and given us their trust, recognizing that together we are co-heirs of grace through Jesus Christ.

And so we continue, growing by grace, bearing fruit through God's love, confronting changes with joy and looking to the future, always with hope, thanking the Lord, who abounds with 30%, 60% and 100% fruit.

Olga Piedrasanta, Ofelia García and Ruhama Pedroza

See "For further reading" on page 29 to find more information about the materials mentioned.



Photo by Mary Cano

As symbolic acts, women from different countries join hands in Central America (above) and the Southern Cone (below), recognizing that, together, they can achieve many things.



Photo by Linda Steilly

Doing theology

Encouraging women’s theological processes has always been an integral part of MTAL. The following four theological reflections touch on themes that have been important to MTAL throughout its history.

Discovering and using our gifts

By Rebeca González Torres¹

“We have gifts that differ according to the grace given to us . . .”

— Romans 12:6 (NRSV)

The Movement of Anabaptist Women Doing Theology from Latin America (MTAL) is a fruitful ministry, with roots in the Global Gifts Sharing Project of Mennonite World Conference. Brothers and sisters in the global family took the time to observe how different gifts were understood and what forms they took in each context. Out of this process, the movement was born and started to grow.² The Spirit of God guided and moved us to share with one another all the richness we have received by God’s grace. The best living and glorious example of sharing gifts comes from God. This world exists, because God decided to give us the gift of creation, so we can live in harmony with all that was created. We have also been able to share in

¹ Pastor Rebeca González Torres is the coordinator of the Education and Materials Development Commission of MTAL and co-coordinator of CITA (*Comunidad de Instituciones Teológicas Anabautistas de Iberoamérica*).

² Tshimika, Pakisa K. and Tim Lind. *Sharing Gifts in the Global Family of Faith: One Church’s Experiment* (Intercourse, Pennsylvania: Good Books, 2003). <https://mwc-cmm.org/en/resources/sharing-gifts-global-family-faith>



Rebeca González ,of Mexico, serving the Lord’s Supper; Elizabeth Vado, of Nicaragua, playing the guitar; and Deusilene Milhomem, of Brazil, preaching, illustrate various gifts honed and fostered in this movement

God’s existence, as we have been made in God’s image and likeness. And most importantly, God saved humankind from eternal death by giving us God’s only son.

In 1 Corinthians 4:7 and 2 Corinthians 5:18, Paul urges us to recognize that we have received everything from God. Therefore, offering it back becomes a way of worshiping and pleasing God.

The word “gift” (*xaris* in Greek) refers to each of the things we have received from God. It can be a smile, a hug, a dialogue, sharing skills, giving time and money, or sharing ideas. Everything we are and everything we have are gifts that can be shared. When we share gifts, we not only create community, but we also help the community. We connect with other people, and that becomes a spiritual gift. It does no good to have a gift that we keep to ourselves.

In Romans 12:2, we are invited not to imitate selfish customs in hostile environments, in which the rich cross their arms and turn their backs on the needy. Others walk through life only extending their hands to receive, thinking they are poor and have nothing to give. Usually, those who think this way close their hearts, guarding the little they have and closing themselves off from those around them, so that no one takes anything from them.

In Romans 12:3, Paul mentions the importance of having a sensible self-conception. In other words, we are not to think that we are more valuable than those around us, but we also should not think that we are

worth less than others. We are called to believe that we have as much value as any other human being.

To see ourselves in this way, we must go through a process of self-discovery, which allows us to realize that we have a great deal to share and that, by giving of ourselves to others, we enter a dimension of life that brings fulfillment and joy. When we recognize ourselves in the context of the community around us, we gain confidence to be able to see how valuable it is to give of ourselves and to receive from others as well.

The needs present in a community are a driving force that pushes others in the same community to give to those who are in need. This, then, allows the person who receives the gift to release his or her own gifts, so that others may benefit from them. This dynamic and lively exchange enables the body of Christ to be well-coordinated and nourished, thereby bringing about growth in harmony and abundant life (Ephesians 4:16).

Just as the body is united and no member walks alone, but each part belongs to the others, so it is with MTAL (Romans 12:4-5). We may be separated, geographically speaking and by culture and the specific contexts of each region. However, these realities do not limit us. We seek and find specific roles in this part of the body of Christ. Each woman assumes her place and shares herself with others. It is incredible that many of us have never been in the same physical space. However, this movement has given us an identity and strength. We have been sustained by this solid identity, which was created through processes of community participation, in which we identified teachers, evangelists, managers, facilitators, women with the gift of prayer, leaders with a passion for serving in community development, artists, expert cooks, courageous leaders who walk alongside others in social advocacy, professional Bible scholars, writers and so many more. There is no homogeneity, nor do we seek it. Rather, there is a diversity of forms, colors, flavors and perspectives of life. We have created a strong motivating force to share our gifts, and thus, we rejoice in the common good, and no one can stop or limit what the Spirit of God is doing in each region.

In conclusion, I invite you, as you are inspired by the Lord, to continue to cultivate, with those around you, the importance of sharing everyone's gifts in community, not neglecting the gifts that are in you, and sharing with great care. This women's movement will continue to be strengthened, as an example to our daughters and granddaughters, and this will lead to a better future.

Go and tell them! Leadership and Jesus' liberating message

By Cindy Alpizar³

“Do not hold on to me,” said Jesus in John 20:17-18 (NRSV). Mary Magdalene wanted to cling to Jesus and never leave him. She longed to continue walking by his side, but it was not the right time for her to do so. From then on, the teacher was confident that she was capable of being a faithful messenger to spread the news of the event that changed the world. She would carry the news of the gospel of the resurrection. However, Mary Magdalene wanted to keep her good friend, the Christ, close and visible. She wanted to listen to him, serve him and adore him, like she always had. She was unaware that she was ready to do this work once the Son returned to the Father.

This passage faithfully shows how Rabboni himself states: “I am ascending to my Father and your Father” (John 20:17, NRSV). It is a revealing affirmation. She, too, was included. She, too, was a daughter, and she, too, was a disciple. “Go to my brothers and [tell] them,” Jesus said to her, perhaps without her understanding that she was being authorized, recognized and sent. This woman was to share with the disciples what had happened, and the biblical text describes that what she told them seemed like madness to them.

Jesus, as he went through the towns and villages, announced, liberated, healed and dignified many women who were being subjected to death, illness, loss and discrimination. After having experienced Jesus, they could not resist his innovative and revolutionary message, which gave them hope, brought them out of the shadows and marginalization, and gave them a name, recognizing their inheritance as daughters of Abraham. They were now free from many historical, cultural and religious chains, but most interestingly, they decided to surrender that freedom to this teacher, prophet and doctor called Jesus, who accepted them into his movement without discrimination (Luke 8:1-3).

All of this confirms that Jesus surpassed the social parameters and norms of his time. He never accepted or reproduced discriminatory actions against women. For Jesus, women have the same value and status as men. He formed, and continues to form, a mixed community, in which men and women lived and traveled together. Jesus maintained friendships with women and defended them when they were unjustly censured. Jesus placed himself decidedly on the side of the marginalized, so his message is good news for women.

³ Collective communicator, pastor and national council treasurer, Costa Rica.



With creativity, women of the Bible converse. Pictured are Lydia (Heidy Gutierrez Salas, Bolivia), Mary, the mother of John Mark (Gema Huerta, Chile), the Samaritan woman (Pamela Guevara Gutierrez, Peru), Martha (Mabel Castro, Uruguay), and Mary Magdalene (Martha Basualdo, Paraguay).

In the New Testament, set within the context of the Roman Empire and a patriarchal system, we find many women participating in Jesus' project. These women were faithful witnesses to how deeply the grace of God reaches, not only to transform lives but also to raise up agents of social transformation. For example, the Samaritan missionary's testimony impacted her whole community for Jesus; and Priscilla's teaching shaped Apollos, who, in turn, strengthened the church in Corinth. Lois and Eunice, fervent teachers of the faith, disciples Timothy, who became a trusted co-worker with Paul in spreading the gospel. In addition, Lydia, a church leader; Mary Magdalene, one of Jesus' close disciples; Philip's four daughters, who were prophetesses (preachers); Phoebe, a deaconess; Junia, an apostle; Mary, who gave birth to Jesus who brought salvation; Anna, a prophetess; Martha and Mary, Jesus' friends and apprentices; Susanna, Euodia and Syntyche, servers; and many others in the biblical testimony were models of perseverance, dedication, struggle, resistance, and, above all, faithful discipleship and lives of devotion to Jesus Christ.

Galatians 3:27-28 mentions the gender equality confirmed in baptism, in which women and men are given an equal covering by Christ, as a symbol of unity. There is no longer — or at least there should no longer be — a difference between the members of the community of faith, who have been impacted by the message of the kingdom.

That is why, in 2003, we created a movement to extend the kingdom of God in our Latin American contexts. Women could participate, grow

together, support one another, offer theological and biblical formation, be actors together with men in their communities of faith, and understand that the call and ministry have no gender, race, age, or nationality. We believe in the biblical, faithful and loving testimony that Jesus left us, embodied in many of the gospel stories.



Photos by Linda Shelly

At a 2007 regional meeting in Guatemala, after discussing domestic violence prevention, women pray for men, and men pray for women.

Our God is unchanging, and God's word is unchanging. "So God created mankind in his own image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them. God blessed them" (Genesis 1:27-28, NIV). This is the biblical story, and this is the will of God, which remains true today, even though many people still do not understand it. Or, as some of Jesus' twelve apostles thought: It is madness.

We are beloved daughters of God

By *Deusilene Martins Milhomem de Carvalho*⁴

Biblical Text: Luke 7:36-50

Luke 7:36-50 relates the story of a woman who attends a dinner at the house of Simon the Pharisee, though she was not invited, nor was she welcome. It was a toxic environment for her because of the customs and traditions of her time. However, she did not conform to the rules and norms.

She knew that Jesus, the source of love, would be present in that house. All she wanted was to see and touch Jesus. So she went and prostrated herself

⁴ Pastor and MTAL Sister Care coordinator Brazil, Mennonite Church of Gama, Brasilia, D.F., Brazil.

at his feet, with deep humility, love and gratitude. She wept, letting her tears fall on his feet, kissing them and wiping them with her hair. Then, she anointed them with a very costly perfume: pure spikenard. I think everyone in that house smelled the sweet perfume.

The Pharisee, Simon, was appalled at this woman's attitude. He thought, with irony, "If Jesus knew who she was, he would not let himself be touched by that sinner." He questioned all the good in this woman. But the best was yet to come. Jesus' brilliant defense of the woman, in front of everyone present, was: "Therefore, I tell you, her many sins have been forgiven—as her great love has shown. But whoever has been forgiven little loves little" (Luke 7:47, NIV).

The woman showed her love for Jesus, and Jesus showed his love for her by forgiving and defending her. When we recognize that we are forgiven and beloved daughters of a loving God, we are liberated to enter into abundant life.

Believing that we are beloved daughters of God is a central theme of Mennonite Women USA's Sister Care program, which has had a great impact on MTAL. The first Sister Care workshop was held in February 2013 in Guatemala, led by Carolyn Holderread Heggen and Rhoda Keener, authors of *Sister Care: Equipping Women for Healing Ministry*. Sixty-four women, from seven countries, participated, and they left ready to teach other women what they had learned and experienced. This train-the-trainer model was, then, used throughout Latin America and the Caribbean. At first, the coordinators tried to keep a list of workshops and participants, but after reaching 4,500 participants, the count was lost, as the growth had become organic.



Photo provided

In 2015, women from Brazil gather in Curitiba to participate in a *Cuidándonos entre mujeres* (Sister Care) training session. A Brazilian team was created then to take the workshop to many women in the different regions of the Mennonite churches in Brazil.

In January 2015, we decided to invite the authors to Brazil to offer training and share their experiences with Brazilian women. To our surprise, the number of women who participated in the training session was so large that the leaders needed a team to help with all the activities. It was then that Sister Care Brazil was created, which, from then on, has led seminars throughout Brazil.

Since 2016, in Brazil, we have been carrying out the beautiful work of MTAL, known as Sister Care Brazil, caring for and with women. Since then, we have developed care seminars for women in several regions of the country. To-date, we have worked with more than 1,600 women in local church contexts.

First, we address emotional wounds and give them the respect and recognition they deserve. In this loving environment, many women are healed by God and rediscover the gifts they have been given for the edification of the body of Christ in their church contexts.

Hearing about the revival and transformation that these women have experienced, or even their desire to serve and be facilitators for future events, motivates and inspires us to continue multiplying the project. The seminars we conduct have been received well by the women and local churches. This is due to the relevance of the topics addressed, especially considering the patriarchal context of Brazilian culture. After the seminars, it has been noticeable that the women have been able to renew and heal their souls.

The Sister Care Brazil project has expanded to include men, boys and girls, due to a need that arose in certain regions of the country. The materials were adapted to serve these specific groups. For children, the focus is on living into the call to “care for one another with love,” and for families, we affirm that “we are all equal, women and men, in the eyes of God.” With these new possibilities, we have extended care for families, understanding that “there is no difference between ... men and women; [we] are all one ...” (Galatians 3:28, GNT).

We can reaffirm, with certainty, that what most motivates us to continue this work of care for women is the transformation that both the leaders and the women who participate experience. This transformation is what inspires us to share with other women in their specific contexts.

Healthy boundaries in power dynamics and sexuality in the church

By *Alix Lozano*⁵

As we celebrate 20 years of MTAL's work, it is important to recognize that one thing we focus on is putting our ethics into practice, especially in our relationships. Thus, we feel a call to raise awareness of issues present in the church: abuse of power and sexual abuse.

Power is a determining factor in relationships. Power has been associated with dominance, force and imposition on others, which can ultimately lead to the oppression of vulnerable people. Power is also derived from the resources a person possesses, which has the potential to help or harm people with less power who seek comfort or support, particularly in times of crisis. Power can be used for good or for ill. Everyone in a leadership position has power and should know how to use it. If someone with power crosses a boundary and other people are affected, the consequences can be devastating.

Sexuality is a fundamental dimension of life that identifies us as human. It includes the behaviors, relationships, sexual orientations, values, beliefs and attitudes of humans, as we relate to and interact with one another. It also includes the changes that take place in our bodies, as related to love and reproduction. Sexuality has been given to us by God as part of the fullness of life (Genesis 1:26-28).

Sexual abuse generally occurs when a person in a position of power harms, degrades or controls a person who is in a position of vulnerability — someone who has fewer resources or opportunities, which creates a situation in which they can either be helped or hurt.



Photo by Linda Shelly

Elizabeth Soto and Alix Lozano lead a "Healthy Boundaries" workshop with MTAL, prior to the 2018 Andean gathering in Colombia. During this workshop, they developed ideas for the curriculum, "*La confianza sagrada: Límites saludables para el liderazgo en las iglesias*" (Sacred Trust: Healthy Boundaries for Leadership in Churches).

⁵ Pastor and Colombian theologian, Mennonite Church of Colombia.



Photo by Linda Shelly

Alix Lozano and Paul Stucky facilitate a Healthy Boundaries workshop with Venezuelan church leaders, recognizing that, although it is an important topic for MTAL, it is not just for women.

In church ministry, we often cross boundaries. While it is true that every person in leadership makes their own ethical decisions on an internal, personal level, it is also true that they need an external system to hold them accountable to healthy boundaries.

Healthy boundaries are not rules, but they are guides or limits that help us create safe spaces in human relationships, which ultimately contribute to building trust and respect for others. **Why is it ethically essential to talk about healthy boundaries?**⁶

Because it is an urgent church matter.

In 1 Corinthians 12:12-27, we find the metaphor of the church as a body — a community with many members, in which each part cares for the others. As verse 26 says: “If one member suffers, all suffer together; if one member is honored, all rejoice together” (ESV). Thus, it is urgent for the church to be in solidarity with the person who suffers abuse in the community of faith. In other words, it is imperative to stand with the person who suffers.

⁶ Healthy Boundaries (*Límites Saludables*) is the name of the material in its original form from the FaithTrust Institute. Legal permission was given for the use of their materials in Spanish in an adapted version, together with *Confianza Sagrada* (Sacred Trust) lessons. This was made possible with the endorsement and support of the Mennonite Mission Network Latin America ministry. The theme of Healthy Boundaries had emerged in many contexts that prompted the development of the new material. The purpose is to train MTAL facilitators for its use in different countries.

Because it is an urgent pastoral matter.

In Luke 4:18-19, Jesus says: “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor” (NRSV).

Healthy boundaries encourage us to accompany or walk alongside the victims and aggressors. In the community of faith, it is urgent to help manage the emotional, mental and physical healing of broken people, as part of the task of moving toward the integral health of the whole community.

Because it is ethically urgent for all followers of Jesus.

The Sermon on the Mount, the kingdom manual and ethical guide for Anabaptists, includes Jesus’ call for human behavior in God’s kingdom: to be salt and light (Matthew 5:13-16). As salt, our task is to preserve both the individual good and the common good, prevent social decay, and ultimately, help bring flavor and joy to the lives of humans.

And as light, our task is to reveal darkness, not to hide it. We are not to be a part of the silence that favors the darkness, nor be complicit in it. Rather, we are to expose it, unmask it and denounce it, “so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven” (Matthew 5:16, NRSV).

As churches with the vocation of peace, it is urgent to reclaim our prophetic mission of both calling attention to and denouncing the behavior that has normalized any form of violence that affects the bodies and lives of others.



Photo by Linda Shelly

Women from the Andean region gather for a photo after the Healthy Boundaries workshop.

Testimonies



"After 20 years of MTAL, I celebrate the beauty of the fabric. After 20 years, I am happily surprised to see the growth of that small seed that was planted at the Mennonite gathering in Uruguay, in the Southern Cone. An adventure began, and amid questions and much enthusiasm, I was challenged to be part of this movement. Through this process, I began to learn and grow through our collective building of knowledge and the strengthening of our bonds.

"My path has not been easy; I experienced obstacles, resistance and prejudice, together with my female companions, for having a voice that challenged dominant ones. However, on this journey, our fabric gradually filled with color."

— **Ester Bornes, Argentina**



"As part of MTAL, I have experienced a beautiful journey of learning, as well as spiritual growth, as I've shared with sisters from different countries. Praying for one another and listening to one another's teachings and testimonies is enriching and renews my hope and faith that there is an all-powerful God who works in each one of us in special ways. The experience of encouraging, writing and sharing a devotional was challenging and beautiful!

"I thank God for those courageous and faith-filled women who started this wonderful ministry and who, to this day, continue to face challenging circumstances. May our Lord continue to bless us."

— **Pamela Guevara Gutiérrez, Peru**



"I have yearned to see women involved in the ministry of our Lord Jesus Christ, and MTAL has been part of that vision. It has been a guide, a valuable resource, that opens the door for women to share their gifts and talents in the service of the kingdom.

"The challenge from MTAL to write and record devotionals motivated the women in Panama to replicate the idea and produce and share devotionals every day in our own language.

"It inspires and strengthens my whole soul to see the sisters work together, through teamwork and dedication, united in the same journey throughout Latin America!"

— **Alina Itucama, Panama**

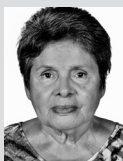


“Since I have been part of MTAL, my life has been full of learning. I have also been able to share what I have learned with other women from different churches and communities.

“MTAL is about learning, living together and accompanying one another in all circumstances: grief, joy, illness, etc. I call it ‘the transforming and healing community.’

“To be part of this movement is to have a big family in faith, as well as to gain new sisters and friends. Our communication, although virtual, is fluid and full of feeling — a fundamental part of good relationships.”

— **Martha del Carmen García, Nicaragua**



“MTAL is a space that challenges us and invites us not to give up along the way.

“I have had many experiences as a regional representative of MTAL. I have especially enjoyed compiling the writings of women, which gave birth to the devotional books. It has been enriching to investigate and deepen our understanding of the biblical text, following a common thread that responds to the liberating teaching of Jesus and our Anabaptist theology, both of which are themes throughout this movement.

“My experience as part of MTAL has been a journey of learning that encourages me to keep the flame of faith alive and to share this inspiration with others.”

— **Ondina Murillo, Honduras**



“In 2016, at a regional event, I connected and interacted with several leaders from our region, and I instantly fell in love with the movement. I began participating in its activities and representing it in my country.

“More than just conferences and seminars, MTAL represents a social and spiritual team that nourishes our total being. I am a witness, together with this group of women from more than 20 countries, of the restoring, healing, liberating, sustaining and saving power of Jesus, which has been manifested to hundreds of people during these past 20 years. MTAL has been God’s provision in my life!”

— **Vilma N. Rolón, Puerto Rico**

Plans and dreams

These first 20 years were just the beginning. MTAL is continuing its journey. It is important to celebrate the accomplishments, as well as recognize the desire to grow and invite more women to participate. Our dream is to see even more sisters studying theology and serving in leadership positions with their gifts, not only in their local churches and conferences but also within the global church. Additionally, the formation of a Global Anabaptist Women's Network remains a dream, as we recognize the value of cross-cultural relationships. MTAL has its roots in the Global Gifts Sharing Project of MWC, and indeed, the gifts that have been developed and shared during these 20 years are achievements that will continue to bear fruit, as we recognize the value of each person's gifts. "There is no longer Jew or Gentile, slave or free, male and female. For you are all one in Christ Jesus" (Galatians 3:28, NLT).



Photo by Laurie Oswald Robinson

Women from Africa, Asia, Europe and the Americas gather for a workshop, at MWC's 2015 Assembly in Pennsylvania, to discuss the formation of a Global Anabaptist Women's Network.

Timeline

Introduction: The movement of women (MTAL) has been like the ongoing metaphor of sowing and reaping (cf. Mark 4:26-29). Thanks to God's presence, this movement has become like a great fertile land. Now and then, the work is evaluated in preparation for a new sowing season: The land is plowed; we smell the fresh scent again; and we witness the fertile soil, through the gifts and participation of each sister. After 20 years of continuing to harvest and gather the fruits, we give thanks for the creator's wonderful presence among us. We keep asking: *Where shall we sow today?*

2002 background: Mennonite World Conference (MWC) took the initiative to select mostly women from Latin America to facilitate a series of workshops within the framework of the "Global Gifts Sharing Project." These workshops were held in various countries throughout Latin America, so that facilitators might discover and encourage the gifts of the communities of faith. This initiative helped hone the facilitators' skills, and some were invited to attend the 2003 MWC Assembly in Zimbabwe.

2003 Zimbabwe: At the MWC Assembly, Latin American women participated in workshops led by African women theologians. What they heard encouraged them to dream of a Latin American movement. Thus, they discussed and implemented this dream, and MTAL was born. Since then, more than 150 Latin American women have received scholarships to study theology, facilitating the formation of their gifts for leadership positions in the church.

2004 Venezuela: The first MTAL gathering was held in the context of a regional church meeting. The planning of special sessions for women has resulted in more than 20 regional MTAL gatherings, with the added benefit of an increase in the number of women present at the broader church meetings.

2007: John Driver was invited to facilitate a workshop titled "Woman and Man: Image of God" at the regional meeting of the Southern Cone churches in Uruguay. Driver granted MTAL permission to publish the material and add conclusions and study questions. Additionally, a theological meeting of women from Central America was held in the context of their regional church gathering known as CAMCA. At this gathering, presenters discussed the topic of domestic violence, a theme that, due to its importance, has continued to be addressed in some MTAL gatherings. A symbolic act of prayer closed the event, with men praying for women and vice versa.

2009 Paraguay: Women theologians from across Latin America convened for the first time, and they also shared theological presentations with African sisters. MTAL read a statement at the MWC Assembly, and four women were invited to officially participate in MWC commissions. MTAL continues to refer gifted and experienced women for the commissions. Three MTAL women are currently serving on MWC commissions, as of 2023.



Photo provided

Olga Piedrasanta, Ofelia García and Alix Lozano present a statement from MTAL at the 2009 MWC Assembly in Paraguay.

2010 Nicaragua: During the CAMCA regional meeting, MTAL presented its first book, *El mensaje liberador de Jesús para las mujeres hoy* (The Liberating Message of Jesus for Women Today). Additionally, the MTAL World Day of Prayer for Latin American countries began, and from then on, a prayer liturgy has been developed each year.

2013 Guatemala: The first Sister Care workshop was held in Guatemala, led by Rhoda Keener and Carolyn Heggen, to prepare Latin American facilitators. Materials were translated into Spanish and Portuguese, with contextual adaptations into Kekchi and Low German. More than 4,500 women in the region participated in the workshops, which contributed to stronger relationships and mutual listening and support. Celebrations for MTAL's first 10 years took place in multiple countries.

2014 Guatemala: A continent-wide MTAL meeting was held in the context of the Latin American Consultation. During this gathering, MTAL was reorganized, and more women were invited into leadership roles.



Photo provided

MWC General Secretary César García meets with some of the MTAL leaders to brainstorm strategies for increasing women's participation in MWC leadership.

2015: An MTAL gathering was held at the MWC Assembly in Harrisburg, Pennsylvania. The name was changed to *Movimiento de Mujeres Anabautistas Haciendo Teología desde América Latina* (Movement of Anabaptist Women Doing Theology from Latin America, MTAL). A strategic plan was developed, and a gathering was coordinated to form a

global network to include women from other continents.

2016: “*Cuidándonos entre mujeres*” (Sister Care) entered a new stage, with enriched material for facilitators. Linda Gehman Peachey also facilitated workshops in Brazil and Bolivia, based on her booklet, *Created Equal*. Participants also included brothers and sisters from other countries.

2017: The Prayer and Action Commission was created to replace the committee for the Day of Prayer. From then on, liturgies were developed with contextual themes, lessons on the same themes were added for children, and liturgies were translated into various languages. Accompaniment in prayer, continued fellowship and communication were all encouraged.

2018 Colombia: In the Andean Region, MTAL worked on the topic of healthy boundaries. In 2022, the manual, *La confianza sagrada: Límites saludables para el liderazgo en las iglesias* (Sacred Trust: Healthy Boundaries for Leadership in Churches) was published.

2020: In the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, times of prayers, songs, supportive accompaniments, communion, reflections and teachings on various topics, as well as WhatsApp groups, were created in virtual formats to support communication and prayer.

2021: Latin American Anabaptist women wrote the first devotional book, offering a year of reflections, with more than 300 women contributing to the process. The next two books also offered daily devotions, with each covering two years — 2022-2023 and 2024-2025. The reflections continue to be shared daily, in a video format, as well as being broadcast on two radio stations.

2022 Indonesia: MTAL participated in the MWC Assembly in Indonesia, including participation in assembly dispersed travel and various workshops. MTAL leaders evaluated the previous five years and prepared a new five-year strategic plan.

2023: Preparations were made for MTAL’s third devotional book, for 2024-2025, and MTAL celebrated its 20th anniversary.



Photo provided

In 2022, a group from MTAL enjoys the hospitality of the GITJ Banyutowo church in Indonesia before the MWC Assembly.

Questions for reflection and discussion

1. Listening to the experiences of African women theologians inspired Latin American women to form a movement. What does it take for an idea — a seed — to grow and flourish?
2. Rebeca González Torres (Mexico) wrote, “It does no good to have a gift that we keep to ourselves.” What do you see MTAL doing to lead the way, so that more women can develop and use their gifts in church leadership? What can you do to support other people’s gifts?
3. In Cindy Alpízar’s (Costa Rica) reflection, we find a list of women in the Bible who had an impact on society and their circle of friends. Who are the women who have had a positive impact in your church or community and serve as examples for other women?
4. Deusilene Martins Milhomem de Carvalho (Brazil) emphasizes the themes of *Cuidándonos entre mujeres* (Sister Care). There is no doubt that Sister Care has been a driving tool for MTAL and has brought healing and flourishing. If you have participated with Sister Care in your own context, what was the experience like, and what did its teachings produce? If not, do you want to learn more about it?
5. Colombian peace theologian Alix Lozano talks about misuse of power as the subjugation of the most vulnerable people, such as children, women, the sick or others in unsafe situations. What protocols, norms and practices have your local church established to regulate the use of power and care for the most vulnerable?
6. After having read the four reflections written by MTAL theologians, what has encouraged you to continue strengthening women in your own context?
7. During the pandemic, the use of technology gave MTAL the opportunity to broaden the movement. What did you gain from MTAL or other organizations making use of new ways of communicating during the health crisis?
8. MTAL has published three devotional books, with more than 300 women participating in their creation. How has the process of writing, reading or listening to these reflections, or other devotional books written by Anabaptist women, contributed to your life?



Fotografías compartidas

Encouraging women to study theology continues to be important to MTAL. Many have received scholarships from Mennonite Women USA, and others received scholarships from SEMILLA or other programs. Left: Colombian students who were awarded scholarships in 2013. Right: Women who graduated from SEMILLA's School of Justice and Peace in 2022.

For further reading

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Mennonite Mission Network website: The web page for the Movement of Anabaptist Women Doing Theology from Latin America (MTAL) includes a description of MTAL: <https://www.mennonitemission.net/partners/MTAL>; as well as various articles and videos: <https://www.mennonitemission.net/video/webinars/4741/Presentation-of-the-MTAL-devotional-book>.

Merienda Menonita, a podcast produced in Quito, Ecuador, episodes 11, 12, 34 and 87: <https://meriendamenonita.fireside.fm/episodes>.

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The *Missio Dei* series

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- No. 31** Linda Shelly, *Remembering forward: Celebrating a century of Mennonite ministry in Argentina* (2021)*
- No. 32** Movement of Anabaptist Women Doing Theology from Latin America (MTAL), *Women, 20 years of paving the way between dreams and hopes* (2023)*

*Available in Spanish.

Women, 20 years of paving the way between dreams and hopes

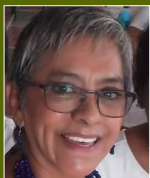
This booklet not only tells the story of the first 20 years of the Movement of Anabaptist Women Doing Theology from Latin America (MTAL), but it also bears witness to the theological work of women, through four theological reflections. Titles of the reflections were chosen to reflect some of the main themes that MTAL has focused on during the past two decades: “Discovering and using our gifts,” “Go and tell them! Leadership and Jesus’ liberating message,” “We are beloved daughters of God,” and “Healthy boundaries in power dynamics and sexuality in the church.” We invite you to study this booklet and reflect and dream with us.



Angela Opimi



Mary Cano



Ofelia García



Olga Piedrasanta



Ruhama Pedroza



Rebeca González



Cindy Alpizar



Deusilene Milhomem



Alix Lozano



Zarái Gonzalia

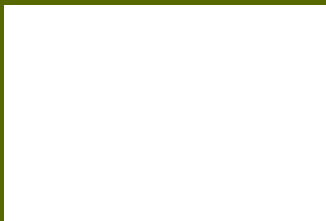


Linda Shelly



Rebekah York

Like all of MTAL's work, this booklet does not have only one author. It was written by a team that benefited from the feedback of one another. In the pictures above, the nine main writers are listed first, then comes Zarái Gonzalia, who coordinated the theological reflections; Linda Shelly, who coordinated with MTAL and Mennonite Mission Network; and Rebekah York, who translated this booklet from Spanish to English. This booklet also includes the testimonies of six sisters from different parts of Latin America.



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