

Intersections

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In 2019 MCC reaffirmed its commitment to “engaging the next generation” as an organization-wide strategic direction. MCC acknowledges and celebrates the integral role young adults play to shape who we are as an organization and the work we do. Even if individuals do not continue with MCC service after participating in MCC service and learning opportunities, MCC hopes that they will take the learning and growth they experienced to influence the spaces they find themselves in positively—to act as global citizens sowing seeds of peace. MCC places hope and faith that young adults will continue to carry the torch by supporting and strengthening the work of MCC and by serving in the name of Christ wherever their journeys take them.

Identifying MCC’s strategic directions is relatively easy. Implementation is more complex and challenging. In this issue of *Intersections*, authors explore the complexity of developing young adult leaders through different lenses, highlighting strategies, challenges and opportunities facing MCC’s young adult service programs.

Many young adults are acutely aware of issues such as anti-colonial practice, diversity, inclusion, power and privilege and wonder how those connect to Christian service. As numerous historical and contemporary wrongdoings of the Christian church and its leaders have come to light, many young adults are suspicious of faith-based approaches to relief, development and peace. At the same time, many recognize the strengths and potential of the Christian church to foster positive change. They seek to act for social justice and be a part of something larger than themselves. Meaningful leadership development opportunities must be safe places for individuals who feel they have more questions than answers but are seeking to live out the values, principles and practices that drew them to consider MCC service in the first place.

Young adults starting down their career paths are often seeking to gain experience, test their knowledge and skills and continue learning and trying new things. However, engaging first-hand in the work of MCC is not easy and is stretching. I often describe my own participation in MCC’s Serving and Learning Together (SALT) program as one of the most challenging, but also most rewarding, years of my life. However, the investment of those committed to seeing me grow, as well as engaging in intentional self-



Young adult leadership

development involves risk-taking, faith and a willingness to get messy. Both young adults engaged in service and those walking alongside them are called to humbly listen, share, learn and grow.”



Youth are both developmental assets and agents of change in society.”

Learn more

Matyók, Thomas, Jessica Senehi, and Sean Byrne. *Critical Issues in Peace and Conflict Studies: Theory, Practice, and Pedagogy*. Washington, D.C.: Lexington Books, 2011.

Schwartz, Stephanie. *Youth and Post-Conflict Reconstruction Agents of Change*. Washington, D.C.: United States Institute of Peace Press, 2010.

Smith, David J. “How Cultural Exchange is a Hands-On Way to Build Peace.” Fulbright Germany website. September 22, 2022. Available at: <https://www.fulbright.de/news/our-fulbrighters/article/how-cultural-exchange-is-a-hands-on-way-to-build-peace-interview>.

reflection, allowed me to learn from these “real-world” experiences and prepared me for the work I do today. Not ignoring the need for adequate levels of safeguarding and support, young adult leadership development involves risk-taking, faith and a willingness to get messy. Both young adults engaged in service and those walking alongside them are called to humbly listen, share, learn and grow.

Engaging young adults and providing leadership development opportunities for them are integral for the long-term sustainability of the global church and of Christian relief, development and peace organizations like MCC. The energy, support and constructive feedback they bring helps us to avoid growing complacent and strengthens us as an organization. The active participation young adults bring helps us to see blind spots we may not have otherwise noticed. They are not only the “next generation” for MCC—they are the here and now.

Just as experiences, needs and priorities change from generation to generation, so too must the programs and strategies designed to foster leadership development of young adults.

The following articles demonstrate that there is no single program or strategy that will meet the needs of all young adults. The church and its service and mission organizations must continually assess barriers to young adult engagement. This requires creativity, a willingness to try new things and multiple entry points for participation.

Wade George Snowdon coordinates Serving and Learning Together (SALT), an MCC young adult program that provides opportunities for Canadian and the U.S. citizens to serve alongside and learn from MCC partner organizations and communities around the world.

Connecting people, building peace: the impact of cross-cultural exchange

In 1950, MCC launched the International Volunteer Exchange Program (IVEP), which sought to connect young adults from different countries with partner organizations and host families in the United States and Canada. Over the past 72 years, IVEP has encouraged young adults in their growth as global citizens active in social justice and peacemaking while also providing opportunities for learning and mutual transformation through the development of intercultural skills.

Throughout the decades, former IVEPers have shared many stories of personal success and learning, highlighting the development of their vocational skills and their deepened intercultural understanding. These participants have grown spiritually and professionally through this volunteer experience. IVEP service has not only fostered personal transformation but has had a significant impact on the communities where IVEPers have lived and worked, particularly in bridging understanding and fostering peace.

Youth are both developmental assets and agents of change in society. While the focus often tends to be on youth *becoming* these changes as they move into adulthood, more attention is now shifting to youth *being* these changes in their current situations. This shift is evident in the positive impact that IVEP has on the agencies and the communities where they serve.

One impact is in the development of friendships. The Crowded Closet Thrift Shop in Iowa City, Iowa, has hosted numerous IVEPers. While the shop works hard to develop the managerial skills of IVEPers, a greater goal is to build connections with local volunteers. Manager Christine Maust reflects, “I’ve always felt that friendship building for our volunteers—who are just good old Midwesterners, many from Mennonite communities—is where it’s at. I’ve watched them build friendships with the IVEPers. Their hearts and minds grow as they come to love this person who had a vastly different life than them.” Working side-by-side connects people. Relationship is the underlying component in interpersonal understanding, which lays the groundwork for peace.

Another impact on local communities is learning from the distinctive perspectives IVEPers bring to their work and their host communities. At Living Branches Retirement Community in Souderton, Pennsylvania, the young IVEPers interact with the older residents. They engage and teach. “They are the young world leaders. They give us an insight into what we can do to help the other young people of the world,” coordinator Eileen Burks states. These interactions offer a window into the next generation and broaden the perspectives of those around them. This empathy and understanding builds a foundation for peace.

IVEPers also serve to challenge preconceptions. The Hungry World Farm in Tiskilwa, Illinois, a predominantly white town of 690 people, many of whom have lived there their entire lives, hosts IVEPers from Africa. Speaking engagements with local church groups and at community centers bring the community and the IVEPer together. These talks provide powerful opportunities for community members to know a person of color from another culture and learn to value that person. Farm manager Karla Stoltzfus Detweiler comments that “it is beautiful to see the engagement and love that flourishes as we get to know these people who come to us.” Developing this connection with someone outside of their own culture breaks down misconceptions that community members may have had.

Gathering young people together in the IVEP program also creates space for them to hear from each other. Young adults have not become hardened in their views. They are idealistic. When people from different cultures and backgrounds dialogue together, they exchange ideas and learnings. They build empathy and understanding with each other. When these young adults return to their home countries, they bring this bridge-building experience back with them, equipping them to empathize with and understand differences in their home contexts.

Steffy Martinez Reyes served with IVEP and is now the Seed program facilitator for MCC Guatemala-El Salvador. She credits her time in IVEP with equipping her to have conversations with other young adults about the political situation in her country. Intercultural service opportunities have made the church more aware of current socio-political realities while creating a space to analyze events through the example of Jesus. The opportunity for young people to hear from each other, particularly as it relates to cultural exchange, is a source of encouragement. “Knowing that there are spaces and opportunities within the church environment brings hope, encouragement and a feeling that they are heard and taken into account. It also helps them to be more aware of and critical about how to live a true following of Jesus that is not just words but also goes into practice.” Living a Christ-centered life brings peace.

“Engaging young adults and providing leadership development opportunities for them are integral for the long-term sustainability of the global church and of Christian relief, development and peace organizations like MCC.”

“Relationship is the underlying component in interpersonal understanding, which lays the groundwork for peace.”



In 2019, IVEPer Carol Eugenia Miranda Ramires from Honduras helps six-year-old native Spanish speaker, Bernat Gasch, read a book in English at Lancaster Mennonite School in Lancaster, Pennsylvania. (MCC photo/Diana Williams)

These interactions and learnings further benefit the work of MCC both domestically and internationally. Maust described that IVEP service “really brings to life our desire to be connected to the work of MCC around the world. There’s something really alive about inviting a worker from another part of the world into our shop. It brings the work of MCC to our doorstep.” In this way, we all get a chance to work for peace alongside these international volunteers.

Jenn Esbenschade is the director of curriculum for Lancaster Mennonite, a preK-12 school located in Lancaster, Pennsylvania.

A new model of service learning: Global Health Virtual Practicum with Goshen College

In early 2020, many post-secondary academic institutions and non-governmental humanitarian and development organizations that provide opportunities for young adults to engage in international service and learning scrambled to adapt to the COVID-19 pandemic. Barriers to travel and local restrictions made traditional international study and service programs untenable for students and greatly reduced the number of opportunities available for young adults to participate in the global service-learning programs offered by MCC. Simultaneously, many young adults around the world were being introduced to the topic of global health through their daily experiences with the pandemic. Tasked with looking for creative alternatives to engage young adults ready to serve that met pandemic restrictions, Goshen College partnered with MCC to pilot a new online approach to community-engaged learning called the Global Health Virtual Practicum.

As an Anabaptist liberal arts post-secondary institution, Goshen College is well known for its study abroad and community-engaged learning programs. For over 40 years, their students completed an international service-focused study-service term (SST) that provided “the opportunity to approach life, leadership, and career as global citizens, able to collaborate for the common good and respect human dignity across cultural differences” (Goshen College, 2022). Traditionally an immersive three-month program, SST participants spend their first six weeks in “study,” attending language classes and learning about the country’s culture and history, all while living with a local host family. In the remaining six weeks, students are scattered across the country, live with new host families and spend their days volunteering in community-engaged learning assignments alongside a local organization. In many global contexts over the years, MCC programs and partners have facilitated connections for these SST programs and service placements.



The course offered a unique opportunity for students to engage directly with the people who deeply understand and implement global health work and can best explain the context and impact on the communities served.”

While the timing of the course was uniquely beneficial because of the pandemic, it was also in line with longer-term strategic priorities of both Goshen College and MCC to find creative new ways to engage students and young adults in meaningful service-learning opportunities. Goshen College had witnessed a steady decline in SST participation, dropping from 83% in 1983 to a low of 46% in 2019. Additionally, differences in SST enrollment based on race/ethnicity, socioeconomic status and parental educational attainment became apparent. Prior to the pandemic, Goshen College hosted

a set of meetings for administration, faculty, students and alumni to better understand the barriers to participation. While maintaining the core purpose of providing students the opportunity for an immersive learning experience with the goal of building skills to navigate today's globally connected world, Goshen used this data to update the SST curriculum.

Around the same time, MCC embraced a renewed focus to intentionally “engage the next generation” as part of its strategic plan, while the establishment of a new public health program at Goshen College opened the doors for a long-term partnership between the two organizations to offer the Global Health Virtual Practicum. Such virtual modalities have the potential to be more cost-effective, lower climate impacts, be more accessible to people unable to travel or who come from less privileged backgrounds and provide a greater variety of opportunities for engaging the next generation in this work.

With oversight provided by MCC's health coordinator, the course culminated in students conducting a mixed-methods project evaluation for an MCC partner organization. Students carried out semi-structured interviews with MCC and partner organization field staff that fostered a unique opportunity for students to engage directly with the people who deeply understand and implement global health work and can best explain the context and impact on the communities served. Providing a meaningful and practical learning opportunity for students, the high quality of work also benefited MCC programs and local partner organizations.

In its pilot year (2020-2021), the Global Public Health Virtual Practicum mirrored the year-long structure of MCC's global service learning (GSL) service terms. While the one-year model had its benefits, including better cohort formation and more time to practice skills, Goshen and MCC, drawing on evaluation of the one-year pilot, determined the course structure could work better for a wider diversity of student schedules in future years as a one-semester online course. Now heading into its third year, the core structure of the course has been retained, mixing academic learning, practical applied service with MCC partners around the globe and a diverse global cohort of MCC-affiliated participants and students from Goshen College and Eastern Mennonite University. The course now, however, was able to be cross-listed with the global health course offered in the new public health program, giving opportunity for public health majors and minors to take a community-engaged learning course alongside an interdisciplinary cohort of students.

The Global Health Virtual Practicum demonstrates how virtual modalities can be leveraged to provide meaningful cross-cultural learning and service opportunities. The success of the course, even amid the pandemic, demonstrates the benefits of cross-sectoral collaboration between non-governmental humanitarian and development organizations and higher education institutions for the continued learning of young adults.

Brianne Brenneman is public health program director and assistant professor of public health at Goshen College in Goshen, Indiana. Paul Shetler Fast was MCC health coordinator from 2018 to 2022 and is currently the executive director of Maple City Health Care Center in Goshen.



Goshen College. (2022). Study-service term (SST): global education at Goshen College. Available at: <https://www.goshen.edu/sst/>



Such virtual modalities have the potential to be more cost-effective, lower climate impacts and be more accessible to people unable to travel or who come from less privileged backgrounds.”

Power dynamics in mentorship across cultures

My supervisor, Issa Ebombolo, flagged down a mini-bus and we hopped in, squishing our way past women with babies on their laps, food bundled together with colorful material and men chattering away on cell phones. By the time we found our seats, the bus was now a rolling murmur of undetectable voices. As a six-foot-tall white woman, I had become used to sticking out when traveling in Zambia—but on the bus that day I could sense the men holding their gaze in my direction past the point of comfort.

 **What made the difference was that these power dynamics were not ignored. Instead, with each interaction, Issa carved out the space for us to intentionally reflect with a curious mind, an advocate's heart and a desire to empower one another."**

Sensing my unease, Issa stood up from his seat and began addressing the men in the local language. What I expected to be a shaming of behavior came out much softer. The men began laughing with Issa and he sat back down. Their heads turned back to what they were previously doing, and we rode on to our destination. Ten years later, I still do not know what he said to the other men on that bus. But I remember how I felt. I remember sensing that Issa had leveraged his power to assist me in an uncomfortable situation when I felt my own power was lacking.

Let me be clear, I hold many forms of power. While Issa was the founder and director of the local organization with which I was serving, whether I liked it or not, my whiteness presented me with an unavoidable amount of power. I remember teachers giving me a literal pedestal to sit above students when I came to their classrooms. The power dynamics between Issa and me ebbed and flowed depending on the day and the situation. What made the difference was that these power dynamics were not ignored. Instead, with each interaction, Issa carved out the space for us to intentionally reflect with a curious mind, an advocate's heart and a desire to empower one another.

When experiencing a situation like we did on the bus, all I really wanted to do was forget and move on. But Issa never tiptoed around a situation so rich of potential learning. Instead, he leaned in to ask questions like, "What is public transportation like in Canada? What does it feel like when people stare at you?" As a young woman in a new culture and new to the working world, I had not known this kind of non-judgmental curiosity was possible from a supervisor. Issa taught me that asking good questions opened doors for greater cultural awareness and healthy relationships. With each question, we took a potentially harmful experience and used it as an opportunity to learn and grow together.

My experience also would have been different had he not stood up and intervened on the bus. It would have been much easier for me to simply put headphones on to tune out and for him to distract himself with messages on his phone. However, leveraging power for the benefit of others can only be done when someone recognizes they have it in the first place. As a man who understood the local language, Issa knew his power could diffuse misconduct. Issa did the hard work to look up, scan the situation and try to put himself into my perspective—a new arrival to his country.

To grow in our capacities, we need people who are willing to provide constructive feedback, not shying away from the truth. For example, Issa had asked me to lead a teacher training on a new section of a curriculum we were developing. I felt nervous, lacked confidence, but wanted to push myself out of my comfort zone and try something new. After the event,

I asked him how he thought it went. He laughed to himself quietly, looked me straight in the eyes and said, “Oh, no one could understand you. You talked too fast and have a different accent than them.”

This would have been alarming had he saved this comment for a six-month evaluation, staring sternly at me from across his desk. Instead, his laughter disarmed me, and we laughed together. We talked about what I could have done differently. We talked about styles of instruction that are more suitable in the context, and how to talk in a different accent to be better understood. For months after, I watched and learned as he captivated crowds during every training, until I felt ready to try again.

For Issa, being this direct with feedback was counter-cultural. Through his many intercultural relationships, he has learned that setting aside his own comfort for the sake of another's growth is important. I would have never grown in my confidence and abilities had he glossed over my areas for growth to save me from the hard truths I needed to learn.

Power dynamics exist and should not be ignored. They are present in our workspaces, between close friends and at home. What we do with these shifting dynamics matters. How we acknowledge them, the way we talk about them, the work we do to understand them and even the way we conceal them matters. While neither of us were able to level the power structures and dynamics we both held completely, we navigated them together, side-by-side. We asked hard questions and worked at trying to narrow the gaps of power we each have. For that reason, I consider Issa to be one of my greatest mentors and seek to build on the things he taught me as I walk alongside others.

Rachel Watson participated in Serving and Learning Together (SALT) in 2012-13 alongside MCC Zambia partner organization, Peace Clubs. She is currently the communications and program support facilitator with MCC Bolivia.

Barriers and opportunities for BIPOC engagement and leadership development

Envisioning communities worldwide in right relationship with God, one another and creation, MCC is a learning organization rooted in values and principles that embraces diversity and seeks inclusion. Dismantling barriers and supporting opportunities for Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) leadership development is a way that MCC invests in working towards being in right relationship with diverse people and communities. A three Cs strategy of *context*, *culture*, and *cultivate* is a starting point for supporting BIPOC leadership development. Each of the Cs identifies a learning opportunity for engaging with BIPOC young leaders.

Taking *context* seriously requires learning about the circumstances, experiences and structures that shape and influence the present reality of BIPOC individuals and communities. Acknowledging the lived experience of groups outside of normative culture provides validation and increases BIPOC engagement. Every individual story matters and acknowledgment demonstrates that space is created for diverse representation in the narrative of *who* and *how*.

“ I would have never grown in my confidence and abilities had Issa glossed over my areas for growth to save me from the hard truths I needed to learn.”

“ Acknowledging the lived experience of groups outside of normative culture provides validation and increases BIPOC engagement.”

Learn
more

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“ A barrier for BIPOC young adult leaders is the time it takes to learn the subjective culture, which causes isolation rather than nurturing a sense of belonging and community.”

Culture has broad impact on individuals. Culture involves engraving meaning and interpreting values, symbols and artifacts. People within a culture usually interpret the meaning of symbols, artifacts and behaviors in the same or similar ways. Those outside a specific culture can have a similar experience but an utterly different interpretation. For BIPOC leaders it is important to experience spaces that reduce and eliminate cultural assumptions.

To *cultivate* is to engage intentionally in the level of development needed to acquire desired outcomes. Non-BIPOC individuals must be encouraged to work on uncovering and dismantling their unconscious bias. We all have unconscious biases to work on. Failing to recognize unconscious biases that shape institutions ends up devaluing BIPOC expertise, qualifications and merit. These biases reduce trust in BIPOC contributions. Cultivation in this framework means valuing the contributions of BIPOC young leaders without the clause of minimizing their ability to positively impact outcomes and deliverables. Instead, encouraging cultivation is *expecting* desired results from BIPOC leaders.

BIPOC young adults thrive with creative ideas, excellence, ingenuity and knowledge. What then is the problem with developing young adult BIPOC leaders? A 2019 study from McKinsey highlighted the stark inequality in company leadership, revealing that white people hold 86% of executive positions and 65% of entry-level jobs. Meanwhile, BIPOC employees comprise 34% of the entry-level workforce but only 14% of leadership teams. Additionally, BIPOC leaders and employees working in fields that require mandatory credentials are often equally or better qualified than their non-BIPOC peers. Minority candidates often need to be exceptionally capable. Due to systemic barriers, this level of talented leaders must often navigate assumptions around ethnicity while trying to be fully seen as competent.

Faith-based communities and institutions are not exempt from the pattern reflected in the McKinsey study. MCC is on a journey to increase opportunities for young BIPOC leader engagement. Creating opportunities for young BIPOC leaders to thrive requires a paradigm shift that involves working on the three Cs. Walking alongside and creating invitational opportunities for young BIPOC leaders requires both personal and collective work to mitigate harm.

To foster a thriving atmosphere for BIPOC individuals, create institutional layers of support for the change and engagement you want to see. Work on reducing the impact of subjective culture. Subjective culture includes nonverbal expectations that are not easily identifiable that can feel like an invisible wall, yet you know something is there and that you are blocked. Subjective cultures also function as norms that are known and communicated by insider groups. Those who have a generational investment in the culture and participate in maintaining these unspoken standards and practices reinforce barriers. Subjective culture needs an interpreter. A barrier for BIPOC young adult leaders is the time it takes to learn an organization's subjective culture, which causes isolation rather than nurturing a sense of belonging and community. Navigating institutional subjective culture while not fully understanding it in turn leads to burnout.

BIPOC young adults often feel a pressure to overperform, carrying the burden of being the one person to represent the entire BIPOC community within the organization. This pressure in turn increases the fear of failure. Organizations that seek to develop BIPOC young adult leaders must work at ways to ease

this pressure to overperform. Increased staff diversity in turn helps reduce the internalized pressure of feeling as though one must represent all BIPOC people.

The saying, “It’s not what you know, it’s who you know,” has been a barrier for BIPOC leaders. Creating a thriving culture for leadership development requires intentional investment. Designing leadership development programs that employ a cohort and mentoring model to support BIPOC young adults to learn and practice new relational skills bridges some of the “who you know” gap, giving potential leaders skills they need to succeed and build supportive relationships. Customized mentoring opportunities are important to help BIPOC leaders navigate the complexities of subjective culture.

Investing time with BIPOC young adults is vital for modeling development. Do not assume you know what the young adult needs. Instead, ask “What do you need?” and “How can I support you as a leader?” Other immediate ways to support BIPOC leadership development is to pray, regularly affirm and share space.

There is no single program or approach to develop BIPOC young adult leaders. However, starting with the three Cs strategy of *context*, *culture* and *cultivate* helpfully points an organization like MCC back to learning more about the unique needs of specific individuals. Church organizations like MCC must adopt a customized approach to BIPOC young adult leadership development that meets individuals where they are at and reduces the impact of subjective culture. Failure to invest time in developing such customized approaches will not only reduce trust but contribute to disengagement resulting from burnout.

Hyacinth Stevens is MCC East Coast executive director. Prior to this role, she worked as MCC’s New York City program coordinator. Stevens is an alumnus of and mentor for MCC’s Summer Service program which encourages and strengthens leadership capabilities for people of color.

Equipping, empowering and engaging through social enterprise

A coffee shop in Winnipeg owned by MCC Manitoba where youth and young adults gain and practice employable skills in a real-world setting, Sam’s Place combines social enterprise with MCC’s commitment to youth and young adult engagement. The overarching goals of Sam’s Place are to provide skills training to youth and young adults facing barriers, to engage and integrate participants into the work of MCC and to teach creation care principles.

Seeking to provide a safe and inclusive environment, Sam’s Place engages youth and young adults between the ages of fourteen and twenty-four to participate in their own communities. The program offers a space to learn that has minimal barriers to entry and is carried out in small intentional increments. Participants are diverse, including individuals with mental health challenges and people in need of a supportive community.

Sam’s Place equips participants with necessary employment skills, leading to their empowerment and self-actualization. Participants learn the hard skills of handling cash, food and beverage preparation and dishwashing, as well as



Participants engage in a “human knot” icebreaker activity during a Summer Service Leadership Conference in 2019. MCC’s Summer Service Program supports young people of color to develop their leadership skills through working with their local churches and communities. (MCC photo/Laura Pauls-Thomas)



For more information about MCC Manitoba’s Sam’s Place, visit: <https://sams.place/>

“ Sam’s Place offers a space to learn that has minimal barriers to entry and is carried out in small intentional increments.”



Sam's Place participant, Kayla J., learns how to make a specialty espresso beverage with the help of Sam's Place mentor, Robert Wells. (Photo courtesy of Alison Greenslade).

“Staff at Sam's Place emphasize fostering a caring, patient and supportive learning environment that pays close attention to the distinctive journeys and needs of all participants.”

the soft skills of customer service, taking responsibility, communication and self-awareness. Sam's Place staff train participants using a variety of methods, such as written instruction, videos, hands-on learning, workshops and certification. Staff at Sam's Place emphasize fostering a caring, patient and supportive learning environment that pays close attention to the distinctive journeys and needs of all participants. For example, one participant who had missed school due to severe anxiety did not want to have direct contact with customers and hoped to remain in the kitchen to wash dishes. By the end of their time at Sam's Place, they were regularly attending school again and fully confident running the cash register and talking to customers.

Lives have been changed by taking part in Sam's Place programming. When finished with the program, participants often secure paid employment. Other times, their goals are different. For example, one individual participated with the hope of removing herself from gang activity. She excelled in the kitchen, which included being second-in-command during a large holiday event held at Sam's Place. After her participation, she decided to re-enroll herself in high school and will graduate in 2023.

Along the way, Sam's Place also seeks to engage participants in the broader work of MCC at both the local and international level. Many program alumni stick around Sam's Place to serve as mentors. Some stay because they feel Sam's Place is a safe environment. Other alumni have remained engaged with MCC in other ways. For example, a university student who started as a mentor at Sam's Place then applied for a paid summer position with MCC Manitoba. Once that role ended, she applied for a role within MCC Manitoba's communications department and now works full time with MCC. By exposing them to the broader work of MCC, the Sam's Place programs help participants better understand their connection to broader realities and prompts reflection to consider their identity, hopes and ways to work towards reaching their goals.

Programs such as Sam's Place help to dispel the myth that youth and young adults “don't want to work” or are “lazy.” During the COVID-19 pandemic, Sam's Place had a waitlist of individuals wanting to participate in the volunteer program. Young people want to work but also desire to be part of something meaningful and larger than themselves and to know that they play an important and valued role in the community.

When youth and young adults discover who they are, how they are loved and what they are capable of, they are equipped with the tools they will need for future opportunities. They are empowered to seek change not only in their own lives, but in the world around them. They advocate for justice and are active and engaged members of their community. Sam's Place's mission to empower and equip young people reminds them of their inherent value and the value they offer to the world around them.

Alison Greenslade is the manager of Sam's Place in Winnipeg, Manitoba.

Young adult leadership in the global Anabaptist church

Young people globally are currently experiencing increasing economic, social and psychological challenges. The boom of technology and social media has made it easier for cultures, languages, ideologies and information (and disinformation) to spread quickly throughout the globe. Young people are the

primary target of such media. Unfiltered information disseminated via social media greatly affects value systems and patterns of thinking and influences everyday actions taken by young adults. The role of the church to help young adults navigate and discern among competing values is more important than ever. Mennonite World Conference (MWC) envisions to build diverse young adult leaders of the Anabaptist Church through multiple mechanisms: the Young Anabaptists group (YABs), the Global Youth Summit (GYS), and the Young Anabaptist Mennonite Exchange Network (YAMEN) carried out by MCC on behalf of MWC.

Young adults from the global Anabaptist church have been part of MWC since it began in 1925. It was not until 1997, however, that MWC formally highlighted the importance of young adults. During the MWC Assembly in India that year, speakers underscored that more than 50% of church members were women and young people, yet they were underrepresented in the church's leadership and decision-making. With the slogan, "youth are not the church of tomorrow but the church of today," MWC leadership formalized the representation of young adults into its structure through the creation of a Young Anabaptists, or YABs, committee. Under the direct leadership of the MWC General Secretary, the objective of this committee is to share the needs of young people from their respective regions and jointly discuss projects and themes relevant to young Anabaptists with other MWC leaders.

In 2003, MWC held its first Global Youth Summit (GYS) in Zimbabwe. Unlike the Assembly, this event largely focused on the needs of young Anabaptists. Building off the momentum of this event, five continental representatives were appointed to raise awareness of challenges faced by youth and their dreams for the global church. They also rallied for more youth involvement in decision-making within the church. Soon after, YAMEN, a joint MWC-MCC service opportunity for young Christian adults from outside the U.S. and Canada to live and serve in a new culture, was created. YAMEN participants either come from an Anabaptist church or serve in an Anabaptist organization to make connections between Anabaptist churches in different parts of the world.

A second and larger GYS took place in Paraguay in 2009, securing it as a permanent part of MWC. Another five continental representatives were given a mandate to create a blueprint for an ongoing GYS structure, building on feedback from GYS participants. These discussions led to the creation of the Young Anabaptists Network, which creates intentional opportunities for networking, fellowship and capacity-building for young Anabaptists. GYS activities seek to increase awareness of Anabaptist identity and empower decision-making in the church and peacemaking in local communities.

GYS is not simply a gathering for young adults. These three days are a time when attendees build community, encourage one another in their faith, attend workshops relevant to young adult needs, share new experiences with each other and pray for one another. GYS activities empower individuals to go back to their churches to use and share what they learn. GYS also offers participants the chance to travel and explore the world's diversity first-hand, building understanding and deepening connections across cultures and strengthening commitment to the global church. Participation by young adults from around the world in the GYS represents enduring commitment to the global church—a commitment that persisted even in the face of the global pandemic, as young adults gathered for a GYS alongside the 2022 MWC



To learn more about MWC, GYS, and YABs, see: <https://mwc-cmm.org/yabs>

To learn more about YAMEN, visit <https://mcc.org/get-involved/serve/volunteer/yamen>.



The role of the church to help young adults navigate and discern among competing values is more important than ever."

“ Youth are not the church of tomorrow but the church of today.”

“ Participation by young adults from around the world in the GYS represents enduring commitment to the global church.”

Assembly in Indonesia. Time and again, GYS participants leave with an appetite to learn and know more about their Anabaptist identity and values.

Many young adults who led the YABs committee, participated in GYS and served with YAMEN have continued to provide energy and strength to the global church, not only through holding leadership positions in MWC, but also within their local churches and in other ministries. This was certainly the case for me. After attending my first ever MWC Assembly in Paraguay in 2009, I participated in MCC’s International Volunteer Exchange Program (IVEP) and served at the MCC United Nations office (the latter in partnership with MWC). Since then, I have held various roles with MWC and provided mentorship to YABs between 2015 and 2022. These experiences inspired and ignited a burden for me to start a not-for-profit organization with the purpose of investing in local youth to see beyond their small village or town, encouraging them and reminding them that they are not alone in their struggles.

Over the years, MWC has made significant progress in addressing the needs of young adults and incorporating their gifts into MWC’s structures and activities. Investing in young people must be a priority for the global church. Young adult interest and active involvement in the global Anabaptist church remains high. Churches and church-related organizations like MCC must invest in the younger generation to change the face of the global church, and the world, for the positive.

Tigist Tesfaye Gelagle has worked with MWC since 2015, currently serving as secretary of the Deacons Commission. She is a member of the Meserete Kristos Church in Ethiopia.

Impact of accompaniment and mutual transformation through Seed

Seed is a two-year MCC program that brings young adults from different parts of the world to live and work with communities and MCC partner organizations by creating space for accompaniment and mutual transformation. The word that best defines the program is accompaniment, which the Seed program understands as walking together, living within communities and learning, growing and transforming together. Moments of *being with* rather than *doing for* are the norm. Participants do not come with magic formulas to solve local problems. On the contrary, they dedicate time and tools to gain a deeper understanding of the context and challenges that are present in their communities. They try to walk alongside and foster spaces for community development, recognizing that the best answers to problems are found within the communities themselves.

The Seed program is described by former participant Jordan Gutierrez as “wonderfully simple and excruciatingly difficult.” Deep learning about a context, hearing stories of violence and trauma, navigating cultural differences and communication barriers and waiting to do things at the pace of local communities are all difficult. Add limitations such as inconsistent electricity, water shortages and poor health services, and the Seed experience can sometimes be unbearably challenging. At the same time, the sense of community, the resilience, the landscapes, the richness of culture and deep relationships formed are part of being with and mutual transformation.

The resulting learning has had a lasting impact on participants, communities, partners, projects and MCC. Gutierrez says that her participation in Seed impacted the essence of who she is today, and she hopes it will continue to shape her life as she ages.

The Latin American countries that Seed operates in are multicultural, bringing together a variety of Indigenous, Afro-descendant, mestizo and other communities. Seed participants encounter a wide spectrum of beliefs in partner organizations about what it means to work for peace and nonviolence. This diversity is also reflected in the respective projects undertaken by Seed participants, with emphases such as education, agriculture, migration, creation care and more. Seed participants live and work in communities displaced by centuries of colonization, war, exploitative economic models and neoliberal regimes of accumulation. These communities suffer from armed political violence, discrimination, racism, crime and urban violence. As an effect of colonialism, many in these communities have internalized the idea that all truth, solutions, answers and examples of best practice always come from outside the country. In the case of Latin America, the collective imagination often feels that the “best” is found in the global North.

Bringing together a diverse group of Seed participants from multiple countries into one unit is a vital component of the program. In an evaluation of the Seed program in Colombia, David Shenk wrote: “Thanks to the diversity of each group, the Seed program helps, within MCC, to dispel the traditional idea that only white North Americans contribute and serve in the global South. Latin American and African Seed participants break this paradigm and actively demonstrate that people of all backgrounds, nationalities, ethnicities and socioeconomic classes can, and do serve, contributing to local communities.” Breaking this paradigm is not only important for MCC, but also for local communities who can view themselves as more demographically similar to a Seed participant. This helps communities to rethink their value and role within society, seeing themselves not simply as recipients of assistance, but also as dynamic actors in the transformation and accompaniment of others, providing a balance in the relationships formed.

Relationships built through Seed are beneficial for both MCC and partner organizations. By challenging perceptions and offering different interpretations, participants help both MCC and partner organizations better understand the reality of local challenges. This has a positive impact on the MCC support provided to communities by increasing cultural awareness, building relational bonds and determining better ways to address challenges experienced during project execution.

Although most of the leaders of the projects, organizations and churches with which Seed partners are men, the people who usually execute, assemble and carry out the work are primarily women and youth. These are the people with whom Seed participants spend the most time. For these local women and youth, walking alongside Seed participants has broadened their perspectives on possibilities they may not have otherwise considered. Working with Seed participants has motivated them to be active leaders in their communities and to take advantage of opportunities to develop their skills. In some cases, the long-term presence of Seed participants has also generated a greater sense of safety and visibility among community members who have been affected by acts of violence.

 **Seed participants do not come with magic formulas to solve local problems. On the contrary, they dedicate time and tools to gain a deeper understanding of the context and challenges that are present in the community.”**

 **Working with Seed participants has motivated women and youth to be active leaders in their communities and to take advantage of opportunities to develop their skills.”**



To learn more about the Seed program, visit <https://mcc.org/get-involved/serve/volunteer/seed>.

To read more about the experience of Seed participants, visit: <https://seedcolombia.wordpress.com/>

As participants have honed their skills and developed a deeper understanding of community development processes, Seed has also been an entry-point for longer-term MCC service. In MCC Colombia alone over the past ten years, at least eight Seed participants continued to work directly with partner organizations or MCC after their term with Seed ended.

Seed is not a program that places outside experts in a community, but instead provides opportunities for young adults to mentor, serve and learn from others. When Seed participants ask local communities about their plans, aspirations and strategies for addressing challenges, it motivates community members to look at themselves, assess what they have and acknowledge that they have much to give. Seed is therefore not about doing for, but rather the hard work of accompaniment and mutual transformation.

*Carolina Perez is the Seed coordinator for MCC Colombia.
Estefanía Martínez Reyes is the Seed coordinator for MCC Guatemala and El Salvador.*

Leadership development through experiential learning

In 2016, I completed a bachelor's degree in arts and sciences, specializing in agriculture and international development. With ample book knowledge, I felt dedicated to a career in development, but with limited experiential knowledge, I struggled to envision what practical role I could play. I applied to MCC's Serving and Learning Together (SALT) program because I wanted to learn how a young, white, Canadian, Christian female could appropriately, effectively and meaningfully engage in international development work. I accepted an assignment with MCC India partner organization, Social Revival Group of Urban Rural and Tribal (SROUT), whose focus is to enhance livelihoods, education and health among the rural poor. This position also connected me to the Mennonite community in Korba, Chhattisgarh.

Reflecting on how this SALT opportunity shaped me, I will explain how putting theory into practice helped me develop perspectives, capabilities and resiliencies that I continue to draw on today. I offer my SALT experience as a case study for how MCC's commitment to connecting peoples through global service learning can contribute to the formative development of young adult leaders.

Personal growth—learning empathy: When I arrived in Korba, I was alien, a foreigner, a stranger among the people in this new land (Deuteronomy 10:19). I entered a different version of what was considered “normal,” and my hosts had to teach me how to live in this Indian context. They started with the basics: how to eat, how to put on clothes, even how to use the bathroom. With less Hindi competence than a three-year-old, I felt like a child in an adult body. Furthermore, I was an obvious foreigner in a part of India where foreigners are uncommon. Despite adapting significantly throughout the year, I always stuck out like a sore thumb.

Those experiences were hard, but they were experiences I had chosen. Struggling through layers of culture shock and fatigue gave me greater empathy for people who go through similar experiences through no choice of their own, without a fixed timeframe, without the support of an organization and with no promise of returning to a familiar home and community afterwards. I returned to Canada with greater patience, compassion and understanding for newcomers

and those from non-dominant cultures. Opportunities to articulate this learned empathy in my first language helped me become a better advocate, ally and friend to those around me who were experiencing cultural transitions.

Professional growth—opening my mind and opening doors: During SALT, I participated in project monitoring and evaluation, both with the partner organization to which I was seconded and with MCC staff. Thus, I was involved in two layers of project planning, monitoring, evaluation and reporting (PMER), witnessing MCC’s partnership model in action. I learned that effective PMER is grounded in a thick understanding of the local context and an ability to communicate that context to outside audiences. Moreover, I realized that this niche aligns with my interests, aptitudes and skills.

My experience in SALT gave me the capacity to envision how someone with my positionality could effectively and appropriately fill a PMER role. Seeing a practical route forward, I pursued a master’s degree that would enhance my skills and experience in this area. Notably, my participation in SALT demonstrated to my thesis supervisor a capacity to live and work in another culture, learn another language, manage my health and well-being and build positive intercultural relationships, giving him the confidence to send me to Central America to conduct data collection with his long-term community partner. SALT also gave me the confidence to accept that opportunity. Throughout four months of fieldwork, I thanked God continuously for the ways that my time in India had prepared me for that work.

Spiritual growth—inspired to serve: Christians aspire toward servant leadership (Mark 10:42-45), but it can be difficult to grasp how daily tasks and small acts of service are part of God’s kingdom coming “on earth as it is in heaven” (Matthew 6:10). During SALT, I often struggled to see meaning and purpose in what I was doing, especially when it seemed that my main contribution was just showing up. Eventually, I realized that showing up made me a witness to whatever was taking place. Having seen it, I could then bear witness to it. I became better at noticing where God was at work around me and sharing those observations with others.

I am particularly grateful for ways that MCC’s India team put faith into action through MCC’s fundamental commitments. I witnessed staff embodying God’s kingdom principles and demonstrating servant leadership. In those acts, I saw glimpses of God’s kingdom. I observed and learned a little more about what it means to be part of this great cloud of witnesses (Hebrews 12:1)—noticing, pointing out, sharing, celebrating and joining in the good that God is doing.

Conclusion: In Deuteronomy 10:19, God calls the Israelites to love the foreigners among them because they had been foreigners in Egypt. In this way, God reminded the Israelites that their firsthand experiences taught them to love and serve others well. For me, experiential learning through SALT bridged theory and practice, proving personally, professionally and spiritually formative. It motivated me towards future service. I continue to be grateful for how my SALT experience, with all its joys and challenges, prepared me for the work I am doing today. I look forward to how God will continue to use these formative experiences in the future.

Sara Wyngaarden served with MCC’s SALT program in India from 2017 to 2018. She is now the planning, monitoring, evaluation and reporting (PMER) coordinator for MCC Guatemala and El Salvador.

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In August 2022, Victoria Mamani Sirpa (middle) from Fundación Comunidad y Acción (FCA) shares with MCC Seed participants during a greenhouse tour in El Alto, Bolivia. (MCC photo/Rachel Watson)

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