

Stirrings: The Early Years

By Miriam K. Stern*

My early years: 1927-1944

*With each new stirring, we never know
the impact on us as we grow.*

I was the last of nine children. I was born on May 20, 1927, in Chambersburg, PA. My parents were Adam and Nellie Ausherman Knepper. In birth order we were Robert, Paul, Ruth (Hess), Charles, John, Lewis, Abner, Joseph, and me. With a stretch of five boys before I arrived, a girl must have been a surprise. My parents were both forty-five years old, and my father remarked at my birth, “This one is to take care of us in our old age.” I was named Miriam Naomi Knepper. Of the many nicknames my siblings called me, Mim is the one by which I am still casually known.

My earliest memory is of a family event when I was two years old. My oldest brother Robert and his bride, Mae, had returned from their honeymoon in Florida. My family was all gathered in the dining room of the old farmhouse eagerly listening to the details of their trip. Then the newlyweds started to hand out presents from their luggage for the young ones of the family. I don’t remember what my brothers received, but mine was a doll nicely displayed in its wrappings. I just stood there looking at it in the box. The sight of that twelve-inch doll was so overwhelming for me, a shy two-year-old, that I had to be told to take it out of the box. More important than what the doll wore, which I don’t remember, was the name that came with her, Flossie Flirt.

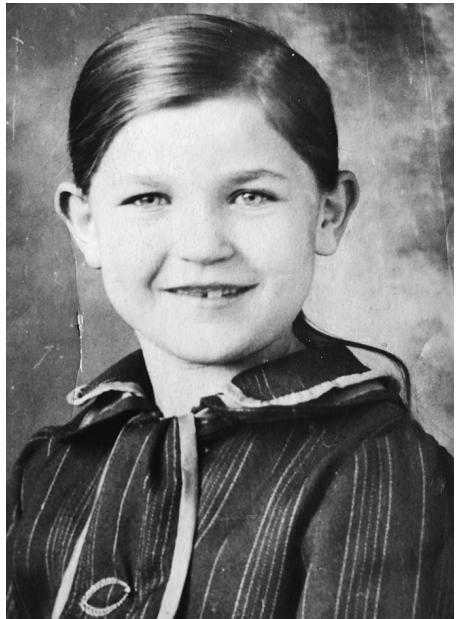
* Miriam K. (Mim) Stern served for many years as a missionary in Zimbabwe and Zambia, and then worked with international students in Philadelphia, PA. Now in her late nineties, she lives at Messiah Lifeways. This feature is the first section of her memoir, *Stirrings: Seventy-Plus Years in God’s Service*.

BRETHREN IN CHRIST
HISTORY & LIFE



The Adam Knepper family, 1931. Back row, left to right: Paul, John, Robert, Charles, Ruth. Middle row, left to right: Nellie (mother), Mim, Adam (father). Front row, left to right: Lewis, Joe, Abner.

Sometime later, the visiting evangelist came to our house for dinner. Giving attention to the little girl in the family, he asked me, “What is your dolly’s name?” I brightly said, “Flossie Flirt.” Of course, he laughed but my mother tried to shush me. I did not know why she did that. The name seemed all right to me before; it must have meant something I didn’t know about. Later, I remember I had another doll that my teenaged sister dressed to look like her name, Red Riding Hood.



Mim at age 6.

STERN: THE EARLY YEARS



The Knepper homestead, Chambersburg, PA.

In that era, children's games on the farm and at church were patterned after what the adults around them did. We played at "farms" where wooden stick animals stuck in the sand piles satisfied our image as owners of livestock. We knew funerals, with so many old relatives dying. And so we played "funerals." As one of us lay dead, another would solemnly say, "Yes, he looks very natural." Then the burst of laughter from all of us would finish that diversion. We played "butcher day." We knew the November butchering day very well when two hogs were slaughtered. I was often the pig caged under the big table with stout legs. After shooting the animal, it was important for the butchers to stick the pig to allow proper bleeding. My siblings enacted this step in the butchering process by vigorously tickling me under my chin. The game soon ended with me alive and well.

My only sister, Ruth, was fifteen when I was born. Africans speak of having a young mother, someone much younger than their mother. Ruth became like a young mother to me. I loved sitting on her lap, especially when she told stories of the elderly ladies under her care where she did home nursing. I was six when she married Eber Hess, the love of her life. He teased me, saying that he was taking her away and I could no longer sit on her lap; I quickly assured him I would come to their place and sit on her lap.

Even though I had so many brothers, I also had girl playmates. My

oldest brother Robert and his wife Mae with their growing family lived less than a mile from the Knepper homestead. The oldest daughter, Janet, made me an aunt at age three. In due time, Sylvia (Nichols), Pauline (Potteiger) and Fern (Musser) arrived so there many little girls in my life. Later, three more girls and one boy were added to that family: Lois (Wolgemuth), Beth, Nelson, and Anita (Stern).

When I was seven, I became an aunt again. My niece Betty (Hess) was born to my sister Ruth. Ruth's husband Eber was the janitor for the Duffield Elementary School next door to their home. It became easy for me to spend many overnights with them as grades 1-8 were in that same school. They lived only one mile away from our home, so fun times together happened often as my sister helped my mother with special projects, such as sewing. With our seven-year age gap, Betty would follow whatever silly thing I would suggest. She still reminds me that we once tried to get into ample Grandma's corset at the same time. We must have thought it was quite large. Two giggling little girls did not fit in that corset.

At school and church

I started first grade at Duffield Consolidated School about a mile from our home. With no pre-school or kindergarten, plus being very shy, I was ill-prepared for public school. I still can see myself in first grade, standing in a line, struggling to spell cat when my turn came. By third grade, I seemed to have awakened to a wider world. I remember loving the green geography book with stories about far-away places like Tibet, with *yurts* and *yaks* and other exotic new words. They stirred something in me like eight-year-old goose bump feelings of awe. I wonder now if I was the only one in my third-grade class who had these feelings. I also loved playing with my international paper dolls with native costumes that were cut-outs with little tabs for fastening onto the cardstock doll. Was kindling being laid in my heart and mind for a later missions fire?

Duffield Elementary School in my memory was a very safe and secure place as compared to some public schools today. There was always reverence for the Bible, daily recitation of the Lord's Prayer

and the pledge to the flag. We sang daily from the *100 Best Songs*. I remember many of those old songs and am amazed that many depicted the agony of parted lovers of which we glibly sang without understanding in our innocence. Sprinkled in among the secular songs were hymns of our Christian faith. We sang life as it was with both the holy and the profane.

A special highlight of my elementary school life was poetry. At one stage we were expected to learn one poem each month and recite it before the class. The poems were usually classics of a sort, driving home a moral or portraying the results of good or bad behavior. I still remember many of these poems and have used them to entertain children and even sometimes adults. One poem with four verses I especially remember is *They Didn't Think* by Phoebe Carey.

*Once a trap was baited with a piece of cheese,
It tickled so a little mouse, it almost made him sneeze.
An old rat said, "There's danger, be careful where you go."
"Nonsense," said the other, "I don't think you know."
So he walked in boldly, nobody was in sight.
First he took a nibble, then he took a bit.
Closed the trap together, snapped as quick as a wink.
Catching mousie fast there, because he didn't think.*

We attended the New Guilford Brethren in Christ Sunday School which became a wonderful social outlet to me and the ever-growing crop of Brethren in Christ church children in the 1930s. Chester Wingert, a young adult, used a great system of rewards that made Scripture memorization exciting for us. If we memorized certain passages, we got little blue and red tickets as rewards. I don't remember what we got for our tickets. I must have been one of Chester's avid students, as one Sunday he asked me unexpectedly to recite a portion of James 1 before the congregation. I should have had prior notice as it was not a perfect performance. I now smile to think of a nine-year old admonishing the brethren to "count it all joy when you fall into divers temptations" (James 1:2-3 KJV).

BRETHREN IN CHRIST
HISTORY & LIFE



Mim's Star Memory Certificate from 1936.

All my New Guilford peers were involved in memorizing five significant Bible portions for which we received a little diploma called "The Stars Memory Certificate." The required selections were the Lord's Prayer, the books of the Bible, the Twenty-Third Psalm, the Beatitudes, and the Ten Commandments. We got a star for each portion we memorized, and upon completion of the memory work the certificate would contain five brightly colored one-inch stars. According to my framed certificate, I was nine years old when I achieved this goal. In my adult years, I looked for a similar learning tool for use in children's church but found nothing. I feel these fundamentals should be part of the church children's curriculum during a person's optimal learning years.

I was ten years old when I responded to my mother's nudging to go forward to the altar during a revival meeting at the Five Forks Brethren in Christ Church. The evangelist was the Rev. Allen Brubaker. Asking Jesus into my heart added fuel to my love for Bible knowledge. Soon

after the revival meeting, I was baptized in a flowing stream at Ambrose Myers's farm. In those days, church membership followed baptism. I now had to wear the prayer covering to church and school and other events outside my home. With deacon parents, I didn't have a choice to do otherwise. How many girls of my generation cringed at the thought of going to school wearing a covering and looking so different while the boys looked like all the other boys! Some things in my life did not seem fair, and this matter of dress was one. My girl friends from our church were going through the same feelings at their schools. I look now at the wedding picture of my parents in which my mother was dressed in the fashion of the day. I wish I would have asked her how she felt when it was required that, for church membership, she had to conform in dress into the plain woman that I knew.

A highlight of my mother's year was attendance for part of a week at Roxbury Camp. This was my mother's vacation and was possible because we had a hired girl from the Florin Orphanage (later called the Messiah Children's Home) helping us on the farm during those years. I went with my mother, excited to stay in the big tent where she rented space for us. That was before RVs and the hotel. My favorite attraction at camp was the creek where Lois Wenger (Martin) and I would play. We loved to skip from rock to rock and sometimes our missed footings meant wet dresses. When I turned eleven, my parents and I decided that we no longer needed a hired girl. I thought I could stay home from Roxbury and cook for the men of the family and let mother go to camp. She allowed me to do it, with her careful instruction and preparation. I did make some salty mistakes: I did not think through the fact that cured ham needed no salt. The feedback from my brothers was loud. My brother Charles, number three of the seven brothers, showed mercy for his kid sister when he said, "She didn't know." For that, I loved him forever. My father did not attend Roxbury. He thought it was too noisy.

High school years

The summer I was thirteen years of age I was finally old enough to

attend the annual Junior Youth Conference held at Messiah College. I was very excited about this event. Professor Earl Miller taught us a beautiful song, which I in turn taught to many young people during my life. It goes like this:

*As the moon reflects the light of the sun she adores,
and travels around the wide world,
Let me Lord, in my life, reflect the light of Thy love,
As I too go around the wide world.*

In my adult years, I have been surprised that I have not found anyone in my peer group who remembers that song. Why did it sink so deep in me that I taught it to so many others? Early missional stirrings?

Chambersburg High School was five miles away from my home—a distance that made it difficult to participate in extra-curricular school activities. There were always daily chores, both before and after school. When we began using electric milkers, my job was to clean the milking equipment before leaving for school, which is why I often ran down the lane to catch the bus. Also, if I attended after-class activities, I could miss the bus home. Five miles was a long walk home. Another obstacle to my participation in school plays and choirs was the church's stance on what was considered worldly. My church membership mandate on the covering and plain clothes kept girls from doing what the heart wished to do. I anticipated going to Messiah Academy for my senior year, which I saw as a place of sheer utopia with freedom to participate in whatever was offered. And maybe, in time, even my plain clothes could be shed and replaced with attire more in keeping with the times.

However, there were good times among the plain folks. Solomon Wingert, at the New Guilford Church, started singing classes for young people. I was a pre-teen riding along with my four brothers to these singing classes. Learning the “do, re, mis” was precursor to a later weekly Friday night singing school in the elementary Duffield Consolidated School. This was led by Bishop Laban Wingert. He gave instruction on the rudiments of staff notation from a large chart. The “Time and Tune” was our songbook. Here a roomful of young adults could sing, in four parts, the do re mis just as well as the words. At

a time when movies were not yet accepted in the area, this singing school provided a social outlet for young adults from the Mennonite, Brethren in Christ, and Church of the Brethren groups. From this mix of young people with similar faith practices, relationships grew that led to marriages. I heard that in later years, Nelson Wingert, the son of the teacher, had a reunion of those singers of the “Time and Tune” but I was always too far away to attend.

Missional influences at home

My mother influenced me greatly. I did not realize it at the time. The salvation of her nine children was of prime importance to her. We all heard our names mentioned in our daily morning family prayer time. She also read many of the library books I brought home from school, reading long after my father had gone to bed. Was she wanting to know what I was reading, I wonder? She wanted her children to have more education than her eight grades. Growing up in the middle of thirteen siblings, she helped care for the younger ones. Her last-born siblings attended Shippensburg Normal and became teachers

I believe that mother also had the teaching genes. It showed when she corralled her children on Saturday after lunch to teach them the next day’s Sunday school lesson. She hoped that her children would become active participants in the Sunday school class. I seemed to have gained more from this opportunity to learn than my brothers. Was it because their father was on his bed taking a nap? Maybe. Mother was adamant that her farmer sons would attend the annual Winter Term at Messiah College. When a Teacher Training Course sponsored by Asa Climenhaga was offered as a night class at our church, mother in her fifties was right there in the class. I, about six years old, went with her and slept on the church bench. Was a variant of osmosis happening?

Mother said she felt a call to missions; I don’t know at what point this call came. She was a farmer’s wife, already with many children, and with a meager education. She reasoned that since she could not answer the call herself, it would come through her children. As she watched each child grow, did she wonder if this might be the one God

would call? She certainly gave me good opportunity to gain some skills in serving others, and not only at home. She took me with her when visiting shut-ins in the community. I was usually assigned to wash up the dishes in the kitchen sink, and if the lady was bed-ridden, to wash her back. I was learning to serve.

My father did not feel the same mission calling as my mother, but he supported anything having to do with the call of the Lord. He had been a board member of the Mont Alto State Bank for many years. When the president of the bank died, he became the vice president. In time, he moved into the office of president. In his nineties, when he could no longer drive, someone would pick Dad up to appraise properties, clad in his plain coat and black hat. I learned that there were times at the bank when two members of the team of officers opposed each other. Dad took a neutral position and kept the two factions from disrupting the business operations of the bank. Perhaps that was the reason he remained in office as president until he died at ninety-seven years of age. Was that his mission field?

Through my teen years, I had stirrings of having a home someday where I could extend hospitality, not necessarily feeding many people, but giving people a welcoming place to stay—maybe like a B and B. That was heart preparation for much of my adult life. There were times I could describe our home as Grand Central Station. As for a profession, I was strongly influenced by a lady in my home church who trained as a nurse at Lankenau School of Nursing in Philadelphia. With so many teachers in my mother's family, a change of profession appealed to me.

College years, 1944-1949

Delight yourself in the Lord and he will give you the desires of your heart (Psalm 37:4).

After three years at Chambersburg High School, my dream of attending Messiah College came true when I enrolled as a senior at Messiah Academy for the fall of 1944. At Chambersburg High School, I was in the academic program, but at Messiah I could include typing,

much to my delight. With so many new church friends, it was almost like a magnet to continue on with them, after graduation, to Junior College at Messiah.

Junior College opened new vistas to those of us from rural areas, especially in music. Thanks to Professor Earl Miller, many of us had our first introduction to classical music, both religious and secular. It was a new day when farm young people could join in singing Handel's Messiah in the Forum in Harrisburg. I heartily enjoyed participation in quartettes and choral groups. It was wonderful to be a student at Messiah College.

As my freshman year ended, many of my college friends were taking summer jobs in exciting places like Cape Cod and Martha's Vineyard. I wanted to join them in a summer job in a faraway place, but my mother said that she didn't want to lose me sooner than necessary. She suggested I look for something closer home. So, I did!

Summer job

In the local newspaper, there it was! They needed a cook. Four elderly spinsters in the nearby Caledonia Mountains had lost their tried-and-true middle-aged cook. Would I dare to try—a farmer's daughter knowledgeable about milking cows and feeding hungry brothers? I applied.

Dad was willing to fuel my desire to try my away-from-home wings. He drove his youngest child in the old black Chevy seven miles down Route 30 to Caledonia to the Dock mountain residence. We wended our way up the long winding lane to the big dark sprawling house on the hill, almost hidden from the road below. The huge verandah wrapped around most of the house, enveloping the inner chambers in an eerie darkness. The setting seemed good for a mystery story to be read on a rainy afternoon. Need I say that I had butterflies in my stomach?

We were greeted at the door by a tiny slightly hunched lady of eighty years or more, one of five sisters. She was impressive in a modest dress of navy blue with a bit of white lace at her throat and a

white triangular piece on her head. Her skin, weathered by many suns, reminded me of the potatoes that had wintered in our ground cellar on the farm.

Her share of the household workload seemed to include hiring domestics. She was amiable and articulate as she posed the terms of my possible employment. “Miriam, I think you’ll do,” she said, closing the interview. This was my introduction to Miss Lavinia Dock, RN.

Coming to work on the designated day, I was assigned to the servant’s quarters up a flight of steps. I had a bedroom and living room, albeit both small, and a bath. How different from the world I knew. I liked it.

I learned that earlier in the century the Dock family had lived in Harrisburg, Pennsylvania. This Caledonia mountain home was just their summer residence when life in the city became too hot and unbearable. Financial reverses during the Depression years necessitated that they maintain only one home. Their choice to live in the mountain residence was probably the lesser expensive of the two.

One needs to meet the rest of the household to fully appreciate Lavinia: she stood out in sharp contrast to the other sisters. Emily, the youngest of the five sisters, was the one in charge of meal preparation and cooking. She was pleasantly plump with an oft-furrowed brow, indicative of the degree of responsibility she felt for this aging household. She usually spent a good part of the morning deciding what they should eat, then calling in the order to the nearby country store. It was quickly delivered by the ready-on-demand taxi driver, the same one who later picked me up every Monday morning at my Duffield home. Food preparation was an education in itself. I think Emily kindly tolerated me as a young thing having much to learn. Country-cooking I knew, but not quite the same in this household. I don’t think my brothers would have relished braised liver, done in the oven.

Then there was Laura, tall and elegant. I was slow to catch on, even on our walks on the trails together, that she was deaf. I sensed that she cared deeply that I would not be lonely in this house where youth was

a scarce commodity. She said she liked my colorful skirts.

Soon after I joined their ranks, the eldest sister, in her nineties, died. She was embalmed in her bed. Although I had not met her before she died, the sisters asked if I would like to see their deceased one. I was appreciative of their thoughtfulness, and also very curious as I tiptoed upstairs with my escorts. I found it both interesting and a bit weird to see this dead woman all fixed up in her bed. I learned that she had been influential in the Pennsylvania State Forestry Department. She was praised for her kindness to the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) boys who had served in the war but found employment with the Forestry Department. One sister had died long ago. The only brother, a doctor, lived in California with his wife and two sons.

Lavinia was always busy, usually tending to a multitude of small concerns. She had an uncanny sense of knowing when a situation needed a little help, which was fortunate for me. This was the era when wood-burning ranges were on the way out, but their kitchen had not yet been modernized. What did I know of chimneys, flues, and drafts? Little did I realize that this was part of my preparation for life in Africa six years later. It was Lavinia to my rescue with that wood stove. I can hear her admonishing me in a singsong tone, "First, you gotta' get a good hot fire," over and over again. I actually heard her chanting those lines to herself one day as she pruned the clematis vines on the porch.

She seemed less foreboding to me than the other sisters. One day I confessed to her my clumsiness in accidentally breaking a pretty little dish. She quickly comforted me, saying, "Why Miriam, if we never broke anything, there'd be no reason to buy anything new." That made sense to me. And another time my efforts in making pie crust ended in dough so short that it had to be put into the pan in pieces. Lavinia loved it, declaring that she would like a pie that was just crust.

It quickly became obvious to me that the sisters felt uncomfortable having a college student maid eating in the kitchen by herself. Actually, I preferred it that way and continued doing so. I think really in the end it was more comfortable for all of us. Lavinia showed her dislike of class

distinction when she breezed into the kitchen announcing, “Miriam, I think we should have a song fest tonight.” And we did. It was almost a disgrace to the grand piano, between my mediocre skill in playing and Lavinia’s former expertise in playing, which she said was reduced to a sad slow hymn. What we lacked in skilled performance we made up for in appreciation of the real thing, a live performance.

Lavinia invited me to read any book in their library. Well-filled book shelves occupied a large section of one wall. My appetite for classical music had been whetted in my class Introduction to Music at college; here I could read to my heart’s content. Interestingly, to be sure I wouldn’t miss it, Lavinia laid out a special book, *A History of Nursing*, by Nutting and Dock. I was not as captivated by it as by the music menu. That book came back to haunt me in a few years.

As I worked in the kitchen, I often noticed people appearing at the back door. Lavinia would meet them and then disappear upstairs somewhere. After a while she would appear with an assortment of things ready for their second life, such as clothing, books, or a useful gadget. No one went away empty-handed.

Summer ended and it was time for me to go back to college. It had not been an easy summer for the Dock sisters, with their sister’s death and a novice cook. Perhaps the young country girl had provided some diversion to their otherwise mundane days. It was a good experience for me that I was to appreciate more later. God works in mysterious ways to do what he has in mind.

Meeting Pete and his family and church influences, 1946-1950

*We cannot imagine when young and naïve,
The impact of our fathers’ faith,
God’s will to achieve.*

In my teens I had heard of Pete Stern but had never met him. Since he figured largely in my life, let me introduce him.

Pete’s family background

Ira Musser Stern was born to Earl and Martha Stern of Roaring Spring, Pennsylvania on June 17, 1923. He was their second child,

a second son. He was born during the Roaring Twenties when the country had revived from the First World War but before the Great Depression. There were many inequities in the economy. While some families enjoyed upscale living, it was not so with many farmers. The E. K. Stern family grew to include five sons and two daughters: Aaron Hoffman, Ira Musser, Mary Kathryn (Long), Earl Irvin, Lucille Martha (Ulery), James Myron, and Jacob Harold. The older generation knew Pete as Ira Musser, but along the way, perhaps in college, he became known as Pete.

When Pete was eleven, the Earl K. Stern family moved from Blair County to Nittany Valley, Mill Hall, PA. This move was in response to the request of a close friend, the Rev. Henry Miller, who wanted help in growing a small rural church in the central part of Pennsylvania, in Clinton County, the Cedar Springs Church. Pete realized many years later that it was missionary genes that caused his parents to answer God's call and leave the comforts of electricity, running water and indoor plumbing to a house with none of those.

Before the family's move to Clinton County, there was much discussion between parents and children as to which farm should be bought. There were two choices. Mother Stern favored the one on the high ground near the Cedar Springs Church, a little brick church by a stream, thinking of the spiritual development of the children. The boys wanted the rich river bottom farm on the island in the Susquehanna River near Lock Haven, thinking of the joys of the wide river. During a revival meeting while staying in the Stern home, Bishop Dave Eyster suggested drawing lots. The lot was drawn during the family morning prayers. Papers indicating the two farm choices were placed in the Bible. Dad said Mother should draw first. She got her motherly desire of the farm on the high ground near the church, which allowed the children to thrive in the Cedar Springs Church.

It was not surprising then, that at one time six of the seven Earl Stern children were in some form of mission or church-related work. I remember Dad Stern quoting 3 John 4, "I have no greater joy than to hear that my children are walking in the truth."

My family background

Both Pete and I had German ancestry. Research says that both the Sterns and Kneppers left the German motherland for religious reasons: believers' baptism and refusal to carry the sword, both of which were contrary to the standards of the Reformed Church.

My eighth great grandfather, Wilhelm Knepper, was one of six twenty-somethings who spent four years in the German Julich prison in the eighteenth century. It is recorded that Wilhelm wrote four hundred hymns while in prison. I have one in my possession but, having been translated from the German to English, it is not easy to sing. These young men were granted their freedom if they left the country. Neighboring Holland accepted Anabaptists and there Wilhelm met Veronica who became his wife. In time, this couple found passage with leader and fellow believer, Alexander Mack, on The Allen, a ship bound for Philadelphia. Their arrival was in September 1729. While I was living in Philadelphia, I visited the Philadelphia Genealogical Society and was excited to photocopy Wilhelm's signature from the ship's log. This group of immigrants was known as the German Baptist Brethren, the church of my father's family. I'm delighted that Jordan Knepper, a great grandnephew, is researching Wilhelm's life as an Anabaptist in Germany.

In 1882, my mother Nellie was born to Lewis and Hannah Ausherman of Chambersburg, PA, the middle child of thirteen siblings. The Ausherman parents were members of the Brethren in Christ Church. Sadly, in that era, there was no church activity for church young people. When the big brothers were restless for some social activity, Grandpa mentioned that the United Brethren Church up the road had something going. That was the end of the boys' interest in the little white church of the Brethren in Christ down the road. When Sunday School began in 1907 at New Guilford, Grandpa and Grandma Ausherman, realizing that most of their children had been lost from the Brethren in Christ Church, enthusiastically became involved with this new Sunday school movement. Grandpa became the Sunday school superintendent and Grandma became a teacher. I

was surprised to learn this fact many years later as a missionary on furlough when Levi Wingert informed me that my grandmother had been his Sunday School teacher. As I was one of Grandma's younger grandchildren, I remembered her only as a crippled old woman. When my parents married, they in time became strong Brethren in Christ members. The succeeding generations of the large families of the Kneppers, Wingerts, and Sollenbergers brought rapid growth to the little white New Guilford church through the Sunday School movement.

The Sunday School movement seemed to herald many new activities for youth who would be the church of tomorrow. Youth were encouraged to enter our church colleges even if they were not preparing for special ministry in the church. I was fortunate to be a young person in the 1940s who was in college with no specific ministry in mind.

Meeting Pete

In the summer of 1946, General Conference convened at Manheim Brethren in Christ Church in Lancaster County. In those days, with very few youth-related activities in the church, young people enjoyed attending the church's annual meeting. During this conference, Pete Stern got up courage to ask me to go for a ride in his maroon Fleetline Chevy. It seems that I was on his mind for some time, having seen me at church-wide events at Messiah College. Conversation flowed freely as we seemed to have similar thinking on many subjects. However, thoughts of marriage were not on the radar because Pete was serious about pursuing a college degree. I had another year of Junior College before entering nursing school.¹

On our first date, Pete told me that, upon completion of his high school years at Messiah four years previously, he had been adamant that his school life was over forever. It was easy for him to settle down on the Stern potato farm where there was always profitable work.

¹ A note on the extra mileage of the maroon *Fleetline*: Dick Long, a hometown boy who later became a pastor, and Dave McBeth, a Messiah college friend, mentioned that they borrowed that car for dates.

Near the end of those four years, however, something strange began stirring within him, nudging him to consider registering for the 1946 school year at Messiah College. The college was just opening the four-year degree program. He wondered whether he should follow these inner promptings that were outside his usual thinking. During these years he had been deferred from the military draft due to farming. If he decided to return to school, it had to be for theological training. With his former pronouncements laid aside, he surprised himself and registered for the four-year Religious Education program. He was now in college for the long haul.

I had another year at Messiah College, which gave us a year together on campus to learn to know each other. We used it well. Registering in the Religious Education program meant that Pete had to take Greek. While he was taking first year Greek and I was in my second year Greek, it seemed reasonable that I coach him. Alas, poor concentration on the part of both student and “teacher” did not give the best results. Then there was Study Hall, a quiet place where you could observe mannerisms missed in lively conversation. Pete had a car that made attending activities outside the campus a good time for dates.

Pete thrived at Messiah College. He was thrilled with his course on Conducting Music. Professor Earl Miller allowed him opportunity to become student director of Male Chorus. Pete loved it. Favorable comments on his performance from his professor were worth more than gold; he thrived on it. Pete at this time had stirrings to become a singing evangelist, a person who travelled with an evangelist as a song leader. However, this never materialized.

Revival meetings at Messiah College were special times of heart searching, especially if students had not made a full consecration to the Lord. It seemed to Pete and me that “missions” demanded the deepest “yes” of all commitments to the Lord. To young men like Pete, with prospects of a farm of their own someday, this choice could be a big struggle. Answering a call to the mission field was something in the back of my mind, but only if the door opened wide. I wanted to be

sure before declaring to anyone that I was going to be a missionary. To Pete's farmer mind, the thought of missions in far-away Africa was less appealing than serving in the United States.

Nursing school

By the end of one year together at Messiah, even though our relationship was growing serious, I registered to enter Lankenau School of Nursing in inner Philadelphia in September 1947. Lankenau Nurses' Training School was founded by John Lankenau. He was told that if he wanted his hospital to succeed, he should get the Lutheran church's support. He followed through with this recommendation that brought many Lutheran deaconesses from Germany to serve in the school. They were careful to see that student nurses were surrounded with godly influences. During the Tuesday evening chapel service, I gained an appreciation for the Lutheran liturgy and worship, very different from my Brethren in Christ experiences.

Many of my classmates were Lutheran girls from the Pennsylvania coal mining area, just out of high school, simple and naïve to city ways. My roommate, Frances Brouse, was a devout Lutheran. We were both two years older than most of our class. Our class had great camaraderie with many food fests in our room. We had lots of goodies from Fran's parents' bakery in Lebanon, and I enjoyed preparing home soul food. At such times we would break out into barber-shop-type harmony. It's interesting that three of our group married ministers.



Mim as a nursing student.

As probationary students, we donned our blue and white striped uniforms, white stockings, and white Oxford shoes. One of our first classes was “History of Nursing,” taught by Sr. Anna Ebert, one of the deaconesses. When she issued our textbook, *A History of Nursing* by Nutting and Dock, lights flashed in my mind—first, to think that all summer I had lived with humble Miss Dock, the co-author of that textbook, and second, that I was too naïve to realize greatness when I lived among it.

I did the logical thing. I wrote to Miss Dock, expressing my extreme delight in finding her book as our chief nursing history resource, trying to make up for the naivete of my earlier days. She responded warmly, assuring me of her joy that I had entered the nursing profession. Her impression was that whatever I did in the future would be something with purpose. I read that although she had been a church organist, she had never claimed membership in a church but felt the teachings of Jesus would make the world a better place. She showed me humble greatness, choosing at one time to work among the poor and immigrants. She and others of her profession and time fought for women’s right to vote. She made a difference in my life, and many others.

New stirrings during Christmas 1947

Over Christmas of 1947, I was home after my first four months of nurses’ training. Pete had come to spend Christmas Day with my family. In the evening everyone had gone home, my parents had gone to bed, and we at last were alone. After the year at Messiah College, living in such close proximity, we were learning to deal with the miles between us and it felt especially good to be together again. We were happily catching up on what was happening in our lives. Around midnight, Pete courageously acted on his intention, when to my surprise he slipped onto his knees in front of me and asked me if I would marry him. I was taken a little off guard as I had just started nurse’s training that September, but I said yes I would marry him, but not quite yet. This was before engagement and wedding rings were accepted in



Pete as a teacher.

the Brethren in Christ Church. Instead of a ring, Pete produced a beautiful lady's Hamilton watch from somewhere, which he lovingly placed on my wrist. Outside beautiful snow had begun to fall: a benediction on our love and our intentions to wed. I returned to Lankenau Hospital in due time as another engaged trainee, but determined not to marry until I finished training. I was not favorably impressed by those who married before finishing their course.

One day the Lutheran sister leading our regular Bible Study casually mentioned something about me being a missionary. Why did she say that? I had never talked about mission work with her. I remembered my mother saying that one must live close enough to the Lord to hear his voice. The call can come many ways through God's people. The sister had it right, as both my roommate Frances and I ended up as missionaries in Africa, Frances in Liberia and I in the Rhodesias.

When people in my home community learned that I was dating Pete and also training as a nurse, a common reaction I heard about was, "What's the use of that? She'll just get married anyway." That feedback made me determined to use my profession in some significant way, maybe doing relief work in Europe following World War II's devastation. I was leery of speaking of missions for two reasons. I had no special revelation from God as yet, and there were those who said they were going and never went. I felt it was bad publicity to say you were called and then never follow through. I thought this lack of commitment supported a faddish "missions fever" which seemed to result in a lot of talk and no action. I had another question. Was I "saintly" enough to be a missionary? Our love letters during those

years were peppered with conversations indicating that Christian ministry was lurking in both our thinking. Then there was a popular song I enjoyed:

*Far away places, with strange sounding names,
Far away over the sea,
Those far-away places I've been reading about,
are calling, calling me.*

During my training days in the OR, while doing menial tasks like cleaning up after surgery, we would sing the popular song, "I can dream, can't I?" I had lots of time to dream, wondering if Pete and I would be a good a match.

We grew up 125 miles apart, not knowing the other existed, but had very similar backgrounds. We both grew up on farms with strong work ethics and many siblings, both came from strong plain Brethren in Christ homes, both sets of parents were deacons, both accepted Jesus as Savior in their pre-teens, both lived during the Great Depression and with the results of World War I, and both often ate cornbread and milk for supper on summer evenings. Importantly, both attended Messiah College. Would all those commonalities make a good match?

Research says that for spouses with similar backgrounds, there is good communication about 80 percent of the time. We learned and accepted that we had different ways of thinking and acting. I could multi-task, and Pete could not. This difference showed up when Pete asked if he could help with a meal. He did not want four orders at once: after one job was done, he was ready for the second. Pete was quicker with big decisions, while I was quicker with small decisions. Perhaps for us it was a gender issue. I would describe that our working together through the years was like a hand in a glove. Our differences got the work done.

More stirrings

During Pete's years at Messiah College, he, among others, was greatly influenced by Charles and Mary Eshelman. They had just returned from the African mission field and came on staff at the

college with an eye for young prospective missionaries. Before the Eshelmans had their own car, Pete provided transportation for them to their speaking engagements, and in turn, enjoyed Mary's yummy pies. I think the couple filled a certain gap in Pete's life created by me being in Philadelphia. Charles Eshelman had a great sense of humor that may have brushed off on Pete and his roommate J. Robert Lehman. They dubbed their college room "the Vatican," with Pete as the pope and Bob as the bishop. The Eshelmans became a valuable resource to us as our stirrings kept moving us in new directions towards the mission God had for us together.

Summers during the college years usually found the Stern boys back home in the island farmhouse, working in the E. K. Stern & Sons potato enterprise. Pete utterly enjoyed driving the tractor, plowing those fertile flat fields on the island farm. But there was a usually a disconcerting tug, a stirring, at his heart whispering, "Is this how you are meant to spend your life?"

The summer of 1950 turned out to be different. These stirrings were causing changes in Pete's usual pattern of summer activity. Pete had just graduated with from Messiah College with a Bachelor of Religious Education degree. During college, he had become good friends with Raymond Hess, a building contractor from Souderton, near Philadelphia. Raymond invited Pete to work with him for the summer in building construction. God in his wisdom knew that Pete would need those building skills in God's work later. A further attraction of that job was that I was in nurses' training in



Mim as a "probie" nurse.

Philadelphia, only an hour away by train. So often we mistake God's schemes as our schemes. Raymond and Ruth Hess became very special friends, hosting me many weekends.

That following September 1950, I gained the coveted RN diploma and pin from Lankenau Nursing School. On the night of my graduation, in my speech as editor of our yearbook, *The Xray*, my theme was "little things." I found that little things make the difference in the ratings of a good nurse. Little things also affect our service to the Lord. Pete and I had now completed both of our education programs: what was to keep us now from entering life together for keeps?

Marriage and hearing God's voice, 1950-1952

A month after my graduation from Laukenau, on October 14, 1950, we were married in the United Brethren Fetterhoff Chapel just up the road from my own church, the New Guilford Brethren in Christ. The elders at New Guilford had vetoed my request to bring a little portable organ into the church to enhance our wedding music—hence our wedding in the United Brethren Chapel that allowed organ music. The simplicity of my white satin gown, which I made, with no veil did not detract from the beauty of the moment that made us one. Pete's older brother Rev. Aaron Stern was the officiant and his brother-in-law Rev. Alden Long read "How Do I Love Thee?" by Elizabeth Barrett Browning. One unique and very appropriate wedding present from our good friends and mentors, the Eshelmans, was a pair of graceful African kudu carvings. Was there a stirring message there?



Pete and Mim on their wedding day, October 14, 1950.

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The Knepper-Stern wedding party, October 14, 1950.

Our reception was at College Inn in Chambersburg near Wilson College. My training classmates thought they were having fun by adding items to our suitcases. How embarrassed they were to learn that the luggage they molested was not ours but belonged to guests in the Inn. We did the necessary apologies and the guests took it all in fun.

After a short honeymoon, because it was potato harvest time, we happily settled down on Dad Stern's river-bottom farm into the old farmhouse on the island in the Susquehanna River. Dad Stern had bought this farm after first buying the farm nearer the church. The island farmhouse was a perfect catchall for the Stern college crowd home for the summer where there was always ready employment in the family potato industry. Now we were happy newly-weds alone on this island in the Susquehanna River. Sounds perfect, doesn't it?

Hearing God's voice

. . . then the flood would have swept us away. . . . (Psalm 134:4)

How romantic it all seemed! It was November. Just one month before, we had said our "I dos" and blissfully moved into the old farmhouse, all to ourselves.

The house furnishings were a miscellaneous assortment of whatever people wanted to give away when they replaced old stuff with new. There was an old comfy maroon sofa that still had some mileage left. The real find was the old piano-cum-organ that provided much enjoyment for us amateur musicians. The kitchen appliances, stove and refrigerator, were current models. There was a room for a bath upstairs, but it had no fittings yet. We did have an outhouse. The clothesline was anchored at the one end to our house and at the other end to the outhouse. Little did we realize that this home with simple furnishings, or lack thereof, served its purpose as training for this young couple in what was to come. In time we made improvements, but for the moment we prolonged our honeymoon there.

That fall the rain was heavier than usual. In fact, there were strong predictions that the Susquehanna River would flood again. One morning we were unexpectedly awakened from our lethargy when deacon Alfred Whitesel from the church came rushing up to the porch to warn us to get out of the house and off the island as soon as possible. The river was rising rapidly and would soon crest at flood stage. Now one Stern boy had his desire to live by a river, a raging one.

We hurriedly carried the things that we could manage to move upstairs. The big stuff was left in place—it would just have to get wet. We rescued our brother-in-law Al Long's college/seminary papers, stashed in an empty room. While we waited for the men to have things ready to leave the island for higher ground, my sister-in-law Lucy (Ulery) and I cozied ourselves on the studio couch reading *Why the Chimes Rang*. That couch got wet in the flood, dried out, and later used by the Cedar Springs pastor, Henry Miller Jr., and his wife Martha.

After four days of refuge with the Stern parents on the farm on high ground, we returned to clean up the mess. It was not for the

faint of heart, but we were young and strong. A large mass of debris near the back door had been caught by the clothesline, and the pile quickly froze. We walked around that huge pile all winter. Fortunately, with the freezing cold, there was no smell to indicate what might have been in the trash all around the island. Inside the house, we measured the water line on the wall at thirty inches. Upon opening the cellar door, corn cobs greeted us at the top step, and we were chagrined to find that the new furnace Dad Stern had installed was engulfed in water. The men brought the potato sprayer close to the house and ingeniously siphoned water from the cellar, using it to hose down the mud on the walls and furniture. With no bathroom plumbing indoors, we relied on the outhouse at the end of the clothesline. We figured that the clothesline tied to the outhouse had probably kept the outhouse from floating down the river. Thank God for little blessings. But now, indications showed that the water had been to the eaves of the little shanty—a nasty sight to behold. Carbolic acid killed the smell and some muscle-scrubbing activity got that outhouse in operation pretty quickly.

Serious stirrings

One day after the water had receded, while ambling along the river, I noted bits of small furniture that had been washed from peoples' houses, now caught in the bushes. A thought stirred within me and would not leave, "You could work all your life and it could wash down the river." This thought kept resonating with me, together with all those questions concerning the future we had entertained before we wed. When I shared my fresh awakening with Pete, he again had to deal with those earlier stirrings while on the tractor: is this really where God wants me? I also had blurred images of nursing in places other than in my hometown hospital. Our hearts were warming. God was speaking.

Pete and I attended the Messiah College Winter Bible Conference a few months later, in February 1951. We listened to Mary Kreider report on her missionary work as a teacher in Africa. She raised three

specific needs for the mission field: men, nurses, and young couples to work with young people. She hit a target. “We’re all of those,” we said. Our ears were hearing God’s message much more clearly than before.

Because of Pete’s close bond with Charles and Mary Eshelman, we rushed to them with our fresh revelation. They already had their mission eyes on us but were waiting for God to give us the message with the help of that wedding gift, the pair of animal carvings. They advised us to see the Mission Board. We quickly made an appointment to do so.

To us young people, the Mission Board in those days seemed to be composed of austere mature men, but we felt a warmth as chairman Graybill Wolgemuth, with his usual smiling composure, extended his hand to welcome us. The Mission Board felt keenly that missions could only continue if there were young recruits. Perhaps we were one answer to their prayers. The board advised Pete to obtain teaching credentials so he could qualify to teach in the Rhodesian schools run by our missions. Pete immediately registered at Lock Haven State Teachers’ College and obtained those credentials within two years. Up the hill from the college was the local hospital where I worked.

Later in life, in counselling young people trying to discern God’s will for their lives, I used the image of the lights on the landing strip, safely guiding an incoming plane. The lights must be in order. Three criteria worked in our case: The Word of God, the circumstances, and the affirmation of trusted people. Christian missions must be based on the Word of God. This does not discredit the many service-minded people/organizations who respond to the dire needs of global society.

Two special years at Cedar Springs Church

As newlyweds, it was great being a part of Pete’s home church at Cedar Springs for the two years before leaving for Africa. It was a small red brick church by a small stream with much stirring of the Spirit and great camaraderie among the people. From the families of Sterns, Longs, Robbs, Whitesels, and Millers, a young adult choir was formed to accompany Rev. Henry Miller’s weekly radio broadcast, “Glad Tidings”. The program opened with:

*O Zion haste, Thy mission high fulfilling,
To tell to all the world that God is Light;
That He who made all nations is not willing,
One soul should perish, lost in shades of night.
Publish glad tidings, tidings of peace.
Tidings of Jesus, redemption and release.*

Verse 4:

*Give of thy sons to bear the message glorious;
Give of thy wealth to speed them on their way;
Pour out thy soul for them in prayer victorious;
And all thy spending Jesus will repay.
Publish glad tidings! Tidings of peace.
Tidings of Jesus, redemption and release.*

In retrospect, the fourth verse became a reality for that small church. Our brother-in-law Al Long researched and documented the contribution to Christian service of the generation from the mid-1930s through the 1960s from Cedar Springs Church.² Long notes the profound influence of Messiah College and Upland College, where many of the Cedar Springs Church families sent their young people, and where in his words, “music abilities were stretched and enhanced.” Of those young people from that little church who attended Messiah and Upland Colleges, he noted six ordained ministers, four missionaries, and many teachers/professors engaged in church schools and colleges. He calculated that there were 396 years total in Christian service work from that generation. Some of the home folks had hoped that one of that number would come back home as their pastor but it was not to be, as it seemed God was calling elsewhere. Much credit is due to the nurture of our much-loved pastor, Rev. Henry Miller, who in his wise and gentle manner had vision for involving young people in the life of the church, allowing them to experience ministry in their home church.

² Alden Long, *Tales of the Outreach of the Cedar Springs Church* (self-published, no date), 37-39.

Other concerns

During those same years, the Brethren in Christ Church was in a ferment concerning a break with nonconformity and separation from the world. Much of the debate revolved around the issue of keeping a very strict traditional dress code of plain dress for all members. This code involved no necktie for men, long hair for women, and no jewelry, not even a wedding ring. Women had to wear a head prayer covering, a literal interpretation of 1 Corinthians 11:5. Debate for and against the issues was hot. Pete was concerned about which side he would choose to be on if the church split, a disturbing thought when preparing to sail soon for the mission field. In conversation with our pastor, Rev. Henry Miller, he wisely calmed our fears saying, "I have faith in the young people." The denomination did not split.

Mother's dream fulfilled

In August 1952, we set off for Africa. A crowd consisting of family and friends gathered with us on the freighter, *The Roslin Castle*, in New York City, to say goodbye. It was the first time most of the group



The Knepper family before Mim and Pete left for Africa in 1952. Back row, left to right: Paul, Robert, Lewis, Mim, Abner, Joseph, John, Ruth, Charles. Front row: Adam and Nellie.

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Family members on board The Roslin Castle to bid farewell to Mim and Pete (center of front row).

had been to The Big Apple. Most of us had never been on a ship. This was exciting, especially to the little nieces and nephews present, one of whom, Carl Knepper, later became a missionary in Africa. The term of foreign mission service then was seven years, which seemed like forever, especially when saying goodbye to aging parents. I disliked singing tearjerkers at farewells, so instead of “God Be With You ‘Til We Meet Again,” we sang the Doxology. With many emotions wanting to surface, we did our last hugs and kisses. At last, Mother’s dream of many years had come true. And as for my 68-year-old father? It was the first time I ever saw him shed tears.

Aboard the Roslin Castle bound for Cape Town

Thomas Cook & Sons, our travel agent, had cared for us very well. It was exciting to feel that we were really on our way. As this was a freighter, a cargo ship, we would be picking up a load of something along the way. Freighters took only a limited number of passengers, less than twelve. Of our four passengers and crew, I was the only female.

We were plunged into British table manners by being privileged to eat at the captain’s table. Pete utterly enjoyed this dip into the British

culture and quickly adapted to eating English style, with the fork in the left hand and knife in the right. When the captain wondered why I was not doing the same, I said I would try when no one was watching—a streak of pride. I became a believer and often eat English style to this day. A knock on the door at 6:00 a.m. brought tea and “digestive biscuits.” What luxury! Tea in bed! So different from anything we ever experienced. The captain generously offered me the use of his bathroom that was upscaled from the passenger ones.

As we neared Savannah, Georgia, we were alerted that we would soon be stopping in Trinidad, just off the coast of Venezuela. It was exciting to dock at Port of Spain after a few days of sailing. For a few hours, we explored the area near the dock and felt the tropical climate. I saw my first poinsettia in its natural habitat. Here the ship picked up five hundred tons of pitch used for making roads. The islands of Trinidad and Tobago are documented as having the largest deposit of natural asphalt in the world. This added tonnage would add to smoother sailing. The next day we were on our way to Cape Town where roads were waiting for our cargo.

Maybe the fact that Captain Lycett was a Christian made him favorable to these young missionaries. He even invited us for discussion on topics that I think were a bit above our radar. A simple Bible Study would have been easier.

I have tried to remember what we did for twenty-one days at sea. Of course, leisurely eating three times a day took a chunk out of the day. I loved watching the roll of the ocean but after a day or so it became commonplace. We read and played Monopoly, watched for whale spoutings, interacted with the other passengers, learned sea lore from the experienced seamen, and tried to get a tan.

We were alerted about the treacherous Cape rollers, those turbulent waters as two oceans—the Atlantic and the Pacific—come together near Cape Town. As the boat rocked from side to side, staying in bed was difficult. Suitcases slid from side to side. A little raised retaining wall around the table and a wet tablecloth kept plates from sliding off the table. When playing Monopoly with the crew at night, we lifted

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the board to save our houses and hotels when a big wave slapped the boat. I remember standing by the railing, looking down as the boat dipped to about thirty-nine degrees, waiting hopefully for it to come up again. It did. Fortunately, neither of us got seasick. One of the male passengers spent much time in bed. We were thrilled to finally see the famous Table Mountain after twenty-one days at sea. We landed in Cape Town, South Africa in September 1952, filled with awe and wonder of the unknown ahead.

He stilled the waves as he brought them safely into harbor (Psalm 107:29-30).