“Bread, in God’s name, bread.”

The cry for bread in southern Russia (present-day Ukraine) one hundred years ago was for food. Mennonites in the United States and Canada responded and MCC was born. Only months later, the food to southern Russia was followed by tractors. Today, MCC’s work on behalf of the churches in Canada and the U.S. continues through relief, development and peace extended in the name of Christ. Some would say that these three follow each other chronologically, one after the other, but it would be more accurate to say that MCC’s relief, development and peace efforts are intertwined.

In Uganda today one sees the interconnectedness of relief, development and peace. MCC works with churches and community-based
organizations as they respond to the immediate relief needs of communities while also addressing the trauma from rampant killing and abuse in their communities over years of violent unrest. Today, the work of development is also critically important in these same communities. In the Karamoja region, MCC works with the Church of Uganda as it teaches new agricultural skills to farmers who once herded cattle. When visiting a community to talk about the project, one woman told us the crops didn’t appear on their own but required hard work. Sand dams in this same community also provide water the people need to live healthy lives. The stories confirm a simple truth: when people are given the tools to make their lives better, they can thrive.

This special centennial issue of *Intersections* features glimpses into MCC’s work in development over the past decades—work to improve education, healthcare, agricultural production, access to water and more. Articles analyze shifts in development approaches as well as offer analyses of specific development ventures. Of special importance in this issue are the voices of long-serving MCC national staff, who reflect on shifts, challenges faced and lessons learned in MCC’s development work: listen carefully to the wisdom from these faithful MCCers.

Best practices in development must constantly evolve to meet new needs and realities, as these articles testify. The reason we respond, however, endures.

*Ron Byler and Ann Graber Hershberger are the MCC U.S. executive director and associate executive director, respectively.*

**Reflections from the Teachers Abroad Program (TAP), 1962-1985**

“This is my assignment in a nutshell. I am an American Mennonite in the Republic of Congo teaching French to Angolan refugees in an American Baptist Mission Secondary School whose director is a Canadian.”—Agnes Schutz, quoted in “TAP Teachers Describe Teaching Situations,” MCC News Service, November 13, 1964

In 1962, in response to calls from African churches and government ministries and as an outgrowth of a study carried out by Mennonite educator and MCC leader Robert Kreider, MCC inaugurated the Teachers Abroad Program (TAP). Building on MCC’s experience in the 1950s placing hundreds of teachers in remote parts of Newfoundland and Labrador, MCC founded TAP to support newly independent African countries in their quests to build up an educated populace and to support African churches as they sought to contribute to African liberation and independence. At an All Africa Churches Christian Educational Conference in 1962, African church leaders declared that “The leadership of African countries, in the future, will depend upon the secondary schools of today. Indeed, great emphasis has been given to the role of secondary schools in producing ‘top-level’ manpower and thereby contributing both to economic development to expanding public and social services. The Church should recognize that one of the greatest services it can give to the nation is to run secondary schools of the highest possible standard, both in academic attainment and in the values which they impart.”

Over the ensuing two decades, MCC placed 768 teachers in 27 countries through TAP, with the greatest number seconded to Christian and
government-run schools in Botswana, the Republic of Congo (later Zaire, and now the Democratic Republic of the Congo, or DR Congo), Kenya, Malawi and Nigeria, and smaller numbers sent to Algeria, Bangladesh, Bolivia, Brazil, Burkina Faso, Egypt, Ethiopia, Grenada, Greece, Indonesia, Jamaica, Lesotho, the Jordanian-controlled West Bank, Pakistan, Somalia, Sierra Leone, Sudan, Swaziland, Tanzania, Zambia and Zimbabwe. TAP began tapering off in the mid-1970s, ending in 1985. In the course of their three-year service terms, TAP participants reflected on the challenges of teaching, the dynamics of life in contexts shaped by colonial legacies and the nature of Christian service. The excerpts below from MCC news releases and worker progress reports show TAP teachers engaged in such reflections.

**Demanding teaching loads**

“To teach in East Africa in a mission school requires that one be versatile.’
This statement given in orientation before our departure from the U.S. in August 1962, certainly sums up the need of a teacher in Kenya. To illustrate this let me list some of the courses I have taught in the two terms since our arrival at the Kaimosi Girls Secondary School. First term my classes included African History, Geometry, Algebra, Arithmetic, British History, Biology, and General Science. Second term I have added to this list Geography, . . . Duties beyond that of teaching also present many opportunities for varied ‘talents.’ Speaking in chapel services, Sunday morning or evening services, teaching Sunday School classes, invigilating examinations or evening study hours, acting as night-watchman or maintenance man during the school holidays all add variety to a rather busy schedule. We also direct athletic events after school hours and each staff member is sponsor of a club or society such as crafts, dramatics, debate, music, or science.”

—David Yoder, “Teaching in East Africa,” received in Akron, PA, May 4, 1963

**Student passion for education**

“I have seen students coming to chapel at 6:30 am to begin another day. I have watched them copying blackboard outlines with dogged persistence, trying to understand European concepts so foreign to their culture. I have known high school students who think missing school is punishment. Then at noon I have seen them going to their crowded dormitories to prepare their skimpy meals. Beans or rice or salted fish are their T-bone steaks! Peanuts, bananas, and manioc serve as staple foods. I have struggled with them to stay awake for two hours in the afternoon on a windless day. I have watched them carry dripping buckets from the spring in the evening. There are clothes to wash, more studying, soccer (if there is time) and the evening meal to prepare. I have heard the study bell at seven.”


“As we teach the students here, we wonder what struggles they really encounter: getting fees during these uncertain times in Nigeria, finding a faith that satisfies African needs, facing vast and complex changes from village life to city life. We pray that our stay in Nigeria will help the students of Ochaja Secondary School face the 20th century with bolder steps.”

—Dave Giesebrecht, quoted in “Education—Not a Magic Cure-All,” MCC News Service, November 15, 1968

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During the last few years the Mennonite church has become widely known throughout East Africa. And one of the reasons for this has been the MCC Teachers Abroad Program.”
—Paul Kraybill, Eastern Mennonite Board of Missions and Charities, 1967
We TAPers are generally very idealistic people. (Maybe anyone under MCC is.)
—Lois Shenk, 1968

TAP as Christian witness

“I’m not so much interested in whether five years from now anyone at Tumutumu [Kenya] is still using the syllabus for Religious Knowledge that I wrote. What I am interested in is whether the girls can see a difference in my life, and know that it is Christ Who makes me different. If they see this, then the logical conclusion is that He can make the same difference in their own lives.”

“During the last few years the Mennonite church has become widely known throughout East Africa. And one of the reasons for this has been the MCC Teachers Abroad Program which is greatly appreciated. . . . It is making a very significant contribution to the Christian schools of these countries.”
—Paul Kraybill, Eastern Mennonite Board of Missions and Charities, “Educator in Africa Says Time is Short, Task Urgent,” MCC News Service, October 27, 1967

TAP as transformative education for MCC workers

“[O]ne of the most important things life here has taught me has been a greater sense of trust and dependence upon God in the everyday jobs we are called upon to do. Time and time again, when confronted with tasks for which I am not prepared and which I know are beyond all my natural ability, I have been amazed at the way in which He does them if they are given to Him. Often it is when you reach the end of your own strength and resources in a given task, and realize how completely powerless you are, that the power of God is most clearly revealed.”
—Judith Hilty (Tanganyika) to MCC administrator Urbane Peachey, June 8, 1964

“Being the only Mennonites in the country, we worship with people of different denominations and have been tremendously encouraged and enriched as we’ve shared our various Christian experiences. We think we’ve gained a new openness and appreciation for differing forms of Christian expression.”
—Ron Mathies, “The ‘Other’ Advantages and Opportunities of TAP,” MCC News Service, April 15, 1966

“By the time we were ready to leave [our student’s village in Nigeria], we had two live chickens, two huge stacks of bananas, other fruit and some eggs—all in appreciation of our visit. They couldn’t thank us enough for coming. Strange when it was we who were most blessed by the visit.”

“It is much easier to think what this year [in Tanzania] has meant to me than trying to analyze the contribution which I have made. I’m not really sure that I have made any. It is only now, after one year of working, that I am beginning to feel that maybe I have something to offer.”
—Margaret Steider, “TAP: A Service with Adventure,” MCC News Service, October 20, 1967
TAP workers seeking to learn new cultures

“A TAPer’s bookshelf is just about as cultural-ogical as they come... TAPers in East Africa have each had at least a lecture or two in Bantu theology by an anthropologist. In addition TAP Retreats are stimulating days of intense discussion—analysis of self and culture and an attempt to discover the role of the young Christian professional in bringing about the Kingdom of God in the hearts of men. We TAPers are generally very idealistic people. (Maybe anyone under MCC is.)"
—Lois Shenk, “Shouldn’t We Be a Little Frank—In the Name of Christ?” MCC News Service, July 19, 1968

“One can hardly relate effectively to the local community without being able to speak to people, and yet a short term hardly warrants enough time to be spent on language study to get reasonable facility in it. This is particularly true when one is in a high school situation in Kenya, for one can manage so well without knowing any language but English. But the longer I am here, the more embarrassing it becomes to go beyond the school gates and not be able to communicate with the rural people.”
—Judith Hilty to MCC administrator Robert Miller, September 20, 1964

Teaching and living amidst colonial legacies

“[D]o not be too critical of African nationalism and of newly independent African governments. You may frequently hear expatriates expounding on the view that Africans are not doing an adequate job of governing themselves. . . . it is my belief that, not only should a foreign worker refrain from being too critical, but he should be in basic sympathy with the nationalistic movement of the country in which he serves. . . . within certain limitations, a person need not forsake his convictions as a Christian in order to subscribe to this sympathetic attitude towards African nationalism.”
—Ken Lohrentz, “Attitudes of the TAP Teacher,” February 1965

“It is really difficult to enjoy the comforts of a nice house when one knows that one has such comforts because one has a white skin and when one learns that money which had been set aside to improve student quarters has been poured into the construction of one’s own comfortable house. Several times recently we have encountered the astounding philosophy that it is only natural to look after housing needs of white teachers before those of the Congolese who are already used to living in poor conditions. It is on hearing such attitudes from ‘missionaries’ that one begins to understand why missionaries are not always loved.”

Lois Shenk, a participant in MCC’s Teachers Abroad Program (TAP), shown teaching Sunday school at Githumu Secondary School in Thika, Kenya, in 1967. (MCC photo/Willard Claassen)
Learning and transformation: tracing shifts across MCC’s education program

Throughout its one hundred-year history, MCC has supported learning opportunities for millions of people in the United States, Canada and around the world. In the process, MCC has passed through its own arc of transformational learning as new experiences opened workers’ eyes, leading many to see themselves in a new light and even rethink their most basic assumptions about education itself.

MCC has supported education by sending teachers to other countries, providing scholarships for students, shipping millions of school kits and working to strengthen local partner schools. This education support has been driven by a belief that education improves people’s individual and collective lives by building knowledge, skills and values that prepare people for vocations and empower them to find new solutions to community problems.

MCC workers have also learned that formal schooling has a more problematic side, one of unintended negative impacts. In her 1977 reflection on Integrating Education and Development (a study written 15 years after MCC began intensive support for formal education as a key solution for problems in Africa), Nancy Heisey reached this staggering conclusion: “We have seen that education, defined as schooling, is one of the roots of the development problem for nations struggling with the demands of a modern world.”

This article examines MCC’s education approaches over the past century, while analyzing the successes and challenges MCC has faced in its education work. It will also explore concerns that MCC workers like Heisey raised about educational programs and MCC’s ongoing search for ways to support education that is liberative and empowering rather than being a “root of the problem.”

MCC’s first few decades focused on famine relief in Russia, the resettlement of Mennonite refugees to Paraguay and post-World War II relief efforts in Europe. Education was not MCC’s primary focus in these decades, but
was nevertheless sometimes part of these early efforts—for example, MCC supported children’s homes in Europe during and after the Second World War as well as schools in the Mennonite colonies in Paraguay. At this stage, the emphasis on education was more as a tool for *shaping values and identity* than as a tool for development. Specifically, these education initiatives sought to shape the values and identity of Mennonite communities and MCC workers.

Mennonite groups that had settled in Paraguay with MCC support insisted on having their own schools. A 1944 report quoted a common adage that held, “As the school, so the church,” explaining that the church is “vitally concerned with keeping absolute control over matters of education.” In the 1940s, some teachers in the Paraguayan Mennonite schools who had become adherents of Germany’s National Socialist ideology were using their influence to promote Nazi values among young people in the colonies. This raised great concern both within the Paraguayan Mennonite colonies and within MCC and generated calls for finding teachers who were “loyal to Mennonite Christian principles.” In a 1946 report to the Executive Committee, MCC’s director in Paraguay recommended that MCC should “use its influence [within Paraguayan Mennonite colonies] in the direction of securing the right kind of teachers.”

This understanding of education as a tool for shaping values and identity was also reflected in MCC-operated alternative service programs in the 1940s and 1950s. MCC and Mennonite church leaders recognized that alternative service terms had life-changing effects on Mennonite young adults and began to intentionally create orientations, trainings and curricula to maximize this transformational learning opportunity and so strengthen commitment to traditional Mennonite convictions. The MCC Peace Section was established in 1942 in part to “lead and aid our churches in the education of the youth in the ways of peace and non-resistance in keeping with our confession of faith as based on the word of God.”

In a 1947 Peace Section meeting, Rufus Franz gave a passionate call to strengthen MCC peace education. He argued that a person cannot “fully live according to the principles of peace” without a “heart changed experience.” He granted that education alone cannot bring about this miraculous transformation of one’s heart but did insist that education can “make the conditions so favorable that the miracle can be realized.” This could happen through Christian service: “we must help them [people in service] to lose themselves in order to save themselves, in Christian activity and service.”

From the 1950s onwards, MCC began to support educational initiatives that aimed to further economic *development* by securing education for more young people in the so-called developing world. So, for example, MCC launched scholarship programs to increase access to education for disadvantaged groups. In 1954, MCC began paying schooling costs for orphaned boys in Korea. This program of individual scholarships to help children access formal education soon expanded to other countries. These scholarships were funded by individual donors who received regular reports about the children they supported. This model eventually came to be known as Global Family, growing to over 2,000 students by 1968 and continuing for nearly fifty years in different forms.

MCC wrestled with tensions related to the sponsorship model. On the one hand, it generated strong interest from some supporters because of the sense of connection it created, giving donors a tangible glimpse onto the impact of their
donations, and of course it provided life-changing educational opportunities for many thousands of children. On the other hand, the individual sponsorship model tended to reinforce a paternalistic dynamic between giver and receiver, created challenges related to participant selection and added a significant administrative load for MCC staff to facilitate individual connections. In the early years of this century, MCC stopped producing reports for donors about individual children, instead providing reports about MCC’s work with specific schools or informal education programs. This coincided with a programmatic shift within MCC’s education program towards strengthening educational quality and away from an exclusive focus on access.

MCC also supported education as a tool for development by placing teachers in schools. The first large-scale effort to place MCC teachers in schools was in Newfoundland and Labrador in Canada beginning in 1956. Building on this experience, MCC established the Teachers Abroad Program (TAP) in 1962 in response to a call from newly independent African nations who believed formal education was the key to economic development and modernization. Mennonite college graduates motivated by a desire to serve were also looking for opportunities to use their professional skills to make a positive difference in the world. TAP eventually placed over 200 teachers per year, providing over 2,800 “teacher-service years” over a quarter century, primarily in countries across Africa. MCC also placed many teachers across the United States during the sixties and seventies through the Voluntary Service program, including in Cleveland, Atlanta, Appalachia, St. Louis and Mississippi.

The reflections of MCC teachers about their work from the 1950s onwards tell the story of MCC’s own education as an organization. The majority of these teachers were white Mennonite college graduates driven by a desire to make the world a better place and inspired by the values of peace and justice nurtured by Mennonite colleges, churches and MCC itself. They went out with the best of intentions, motivated by visions of what they could accomplish, yet their service experiences prompted critical questions, as these workers’ worlds were turned upside down. Put bluntly, for many MCC teachers their own transformative education consisted in cracks in the internalized, subconscious sense of superiority over the people they were there to serve. The first crack was to simply notice these internalized attitudes. Whether in post-colonial Africa or in the white supremacist context of the United States, white MCC teachers began to realize that while education had the potential to empower, it was also shaping others in their image: success was understood to mean that students could eventually become teachers and continue the system their white teachers had set up. By 1970, a TAP report recognized this dynamic and described a hope for the gradual emergence of an “educational system which is more authentically Kenyan in character, and purpose.”

In 1977, Nancy Heisey wrote her analysis of education and development, highlighting fundamental problems of the education system MCC supported and promoted: this system cultivated values of individualism and consumerism, reinforced a worldview of white, Western superiority and fostered a pyramidal societal model in which an elite few succeed while the majority are discarded and left unprepared for a vocation or life in a rural context. Such educational systems, Heisey observed, intensified rather than diminished inequality between rich and poor, an observation that led to her conclusion that formal schooling was “one of the roots of the development problem.”

The lessons of this era led to a slightly more humble, self-critical approach by MCC from the 1980s onwards. When MCC began sending English teachers to


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China in the early 1980s, the language was markedly different than when the first TAP teachers were sent to Africa twenty years earlier. Instead of helping “emerging nations . . . compress a century of development into the span of a decade” (MCC Workbook 1962 about TAP) or helping “the local protestant churches and overseas missions to inherit the land” (MCC Workbook 1965 about TAP), the new China Educational Exchange was described in 1982 as “an unusual opportunity for learning and serving in this moment of history. This is a venture of faith. In this program is the expectation, joy and wonder of growth. Neither do our Chinese friends nor we know where these exchanges will lead.”

In 1990, a landmark gathering in Lesotho brought together MCC staff and African educators and church leaders for an All-Africa Education Conference to evaluate MCC’s involvement in African formal education. The report from this conference echoed the critiques that Nancy Heisey had articulated 13 years earlier and concluded with the assertion that “MCC must listen to what Africans are saying.” The conference seemed to both acknowledge the flaws in the education system and affirm that MCC should stay engaged and support African efforts to improve and reshape the system.

The awakening awareness of white, colonial privilege in international contexts paralleled a growing recognition by the white majority within MCC of their privilege in the U.S. and Canada as well.

In the last quarter-century, MCC began to use the language of partnership and emphasize the idea of local ownership. Together, the emphases on partnership and local ownership have resulted in great diversity in MCC-supported educational ventures. Education partners today include early childhood education centers, primary and secondary schools, after-school programs, vocational training, peace education and education for children with disabilities. In this era of partnership, MCC’s role in education has shifted from direct teacher placement and MCC implementing educational programs to helping local schools and organizations do their educational work more effectively. MCC support now often comes in the form of grants to partners to buy materials, pay for activities, train staff and more. MCC staff facilitate reflective learning processes—commonly called planning, monitoring, evaluation and reporting, or PMER—to help ensure accountability and transparency and to capture lessons learned that can strengthen the work or be shared with other partners. Emphases within MCC’s current education program include: strengthening school management committees to increase parent and local community involvement; improving gender equity in education; making education more relevant by focusing on practical vocational skills in addition to traditional academic subjects; strengthening child safeguarding practices to prevent and respond effectively to child abuse; and building teacher capacity to work with children who have experienced trauma.

Learning has been at the core of MCC’s work for one hundred years, as MCC has simultaneously worked to provide learning opportunities for others and intentionally tried to learn from its own experience. It is exciting to imagine what new opportunities and lessons are waiting in the years ahead.

Lynn Longenecker is MCC education coordinator, based in Akron, Pennsylvania.
Patience and partnership: two tensions in the development of MCC health programming

MCC’s health programing has taken many shapes over the last one hundred years, including distribution of medical supplies in 1940s Europe during war and post-war reconstruction, staffing mental health hospitals in the United States during World War II, construction and management of clinics and hospitals around the world from the 1940s to the 1980s, HIV responses in the first two decades of this century, support for water and sanitation projects and responses over the past decade to trauma and sexual violence. Throughout this complex history, two central and unresolved tensions have persisted in MCC health programming: the tension between shorter-term relief and long-term change and between direct management and partnership.

Short-term relief or long-term change?

MCC was founded in 1920 by Mennonites to provide short-term humanitarian aid to coreligionists in Europe. During World War II and its aftermath, much of MCC’s international programming was built on a short-term relief model, including in health, where the focus was on sending supplies and personnel to address immediate medical needs. However, by the early 1940s, as MCC put down roots in more diverse contexts, its approach to health began to shift. As MCC worker Robert W. Geigley explained in a 1943 evaluation of struggling health programs in Paraguay, “here you cannot assume that [short term] material aid will bring any lasting result. You save a man from syphilis and he dies of tuberculosis. You cure him of TB, and he goes back to the same home with the same poor food and diet, and in six months he has TB again . . . . The approach to problems here must be very different than in the case of European areas . . . we therefore [propose] a long, slow developing program, with the idea of starting at the bottom with broad projects . . . looking for results only over a period of ten to twenty years.”

This push toward longer-term impact in health work can be seen across MCC programs from the 1940s to the 1960s. Short-term solutions, like providing temporary staff to struggling mental hospitals in the U.S. as part of the Civilian Public Service (CPS) program, gave way to research and advocacy for systemic changes and the creation of new institutions like Mennonite Mental Health Service in the U.S. and the Mental Health Program in Canada. Similarly, clinical staff placed at non-MCC hospitals around the world quickly realized that if the fundamental systems of healthcare and the drivers of ill health were not addressed, their efforts would result in only superficial impact. This realization in turn led to a flurry of hospital and clinic construction and management around the world: in the 1950s alone, this included the construction and management of clinics in China, Haiti, India, Indonesia, South Korea, Mexico, Paraguay, Philippines, Taiwan, Uruguay and the United States. Similarly, clinical health programs serving urgent needs, such as the MCC-run hospital in Grande-Rivière-du-Nord, Haiti, frequently spun off projects serving longer-term needs like water and sanitation, education, agriculture and reforestation.

However, MCC has remained committed to addressing immediate needs in health programing, which has created a productive tension with the desire to support long-term change. For example, in Haiti, MCC work began with...
short-term medical interventions in the 1950s. It started to pivot away from short-term medicine in the 1970s in favor of working for longer-term systemic change. This shift peaked in the early 2000s, when MCC focused entirely on health-related advocacy and basic water and sanitation infrastructure. However, by the late 2010s, MCC had returned to a more balanced approach between these poles, with both long-term public health and advocacy work as well as direct support for interventions addressing mental health, sexual violence and acute child malnutrition.

**Partnership: direct management or partnership?**

Another persistent tension in MCC’s health programming has been between letting diverse local partners drive programming and retaining more centralized control. This tension is closely intertwined with the tension between long-term impact and short-term results. However, this history is not a simple path from direct control to local partnership. Even by 1944, MCC’s health work in Paraguay included pairing a local apprentice with each foreign doctor MCC sent to Paraguay, with the vision that the apprentice would eventually take over the work. Similarly, when MCC started medical work in different countries for the first time, it nearly always did so by working through existing institutions, such as Hôpital Albert Schweitzer in Haiti, Cuauhtemoc Regional Hospital in Mexico or the Hebron General Hospital run by the Anglican Church in the Jordanian-controlled West Bank. However, over time these seeds of partnership grew to include more and more national staff, more local organizations as partners and less reliance on imported staff and solutions. In the 1970s, MCC accelerated this move away from directly implemented programming and toward a partnership model of programming.

However, despite its clear advantages, reliance on partnerships has brought recurrent challenges and a counterbalancing desire for more direct control, common priorities and uniform standards. Early support for partner hospitals in the 1940s and 1950s quickly moved toward directly running hospitals when MCC staff grew frustrated with lack of control, different quality standards and failures of partners to fully align with MCC values. By the 1970s and 1980s, however, many of these directly-run hospitals were turned over to local partners and staff as MCC emphasized local ownership once again. At the same time, while relying increasingly on partners and local staff to implement health programming, MCC showed a growing willingness to set central program priorities and standards. For example, while MCC’s Generations at Risk HIV initiative in the first decade of this century was implemented by partners, it set more centralized direction, prioritization of approaches and minimum standards of care than had been present before.

**Finding Balance**

Over the past century of health programming, the relative emphasis within these two sets of tensions has been constantly shifting over time and between places. This history is not a clear evolution from bad to good, or even from one model of work to another. Rather, it represents a slow and largely decentralized evolution of MCC’s approach to health programming that attempts to be responsive to the many diverse contexts where MCC works, the push and pull of various stakeholders and the gradual accumulation of experience and wisdom.

*Paul Shetler Fast is MCC health coordinator, based in Goshen, Indiana.*

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**Another persistent tension in MCC’s health programming has been between letting diverse local partners drive programming and retaining more centralized control.”**

Maria Jose washes her face with a bucket of water at a well in the Daf neighborhood of Caia in 2008. Living with seasonal drought in rural Mozambique makes growing crops and personal hygiene difficult. In 2007, through MCC, a mechanical engineer specializing in hand-powered well drilling arrived to resume and expand an initial effort done two years earlier. (MCC photo/Matthew Lester)
Assessing the evolution of MCC’s development work: reflections from MCC’s global staff

Most MCC workers from Canada and the U.S. in MCC’s global programs have typically served for one-, three- and sometimes five-year terms. A relatively small number, meanwhile, have continued in service for more than five years. MCC programs have thus experienced ongoing flux in staffing. Amidst these cyclical disruptions, MCC’s “national staff” (MCC workers who serve within their own countries, such as an Indian woman who oversees MCC India’s education program or a Bolivian man who directs MCC Bolivia’s rural development program) have provided indispensable and vital stability, depth of contextual knowledge and breadth of experience to MCC programs. In this article, MCC staff from Bangladesh, Bolivia, Haiti, India, Lao People's Democratic Republic (Laos) and Nigeria, who together have over 150 years of MCC experience, reflect on shifts within MCC’s program, challenges faced, successes celebrated and lessons learned from MCC’s development work carried out in the name of Christ.

Bangladesh

The MCC program in Bangladesh began in 1970 as a relief effort to respond to needs of victims of natural disasters. MCC responded to floods, cyclones and tidal bores with money, materials and personnel. As time went on, this relief response progressed into agricultural and economic development activities. Development efforts focused on two main initiatives: educating poor farmers how to increase crop production and empowering disadvantaged women to earn a living to support their families.

MCC’s agricultural program introduced winter vegetables and soybeans (a new crop) in its operational area. MCC introduced these crops to increase income for farming families and to help alleviate the widespread malnutrition among the rural population. The crops MCC introduced continued to be grown by farmers long after MCC stopped working in the area, providing income for farm families and food. Almost all crops grown by farmers in Bangladesh are grown with the intent of selling some or all of them for cash. In many cases farmers sell their entire crop to pay off debts and later buy the same food back by selling their labor. In the case of Bangladesh, MCC’s focus on agriculture was very appropriate.

MCC carried out its agricultural research in collaboration with the country’s agricultural research institutes. MCC’s annual research publications were valued greatly by national researchers.

Klassen, George.  
The Rower Pump.  
these women. The program therefore focused on creating jobs where these women could work from their own homes or in cloistered areas not far from their homes.

MCC Bangladesh’s job creation program helped bring about Aarong, a now nationwide and hugely successful department store created to sell products made primarily by disadvantaged women. The job creation program also spawned other business initiatives, including Saidpur Enterprises, Jute Works and Prokritee. These fair trade businesses are now independent of MCC and are still creating jobs for disadvantaged women and bringing in hundreds of thousands of dollars for their families.

In its early years of involvement in Bangladesh, MCC worked through other Private Voluntary Development Organizations (PVDOs) and with different government agencies to implement its relief and development programs. However, towards the mid-seventies, MCC began to directly implement agriculture and job creation programs. During this period, which lasted until after 2000, MCC placed highly qualified personnel to conduct research into agricultural production and job creation. These researchers worked at the grassroots level to find solutions to problems in these sectors.

During this time, MCC adopted the approach that Bangladeshi national staff should not usually make a career working for MCC, but should typically move on from MCC after a few years. This bias, coupled with a policy of three-year expatriate personnel circulating through the program, led to short-term institutional memory which in turn caused some innate weaknesses in the organization. One of these weaknesses was the lack of sustained leadership at the top due to operating with purely voluntary workers. Changes in leadership every three-to-five year caused the program to suffer. A large organization such as MCC Bangladesh would have benefited greatly from long-term leadership to provide stability, consistent direction and improved morale.

From 1972 to 2000, expatriate volunteers were the mainstay for research and extension activities in both job creation and agriculture for MCC Bangladesh. After 2000, MCC’s methodology changed drastically from “direct programming” to working through “partners.” This approach had a disadvantage in that it removed MCC from direct contact with the people it was trying to help. It was also not very successful in placing expatriate workers with partners to conduct research or extension activities as the partners chosen lacked the resources to: 1) invest in research in and development of new technological approaches and 2) work with government departments to employ expatriates. Despite these disadvantages, this shift in methodology towards partnership became more attractive as Bangladesh developed skilled people of its own who created and staffed Bangladeshi organizations and the government became more and more reluctant to allow expatriates to serve in the country as development or relief workers.

Regardless of the many changes to the program over the years, MCC’s efforts in Bangladesh have always focused on the poor, disadvantaged and those in need of aid. Its concern has always been for those who feel powerless to progress on their own, giving them the tools they need to rise out of poverty into a sustainable existence.

*Derek D’Silva worked with MCC Bangladesh in multiple capacities from 1974 to 2011, most recently as MCC Bangladesh director.*
India

Mennonite Central Committee in India has changed significantly over the decades. My life too has been changed through my association with MCC. After receiving assistance through MCC’s Vocational Training program as a young woman, I joined MCC India’s staff, where I have served for over 39 years. This service has been a tremendous honour—a journey of love, care, hope, strength and strong faith in God’s love.

Our work patterns have changed and so has the office environment. Today we have many more electronic gadgets compared to our old typewriters. While today we almost always have electricity, in the past we worked amidst power cuts for several hours a day.

MCC’s work in Kolkata is well-known by residents, especially because of the humanitarian resource items that MCC distributed for many years to schools, orphanages and old age homes. More than 300 institutions received canola oil, milk powder, soap, canned chicken and wheat through these MCC distributions, providing essential care for many children in schools and the elderly in old age homes.

The closing of the distribution program in the 1990s brought a lot of anxiety. MCC began to focus more on development work and thus did not want its partner institutions to become dependent on MCC but rather to look beyond handouts. MCC encouraged them to develop proposals for income generation activities. However, this did not always work as hoped. For example, the mission of the Sisters of Charity, Mother Teresa’s mission, with which MCC worked, is to feed the poor and hungry. They do not have the means to start an income generation program. Rather they are called to give service and to date they are still taking care of orphans, the mentally challenged, the destitute and the dying.

Our education program is now more focused on access to quality education than simply on access, but still in India access to education, period, is a pressing need. The one-to-one educational sponsorship that MCC India used to operate had a personal touch and fostered relationships between sponsors and children. Each year the students sent Christmas Greetings with a letter and card, which the students enjoyed doing. This one-to-one relationship between student and sponsor got lost with the change in focus towards strengthening schools as institutions. We in the Kolkata office still maintain contact with students. When we see a student get a job after years of struggle through schooling and training, that brings satisfaction and joy to our work and the change we see in the family later is remarkable. MCC India has transformed many lives and brought smiles to the faces of students and their families. Compassion and love have made a difference in individual lives.

MCC stands out among other funding agencies because MCC respects each partner agency with whom we work. We care for people and we listen and implement our work in a just way. We trust our partners’ good work. We work as partners and do not make them feel that we are the donors and they are the receivers. Yes, we need our work done, too, so we are transparent from the beginning of the project with partners, their board members and participants about our expectations. We also share with them about MCC’s work and who supports MCC.
MCC carries out its mission without preaching the word of God. Rather, our staff live out the word of God, which one can see through their attitude, behaviour, respect for each other, compassion, just dealing and love. That is why many of the people whom we come across want to join MCC’s staff or want to become a Mennonite. I pray that this mission carries on bringing faith in Christ.

In our office, we always say, “This is God’s work and He will surely guide us through.” MCC is so fortunate to have worked with God-fearing people like Mother Teresa, the late Brother T.V. Mathews, the late Sister Florence, Dr. Johnny Oommen and many others who have served and continue to serve with compassion, love and hope. These partners and spiritual leaders are our strength and help us to be gracious, kind, humble and helpful to each other in times of need.

MCC continues to be a strong support to the impoverished and marginalized and works hard to meet the needs of the people. MCC is known for its simplicity, justice, listening attitude and commitment to building the capacity of the poor. God bless MCC!

_Ayesha Kader is education sector coordinator for MCC India. She has worked with MCC for four decades._

**Bolivia**

I have worked with MCC Bolivia since 1995, first as a technical officer and more recently as rural program coordinator. In these roles, I have carried out evaluations of MCC’s development programs. These evaluations have revealed that the strengths of MCC’s work are its emphases on connections, interpersonal relationships and friendships. Bolivian communities have recognized the commitment and dedication shown by MCC workers throughout the project implementation process. From the beginning to the end of their service terms, MCC workers are reminded of the importance of accompanying marginalized communities and the churches and community-based organizations that work with them. The relationships MCC workers build with Bolivians continue even after MCC staff return to their countries of origin.

Throughout my time with MCC, we have consistently worked to improve food security and access to safe water and sanitation facilities and to minimize the risk of violence faced by vulnerable communities. Even amidst this consistent focus, however, one can note shifts. For example, in the past MCC implemented its own projects in rural and urban communities, with a focus on the city and provinces of the Santa Cruz department. Direct implementation has given way over the past decade or two to partner accompaniment. A related shift during these past two decades has been a reduction in the number of MCC service workers assigned to live within rural communities as part of MCC’s rural development program in Bolivia. MCC continues to place workers, but its focus is now on supporting and accompanying partner organizations as those organizations, rather than MCC staff, implement rural development projects in eastern and western Bolivia.

In the past, MCC Bolivia focused its program on resettling Low German Mennonite, Quechua and Aymara families who arrived in the east of the country in search of land for building houses and growing crops. Migration today continues to be a challenge facing rural communities, as these...
communities struggle to meet water and food security needs. MCC continues to walk alongside farming communities, both native Indigenous and Low German Mennonite, in supporting agricultural diversification, adaptation to changing climates and cross-communal collaboration and learning.

Exchange visits with other MCC programs have been extremely valuable for MCC Bolivia staff and our partners. So, for example, an exchange visit with MCC programs in Bangladesh and Central America allowed us to share ideas about how to support and strengthen local organizations, what effective conservation agriculture programs look like, how to plan agricultural development work in a way that maximizes food security and how to accompany rural communities as they face changing climates.

Although international NGO development projects are welcome in Bolivia, they should be part of a development plan promoted by the Bolivian state. MCC’s projects, like the work of other international NGOs, are monitored more carefully today than before by government authorities. MCC has worked hard to meet Bolivian government expectations, while remaining constant in its commitment to accompany marginalized communities and standing firm in its call to serve in the name of Christ.

Patrocinio Garvizu has worked for MCC in Bolivia for twenty-five years, most recently as MCC Bolivia’s rural program coordinator. Originally from a Quechua community in western Bolivia, he has lived for many years in eastern Bolivia with his wife and two children.

MCC was talking about protecting natural resources and the importance of trees since it started working in Haiti, long before other NGOs and local organizations began worrying about erosion and deforestation in the country. It has always had a long-term vision for sustainability.

Haiti

I have seen many things in my years with MCC in Haiti. MCC’s history here is long—it is a sixty-year legacy of focusing on people and building local capacity in Haiti. I myself am an example of MCC’s investment in long-term and sustainable development through people. When I was called to work for MCC as a young man, almost forty years ago, I had no idea this would be my life. I could not imagine all that would happen in Haiti’s Artibonite Valley through MCC.

MCC’s work in Haiti has always placed a strong emphasis on building up local organizations and equipping local people. This has consistently been our strength. MCC has maintained a focus on community building and mobilization of community cooperation groups called gwoupman in Haitian kreyòl. MCC has prioritized accompanying the most vulnerable and worked to empower women through its programs. It has built respect for natural resources and the environment and has always maintained a focus on peace, justice and long-term change.

MCC was talking about protecting natural resources and the importance of trees since it started working in Haiti, long before other NGOs and local organizations began worrying about erosion and deforestation in the country. It has always had a long-term vision for sustainability. MCC’s work was best when we held fast to that empowering vision. A commitment to long-term sustainability is why MCC Haiti has always invested in trees. MCC helps people learn how to care for their own natural resources, like the soil, trees and water sources, helping them understand the necessity of protecting these essential resources. To build on what people have, rather than always importing solutions from the outside—that has been our focus. If we can’t protect what we have, we cannot live well or long in Haiti.
The most challenging times for MCC was during the years of military control after the Duvalier rulers. It became really challenging for MCC to work in these years. During that time there were practical challenges that kept us from doing the work as well as the spiritual and psychological challenges that come from living under fear and repression. We couldn’t plant trees and we couldn’t organize trainings to conserve the soil to help people plant better. But the most difficult thing was that we could not hold meetings or bring community members together. We could not mobilize. We could not put our hands together to support one another. This was the reality during the military years. Today we are faced with political problems again, the worst since that time. This is always our challenge in Haiti, to be on the ground, doing the work despite the political problems around us and the people that want to divide us and pull us apart.

When I think of MCC’s legacy in Haiti, I think of the green trees that cover so many mountains that used to be barren deserts, the streams that now run again in river beds that had been dry for decades, the birds that have returned and the faces of the people with whom we have worked to make this happen. We have shown people that a sustainable, hopeful future is possible and is worth investing in. People now believe that trees can be a source of income and have enough value for people to buy and plant them with the little money they have. There are communities where MCC works that now have their own self-supporting tree nurseries. We have created a business spirit around trees, for people to enter the tree business, to invest back in their own communities. MCC has created a spirit of hope that motivates people to invest in the future. They now see buying trees as something that is important because trees have economic and environmental value—people want to invest in trees because they have hope and believe they have the power to change their future. You cannot put a price on this change in mindset.

MCC’s staff and partners, in the way they do their work, their passion for their work and the way that they live out their values through service, are truly engaged in service in the name of Christ. Such service is MCC’s greatest success and is the seed of enduring development planted here in Haiti.

Jean Remy Azor is executive director of MCC Haiti partner, Konbit Peyizan. He worked previously with MCC Haiti for 37 years.

Nigeria

Reviewing MCC Nigeria’s history, one can see several programmatic shifts. For example, MCC’s main engagement during its initial years in Nigeria involved placing teachers from Canada and the U.S. in Nigerian schools as part of MCC’s Teachers Abroad Program (TAP). As Nigerians began graduating more teachers from universities and teacher colleges, MCC’s program expanded into a variety of other sectors, such as agricultural development, health care outreach, afforestation and more. The seeds of new ideas were planted, with some sprouting, blossoming and growing into oak trees and with others dying off. Other shifts over the past decades included:

- A transition from primarily engaging Nigerian partners through the secondment of MCC workers to also providing grants to support partners’ visions;
- A shift from churches being MCC’s primary or even exclusive partners to MCC also developing partnerships with organizations identified with other faiths (in Nigeria’s case, Islam);
- A movement from relationship building as MCC’s primary
programmatic mode towards the adoption of results-based programming;
• A shift from MCC program leadership coming exclusively from Canada and the United States to Nigerians such as myself being able to take up a leadership role in my own country, a shift that values the depth of cultural and contextual knowledge Nigerians bring to MCC’s work in Nigeria.

Despite the changes in some areas of MCC’s operations in Nigeria, some things have remained constant, such as:

• working alongside partners in relationships of mutuality;
• being present to share in the joys, sufferings and challenges of the Nigerian people in the communities where MCC operates;
• building relationships with churches and vulnerable communities;
• valuing and connecting with Nigerians as people made in God’s image.

Matthew Tangbuin is MCC Nigeria representative. He has worked for MCC for 21 years.

Laos

Over the four decades of its presence in Laos, MCC has been actively involved in projects ranging from addressing the problem of unexploded ordinance (UXO), organizing teacher training, providing needed supplies for children’s education and implementing complex integrated rural development projects aimed at improving food security, nutrition and sanitation in remote villages. Throughout these varied projects, what has remained constant is an emphasis on peacebuilding. However, the focus of MCC’s peacebuilding has changed over the years, shifting from initially helping farmers come to grips with deaths from bombies to more recently helping to resolve land issues and offer conflict resolution training in rural communities.

Reflecting on my years with MCC, what stands out for me, and what I believe characterizes MCC at its best, has been working closely with villagers, sharing their triumphs and their heartaches, learning from them and witnessing slow but steady improvement in their lives. Our reward has been a sense of fulfillment in seeing renewed hope, empowerment and gratitude in the eyes of those we helped, such as the boy whose eyesight was restored after being injured by a bombie explosion and then rushed to the hospital by MCC.

If ever there was a desperate need in Laos, it was to clear bombies (unexploded bomblets) dropped by the U.S. military onto farmers’ fields in the north of the country at the height of the U.S.-led war in neighboring Vietnam. Farmers could not grow their rice crops because of the bombies—or, when they tried, many were killed and injured. In 1975, in collaboration with American Friends Service Committee (AFSC), MCC initiated efforts to reduce the ongoing damage caused by unexploded bombs and bomblets. In true MCC fashion, the MCC team worked directly with farmers, supplying shovels, oxen, plows and a shielded tractor to clear the land. This method of bombie clearance, while it had a positive impact, was inefficient and, shielded tractors aside, not always safe.

Through advocacy and public engagement, MCC sought over the ensuing twenty years to raise awareness about how unexploded bombies put Lao farmers and their families at daily risk. Then, after two decades of effort,
MCC partnered with the Mines Advisory Group (MAG) from the United Kingdom. In 1994 alone, MCC and MAG destroyed more than 4,000 pieces of unexploded ordnance!

In its health and integrated rural development projects, MCC has used the same effective approach of working closely with villagers in remote districts of provinces such as Huaphan, Phong Saly, Vientiane and Saysomboun. Working with village leadership, we determined and addressed their most pressing needs. Our approach worked, helping to alleviate poverty and illness. I have countless memories of seeing villagers bringing their sick children to see the MCC medical doctor early in the morning, before the dispensary was opened, grateful for access to medical care.

We had many challenges. Travel to visit poor families in remote villages was time-consuming and expensive. For the bombie clearance, MCC and the Lao government lacked technical expertise, so finding efficient and safe ways to remove bombies proved time-consuming. Raising awareness about the bombie problem took too long—it was almost twenty years after the war that the bombie problem became globally recognized.

Over the decades, MCC Laos staff have learned the value of working closely with communities, building up community peacebuilding skills, collaborating amicably with partners and various government entities (from village councils to government departments and ministries) and the centrality of the wellbeing of those we are here to help. When we have kept these principles in mind, we have had success in every endeavor we have undertaken.

Hien Phammachanh served with MCC Laos from 1984 to 2010, most recently as co-representative.

Simple living, peace theology and MCC’s World Community Cookbooks

A decade ago, as MCC turned ninety, I had the opportunity to reflect on the importance of MCC cookbooks within MCC’s institutional story and the impact of those cookbooks on all kinds of communities around the world. I was surprised by how deep my reflection took me and how much of my identity as a Christian is connected to the World Community Cookbooks trilogy: More-with-Less Cookbook, Extending the Table and Simply in Season.

My analysis and appreciation for these cookbooks begin with Matthew Bailey-Dick’s 2005 essay on “The Kitchenhood of All Believers,” in which he argued that we have failed to appreciate how collections of recipes are more than cultural, historical or sociological artifacts, but can also be useful resources for theological reflection. Some of us Mennonites in the U.S. and Canada can be lousy Anabaptists—we can get so focused on how cookbooks carry on particular culinary ethnic traditions that we fail to notice that even a cookbook can “stand as a witness to the Gospel” and serve as “a mission partner for God’s work in the world.” Bailey-Dick goes on to identify at least eight different ways Mennonite cookbooks in Canada and the U.S. communicate the forces that shape our faith: simple living, the globalization of Mennonites, remembering the past, Mennonite migration patterns, gender roles, Anabaptist history, acculturation and inter-Mennonite cooperation.

Burkholder, John Richard and Barbara Nelson Gingerich. 


Schlabach, Joetta Handrich. 

When it comes to the World Community Cookbooks, I could treat each of these themes separately. The very idea of “more-with-less” has its roots in the world food crisis and expressions of simple living of the 1970s. As an organization, MCC has contributed to Mennonites’ collective experience of globalization, shaped Mennonite migration patterns, served as an organizing base for gender justice and figured prominently in the last century of Anabaptist history as we have worked to integrate who Mennonites have been and who we are becoming. In this article, however, I prefer to mix these themes together into a kind of peace theology party mix. That is, when I look at this trilogy of cookbooks, I see all these themes contributing to a larger conversation about how we live as Anabaptist Mennonites seeking to practice and preach the gospel of peace in the global village of a groaning planet.

A few words about what I mean by “peace theology” are in order. Peace theology is an approach to interpreting Christian scripture, articulating a religious worldview and proclaiming a form of Christian faith that manifests in a commitment to renounce violence and follow Jesus Christ, the Prince of Peace. Peace theology is not one thing, nor is there one form of Mennonite peace theology. In 1989, for example, MCC sponsored a collaborative project of its Peace Committee and Ecumenical Peace Theology Working Group to describe the various types of Mennonite thinking about peace and explicate their theological foundations. With a goal “to seek a consensus on a perspective that would be useful to MCC” as it strove to “articulate [its] perspective in interchurch/ecumenical contexts,” the project produced the modest print publication, Mennonite Peace Theology: A Panorama of Types, published by MCC’s Peace Office in 1991. In 2005, MCC initiated another round of this original project, culminating in a conference and book entitled At Peace and Unafraid: Public Order, Security, and the Wisdom of the Cross. Like the earlier panorama, this conversation sought to sort through difficult questions about daily Christian living and about what systems help create and maintain peaceable communities. The project team proposed seven “continuing lines of inquiry,” the first of which was a call for more empirical evidence: “We could use a further project combining the folk methods of Doris Janzen Longacre and the scholarly methods of Gene Sharp to gather more examples of nonviolent ‘best practices’ that are contributing to human security.” I mention all of this because I consider Doris Janzen Longacre, editor and compiler of the original More-with-Less cookbook and its companion volume on simple living, Living More with Less, to be one of the insufficiently praised contributors to Mennonite peace theology in the twentieth century.

While her formal training was dietetics, Longacre’s approach to her work staffing MCC’s Food and Hunger Concerns Desk was also pastoral. In the 1970s, MCC was challenging its constituents to eat and live more simply by decreasing household food budgets by ten percent. This call to action came from the recognition that patterns of overconsumption in Canada and the U.S. were feeding global injustice. Longacre grappled with the “holy frustration” of wanting to cut back but not knowing where to begin, and in that grappling emerged with a discovery: it is possible that wasting, eating and spending less actually gives us more. In the opening pages of More-with-Less, Longacre describes (white) Mennonites in the U.S. and Canada as good cooks who care about the world’s hungry, deftly turning a social location into a theological and ethical one: “We are looking for ways to live more simply and joyfully, ways that grow out of our tradition but take their shape from living faith and the demands of our hungry world.” Food security and food sovereignty are indeed matters to which peace theology must attend. The Christian gospel,
encountered through the World Community Cookbooks, is a message of well-being found through interdependence.

Through *More-with-Less* and *Living More with Less*, Longacre identified ways of knowing, being and doing that help us see and make connections among our lives, communities around the world, the natural world that needs both our respect and tenderness and God’s calls for justice and for nonconformed lives that are also lives of freedom. *More-with-Less* invites those in the global North who are affluent to turn our gazes inward and ask questions like: “How can my community resize its ecological footprint so that we can live more freely?” *Extending the Table*, meanwhile, turns our gaze back out at the world, but with a new awareness that God’s world is full of resources. The rich giving to the poor is not justice. Justice is done when the rich and poor share what they have with each other. Finally, *Simply in Season* brings the outward and inward together because the invitation to eat locally and seasonally is about gaining a better understanding of both the rhythms and seasons of the places where we live and the complexities of the global food system in the places where we shop. Indeed, *Simply in Season* co-editor Cathleen Hockman-Wert urges us to think of eating and shopping for food as spiritual disciplines because God’s first gift to all Earth’s creatures is that of food and not all foods are morally neutral. Whenever I turn to this trio of cookbooks, something I do weekly as part of my own spiritual practice of preparing meals for my family and friends, I do so grateful that I am awake and alive to the challenges of living more with less.

Malinda Elizabeth Berry is associate professor of theology and ethics at Anabaptist Mennonite Biblical Seminary in Elkhart, Indiana.

**MCC creation care and sustainability initiatives over the decades**

Concern for the environment and respect for God’s creation have been part of MCC’s approach to its work since 1920. Over the decades, MCC’s awareness of the rapid pace of environmental degradation, resolutions taken by Anabaptist denominations and stories from partners about the impacts of the climate crisis on their communities have spurred efforts to enable communities to adapt to climate change, engage constituents in modifying their lifestyles to reduce harmful environmental impacts and expand advocacy efforts.

**Program:** For many decades, MCC has actively cared for creation by promoting reforestation and soil conservation in its agriculture and food security programming. Starting in 1994, MCC also began to systematically incorporate creation care and environmental responsibility into program planning and evaluation. This approach was formalized in 1999 when the MCC board adopted an environmental stewardship and program planning policy that articulated basic expectations for its international program. This included assessing projects for their environmental impact, identifying national and regional priority environmental issues and conducting program evaluations that examined how environmental considerations were included in planning. An Environmental Guide for Program Planning was developed to provide guidance on how to put MCC’s environmental stewardship policies into practice across MCC program.

“In the 1970s, MCC was challenging its constituents to eat and live more simply by decreasing household food budgets by ten percent. This call to action came from the recognition that patterns of overconsumption in Canada and the U.S. were feeding global injustice.”
In March 2010, MCC adopted a set of operating principles, or core values, that shape MCC’s program and operations. This included a commitment to act sustainably. “Called to live simply and to be a steward of God’s creation, MCC seeks to act in ways which promote environmental, social, and economic sustainability,” MCC’s binational board proclaimed. As part of living into this commitment to act sustainably, MCC program staff revised and approved an environmental assessment tool for use in planning, monitoring and evaluating its relief, development and peacebuilding programs.

The early focus of MCC’s creation care and environmental sustainability efforts on reforestation and soil conservation projects has expanded in recent years to other activities to help communities adapt to climate crisis-related risks, including providing access to potable water and seasonal safety nets, introducing crops and livestock breeds, supporting livelihood diversification, promoting hazard resistant shelter construction and helping communities prepare for disasters.

Public engagement: MCC’s engagement with Anabaptists in the U.S. and Canada on creation care and environmental sustainability began with the 1976 commissioning of the More-with-Less cookbook, with the goal of helping Christians to eat better and consume less of the world’s food resources. In 1982, MCC established a Global Education Desk in its Akron, Pennsylvania, office. While the education responsibilities of this position were eventually merged into other departments, the desk’s goal was to educate pastors and congregations in the U.S. and Canada about how their lifestyles affected the earth and were linked globally.

In 1989, the General Boards of the Mennonite Church and the General Conference Mennonite Church adopted a statement, “Stewardship of the Earth—Resolution on Environment and Faith Issues,” which called MCC in the U.S. and Canada to “seek policy directions from the several Mennonite church bodies in promoting creation stewardship.” MCC board members responded by including creation care as one of its three top priorities at MCC’s annual meeting that year and called for staff to continue to address environmental concerns from a biblical perspective. Responding to this call from Mennonite churches and the MCC board, staff developed a variety of

![Farmers in Koti, Burkina Faso, meet to share updates with MCC/ODE staff and showcase their vegetable harvest during dry season. MCC partner ODE has created a garden space where 100 farmers, 50 men and 50 women, grow vegetables during the off-season. The gardens are sustained using water from four wells, with plans to expand to eight wells. (MCC Photo/James Souder)](image-url)
resources in the 1990s for individuals, families and churches related to creation care, including:

- Earthkeepers, a 1991 study for individuals and churches that linked ecotheology to questions of militarism, war and economic systems;

- the three-part Trek series, released between 1996 and 2004, with reflections and suggestions for individuals and families to live simply and with mindfulness of their ecological footprint; and


Several MCCs also undertook public engagement initiatives on creation care. MCC Ontario employed a creation care coordinator from 2006 to 2011 who focused on encouraging Anabaptist schools and churches to explore their impact on creation and to install solar panels as part of a green energy initiative. MCC Saskatchewan started a blog and workshop initiative called “No Waste Wednesdays” in 2010 that ran through 2013, focused on encouraging constituents and the public to adopt environmentally responsible ethics and behaviors. More recently, in 2016 MCC U.S. partnered with Eastern Mennonite University and Goshen College to establish the Center for Sustainable Climate Solutions to mobilize Anabaptists around climate change mitigation and advocacy. In 2018, the Center conducted a speakers’ tour targeting Anabaptist churches, universities and organizations that featured three international MCC staff and partners sharing about the impacts of climate change on their communities.

Advocacy: MCC’s advocacy efforts related to climate change and sustainability have been guided by MCC’s programming and connected to its public engagement. Beginning in the 1970s, MCC’s Washington Office was an early member of the Washington Interreligious Staff Community Energy and Ecology Working Group. In the 1990s, the Washington Office focused advocacy efforts on promoting fuel efficiency standards, sustainable use of public lands and an energy policy that addressed climate change. In 2001, the Washington Office released its Guide to the Environment, providing biblical reflections and action steps for concerned Anabaptists and others.

“MCC remains committed to help communities adapt to the impacts of rapidly changing climates, to call Anabaptists and others in Canada and the U.S. to reduce the harmful environmental impacts of their lifestyles and to advocate for policies that promote environmental sustainability.”

Ntate Marou Lenkoe, a farmer in Makilenyaneng, Lesotho, stands in one of the crops he grew using the conservation agricultural methods he learned as a participant in a “Farming God’s Way” workshop. MCC partner Growing Nations runs the workshops to teach farming methods with a biblically-based creation care focus to help counter the effects of climate change and reduced rainfall. (Photo/Barry Mann)
Constituent education included the 2003 spring seminar’s focus on creation care advocacy. In the past ten years, in response to the effects of climate change and environmental degradation on the communities in which MCC’s partners work, the Washington Office has continued its environmental advocacy work with a strong focus on climate change, international adaptation assistance and adequate funding and strong safeguards for the Green Climate Fund. Additionally, advocacy has focused on the environmental impacts of the fences and walls being built along the U.S.-Mexico border.

MCC’s commitment to creation care and environmental sustainability is not new. While MCC’s focus has shifted over the decades in response to growing awareness of environmental degradation and the voices of partners affected by the climate crisis, MCC remains committed to help communities adapt to the impacts of rapidly changing climates, to call Anabaptists and others in Canada and the U.S. to reduce the harmful environmental impacts of their lifestyles and to advocate for policies that promote environmental sustainability.

Meara Kwee is MCC’s protection coordinator, based in Akron, Pennsylvania.

**MCC as an incubator for new approaches to relief, development and peace**

MCC has grown dramatically over the past century. By many typical measures—geographic scope, size of operating budget and the number of volunteers, staff and partners—MCC is now impressively large. These measures, however, significantly underestimate the reach and impact of MCC over one hundred years, because MCC has also seeded or spun off an astonishing number of independent organizations. Many of these continue to thrive and have developed in interesting and unanticipated ways that nonetheless align broadly with MCC’s mission. I would thus argue that a proper retelling of the MCC story requires the inclusion of the stories of numerous institutions that no longer bear MCC’s name.

This argument may seem rather obvious when looking at trends in MCC’s global program. In recent decades, MCC has shifted toward a partnership approach that focuses on building the capacity of local grassroots organizations. In countries such as Bangladesh, for example, at least a dozen MCC job creation projects have spun off into new ventures that are still in operation. Meanwhile, in most contexts where it operates, MCC has gradually shifted from initiating and implementing projects towards accompaniment of a diverse range of local partners, including churches, church-related agencies and community-based organizations.

MCC’s story in Canada and the U.S. includes numerous examples of initiatives that became independent or differentiated themselves from MCC. Ten Thousand Villages is one of the best known examples of an initiative that began within MCC (first as SELFHELP Crafts of the World) that developed its own distinctive identity.

Beyond Villages, a wide range of separately incorporated organizations have emerged out of MCC programs, projects or departments throughout Canada and the U.S. They can be found from coast to coast, from More Than a Roof,
a nonprofit addressing housing needs in British Columbia, to the Prairie View Mental Health Center in Kansas, to MTS Travel in Pennsylvania, to the Tire Recycling Atlantic Canada Corporation in New Brunswick. Many more independent organizations that had their beginnings within MCC could be named. Across these distinctive organizations, one can detect a pattern: MCC tests and lays the groundwork for a good idea to take root, and then lets it go so that its impact can grow.

To dig a little deeper into the Canadian context, MCC is widely credited with instigating two social innovations that have come to overshadow MCC program in Canada—the private sponsorship system for refugees and the contemporary restorative justice movement. In both instances, MCC supported the emergence of a cluster of complementary organizations to deliver services that met the needs of particular communities. For refugees, these complementary organizations included the Calgary Centre for Newcomers, the Edmonton Mennonite Centre for Newcomers, the Global Gathering Place in Saskatoon and the Mennonite Coalition for Refugee Support in Kitchener-Waterloo. For victims and offenders, such complementary organizations included Community Justice Initiatives in Kitchener-Waterloo, Initiatives for Just Communities and Mediation Services in Winnipeg and Saskatoon Community Mediation Services. MCC also helped to establish broader networks such the Canadian Refugee Sponsorship Agreement Holders Association and the Church Council on Justice and Corrections in order to share best practices and amplify advocacy messages. Indeed, advocacy has always been a collaborative pursuit for MCC: the ongoing public policy influence of organizations such as KAIROS: Canadian Ecumenical Justice Initiatives or Project Ploughshares, the peace research institute of the Canadian Council of Churches, would not be possible were it not for the crucial support provided by MCC at their formative stages.

I could discuss many additional examples at length, including the Canadian Foodgrains Bank, which is not only an example of a former program that flourished once given its independence, but is one of MCC’s most significant ecumenical partnerships in Canada. One should also note that, while playing a less direct role, MCC figured prominently in the birth stories of several significant binational Anabaptist-Mennonite organizations that have come to focus on specific elements of MCC’s overall mission, including Mennonite Economic Development Associates and Christian Peacemaker Teams.

Questions that this remarkable family tree raise for me are: what generated MCC’s nurturing, collaborative and entrepreneurial organizational culture, and what will enable it to continue? A growing number of incubator programs across Canada and the U.S. support emerging social enterprises and nonprofits, yet MCC has functioned as an incubator in an unstructured and responsive way for much of its history. Indeed, I think “incubator” is an apt one-word description for MCC, pointing us to a crucial and underappreciated dimension of the MCC story. In addition to serving as an incubator of organizations, MCC has been an incubator of partnerships, institutional leaders and, perhaps most importantly, disciples.

Paul Heidebrecht is director of the Kindred Credit Union Centre for Peace Advancement at Conrad Grebel University College.
MCC and Indigenous peoples in the United States: assessing the past, visioning the future

In this article, MCC Central States Indigenous Vision Circle coordinator Erica Littlewolf reflects on the past, present and future of MCC’s work with Indigenous peoples.

How has MCC’s work with Indigenous peoples in the United States (and on Turtle Island more broadly) changed over the decades? What, if anything, has remained constant?

I first heard of MCC while working through the MCC U.S. Summer Service program for four months (2000-2004) in my home community. I then began employment with MCC in 2007 with the Oglala Lakota Nation Service Unit located in Porcupine, South Dakota, on the Pine Ridge Indian Reservation. At that time, MCC gave small community grants to local organizations doing decolonization work, while also addressing humanitarian needs in the community, such as by providing firewood to keep people warm during the winter months. In 2009, following a long discernment process with the Pine Ridge community and MCC, we decided we would remove the unit from the reservation and begin the Indigenous Visioning Circle. We envisioned the work moving from the micro-level, serving one community, to the macro-level, looking at systemic issues. We were encouraged by the community to utilize the resources and networks to which MCC has access, such as MCC’s offices in Washington, D.C., and at United Nations in New York.
I think MCC is beginning to see that change needs to happen systemically instead of viewing things as the “Indian problem” that needs to be fixed with social services. This shift has been happening gradually for many years—we can take part in this ongoing change. Everyone is necessary and the more creative we can be the better.

**What lessons has MCC learned from its work with Indigenous nations? What have been key successes and failures?**

I think it remains to be seen what MCC has learned from its work with Indigenous nations. I think when MCC has truly changed, MCC workers will see themselves as beneficiaries of wisdom and relationship, not just as part of an organization that gives. It will be more of a question of, “How has MCC changed because of this work?” meaning they have implemented their learnings and not just talked about having learned things.

I also think that each interaction and relationship MCC has had, has currently or will have in the future with Indigenous people is a chance for MCC to learn and change. Whether an exchange is good or bad in the moment is irrelevant—more important is reflection on past actions for the sake of improved relationships in the future.

**What is your vision for how MCC will work with Indigenous peoples in the future?**

My vision for how MCC will work with Indigenous peoples in the future is relational. I dream that MCC will co-journey with Indigenous peoples in mutual relationships and that fostering right relationships will be at the heart of this work. I dream that MCC would recognize Indigenous peoples in the United States as sovereign, as if they are working with peoples from another country. I dream that MCC can see the damage of the Doctrine of Discovery, while also embracing the opportunity we presently have to work toward change. My hope is that MCC can take leadership from Indigenous people, yield power and control and see what can come of a new-old way of doing things. I dream that we can look beyond one-year or two-year plans and think of the seven generations in all that we do, that our actions may be bold, life-giving and give way to life for those yet to come.

*Erica Littlewolf is the Indigenous Visioning Circle program coordinator with MCC Central States.*

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**Shifts in settler self-consciousness within MCC Indigenous Neighbours work in Canada**

Starting with its role in the resettlement of Mennonites to Canada, MCC has always been intertwined, even when unacknowledged, with the lives of Indigenous peoples. Aside from work with ecumenical coalitions, MCC’s first intentional, direct engagement with an Indigenous community in Canada was likely in the Southern Inuit town of Cartwright Labrador in 1960, which expanded in the early seventies to Northern Inuit and eventually Innu communities. Following the establishment of the MCC Canada Native Concerns (now Indigenous Neighbours) program in 1974, MCC engagement with Indigenous communities across the north expanded, with an MCC
Service by settler Canadians could take the form of prescribing what Indigenous people needed according to MCC’s agenda, rather than prioritizing the agendas of marginalized Indigenous nations.”


In her history of MCC in Canada, Esther Epp-Tiessen identifies several learnings that emerged over the decades of MCC program engaging Indigenous communities in the country. Epp-Tiessen observes that MCC workers entered into relationships with a listening and learning stance during this initial period of exploring service and community development projects in Indigenous contexts. This listening and learning stance in turn led MCC to advocate for justice for Indigenous nations through Canadian ecumenical coalitions like Project North and by assisting the formation of the Interchurch Task Force on Northern Hydro Development.

In the mid-to-late eighties, as MCC workers in Indigenous communities began to develop long-lasting friendships and take some risks in solidarity, partnership and increased local accountability started becoming measuring sticks for local involvement. “How could MCC stand next to the people it served in such a way that the people and not MCC took leadership; that the heritage and identity of the people it served was respected?” asked Betty Pries (61). Some MCC staff started to speak of two MCC constituencies: its traditional Mennonite supporters and its Indigenous partners with whom MCC workers built relationships and whose needs, MCC staff argued, should shape MCC’s program in Indigenous contexts and push MCC towards advocacy. The 1980s witnessed several examples of MCC staff listening to and responding to counsel from Indigenous partners, including: MCC worker Dorothy Mills’ refusal to carry out policies of the Department of Social Services in Davis Inlet in 1984; solidarity with the Innu in their struggle against low-level military flights near Goose Bay; participation in the Lubicon Cree campaign against oil and gas companies; and, to a lesser extent, engagement with the Anicinabe Park Occupation in Kenora in 1974 and Kanehsatake (Oka) in 1990.

Over the following decade, MCC began confronting more of the complexities of its service worker model, including the paternalism inherent in some MCC development and engagement approaches. At the most basic level, service by settler Canadians could take the form of prescribing what Indigenous people needed according to MCC’s agenda, rather than prioritizing the agendas of marginalized Indigenous nations. A review of MCC’s summer gardening program, for example, indicated that the program fostered significant relationships, but there were no more gardens being maintained than when the program began, suggesting a lack of Indigenous ownership. MCC’s service theology, Epp-Tiessen contends, has always run the risk of paternalism, quoting Mennonite ethicist Ted Koontz’s analysis of the potential paternalism of service: “We have; they have need; we give them what they need. In a deep way the patterns of our thinking may contribute to the very sense of disempowerment which we seek to overcome” (208). Grappling with the potential paternalism of service has pressed MCC workers to ask if a vision of MCC service might be articulated that does not focus on what we (settler Canadians) do to help them (Indigenous First Nations).

As awareness grew of potentially paternalistic modes of service, MCC’s focus in Canada over the past two decades regarding Indigenous issues has
shifted inward. MCC’s Indigenous Neighbours work encouraged Canadian Anabaptists to recognize their positioning within the broader dominant settler society and to collectively acknowledge their power and privilege as settlers, as well as acknowledge the sins of a colonial past and ongoing colonial present. This was not a new idea for MCC. Indigenous friends and partners had been encouraging Mennonites for several decades to reflect inward on their place as settlers in Canada. In 1975, a Kenora Report by Meti scholar Emma LaRoque commissioned by MCC to assist it “in gaining a theologically valid perspective on minority oppression,” observed that “the Mennonite Church must come to terms with power and powerlessness.”

MCC more broadly was slow, however, to internalize a critical understanding of racialized oppression and how Mennonites of European background in Canada participated in such racialized oppression. Stressing the importance of internal work, MCC Canada Indigenous Neighbours program coordinators Harley and Sue Eagle emphasized relationship building itself as peacebuilding. In the 1990s and the first part of this century, learning and owning our own complicity in settler colonial history and healing the brokenness within broader Canadian society, including the Anabaptist community in Canada, came to be understood as essential for—and an inherent part of—building authentic relationships between settler Canadian Mennonites and Indigenous peoples.

To spur Mennonites to reflect on colonial legacies in Canada, MCC promoted use of the Kairos Blanket Exercise, an interactive tool designed by the ecumenical Kairos initiative of which MCC was a part. During the years of the Canadian government’s Truth and Reconciliation Commission, MCC pushed for Mennonites to acknowledge and address Mennonite involvement in the Indian Residential School system, including in the Timber Bay Children’s Home at Montreal Lake, Saskatchewan. The Commission’s 94 Calls to Action implored the church to repudiate the Doctrine of Discovery, which had already become another emphasis for MCC conversations with its Anabaptist supporters, including how the assumptions behind the doctrine continue to manifest in our theology, legal structures, and unconscious interactions. MCC also increasingly engaged in places where the interests of Anabaptist communities came up against Indigenous ones, such as the Haldiman Tract in Six Nations of the Grand River in Ontario and the Young Chippewayan land dislocation in Saskatchewan documented in the film Reserve 107.

MCC’s Indigenous Neighbours work today is at a significant crossroads. MCC is more aware of the dangers of paternalism and has a bolstered commitment to advocacy with Indigenous peoples. At the same time, MCC has access to fewer formal denominational or organizational structures allowing for the fostering of relationships between MCC and Indigenous First Nations than ever before. MCC’s history of placing workers in Indigenous communities is largely a thing of the past. MCC continues to engage with Indigenous communities when possible, particularly in northern Ontario. Yet many of MCC’s current connections with Indigenous individuals and institutions, as well as with non-Indigenous supporters passionate about Indigenous justice, developed over time through the placement of MCC workers in Indigenous communities. Neil Funk Unrau, reflecting on the Anabaptist interaction with the Lubicon Cree Nation, suggests that the distinctively Anabaptist response to injustice against Indigenous nations in Canada has consisted not simply of showing up sporadically when
barricades are being erected, but of a willingness to be present long-term in the community for the “slow, frustrating task of building people-to-people relationships” (with the readiness to be present giving MCC’s response legitimacy).

MCC has considerably fewer opportunities now for sending people out of their comfort zones to be mutually transformed by the complexities of relationship building. We therefore need creativity to determine anew how to foster opportunities for authentic relationship beyond occasional interaction. Advocacy that responds to Indigenous calls for respecting treaties and Indigenous rights is one important response, though we need to be mindful of the need for authentic relationships to do advocacy well. Ecumenical collaborations have been an important part of MCC’s past and could hold some relational opportunities going forward. The key challenge remains how to further catalyze settler Anabaptists in Canada as a people to engage with the Indigenous neighbours with whom we share this land.

Kerry Saner Harvey is Indigenous Neighbours coordinator for MCC Manitoba.

MCC and fair trade: from SELFHELP Crafts of the World to Ten Thousand Villages

The World Fair Trade Organization (WFTO) defines fair trade as a “trading partnership, based on dialogue, transparency and respect, that seeks greater equity in international trade. It contributes to sustainable development by offering better trading conditions to, and securing the rights of, marginalized producers and workers—especially in the South.” Fair trade organizations that produce and sell handicrafts, food items and more put these goals into practice through the application of the WFTO’s ten principles of fair trade, which include transparency, fair wages and good working conditions.

Faith communities have played an important role in developing these principles and practices of fair trade, and Anabaptist communities and MCC are recognized as critical to the development of the fair trade industry in Canada and the United States. Anabaptist involvement in fair trade began with Edna Ruth Byler after she visited Puerto Rico in the late 1940s and saw the embroidery women were making but had no place to sell. She returned to the United States and began selling their work out of the trunk of her car and then in church basements and fellowship halls. Interest grew, and what started as a one-woman operation turned into SELFHELP Crafts of the World (hereafter SELFHELP Crafts), one of the first businesses to develop fair trade practices to benefit artisans. SELFHELP Crafts became an official MCC program in the mid-1960s, with headquarters in Akron, Pennsylvania, and a flagship store in nearby Ephrata. In 1965, this work expanded from the U.S. to marketing in Canada, with the Canadian Overseas Needlework and Crafts Project launching in Saskatchewan, and with the first SELFHELP Crafts of the World store in Canada opening in Altona, Manitoba, in 1972. SELFHELP Crafts rebranded in the 1990s as Ten Thousand Villages (referred to below simply as Villages).

MCC, through SELFHELP Crafts and now Villages, has been active in fair trade for nearly 75 years, with Villages’ mission to “create opportunities for
 artisans in developing countries to earn income by bringing their products and stories to our markets through long-term, fair trading relationships.” Through Villages, MCC has learned significant lessons about the impact of fair trade on artisan livelihoods. Most recently, MCC Canada commissioned an impact evaluation that examined artisan groups in India and Nepal to better understand the role Villages has played in advancing artisan livelihoods. While this study looked at a small portion of the work that Villages does, focusing on a limited geographic region, it identified lessons that are relevant to the breadth of Villages’ engagement with artisan groups and fair trade suppliers, lessons related to a) the impact on household income and socioeconomic status; b) the role of Villages in producers’ organizational growth; and c) the tensions between supporting artisans and compliance with WFTO standards.

**Impact on household income and socioeconomic status:** The evaluation found that handicraft sales represent an important source of income for artisans. For instance, handicraft work often comprises 50% to 75% of artisans’ total household incomes. No artisans, meanwhile, were found to be living below the poverty line. Many artisans highlighted the social supports they received through fair trade handicraft work, such as health care, literacy classes and improved communication skills. While the evaluation found that fair trade does have a positive impact, with artisans receiving regular income that allows them to send children to school, purchase food and clothing and receive social supports, quantifying the extent of this impact is extremely difficult due to the wide variety of producer groups with which Villages works. So, for example, Villages is only one of many purchasers to which most producer groups sell, making it difficult to single out the distinct impact of Villages’ purchases.

**The historical role of Villages in producer organization growth and development:** The impact of Villages on producer groups, however, is quite clear, as all groups noted that partnering with Villages strengthened their ability to produce and sell to other buyers when they first started. Villages is among the oldest buyers for groups, and the support and technical assistance provided over the years helped improve producer capacity and sales and build momentum and reputation. Support from Villages included flexible payment arrangements, shipping support, leeway with delays in fulfilling orders and payment advances (with Villages paying half the cost of orders upfront). The evaluation also noted that the long-term impact on producer groups by selling to a well-known and respected buyer like Villages and generating a long-term business relationship with regular orders and payments cannot be overstated.

**Challenges and tensions between supporting artisans and compliance with WFTO:** To be considered compliant with fair trade principles by the WFTO, producer organizations must submit detailed reporting that presents evidence for how they adhere to the WFTO’s ten principles of fair trade and its more than seventy compliance criteria. The evaluation noted that ensuring WFTO compliance and having a positive impact on artisans are different and often conflicting goals. Compliance requires significant investment in staff time, funding, data collection and management to meet reporting requirements and provide the level of detail needed. For small producer organizations that operate on small margins, it can be difficult to meet these requirements while also dedicating the time and resources needed for artisan capacity building and support.

A Palestinian refugee living in the West Bank holds a piece of needlework in 1977. In 1952, Ruth Lederach, an MCC volunteer working as a nurse in Arroub, West Bank, proposed that MCC establish an embroidery project to help Palestinian women who were displaced by the 1948 war, earn much-needed income. (MCC photo/Paul Quiring)
Ten Thousand Villages and the broader fair trade industry have grown significantly from simple beginnings as a venture in the trunk of Edna Ruth Byler’s car. Shifting economic landscapes and rapidly changing business models force fair trade enterprises to compete in a challenging environment. The future of Ten Thousand Villages is in flux. In the face of flagging sales and consistent operational losses, MCC Canada made the difficult decision at the beginning of this year to close the ten MCC Canada-owned stores, along with its warehouse and its head office, by the middle of 2020. Eight Villages stores operated by local boards will continue to operate in Canada. Meanwhile, Ten Thousand Villages in the United States continues to reposition itself within a competitive market for brick-and-mortar sales, seeking to strengthen online sales and to develop distinctive “maker-to-market” sales spaces that connect consumers with artisans and their stories. Whatever the future holds for MCC and Ten Thousand Villages, MCC can take deep pride in having pioneered a global movement dedicated to ensuring that producers are treated and compensated fairly.

Allison Enns is MCC food security and livelihoods coordinator, based in Winnipeg.

On the outskirts of Vientiane, Laos, in Nakhoun Noy village, Mon Sipasert (right) works with her sons Som Nuk Sinnachack (left) and Bounthanom Sipasert in this 1997 photo. This family made creches for Ten Thousand Villages. (MCC photo/Mark Beach)
Sand dams in Kenya: translating past successes to address future challenges

In the Nzamba community of the semi-arid Ukambani region of Kenya stands a one-hundred-year-old rock-and-mortar wall built across a dry waterway. Sand has filled in behind this rock dam, which accumulates water from the rainy season’s storms. Months later in the dry season, scoop holes around the dam are frequented by residents who collect water for the household, livestock and crops. This sand dam was the oldest visited in a recent evaluation of sand dams, undertaken by MCC with its two Kenyan partners, Sahelian Solutions Foundation and Utooni Development Organization. Thousands of sand dams have been built in Ukambani since the colonial era, attesting to their potential as an elegant solution to the fundamental challenge of water supply. Thus, sand dams have a seeming permanence in the local landscape, both in the durability of the structures and in their enduring appeal to communities. However, dramatic changes have occurred in the region, and even greater climate and social changes are poised to occur over the coming years. As MCC and its local partners look back on their instrumental role in several decades of promoting sand dams, these dual questions can inform what lessons we take from these projects: What accounts for the staying power of this community-based solution to providing water? And how might projects like this stay forward-looking in the face of the accelerating shifts in climate and social structures?

The staying power of sand dams was not evident early on, as they were not universally embraced upon their initial introduction. The dam at Nzamba is

Nanteya Mamayio (green sweater) and other Maasai get water from the MCC-supported sand dam constructed by MIDI and the villagers of Singiraine, Kenya. The water source provides 3,000 families (20,000 people) from a 15-mile/25 kilometer radius with water for cooking, bathing and laundry.

(MCC photo/ Matthew Lester)
characteristic of this initial skepticism and resistance: community members (especially women) who built the Nzamba dam were forced under colonial “chief’s law” to trek many days through the bush to a railhead for dam supplies. Understandably, the local Kamba people associated sand dams with colonial repression: the resistance to the sand dam was not a principled objection to the technology, but the manner in which it was imposed on the community.

For the Kenyan public’s reception of sand dams, the tide turned during a crippling drought in the 1970s, when a respected Kamba engineer suggested sand dams might alleviate the crisis. The resulting trial sand dam was so obviously effective at providing water that neighboring communities started replicating the success. Equally important was framing sand dams more as a communal activity, rather than only as a new technology. Sand dams were initiated and built by the communities themselves within the traditional mechanism of mwethya, a system of shared labor and mutual benefit. Community “self-help groups” which grew out of mwethya now form the backbone for implementing sand dams. The overarching key lesson from past sand dam success is how important adapting sand dam technology to the local context and introducing it using traditional mechanisms were vital to its widespread adoption. Only when communities were able to implement sand dams under their own terms, within the mwethya tradition, were the benefits of sand dams realized.

No development solution is static, as cultural and environmental changes alter the context in which a solution is implemented. What adjustments were critical in the past? Are sand dams equipped to meet future changes? Some adjustments to sand dams have naturally evolved. For example, communities building sand dams recognized early on that the silting of dams dramatically reduces water storage capacity. In response, sand dam projects started including terracing along the edges of the dams, thus capturing the silt. This adjustment not only improved water storage, but also provided better conditions for growing crops near the dams. Communities also discovered that building sand dams paired well with carrying out a range of associated activities, such as brickmaking and beekeeping. Kenyan organizations promoting sand dams began to do so within an integrated model of development that included income generation and livelihoods components. Intentionally including such activities expanded the range of potential benefits to communities, yet it also required a more robust degree of community organization and ongoing support. The recent MCC evaluation of sand dams found that most sand dams have water in the dry season, but that this resource is largely underutilized at many dams—livelihoods initiatives that could take advantage of this resource have not been as widely adopted as expected.

Several assessment studies have quantified the benefits and challenges of sand dams, thus raising awareness of where sand dams have fallen short of expectations. So, for example, assessments have found that sand dams have not translated into large-scale improvements in food security and that water extracted from sand dams presents a health risk due to bacterial contamination. Squaring these findings with the clear anecdotal accounts of sand dam effectiveness, and their obvious popularity with communities, remains an ongoing point of investigation. Attempts to make sense of conflicting conclusions often miss a cultural component, as assessments center around Western values of quantification and objectivity, which can be at odds with traditional African narratives and relational styles.


Central to the future of development projects such as sand dams is their ability to respond to the global climate crisis, which is shifting the very environment upon which Kamba culture and practices are adapted. Although not developed with climate change in mind, sand dams fortuitously represent a resilient response to the climate crisis. Sand dams have the potential to buffer shocks caused by shifts in rainfall patterns by increasing opportunities to collect rain when it does fall.

Less certain is how sand dams adjust to equally dramatic social changes. Sand dam promotion remains within a community-based, NGO-supported model. Efforts to incorporate sand dams into the mandate of local governments have largely failed; for the most part sand dams have not spread spontaneously in the private sector or by community financing, as was hoped. In the face of global cultural changes like moving towards privatization and away from community traditions, do self-help groups themselves have staying power, or is there another effective model of sand dam promotion as yet unrecognized? This is perhaps where observations by the sand dam communities themselves converge with development-level assessments: supporting the underlying community structures is just as important as the sand dam technology itself.

In part because of their popularity in Kenya, sand dams are now implemented in other countries such as Mozambique, Ethiopia and Chad. The degree to which sand dams can scale-up further remains to be seen, but the century-long durability of the dam at Nzamba suggests that these structures will be collecting water for decades to come.

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**MCC, the climate crisis and vulnerable communities**

Part of MCC’s strategic plan for the coming five years is to “design and assess MCC’s program and operations in light of our commitment to care for God’s creation and accompany marginalized communities harmed by climate change.” Why is this important? Put simply, the people that Jesus called us to serve and walk with are the ones on the receiving end of disasters caused by a changing climate. The poor, the vulnerable, the people without a safety net—these are the folks who suffer when droughts happen, when sea levels rise, when mosquitoes carrying disease expand their range.

While none of us can escape severe weather, some of us are better able to respond. As Peter Dula, associate professor of religion and culture at Eastern Mennonite University, observed in a recent summary of Anabaptist approaches to creation care: “Holland has dikes. Bangladesh has floods.”

Scientists’ predictions about a rapidly changing climate are proving correct. The climate crisis, meanwhile, is affecting the vulnerable communities in which MCC and its partners work. The climate crisis means not only more numerous and intense extreme weather events, like hurricanes, floods and droughts—the climate crisis is also one driver (among others) of mass migration and conflict.
MCC works with vulnerable communities to further develop their capacity to adapt to the climate crisis by scaling up innovations that enable them to become more resilient to climate and environmental changes. In Zimbabwe, for example, MCC supports resilient and agroecologically sound intercropping farming systems that increase food security through farmer-led cereal legume trials and by growing drought-resistant crops using soil and water conservation techniques like conservation agriculture. Building resilient farmer-driven agriculture extension systems increases farmers’ capacity to innovate, enhances improved soil fertility, diversifies production and improves human and animal nutrition.

Through these innovative, sustainable, affordable, accessible, replicable and resilient intercropping farming systems, smallholder farmers can minimize the impact of climate-induced pests such as the fall armyworm, the maize stalk borer and invasive striga weeds. Using so-called “stinky sticky” technology, based on in-depth understanding of chemical ecology, agrobiodiversity and plant-to-plant and insect-to-plant interactions, farmers plant a cereal crop with a repellent leguminous intercrop (stinky) such as Desmodium uncinatum, with an attractive trap plant such as Napier grass (sticky) planted as a border crop around the intercrop. Through this technology, vulnerable communities can control climate-induced pests and weeds in environmentally friendly ways that build community solidarity.

While resilience and adaptive capacity building are the preferred means to address the impact of climate change, MCC recognizes that sometimes the impacts are far beyond the coping capacities of affected communities. In the Afar region of Ethiopia the impact of climate change is so severe that growing crops is not possible. The pastoralists in these communities survive by keeping animals such as goats and camels. Unfortunately, the extreme chronic droughts due to climate change in the Afar region are leading to human and animal thirst, chronic hunger, malnutrition and sometimes death.

MCC is responding in Afar by trucking in water for human and animal consumption, providing emergency fodder and vaccines for animals alongside food assistance for humans. MCC is also supporting sustainable innovative projects that improve water access. So, for example, MCC is working with

Ebou Dango waters onions in a vegetable nursery in Didyr, Burkina Faso. She participates in a program supported by MCC through partner Office of Development of Evangelical Churches (Office de Développement des Églises Evangélique or ODE) to help women farmers adapt to climate change through conservation agriculture practices, seed production and off-season vegetable production. ODE supports agriculture and food security projects across the country. (MCC Photo/James Souder)
a local partner called APDA on constructing dome-shaped steam wells that harvest water from the volcanic steam that moves up through a fault line in the earth and escapes through vents.

While all people feel the impact of the climate crisis, poor women commonly face higher risks and greater burdens from climate change. Restricted land rights, limited channels to influence political decision-making spheres and lack of access to financial resources, training and technology all hinder women’s ability to adapt to climate change. MCC works to ensure that women have access to and control and decision-making power over project resources. MCC also works with men who champion gender equality and who create safe spaces for men in their community to cultivate healthy masculinities, helping to ensure that women’s empowerment efforts are successful and well-received. MCC recognizes that tapping into the wisdom and unleashing the knowledge, experience and capability of women are essential to craft effective climate change solutions for the benefit of all.

In Canada and the U.S., MCC undertakes climate change mitigation efforts, including pressing the church to embrace simple living and care for God’s creation and to pay attention to the impacts of the climate crisis, particularly on the poor and vulnerable. MCC also advocates for government policies that seek to slow down the climate crisis. MCC recently partnered with Eastern Mennonite University and Goshen College in founding the Center for Sustainable Climate Solutions to advance thinking and action within faith communities on climate change mitigation.

The time has come for us, as Anabaptists, to recognize that a faithful response to our brothers and sisters around the world means addressing the root causes of our climate crisis. We must connect the dots between climate change and our theology of peacemaking. Simply put, our lifestyles, including our addiction to fossil fuels, do violence to the most vulnerable and marginalized people around the globe. As is abundantly clear throughout the biblical narrative, God cares about all of creation, especially the most vulnerable among us. May we do the same.

*Eric Kurtz is executive director for MCC Great Lakes. Vurayayi Pugeni is area director for MCC programs in southern Africa.*
MCC and the Jubilee 2000 Campaign

While on staff at the MCC Washington Office in the late 1990s, I walked into the office of Senator Arlen Specter of Pennsylvania to talk about the Jubilee 2000 Campaign. This dynamic movement advocated for cancelling the massive debts that low-income countries owed to wealthy nations and international monetary institutions. I asked the aide to the Senator if he had received letters from Mennonites about Jubilee 2000. He waved his hand in dismay and vigorously nodded his head saying, “We have plenty of letters; don’t need any more letters. We’re on board!”

This positive response was a remarkable turn-about. When I first came to Washington with MCC in 1995, Congress was hostile to cancelling these debts. Fellow advocates told me, “We can talk to the Administration about this. We can talk to the World Bank. But don’t let Congress know that we’re promoting debt cancellation because they hate this idea!”

The Jubilee 2000 Campaign changed that. The Campaign originated with a call by the All-Africa Conference of Churches, which identified the approaching millennial landmark as an opportunity to apply the biblical year of the Jubilee in which debts are forgiven and people given a new start in life. Their challenge was taken up by Christian Aid and others in the United Kingdom, by a U.S. church-based coalition called Jubilee 2000 USA that included MCC and ultimately by some 60 country campaigns around the world.

Jubilee 2000 mobilized people of faith from a wide range of participating religious groups: the Catholic Church, mainline Protestant denominations, peace churches and evangelicals, as well as Jewish and Muslim organizations. Polls indicated that the idea of debt cancellation for poor countries was never popular with U.S. society as a whole—churches and religious organizations embraced and drove this effort.

The MCC Washington Office mobilized its Mennonite constituents and served on the Jubilee 2000 Executive Committee. MCC had an important impact on policy makers because of the time and effort it dedicated to this ecumenical effort, but even more because Anabaptists “in the pews” chose to raise their voices on behalf of neighbors in need.
The relatively short time it took to pass debt cancellation legislation surprised many in Washington. Senator Ted Kennedy asked a prominent Jubilee campaigner how they were able to succeed in just a few years, noting that he usually expected at least a ten-year process for any reform effort. Rep. Spencer Bachus, at the time chair of the House Financial Services Committee and lead Republican backer of the legislation, thanked Jubilee 2000 advocates for “giving me the opportunity to do the kind of thing that I came to Washington hoping to accomplish.”

Uganda was the first country to have its debts cancelled. Ugandan churches and civil society united to make sure that the money saved from debt cancellation was dedicated to poverty reduction efforts. They created a network of monitors across Uganda at the village level to make sure that budgets for education, health care and other social services were actually increased. In 2000, the Jubilee U.S. coalition brought Charlotte Mwesigye, the coordinator of Jubilee 2000 Uganda, to the U.S. to talk to churches around the country about its impact. She said something I’ll never forget. “I want you to understand what your work has accomplished,” she told us. “Because of your work, Uganda now has medical clinics with doctors and medicines that didn’t exist before and schools with teachers and text books they didn’t have before. There are children alive today because of what you’ve done.”

That accomplishment belongs to Anabaptists in the U.S. whose letters overwhelmed Senator Specter’s office and to the caring people of faith who took time to “speak out for the cause of the destitute and for all those in need” (Prov. 31:8,9). Jubilee 2000 saw many Anabaptists in the U.S. engage public officials, some perhaps for the first time. It was an extraordinary demonstration that advocating for humane public policies can save and transform many lives. That conviction carries on today among Anabaptists speaking out for compassionate government policies and action to end U.S. and global poverty, press for racial justice, overhaul a broken immigration system and protect the rights of Dreamers and asylum seekers. During this difficult time in our national life in the United States, the Jubilee 2000 Campaign can be a reminder and an encouragement that much is possible, much is yet to do and much fruit can yet be harvested for justice and compassion in our nation and world.

“Because of your [advocacy for debt cancellation], Uganda now has medical clinics with doctors and medicines that didn’t exist before and schools with teachers and text books they didn’t have before. There are children alive today because of what you’ve done.”
—Charlotte Mwesigye, Jubilee 2000 Uganda

Martin Shupack is director of advocacy for Church World Service. He worked with the MCC Washington, D.C., office from 1995 to 2005.
MCC workers (from left) Russ Toevs of Whitewater, Kansas; Derek D'Silva of Sonapur, Bangladesh; Abdul Mannan and Khabirul Islam Khokon of Noakhali district, Bangladesh; Paul Shires of Arroyo Grande, California; and Lee Brockmueller of Freeman, South Dakota, in a soybean field. (MCC Photo/Russell Webster)