

# Conference Minister's Corner

**“That makes me feel alive”: Leadership Board member Wilmer Villacorta’s transformative love/love of transformation**

*By Rev. Amy S. Zimbelman*

**This article is part of a series on new leaders in our conference. Learn about Linda Mawhorter [here](#) and Jenelle Roynon [here](#).**



Returning Leadership Board member Wilmer Villacorta has accomplished much in his life: he is a professor at Fuller Seminary, and author of two books, a pastor of various congregations for 15 years, and an elder at Mountain Community Mennonite. He is also a devoted husband to Jeannie, a father of four, grandfather of three, and an avid soccer player. Wilmer has won some awards in his day, including the Outstanding Civic Service Award by the City of Los Angeles.

Much of this impressive resume has been accomplished while on the move. Wilmer has been settled in Colorado for 15 years now but hasn't always been able to stay put. "Displacement has been a constant theme in my life," he says. Wilmer's life circumstances have asked him to be nimble and flexible, to be unafraid of change. This propensity for transformation seems to be one of his superpowers.

And he, in turn, asks for transformation from his seminary students.

"One of my classes is on the themes of leadership, women, and hyper-masculinity. Usually, about 80% of the students don't think women should be in leadership—even though Fuller endorses an egalitarian position. So, from the start, I tell the male students: 'If you think women are your helpers, you're going to be confronted.'

"By the end of the class, I see major changes in students' perspectives," he says. "That makes me feel alive."

As he tells me about this work, I wonder what led Wilmer to this calling of loving church leaders enough to not let them stay put, to move hearts and minds towards justice?

Wilmer grew up in Peru in a family of five kids. When his father, part of the Peruvian Air Force, was stationed in France, the family moved and Wilmer became fluent in French. Wilmer started serving as an associate pastor there and then moved to California to continue working in church and nonprofit work in 1986. He met Jeannie through a mutual friend and a year later they were married.

Wilmer and Jeannie moved to Pasadena, CA, and the plan at the time was in line with the American Dream: Wilmer and Jeannie started their family with their first two children; Wilmer hoped to finish his Masters of Divinity from Fuller Seminary, get ordained, get a church, and get a nice house. But God had different plans.

Wilmer started feeling like he needed to go back to Peru.

"I prayed: God if you want me to go back to Peru, you must let Jeannie know and give us a clear sign. So, I asked Jeannie about it, and she started crying. She told me that she had prayed that if God wanted the two of them to go then Wilmer needed to bring it up and ask her about it."

They prayed about it more and received "sign after sign."

So, from 1997 to 2002 they lived in Peru for some wonderful years of ministry. Wilmer and Jeannie worked as directors of a mission school that trained Latino church planters and built networks between North American college students and indigenous ministries, while also teaching leadership courses to pastors. They had two more children.

“We learned a lot about leadership and the complexities of culture,” Wilmer says. “Interestingly, I had been displaced so long—for 16 years—that I was treated as a foreigner in my own country. Jeannie doesn’t look Peruvian, and my accent had changed from living abroad, so people thought we were Colombian, Chilean, or Mexican.”

In 2002, the family moved back to the U.S. for Wilmer to complete his doctoral work. Fascinated by his time of ministering in Peru, he wanted to study the intersections of culture, leadership, pastoral formation, and the concept of machismo/hyper-masculinity in Latin contexts. Fuller was the best place he found for that.

It was while at Fuller in Colorado Springs that he came across Mennonites. Jaime Lazaro invited him to be part of a Spanish-speaking church, saying that immigrant churches in MC USA would be treated with more respect than in other denominations. Wilmer had many good conversations with Mountain States leaders at the time: “They made me want to give Mennonites a chance.”

So Wilmer started serving a term on Mountain States Leadership Board in 2012. He got ordained in our conference in 2014 and served as a pastor at El Centro for three years until it closed.

Soon thereafter, Wilmer published his first [book about power dynamics](#) and two years later, published his second [book on women in leadership](#).

Looking for a church home, Wilmer found himself drawn to Mountain Community Mennonite Church. He was glad to see female moderators (i.e., Rhoda Blough, Karen Cox), and he was hoping to attend a church with a female pastor. I [Amy] was serving there at the time.

Wilmer soon became a church elder and has run AV during the pandemic, making church services possible.

Though he is not worshiping with a female pastor, Wilmer has great things to say about the current pastor, Vern Rempel. “We have a pastor who’s creative, not in a box. He has very open views about things like women in ministry. He’s honest, with a fun sense of humor. Our church is in a good place now.”

Vern and Wilmer also connect in their mutual love of St. Francis’ spirituality. “I’m drawn to subtraction, silence, simplicity. As you get older, you have a chance to be a grumpy old man, but I want to descend into God’s deep love as I learn about the spirituality of aging. If I had another timeline for my life, I’d be content to live in a monastery.”

But since it’s fortunate for us that he is not, in fact, in a monastery, I ask him what hopes he has for our conference. He addresses me directly:

“The leadership is young—you and Ryan and others. It’s good to be on your team and help in whatever ways I can. That gets me to dream and see that a lot of things could be done. And when you asked me, I thought, ‘This is going to be hard to say no to Amy.’”

Whether in the classroom (usually virtual) or in our conference, Wilmer remains passionate about his calling that he names as “Equipping leaders and pastors and seeing the church changing and morphing.”

“Sometimes my colleagues have freaked out about changes they’re seeing in the church, especially because the pandemic has pushed some institutions over the cliff.

“But I’ve tried to learn what God has for us as a community, and that takes a lot of work. A challenge in my life, and what I challenge my students with is this: not to put God in a box and keep God in that box for 60 years.

“Because,” he says, “the future is really promising.”