Fleeing war, finding hope in Ukraine | In times of crisis: Answering Christ’s call to care | Serving then and now

Celebrating 100 years 1920 - 2020
The MCC U.S. and Canada boards traveled to Zaporizhzhia, Ukraine, to remember MCC’s past and plan for MCC’s future. We heard about the impulse of Christians in the U.S. and Canada 100 years ago to help their sisters and brothers in southern Russia (present-day Ukraine) who were dying of starvation.

We visited MCC’s partners in Ukraine who are responding to people in need today — displaced people, former prisoners, people with HIV and AIDS and other marginalized groups. And we saw how MCC is helping Mennonite Brethren, Baptists and other churches respond to these present-day needs.

We visited the Zaporizhzhia Baptist Union which distributes MCC comforters, canned meat and kits to vulnerable people. The director Vadym Proshak told us, “We want people to have a chance in life and we couldn’t do what we do without MCC’s help.”

When the boards met together in Ukraine, they reaffirmed MCC’s commitment to responding to marginalized people on the move. We thanked God that MCC continues to be a ministry of the churches in the U.S. and Canada, and that MCC’s work through the churches and other partners helps people in crisis and gives them ways to sustain themselves, their families and their communities.

If “you can’t help, then we will die of starvation,” Christians in the region wrote to MCC. We experienced while serving with MCC.

A century of caring

Mennonite Central Committee (MCC), a worldwide ministry of Anabaptist churches, shares God’s love and compassion for all in the name of Christ by responding to basic human needs and working for peace and justice. MCC envisions communities worldwide in right relationship with God, one another and creation.

MCC turns 100! Join the celebration!

Celebration 2020: MCC at 100

June 19-21, 2020
Lancaster County, Pennsylvania

Join us for a national celebration of MCC’s history, mission and supporters. Weekend events include: evening celebration (which will be livestreamed), tours, exhibits, children’s activities, great food, music and storytelling. Sign up by May 1 for an MCC Thrift bus tour, the Century for a Century bike tour or the Pax Ultimate Frisbee® tournament.

mcc.org/centennial

Learn more and find other events in your area.

Find more news at mcc.org

A century of serving others

MCC begins in Russia

1920: Russia

MCC was incorporated in 1920 as a ministry of Mennonite Brethren and other Anabaptist churches, with a shared goal of reaching those affected by war and disaster with hope in Ukraine.

Yulia Barsa reflects on her journey of being displaced by war and now helping others.

Cover story

100 stories for 100 years

mcc.org/centennial/100-stories

Explore images and stories from the breadth of MCC’s work — from a graphic story on the 1920 trip that began MCC’s ministry to accounts of women peace-makers now. Sign up for a monthly email highlighting stories from the collection.

Worship resources

With thanksgiving, we are reconciled for ministry

Go to mcc.org/centennial/worship-resources for a centennial collection of litanies, prayers, sermon starters, stories, videos and children’s stories from MCC’s 100 years of ministry. Explore how your congregation can use these resources to encourage one another to share God’s love and compassion for all.

All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation…” 2 Corinthians 5:18 (NIV)

You can share New Hope in the Name of Christ

Celebrate 100 years of ministry by giving an extra centennial gift through the New Hope in the Name of Christ fundraising campaign. Learn more or give at donate.mcc.org/new-hope, by calling 888-563-4676 or give through the enclosed envelope.

A century of caring

J RON BYLER

MCC U.S. EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

“A century ago, MCC was a ministry of Mennonite Brethren and other Anabaptist churches, with a shared goal of reaching those affected by war and disaster with hope in Ukraine.”

J RON BYLER’S EMAIL ADDRESS IS RONYBLER@MCC.ORG

A Common Place

Celebrating 100 years 1920 - 2020

Lancaster, PA

March 19, 2020

Mennonite Central Committee

MCC headquarters

121 East 30th St., PO Box 500

Akron, PA 17501-0500

Call MCC toll free 888.563.4676.

MCC news

Find more news at mcc.org

100 stories for 100 years

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Cover Story

Fleeing war, finding hope

Celebrating 100 years of ministry in the name of Christ in 2020, MCC continues to meet urgent needs in the region where its work began.

STORY BY JASON DUECK
PHOTOS BY MATTHEW SAWATZKY

Igor and Larisa Semyonov each grab two corners of an MCC comforter, carefully center it over their blue top sheet, and let it slowly parachute down as the finishing touch of their freshly made bed. The bright fabric rectangles splash color into the cream-toned one-bedroom apartment, which overlooks the river on the outskirts of Zaporizhzhia, Ukraine.

Sitting on the closet shelves are cans of meat, bearing the logo of MCC and the phrase “In the name of Christ.”

Until 2014, the couple saw themselves as the kind of people who offered relief to others, not who’d need to receive it themselves. They were happily living in the city of Donetsk, around 120 miles east of Zaporizhzhia. He had worked in prison ministry and was distributing literature for a Christian publishing company, and she worked with women in drug and alcohol rehabilitation.

Even when Igor Semyonov was diagnosed with a very aggressive form of cancer in his lymph nodes, his primary concern between treatments was when he could get back to helping people who didn’t have anyone else helping them. But their lives were upended when the annexation of the Crimean Peninsula and accompanying protests lit the fuse on a major conflict between pro-Russian separatist and Ukrainian forces in August 2014, centered around Donetsk and consuming the Donbass region of Ukraine. Fearing for their safety, the couple decided to leave until it was safer in Donetsk.

“We were so used to everything and our life there and it was very scary to move to an unknown place with unknown things,” Igor Semyonov says. “But we left our home and moved to a place near the sea, we thought for two or three weeks.”

The fighting didn’t end after two or three weeks. The war in Donbass continues today, leaving 30,000 wounded, some 13,000 dead and more than 1.4 million displaced, according to the United Nations Human Rights Monitoring Mission in Ukraine.

This isn’t the first time Zaporizhzhia has served as a focal point for persecuted people. When MCC was founded in 1920 to provide food and assistance to starving Mennonites and others in the wake of the Russian Revolution, the first relief kitchens were set up in Khotyn, a Mennonite community within the borders of the city of Alexandrovsk, today called Zaporizhzhia.
Through MCC, Igor Semyonov connected to trainings in trauma healing and peace, including this peacebuilding training in Zaporizhzhia in 2016. (MCC photo/Colin Vandenbergh)

continued, even through a recent surgery to remove cancer from his lymph nodes, and he says nothing gives him greater joy than helping people work through and recover from trauma.

“I see the meaning of life in this and I see joy in this, and I can express myself in it,” he says. “I’m very satisfied when I can be praying for them or when I help them to get this fear out so that they can also change their lives and when I can give them this living hope in God…”

Displacement is incredibly traumatic, and one of the challenges people face after being forced from home is rebuilding their community, essential to the journey of renewing their identity and sense of self.

MCC partners — from ZBU and New Hope Center in Zaporizhzhia to New Life Charitable Fund in Nikopol — are helping.

Nina Gvozdeva and her son Danil Matsko lived in Horlivka, near Donetsk, until the war forced them to flee five years ago. They stayed in a military dormitory for three years before moving to their current home in Zaporizhzhia — a one-room apartment of some 100 square feet.

Gvozdeva says she kept telling herself it would be just a little bit longer.

For the first few weeks, every conversation was about when they’d go back to Horlivka. One day, after a few months, she wanted to lift her son’s spirits and bought him an art farm for his desk. Then, some time after that, she hung one of his paintings, an abstract piece with a spaceship and lot of purple, near a window where the light would catch it. She’d catch herself talking about this place as “home.”

But even as she made efforts to acknowledge how her life was changing, she says it wasn’t until she heard about New Hope Center from a chance conversation that she felt truly hopeful.

“My son and I were so excited,” she says. “We just got acquainted with these people, and we were looking forward to going there every day — we were just running, running, running there.”

Through a partnership with MCC, New Hope Center, a Mennonite Brethren-initiated ministry that builds community for vulnerable children and families, offers a tutoring program to help students who struggle in school.

Danil, 12, says even he was surprised when tutoring helped him pass his math exam with a higher mark than he’d seen all year.

But the support that New Hope offers reaches far beyond academics. “They helped us, and Danil became more confident. He learned to communicate,” Gvozdeva says. “People there are like our friends, some men are like older brothers …”

“Once I told someone I know that New Hope Center is like drinking water in the desert,” she says. “First, they helped us to accept all of the situation — just to live in the present, think about today. We could share about our problems and talk through it. On Sundays we go there, and they explain the Bible and I just can’t even imagine how we could live without them.”

The center’s vision is God’s restoration in all things for people — including how they see themselves and others, says Maxym Oliferovskiy, program director for New Hope Center.

“In society, there’s lots of stress that influences the families, especially because of the war here,” says Oliferovskiy. “So, in everything we do with them, we try to bring God’s peace to their souls, to their families, that they can, in return, bring this peace to other families and schools where the children study.

“And they feel it, as we share about what we do and how we interact. They call it different names, they call it ‘atmosphere,’ ‘nice,’ ‘peaceful,’ but they experience it and feel it and we’re very happy that we can increase these things in their homes.”

Jason Dueck is a writer for MCC Canada. Matthew Sawatzky is a photographer in Winnipeg, Manitoba.

You can help grow the ministry of MCC into the next century

Give an extra centennial gift today. Learn more at donate.mcc.org/new-hope, see the enclosed envelope or contact your nearest MCC office (see p. 2).
Yulia Barsa

War and migration can shape the lives of families over and over. Explore the journey of one Ukrainian woman and her work with an MCC partner today.

AS TOLD TO JASON DUECK

Even though I was born here in Nikopol, Ukraine, my parents moved east to Avdiivka when I was very young, so it never felt like my home — not until I came back, anyway. We would spend every summer here with my grandparents. Nikopol has a big water reservoir and beach where I would go swimming with my cousins every free second that my grandmother would let me after I finished my chores.

I’ve moved around, even before the wars forced me to move. I went to Omsk, Siberia, for university and studied to become a fashion designer. That’s where I met my first husband too.

We married and I had my first son while in school. I wrote my term papers with my 2-month-old sitting on my lap. Then we moved back to Avdiivka after graduating.

Several years later, my husband and I divorced and then I met a man from Syria and moved there to live with him. We had another son — 12 years apart, just like my sister and me — and I lived there for 14 years, working as a talent agent for a nice hotel.

Then in 2011, I had to move because of war for the first time. The civil war in Syria made living there very dangerous, so my sons and I moved back to Avdiivka while my husband stayed in Syria.

We moved on August 29. My younger son had to start school in just three days, and we had to buy all new school supplies. I became very depressed being back in Avdiivka. I had built my whole life in Syria and now I had to uproot it all to come back here.

I was very lucky to have a good friend who encouraged me during that time and helped me to become present in my life again and get myself back.

Then, just as I was feeling on track, the war in Ukraine began in 2014. We had to move again, this time to Nikopol, where my sister still lived. My family had been displaced by two different wars in two different countries just a few years apart. My husband is still living in Syria and we don’t know when we’ll get to see each other again.

But coming to Nikopol is where I learned about New Life Charitable Fund (an MCC partner supporting vulnerable and displaced people).

The first time I went to New Life, they gave us a blanket, sheets, towels, soap and a food package. After that, I’d get a monthly package of household supplies — and a package with food and canned meat. The canned meat was always a favorite at my house.

We’ve had peacebuilding training with people from MCC and heard from Christians and Muslims, other displaced people, veterans — all kinds of perspectives. It gave me hope I never thought I would have again.

I’m so proud when I get to tell people about the work that New Life does in Nikopol. We distribute canned meat, comforters and hygiene kits from MCC to displaced families. We run a social enterprise where women learn to sew and sell what they’ve made to support themselves, and we run all kinds of sports, classes and different activities for children.

I’ve received a lot of help from New Life and it’s just my nature to want to give back more than I’ve taken. I’ve also grown and learned so much. We’ve had peacebuilding training with people from MCC and heard from Christians and Muslims, other displaced people, veterans — all kinds of perspectives.

All of it has given me hope I never thought I would have again.

Yulia Barsa works and volunteers for New Life Charitable Fund, an MCC partner organization in Nikopol, Ukraine, that reaches out to displaced and vulnerable people.
In times of crisis

A century ago, MCC was formed to help Mennonites and others facing starvation in southern Russia (present-day Ukraine). Answering Christ’s call to care for those facing war and disaster remains an important facet of MCC’s work.

MCC’s first relief kitchen in southern Russia opened in Khortytsa on March 16, 1922. This photo (left), circa 1922, is from Trans-Volga, Russia. MCC worker Arthur Slagel noted that the neediest in the area were chosen to receive a daily ration of, as nearly as possible, 778 calories. The menu varied with supplies available but consisted, for the most part, of bread every day, cocoa twice weekly, beans once or twice weekly, and the rest of the time corn grits or rice cooked with sugar and milk.

Our food since last spring has been black tea and herring, and now dear friends, all of this is gone. If you can’t help, then we will die of starvation.”
– Letter from southern Russia, Dec. 25, 1921, (from Feeding the Hungry, a 1929 book about MCC’s response)

In 1923 in Platovka, Russia (above), Mennonites load wagons with emergency food, including tins of milk. Several hundred wagons were needed for some larger transports. In addition to providing food, MCC sent two shipments of 25 tractors (below) to help replace the horses that had died or been taken during a time of war and hunger.

Like wildfire, the message went through our village. The American food had arrived at the railroad station...we rejoiced in our hearts, and when I came home and told my family what my eyes had seen we resolved that we would never forget this day.”
– Gerhard Schroeder, 1922 (from his book Miracles of Grace and Judgment)
A witness of love and peace
1930s to 1940s

MCC's work stretched across Europe and helped thousands devastated by war, including feeding 72,000 children at sites in eight German cities in the late 1940s, such as this school (right). In London, England, MCC worker John Coffman (below right) finds warm winter clothing for Mary, 11, last name not known, whose home was bombed the previous winter and whose family slept each night in an underground shelter.

Aiming to live out a Christian mission in word and deed, Coffman and his wife Eileen made a suggestion that would shape MCC for decades to come. In April 1941, they wrote to MCC leaders in Akron to say that including a label on donated clothing with a “little slogan such as: In the Name of Christ” might “be useful in promoting the cause of Christ, as we administer the clothing which is made and donated by our people.”

In the U.S., Mennonites in Virginia (below) and in Kansas began experimenting with mobile meat canning, launching efforts that helped families in Europe in the 1940s, and today generate nearly a million pounds of canned meat for families in need worldwide every year.

The work expands
1950s to 1960s

Fueled by the efforts of volunteers in Canada and the U.S., including the sewing circle (below right) at Mellinger Mennonite Church in Lancaster, Pennsylvania, the ministry of sending MCC comforters, food, clothing, Christmas bundles and other assistance expanded far beyond Europe. MCC assistance brought hope and comfort not only in Japan (right) and in South Korean communities devastated by the Korean War, but also in Africa, Latin America and the Middle East.

MCC worker Geraldine Ebersole (below left; names of others not known) worked with Palestinian refugees in Jericho, West Bank, in 1951. MCC workers began a layette project for pregnant women, teaching them to sew baby items. When her baby was born, each woman received the layette she made and other items added by MCC.

Because there are both emergency and long-term needs and because even in emergency situations food and clothing are not the only answer to the problem, it is important that self-help projects be developed...such as sewing classes.”
– 1957 report to MCC Executive Committee

Your willingness and eagerness to share your blessings...the thousands of tons of food, clothing, shoes, soap, medicines and tools...it has rekindled hope, faith and interest and created new purpose and courage for the future.”
– Report from Berlin, MCC’s “European Relief Notes,” October 1947
MCC works alongside local people, churches and partner organizations, striving to provide emergency relief to people in need regardless of nationality, religion or political beliefs.

In Lao People’s Democratic Republic in 1976, farmers returning to areas heavily bombed by the U.S. military needed tools. The ones that MCC provided (top left) were made in the only foundry in the country that was melting down expended shell, mortar and bomb casings. This assistance was followed by years of work to help clear unexploded ordnance posing a still-deadly threat beneath farmers’ fields and homes.

In 1985 in Mozambique (below left), during a civil war that took more than a million lives through fighting and starvation, MCC and its partner, the Christian Council of Mozambique, distributed 5,800 metric tons of corn from the Canadian Foodgrains Bank, and 1,000 metric tons from the U.S. Below, MCC partnered with Honduran Mennonites to respond to the needs of refugees from the war in El Salvador in the late 1980s.

“Wars, violence and a call to care
1970s to 1990s

You have suffered with us and rejoiced with us. And your presence with us today is a sign of hope that God is not far from us.”
— Rev. Ibrahim Nseir, 2018, Aleppo, Syria

Today, with more people displaced from home than ever before and disasters becoming more frequent, MCC—in addition to longer-term work in development and peace—continues to meet urgent needs and help communities rebuild, often over years. In India, MCC helped construct 450 houses (top left) to relocate a village declared uninhabitable after the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami. Amid continuing conflict in Syria, MCC partners with the Rev. Ibrahim Nseir in Aleppo (middle left) and others to respond.

And in each gift of hope and love—such as this comforter embraced by Rosette Aime (below) in a temporary shelter after the 2010 Haiti earthquake—MCC strives to carry out the call of Matthew 25:35 (NRSV): “For I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me…”

Gifts of love
2000 to present
A world on the move
How you can help

Five years ago, Papayon Adji was in the middle of prayers at his mosque when he heard shouting from outside. “They’re here,” he thought in panic. “I didn’t think they’d come while we were praying.”

He and others hid in fear, hearing gunshots and fighting outside as soldiers dashed with armed rebels hunting for what they considered foreigners to their country.

After a lifetime in Central African Republic (CAR), Adji fled north with his family, eventually landing in a refugee camp in southern Chad called Kobiteye.

In CAR, violence toward people of Chadian descent—like Adji, whose parents are Chadian—has caused thousands to flee into nearby countries where they may have no family or support.

His flight is a story repeated across continents—in countries including Syria, Iraq, Ukraine, Colombia, Honduras. Around the world, more people today are displaced from their homes than ever before.

Throughout MCC’s relief, development and peace work in more than 50 countries, MCC addresses the reasons people must flee their homes—from lack of food to violence.

After a disaster or crisis, emergency assistance and food for work or cash for work projects offer chances to rebuild at home. Conservation agriculture and other strategies help farmers withstand climate change even after leaving their land. Programs in peacebuilding and trauma healing develop skills to address existing conflicts and prevent violence before it can force people from home.

As MCC marks 100 years of ministry in the name of Christ, responding to those who have fled home is a priority. And MCC invites you to take part.

Why do people move?
Food shortage, environmental disaster, climate change, poverty and conflict push people to move. Land, resources, jobs, family, health and education pull people to move. People move voluntarily, a choice made after weighing the pros and cons. People move involuntarily, forced by violence, persecution and human trafficking.

In the Bible, the people of God were called to remember their story of migration. That remembering led to a call to safeguard the well-being of foreigners among them (Leviticus 19:33-34).

REMEMBER
- migration stories from your own life
- ways migration shaped your family
- migrants you have met

CONSIDER
- the variety of reasons people may leave home
- those opening their homes and offering hospitality to people on the move
- the choices you’ve been able to make about where to live

RESPOND
- How can we as Christians respond to the call to safeguard the well-being of people on the move: before they leave home; during their journeys; and once they arrive?
- What are the ways we are connected to each other?

Your gifts to the New Hope in the Name of Christ centennial fundraising campaign will meet urgent needs and allow MCC to invest in special projects for people on the move, including a water, sanitation and health project in Adji’s refugee camp in Chad.

Adji is one of some 24,000 people who have streamed into southern Chad from CAR and are surviving in three government-built camps and the surrounding countryside, many living without basic necessities like clean water and sanitation.

Over the past few years, MCC has supported projects in the camps to install water pumps and train committees to promote hygiene. But with thousands of people in each camp and more continuing to arrive, pumps are constantly in demand. They are breaking, there aren’t spare parts to fix them—and the already enormous challenges of providing adequate, safe water and sanitation are growing.

If this work is expanded, it will meet immediate needs for water and improve health. But it also would empower more people like Adji, whose mechanical skills were recognized through the project and who received training to repair and maintain pumps.

And by expanding to nearby communities, it would help build peace between long-time residents and the newcomers.

In honor of 100 years of ministry, MCC invites you to reflect on how you can be part of reaching out to people on the move today.

GIVE to the New Hope in the Name of Christ centennial fundraising campaign to meet urgent challenges now and for the future. Go to donate.mcc.org/new-hope, call 888-563-4676 or contact your nearest MCC office (see p. 2).

GATHER your small group or Sunday school class to talk about the “Why do people move?” points on p. 16. Pay attention to migration journeys in MCC stories, in the news or in movies, books and poems.

PRAY for those who are on the move today. Is God leading you to pray for people in a particular place or situation, for children, for mothers? Do you feel called to pray for good opportunities for them, for safety, for healing from the trauma they’ve encountered?

ADVOCATE to government leaders as one important way to live out your Christian witness. With resources from MCC’s advocacy offices, you can speak out to build a more just and peaceful world for people on the move. Go to mcc.org/migration-action.

By the numbers

In today’s global population, millions of people have left home, some by choice and some involuntarily.

25.9 MILLION refugees have fled their home countries because of persecution, war and violence.

MORE THAN HALF of these refugees are under the age of 18.

41.3 MILLION internally displaced people have fled their communities because of violence and disaster, but remain within their home countries.

EVEry MINUTE of 2018, 25 people were forced to flee their homes.

Source: United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR)

Chad reporting by Jason Dueck.
Serving then and now

Names
Joe Haines (from West Milton, Ohio, Pleasant Hill Brethren in Christ Church); Rebecca Janzen (from Edmonton, Alberta, First Mennonite Church)

Assignments

Typical days
JH: Played trombone to wake boys, bought provisions in the market (a good chance to practice Arabic), did other chores as needed, led woodworking activities, organized hikes.
RJ: Started with rounds of greetings to staff and students and Turkish coffee with my supervisor to plan the day, then helped adult refugees apply for scholarships, planned for English learning activities, joined classes and led exercises to help students practice speaking or listening to a native English speaker.

Joys
JH: Just relating to the boys and getting to know them and staff, exploring the land of the Bible—it was like a living classroom.
RJ: Connecting with students. Because I was learning Arabic and they were learning English, we could relate about how to memorize words or study strategies.

Because of Pax/SALT
JH: By 1965, I was serving with MCC in the Middle East again, this time with my wife Elaine. I was ready to get back to that part of the world. I had really fallen in love with the Arabic language and felt it could end up being kind of a mission for me.
RJ: Know that you’re going to be stretched and pushed. Know that there are going to be so many good moments and that it’s going to be beautiful.

If you’re considering MCC
JH: Talk with family, friends and teachers and prayerfully reflect. Be ready for an adventure—and be ready to be changed.
RJ: Know that you’re going to be stretched and pushed. Know that there are going to be so many good moments and that it’s going to be beautiful.

MCC turns 100 years old this year!
In 1920, Mennonites and Mennonite Brethren came together to help Mennonites and others who were starving in what was then southern Russia and is now Ukraine. Today, MCC continues to help people in more than 50 countries around the world, including Ukraine.

Zdrastvuyte
(Say “Z’DRAV-stvoo-ee-lay”)

My name is Aya Dvoretskaya.
Age: 7
Lives in: Zaporizhzhia, Ukraine
I live with my mother, father, sister and two brothers. I really like drawing and doing all kinds of artwork, and my mother loves to hang up my pictures around our apartment. I love dressing up, and my grandmother gave this outfit to me as a gift for International Women’s Day last March.

I participate in a lot of activities at the New Hope Center (an MCC partner) like doing arts and crafts, going to camps and playing sports and games and learning about the Bible.

My favorite food: pea soup
What I want to do: work in a café like my mother

Color a quilt square
For decades, people have stitched comforters and quilts that MCC sends to people around the world. It’s a message of hope and warmth that families can literally wrap around them. How would you color a quilt square to give?

Print more copies ➯ mcc.org/hello
DID YOU HEAR?
MCC IS 100!
You can help grow the ministry of MCC into the next century.

Share New Hope in the Name of Christ by giving an extra centennial gift. Give now at donate.mcc.org/new-hope.

Include a gift to MCC in your will. This is a simple and powerful way to have an enduring impact in the world.

Pray for the many people who are building better futures for their families, with your support.