The concept of service—specifically, of Christian service—has been central to MCC’s identity over the course of its nearly century-long history. Yet service is more than a concept: it takes embodied form. Theology, identity and action all come together in the praxis of Christian service. When embodied service crosses international, socio-economic and cultural boundaries, questions and complications emerge. Legacies of colonialism, racism and unequal power and wealth distribution shape the identities of people engaged in service and the communities in which service takes place. The experience of service is as much shaped by the individuals participating in a term of service as it is formed through the structure and ethos of the organization and program through which they serve.

In *Black Faces, White Spaces*, African-American academic Carolyn Finney contends that one’s experience of a place is intertwined with that location’s socio-economic and cultural histories. One’s embodied experience of service will thus in turn be shaped by the histories of the place where one serves. How can Christian service programs, such as those offered by MCC, best recognize and honor these diverse histories and factor those histories into how service programs are structured?

A recent experience underscored the importance of such questions for me. I serve as the Canadian coordinator of the International Volunteer Exchange Program (IVEP), a program in which young adults from the global South come to Canada and the U.S. for eleven months of service. Recently, as I drove a group of IVEP participants across Canada on the way to their mid-year conference, I shouted out, “We’re crossing the border from Manitoba to Saskatchewan!” “Ah yes,” replied an IVEPer from Zimbabwe, who was serving at an Indigenous centre in Winnipeg, “we are crossing from Treaty 2 territory into Treaty 4 territory.” This young woman from Zimbabwe had lived in the country of my birth for less than six months, yet spoke far more profoundly about the reality of the land we were driving across than I had. I was humbled. This experience reminded me that again and again I need to relearn the history of the place I inhabit. Sometimes it takes outside eyes to see this. Everything I have ever experienced is through the body of a white, straight, educated Canadian of middle-class background, with ready access to a passport and family support. I need other perspectives to see more fully.
Preparing people for cross-cultural service and exchange means addressing different cultural assumptions about our embodied selves. For IVEP, that means preparing young adults from 28 different countries for a year of negotiating cultural assumptions in Canada and the United States while in service. A recent review by MCC in Zimbabwe of Zimbabwean host families’ experiences in receiving and hosting young adults from around the world for one-year service assignments helped me initiate conversations with IVEP orientees about the challenges to negotiate in life in cross-cultural service. The review found that Zimbabwean hosts reported that the young adults from Canada and the U.S. living with them sometimes did not bathe or dress properly, while engaging in a variety of other behaviors that seemed out of place or even inappropriate to the Zimbabwean hosts. These host families wondered how best to address these situations. This report changed the way I was able to discuss cross-cultural living with IVEP participants who were about to meet their own U.S. and Canadian host families. After asking IVEP participants to read the report, we asked them what challenges Canadian and U.S. hosts might face in hosting them. Suddenly, orientees recognized service as multi-directional, not just from the global North to the global South, as an opportunity for cross-cultural learning from one another across multiple lines of difference.

This issue of Intersections explores shifting understandings of service across MCC’s history and various dimensions of how Christian service involves our embodied selves and of how factors such as gender and nationality shape experiences of service. It also includes a summary of key findings of a study that examined the impact of MCC’s eleven-month service programs for young adults. Together, these articles reveal some of the complexities, challenges and opportunities involved in serving in the name of Christ.

Kathryn Deckert is the Canada coordinator for MCC’s International Volunteer Exchange Program (IVEP).

Shifting discourses about service

The notion of service has stood at the heart of MCC’s self-identity for decades. Yet, at the same time, the meaning of service has shifted over MCC’s nearly century-long history. Or, perhaps better put, the nature of service has been an ongoing point of contestation within MCC. In this article, I trace shifting meanings of service across MCC’s history, examining how MCC workers have critiqued and reimagined service.

Service in MCC’s early decades had two primary meanings. Service represented first and foremost an act of discipleship, a lived response to Jesus’ command to his disciples to give food to the hungry and water to the thirsty (Matthew 25:31-46). Service, from this vantage point, is roughly synonymous with relief efforts to meet basic human needs. For many supporters of MCC today, this approach to service shapes their understanding of MCC’s mission—and, indeed, through the distribution of comforters, relief kits, canned meat and more, a vital part of MCC service is a reaching out to the Christ whom we encounter in those who hunger and thirst.

A second primary meaning of service in MCC’s first half-century was service a Christian alternative to military service through programs such as Civilian Public Service (CPS), Pax and the Teachers Abroad Program (TAP). Such
alternative service was often understood as a different way of contributing to the good of one’s country. So, for example, MCC’s executive committee declared in a September 16, 1943, statement that CPS work “has meaning to the men who perform it as an expression of loyalty and love to their country, and of their desire to make a contribution to its welfare.”

The 1950s saw the emergence of a preoccupation that has reverberated up to the present, namely, a worry that MCC service runs the risk of becoming decoupled from Christian witness. At a 1958 consultation about MCC’s work attended by Mennonite, Mennonite Brethren and Brethren in Christ mission agencies, Brethren in Christ church leader and chair of the MCC board C.N. Hostetter asked, “In the light of MCC’s function as a relief organization and not as a church, is there no danger of an overemphasis on purely social service? Such danger does exist. It is important that our relief ministry ‘In the Name of Christ’ be more than a nominal cliché. . . . Unless our workers know Christ, give themselves to Christ as they give themselves for others and witness positively for Christ, our program falls short as Christian relief.”

This concern about the potential separation of “word and deed” has surfaced repeatedly over the ensuing decades, with an insistence that MCC service is carried out in the name of Christ. In an influential article in 1970 on the occasion of MCC’s fiftieth anniversary, Peter Dyck articulated a “theology of service” that would resist a “fragmented approach” that assigned “Christian mission” exclusively to Anabaptist mission boards. Authentic Christian service, argued Dyck, was “eschatological hope made visible,” a testimony within a fallen world to God’s redemptive love. In a slightly different vein, long-time MCC worker in Central America Susan Classen argued in 2003 that “If MCC is to continue into the future, we will need to root ourselves in a spirituality of service.” Service, Classen continued, “is not finally a ‘should’ so much as a ‘therefore,’ a response to God’s prior work in our lives.”

Even as service in MCC’s early decades was viewed as a one-way response of discipleship from the United States and Canada to the rest of the world, narratives within MCC complicated this unidirectional picture. Writing in 1970, former MCC administrator and long-time Mennonite church leader Robert Kreider described MCC as a “continuing education” program for North American Mennonites, reflecting on the fact that MCC workers testified to how much more they had learned and received during their service terms than they had given or taught. In the 1990s, MCC executive director Ron Mathies expanded Kreider’s argument by conceptualizing Christian service as transformative education and portraying MCC as an “educational institution.”

The 1970s also saw the start of creative ferment and rethinking within MCC about the nature of service. In 1976, for example, Urbane Peachey, then MCC’s Peace Section executive secretary and Middle East director, penned a provocative article for MCC’s internal publication, Intercom, entitled “Service—Who Needs It?” “We’ve really done our best to send skilled personnel who could make a needed contribution,” Peachey wrote, “but now there are a number of countries which are interested in our aid but not our personnel.” MCC should ask itself: “Who is asking for the relationship? With whose needs are we primarily concerned?” Was MCC concerned with the need of Anabaptists from Canada and the U.S. to serve, or with the self-identified priorities of churches and communities in the countries where MCC operated?”
where MCC operated (which might not include the placement of North American workers)? Such questions about what role, if any, service workers from Canada and the U.S. might fruitfully play internationally became more pressing as countries around the world gained greater independence from former colonial powers and with the rise of a professional class and the growth and development of civil society organizations in those countries. These types of questions also gained in intensity as MCC moved from direct implementation of program to greater partnership with and accompaniment of local churches and civil society organizations.

During this period, service started to be redefined as learning. Responding to Peachey’s 1976 Intercom article, Atlee Beechy, a member of MCC’s executive committee, wondered if “perhaps it is time to redefine the meaning of service, to recognize more fully the two-way dimension of service, including the notion that learning from others is an act of service.” Such pondering was accompanied by active debates within MCC over the following decades about colonial and racialized assumptions about who is serving whom and where, with some visions of service critiqued for their implicit assumptions of service as a unidirectional initiative of white Mennonites of European heritage to the rest of the world. Reflecting back on these debates in the late 1990s, Judy Zimmerman Herr summarized these concerns in the form of questions: “Does being in a giving posture demean those we send our help to? . . . Is our service really an expression of power? How do we prevent our service from becoming an attitude of self-righteousness?”

The redefinition of service as learning was crystallized in a 1986 review of MCC Africa’s work led by Tim Lind. “Africans have suffered under centuries of words and theories of change/development coming from the North,” Lind observed. “It is in this context that servanthood for us today means abandoning all of the good and useful things we have to say in Africa in favor of a listening stance.” MCC workers from Canada and the U.S., Lind argued, needed to take a “back seat” and adopt a “waiting” posture. Revisioning service as listening and learning, Lind recognized, “may seem to some less than exciting and creative, particularly as it involves a shift in our thinking about ourselves as initiators and planners of activities and responses to need. However,” he continued, “we feel that this posture is in fact highly creative as it allows space and visibility to approaches to service and development which are different from our Western approaches, and which can mix with our own approaches in new and exciting ways.”

This reconceptualization in the seventies and eighties of service as a multi-directional movement of listening, learning and sharing has shaped MCC service programs up to the present. This new understanding of service was reflected in the name adopted by MCC when it inaugurated an eleven-month service program for young adults from Canada and the U.S. to the rest of the world: Serving and Learning Together, or SALT. [MCC Canada had also earlier operated a voluntary service program inside Canada under the SALT name.] In later years, the Serving with Appalachian Peoples (SWAP) program changed its name to Sharing with Appalachian Peoples. Meanwhile, MCC service programs have expanded understandings of who is engaged in service and where. MCC U.S.’s Summer Service program and MCC Canada’s Summerbridge program have provided opportunities for young adults of color to serve in their local communities. The Young Anabaptist Mennonite Exchange Network (YAMEN), operated in partnership with Mennonite World Conference, offers eleven-month service opportunities for young adults outside of Canada and the U.S. to other
parts of the Majority World, opportunities through which the global church shares gifts of service with one another. And the International Volunteer Exchange Program (IVEP), initially established in 1950 to provide European Mennonites with one-year service opportunities in the United States and Canada, now includes participants from over 25 countries.

The broader contexts within which MCC service takes place are ever evolving. Increased restrictions on visas by many countries, including Canada and the U.S., present barriers to intercultural service programs like those operated by MCC. Organizations receiving service workers have greater expectations of those workers bringing professional and even specialized skills. The meanings of service within MCC will undoubtedly continue changing as MCC enters its second century and as MCCers engage in vigorous discernment about what constitutes service in the name of Christ.

Alain Epp Weaver is co-director of MCC’s Planning, Learning and Disaster Response department.

Navigating gender dynamics in service

Women from Canada and the United States working in international assignments live with one foot in two worlds. Aware of and impacted by the cultural realities and gender dynamics of their country of service and their sending country, they navigate implementing a programmatic lens rooted in a North American perspective and a daily reality shaped by their country of service. This past year, with long-overdue attention paid to questions of sexual violence and gender discrimination in the United States and elsewhere, women from the U.S. and Canada serving globally with MCC arguably felt these tensions more acutely than ever.

In the U.S., Canada, Europe and beyond, a groundswell of activism has brought renewed attention to sexual harassment and discrimination, unequal pay and lack of equal respect for women in the work place. #MeToo has become synonymous with a new movement of women’s empowerment. Yet many MCC workers live in contexts in which the concept of a hashtag is just as unfamiliar as the sentiment behind it. How can women serving with MCC globally who care deeply about the importance of working for greater gender equity in the United States and Canada appropriately address these issues in the societies in which they work?

Over the past decade, MCC has worked to improve how MCC and its partners incorporate gender analysis into planning and implementing projects. When partners plan a new food security, education, peacebuilding, disaster response or health project, MCC staff work with them to ask how women and girls are considered in the process and how gender dynamics more broadly are accounted for. During the design phase of a recent education project in Mozambique, project planners asked: How is the quality of education in this context different for boys and girls? By asking that question, they found that

Children, as well as teachers and administrators, bring their own early socialization into the education process. Frequently, girls are raised not to value themselves highly, and without a sense of the basic human
rights to which they are entitled. Boys may not question traditional gender roles that reinforce notions of male dominance and which may influence gender relations throughout the life cycle. Discrimination against girls during adolescence can reduce their readiness and ability to participate and learn, and results in fewer opportunities for them to develop to their full potential.

The project in Mozambique will work to address some of these discrepancies in education that begin in childhood when girls are taught to undervalue themselves. Designing project activities in a way that incorporates rigorous gender analysis presses MCC and its partners to look more closely at how a society’s gender norms shape daily realities for women and girls as well as men and boys.

While MCC has prioritized the incorporation of gender analysis into project planning, women in intercultural service with MCC do not have a clear-cut guide for how to navigate gender discrimination they may face during their terms of service. To be sure, women in the United States and Canada face specific forms of discrimination and navigate patriarchal systems every day. When these women enter new cultural contexts for service, they in turn must navigate different patriarchal systems with their own specific forms of discrimination.

In Burkina Faso, the country in which I serve, women arguably enjoy a relative degree of empowerment in comparison to women in many other African contexts. Women serve in the police and top governmental positions, while gender equality is protected under the country’s constitution. Day-to-day life, however, tells a different story. Women farmers, for example, are expected to work in the field all day and then return home to fulfill their other obligations of child rearing, wood gathering and water collecting. Men, on the other hand, can typically relax when not at work.

As MCC’s co-representative for Burkina Faso (together with my husband), I routinely encounter paternalistic attitudes and discriminatory assumptions about my abilities, though obviously to a lesser degree than Burkinabe women working in the fields. While my husband was granted immediate respect from our male project partners, I had to work to earn it. [Of course, women working in the United States and Canada can also face discriminatory expectations in the workplace!] In the beginning, partners would address all questions and concerns to my spouse, assuming he was the ultimate decision maker. Partners expressed surprise that I had the strength and endurance of a man to drive long distances over rough roads to visit them in their villages. After the birth of our third daughter during our term, many friends and colleagues in partner organizations assumed that we would continue to have children until we got a son. No MCC gender tool exists that helps women in intercultural service within MCC to navigate cultural assumptions around gender and the corresponding expectations and challenges women in service face.

Recently our office helped to facilitate a training for farmers about conservation agriculture. Because MCC is working to integrate gender analysis across programming, we dedicated a session to addressing how gender roles and expectations in Burkinabe society shape how an effective conservation agriculture project should be constructed. Together with MCC’s conservation agriculture technical officer, I facilitated the session. We divided the men and women farmers into two groups to allow for...
candid conversation before coming back together. The women immediately bonded over discussing their extra responsibilities beyond working in the fields. “Why do our husbands get to come home and relax?” “They have no idea what it’s like to work with a baby strapped to their backs.” They said they had never discussed these topics with their husbands because challenging these expectations is not a realistic option. Men are the traditional “chiefs” of the home.

Back in the plenary session, the women shared with the mixed group what we had discussed. Empowered by their collective voice, they led the conversation about the unfairness they experience. It was a lively discussion handled well by the men. So much so that the women felt comfortable enough to bring up the topic of their social obligation of plowing the fields while wearing dresses and coiffed hair, while men are allowed more comfortable and practical attire. Men acknowledged the major roles women play in a successful harvest and in managing the home. Participants discussed how women could potentially be given a more equitable share of decision making power in household and farming decisions, given the significant roles they play.

Women in intercultural service with MCC encounter many of the same patriarchal and discriminatory attitudes that women where they serve experience. At the same time, the #MeToo movement reminds us that women in the countries of the global North experience other forms of patriarchal discrimination. Women in MCC service often hold dual identities, carrying with themselves concern and passion for renewed movements against sexist discrimination in the United States and Canada, while also navigating new forms of sexism in their contexts of service. In holding these dual identities together, women in intercultural service have opportunities to make connections between different forms of sexist discrimination and to work for a future of empowerment and equality for women everywhere.

Sarah Sensamaust is MCC Burkina Faso co-representative.

**Serving “with” and not “for” in the United States**

Oppressive missional models of service that only want to do to or for others have been labeled the *White Savior complex, reductive seduction* or *poverty tourism*. These outdated service models tend to exploit and seek to control and retain power over others, in the process devaluing the leadership gifts within local communities. Many within MCC are aware of the challenges that need to be navigated when conducting short-term missions. Awareness of theory, however, does not automatically provide immunity from inadvertently participating in cycles that further oppression: deliberate action and ongoing reflection are needed. When it comes to the topic of short-term missions, *with* is a key word. MCC’s Summer Service program in the United States has been designed out of a conviction that true transformation occurs when individuals and communities are able to exercise their own agency, with MCC simply playing a supporting, or accompanying, role.

What I find powerful about the MCC Summer Service program in the U.S. is that it is specifically for people of color to serve in their own communities. Its primary focus is on empowering local leadership and
building up young adults of color. The program is not about sending young adults to disadvantaged communities for the summer to make a change, but rather about raising up local leadership from within communities of color to identify and work for the changes that are needed within their own communities. MCC’s role in this program is to partner *with* churches of color. MCC does not impose a uniform model of ministry or seek to control the service projects of young adults of color in their communities. MCC works *with* leaders from the contexts in which Summer Service participants work, trusting that these communities have the solutions and resources to accomplish their goals.

People of color can sometimes replicate patterns of colonialism as we work at leadership development and missions. As a person of color leading the Summer Service program, I need to be aware of when I’m operating out of the dominant culture and not working with churches and young adults. I want to avoid dominant culture patterns that emphasize perfectionism, quantity over quality, paternalism and power hoarding.

I learned the value of working *with* others during my first year as an urban youth pastor. On sunny, warm days, local pastors would go the community park and carry out activities with the neighborhood kids. One young boy would always be there. He loved playing outside and working in our community garden. After a few weeks, I noticed a pattern. Even though he was eight years old and could physically swing by himself, he would always ask to be pushed on the swing by an adult. Or when tying shoes, he would often ask an adult to do it. I began to wonder: Is he doing it for attention? Does he lack the skills? Is it easier for him not to learn, knowing others will do it for him? He would always ask to be pushed on the swing by an adult. Or when tying shoes, he would ask an adult to do it. I began to wonder: Is he doing it for attention? Does he lack the skills? Is it easier for him not to learn, knowing others will do it for him? Peter Block, an author about community building, claims that “Every time you help someone, you’ve colonized them.” This is strong language, but I think it is true. When we do things *for* or *to* people, we take away their agency. If you do that for long enough, people begin to believe they can only receive and never give, that they lack the ability or skills to make change and in turn they lose their sense of dignity and worth. The boy in the park had things done *to* or *for* him for far too long. As pastors, we didn’t want to fall into the trap so many other churches have of perpetuating oppression. We had to think critically about what it meant to form lasting relationships and work *with* others in our community. We wanted to learn the role of the church in addressing trauma and to avoid perpetuating a cycle of oppression.

MCC needs to be aware of when it is acting out the dominant culture and not living out the kingdom of God. I believe if MCC creates space for more people of color in leadership, we can break away from the old models of short-term missions and dominant culture patterns. By including people of color in leadership and at the planning stages within MCC, we avoid perpetuating oppression, we share power and we recognize that there is not one right way to lead. As MCC provides mission and service opportunities, may we remember the incarnational model of Jesus Christ who walked *with* us, proclaimed good news to the marginalized and restored right relationships between us and God and with one another.

Danilo Sanchez is MCC U.S. Summer Service national coordinator.
Building unity within diversity in cross-cultural exchange work in Indonesia

Young adult exchange programs in Indonesia offer a good case study of the relevance of investing in cross-cultural skills needed to navigate life in multicultural settings. For young adults from Indonesia, and I suspect many other countries, the development of these skills is helpful to their ability to navigate their identities and interactions both at home and abroad. In the Indonesian context, young adult cross-cultural exchange programs help to promote unity within the vibrant diversity of Indonesian society.

MCC work in Indonesia has taken place in many different parts of the country. In the past, MCC has worked in multiple parts of Indonesia, including Borneo, Sumatra and Java, all parts of the Indonesian archipelago with distinctive cultures, languages and ethnicities. Over the years, the MCC team brought together people not only from Canada, the United States and Indonesia, but also from many other countries and cultures. At its best, MCC was a vibrant site of multicultural, or intercultural, service in Indonesia. The team’s multicultural character in turn reflected the fundamentally multicultural character of Indonesia itself.

People from the multicultural societies of the United States and Canada, in my experience, often tend to view other nations as monocultures. Perhaps rooted in colonial assumptions about what constitutes a nation, this unreflective assumption of “one country one people” means that many MCC workers who came to Indonesia from Canada and the U.S. to serve were surprised to realize that Indonesian Christians generally and Indonesian Mennonites specifically are already engaged in intercultural service. Indonesia, after all, is made up not only of scores of islands, but is also marked by many different languages and ethnicities. Javanese culture, for example, is very different from the culture of East Indonesia. Even within Java itself, culture varies markedly between eastern, western and central Java, while more than ten languages are spoken on the island.

Today, MCC is not implementing any of its own program in Indonesia, but instead supports the work of Indomenno, a church-based association begun by the three Mennonite synods in Java. At present, Indomenno encourages youth to participate in both international and more localized exchange programs. Through the Young Anabaptist Mennonite Exchange Network (YAMEN), a shared program of MCC and Mennonite World Conference, and MCC’s International Volunteer Exchange Program (IVEP), churches from the three Indonesian Mennonite synods send their young adults to Canada, the United States and other countries around the world. When the young people who participate in these eleven-month MCC exchange programs return to Indonesia, they have gained many skills related to cross-cultural work. They have immersed themselves in new cultures in their placement countries and have learned how to accept and adapt to new cultural patterns, mixing those new patterns with cultural practices from their home communities. When they return to Indonesia, they have re-adapt to their home culture, while discerning how to use their newly-developed skills in cross-cultural exchange.
The Mennonite synods of Indonesia offer Indonesian Mennonite youth ways to further develop their cross-cultural skills. One Mennonite synod has a youth program called Youth for Peace, in which young adults work together to identify creative ways to promote peace within Indonesian society. IVEP and YAMEN alumni have found the Youth for Peace program to be one outlet for using their new cross-cultural skills.

Other Indonesian Mennonite churches have developed a “live in” program aimed at equipping Indonesian Mennonite young adults with a deeper understanding of cultural diversity within Indonesia and with the skills to form friendships across cultural divides. The program sends participants to rural parts of the country to live with local families for a brief stay, ranging from a couple days to up to three weeks. During this time, young adult participants learn skills such as wood craft from their host families. Participants also serve in their placement community’s local church and carry out community service. Usually the participants come from big cities and have never experienced the culture of rural Indonesian life. Through this program, Indonesian Mennonite young adults develop an appreciation for the diversity of Indonesian society and the goodness of different ways of life.

The cross-cultural youth movement supported by MCC through Indomenno does not only happen in church, but also between religions. Because Indonesia is so diverse, Indonesia has many communities with adherents of different faiths. Learning to be a Christian peacemaker in Indonesia means learning the value of tolerance and the ability to live in peace and harmony with people who are different, including people of different religions. Indonesian Mennonite churches, with support from MCC, provide young adults with opportunities to learn the importance of tolerance and good relations between members of different faiths. Through conversation with people of other religions, stereotypes of those religions can begin to break down: Indonesian Mennonite youth gain a deeper understanding about what other religions believe and practice, while also helping non-Christians gain a deeper understanding of what Christians believe and practice. By breaking down stereotypes, this program, which brings together young adults from Sumatra, Borneo, Sulawesi and other parts of Indonesia, builds bridges of peace and helps create unity amidst diversity.

Intercultural service in the form of cross-cultural exchange equips participants for a peacebuilding mission of building unity amidst diversity.

In August 2016, as part of its ongoing commitment to learn from and strengthen its program initiatives, MCC initiated a study of the impact of its three eleven-month programs for young adults: the International Volunteer Exchange Program (IVEP), in which young adults from around the world serve in Canada and the United States; the Serving and Learning Together program (SALT), in which young adults from Canada and the U.S. serve around the world; and the Young Anabaptist Mennonite Exchange Network program (YAMEN), a shared program of MCC and Mennonite World Conference (MWC) in which young adults...
from outside Canada and the U.S. serve in other countries, primarily in the
global South.

The study’s objectives were twofold. First, the study explored the effects
of YAMEN, IVEP and SALT on sending churches, participants’ faith
journeys, participants’ skills and passions and participants’ global
citizenship. The study used an understanding of global citizenship based
on a definition developed by Oxfam Canada as including awareness of
the wider world, respect for diversity, involvement in social justice causes,
action to make the world more sustainable and contribution to local and
global communities. Second, the study built on these findings to formulate
recommendations for how best to improve the three programs.

For the IVEP and YAMEN parts of the study, the research team chose
Colombia, Indonesia and Zambia for in-depth examination. In these three
contexts, MCC has, or has had, extensive experience with its young adult
programs, along with active engagement with Anabaptist churches. In each
country, researchers organized focus groups and interviews of IVEP and
YAMEN alumni. They also conducted interviews with Mennonite World
Conference representatives, denominational representatives and pastors
and other leaders from congregations that have sent and received IVEPers
and YAMENers.

For the SALT portion of the study, the research team emailed a confidential
web-based survey to all SALT alumni with email addresses on file who
served between 1981 and the 2015-16 program year, or approximately
78% of alumni. To assess how church leaders in Canada and the U.S.
view SALT, researchers sent a short, web-based survey to pastors from a
sample of Anabaptist sending churches, as well as to leaders of Anabaptist
denominations, conferences and mission programs with knowledge of SALT.

Through these surveys, interview and focus groups, the research team
collected input from a total of 380 respondents. Through in-person
interviews and focus groups in Indonesia, Zambia and Colombia,
researchers heard from 86 IVEP and 11 YAMEN alumni, 35 pastors
and MWC representatives, 45 lay leaders (other than pastors) and two
community leaders. The SALT surveys resulted in responses from 177
alumni, seven pastors and 17 Anabaptist denominational leaders.
The study found that alumni link their participation in IVEP, YAMEN and SALT to growth in their faith, personal and vocational skills and engagement as global citizens. To maximize this growth, however, the study found that participants need more consistent emotional support during and after the program. Additionally, the results show that the primary impact of these exchange programs occurs in the lives of individual participants, rather than in sending and receiving congregations. This finding suggests that MCC should pay closer attention to discerning with church partners what changes sending and receiving churches want to come about through these exchange programs.

IVEP and YAMEN alumni across Indonesia, Zambia and Colombia noted that participation in these programs strengthened their commitment to service, increased their sense of independence or confidence, led to increased empathy and hospitality toward foreigners in their own country and contributed to the dismantling of stereotypes that participants held of others. The most cited effects for SALT alumni included: increased appreciation of diverse faith perspectives; new or improved language skills; new or increased interest in building bridges and/or community between people of different faiths, ethnicities and races; and new or increased interest in working on social justice causes such as poverty, inequality and racism.

While respondents generally reported largely positive effects from their participation in these exchange programs, they also identified negative outcomes, including spiritual struggles, stalling of careers, difficulty reconnecting with the church and depression. These negative impacts, in turn, were linked by participants to feelings of not having had either adequate emotional support during the service terms or emotional and vocational support upon reentry. Not having adequate support in place to help young people process and integrate their experiences can limit the ways in which the transformative experiences during their year of service can shape their lives.

IVEP and YAMEN alumni in Colombia, Indonesia and Zambia requested more emotional support after their year of service. In all three countries, alumni stated the importance of connections with other alumni to process their experiences and the challenges they faced upon re-entry, even decades later. Alumni affirmed the countries that organized IVEP and YAMEN
alumni reunions and encouraged MCC to organize more such reunions in the future, while also using social media to foster connections among alumni. Study participants also suggested that MCC and sending churches create mentorship opportunities, in which older alumni could serve as mentors for recently returned alumni, providing a listening ear and walking with them as they reintegrate into their home communities and look for work or return to school. Additionally, for alumni who desire confidential emotional support or who have had traumatic or challenging experiences during their year of service or reentry, MCC needs to make confidential counseling resources more accessible to participants. These resources need to be presented in a way that lessens stigma and normalizes the use of professional counseling.

Unlike IVEP and YAMEN alumni, SALTers did not expect MCC to provide them with ongoing support during re-entry. SALTers did, however, note the need for more consistent accompaniment and emotional support during the program. While many noted that they experienced growth during challenges, functioning under ongoing stress and trauma is not ideal for growth and should not be normalized. MCC should continue to provide in-country supervisors with clear expectations for supporting SALTers, including frequency and types of check-ins, and resources related to self-care, such as confidential counseling. All in-country supervisors should receive ongoing training on trauma and sexual violence so that they can better respond to SALTers who experience trauma and can also proactively create environments in which SALTers know that disclosing sexual violence or other traumatic experiences will result in a life-giving, trauma-informed response.

In her article, “The ‘Third World’ is Not Your Classroom,” Courtney Martin explores how learning happens during study and work abroad experiences. Martin argues that “the best learning happens not just when you’re thrown off a bit . . . but when you have the context of real, complex relationships within which you can find your footing again.” The study findings suggest that MCC needs to do more to facilitate opportunities for participants and alumni to find their footing during and after these exchange programs within the context of complex relationships that provide them with the space to process and integrate their experiences into their lives.
At the level of the sending church, the pastors and congregations interviewed for this study voiced their affirmation for the positive impact IVEP and YAMEN have on participants, including increased leadership skills, strengthened commitment to service and an improved understanding of Anabaptism and the global church. The extent to which church leaders noted a pronounced effect at the level of the local church is variable, however, with many suggesting that the impact of these programs are focused at the level of the individual.

Several pastors in Colombia, Indonesia and Zambia, however, believed that connecting local churches to the global church is an important objective of these programs, although they thought that more could be done through the programs to strengthen those connections. While not an explicit objective of YAMEN or IVEP, strengthening church-to-church connections is certainly a complementary objective to current program objectives to “build the church together” (YAMEN), “share gifts between churches” (YAMEN) and “strengthen bonds of Christian fellowship” (IVEP). Connecting participants’ receiving and sending churches intentionally and systematically may be a way to strengthen these programs’ overall ability to strengthen the church, break down barriers, bring people of a common faith together despite diverse expressions of that faith and further support the work of Mennonite World Conference. If MCC desires IVEP, YAMEN and SALT to effect change at the level of the church, MCC should work with MWC and its church partners to determine what local churches want to achieve through church-to-church connections and then intentionally administer these three young adult exchange programs in such a way that better facilitates connections between sending and receiving churches.

IVEP, YAMEN and SALT have led to transformative effects in the lives of participants in the areas of faith, personal growth, skill development and global citizenship. Providing more consistent emotional support to participants and intentionally connecting sending and receiving churches will allow MCC to strengthen program effects for participants and their churches.

Meara Dietrick Kwee is an MCC learning and evaluation coordinator.

**The promise and challenge of intercultural service teams**

Many years ago, during an MCC country program review in Latin America, the evaluation team I was on engaged in a lengthy discussion about the “perks” that expatriate workers from Canada, the United States and Europe enjoyed during their MCC service term. Our local context expert, a professional who worked for a major aid organization, was dumbfounded that MCC would cover 100% of the costs of child care and private school tuition for service worker families and provide work for both spouses as a matter of course. At some point in the discussion, however, we realized that all along he had assumed that service workers were paid a salary commensurate with his own. When he realized that international service workers were what we used to call “volunteers,” he said, “Never mind! I thought you all had salaries! I completely withdraw everything I just said. Now it makes perfect sense.”

And yet, despite the “perfect sense” that it makes to differentiate support packages received by international workers serving outside their countries of nationality from the salaries and benefits received by national staff...
employed by MCC in their country of nationality, conversations and debates persist within MCC about the challenges that such differentiated support packages pose to creating truly intercultural teams. I strongly suspect that no MCC country program has fully succeeded in satisfactorily resolving these tensions generated by different types of support packages, because every country program is operating within a context of power and privilege and within hierarchies shaped by the legacies of colonialism. MCC operates within and at times reflects and reproduces these broken structures and can only imperfectly redress the wrongs that they produce. Immigration and labor laws vary from one country to another, dictating in part how compensation is organized. The ways that family members understand one’s commitment to working with MCC may differ widely as well. However, creative approaches to policy at the country program level can at least partially correct the persistent imbalances and foster more equivalence among team members who come from disparate situations, in turn nurturing a shared sense of mission.

In his letter to the Philippians, Paul claims that Jesus, “though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness” (Philippians 2:6–7, NRSV). This vision of Jesus' self-emptying in service has arguably animated and infused MCC’s understanding of service in the work of accompanying hurting people. This conception of service as self-giving and self-emptying is in turn translated into organizational commitments:

- Witnessing to God’s upside-down kingdom, MCC embraces God’s partisanship for the poor and is committed to working amongst marginalized communities for human rights and poverty reduction.

- As a response to the Biblical commandment to love God, our neighbors, and our enemies, MCC serves and learns in community and builds bridges across cultural, political, religious and economic divides.

- Working towards a vision of God’s reign on earth, MCC is committed to dismantling barriers of racial, economic and gender-based oppression and to ensuring that all community members are active participants in program design and decision-making.

While it is clear (at least in theory) how these principles apply to community work—e.g., participatory decision-making, grass-roots accompaniment—MCC has paid less attention to how the principles play out within intercultural MCC teams. As teams become more diverse, especially in terms of national origin, the lines defining who are the poor, the marginalized and the oppressed become somewhat blurred as categories of social class intersect with ethnicity and national origin. Determining what constitutes equitable treatment becomes challenging. Is a national staff person with a master’s degree and 15 years of experience working for non-governmental organizations poor, marginalized and oppressed in comparison to a 20-year-old SALTer from Goshen, Indiana? If that national staff person is still paying off an educational loan from a family member, can MCC help her make payments as it would for some expatriate workers? What if the national staff person has an urgent medical need, but her health insurance provider will not give her an appointment until next month, while the international service worker at the next desk can see any specialist in the city that day and be fully reimbursed?
What does it look like, in the words of MCC’s operating principles, to learn in community and build bridges across cultural, political, religious and economic divides? How do these principles of equity and commitment to dismantling discrimination work in practice within an international team that includes staff from the country and that includes some staff compensated through regular salaries and benefits (national staff serving in their country of nationality), while others are compensated as volunteers (expatriate service workers, who receive a stipend, but also generous benefits such as housing, full health insurance and, where applicable, children’s education costs)?

MCC, to be sure, is not the only international non-governmental organization that grapples with the complexities involved in working towards equity and fairness in the compensation of members of intercultural teams that include national staff from the specific country of operation. Houldey (2017) and Roth (2015) suggest that in some contexts as many as 90% of all aid workers are national staff working in their countries of origin. As these national staff work alongside international workers from other contexts, workers inevitably observe different types of and disparities within compensation and support. A writer for the “Secret Aid Worker” blog (2015), for example, poignantly questions the justifications offered by international NGOs for differentiating the medical insurance packages offered to international and national staff.

MCC works at this challenge by giving its country programs flexibility to create internal policies aimed at fostering equality within program teams that are contextually relevant. For example, when my spouse and I served as MCC representatives for Colombia, we instituted a $400-per-person-per-year emergency medical fund within our budget for national staff to draw on in situations where their national insurance was woefully inadequate.

While MCC teams across the past century have almost always had some form of intercultural composition, the intercultural character of MCC teams has become more pronounced in recent years. The number of multi-year international service workers who come from the Majority World (i.e., not from Canada, the United States or Europe) is steadily growing. The Young Adult Mennonite Exchange Network (YAMEN) program in which young adults from Majority World countries serve in other Majority World countries has rapidly expanded. MCC’s two-year Seed units for young adults are deliberately designed as intercultural teams that bring young adults from Seed countries like Bolivia and Colombia together with young adults from the broader region and from Canada and the United States. The growing intercultural character of MCC teams pushes MCC actively to grapple with the tensions involved in working towards greater equity within intercultural teams. If we don’t deliberately address such tensions, the implicit biases in our actions and decisions will inevitably default to maintain the status quo, leaving colonial relationships unquestioned. At its best, MCC constantly operates in a dynamic tension, like the strings of piano or guitar, or human vocal cords, vibrating into harmonic music, ever changing, responsive and expressive.

Elizabeth Phelps works as a consultant and previously served as MCC co-representative for Colombia.