

Intersections

MCC theory & practice quarterly

Spring 2017
Volume 5, Issue 2

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On November 1, 1955, the American War in Vietnam began. On April 30, 1975, the last of the U.S. troops evacuated the country. Evidence of the war is everywhere in today’s Vietnam. Museums and memorials marking the war are scattered across the country. Both former soldiers and civilians, along with their children, grandchildren, and even great-grandchildren, continue to be affected by a chemical defoliant sprayed during the war. The environment may never recover fully.

The governments of the United States and Vietnam have begun to hold 40-, 50-, and 60-year memorials of various events related to the war. Such commemorations of the war naturally attempt to grapple with atrocities endured, seek to honor notable acts of bravery and strive to draw conclusions about lessons learned. Most of these commemorations (American and Vietnamese) will focus on the impact of the war in terms that evoke an emotional response of nationalistic support of one side, while vilifying or ignoring the other. The Vietnamese will celebrate the heroic triumph of an outnumbered and ill-equipped military over the American imperialist invaders. The Americans will honor the service and sacrifice of the American veterans who fought in the war.

The stories that the Vietnamese and U.S. governments will tell are not the only stories. Soldiers were not the only people affected. In 1954, Mennonite Central Committee (MCC) sent personnel to support suffering Vietnamese people following the French Indochina War. MCC maintained a presence in Vietnam until 1976, when the government of newly reunited Vietnam required that all non-Vietnamese citizens leave the country. At that time, MCC continued to coordinate humanitarian assistance to Vietnam from Thailand. In 1990, when Vietnam reopened its doors, MCC was among the first international non-governmental organizations (INGOs) to establish an office in Hanoi.

Over the decades, MCC workers in Vietnam have sought to engage Vietnamese neighbors, colleagues, and partners on a personal and human level. This engagement has yielded important stories to remember and share. This issue of *Intersections* shows how the commitment to continue seeing people’s humanity can affect not only relationships in the present, but also lay groundwork for how partnerships develop into the future.

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Vietnam Full Disclosure: <http://vietnamfulldisclosure.org/>. Website with a wide range of advocacy and educational resources related to the Vietnam War and its legacies.

The United States of America Vietnam War Commemoration website: <http://www.vietnamwar50th.com/>. Official website connected to U.S. commemorations of the Vietnam War.

When people are reduced to being seen only as “the enemy,” their humanity is stripped; in a heated conflict, almost anything can seem excusable in trying to overcome this “other.” Reducing people to enemy status provided justification for the U.S. military to pummel the Vietnamese landscape with bombs and spray dioxin-contaminated Agent Orange that withered foliage, crippled livestock and sickened both soldiers and civilians who breathed its stifling fog. More than one million people died in the course of the American war in Vietnam (some estimates are as high as 3.6 million); millions more have suffered the ongoing impact of Agent Orange. Even today, grandchildren and great-grandchildren of people who lived through the war are born with severe disabilities and other health problems due to dioxin exposure from Agent Orange.

Another legacy of the war simultaneously developed amid the atrocities. This legacy maintained a determination to see humans as human—as fellow image-bearers of the great Creator, equally deserving of life and love, even amid conflict. Those who remained faithful to peaceful conflict resolution and to the principle of providing assistance to anyone in need not only helped to preserve life at the time, but also began to defoliate the cover of protection that exists when labeling someone as “enemy.”

Before the war began, throughout the conflict, in its aftermath and continuing today, MCC has sought to come to the aid of people affected by the American War in Vietnam. Sixty years from the onset of the war and forty years from its conclusion, this issue of *Intersections* offers the opportunity to reflect on the importance of direct engagement with the Vietnamese people. There are important stories to remember and to tell. While there is intrinsic value in the practice of remembering and storytelling, we hope that the reflections in this issue can be relevant to MCC and other humanitarian organizations operating in pre-conflict, active conflict and post-conflict settings.

Karen and Major Treadway are MCC representatives in Vietnam.

Peace identity in war time

Mennonite Central Committee began its ministries in revolutionary Vietnam in 1954, immediately following the signing of the Geneva Accords that ended the French Indochina War. Partnering with the Christian and Missionary Alliance and the Evangelical Church of Vietnam (ECVN), MCC provided humanitarian assistance and medical services within the context of Cold War realities. From the beginning, church and mission leaders, as well as top South Vietnam government officials, understood that Mennonites eschewed participation in military service. This article traces how, over the course of the next 20 years, MCC worked to maintain its identity as a peace organization in a country at war, weighing competing interests from North American leadership, North American constituency, other international non-governmental organizations (INGOs), United States (U.S.) government agents and MCC personnel present in Vietnam.

Military engagement renewed in 1959 as the two major parties in Vietnam failed to pursue a political resolution. Paul Peachey, representing the MCC Peace Section, visited Vietnam in March 1960. By late 1961, Saigon President Ngo Dinh Diem was calling the conflict a “real war.” Early in 1962, the United States formed the Military Assistance Command-Vietnam and began directing military activity against the insurgency in South

Vietnam. Unable to control the insurrection in the South, the U.S. prepared to launch bombing raids on North Vietnam. Its naval forces provoked the August 1964 incident in the Tonkin Gulf, which in turn provided the rationalization to begin the massive bombing raids that continued for several years.

Earlier that year, anticipating an expansion of social work ministries, MCC invited Paul Longacre to direct the Vietnam program. Typhoons and catastrophic floods in central Vietnam quickly engaged Longacre's time. Cooperating with U.S. and Vietnamese government agencies, MCC workers soon realized that military strategy was determining who received relief assistance. Declaring that "MCC *must* speak out" against such policies, Longacre sent a letter to the deputy prime minister and shared his concerns with other INGOs working in Vietnam.

The first U.S. Marines came ashore in Vietnam in March 1965. As the number of combat troops steadily rose, the MCC Executive Committee asked Executive Secretary William Snyder to write to President Lyndon Johnson expressing "deep concern" about the burgeoning war bringing suffering to the Vietnamese people. Throughout the summer, major American Mennonite church bodies also protested the expanding war, while the missionaries working with Eastern Mennonite Board of Missions and Charities (now Eastern Mennonite Missions) prepared a statement of concern.

The growing American military involvement stirred the American Protestant and Orthodox churches collaborating under the umbrella of the National Council of Churches (NCC) and Church World Service (CWS) to respond to the needs of an increasing number of displaced persons, with the NCC proposing that MCC coordinate and lead a joint relief effort with CWS. In January 1966, MCC, CWS and Lutheran World Relief (LWR) signed an agreement to form Vietnam Christian Service (VNCS) "to serve refugees and other people in the emergency situation in Vietnam." There was strong support for VNCS within MCC, but some supporters began expressing concerns about possible unintended consequences of the VNCS response. These dissenting voices noted that caring for those displaced by the war seemed to facilitate America's military escapade and wondered if MCC should even operate in Vietnam.

Atlee Beechy became the first VNCS executive director. Beechy told the head of the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) in Vietnam that VNCS senses "a responsibility to work toward peace." He wrote letters to U.S. congressional representatives and made a point to "preach peace" as he interacted with American officials. In July 1966, Snyder and C.N. Hostetter, Jr., the chair of MCC's Executive Committee, wrote a letter to President Johnson and led an MCC delegation to the White House, expressing "our opposition to escalation of military efforts which increase the dimensions of human suffering," and calling for "some bold initiative" to end the bloodshed.

Frank Epp, editor of the weekly *Canadian Mennonite*, visited Vietnam in March of 1966, bringing with him serious reservations about MCC's presence, but returned home convinced that MCC belonged in Vietnam. Throughout the war, critics within MCC's constituency frequently suggested that MCC was too closely associated with the United States' Vietnam policy and should leave. Defenders of MCC's Vietnam program

“ Throughout the war, critics within MCC’s constituency frequently suggested that MCC was too closely associated with the United States’ Vietnam policy and should leave. Defenders of MCC’s Vietnam program countered that for MCC to leave would deprive MCC of a powerful base of legitimacy in speaking against U.S. policy.”

Learn
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Martin, Luke. *A Vietnam Presence: Mennonites in Vietnam During the American War*. Morgantown, PA: Masthof Press, 2016.

Ediger, Max. *A Vietnamese Pilgrimage*. Newton, KS: Faith and Life Press, 1978.

“We are endeavoring to minister regardless of the accident of geography, race or religion to acute human need.”— James MacCracken, Church World Service, 1967

countered that for MCC to leave would deprive MCC of a powerful base of legitimacy in speaking against U.S. policy.

VNCS provided food, medical and other assistance to displaced persons in central Vietnam. VNCS workers were committed to helping war victims, but many struggled with feeling like they had become cogs in the massive U.S. war machine. President Johnson’s decision in May 1967 to combine all U.S. agencies, including USAID, into one operational body—Civil Operations and Revolutionary Development Support (CORDS)—under General William Westmoreland’s military command exacerbated these reservations. CORDS viewed VNCS personnel as part of their pacification team.

Pleased with VNCS’s service to displaced persons in central Vietnam, USAID proposed contracting with VNCS to care for affected people in other areas. MCC’s Executive Committee initially gave authorization for the partnership, but before the planned signing in July 1967, MCC asked the VNCS director to desist, in order to “maintain a VNCS identity and integrity to the greatest degree possible in the face of stronger military control of South Vietnam by the United States forces.”

Questions arose within MCC and VNCS more broadly about whether VNCS should continue its already existing programs. There were two schools of thought. One group believed the war and/or the U.S. presence in Vietnam was wrong and immoral. They came to Vietnam believing that the independent, Christian, and church ownership of their agency would be emphasized. They refused to be “on the U.S. team,” did not want to be associated with U.S. efforts and believed it was their Christian duty to express the difference. Others, meanwhile, felt just as strongly that they were in Vietnam to serve the Vietnamese people in any way possible, regardless of the limitations. They wanted to serve the suffering and needy and did not want VNCS personnel engaging in secondary activities that would jeopardize the working relationship of VNCS with ruling authorities, including the U.S. military, in Vietnam. They did not care who received the credit for their help, including the American government.

Saigon-based VNCS administrators believed its personnel could oppose U.S. policies in Vietnam by writing and talking with U.S. citizens involved in policymaking. They asked: Would VNCS not contribute to alleviating suffering in Vietnam if it could influence the policy-makers to de-escalate or withdraw from the country? James MacCracken, the CWS executive director who respected MCC’s peace concerns, said VNCS staff should remain neutral, referencing that the CWS parent body, the National Council of Churches, spoke forthrightly against U.S. escalation and warfare: “It is not in line for Church World Service to become political and associate itself with either a hawk or a dove role. We are endeavoring to minister regardless of the accident of geography, race or religion to acute human need. It is this and this alone in the name and for the sake and for the love of Jesus Christ that we have turned to the Mennonite Central Committee and requested that a ministry of service be undertaken.”

In September 1967, VNCS leader Paul Leatherman and representatives of three other agencies critical of U.S. policy met with the American ambassador in Vietnam, who stated that voluntary agency personnel had no right to oppose U.S. or Vietnamese government policies. When key leaders of International Voluntary Service (including two Mennonites) resigned a few days later in protest of U.S. policies, the head of CORDS

Refugee Division stated that it was against U.S. policy to control the programs or statements of voluntary agencies. MCC Executive Secretary Snyder also pressed the matter in an October 6, 1967 memo to USAID officials in Washington, saying that CORDS put pressure on VNCS to relate its programs “to immediate military objectives.” This led to a USAID directive that CORDS personnel assist the Vietnamese government in coordinating participation in provincial relief programs “in such a way to preclude charges of interference in and control of Volag [voluntary agency] activities.”

The coordinated attacks on Tet in 1968 proved to be a game-changer, precipitating a change of U.S. military commanders and President Johnson’s readiness to pursue “peace through negotiations.” Shortly before the Tet military offensive, Mennonite missionaries in Vietnam had released their “Letter to American Christians” calling for an end to U.S. military activity in Vietnam. That summer, Beechy contacted the diplomatic missions of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRV, commonly referred to as North Vietnam) and the National Liberation Front (NLF, or the Viet Cong, a political organization and army operating in South Vietnam and Cambodia during the Vietnam War), introducing Mennonites and their concerns for peace and proposing possible relief programs. Following Richard Nixon’s inauguration as president in January 1969, the war continued with the Saigon government’s military forces expanding as U.S. troops withdrew. MCC personnel in Vietnam signed statements calling on the U.S. to withdraw its military forces.

In January 1970, MCC transferred VNCS administration to CWS. That summer, Beechy began a nine-month-long peacebuilding role on behalf of MCC to DRV and Provisional Revolutionary Government (PRG) emissaries in Europe and Asia. [The PRG was an underground government established in 1969 in opposition to the South Vietnamese regime.] Beechy’s final report in 1971 to MCC emphasized the urgency of ending the fighting in the “deeply fragmented, fearful, and hostile” climate of South Vietnam. “All MCC personnel should be reconcilers,” Beechy urged. “We must remain in the midst of the suffering and division as long as we can work effectively and with a sense of integrity. A second imperative is that we do everything possible to stop U.S. military participation in this manmade hell.”

MCC separated from VNCS in January 1973 and returned to its pre-1966 status of administering its own programs. On January 27, the U.S. and the DRV signed the Paris Accords, an Agreement on Ending the War and Restoring Peace to Vietnam. While this enabled the U.S. to withdraw its military forces, the war continued at a lower intensity.

Leaders of the ECVN claimed an apolitical stance, though most identified with the policies of the Saigon government. MCC personnel working with the church’s medical programs chafed at the ECVN’s position. The ongoing MCC Vietnam program placed more emphasis on ability to communicate with and engage Vietnamese people than on the development of specific programs, encouraging MCC workers to “find ways to express Christian love and concern to help bring about real reconciliation and peace.” In the spring of 1974, MCC Vietnam defined “peace and reconciliation” as its main objective in Vietnam. While continuing to support ECVN medical programs, MCC personnel also assisted released political prisoners, prepared written materials for North American churches and directed

“ All MCC personnel should be reconcilers. We must remain in the midst of the suffering and division as long as we can work effectively and with a sense of integrity.”—Atlee Beechy, 1971

attention to the problem of unexploded ordnance. In May of the same year, 16 MCC personnel and several Mennonite missionaries signed a letter to U.S. Congressional leaders urging a reduction of U.S. armaments to Vietnam and a political resolution to the conflict.

The war ended in April 1975. Four MCC men stayed for a time. An MCC delegation visiting Vietnam in November of that year negotiated for an ongoing MCC program with the Vietnamese people. MCC's strong commitment to peace and reconciliation throughout the war has enabled MCC to continue working in Vietnam with the blessing of the Vietnamese government.

Luke Martin worked in Vietnam from 1962 to 1975 with Eastern Mennonite Board of Missions and Charities (now Eastern Mennonite Missions). He works as an author, pastor and Vietnamese interpreter.

MCC and the anti-Vietnam War movement

Many MCC constituents in the United States in the early 1960s were still quite distinct from society, thanks both to the theological principle of separation from the world and to a history of cultural isolation. If not for some of their sons and daughters living and working in Vietnam as MCC workers, and some of their sons resisting cooperation with military conscription, these factors may have prevented any significant engagement with the anti-Vietnam War movement on the part of Anabaptists in the U.S. The work and witness of these young men and women committed to living out Christ's way of peace, even in a world at war, pushed Anabaptist churches in the U.S. to greater engagement with public policy issues, including decisions of war and peace. This article will examine how during the Vietnam War MCC slowly learned to address public policy issues raised by the war.

As MCC workers in Vietnam gained a first-hand view of the war and the suffering it caused, their reports began to have a profound impact on the churches that had sent them. An MCC letter to the White House in November 1967 reflected the concerns that arose among MCC workers carrying out relief efforts in a context of war: "we cannot serve the victims of war in Vietnam without seriously questioning those activities of the United States which cause the suffering we seek to alleviate. Our consciences protest against providing clothing and food and medical care for refugees while remaining silent about a policy which generates new refugees each day."

MCC staff sent numerous letters and delegations to the White House during the course of the war. MCC Executive Secretary William Snyder sent a letter to President Lyndon Johnson dated June 2, 1965, expressing "deep concern over the enlarging of the war in Vietnam with its consequent toll of human suffering." MCC sent every member of congress special issues of *The Mennonite* and *The Gospel Herald* from January 1966 that presented the perspective of Mennonite workers in Vietnam. In 1972, MCC coordinated a delegation of Mennonite and Brethren in Christ leaders to the White House. The leaders' prepared statement implored the U.S. government to cease all military aid to Vietnam and urged the government to "Repent! Turn about, make a fresh start!" MCC's

“ We cannot serve the victims of war in Vietnam without seriously questioning those activities of the United States which cause the suffering we seek to alleviate. Our consciences protest against providing clothing and food and medical care for refugees while remaining silent about a policy which generates new refugees each day.”— MCC letter to President Lyndon Johnson, November 1967

Washington Office coordinated this and other visits by MCC workers and denominational leaders to address public policy concerns arising from the U.S.'s involvement in the Vietnam War.

This type of public policy advocacy was new territory for MCC's engagement with government, as the focus began to shift from speaking on behalf of conscientious objectors from constituent churches to speaking on behalf of friends and partners halfway around the world who were suffering from our government's policies. Some members of MCC's supporting churches viewed this kind of advocacy as inappropriate for a church agency. MCC organized a major consultation with Anabaptist church leaders in December 1966 to discuss concerns about the church's peace witness in the public arena and MCC's role in that witness. In the aftermath of the consultation, MCC continued to engage in active resistance to the United States' involvement in the Vietnam War through public policy advocacy, even as many of its Mennonite and Brethren in Christ supporters continued to view such advocacy incompatible or at least in tension with traditional nonresistant commitments and practices.

Meanwhile, dozens of young men from Mennonite and Brethren in Christ churches in the U.S. protested the war by resisting the draft. Society's deep divisions about the war played out in a Mennonite landscape of theological concerns about allegiance, discipleship and civil disobedience. MCC Peace Section staff member Walton Hackman provided counseling and resources to many young draft resisters. The Mennonite Church affirmed resistance to the draft as a valid application of its teaching about peace and nonresistance at its national convention in 1969.

MCC workers from Vietnam who returned to the U.S. were widely sought after for speaking engagements in churches, schools and civic organizations. Atlee Beechy estimates that he spoke to 150 different groups in his first year back from MCC service in Vietnam. As people with intimate knowledge about the war in Vietnam, former MCC workers participated in anti-war mobilizations back in the U.S. Following his MCC Vietnam service, Doug Hostetter worked for the People's Peace Treaty project and traveled to both South and North Vietnam with the U.S. National Student Association.

The Vietnam War awakened the conscience of many regarding the payment of taxes for war. Delton Franz, the MCC Washington Office's first director, and his wife Marian joined others in promoting the nation's first peace tax legislation, known as the World Peace Tax Fund, introduced by Ron Dellums in 1972. MCC created a Taxes for Peace Fund in 1972 in response to the desire of its Anabaptist supporters to send their withheld war tax dollars to support MCC's peace work.

MCC workers in Vietnam also engaged in behind-the-scenes work that resulted in significant contributions to the anti-war effort in the U.S. In 1973, MCC worker Pat Hostetter Martin introduced a journalist to several persons, including a young Vietnamese woman handcuffed to her hospital bed. This woman, a political prisoner, had been beaten and sexually assaulted by South Vietnamese soldiers. These connections facilitated by Hostetter Martin resulted in a four-part series on political prisoners in the *New York Times* highly critical of the war.

MCC did not, to be sure, fully engage with the leaders and tactics of the anti-Vietnam War movement in the United States. Yet, through support of



Legacies of War website:
legaciesofwar.org

Bush, Perry. "The Political Education of Vietnam Christian Service, 1954-1975." *Peace and Change*. 27/2 (April 2002): 198-224.

King, Martin Luther. "Beyond Vietnam: A Time to Break the Silence: Declaration of Independence from the War in Vietnam." Sermon delivered at Riverside Church, New York City, April 4, 1967. Available at http://kingencyclopedia.stanford.edu/encyclopedia/documentsentry/doc_beyond_vietnam/.

MCC opened its office in Washington, D.C. in 1968 to focus Anabaptist advocacy efforts about conscription and against the Vietnam War. Today, the MCC Washington Office calls on the U.S. government to assume responsibility for the deadly legacies of Agent Orange/Dioxin. To learn more about the Washington Office's work, visit washington.mcc.org.

conscientious objectors to the war, its growing advocacy work, its support for war tax resistance and its on-the-ground witness to the atrocities of the war, MCC developed its own parallel witness against the U.S.'s involvement in the Vietnam War, a witness in keeping with its theological understandings, its relationships and work in Vietnam and a church support base still cautious about advocacy to government.

Titus Peachey worked with MCC for more than thirty years, most recently as peace education coordinator for MCC U.S. He currently serves on the board of Legacies of War, the leading U.S.-based educational and advocacy organization working to address the impact of conflict in Laos during the Vietnam War-era, including removal of unexploded ordnance (UXO).

“ Jesus’ command to ‘love your enemies’ called some within MCC to assist all Vietnamese people in need—including those in communities ‘on the other side.’”

To love the “enemy”

For almost 500 years, Anabaptists have refused to participate in war. After World War I, diverse groups founded MCC as an inter-Anabaptist institution to assist victims of the Great War. Since then, MCC has continued to assist people globally, often in post-conflict situations. MCC initially worked only in areas controlled by the U.S. military and the Saigon government of South Vietnam. However, Jesus’ command to “love your enemies” called some within MCC to assist all Vietnamese people in need—including those in communities “on the other side.” In this article, drawing on my experiences working with MCC in Vietnam in the late 1960s, I examine the risks involved in acting on Jesus’ command to “love your enemies” in a conflict zone and the results that flowed from answering that call.

In Tam Ky, Quang Nam Province, where I worked in Vietnam from 1966 to 1969, I built friendships and trust with many Vietnamese friends. Together, we developed a literacy program welcomed by parents and children on both sides of the conflict. The literacy program started in displaced person camps in Tam Ky, but soon spread to villages beyond the U.S./Saigon government perimeter. This expansion enabled me to work and make friends with a broad spectrum of people in both Tam Ky and also communities deemed “unsafe” and “hostile” by the U.S. military. In a letter to my parents in 1968, I wrote: “Tonight Tam Ky is beautiful and peaceful. It is really kind of great to go out at night because at night I own the whole town. The GIs and CIA may use it during the day, but at night it is their enemy. But for me, it is my friend both day and night.” The same span of Vietnamese friendships that enabled me to live and work safely in both Tam Ky and with marginal communities proved threatening to the U.S. military. War is fueled by fear and hatred of the enemy, so for soldiers to see their fellow countrymen making friends and living peacefully with both sides in a combat zone is, as one U.S. official explained, “hard on the morale of the U.S. soldiers.”

The first reaction of American officials in Tam Ky was to ask the U.S. Embassy in Saigon to pressure Vietnam Christian Service (VNCS) leaders to have me transferred out of the war zone. [MCC was the lead organization of VNCS, which also included Church World Service and Lutheran World Relief.] That effort failed, after a chance meeting with a U.S. journalist led to an article in the *New York Times* pointing out that the U.S. government—which was destroying Vietnam—was attempting to kick out volunteers who were trying to help Vietnamese people. (A worker from International Voluntary Service was also on the list of people the U.S.

military wanted removed.) The article further noted that, in a democracy, the government cannot tell non-governmental organizations (NGOs) how to deploy their staff, while the separation of church and state is supposed to protect religious organizations from government interference.

Several months after the effort to remove me from Tam Ky backfired, a student who taught in our literacy program asked me to meet her father at her aunt's house. Her father informed me that he worked for the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) and that he had been assigned to spread disinformation about me in the Tam Ky area. He explained that the CIA had informants from rural National Liberation Front (NLF) areas who would come monthly to Tam Ky and report to the CIA about local officials in their area, so that the military could attempt to kill them. The CIA plan was to tell the informants that I was a covert CIA agent. The assumption, he explained, was that when the rumor took hold, the NLF would "solve the Doug Hostetter problem" the next time they infiltrated Tam Ky. When I asked Vietnamese friends how I should respond to the warning, they advised me to pray and trust my friends. If I were to leave Tam Ky just as the rumor was spreading, they said, it would be believed, and MCC could never again send volunteers to Tam Ky. Several months later, my literacy teacher asked me to meet with her father again. He reported that the campaign had been a failure; the informants had spread the rumor, but the people did not believe it and now I was likely safe.

All of the Western NGOs in Vietnam claimed that they were there to love and assist the Vietnamese people. But most of them only assisted Vietnamese who lived in the areas controlled by the Saigon government, protected by U.S. troops. Some Mennonites and Quakers tried hard to expand our work to assist people on both sides of the conflict. In 1975, 130 international NGOs were operating in South Vietnam. When the U.S. troops withdrew, only MCC and the American Friends Service Committee remained as witnesses to a God who is bigger than the United States and who loves all Vietnamese people, regardless of where they live or whose military is in control.

Doug Hostetter is MCC's United Nations Office director. He also served with MCC in Tam Ky, Vietnam from 1966 to 1969.

The Vietnam Mennonite Church: laying a foundation of peace in the shadow of war

Shortly after the signing of the Geneva Accords in 1954 to end the French Indochina War and temporarily divide Vietnam into northern and southern zones, Mennonite Central Committee (MCC) came to Vietnam to support charitable work for Vietnamese people regardless of their religious affiliation, ethnicity or political ideology. The organization worked together with the Evangelical Church of Vietnam (ECVN) and The Christian and Missionary Alliance (C&MA), which had a presence in Vietnam as early as 1911. While North American Mennonites came to Vietnam to respond to basic human needs following the French Indochina War, their presence and commitment to peacemaking had a deep influence on those who would eventually form the Vietnam Mennonite Church (VMC).



Hostetter, Doug. *The People Make the Peace*. Charlottesville, VA: Just World Books, 2015.

Martin, Earl. *Reaching the Other Side*. New York: Crown Publishers, 1978.

MCC's first activity in Vietnam was helping to distribute food, clothing and blankets for people migrating south, working closely with the ECVN relief team. MCC also provided medicine for C&MA leprosy camps among ethnic minorities in Buon Me Thuot City in the central highlands for many years. In 1960, MCC partnered with ECVN to build and operate a health clinic in Nha Trang City along the south-central coast. MCC maintained an office in Saigon (now called Ho Chi Minh City).

When the American War spread in Vietnam, MCC partnered with two other organizations—Church World Service and Lutheran World Relief—to collectively operate as Vietnam Christian Service (VNCS) from 1966 to 1972. VMC activities supported displaced persons in areas of central Vietnam such as Quang Ngai, Tam Ky and Hue; supported highland farmers in Di Linh and Pleiku; and, together with ECVN, also built a health clinic in Pleiku. Many additional social work projects and other health care efforts took place in and around Saigon.

Eastern Mennonite Board of Missions and Charities (EMBMC—now Eastern Mennonite Missions, or EMM) first sent workers to Vietnam in 1957 to preach the gospel and to establish the church. After a period of learning Vietnamese, these new workers invited their neighbors and students to study the Bible, share their faith, organize English classes, distribute tracts and organize many other programs and social activities to help people. New believers and ECVN Christians worked together in both evangelical and social work.

Together with Vietnamese colleagues, EMBMC workers envisioned, established and operated a Mennonite center opposite a large public hospital in the center of Saigon. EMBMC purchased the 7,500 square-foot space in 1960 as a student center (sharing its location with the EMBMC office), and it hosted many activities: English classes for hundreds of students (sometimes using the story of Jesus in the curriculum), a library and reading room for students and a fitness room. Many students signed up for Bible courses offered on weekends in addition to regular Sunday services. The first believers were baptized in 1961. A second Mennonite center opened in Gia Dinh (now Binh Thanh District), Ho Chi Minh City: this center served as a focal point for Mennonite efforts to assist economically marginalized families during the war. EMBMC also purchased a small, 120 square-meter facility in Binh Hoa, a few blocks away from the main Gia Dinh office. Here, a childcare center helped poor families.

In 1970, Vietnam Mennonite Missions began ministry in Can Tho, the largest city in the Mekong Delta, about 170 kilometers south of Saigon. Among their activities were Bible classes, English lessons and tailoring courses for young women. ECVN university students acquired a 333 square-meter facility on Tu Duc street in February 1975 for use as a student dormitory with space for eating, studying, and worshipping God during the week

On April 30, 1975, as the war ended and Vietnam returned to a unified country, all EMBMC workers needed to leave Vietnam. Some Vietnamese Mennonites had to evacuate abroad or return to their hometowns throughout the country. Almost all church and Christian center activities were halted during the transition of government. Soon after, the government issued an announcement requiring all churches' and

“ The VMC was formed amidst the tumult of war. Now, the church finds itself in a favorable position, attained in part through the support of American Mennonites. VMC will continue to build peace in Vietnam and also throughout the world.”

temples' weekly activities and large-scale events to be registered with state authorities. Due to internationally dispersed leadership of the Mennonite churches, VMC could not complete all registration requirements. In June 1978 the government assumed control over Mennonite church properties.

In the ensuing years, at the direction of Pastor Nguyen Quang Trung, Mennonite church members worshiped with other, fully-registered congregations (e.g., ECVN and Grace Baptist Church), waiting for the day when they would be able to operate their own location again. Throughout this time, Pastor Trung visited and prayed with Mennonite families. Early in 1983, the executive board of the Vietnam Mennonite Church and Pastor Trung agreed that the Lord was leading the congregation to begin worshipping together at the pastor's home. Attendance continued to grow with faithful believers committed to following the Lord and with more than 70 people gathering for the Christmas celebrations.

VMC strives to operate in a constructive spirit of peace, always turning to peace as a guide for its activities. Specifically, during and following the war, the church called on believers to heal and build the country through peaceful methods, not with violence. In this spirit, the church established relief centers and health clinics to help people suffering in the midst of violence. Mennonite believers must assume responsibility for the people around them and unite in interacting with others in a peaceful way.

The VMC was formed amidst the tumult of war. Now, the church finds itself in a favorable position, attained in part through the support of American Mennonites. VMC will continue to build peace in Vietnam and also throughout the world. This message of peace is warmly embraced by the Christian community and is also the philosophy of life for interacting with our neighbors.

Huynh Minh Dang is General Secretary of the Vietnam Mennonite Church.

Tensions in MCC Canada's resettlement of Vietnamese refugees

Late in 1978, Canadian Mennonites saw the crisis of the "boat people" unfold on their television screens. Images of Vietnamese refugees fleeing their country in overcrowded and decrepit boats, risking the dangers of the open seas and the threat of pirate raids, moved Mennonites to action. They began to phone MCC offices across the country, asking how to help. MCC Canada's response to the Vietnam refugee crisis involved struggles that endure within MCC to this day—namely, a tension between compassionately resettling refugees and proactively addressing the realities that create refugees in the first place.

Following the end of the war in Vietnam, a new Canadian immigration law allowed approved groups of individuals to sponsor a refugee if the groups assumed full responsibility and financial liability for one year. In response to a directive from MCC Canada's annual meeting in January 1979, staff began negotiations with the federal government, hoping to expedite the process of approval and settle the liability issue. These negotiations proceeded quickly and on March 9, 1979, MCC Canada signed a Master



Martin, Luke S., Nguyen Quang Trung, Nguyen Thanh Tam and Nguyen Thi Tam, "The Mennonite Church in Vietnam." *In Churches Engage Asian Traditions*. Ed. C. Arnold Snyder and John A. Lapp, 315-336. Intercourse, PA: Good Books, 2011.

Agreement on Private Refugee Sponsorship with the government. This agreement allowed MCC to approve constituent sponsoring groups—mostly church congregations, but also groups of at least five individuals. Other national churches and church organizations subsequently signed similar agreements.

Mennonite and Brethren in Christ congregations responded enthusiastically to the invitation to privately sponsor Vietnamese refugees. Within the first two years, they had sponsored 3,769 refugees; by 1985, the number had risen to 4,651. More than half of MCC's constituent congregations across the country became involved in refugee sponsorship; some congregations sponsored one family after another.

The reasons for their eager involvement in refugee sponsorship were many. Some Canadian Mennonites remembered their own refugee stories and could relate to the plight of the Vietnamese. (In the 1920s, 21,000 Mennonites had fled Russia for Canada, with the assistance of MCC; in the late 1940s and 50s, another 8,700 arrived via Europe or Latin America.) Some sponsors were especially eager to assist those fleeing a Communist regime as they had. Others who had actively protested the Vietnam War saw refugee sponsorship as a peace response. Still others simply wished to extend welcome and compassion to suffering people.

MCC Canada's refugee assistance program was not without controversy. One factor was MCC Canada's role in the larger MCC international program. At that time, MCC Canada did not have direct supervision over international work, which was the responsibility of an entity informally known as "MCC Binational," based in Akron, Pennsylvania. When a senior MCC Canada staff person inserted himself into the program work and pushed hard for refugee resettlement, he seriously offended MCC workers in Thailand (where MCC's Vietnam-related work was based in the post-war years), as well as some MCC colleagues in Akron.

At a deeper level, the controversy reflected a debate over whether MCC should prioritize refugee resettlement in Canada or economic development in the post-war region. Should MCC invest significant time and financial resources in helping refugees find new homes in Canada? Or should it devote itself to supporting socio-economic development in Vietnam (and also press for the U.S. to lift its embargo on Vietnam), thereby preventing people from experiencing a need to flee their homes in the first place?

MCC workers in Southeast Asia clearly favored the latter. They saw that many of the refugees fleeing Vietnam were among the people the country needed most—those with education and financial resources—and felt that refugee resettlement was a "brain drain." They observed how massive refugee camps in Thailand caused resentment among the Thai people, and they wanted MCC to prioritize long-term justice and socioeconomic development work.

These tensions received a public airing in some Canadian Mennonite periodicals. The *Mennonite Brethren Herald*, for example, published several hard-hitting critiques by constituents regarding MCC administrators and MCC service workers in Thailand. Eventually three workers in Thailand resigned, hurt and frustrated by the lack of trust in them personally, the lack of understanding of the complexities of the context and what they perceived as the Canadian constituency's eagerness for a "quick-fix" response rather than sustained attention to longer-term solutions. MCC

 **More than half of MCC's constituent congregations across [Canada] became involved in refugee sponsorship."**

sent a board member with pastoral gifts on a three-month assignment to try to re-build morale among the remaining team members.

MCC continues to face challenging decisions about how to respond to complex refugee situations. So, for example, in the face of mass displacement within and from Syria, Syrian church leaders call on MCC to support displaced Syrians in staying within the region. At the same time, however, Canadian Mennonites have eagerly mobilized to welcome Syrian refugees. To be sure, refugee resettlement should not be the only MCC response to mass displacement. At the same time, however, Canada's private refugee sponsorship program—birthed in the years after the Vietnam War, with significant MCC Canada involvement—remains an important way that MCC responds to refugee crises. The private refugee sponsorship program has proven to be a highly successful way of integrating newcomers into Canada, with Canadian Mennonites, supported by MCC, continuing to play a significant role in private sponsorship of refugees from around the world.

Esther Epp-Tiessen is MCC Canada's Ottawa Office Public Engagement Coordinator.

Rekindling MCC work in post-war Vietnam

From 1976 (a year after the war concluded) until 1989, annual MCC shipments of aid and visits of MCC delegations to Vietnam continued despite the absence of expatriate MCC workers in the country. Beginning in the early 1980s, an MCC representative based in Bangkok worked through the Vietnamese organization Aidresep to make quarterly trips to Vietnam, providing assistance to select projects. In 1990, 15 years after the American War in Vietnam, MCC was one of the first North American non-governmental organizations (NGOs) to receive permission to open an office in Hanoi, with oversight from Vietnam's Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Shortly after our arrival in Hanoi, I was shopping in the market when a vendor asked, "Are you Soviet or French?" I told her I was an American working for an aid organization. A friend called to her, wondering who I was. "She's repairing war damage," was the answer. Then she said to me, "American bombs killed lots of people," implying, with a smile, that it was appropriate that I should be helping to repair the damage. This conversation and others like it revealed to us the internal debate within Vietnam and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs over how to handle foreigners and foreign NGOs. We quickly learned that for MCC, an NGO associated with the country of the former enemy, working in a post-war era would necessitate redefining its role in the country and reconceptualizing how the organization would measure success.

In this context, MCC could not partner with local churches as it typically does. We were advised, for the security of the local church, to be very cautious in any contacts with the churches. At that time, there were no Vietnamese NGOs. All Vietnamese organizations received their mandate and support from the government, so "non-government" was a foreign concept. MCC continued to discuss with our Vietnamese government contacts our desire to partner with grassroots organizations. In the absence of that possibility, the government helped to broker relationships with several universities, local government offices, the Women's Union, health

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MCC Canada Refugee Resettlement website: <https://mcccanada.ca/stories/refugee-resettlement>

Kumin, Judith. "Orderly Departure from Vietnam: Cold War Anomaly or Humanitarian Innovation?" *Refugee Survey Quarterly* 27/1 (2008): 104-117.

“A grain of rice when you are hungry means more than a bowl of rice when you have enough.”—Vietnamese proverb

departments and hospitals. Within these entities, we often found visionary leaders who were willing to take risks to bring about improvement in the lives of those they were serving. Some people within and outside of MCC were critical of our ties with the Vietnamese government, but this was the way we had to work if we wanted to be in Vietnam as a restorative presence in solidarity with our country's former "enemy."

MCC was seen as an "old friend" of Vietnam, who had not supported the American War. This often meant that we were seen as supportive of the North; it was difficult to communicate that we were pacifists, desiring to minister to human need on both sides of the conflict. MCC played three main roles during this period.

First, MCC provided financial assistance, which legitimized MCC's presence in the eyes of the government. Beyond the tangible assistance, the money also symbolized solidarity with a suffering people and brought hope for the future. The amounts of money were relatively small, and our government contacts often pressed for more.

Second, MCC sought to strengthen human resources and provide professional opportunities. During the war years, professionals in Vietnam had been cut off from developments in their fields. We were able to link them with study tours, short courses and graduate study opportunities—particularly in Asia, but also in the West.

Third, MCC workers functioned as a bridge to North American communities, telling North Americans the stories of the Vietnamese people we had come to know and explaining to our Vietnamese partners that we represented North American Christians who wanted to help repair the harm done by the war. MCC was unique among the international NGOs operating in Vietnam at the time in having a strong constituency of people who felt ownership in the organization and supported it financially.

When we returned to Vietnam in 2012, we found a cohort of young Vietnamese who had studied development and were applying their knowledge to the situation in Vietnam. (In our early days there, such a group of people did not yet exist.) We also were able to meet with some of MCC's early project partners who told us, "We will never forget that MCC helped us when we were in extreme need after the war." They referred to an old proverb: *A grain of rice when you are hungry means more than a bowl of rice when you have enough.*

Janet Reedy, together with her husband, Stan, served as MCC representative overseeing the (re)establishment of the Vietnam program in 1990. The Reedys continued to serve in Vietnam until 1992.



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Bush, Perry. "Vietnam and the Burden of Mennonite History." *Conrad Grebel Review* 17/2 (Spring 1999): 5-27.

Karnow, Stanley. *Vietnam: A History*. London: Penguin Books, 1997.

Agent Orange/Dioxin and the ongoing legacies of the Vietnam War

The Vietnam Association for Victims of Agent Orange/Dioxin (VAVA) was established on January 10, 2004, uniting people living with the effects of Agent Orange (AO) exposure and those who have volunteered to support them. VAVA mobilizes domestic resources, as the government looks to VAVA for recommendations regarding policies in support of affected persons. With support from international partners, VAVA assists families affected by AO through agricultural and educational support, routine health checks and ongoing medical care and rehabilitation. VAVA also joins its international partners in advocacy for justice for people living with the effects of AO in Vietnam.

The Vietnam War ended long ago, but the war's legacies continue to linger in Vietnam. During the conflict, the U.S. military sprayed more than 80 million liters of toxic chemicals—of which approximately 61 percent was Agent Orange, contaminated with an estimated 366 kilograms of the highly-toxic substance dioxin—over large portions of central and southern Vietnam. Intended as a chemical defoliant, AO has caused serious environmental devastation. Meanwhile, more than 4.8 million people suffered exposure to AO and more than three million people in Vietnam have died or are suffering from serious diseases or disabilities caused by AO exposure. The children, grandchildren and even great-grandchildren of people directly exposed have suffered AO's effects. Many families have three or more members who require assistance for daily living, exacerbating families' already difficult economic situations.

During and following the war, international support from various organizations, individuals and governments have aided the Vietnamese people in physical and mental recovery from the consequences of war. The help of friends and international non-governmental organizations (INGOs) is not only of material significance, but also a source of great encouragement for people affected by AO in Vietnam. Furthermore, international partners have strengthened advocacy efforts to petition the U.S. government in cooperating with Vietnam to address the ongoing health and environmental devastation created by AO.

Through our partnership with MCC, VAVA provides medical care, physical rehabilitation and livelihoods training for people affected by AO, especially in Quang Ngai Province. We at VAVA have appreciated the dedication and professionalism of MCC's experienced staff and its committed workers. Close friendships have been forged with MCC workers and VAVA staff through years of collaboration on projects to assist people affected by AO. Additionally, people in Quang Ngai have particularly appreciated the presence and contributions of MCC workers who have lived and worked alongside people living with the effects of AO in Duc Pho commune, accompanying them in overcoming some of their sufferings in life.

Since its inception, VAVA has grown into a nationwide organization with more than 360,000 members throughout almost every province of the country. It has mobilized more than 1.2 trillion Vietnamese dong (U.S.\$60 million) to assist affected persons with housing, loans, healthcare, disaster recovery and scholarships. VAVA has also made significant strides in raising awareness in Vietnam and throughout the world about the AO tragedy, garnering further support to aid affected people. VAVA

“The children, grandchildren and even great-grandchildren of people directly exposed have suffered AO's effects. Many families have three or more members who require assistance for daily living, exasperating families' already difficult economic situations.”

Learn more

VAVA website: vava.org.vn/?lang=en

The Aspen Institute: Agent Orange in Vietnam Program website: <https://www.aspeninstitute.org/programs/agent-orange-in-vietnam-program/>

Martini, Edwin A. *Agent Orange: History, Science, and the Politics of Uncertainty*. Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts Press, 2012.

also regularly sends delegations to meet with veterans' peace groups in other nations as it mobilizes international support, and VAVA continues to press the U.S. government to assume responsibility for damages caused by AO.

VAVA's accomplishments add to the collective efforts of the Vietnamese people to address this particular calamity of the war, together striving to gradually improve and stabilize the lives of people affected by AO. Coordination and cooperation with international NGOs have increased the capacity of VAVA, both in Vietnam and internationally, to respond to the ongoing needs of Vietnamese people living with the effects of AO. VAVA looks forward to continued partnership with the goal of easing the daily struggles of Vietnamese people living with the effects of AO.

Lieutenant General (retired) Nguyen Van Rinh is chairman of the Vietnam Association for Victims of Agent Orange/Dioxin (VAVA).

Intersections: MCC theory and practice quarterly is published by Mennonite Central Committee's Planning, Learning and Disaster Response Department. Editors are Alain Epp Weaver and Bruce Guenther. Opinions expressed in this newsletter reflect those of the authors and not necessarily those of Mennonite Central Committee.

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Intersections: MCC theory and practice quarterly can also be accessed on the MCC website at mcccanada.ca in Canada or mcc.org in the U.S.

ISSN 2376-0893 (print) ISSN 2376-0907 (online)



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Central
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Relief, development and peace in the name of Christ