New ways to grow more food | Canning meat for world families | Serving with those who work the soil
“God said, ‘See, I have given you every plant yielding seed that is upon the face of all the earth, and every tree with seed in its fruit; you shall have them for food.’” (Genesis 1:29 NRSV)

As I write this, the earth here in western Virginia is parched, and I am keenly aware of the crunch of the grass under my feet. Other places are experiencing floods. More painful is the knowledge that while I don’t rely on rainfall for daily food, many around the world do depend on what they can grow.

From MCC’s beginning, supporters have cared about providing food and the means to grow it. After the first gifts of bread, tractors were sent to southern Russia (present-day Ukraine). “Scowling cowboys” accompanied cattle to post-war Europe, in addition to shipments of canned meat. Many agricultural workers served in the 1970s and 1980s.

The needs remain great today. Around the world, we in MCC see communities struggling with hunger. Two of our strategic directions named in 2019 are to work with communities affected by climate change and people displaced from their homes. You’ll read about both in this issue.

Between the bookends of the beauty and abundance of creation described in Genesis and the tree of life that offers fruit to the nations in Revelations, we read the poignant awaiting redemption. Since sin entered creation, we live in the in between. But we are part of God’s reconciling work in all of creation, from waterways to human souls.

In spite of the challenges depicted in these pages, this issue also brings hope—and maybe even some smiles. When I visited Haiti in 2017, I was amazed by what farmers find simple, sustainable methods they can use to grow more food and better support their families.

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.org

ANN GRABER HERSBERGER
MCC U.S. EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

Lend a hand — Hygiene kits

Keeping clean is an important part of remaining healthy, but families who have fled their homes because of disaster or war often struggle to afford these necessary supplies. Hygiene kits also are given through schools or orphanages to encourage healthy habits for children.

Contents (NEW items only)

1 adult-size toothbrush (in manufacturer’s packaging)
1 large bar bath soap (leave in wrapper)
1 nail clipper (good quality)
1 hand towel (medium weight, dark or bright colors; approx. 16 in x 26 in)
1 wide-toothed comb (6 – 8 in)

Hygiene kits are distributed in a useful, double-drawstring cloth bag (11¾ x 16¼ in). You may sew the bag yourself, request bags from an MCC material resources center or donate contents that we will place in a bag. For bag instructions or drop-off locations, contact your nearest MCC office (see page 2) or go to mcc.org/kits.
The year was 2009, and Pabitra Paramanya, a young agriculturalist in West Bengal, India, had a hard sell. He had just started work with MCC partner Asansol Burdwan Seva Kendra (ABSK), a service organization of the Catholic Diocese of Asansol.

And ABSK leaders were eager to introduce a new system for cultivating rice.

But rice has been a staple crop for thousands of years in India. Farmers were little interested in hearing about a new system — especially one that involved planting fewer seedlings and drying out young rice plants rather than flooding them like their ancestors had.

People laughed at him. They made mocking comments in village meetings. “Many times I heard, ‘You don’t know anything about rice farming,’” he recalls.

Paramanya had studied the new System of Rice Intensification (SRI) that ABSK and MCC were promoting. Initially surprised by how different the system was himself, he ran field trials and became convinced it could help.

In West Bengal, India, Sukhi Murmu, left, holds a sheaf of rice. By using a System of Rice Intensification (SRI) promoted by MCC and its partners, she can now grow at least five more bags, or some 550 more pounds, of rice for each harvest. (Sukhi Murmu and Hopna Murmu live in different villages and are not related, though both have benefited from the new rice-growing method.) (MCC photo/Pabitra Paramanya)

Many farmers were leery of experimenting with a new way of growing rice, a traditional crop in India. The success of people like Hopna Murmu inspired others to try the system. (ABSK photo/Narayan Ghosh)

A new way to grow

From Asia to Latin America, MCC and its partners are helping farmers experiment with simple, affordable methods that they can use to increase harvests and provide for their families.

Compiled by Marla Pierson Lester
But even the farmers willing to try other ABSK techniques, like crop diversification, were adamant that SRI wouldn’t work. Eventually, in 2010, Paramanya found one person, Hopna Murmu, who—though he argued against the method—was willing to try SRI on one small plot.

The day Murmu began transplanting rice using the new system, putting only one seedling in every 10-by-10-inch square, his neighbors were standing by teasing him, Paramanya remembers. Murmu’s wife, Hupni Murmu, followed behind trying to put in additional seedlings, until Paramanya finally told her he’d reimburse the costs if the new system failed.

Yet 20 days later, it was Murmu who had reason to smile. His plants were growing faster than he’d thought they could. They had caught up to the size of rice seedlings in an adjacent field that had been transplanted two weeks earlier than his.

Overcoming his own skepticism, Murmu continued to follow SRI, letting the young plants dry out in order for their roots to grow deeper. It paid off. More rice formed on each individual seedling, and his harvest for the plot was 35% higher than before.

But that’s not all. The process spread—to five farmers the next year and then to 21 the year after that. The neighbors who teased Murmu as he transplanted that first field now use SRI themselves.

Within five years, hundreds of farmers were planting rice using the system. That grew to some 1,600 farmers by 2020.

Within five years, hundreds of farmers were planting rice using the system. That grew to some 1,600 farmers by 2020. And this effort becomes even more vital as farmers grapple with the changes in rainfall and more frequent and severe weather that climate change has brought.
**Storing seeds for the future**

Preserving the harvest to eat or sell is important. But farmers also will need seeds to plant the next year. And many MCC partners are promoting saving local seeds that are often better adapted to local conditions and more likely to thrive.

For Jean-Remy Azor, executive director of MCC partner Konbit Peyizan in Haiti, saving seeds is an important foundation to food security—ensuring that farmers can rely on their own planning rather than fluctuating supplies and prices in local markets.

“Farmers have always made an effort to conserve some of their harvest, but it’s not always easy,” he says. “The conditions aren’t always easy, and people don’t always have the means. If you don’t have food to eat, then it can be hard to put some aside to save.”

Konbit Peyizan works with farmers on every aspect of seed storage from how to prepare seeds to how farmers can tell if a seed is dry enough to store. They help farmers figure out how to protect their seeds from rats and other dangers and how to work together to store seeds as a small group or a community.


For years, BICWS, with MCC support through Growing Hope Globally, has helped farmers improve agricultural techniques and have better access to markets.

In the process, BICWS staff are always on the lookout for assets or resources that a community hasn’t been able to tap into before.

In the Terai region, for instance, BICWS noted small ponds owned by local governments. They would fill with water during the rainy season and sometimes hold water through the year, but they rarely were used for anything.

With connections made by BICWS, local government representatives agreed to lease ponds to marginalized community members and to use the fees to pay for upgrades such as deepening the ponds.

BICWS and MCC then identified families interested in raising fish in these ponds and provided training and fish to get families started. Today farmers are finding that the ponds provide one more way to improve their income and provide extra protein for their families.

Sometimes, the newest innovation is to look back.
In areas of Uganda where drought and hunger are prevalent, MCC partner Dynamic Agro-pastoralist Development Organization (DADO) is encouraging farmers to consider traditional granaries. The project is finding local artisans to build traditional family granaries, which used to be common but have fallen out of favor. The hut-like structures with wooden frames and thatched roofs work better than gunny sacks to protect the harvest from pests and mold and to keep it from drying out too much. In Kenya, Adeola notes, partners are promoting airtight bags that help farmers protect their yields, giving them the choice to store their harvest and wait for more favorable prices rather than selling immediately. The one or two bags the project provides give farmers a risk-free way to try the technology, Adeola notes.

"Once they see the benefit, they become convinced to make small investments to buy them on their own," he says. Improving farmers’ prospects isn’t always about the crop itself, though. Adeola and Enns both point to one additional ingredient that can multiply the economic potential of a farming community — working together.

In some cases, like in Rwanda, this means gathering to compost as a group rather than individually, Adeola says. In Cambodia, farmers are finding that they can negotiate better prices when they join together in cooperatives to buy agricultural supplies or sell what they have grown.

In Kenya and elsewhere, farmers are gathering in savings groups and contributing small amounts — usually the equivalent of a few dollars at a time. By joining efforts, though, they are providing loans that members can use for significant purchases.

Take Justus Wambwa Mang’oka in Kwakavisi. After joining a local savings group facilitated by Utooni Development Around the world, savings groups such as this one in Kwakavisi, Kenya, give people a chance to pool their funds together so members can borrow money, often enabling them to make purchases larger than they could on their own. (MCC photo/Mwangi Kirubi)

### Stinky sticky: An organic approach to managing pests

All farmers need a way to manage pests. In sub-Saharan Africa, MCC is promoting an approach that Tanzanian farmers have dubbed “stinky sticky.”

Vurayayi Pugeni, who is MCC’s area director for Southern and Central Africa and Nigeria together with his wife, Thelma Sadzamari, explains the concept.

“This is a push-pull pest control strategy where farmers are trained on how to intercrop their crops with a particular grass that is a repellent to the pest,” he says.

This is the stinky part: Peats don’t like the smell of the desmodium grass planted between crops and avoid it. And the grass also helps to preserve moisture and fix nitrogen in the soil.

It worked well for farmers. In fact, in Zimbabwe, Pugeni notes, it worked so well that stem borer moths were flooding into adjacent fields to eat the crops there. So a step was added.

In addition to planting the stinky grass between plants, farmers also plant a special sticky grass, napier grass, around the edge of the plots.

“When a stem borer moth lands on the grass, it can’t move and gets trapped,” he says.

Farmers celebrate how this method protects their own crops. And because it doesn’t cause pests to migrate to neighbors’ fields, it’s also helping to build peace in the community.

It wasn’t just a success with stem borer moths in Zimbabwe. In Tanzania, farmers didn’t have funds for chemical pesticides and were wary of contaminating their water sources with chemicals, but they had long struggled to find a sustainable solution to infestations of the fall armyworm.

“Because of this technology, farmers are now able to control the pest in a sustainable way and in ways that don’t contaminate their wells,” Pugeni says. "And farmers’ yields are going up. When pests are controlled, production increases and the community has more nutritious food."

The approach, which Pugeni describes as affordable, accessible and easy to replicate, is now being applied in other MCC projects across sub-Saharan Africa.

In Uganda, Josephine Aliech, a farmer, shows her newly constructed traditional granary. Aliech is now better able to dry sorghum and other cereal crops and store them in a safe place. (MCC photo/Fred Bobo)

"Because of this technology, farmers are now able to control the pest in a sustainable way ..."
A harvest of water

From Bolivia to Kenya to Cambodia, farmers in MCC-supported projects are sharing how changes in rainfall and more frequent and severe weather due to climate change make it harder to grow enough food for their families.

But the one thing a farmer can’t control is the weather. So how do MCC partners work with farmers grappling with a lack of regular rainfall?

In Bolivia, one answer lies in imagining a harvest of water.

Using a language of sowing and reaping that is ingrained in farmers’ lives, MCC partner Programa de Desarrollo Integral Interdisciplinario (PRODII; Comprehensive Interdisciplinary Development Program) is urging farmers to look for ways to “plant” and “harvest” water.

“Planting water has to do with the building of any water system that might be needed,” says Nathan Toews of North Newton, Kansas. Toews and his wife Leidy Muñoz are representatives for MCC’s work in Bolivia. “The harvesting is to be able to take advantage of the water that is being saved.”

Sometimes that means directly capturing water.

In a new three-year project, PRODII is helping farmers establish systems that trap water from springs higher in the mountains and funnel it down through pipes. The water is then used for crop irrigation or in the home.

But that’s not all.

PRODII also is urging farmers to invest in efforts to plant trees and make other improvements in what program staff describe as water recharge zones, areas at higher altitudes above the springs.

The increases in his rice yield, even though he had little land, meant he was able to open a small shop. He bought two cows and a motorbike. He was able to invest more in his son’s education and buy him a computer—all gains he gives thanks to MCC and ABSK for helping him to make.

A few dollars, an organic pesticide, a bit more space for each rice seedling. On their own, they sound like small steps. But across the globe, MCC partners are seeing the changes add up. And they ripple out, transforming lives in ways that go far beyond farmers’ fields.

The idea is that preserving the groundwater up high will lead to a better supply of water in the springs below.

It’s not a quick fix. Toews was struck by how well project participants and community leaders like Severino Zarate Choque, shown below in a water recharge zone, knew that yet remained committed.

“They talked about that in 10 years, in 20 years, this land is going to be good,” remembers Toews. The changes may pay off earlier. “But there’s a sense this is definitely about the future.”

And that dedication is something that inspires him.

“When we talk about creation care and climate change, we’re talking about living in a way today that we have a future, that we have a healthy earth in the future,” Toews says. “What is attractive about this project and this system is that these communities are doing that on a very local level.”

The language of planting and harvesting water isn’t new for MCC workers and partners in Bolivia, Toews notes, stressing that long-time MCC agriculture worker Patrocinio Garvizu says he’s heard the terms used for years.

But for Toews, this approach underscores how fragile a resource water is, especially in a time of changing weather patterns.

“The idea of planting and harvesting water really communicates this idea that we have to work to have water. We can’t just assume it’s going to be around,” he says. “The communities know that. They’ve known that for a number of years.”

And it’s a lesson for people everywhere. Toews stresses. He hopes more people will both care for creation where they live and support efforts to ensure communities like those in Bolivia have the water they rely on to live and grow crops.
I’m from Desarmes, a rural area in Haiti’s Artibonite Valley. I recently turned 60 years old, and Desarmes is still my home. I worked for MCC for many years and currently I work for an organization called Konbit Peyizan pou Ranfansan Kapasite Lokal, whose Haitian Kreyol name means Agricultural Collective for the Reinforcement of Local Capacity.

We work with participants in collectives, encouraging and organizing them to work together. Our primary focus is on food security and in reinforcing community capacity so that people are better able to produce what they need to eat.

One of the phenomena that really affects our work is climate change. For 15 years, more or less, we’ve observed that rain doesn’t fall in the way it used to. It rains when we don’t expect it, and then when it should rain, it doesn’t. This has affected agricultural production and has made it increasingly difficult for rural farmers to make a living and to have food to eat.

The level of water in streams has gone down significantly. We also sometimes have very strong winds and even hail, which we never used to see. There are more and more insects attacking plants.

So, with all of these problems, we have to find strategies to help us confront climate change. If not, the circumstances to rural farmers will just get more and more difficult with each year that passes.

We’re working with soil conservation so when it rains the soil will stay in the garden. By keeping the soil cool and damp, farmers can protect plants against drought. And we encourage them to prepare the soil earlier so they can plant whenever that first rain comes.

We urge people to use local seeds and to store seeds — not just to eat in difficult times, but also so they have a stock ready when it’s time to plant. Without this, we would be forced to depend on imported seeds from abroad, which aren’t adapted to the climatic conditions or the geography.

Then there’s reforestation. Trees are a really helpful way to respond to climate change.

We encourage and train people to produce seedlings in tree nurseries which are then distributed in the communities.

We use an agroforestry system so people can create a garden that produces food in the short term but also uses trees for long-term food security and economic security. For example, when people plant mango and lime trees, they’ll give fruit in a few years. But if they plant corn and vegetables at the same time, they’ll have food to eat more quickly.

When I was young, the deforestation crisis in Haiti had been going on for a long time already. There weren’t many trees in Desarmes. It was very hard to find firewood for cooking.

Because they’re in charge of cooking, women were the ones who had to walk up to three hours into the mountains just to find a little wood to burn. Instead of going to church on Sundays, they’d make this long trip to find wood, tie it up in a bundle on their heads and return to town. Then for a few days they’d have fuel for cooking.

Today Desarmes has changed. There are more trees in the area. There are more and more shady places for people to sit, and people are more appreciative for nature and trees. The income people receive from some of these trees might help them build a house or send their children to school.

There are farmers who have been participating in reforestation work for 30 years now. I started working with MCC in 1983. I was teaching and getting involved with the church. In those days, the church was especially encouraged development work. They knew that one way for a Christian to follow Jesus was to accompany people in need, to help them build a better life. And they encouraged training so that leaders in the church would have the tools they needed to accompany the rest of the population.

When MCC looked to the churches to find local leaders for its growing reforestation and agricultural program in the Artibonite Valley, I was hired. I have been working in reforestation and agriculture since then.

Over the decades, MCC focused on the most vulnerable people in the most remote places. In 2019, this work transitioned into a separate, independent Haitian organization, Konbit Peyizan, and I became executive director.

Today, we still have the same mission. We want to go as far as possible to the places where people are the most disadvantaged. The last few years have been hard with a rise in insecurity and COVID-19. Gang violence can make travel from rural areas to cities unsafe and often impossible, so farmers can’t always sell the crops they’ve grown. We see the fact that Konbit Peyizan is still standing, despite all of these challenges, as a huge success.

We have a lot of work to do to help people adapt to and confront climate change. But we have seen people whose lives are different today because of our work, and we have a lot of hope.

Our goal has always been to give people the tools to help them become independent. These simple techniques like not burning land to clear it and building gardens in such a way that the soil doesn’t wash away in the rain, giving the organic material time to decompose and make the soil rich.

After all, if you enrich your soil, your soil will enrich you too! If you nourish your soil, your soil will nourish you in return.

Jean-Remy Azor worked with MCC for 36 years before becoming executive director of MCC partner Konbit Peyizan.

Jean-Remy Azor
A former longtime MCC staff member and current leader of an MCC partner organization reflects on his work and life in rural Haiti.

AS TOLD TO ANNALEE GIESEBRECHT

Jean-Remy Azor
A COMMON PLACE FALL 2021

Jean-Remy Azor
A COMMON PLACE FALL 2021
Despite the disruptions of COVID-19, MCC meat canning continued in 2020-2021 and helped families in places like Syria.

BY MARLA PIERSON LESTER

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s the costs of COVID-19 began to mount across the globe, Syrians were already grappling with a multilayered crisis. Families had lost homes, businesses, savings and belongings over years of armed conflict. Many had fled home, some forced to relocate more than once. Food prices had soared—as much as seven times higher than before the conflict, according to one 2019 estimate.

Then, 2020 brought not only the looming health and economic costs of COVID-19 but also more than 2,600 wildfires, engulfing thousands of acres of agricultural and forest land across northwestern Syria. More than 2 million fruit trees, most of them olive trees, were lost.

For more than a decade, MCC supplies have met urgent needs and offered a message of caring for Syrian families. In November 2020, MCC canned chicken was an especially welcome gift.

“‘We couldn’t buy chicken for a whole year, and eating it has become a dream for me, my husband and our children,’” one mother-in-Homs shared with staff of MCC’s partner Fellowship of Middle East Evangelical Churches (FMEEC).

Families, whose names aren’t used for security reasons, struggle daily. Some lost olive trees in the recent fires. Others have little safety net left after years of war and are grappling to make ends meet, a task more urgent as food prices rise.

Since 1946, volunteers have gathered to can meat through MCC’s mobile cannery, meat that MCC sends to hungry families, según FMEEC staff. “The final response from everybody was, ‘We will do whatever we can to can meat this year. People need the meat. We’re doing it in the name of Christ,’” she recalls. “We just thought we’d dig our heels in and keep going.”

In the end, the 2020-2021 canning season yielded some 320,000 cans, or 480,000 pounds, of meat. It’s about half of the total produced in a normal year, but given the restrictions, Hillegass was delighted.

“It really exemplifies coming together. Together we can,” Hillegass says, echoing a canning slogan embraced by volunteers and canners. “We were making decisions at the last minute. It really took everybody having a lot of grace and understanding. Not just the volunteers.

But the meat suppliers, the can suppliers. “Somebody said the theme for the year was, ‘Somebody said the theme for the year was, ‘Blessed are the flexible. That pretty much sums it up,” he says.

“Even looking back on it, it’s almost hard to believe we were able to bring all of these different things together and make it work. That’s the miracle. We see God working in these amazing ways and doing things we couldn’t do ourselves.”

Hillegass, who served on the canning crew from 2004 to 2007 and then as MCC canning and trucking manager from 2010 through June 2021, has seen firsthand the difference that canned meat can make—whether in Haiti after the 2010 earthquake or in Puerto Rico after Hurricane Maria in 2017. And today, families in places from Ukraine to Syria continue to share just how much MCC canned meat has touched their lives.

In Tartous, a city on the coast of Syria, a father of six tells how his family fled from rocket fire in Aleppo. Uprooted from home, he struggled to earn enough to support his family and eventually took two daughters out of school so they could work.

“Our goal is to get bread, basic materials and some beans,” he says, “but regarding meat or chicken and fish, my children forgot their taste a long time ago, and they became pictures that they only see on restaurant signs.”

His eyes fill with tears as he meets with FMEEC staff.

“Thank you from the depth of the heart for giving us the cans of cooked chicken,” he says. “We have been able to cook them in many ways, you have brought joy to the hearts of children.... Look at them, how happy they are!”

Marla Pierson Lester is managing editor of A Common Place magazine.

Together we can! MCC is urgently seeking a canning manager and canners.

Learn more at mcc.org/canning.

"Somebody said the theme for the year was, ‘Blessed are the flexible. That pretty much sums it up.'"
“I find it very rewarding to get to truly work as a member of the Help Channel Burundi team.”

MCC agricultural worker

Name: Vanessa Bielema

Hometown: Grass Valley, California (Crossroads Church)

Assignment: Serving with MCC partner Help Channel Burundi (HCB) in a conservation agriculture project. My husband Craig, our daughter Wren and I live in Bujumbura, Burundi, one of the most food-insecure countries in the world. I accompany the HCB team in planning, monitoring, evaluation and reporting.

Typical day: Varies from visits to farmers’ fields to hours in the office helping to write and edit reports or form survey tools to get the right data to give a fuller picture of the impacts of our work.

Challenges: Burundi is a place that is scarred deeply by its history of division, violence and fear. While I find it such an amazing blessing to serve with a committed team of Burundians working to bring healing and provision to their country, I often feel that I comprehend so little of the experiences of those around me.

A verse I hold on to: “For surely I know the plans I have for you, says the Lord, plans for your welfare and not for harm, to give you a future with hope.” (Jeremiah 29:11 NRSV) The Bible is so full of images and stories about gardens, farming and livestock. Seeing how much God values the work of stewarding the earth and working the soil brings a profound dignity to the farmers we work with and reminds me how honored I am to serve them. But the need can seem overwhelming. I have begun to think of Jeremiah 29:11 as a prayer and promise for our participants. Our unfathomable God knows each one, and for each one has a plan.

FIND YOUR PLACE

Go to mcc.org/serve or linkedin.com/company/mccpeace or contact your nearest MCC office to learn about current MCC service opportunities.

Hello

BURLUNDI

How do you greet someone in Kirundi?

amahoro

(Say ah-mah-HOE-row) (Amahoro means peace but is frequently used as a greeting.)

My name is Bernice Iteriteka.

Age: 10

Lives in: Gaterama, Rutana, Burundi

I live with my papa and mama and my two brothers and my sister.

In the mornings I wake up about 6 and take a shower and get dressed. After I eat breakfast, I take my books and go to school. At 12:45, I go back home and eat lunch.

Then I go fetch water and go out to find firewood. When that is done, I help to cook our dinner and our family eats. I like cooking the best of my chores because it is easy to cook.

Of the food my parents grow, I like the bananas the best because they are so sweet. We boil them, and we eat them with beans.

What I want to be: a teacher

My favorite food: rice

My favorite subject: math

Adding up the savings

When farmers have little extra money, how does a savings group help? Basically, it adds up. Even if each member can only save a few dollars a month, that still equals a lot more than people could save on their own.

And then families can use loans from the group to start new businesses or to begin to raise a new crop or chickens or goats they can sell.

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