

Bruce: Like, I used to have in my office, like the prayer from Oscar Romero. So I'll just read the end of it. "We cannot do everything, and there is a sense of liberation in realizing that. This enables us to do something and to do it well, it may be incomplete, but it is a beginning, a step along the way, an opportunity for the Lord's grace to enter and to do the rest. We may never see the end results, but that's the difference between the master builder and the worker. We are workers, not master builders. We are ministers, not messiahs. We are prophets of a future not our own."

Meghan: *That was Bruce Guenther, MCC's Director of Disaster Response.*

Today on the show, we're sharing an update on MCC's emergency relief response.

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I'm Meghan Mast and you're listening to "Relief, development and podcast," a production of Mennonite Central Committee.

(MUSIC FADES UP AND THEN DOWN)

In the last eight months, around 75% of the people in Gaza have been forced to flee their homes. Gaza health officials report over 37,000 people have been killed. 70% women and children.

According to [IPC's](#) June 25th food security snapshot, there continues to be a high risk of famine occurring across the Gaza Strip if the ongoing conflict and limited humanitarian access continues.

And that's just Gaza. People are also caught in conflict and facing insecurity in countries like Ukraine, Syria, South Sudan, DR Congo and Myanmar.

Our guest today is Bruce Guenther, MCC's Director of Disaster Response. He's here to tell us more about MCC's emergency relief response.

Welcome Bruce. Thanks for joining me today.

Bruce: Hi Meghan, nice to see you.

Meghan: Can you start by sharing an overview of where MCC is responding with emergency relief right now?

Bruce: Yeah, thanks, Meghan. We're responding to dozens of humanitarian crises around the globe. So, people obviously know about the situation in Gaza and then also in southern Lebanon. But there are many other places that are not as high profile. So, thinking of places like South Sudan or Myanmar, as well as other conflicts around the world. There are many humanitarian crises and the number of displaced people globally is almost at the highest it's ever been.

Meghan: And how is MCC responding?

Bruce: So we typically respond based on the needs that the community identifies and what the partner identifies. So typically, that's one of the highest priority needs for people, is food, but then also other basic household items to cook and prepare that food, as well as basic hygiene items. And then MCC also is supporting with material resources that we ship, including the wonderful comforters and blankets that people make in Canada and the US and canned meat, for example, too, that people do. Increasingly also, we're including more psychosocial response as part of our humanitarian efforts, especially because people are in a conflict area, they're displaced, and they're living with a lot of uncertainty. So trying to also pay attention to how we can support people with their mental health.

Meghan: And what you're describing is obviously, there's so many complex needs and lots of intersecting factors. What are some of the challenges that MCC faces in its response?

Bruce: Yeah, so there are many logistical challenges. So, you know, we're working in conflict areas and war zones and so ensuring that we can get, you know, food to the people who need it - in the midst of, yeah, very violent conflict - is a huge challenge. So Gaza is a good example of that. Because of the Israeli embargo, it's been very difficult to get food into Gaza, and then as the conflict has escalated, we're not able to get food into Gaza as quickly as we would like to. So in March, we were able to ship a number of truckloads into Gaza for our first imported distribution. But since then, because the conflict continues to escalate, borders have become closed, and now we're trying to figure out, okay, how do we still get stuff in in a way that's safe and is allowed? And so that's a huge challenge in Gaza, in terms of, how do we work to ensure that stuff can get in and also that the distribution can happen in a safe way. I would say the other challenge that we obviously face is amount of resources. So there's huge level of need, and we're always having to prioritize need and help partners focus on, providing support for the most vulnerable. But when the need is so overwhelming, it's very difficult to make those choices when there is so much need.

Meghan: When there IS so much need, and in the face of challenges and unpredictability, what would you say are the traits that a disaster team needs in order to respond well?

Bruce: Yeah I think a key characteristic is that you need to as an MCC worker you need to be able to be a strong facilitator and communicator with the partner. And yeah, as you develop plans with them and making sure that relationship, those basic relationship skills are there, and communication skills, that's key, because we can't do things without strong relationships. It's a lot of hard work. You need persistence. And certainly with cases like Gaza, where we're trying to troubleshoot and problem solve, it requires lots of patience, and yeah, a degree of humility, in the sense that you have to have confidence that kind of to take the right next step and yeah, hoping that things will work out, but also being adaptive and flexible.

You need to approach the work, in spite of all those challenges with joy for the work. Yeah with the perspective that you, through partners, through local community, and with the support of MCC donors, you have a lot of support behind you, and you need to approach that with joy and gratitude, that good work is being done, and take that as inspiration for when you need to draw on that patience and grace and adaptability in those, in very challenging circumstances, in very horrible circumstances.

Meghan: Yeah, I imagine having that approach to the work is really important because, because there can be other moments when it's really challenging. In order for it to be sustainable, there needs to be that element as well, I imagine.

Bruce: Yeah, and in the case of Gaza, like it's, it's a huge test. I've never encountered a situation where it's been so difficult to get resources to people in such great need. And that's why there is such a need, it's because resources aren't getting to people when they need them. And that's why there is findings of genocide in Gaza, because humanitarian aid is being withheld from people. And so you have a very acute humanitarian crisis which is completely manufactured because people can't get access to urgently needed food. And so now people are on the brink of famine all across Gaza, within this, within the scope of you know, several months. That's usually a years long thing in the making. So never has it, has it happened so recently that people so quickly have descended into such a catastrophic situation.

Meghan: It's devastating. And what are you hearing from different national staff? Have you heard any stories of the impact that our response is having?

Bruce: Yeah. So as part of our response, we measure the impact, or like, the outcomes for our response, for every project. And one of the things I was thinking about was about our Ukraine response. And we conducted an overall evaluation of kind of the first year and a half of our response to the recent conflict. And one of the things the evaluators said was the response was timely, relevant and of very high quality. And so that speaks to like us ensuring that the food that's distributed is, relevant to the local context, is based on what people need, and is well rounded. And so we're not just, you know, giving the basics that we can. We're trying to ensure that our food, like the food that's distributed, meets a minimum standard of what people need for, yeah, for their diet and according to their food preferences. And of course, people always talk about the quality of the comforters that people make, and how much joy and comfort that those homemade blankets bring to people. So for me, I'm really heartened when I hear that the quality of the responses is high and that people are very satisfied with the aid that's given, and that it's done in a way that's compassionate and safe.

Meghan: You mentioned our response in Ukraine. I have a clip to play from David, who works for one our partners in Ukraine. He recorded it at a food and hygiene distribution in Uman. I'll play it now.

David: Hi, my name is David and I work for Uman Help Centre in Ukraine. I'm here at the food and hygiene distribution in Uman, Ukraine, where around 100 people are waiting to receive our kits. We're sitting in the building of the help centre where mothers with small children and elderly people. Some people are having a cup of tea. We have a beautiful day today, the sun is shining. One lady are having a conversation with our psychologist. A man is looking through the Christian books and booklets that are on the table near the entrance. Probably I shall say bye to you and help with distribution.

(sounds of distribution)

Meghan: So that's from the relief distribution in Ukraine and I hadn't realized the psychosocial support sometimes happens at the relief distributions. Can you talk a little bit about why that is?

Bruce: Yeah, just so like overall part of the evaluation that I was speaking about earlier, one of the things that also came about out of that is the need to integrate psychosocial support through, throughout the programming. So in some cases, that takes on is very formal. So that's. Like individual counseling, or

there might be group therapy sessions, some cases, maybe for children, that's kind of a more non-formal thing, where there's various activities for children, such as art therapy. Interestingly, in Ukraine, we also have horse therapy, or equine therapy that helps, especially with the physiological aspects of trauma. But then, as you say, like in this distribution, there is psychologists there, and they're just checking in with people. So that's like a mental health like, that's kind of a first aid mental health thing, and it's also an opportunity, as I said, to build those relationships and know that they can find that support there, not just at the distribution, but also, in an ongoing, ongoing way. So trying to create spaces that people can access the support that they need.

Meghan: That makes sense. Thanks Bruce. I wanted to ask you also about South Sudan, which as you mentioned, we don't hear as much about in the news. Can you share a bit about what's happening in South Sudan?

Bruce: So we have internally displaced people from conflict within South Sudan. Then we have people now coming from Sudan to South Sudan. So those could be Sudanese citizens, but those are also South Sudanese people that had fled South Sudan and are now coming back as returnees because of the conflict in Sudan. And then there are people who are displaced because of the huge flooding that happened in that area, and the waters have still not receded after three years, and so people aren't able to return home. So there are many factors. And now even this week, the rep was telling us that just across the border in Sudan, yeah, a town had been taken over by a rebel group, and now many people, they were now seeing more and more people coming to Rubkona from Sudan.

Meghan: I have another recording to play. This is Semei, one of our national staff in South Sudan, who recorded himself at a food distribution in Rubkona.

Semei: Hi. My name is Semei. I work with Mennonite Central Committee in South Sudan. I am at a food distribution site in Rubkona. I see hundreds of people who have turned up to receive the food. Majority of them are women. I see many volunteers as well that are preparing the food for distribution. And the other side, I see about six tables where the beneficiaries queue up for verification before they are given the food. Most of these people are internally displaced. Some of them are returnees from Sudan, while others are members of the host community. These people have been affected by conflict and natural calamities, and the most recent being the flooding that happened three years ago. It's a very beautiful day. The sun is shining. Let me walk over to pick some of the conversations...

Meghan: So the thing I was struck by in that recording was that he said most of the people at the relief distribution are women. Can you talk a little bit about why that is? Is that a choice that MCC makes, or does it just happen to be that way that women are the ones picking up the relief supplies?

Bruce: Yeah, good question. Meghan, the part that struck me when I heard it was, it's a beautiful day. So, but yes, so when we do any kind of food distribution, we're trying to target the most vulnerable. And the setting like this, oftentimes that means that female headed households, that are headed by a woman that don't have a husband that's present, they don't have someone to have an income or to bring an income to the family. And so those are often the most vulnerable households that we support. So many people that are part of that distribution in Rubkona are people that, yeah, are female headed households in that setting, and also, would be women that also have very large families and a number of dependents that would make them qualify for the distribution as we need to prioritize based on this huge need that's there.

Meghan: I imagine with every relief response, MCC staff learn so much. Can you give us a sense of where MCC was a couple decades ago, and where we are now?

Bruce: Yeah, it's a good question. So I would say the whole sector is trying to improve. And one of the areas is what I talked about, with reference to Ukraine, is, how do we ensure that the response is high quality? So, yeah, things like adhering to [Sphere minimum standards](#) and to the core humanitarian standard, those are things that all agencies are working towards. Those are all agencies that committed to do. To ensure that the humanitarian assistance is relevant is timely for people, that people are not just recipients of aid, they're active agents in deciding what support they need, and that there's opportunities for them to give feedback on the response.

They're not recipients of charity. They're recipients because we have an obligation as a humanitarian organization to meet their minimum needs. So that's a bit of a, that's an important mindset shift for people to understand is that we as an agency have a duty to meet those minimum standards for people to meet their basic needs. And so, but then that, that's also where the challenge is, because you're trying to, you know, respond to huge levels of need. And so it's often easy to think, okay, we can just do a little bit to everybody, but what we're called to, what we need to do is ensure that those hosts, those people that we're supporting, they get the minimum support that they need. You know, they get the food that they need for that month, and that it's healthy and that it's adequate enough for their entire family. And that when they come to that site for that food, it's safe for them. And if there's problems with the distribution or they don't like something about that's in the food basket, there's an opportunity to give feedback, and they know how to give that feedback. So those are important changes in terms of meeting, kind of what we say, minimum humanitarian standards, safeguarding, including, including security for people in very vulnerable situations.

Meghan: Now I know you've done this work for 16 years, which is a long time! What keeps you motivated in the midst of the challenges and very difficult situations that you see?

Bruce: Yeah, I'm inspired by our partners. I'm inspired by MCC staff, who work in extremely challenging circumstances. So I think about partners in Gaza, where they themselves have been displaced several times and are doing that work in very unsafe conditions, and getting food to people in need, as they are able to do. So how can you not, like want to be part of that and help support them? So yeah, for me, that gives me a lot of hope and inspiration. I think another important thing for me is, it's easy to get overwhelmed and frustrated and the need is overwhelming. And one could think, you know, you could just give up and say, well, it's never going to be enough. But that's not really what we're called to do as Christians. We're called to, feed those who are hungry, give that cold glass of water and to show compassion to people. So as a Christian too, there is that liberation that comes from it's also not up to me. I'm just here to be, to witness to God's love, to God's compassion, in very dire circumstances. And it's not, when I say it's not all up to me, I mean, I don't need to solve all these problems that we as MCC with our supporters, with our partners, were called to, yeah, be that witness in that very difficult situation. And so you know, that truckload that got into Gaza, we celebrated that is that going to solve all the hunger in Gaza? No, but that's a light in a very dark situation.

Meghan: Thanks Bruce. To end, the last question I have is, what would you say to listeners who are supporting MCC in this work?

Bruce: Yeah, a huge thank you. We can't do that work without you. We know as we encounter many challenges, that we have a whole community behind us that's supporting us and praying for us and praying for our partners and so, we want to thank you for your support. Thank you for engaging with MCC. Thank you for helping us meet these very urgent needs in so many places of conflict and disaster. So we're just thankful for that. And I would also think, like many, many supporters, also know what it's like to be in a very vulnerable situation, and part of that is the reason why they are acting out of compassion. So when I think back to for me, it's just a real privilege to be in this to do this work.

My grandmother was the recipient of MCC food at soup kitchen in Ukraine over 100 years ago, and she recalls she would recall, for me, the smell of the bread. So, it's just a real privilege for me to be in a situation where I can work with many people, within MCC, with local partners, to also support people with that daily bread that they that they need. So it's, yeah, it's inspiring to be able to for it to come full circle like that, and to be a part of that larger MCC story.

Meghan: Lovely that you have such a personal connection.
Thanks for joining me today, Bruce.

Bruce: Thanks Meghan.

Meghan: *That was Bruce Guenther, MCC's Director of Disaster Response.*

MCC is providing food assistance in response to conflict/displacement in places like Syria, Lebanon, South Sudan, Egypt, Ethiopia, Myanmar, Colombia, Ukraine.

We're providing food and other household items for people displaced by flooding in Burundi and Kenya.

We're responding to drought with food assistance in Zambia and Zimbabwe. And of course this is just a fraction of the response.

To support this work, check out the show notes for more information.

We're already seeing people respond with such generosity across Canada and the United States. Thank you for your care and compassion. It does make a difference.

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This episode of Relief, Development and Podcast was produced on Treaty 1 territory, the original land of the Anishinaabeg, Cree and Dakota peoples, and the homeland of the Métis Nation. This episode was hosted and produced by me, Meghan Mast. The head producer is Leslie Boctor.

A lot is happening in the world right now. We pray for our partners who are on the front lines of dangerous situations. This is a difficult time for many. May you experience God's provision and protection as we work together to share God's love and compassion for all in the name of Christ. Thank you for listening.

(MUSIC FADES UP AND THEN DOWN)

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