Seek peace and pursue it. Psalm 34:14b

At an unscheduled stop at a mass grave memorial in northern Uganda, we gathered in silence, knowing that one of our colleagues had been forced to flee his village as a child to escape the horror documented by the tragic memorial cairn and plaque in front of us. “LRA War Victims… 365 people lay at rest,” the plaque read.

An hour later, we visited an MCC-supported agriculture project unfolding in relative calm and
security. This initiative could not have been implemented during the horrific violence perpetrated by the LRA only 15 years earlier. I breathed a prayer of gratitude for the tireless peacebuilding efforts of Uganda’s Ocholi religious leaders, MCC partners who insisted on dialogue and prayer as weapons of peace in the early 2000s. Bishops and lay leaders, some of whom came to Canada to share their peace message, took enormous personal risk to be agents of the gospel of reconciliation. How often I have asked myself since this visit to Uganda: In situations of conflict, does MCC need to undertake peacebuilding work with local partners before any other development or humanitarian relief work is possible?

As disciples of the one whose peace surpasses understanding, MCC workers continue to make a distinctive and powerful witness for God’s peace in places marred by violence. They join and support the witness of churches, community-based activists and Muslim, Jewish, Buddhist and Hindu leaders committed to finding alternatives to violence and transformative approaches to conflict. In this issue of Intersections, readers will see how MCC’s peace witness is forged through relationships with “the enemy” and how teaching peace emerges from within the communities where violence has been faced and met with nonviolence. As we mark 100 years of MCC, may we be grateful for the good news of the peace God has brought us in Jesus and faithful to God’s call to share and testify to that good news in our lives.

Rick Cober Bauman is MCC Canada executive director.
Reflections from Civilian Public Service (1941-1946)

As the specter of war loomed in the late 1930s, Mennonites, the Church of the Brethren and Quakers (who identified themselves as the “Historic Peace Churches”) collaborated to advocate to U.S. government officials that provisions be made for conscientious objection to war. MCC officials represented diverse Mennonite, Brethren in Christ and Amish groups in these discussions with government and military officials. Together, the Mennonites, Brethren and Quakers were successful in securing an agreement to establish the Civilian Public Service (CPS) program, which would operate camps where young men would be stationed to carry out work of “national importance” in lieu of military service. These alternative service CPS camps would then fall under the authority of different civilian government agencies, while being operated by MCC and other church bodies.

MCC opened its first CPS camp on May 22, 1941, in Grottoes, Virginia. It would continue to operate CPS camps through March 1946. MCC’s first 25 camps all fell under the jurisdiction of the Soil Conservation Service, the Forest Service and the National Park Service. Over CPS’s nearly five years of operation, MCC collaborated with twelve U.S. government departments, including the Public Health Service, the Department of Agriculture and the Puerto Rico Reconstruction Administration. Of the 151 CPS camps or units that operated during World War II, MCC operated 60 of them on either a solo or joint basis. Records indicate that around 38% of the conscientious objectors who passed through the CPS camps were from different Mennonite churches (with 4,665 young Mennonite men out of a total CPS group of approximately 12,000). CPS men fought forest fires, worked at soil conservation, served as orderlies in mental hospitals and much more. MCC’s first CPS mental health unit opened in August 1942 in Staunton, Virginia. Mennonite experiences in CPS mental health units spurred post-war action for more humane mental health facilities, leading to the founding of Mennonite mental health centers such as Oaklawn in Goshen, Indiana, and Prairie View in Newton, Kansas.

CPS broadened ecumenical horizons for participants, bringing young men from diverse Anabaptist groups together—and with Christians from other traditions. MCC organized educational programs for Mennonite participants, publishing a series of booklets for those programs that covered Mennonite history and theologies of service and non-resistance. MCC sought to foster a spirit of CPS men being “willing second milers” rather than “conscripted Christians,” even as some CPS men chafed at rough living conditions, low pay and compulsory labor (and as some CPS men criticized the program for too-close affiliation with the government and the war effort). CPS service had different meanings for different participants: for some it was a religiously acceptable way of fulfilling a patriotic duty, while for others it represented a positive, proactive witness for the gospel of peace (and for some it was both).

Just as the war effort mobilized many women into the work force, so, too, did women become part of the CPS effort. Wives and girlfriends often moved to be based near and work at or close by the camps where their husbands and boyfriends were stationed. Some women served in the camps as nurses. Women’s sewing societies prepared “camp kits” to send to CPS that included bedding, towels, toiletries, stationery and stamps. Over the course of CPS’s operations, around 2,000 pacifist women lived in or near the 151 camps, with CPS even operating women’s units at eight state-run mental institutions.

We exited CPS persuaded that a life of voluntary Christ-followership demands constant service to other people.”
—Marvin Hein

In 1941, just before Pearl Harbor, I left public school teaching because I knew that once our country declared war, I could not supervise war bond sales.”
—Mary Wiser

Learn more


The excerpts below from CPS newsletters and reports show young Anabaptist men and women reflecting on the meaning of Christian service and peace witness, on broadened ecumenical horizons gained through service and on the meaning of cooperation with the state in a time of war.

**CPS as Christian service**

“CPS work has meaning to the men who perform it as an expression of loyalty and love to their country, and of their desire to make a contribution to its welfare. It has still larger meaning as constructive service and ministry to human needs, and as a demonstration of a way of life in peace and love in contrast to the destructiveness of war and violence.” —from Mennonite Civilian Public Service Statement of Policy, approved by MCC Executive Committee, September 16, 1943.

“CPS is a constructive witness to the way of love as taught by Christ. The fact that the government has not opened the way immediately to use CPS men in areas of more direct need such as relief and reconstruction has not been too disturbing even though many at home and in the camps as well as administrative officials sincerely desire such service and feel it should be made possible. Because the church desires relief service does not mean they will refuse to cooperate with the government in areas that they can use CPS men and which are constructive in nature. . . . [S]o long as CPS gives expression to this deep religious faith there will be support of CPS by the church. Should it become something else, or should the government disallow a religious expression, church support would no longer be forthcoming.” MCC hopes “that through the CPS experience men will deepen and grow in their faith in and love of God,” “that CPS will do works that are a witness to the faith,” “that the men in camp will be more than drafted men,” and that “the men will rise above the fact that they have been conscripted and look upon their status as an opportunity to hear testimony to a deep faith in God and God’s purpose for man.” “The Mennonite Hope in CPS,” Mennonite Central Committee CPS Newsletter 1/13 (March 19, 1943).

“It has been stated that men in CPS are only going the first mile and that often grudgingly. That is far too true; but we can go the second mile. If we were not in CPS where could we better represent the principle of going the second mile? If we cannot go the second mile in CPS, then we are admitting that Christianity is not practical in every occasion.” Abraham Graber (Amish CPS camper), Mennonite CPS Bulletin 3/24 (June 22, 1945).

“To say that the men in CPS are going the second mile and overcoming evil with good is to look at the picture through rose-colored glasses”—Anonymous CPS man, quoted in “Keeping the Vision Clear,” Mennonite CPS Bulletin 4/9 (November 8, 1945).

Writing in the 1945 MCC Workbook, Albert Gaeddert observed “a weariness with the program.” “With too many campers there is a lack of active participation. Interests seem to center about personal convenience.” “We have discovered certain of our limitations. Selfishness is still very much a part of us. We are not free from greed and the things of this world.”

“Most of us entered CPS largely because we had little choice. We exited CPS persuaded that a life of voluntary Christ-followership demands constant service to other people. For two years we had served our national government, the church and each other. Somehow the conviction that our lives were not...
our own was translated into an unshakable belief that we were destined as God’s people to serve the world.”—Marvin Hein, A Community is Born: The Story of the Birth, Growth, Death and Legacy of Civilian Public Service Camp #138-1, Lincoln, Nebraska 1944-1947 (self-published).

“[T]hose to whom CPS has been a challenge and have had as their motive service for Christ and the Church will make excellent relief workers and am hoping that they will be able to go soon into all parts of the world to witness for what they believe.”—Ellen Harder (former CPS nurse, written while working with MCC at Taxal Edge, England) Mennonite CPS Bulletin 4/2 (July 22, 1945).

Broadened inter-Anabaptist horizons

“In most instances [the discharged CPS worker] will be interested in cooperating more closely with other Mennonite groups. He will have formed acquaintances among them, which he will not forget and he may not always sympathize too much with old prejudices. He will know other Mennonites as they are.”—Unnamed CPS worker, MCC Workbook, 1945.

Bennie Deckert reflected that “when we were at home many of us lived largely to ourselves. We had very little contact with the outside world, with men of different denominations, occupations, different sects, communities and states. Our friends lived nearby, perhaps in our very local community. Now we know men from nearly every state, denomination, and from nearly all walks of life. To many of us Mennonites has come the realization that there is much more to the word Mennonite than is embodied in our own local group.”—“Three Years in CPS,” Rising Tide (June 1945).

Women and CPS

Lois Schertz: “Even though the working conditions at the Mt. Pleasant State Hospital were deplorable, there were many good things that came from that experience for me as a woman. The unit became a family. We bonded together in a beautiful way, both men and women. For example, in our church services, men and women both participated. This was my first experience in being allowed to lead a worship service. (I went back home after the war and it took a good 30 years for that to happen).”—Lois Schertz (served at CPS unit at Mt. Pleasant State Hospital, Iowa), “War, Alternative Service, and a Reality Jolt,” Women’s Concerns Report, no. 116 (Sept.-Oct. 1994), 5.

“In 1941, just before Pearl Harbor, I left public school teaching because I knew that once our country declared war, I could not supervise war bond sales. Nor did I want to be part of the accelerating groundswell toward war that seemed to be required of public school teachers.”—Mary Wiser, “Searching for a Brotherly Life in a Warring World,” Women’s Concerns Report, no. 116 (Sept.-Oct. 1994), 8-9.

Expanded understandings of nonresistance and peace witness

“We want to do more than take a stand against war. Many of us entered CPS with the vision that camp was the place where we could make a clear cut witness against war and for the positive aspect of our belief. We believed in the spirit of nonresistance, but also in the power of love to overcome evil.”—Elmer Ediger, Mennonite CPS Bulletin 4/4 (August 22, 1945).
Along with a stronger faith in the nonresistant position has come a greater sensitivity to the all-embracing implications of the Christian gospel. If nonresistance is held in regard to war only and not in attitude toward the mentally ill, the negro [sic], the under-privileged, employer, and fellow employees then nonresistance finds itself on the same level as a Sunday religion. In appreciating the totality of the way of love there comes a deep awareness of individual inadequacy, yet a drawing responsiveness to the call of Christ to permit him to penetrate every thought and act of our being.”—Unnamed CPS worker, MCC Workbook, 1945.

**Mennonites, CPS and collaboration with the state**

“The irony of CPS was that Mennonites sought to remain free of governmental control, but by force of circumstances and tradition found themselves in one of the most intimate relationships ever established between church and state in American history, and with the military arm of the government at that.”—Al Keim, *Gospel Herald*, August 7, 1979.

“Mennonites hold that it is the Christian’s duty loyally and faithfully to obey the state in all requirements which do not involve violation of the Christian conscience, that is, a violation of the teachings of the Word of God. They assuredly believe a Christian must obey God rather than man when the demands of the State conflict with this supreme loyalty to Christ but they also hold that the Christian should ‘Render unto Caesar the things that are Caesar’s,’ and ‘Obey every ordinance of man for the Lord’s sake.’ Although
they acknowledge that it is within the province of the state to require service of its citizens, they reserve the right to refuse such service if it is contrary to conscience. This attitude toward state service does not constitute an endorsement of conscription or compulsion as such, but is rather an expression of the principle of obedience to the powers that be. In like manner, the Mennonite Central Committee takes a positive rather than a merely negative attitude toward the Selective Service Administration and other government agencies which are responsible by law and presidential directive for the administration of this state service.” —from Mennonite Civilian Public Service Statement of Policy, approved by MCC Executive Committee, September 16, 1943.

“[I]t is quite possible to accept an evil compulsion in a Christ-like manner. But it is also a serious matter to judge anyone’s refusal to accept conscription as being un-Christian. For there are those conscientious objectors who cannot acquiesce to government pressure to perform civilian service in lieu of armed service because war and conscription for war are inseparable. We have a profound respect for the men who have worked with us within CPS before deciding that they must bear their witness in jail. They have been a continual challenge to us in our stand.”—Delmar Stahly, “Invitation to Conscription,” Box 96 (monthly publication of CPS unit in Mulberry, Florida) 2/1 (August 1945).

Alain Epp Weaver directs strategic planning for MCC. Frank Peachey and Lori Wise are MCC U.S. records manager and assistant, respectively.

**Challenges and learnings: MCC medical work in Vietnam during the war years**

Drafted by the U.S. government and accepting the invitation to perform alternative service through MCC, I arrived in Vietnam with my wife amidst the war between the North and the South with massive interference from the U.S. military. We were joined by other volunteers from Canada, the United States, Japan, India, Indonesia and the Philippines to work at two MCC hospitals. For some, it was our first plane ride. As idealistic, young MCC workers, steeped in Matthew 25 and the Sermon on the Mount, we were committed to the belief that the kingdom of God deserves our primary loyalty above country and that these understandings are best expressed through acts of service to people in need. Taking an MCC assignment was one way to put that belief into practice.

Since its entry into Vietnam in 1954, MCC had partnered with the Vietnamese Protestant church. This Tin Lanh church was the outgrowth of evangelistic work carried out by the Christian and Missionary Alliance since 1911. The Alliance’s emphasis was on saving souls, planting churches and training local pastors. These life-long missionaries were fluent in the language and supportive of the U.S. involvement in the war.

The medical initiatives arose from the vision of several Tin Lanh leaders. The understanding between the Tin Lanh church and MCC stated that the church would appoint the administrator, support staff and oversee spiritual ministries. MCC would provide doctors, nurses and an operating subsidy. One MCC doctor served as the medical director and a member of the board. The administrators appointed by the church were trained pastors. Gifted with administrative abilities, they also evangelized by holding morning services.
for patients waiting outside the clinic and Wednesday evening services for hospital staff. This preaching was a point of contention for some MCC workers, offended by subjecting a sick and captive audience to a presentation of the gospel. To express their disagreement, some MCC workers refused to participate in these services. Other MCC staff faithfully attended because it was important as fellow Christians to worship with other Christians, despite differing biblical perspectives.

Some Tin Lanh pastors and leaders expected to receive preferential treatment at their hospital, moving to the head of the waiting line or bypassing the intake nurses to go directly to the doctor. This offended MCC workers’ sense of fairness. When their tolerance gave out, they initiated direct western-style confrontations with the clinic gatekeepers who were caught in the middle between Vietnamese cultural expectations and MCC ideals. This point of contention showed up on the clinic board meeting agenda, providing an opportunity for both sides to explain motivations and cultural imperatives. Resolution was reached when the administrator agreed to put procedures in place to lessen favoritism and MCC staff agreed to be less confrontational, because they better understood the pressure the gatekeepers felt from their church friends. MCC workers also realized their fellow clinic staff deserved the same respect they were trying to gain for patients.

During these war years, MCC workers faced another set of challenges. As a voluntary agency authorized by the South Vietnamese Ministry of Health, MCC automatically received certain privileges, including use of the U.S. military postal system, the right to fly standby on U.S. military planes for free and access to U.S. military bases, their commissaries and their hospitals, among other perks. MCC workers were acutely aware that their actions communicated much to the local community and intentionally considered how to maintain consistency between behavior and belief.

As conscientious objectors to war, we were dedicated to creating an identity separate from the U.S. military. Questions of whether or to what extent to use these privileges provoked many long discussions. Some were easily resolved. For example, when the hospital needed a medication that the Ministry of Health could not provide, a trip was quickly organized to the U.S. military hospital to procure it. Trips to the U.S. commissary for American foodstuffs almost never happened, perhaps because the Vietnamese food on our tables was so delicious. Staying in touch with family and friends back home, meanwhile, was a critical component to our sense of well-being and connectedness. Because the U.S. Army postal service was faster and more reliable than the Vietnamese system, most MCC workers used it.

Other challenges were thornier. Two U.S. military bases were across town from the Nha Trang hospital and their medical personnel were curious about our work: the kind of patients seen, the patients’ medical conditions and the facilities of the hospital. The fact that single young women worked at the clinic was an added attraction. They arrived in their Army jeeps in full uniform and with weapons. Some of them asked how they could help. This launched a vigorous discussion within MCC. U.S. military men and their equipment on the clinic grounds was an incongruous and deeply disturbing sight, threatening to undercut all the times MCC workers had said to the Vietnamese community that they were not part of the military. And yet the U.S. military medical personnel could offer expertise and services that would benefit our patients.


Eventually MCC drew up some ground rules that protected MCC’s principles and stance in the country while allowing U.S. military men to make a contribution. They could visit if they wore civilian clothes, arrived in civilian vehicles and left their weapons at the base. [They were astounded we had no weapons on the clinic grounds.] This practice worked well. One military dentist came out regularly with his equipment to see patients and trained one of the staff to clean and pull teeth; he even got permission to transfer a military dental suite to the clinic so those services could continue. One clinic board meeting revolved around the South Vietnamese flag that flew on the clinic grounds. MCC workers wanted it to be taken down. The Tin Lanh church, in contrast, felt their existence depended on the South Vietnamese government prevailing over the communists. Pastor Huyen, chairman of the board and admired for his patience and wisdom, ended the long and heated discussion, stating: “When and if the North takes over, we will fly their flag, but for now we will fly this flag.”

Reflecting from today’s historical vantage point, several things stand out about MCC’s medical work in Vietnam. The one constant was the graciousness shown us by the Vietnamese staff and local community. They welcomed us and invited us into their world, offered us friendship and looked out for us despite our limited language skills and paucity of cultural understanding. Amazingly they did all this although we were citizens from the country that was destroying their land and people. They had the incredible ability to differentiate between us as people and the policies of the U.S. Credit is due to MCC leadership for allowing us to struggle with the issues and having faith that healthy resolutions would be found. The international flavor of MCC workers provided a richness and lifelong bonds of friendship. We agree that our time in Vietnam was one of those permanent life markers that changed us in simple and profound ways and all these years later we are still processing our experience.

*Lowell Jantzi served as MCC coordinator at The Evangelical Clinic, Nha Trang, South Vietnam, from 1970 to 1973. He later served as MCC representative for Vietnam, together with his spouse, Ruth, from 2003 to 2008.*

“This 1975 photo shows, from left, Max Ediger, James Klassen, Earl Martin and Yoshihiro Ichikawa, MCC volunteers who remained in Saigon during the war in Vietnam. (MCC photo/Earl Martin)
The 1960s marked the height of the cold war, a superpower conflict that would later create a heart-wrenching challenge for MCC workers in Laos. The United States and the Soviet Union struggled for strategic advantage amidst the rise of anti-colonial liberation movements around the world. In Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia, the result was over a decade of turmoil, war, genocide and displacement.

In Laos, the primary U.S. military involvement was a massive secret air war (1964-1973) which tallied 580,000 bombing missions, the equivalent of one bombing mission every eight minutes around the clock for nine years. The air war dropped more than 270 million cluster munitions, small tennis-ball sized bomblets that sent tiny shards of steel flying through the air at ballistic speed. An estimated 25 to 30 percent of these bomblets failed to detonate on impact, littering Lao villages, fields and forests with millions of lethal explosives. As Lao villagers returned to their destroyed homes after the bombing ceased, injuries and deaths became the unrelenting legacy of the war.

In the wake of the bombing, MCC opened a small program in 1975 to assist Laos with recovery and small-scale economic development. Having aligned with the communist bloc, Laos was largely closed to the U.S., save for a tiny contingent of seven U.S. embassy staff and two representatives each for MCC and Quaker Service Laos. As the only U.S. citizens with permission to travel around the country, the MCC and Quaker workers became the sole U.S. witnesses to the painful aftermath of the U.S. bombing campaign.

As they visited villages made of bamboo and thatch, they saw U.S. bomb containers everywhere, some still bearing the name of the U.S. corporation that had produced them. Over lamp-lit meals of sticky rice and spicy sauces served on dishes made from melted-down bomb containers, Lao villagers quietly told MCC workers of family members lost to the ever-present bombs. Amid this warm hospitality the question of responsibility hung silently in the air. MCC workers struggled for words. What did peace theology have to offer in these settings?

What followed was more than a decade of experimentation, much of it without success. MCC imported a custom-made tractor with a chain flail and heavy shielding to protect the driver, hoping that it would safely detonate the cluster bomblets. After months of testing it proved ineffective, and Lao villagers continued to live and die among the bomb-laden fields. It was a time of great sadness.

Hope finally appeared on the horizon when the Mines Advisory Group (MAG), an agency devoted to clearing landmines and other UXO, was formed. In 1994, MCC and MAG collaborated with the Lao government to establish the UXO clearance project. The first 20 deminers were trained and began clearance operations that fall. It was a noble beginning, but woefully inadequate in the face of tens of millions of unexploded cluster munitions scattered across thousands of acres of landscape.

Amid the urgency of day-to-day clearance operations, the project raised larger questions. More cluster bombs were being dropped by the U.S. in places like Iraq and Kuwait. Might our relationship with the villagers of Laos move us...
to join the fledgling movement to ban cluster munitions? And what would justice look like in Laos? Should the U.S. government be pushed to provide significant financial support for UXO clearance and victim assistance?

MCC learned several lessons through its work in Laos in the aftermath of war:

- The impact of war on a land and a people extends for generations, long after the media turn to other crises.
- The enormous destruction and harm done to Laos without the knowledge of the U.S. citizenry is alarming. Our government is not always a reliable source for truth.
- Clearing the land of UXO is tedious and dangerous work, requiring an enormous expenditure of resources. The harm cannot be undone. Prevention of conflict, when possible, is a better way to reduce human suffering than relief after war, although both are important.
- By giving numerous presentations in U.S. Anabaptist contexts about the UXO problem in Laos, we learned that many white Anabaptists engage much more naturally with paradigms of service and peacemaking than with the paradigms of justice and advocacy. Raising funds to clear Lao villages of U.S. bombs unleashed a flood of energy and creativity among Anabaptist congregations. Yet the discovery in 1986 of cluster munition component manufacturers in Lancaster, Pennsylvania, raised compelling concerns about the silent complicity of Anabaptists with the systems of war. What would it mean to keep faith with the villagers of Laos in settings where the machinery of war was embedded in local economies and income taxes?
- The paradigms of peacemaking/service and justice/advocacy are not mutually exclusive. The UXO project itself provided crucial information and data that later became the foundation for effective advocacy, an important complement to the storytelling that had become the hallmark of MCC’s early interpretive work on Laos.
- The broader efforts to ban cluster munitions and gain strong U.S. government support for UXO clearance in Laos were capably led by other agencies, rather than by MCC. Legacies of War, an education and advocacy agency begun by Channapha Khamvongsa, a Laotian-American woman, was largely responsible for persuading the U.S. government to greatly increase its support for bomb clearance in Laos. President Obama traveled to Laos in 2016 and gave a major speech describing the years of suffering caused by U.S. bombing and pledged US$90 million in support of bomb clearance. It was as if a great historical harm had finally been acknowledged. Perhaps those like Channapha, whose people have known great harm, have the keenest passion for justice and the greatest determination to find healing.
- Finally, the UXO project in Laos has taught us that within every act of service and peacemaking, a strong movement for justice waits to be born.

In 2019, the UXO project in Laos marked its twenty-fifth anniversary. Having long outgrown MCC, the project now employs several thousand workers who clear an average of 600 pieces of lethal ordnance every day. By all estimates, the work will continue for decades.

Titus Peachey served with MCC U.S. in several peace education roles from 1986 to 2016 and before that as MCC co-representative for Laos from 1980 to 1985.

For stories, images and videos about the early years of MCC work on UXO in Laos, see: http://civilianpublicservice.org/storycontinues/advocacy.

For a timeline of MCC and Quaker work on UXO issues in Laos and support for the international campaign to ban cluster munitions, see: https://mcc.org/sites/mcc.org/files/media/common/documents/mennonitequakertimeline.pdf.

For MCC’s Peace Office Newsletter devoted to stories and analysis of MCC’s work on cluster munitions, see: https://mccintersections.wordpress.com/2014/10/pon_2008_04-06_vol-38-no-2_cluster-bombs-again.pdf.

For news of Legacies of War’s advocacy work to gain significant U.S. government support for bomb clearance and victim assistance in Laos, see: http://legaciesofwar.org/.
Nonviolent resistance during the first intifada and beyond

The Palestinian Centre for Rapprochement between People (PCR) was established in 1988 during the first intifada to bridge the gap between Palestinians and peoples from all over the world. The iconic form of resistance from the first intifada that most people remember is that of Palestinian youth confronting fully armed Israeli soldiers only with stones. Stone-throwing, however, was not the only form of resistance. Sit-ins, peaceful marches and graffiti-writing were some forms of nonviolent resistance used by Palestinians against Israeli military occupation. In Beit Sahour in the occupied West Bank, where PCR was established, people decided to return their ID cards, issued by the Israeli military occupation authorities, back to the military government, as a protest against the legitimacy of the occupation. The ID cards symbolized Israeli military control over the lives of Palestinians: the people who decided to stop carrying them took on significant risk, as they could be stopped at any time by soldiers demanding that they produce their ID cards as they traveled within the country.

Soon after some 500 Palestinians handed their IDs to Beit Sahour’s mayor in order to return them to the Israeli authorities, the latter imposed a strict curfew on the town to prevent more residents from doing the same. Israeli soldiers went from house-to-house to give people back their IDs in the middle of the night. The Israeli military at that time realized the significance of the ID protest and took it very seriously.

Palestinians in Beit Sahour in turn decided to continue creative nonviolent protests against the occupation. One example of such creative nonviolent action was a tax boycott, which came to be referred to by Palestinians as the “white revolution.” Palestinians repurposed the Boston Tea Party slogan, “No taxation without representation,” refusing to pay taxes to an Israeli military government that did not represent us.

Amidst such nonviolent resistance, protest leaders in Beit Sahour looked for ways to help people cope with Israeli military measures taken against Palestinian communities during the intifada. Neighborhood committees
were formed to find ways to ease the lives of residents in each neighborhood as those neighborhoods faced collective punishment because of nonviolent resistance. Curfew was one form of collective punishment often used by the Israeli military, with people forbidden from leaving their homes. Curfews became economic sieges the longer they lasted. Thus, when curfews would last for a week or two, markets would be almost empty even when the Israeli military would lift the curfew for a few hours every four or five days. Neighborhood committees therefore assisted residents in planting kitchen gardens in their backyards and raising animals as alternative sources of food. These measures proved successful in supporting the steadfastness (in Arabic, sumud) of the residents and to a large extent made Israel’s collective punishment measures against Palestinians obsolete.

PCR was founded amidst this creative nonviolent resistance, motivated by a desire to reach out to people all over the world to tell them about the Palestinian resistance and to counter the stereotypes that dominate the western media about Palestinians. A group of Palestinians from Beit Sahour had started to meet with a group of Israelis every other Thursday, alternating between Beit Sahour and Jerusalem. Participants in the dialogue group decided to establish two organizations to carry forward the dialogue, one called the Rapprochement Dialogue Center to be registered in Jerusalem, and the other to be called the Palestinian Centre for Rapprochement between People (PCR) to be founded in Beit Sahour.

The Israeli military government, however, refused to issue a registration for PCR, so an alternative was needed. Fortunately, MCC was there. MCC provided an institutional umbrella for PCR to function as one of its projects in the West Bank. MCC not only gave PCR an institutional home, but also supported its dialogue efforts and nonviolent initiatives for many years.

MCC continued to support PCR’s efforts until PCR managed to fully register as a Palestinian not-for-profit organization. PCR today continues to find ways to bridge the gap between Palestinians and peoples from all over the world. PCR seeks to prepare young people for leadership in Palestinian society, empowering them to serve their communities and become active citizens. An alternative media department operates IMEMC News which provides accurate information for people who are looking for fair media reporting.

Boys stand outside by the entrance to Mennonite Preparatory School for Boys, Beit Jala, in the West Bank, in December 1968. MCC opened the preparatory school in 1962, with the goal to provide quality Christian education to Palestinian children. The school received funding through the MCC child sponsorship program. MCC turned over the school to Palestinian Christian leadership in 1978. Since then, it has operated as the Hope Secondary School. (MCC photo)
Finally, PCR promotes alternative tourism through its Siraj Center for Holy Land Studies initiative. Siraj encourages people from all over the world to come to Palestine to live with Palestinians, learning from them directly rather than filtered through other lenses. All these efforts contribute to PCR’s primary goals of achieving a just and peaceful Palestine and promoting harmony and rapprochement within society and between societies. As long as there is occupation, there will be resistance. Our hope at PCR is to succeed in keeping this resistance nonviolent for the sake of future generations.

Mennonites have been among the few religious groups that have managed to win the respect of Palestinian society because they have worked with Palestinian civil society as partners and have not carried a donor mentality that has hidden agendas. Had it not been for MCC, the Palestinian Rapprochement Center might not have come into being. MCC has thus been critical to PCR’s mission of promoting a culture of nonviolence and creating understanding among Palestinians and peoples from all over the globe.

George N. Rishmaui is executive director of the Palestinian Center for Rapprochement between People.

**MCC accompanying the Colombian Anabaptist churches in their witness for peace**

The story of MCC Colombia’s peacebuilding work is in fact the story of Colombian Anabaptists’ peacebuilding work. Although MCC did not open an office and program in Colombia until 2002, its involvement in Colombia began with the founding of Mencoldes (Colombian Mennonite Foundation for Development) in 1976. Mencoldes was born out of the shared conviction of Colombian Mennonites and Mennonite Brethren that just as the gospel mattered for inner spiritual transformation, so must it also speak to the material and social well-being of communities. While MCC and MEDA

In 2017, MCC partner Edupaz organized Bread and Peace marches at the schools where Edupaz facilitates peer mediation programs. Edupaz works to ensure a culture of peace at the schools, and the annual Bread and Peace march is part of that effort. Bread and Peace is observed by most of the Anabaptist churches in Colombia on September 21, the International Day of Peace, to publicly testify in their communities that peace is not just lack of armed conflict, but also the hope that everyone will have enough food and comfort to live a dignified life (hence the bread). Edupaz is a ministry of the Mennonite Brethren Church in Colombia. (Photo courtesy of Edupaz)
(Mennonite Economic Development Associates) provided the initial funding to launch Mencoldes, it was directed and staffed by Colombian Anabaptists. As Mencoldes matured, it focused on community development, disaster response and economic development.

At the congregational and denominational levels, Colombian Anabaptists in the 1980s (which now included the Brethren in Christ, who joined in 1984) were talking about their faith in new, shared terms. They discussed “responding to their context,” “relating to political power” and “social ministries” and talked about forming themselves to be “witnesses of peace.”

As the churches expanded their ministries in these ways, MCC began to support Justapaz (the Mennonite Church’s peace and human rights institution) and other ministries in Anabaptist publishing and efforts to promote and secure the right of conscientious objection to military conscription. Meanwhile, the conflict in Colombia grew more complicated: new armed groups formed, peace talks dissolved and money from the drug trade complicated the situation. By the late 1990s, human rights violations and assassinations had reached an all-time high. At this point the United States became more directly involved in Colombia through Plan Colombia, a massive military and foreign aid package that was intended to support the Colombian state in counteracting left-wing groups and drug trafficking. Soon after the deal was signed in 2000, however, it became apparent that Plan Colombia was escalating militarization of the conflict and funding significant human rights abuses.

In analyzing the situation, Colombian Anabaptist churches decided they wanted more international accompaniment from global Anabaptist churches, particularly those in Canada and the United States. Collectively, they invited MCC to open an office in Colombia. Although MCC had already been walking with them in their peacebuilding work for years, there was a clearer and more explicit mandate following MCC’s opening of a Colombia program in 2002. The wisdom that can be gleaned from this partnership is deep, but for the purposes of this article, I will identify three key learnings MCC has gained from partnering in peacebuilding alongside Colombian Anabaptist

In 2010, Viviana Meza Guerra (right) and Yaqueline Morelno Morales hang a vibrantly colored quilt, the fruit of a quilting group and trauma healing project that MCC worker Teresa Geiser of Elkhart, Ind., began in the small Colombian community of Mampuján in 2007. (MCC photo)
churches these past 18 years. First, peacebuilding is holistic, in the vision of abundant life proclaimed in John 10:10. Secondly, peacebuilding requires accompaniment, lived out as a deep contextual and relational commitment to these communities. Finally, peacebuilding is a long-term project that extends well beyond project cycles and even individual lifetimes.

In 1998, Ricardo Esquivia, then the director of the Mennonite peace organization Justapaz (and now director of another MCC partner organization, Sembrandopaz), claimed that “peace is life in abundance.” This articulation gained widespread adherence within the Anabaptist churches over the next two decades. Rooted in Jesus’ words from John 10:10—“I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly”—it came to encapsulate a uniquely Colombian Anabaptist vision of peacemaking. “For many,” wrote Esquivia, “peace is the absence of war. They have not yet embraced the concept of peace as the fruit of justice, as reconciliation, understanding reconciliation as the reconstruction of lives, of trust, love, respect, and mutual care” (Esquivia 11). It has been on this foundation that Colombian Anabaptists have partnered with MCC in many of their ministries. While we do support Anabaptist partners actively working in conflict resolution and mediation, many more have chosen to work with victims, trauma healing, education in marginalized neighborhoods, agricultural development, community organizing, refugee assistance, documentation of human rights abuses and ministries with youth and children. Despite their different manifestations, partners would articulate these ministries as peacebuilding in the vision of Jesus—life in abundance.

When the armed conflict edged its way into the Pacific coastal region of Chocó, the Mennonite Brethren church—present in the region since the late 1940s—became concerned about the impact this could have on the economic life of their community. Not only did the armed conflict inflate prices, but it disrupted transportation routes and introduced illicit activities into the economic system. In response, the churches looked for ways to cultivate lives of abundance, eventually founding FAGROTES, an agricultural development organization that teaches farmers how to cultivate cacao and rice through intensive hands-on training and provides processing options for farmers wishing to sell their products at market. By envisioning peacebuilding as that which leads to life abundant, FAGROTES has stabilized communities by providing farmers with the expertise and access they need to be able to sustain their families and avoid the worst of the economic fallout of the armed conflict.

If “life in abundance” is the framework for Colombian Anabaptist peacebuilding, then “accompaniment” is the practice that defines their peacebuilding. Accompaniment is a relational practice, marked by commitment to others as dignified children of God and attention to their spiritual, emotional and physical needs. In some cases, our partners have committed to accompany the same communities for decades, particularly when communities have been victims of the armed conflict. These peacebuilding models seek to rebuild the torn social fabric through trauma healing, community organizing, economic sustainability and leadership development. Other peacebuilding models attend to a transient population, so their accompaniment is necessarily more temporary, but no less relational. One example of the latter model is the response of the Mennonite Brethren in Valle del Cauca to the recent influx of Venezuelans in the cities of Palmira and Cali. With MCC’s support, these churches began to provide


For many, peace is the absence of war. They have not yet embraced the concept of peace as the fruit of justice, as reconciliation, understanding reconciliation as the reconstruction of lives, of trust, love, respect, and mutual care.”

—Ricardo Esquivia
humanitarian aid to Venezuelans who were showing up at their churches. Instead of simply handing out food and health kits, however, the Mennonite Brethren visited participants in their homes and prayed over them; they collected medicines to send back to family members still in Venezuela; they rotated snack responsibilities for the biweekly meetings among group members, so they could share different foods with each other; they helped make doctor appointments when people were sick. According to Francisco Mosquero, coordinator of the Mennonite Brethren aid response in Cali and former director of the peace office, Edupaz, some Venezuelan participants commented to the pastors, “You are different than the other aid organizations, because you see us as whole people.”

For Colombian Anabaptists, this kind of peacebuilding is the work of a lifetime. In the words of Ricardo Esquivia, “We must fill ourselves with patience” (Esquivia 11). When Jenny Neme was closing her tenure as director of the Mennonite peacebuilding organization Justapaz, we invited her to share some reflections with our team. She chose to highlight the slow pace of peacebuilding, reflecting on Justapaz’s foundational work in conscientious objection in the 1990s. Some of the earliest gains were a provision for religious freedom written into the 1991 Constitution, but that was yet a long way from freedom to object to military service (Klassen 254). It would be nearly thirty more years and much diligent, faithful work by Justapaz and others until there was a full legal route to conscientious objection in Colombia. Even today, Justapaz has a department dedicated to conscientious objection, because they still dream of an alternative service option for young people. Although we as MCC work in three-year project cycles, we share our partners’ understanding of peacebuilding as a long-term, lifelong work to which we are all called. And indeed, in MCC Colombia’s 18 years, we have been privileged to see how a long-term commitment to the accompaniment model of peacebuilding brings forth life in abundance in all sorts of unexpected ways.

Elizabeth Miller is MCC representative for Colombia.

Peace clubs in Zambia and beyond

Zambia has always taken great pride in being a peaceful country, not having faced either external or civil war. In recent decades, the relative peace of Zambia has drawn thousands of refugees from many African countries. Given this relative peace, I have often been asked: “Why is there a need for peace clubs in a country like Zambia?”

While to some the need for peacebuilding in a context like Zambia has not always been evident, others have recognized that the absence of war does not mean that there is no violence in the country. For example, gender-based violence in Zambia is widespread and pervasive. According to a study done by USAID in 2010, almost half (47%) of Zambian women over the age of 15 have experienced physical violence. One in five women has experienced sexual violence in her lifetime (Wyble, 2004). Gender-based violence in Zambia includes everything from spousal abuse to sexual violence to psychological abuse to child neglect and more. Recognizing that violence can take many forms, MCC chose to support the pioneering of the peace club model in three schools in Zambia’s capital, Lusaka, in 2006.

"You are different than the other aid organizations, because you see us as whole people.”
—Francisco Mosquero


Peace Clubs Curriculum material can be found here: https://pcc.mcc.org/.
Peace clubs operate as an extracurricular activity. Like any other school club, students are free to join the after-school peace club, with the support of a teacher, to learn about how the principles of peace can help to address the problems they see in their lives and societies. Since the first pilot project in 2006, MCC has supported the development of the peace clubs model in a variety of ways. MCC staff assisted in drafting a peace clubs curriculum that introduces participants to different aspects of conflict analysis and resolution, examining understandings of conflict and violence, exploring gender-based violence, trauma, and the rights of persons with disabilities and charting the journey to reconciliation. The goal of peace clubs is not to teach young people the exact names of the different problem-solving techniques, or to have them able to recite the curriculum word-for-word. Instead, peace clubs are about helping a young generation develop new ways of thinking about peace, conflict and violence and equipping them with skills to peacefully address and prevent conflict in their schools, homes and communities.

Through participation in peace clubs, many young people have become peacebuilders in their schools and communities. They have learned how to be critical and creative thinkers. Peace clubs have equipped them to face unexpected situations. Furthermore, peace clubs have contributed to a change in attitude and behavior on the part of parents, teachers and students, allowing them to use peaceful means to resolve conflicts. Young members of peace clubs have influenced adult community members to change their culture of violence into one of peace. Peace clubs have contributed to a reduction in corporal punishment and increased the use of non-violent disciplinary methods in schools, homes and communities.

From its humble start in three schools in Lusaka, peace clubs in Zambia have expanded to 32 Lusaka schools as well as to 12 Brethren in Christ schools in Zambia’s southern province. The idea of what a peace club can be has even expanded beyond school settings, with peace clubs established in churches, prisons and refugee camps. The introduction of peace clubs into Zambian prisons has proved successful, leading the Zambia Correctional Service to seek to establish a Restorative Justice and Peace Building Unit and expand peace clubs to all 65 prisons in the country. Meanwhile, the peace clubs model has expanded beyond Zambia. Mennonite Brethren and Brethren in Christ churches in Malawi look to introduce peace clubs in their contexts to address and prevent gender-based violence. Churches, schools and prisons in fourteen African countries have adapted the peace clubs model, while groups in Latin America and Canada also look to introduce the peace clubs model in contextually appropriate ways.

Over the course of only 13 years, the peace clubs model has grown from three afterschool activities to a fully developed curriculum implemented in churches, schools, prisons and refugee camps on three continents. Looking ahead, peace clubs certainly face challenges, including how to diversify funding support for long-term sustainability and how to better measure the impact of peace clubs. One can envision this model being expanded all over the world and adapted to many other contexts and refined to successfully introduce alternatives to violence for a more just and peaceful tomorrow.

Issa Ebombolo is MCC Zambia peace coordinator.
MCC peace work in the United States: building an archive

MCC’s peace work has always been multidirectional, including both an inward direction that aims to nurture the peace witness of Anabaptist churches in the United States and Canada and an outward direction that undertakes peace and justice work in the world around us, reaching beyond the boundaries of the church. Tracing the histories of this multidirectional peace witness is not a simple task. Where does one begin? Whose individual and communal stories are part of that broader story? Whose voices are we (de)centering in telling the story of Anabaptist peace witness in the United States?

Perhaps one begins with the formation of the MCC Peace Section in 1942 during World War II. For decades, the Peace Section served as an agency for counseling about conscription and the draft and as a center for study, research, writing and education regarding the Mennonite peace position. The Peace Section “was often on the cutting edge, dealing with controversial issues—draft resistance, nonregistration, war tax resistance, and women’s concerns to name a few.” It served as a “prophetic vehicle” that “could monitor, facilitate, and encourage more activist forms of peacemaking which otherwise would have been stifled by more conservative denominational forces” (Driedger and Kraybill, 142).

Over the ensuing decades, the MCC Peace Section served as the umbrella for a wide variety of MCC initiatives and departments that sought to address questions of justice and peacebuilding. For example, MCC’s Washington

In this 1959 photo, J. Harold Sherk (left) and John Martin of The National Interreligious Service Board for Conscientious Objectors (NISBCO) descend the steps at the Selective Service System headquarters in Washington DC. Sherk, of Kitchener, Ontario, was a Mennonite Brethren in Christ pastor and educator. During and after World War II, he also served in inter-Mennonite peace work, and served with MCC in India doing relief work. October 1949 brought him and his wife Mila to Akron, Pennsylvania, where he served until 1958 as Executive Secretary of MCC Peace Section. In 1958, responsibility as director of the National Service Bureau for Religious Objectors (NSBRO) took the couple to Hyattsville, Maryland, until retirement in 1969. (MCC photo)
Office was established in 1968 under the aegis of the Peace Section. This new office in the U.S. capital provided an important means of public engagement, political advocacy and communication between Anabaptist leaders and government representatives.

From the 1960s into the 1980s, the Peace Section initiated several distinct ministries, such as Mennonite Conciliation Services, Women’s Concerns (later Women’s Advocacy), Peace Education/Draft Counseling and Global Education. With the establishment of MCC Canada in 1963 and the creation of a binational MCC, MCC U.S. and MCC Canada divided responsibilities for addressing different types of country-specific peace and justice issues. In 1990, the MCC U.S. Peace Section was renamed Peace and Justice Ministries and began overseeing the Office on Crime and Justice. In 1993, MCC U.S. Peace and Justice Ministries added a Racism Awareness Program (later the Anti-Racism Program), while its Mennonite Conciliation Services program focused one of its staff positions on urban peacemaking. In 1999, the Immigration Education program was added, and in 2005 Mennonite Conciliation Services and the Office on Crime and Justice merged to form the Office on Justice and Peacebuilding. In 2012, MCC U.S. Peace and Justice Ministries was rebranded MCC U.S. National Program, with focus areas in Immigration Education, Anti-Oppression, Peace Education and Restorative Justice. Today, MCC U.S. National Program addresses Immigration Education, Peace Education, Criminal Justice Education and Anti-Racism and Anti-Sexism Education.

In addition to these programs and activities of the MCC Peace Section and its successors, a significant impact has been the social networks that have emerged around the work. MCC's peace work not only “symbolized the activist edge of Mennonite peacemaking but also provided a network for hundreds of Mennonites who found support and solidarity” (Driedger and Kraybill, 144). In the remainder of this article, I will look at two examples of MCC’s peace witness that represent important shifts not only in the justice and peacebuilding work of MCC, but also in some fundamental assumptions about what that work is to begin with, a peace witness that embraces public engagement and political advocacy aimed at challenging systemic racism and imperialism.

Attention to systemic oppression and injustice, such as racism, has been a significant part of MCC’s peace work in the U.S. MCC U.S.’s Damascus Road Anti-Racism Process from the nineties and the aughts (that works independently today under the name Roots of Justice) stands as a more recent example of such peace work. But MCC anti-racism efforts can be traced back earlier, as white Mennonite participants in Civilian Public Service camps in the 1940s in places like Gulfport, Mississippi, were confronted by the stark realities of racism in the Jim Crow South. MCC’s nascent recognition that peace witness required addressing racism took on a new dimension when in 1960 Vincent and Rosemarie Harding started a Mennonite Voluntary Service unit in Atlanta a couple of blocks away from the home of Martin and Coretta Scott King under the umbrella of the MCC Peace Section.

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calls of leaders like the Hardings, Mennonites in the United States increasingly paid more attention to racial oppression in their own communities, with the Mennonite press even beginning to include appeals for legislative action to address the blight of racism.

Vincent Harding’s work and early partnership with Delton Franz—a white Mennonite pastor and the first director of the MCC Washington Office—arguably shaped the path that led to the first office MCC opened for the purpose of political advocacy. Harding called Mennonites “to transform the principles of nonconformity and nonresistance into active service to the world, especially in the cause of racial justice” (Shearer, 247). Even as the Hardings became understandably frustrated by the slow response of MCC and of white Mennonites to confront the evil of racism more vigorously, their witness helped to catalyze a significant shift in MCC’s peace witness and provided a challenge that reverberates today.

Other voices have also helped to catalyze the transformation of MCC and broader Mennonite peace witness—including the voice of an unnamed Palestinian woman. This Palestinian woman confronted Hedy Sawadsky, a white Canadian relief worker with MCC in the Middle East in the late 1960s, with the biting observation that “what you’re doing here is fine, but it is only Band-Aid work. Why don’t you go home and work for peace and get at the root causes of evil and war?” (Driedger and Kraybill, 137). We do not know the name of this Palestinian woman in Sawadsky’s story, but her impact was meaningful and significant. When Sawadsky moved to the U.S. in 1970, she became involved in war tax resistance and other forms of nonviolent direct action, joining Mennonite activists in protests at the Pentagon and the nuclear weapons plant at Rocky Flats, Colorado.

In the voices of the Hardings and this unnamed Palestinian woman, we hear calls for MCC to embrace a “thicker” concept of peace that includes public engagement and political advocacy—working for change “upstream” (where problems originate) and not just responding “downstream” (where systems of oppression damage vulnerable communities). Voices like the Hardings and this unnamed Palestinian woman have also pressed MCC to recognize how U.S. imperialism abroad and racism at home are interconnected (see Satvedi 2011 for reflections on the interconnection of legacies of colonialism). These voices have pressed white peace workers from the U.S. over the years to confess and repent our own histories of violence and injustice on this continent and to recognize that our work at anti-imperialism abroad must be complemented by our anti-racism and anti-oppression work at home.

In building an archive of MCC peacebuilding work, we must ask critical questions like: Who is being (de)centered in the peacebuilding stories we tell? Whose labor made any of these peacebuilding efforts possible? If, with bell hooks, we understand our global historical context as shaped by imperialist, white supremacist, capitalist patriarchy (hooks 2004), we will recognize that Mennonite peace work must be multidirectional and attentive to intersections, and we will strive to create an archive of voices from the MCC and broader Mennonite past that centers the witness of the Hardings and the unnamed Palestinian woman who confronted Hedy Sawadsky.

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MCC Canada peace programming: a ministry for or to the churches?

Peace programming has been an essential element of MCC’s ministry in Canada since the organization was formed in 1963. But an ongoing tension present from the very beginning was whether this ministry was intended as an outward witness or an inward strengthening—whether it was a ministry for and on behalf of the Anabaptist churches in Canada or a ministry to those same churches.

When MCC Canada (MCCC) was formed in the closing days of 1963, one of its mandates was to further the peace mission of the Mennonite, Mennonite Brethren and Brethren in Christ churches who founded the organization. MCC was to act as a united voice for Canadian Anabaptists in matters of national concern, such as “peace witness, alternative service, immigration and other matters” (Epp-Tiessen, 78). The 1965 MCCC constitution confirmed “peace witness” as a core area of its responsibility.

This emphasis on peace witness indicates that MCCC’s founders envisioned a vibrant outreach program, inviting people beyond the Mennonite community to embrace a vision for nonviolent peacemaking, even while they saw a need for peace education in the MCC member churches. One of the first peace witness projects the new organization undertook was to host a peace booth at Toronto’s annual Canadian National Exhibition. The volunteers who staffed the booth shared literature and engaged passersby in conversations about peacemaking alternatives to war.

Within a short time, it became clear that some of MCCC’s constituent churches were not supportive of the organization’s peace witness efforts. A key issue which surfaced this tension was MCCC’s support for young men from the United States fleeing to Canada—either to evade the draft or to desert the military—because they refused to be part of the U.S. war effort in Vietnam. MCCC allocated a small amount of money to meet the immediate needs of some of these thousands of draft “dodgers” and resisters and encouraged Canadian Mennonite churches to offer to support to these young men. Constituency reaction was swift and strong. Letters to MCC, additional letters sent to the editors of Anabaptist periodicals and conference resolutions condemned MCCC’s stance. People opposed support for the war resisters because they suspected the young men of being drug-using hippies and not “true” conscientious objectors since many lacked a well-articulated faith-based conviction. MCCC made the case that Mennonites’ own historic stance of conscientious objection and resistance to war should lead them to support the resisters, but many constituents did not see it that way. Dan Zehr, director of the MCCC Peace and Social Concerns Program, asked why constituents were generous and open in helping people overseas, but were only prepared to help the “right kind of people” at home (Epp-Tiessen, 115).

Therefore, almost from the beginning, MCCC staff and volunteers realized they could not assume an Anabaptist constituency that would wholeheartedly embrace peace witness work. In order to do the “external” work of peace witness, they would need to do the “internal” work of strengthening constituents’ commitment to peace. Over the years, MCCC invested significant resources in doing just that. MCC’s peace program staff devoted significant time speaking in churches, organizing special events and producing Christian education curricula and other resources with the goal of fortifying
member churches in their commitment to biblical peace theology. One of the longest standing projects was a Peace Sunday Packet, developed initially by MCC Ontario in 1987 that then quickly became a national project. The packet was a special worship, reflection and action resource produced for church use in conjunction with Remembrance Day in November.

The notion of an MCCC ministry to Anabaptist churches was not unique to MCCC’s peace program. Programs that worked with Indigenous people, persons with disabilities, victims of domestic violence and other marginalized individuals—many of these programs birthed by the MCCC peace program—also found it important to minister to the churches. MCCC staff preached and made presentations in churches, created resources for churches and engaged churches in efforts to help Anabaptists in Canada understand and embrace work that was often quite removed from their own lived reality (Epp-Tiessen, 135-36).

Despite these efforts at ministering to the churches, MCCC peace witness initiatives continued to rouse the concerns of individuals, congregations and conferences that purportedly held to a peace church tradition. In the early 1980s, for example, the Mennonite Brethren Conference raised concerns about MCCC’s work in Indigenous communities and its advocacy on military spending and nuclear disarmament. A task force was established to explore these concerns and respond to them. About the same time, a well-positioned observer noted an “anti-MCC feeling” among conservative Mennonites in southern Manitoba because of its work in “the peace section and native concerns.”

Laura Dyck, from Sterling Mennonite Church in Kitchener, Ontario, wears the MCC peace button at a 2015 walk for reconciliation between settler and Indigenous Canadians based on justice and honoring of treaties. (MCC photo/Alison Ralph)
Through the 1980s and 1990s, much constituency critique was aimed at the peace witness work of the MCCC Ottawa Office. As the office addressed government on issues of defence policy, the arms trade and Canadian military intervention in Iraq and Afghanistan, MCCC heard charges from some constituents that it should not engage in such “political” activity. According to J.M. Klassen, long-time executive director of MCCC, the charge of being “political” frequently surfaced when critics disagreed with MCC’s point of view (J.M. Klassen, Jacob’s Journey).

By no means all parts of MCCC’s Canadian Anabaptist constituency opposed public peace witness. In 2001, for example, in response to the September 11 attacks in the United States, MCCC organized a special cross-country hymn sing for peace as a way of calling Canada to resist joining the U.S. in military engagement against Afghanistan. In Ottawa, Winnipeg, Saskatoon, Edmonton and Abbotsford, MCC constituents gathered to pray and to sing publicly for an international order of peace. In 2003, over a thousand people in many countries joined a weekly “women’s fast for peace” as a way of registering their opposition to war on Iraq. Additionally, over 2,000 constituents across Canada signed a joint letter from MCCC and denominational leaders to the prime minister with the same intent.

Nevertheless, by the first part of this century it was becoming more and more difficult to engage Canadian Anabaptists on the issues that formed MCCC’s traditional peace mandate: war and armed conflict, conscientious objection to military service, military spending and the arms trade, a peace tax fund and so on. Constituents more happily embraced such growing emphases in MCC on peace as mediation, dialogue, conflict resolution, cross-cultural relationship-building and non-partisan humanitarian assistance. They were less eager to embrace peace witness initiatives that somehow put them at odds with the broader society or government.

In 1989 MCC Ontario produced a simple red button with the message “To remember is to work for peace.” It encouraged people to wear the button around Remembrance Day as an alternative to the poppy worn to commemorate war veterans and as a gentle call to seek non-violent alternatives to war. The button was well received, and over the years thousands were sold and distributed across the country. But as the years passed, the message of the button lost its power. Indeed, a growing group of constituents identified it as “preachy,” “naive” and “offensive to veterans.” A lengthy conversation on Facebook in 2015 surfaced many of these opinions, prompting an in-depth survey within MCC Canada and the provincial MCCs as to whether it was time to lay the button and its slogan to rest.

Around the same time, MCC Canada also quietly ended staffing for a national peace program. The rationale was that the organization hoped to channel further staff time into the work of the Ottawa Office. This was supposedly a temporary measure, but the move became permanent with no discussion. Many of the provincial offices of MCC discontinued their peace programs soon after. To be sure, MCC continued to support peacebuilding initiatives, primarily in its international program, but it had more or less abandoned the task of ministering to the churches, of resourcing Anabaptist congregations in their basic commitments to Anabaptist-Mennonite peace theology.

Why this major shift? Many possible reasons surface. For one thing, MCCC peace staff had not been very successful in reaching out to some of the more evangelical or conservative congregations and denominational conferences.
With some exceptions, MCCC peace staff mostly found themselves preaching to the choir and were ineffective in stemming the gradual erosion of peace theology and practice among Canadian Anabaptists. Some may have asked: why continue an outreach that did not produce the intended results?

Secondly, it had been decades since military conscription had tested the convictions of Mennonites, Mennonite Brethren and Brethren in Christ in Canada about non-participation in war. Consequently, it was increasingly difficult to engage church audiences in exploring the beliefs and practices that might one day be required to authenticate a stance of conscientious objection. Instead—or as a result—MCCC peace staff increasingly found themselves focusing on pressing justice issues where there was interest, issues such as care for creation, economic justice and justice in contexts such as South Africa, Colombia and Palestine and Israel.

Finally, MCCC’s relationship with constituent churches was changing. As time passed, MCCC could no longer count on the automatic support of Anabaptist denominations and congregations in Canada. By 2020, some Anabaptist conferences had withdrawn their official membership in MCCC. Within this rapidly changing and challenging environment, MCCC positioned itself increasingly as a ministry of and for the church rather than as a ministry to the church. MCCC thus continued to work for peace by supporting churches and community-based organizations around the world in their efforts for peace, but its peace ministry no longer included sustained work to foster and shore up Anabaptist peace convictions about war, armed conflict and conscientious objection among churches in Canada.

_Esther Epp-Tiessen is an historian and author and served as peace program coordinator for MCC Canada from 2000 to 2010._

**A steady witness for peace: MCC in Washington, D.C.**

As the year 2002 wore on, U.S. military action against Iraq seemed imminent. J. Daryl Byler, then-director of MCC’s Washington Office, worked with staff of Mennonite Church USA to mobilize church members against the impending war. They set a goal of gathering 5,000 signatures on a letter to President George W. Bush. In two weeks, more than 13,000 Mennonites representing nearly 250 congregations throughout the country, had signed the letter. [Eventually over 17,000 people signed.] Printed out, the signatures were 300 pages long—a six-inch stack of paper that Jim Schrag, Mennonite Church USA’s executive director, held up at a press conference in September 2002 to demonstrate the church’s opposition to the war. Ultimately, these advocacy efforts opposing U.S. military action were unsuccessful and the U.S. military invaded Iraq in March 2003. But it was a key moment in a steady witness for peace over the past five decades by the MCC U.S. Washington Office (originally named the Peace Section-Washington Office).

Even before the office opened in 1968, U.S. Mennonites had been communicating with government officials about conscientious objection concerns, including a meeting with President Franklin D. Roosevelt in 1937. Between 1940 and 1967, Mennonite leaders testified 13 times before congressional committees about conscientious objection. Concerns about the rights of conscientious objectors continue today, with the Washington Office...
helping to convene a gathering of Anabaptist church representatives in June 2019 to respond to recommendations from the National Commission on Military, National and Public Service.

MCC’s work around the globe has also helped Mennonites understand that their advocacy to the government needs to extend beyond the protection of their own rights as conscientious objectors to calling for an end to war and militarism. During the U.S. war in Vietnam, MCC staff heard a clear plea to advocate for an end to U.S. military involvement in the war. MCC leadership conveyed this message in a 1966 letter to President Lyndon Johnson. “The time has come,” they wrote, “when we can no longer maintain faith with the homeless, the hungry, the orphaned and the wounded to whom we minister unless we speak out as clearly as we can against the savage war in which our country is engaged.” MCC opened its Washington, D.C., office for public policy advocacy in 1968. In its early years, MCC vigorously advocated for an end to the Vietnam War. Following the U.S. withdrawal from Vietnam, this
advocacy shifted to urging the U.S. to normalize economic and diplomatic relations with Vietnam and Laos.

The Washington Office has also spoken out against U.S. militarism more broadly throughout its history, including the increasingly steep levels of funding for the Pentagon. In 1975, the office’s director, Delton Franz, lamented the Secretary of Defense’s use of Scripture to introduce a military budget that topped $100 billion for the first time. “If the Defense Secretary’s understanding of Scripture is found wanting,” Franz wrote, “perhaps equally serious is the ignorance of all too many of us in the Christian community on the realities of the militarization of our economic and political system. Do we understand the immensity of the military juggernaut that we are being asked to buy into?”

Drawing on the experience of MCC’s partner organizations in situations of conflict around the world, the Washington Office has consistently opposed U.S. arms sales and foreign military assistance. So, for example, in the 1980s, the office arranged meetings between MCC workers in El Salvador and congressional delegations who visited the country, helping members of Congress understand the impact of U.S. involvement in the civil war.

In 2000, Colombian Mennonites issued a plea to U.S. church members, urging them to oppose “Plan Colombia,” the U.S. anti-drug initiative that sent billions of dollars to the Colombian military. “Just as lighter fluid among flames produces more fire,” they wrote, “more arms produce more war.” The Washington Office worked persistently—and successfully, in some cases—to change the voting record of members of Congress on the issue. The voices of MCC’s constituents were critical in bringing about this change.

An August 2013 action alert from the Washington Office generated more than 5,000 emails to policymakers, urging them to oppose U.S. airstrikes against Syria. Washington Office staff heard from congressional aides that congressional office phones were ringing off their hooks, with the vast majority of callers opposing military action. In the end, this grassroots pressure helped move the U.S. to support a diplomatic resolution to the immediate crisis. More recent work by the office to address U.S. militarism includes calling for a formal end to the Korean War and opposing arms sales to the Nigerian government in its fight against Boko Haram. The office also opposes efforts to militarize the U.S.-Mexico border, calling instead for more humane responses to migrants arriving at that border.

The MCC U.S. Washington Office is certainly not the only organization in Washington, D.C., that advocates for peace and against militarism. But since its founding over fifty years ago, a vision of peace rooted in God's justice and care for the marginalized has guided the Washington Office’s work. This work has mobilized Anabaptists to engage in public policy advocacy as part of their Christian witness, and has been undergirded by testimonies and calls from churches and peace leaders around the world about the destructive impact of war and militarism and the need for transformative, peaceful approaches to conflict. Over the past five decades, public policy advocacy through MCC’s Washington Office has been an essential element of what it means to work for peace in the name of Christ. May this witness continue as MCC begins its second century.

Rachelle Lyndaker Schlabach is director of MCC’s Washington Office.
MCC advocacy for Indigenous rights in Canada: reflections from history and the present

MCC Canada has a long history of speaking to the Canadian government about militarization and participation in armed activities. Over the years, this advocacy has evolved as relationships with Indigenous nations in Canada have opened the door to new understandings of peace and nonviolence. Yet these new understandings have come with challenges that continue today. MCC advocacy in support of various Indigenous communities of Labrador in protesting against NATO military activities at the end of the Cold War and later against a hydro-electric dam initiative illustrates both challenges and opportunities for MCC’s advocacy in Canada more broadly.

Since the early 1950s, MCC Canada sought meetings with prime ministers to advocate for the rights of conscientious objection and alternative service. Over time, those petitions began to shift focus, moving from requests for the respect of Mennonite religious beliefs to including asks for government actions to reduce international conflict. Speaking to government about matters of conflict and war gradually became a part of MCC’s relief, development and peacebuilding work. This change, along with a recognition that a listening post in Ottawa would further the work of MCC, led to MCC opening its Ottawa Office in 1975.
Over the ensuing years, MCC advocacy became increasingly linked to MCC’s model of accompaniment and community service. As Esther Epp-Tiessen writes in her history of MCC in Canada, MCC service workers living in communities around the world and witnessing firsthand the harm of military action began to increasingly share about the impacts of Canadian policies and military action. These concerns began to form the basis of MCC’s advocacy communications and shape the way MCC understood its dual responsibilities—to its Anabaptist constituent in Canada and to the communities and partners MCC accompanied.

During the final years of the Cold War, MCC Canada undertook advocacy related to the impact of global militarization in Happy Valley-Goose Bay, Labrador. MCC had had an ongoing, long-term presence in Labrador, with work in the province stemming back to the 1970s (and with partnership with Innu communities beginning in 1983). In the 1980s, NATO began testing low-level military flights over Innu traditional territory in Labrador, taking off from and landing at the Canadian military base in Goose Bay. More than 8,000 flights took place each year, harming wildlife and disrupting the Innu community’s traditional way of life. As the Cold War progressed, NATO proposed building a larger, more permanent training base in the area. Despite some hesitation from its governing board, MCC Canada began to highlight the concerns of these Innu communities through advocacy, as part of a larger advocacy campaign against Canada’s participation in NATO in general.

For several years, the Ottawa Office had consistently voiced concerns around NATO and Canada’s participation in the Cold War arms race in their correspondence to government. Now, the office began to include Innu voices and experiences in their communications to government officials, connecting advocacy against Canadian militarization with Innu concerns about how NATO flight were upending their traditional way of life. Advocacy against NATO began to include requests to also resolve land claims and to look for shared points of connections between Mennonites and Innu communities, including shared understandings of relationships to the state.

In a 1989 letter to MCC Canada program leaders, Menno Wiebe, director of MCC’s Native Concerns program, asked: “If the Innu are not requesting military defence, and if Mennonites from a Christian peace position are saying the same things, how would it be if we would find a way of making a joint statement between the Innu and Mennonites to that effect?” Wiebe highlighted a meeting between Peter Penashue, an Innu community leader, and five liberal members of parliament, in which the Innu stated that they were not asking Canada to defend them. For Wiebe, the Innu assertion of their sovereign right to refuse being defended by NATO and the Canadian military opened potential fruitful connections to Mennonite concerns about militarization.

MCC’s Ottawa Office raised further concerns about the NATO flights over Innu territory through its partnership with Project Ploughshares. These advocacy initiatives encouraged Canadians to send letters and request meetings with government officials to voice concerns about the NATO flights, arguing that “in the name of ‘security,’ such fighter-bomber flight training is imposing insecurity on the Innu peoples.” Other letters seeking to mobilize advocacy efforts referred to the lack of a just relationship between the Government of Canada and the Innu, calling on the Canadian government to re-examine its commitment to the proposed NATO base.

If the Innu are not requesting military defence, and if Mennonites from a Christian peace position are saying the same things, how would it be if we would find a way of making a joint statement between the Innu and Mennonites to that effect?

— Menno Wiebe
During this time, the Innu invited Rick and Louise Cober Bauman and their children to live in the more rural community of Sheshatshit, in part based on their increased trust of MCC through MCC’s willingness to advocate. Rick recalls sending faxes encouraging advocacy and providing updates from the local Innu resource centre, connecting Mennonites and many other interested supporters not only in Canada but also in the United States, the Netherlands and Germany. The family living room was the site of planning sessions to block fighter jets from taking off by occupying the runway at the military base. MCC was intimately involved in witnessing the devastations of colonization, the struggle for self-determination and the impacts of Cold War politics on those far removed from the causes of conflict.

With the fall of the Berlin Wall and the ending of the Cold War, flights from and construction on the NATO base stopped. Without the push around direct militarization, Ottawa Office advocacy on the Innu issues declined. The Indigenous communities in Labrador, however, continued to face challenges to their right to live on their land. Structural violence, rather than overt military presence, continued. A hydro-electric dam built at Muskrat Falls and completed in 2019 has posed concerns around land and water contamination.

MCC workers sought to discern how to respond to such ongoing colonization, especially as shifts in approaches among Indigenous communities varied. Overall, the Innu did not oppose the dam, as the project approval was a part of their land claims agreement. The Southern Inuit and Northern Inuit communities downstream from the dam, however, engaged in advocacy over their concerns of methylmercury poisoning, with the support from only a very few members of the Innu community.

MCC workers, up until 2019, engaged actively in responding to these shifting concerns and nuances within the region. They built relationships with land defenders in the Inuit communities opposing the hydro project and actively facilitated community organizing processes. Instead of working with Chief and Council, as they had with the Innu, MCC workers connected with strategic individuals. They worked to bring members of the different communities together, along with working behind the scenes to support public statements and actions. MCC workers intentionally tried to keep a lower profile and focused on raising the voices of individual land defenders, rather than the voice of MCC.

The advocacy component of MCC’s local presence was strong, but public Anabaptist support of advocacy against the hydro project was not the same as with advocacy against the NATO flights, despite heavy RCMP presence at the site to arrest and remove protesters. Other grassroots organizations across Canada and the U.S. advocated against the hydro project, but there was very little Anabaptist outcry. The Ottawa Office was unable to offer much support, due to changing MCC priorities in Canada. Without the direct connections to militarization, there was no longer the same tangible draw for Mennonites or peace activists.

Rick Cober Bauman reflects that “mines and dams didn’t have the same impact as women running in front of jets. We may believe we can live without defense, but can we live without nickel or hydro? Things got more complex.” This complexity was seen not only in lack of Canadian Anabaptist support for advocacy against the hydro project, but also in the important nuances MCC workers navigated each day, as they responded to the different


concerns and relationships they had built, relationships that included the
different perspectives of multiple Indigenous groups, nuances that were easy
to overlook when only focusing on a response to overt militarization or
communicating a more simple story about MCC's presence.

This history is relevant today as the Ottawa Office has been mandated to
look for opportunities to engage in MCC advocacy around Indigenous
justice, as MCC seeks to come to terms with its historical identity as an
organization founded and supported by Canadian Mennonite settlers on
Indigenous land. How do we understand and respond to state violence,
such as colonization manifested as control over territory, when it isn’t
obviously militarized? Can we use the language of state violence and our
complicity to engage with constituents, in a way that engages on a national
level, including in regions where extractive and mega-projects are major
employers of MCC supporters? Additionally, MCC no longer has workers
living with and directly supporting Indigenous communities in Canada,
making it more difficult for us to “hear” Indigenous voices, including
their diversity and nuances, in the ways that have traditionally shaped
our advocacy work. How do we understand and portray nuance, without
holding those active relationships? Addressing structural and colonial
violence in Canada, reflecting on our own participation in that violence and
then engaging in advocacy for Indigenous rights in Canada should be vital
elements of MCC’s evolving peace advocacy, even as MCC faces multiple
challenges in doing so.

Anna Vogt is director of MCC’s Ottawa Office.

Elizabeth (Tshaukuish) Penashue, photographed in 2011, an Innu elder
from Sheshatshit, north of Happy
Valley Goose Bay, N.L., is deeply
concerned about the future of her
community and culture which she
believes is closely linked to the well-
being of the environment. Penashue
organizes an annual canoe trip to
increase awareness of the importance
of protecting land and water from
pollution and to pass on knowledge
of Innu culture, traditional survival
skills and food. MCC has a long-
standing relationship with Penashue
and has provided assistance for
this and other initiatives that are in
line with MCC’s values of caring for
creation and improving relationships
between broader Canadian society
and Indigenous peoples.

(MCC Photo/Nina Linton)
In 1975, the seed for Mennonite Conciliation Service (MCS) was planted. MCC had a well-respected reputation for responding to basic human needs, such as the provision of food and shelter. Yet those carrying out these responses realized more could be done—something was missing. There were needs not being met, and this missing piece impacted the success of the material responses. This need for a Mennonite Conciliation Service (MCS) parallel to Mennonite Disaster Service (MDS) was a need for an organization that would address conflicts and crises before they become violent. Such an MCS would also advocate for justice. This ministry would be collaborative with other Anabaptist organizations and with other Christians active in the work of conciliation, mediation and conflict transformation. In this article, I offer my reflections as a former MCS staff person on the challenges MCS faced, the successes it experienced and learnings from the MCS story.

I joined MCS in July 1999. Having never lived east of the Mississippi, I experienced culture shock upon moving to Lancaster, Pennsylvania, to work for MCC. I had lived in Dallas, Texas, for close to 20 years, working as an insurance claims examiner. In many ways, being an insurance claims examiner stimulated my interest in resolving conflict. During my off-work time, I trained with and volunteered for many years at the Dallas Mediation...
Center. When I received the call to join MCS, I was on a personal journey to determine how I could make my avocation my vocation. I therefore accepted the offer, moved to Lancaster and took on the position of associate on urban peacemaking. I eventually became MCS’s director and then later co-directed the Office on Justice and Peacebuilding with Lorraine Stutzman Amstutz when MCS merged with the MCC U.S.’s Office on Crime and Justice. I continued in that position until 2011, when I left MCC to pastor (and then later rejoin MCC as executive director for MCC Central States, the position I hold today).

MCS certainly faced challenges throughout its history. The earliest documents outlining the origins of MCS make for fascinating reading. From the beginning, MCS’s creators were mindful of two challenges that would be ongoing concerns for MCS: first, the theological, historical and cultural approaches to conflict among traditional Anabaptist groups and, secondly, racism. In a 1976 study on the possibility and parameters of MCS, William Keeney placed MCS within a history of MCC peace witness: “Mennonites have often expressed their opposition to violence and war by the refusal to participate. We have offered alternative service as a demonstration of our positive contributions to society. Mennonite Conciliation Services would seem to be another positive contribution we could make by minimizing the consequences of evil conflict and violence.” In the beginning of his study, Keeney acknowledged that the realities of violence to and in African-American, Latinx and Indigenous communities related to “discrimination” and being “excluded from the benefits of American Society.” Keeney did not use the same language for people of color I use here (that is my translation to the contemporary vernacular), but Keeney clearly understood that ongoing racism was a primary source of violence. If MCS was to take seriously the mandate to address and respond to conflict and harm before it turns to violence, Keeney recognized, then it must contend with the “social disasters” leading to it.

Ron Kraybill’s report to the MCC Peace Section regarding the proposal to establish a Mennonite Conciliation Service was more forthright and explicit about the challenges. Informed by discussions with non-white Mennonites, Kraybill found affirmation for the MCS proposal, yet also heard strong caveats, including from Mennonites of color. These caveats included the following points:

- People of color must be included in the effort to establish MCS;
- Emphasis should be placed on mobilizing local resources, rather than on maintaining a “flying squad of intervenors”;
- MCC needed to ask if Mennonites were ready to take on questions of justice as it sought to establish MCS;
- Involvement in conflicts should be contemplated only in those situations where Mennonites have “earned the right” to speak;
- Mennonites have a lot of “in-house” conflicts that need to be addressed;
- To be credible, MCS would need to develop slowly: MCC would need to be committed to the MCS venture for at least five years before judging it as a success or failure.

I arrived at MCS twenty-three years after these preliminary discussions. During my tenure with MCS, the issues identified at MCS’s inception continued to come up in our internal discussions. We knew that naming, addressing and acknowledging concerns around justice and racism were
always at the core of the work as we continued to resource, train, mediate, facilitate and participate in conciliation efforts. As a woman of African descent whose chosen faith expression has been in the Anabaptist tradition, it was important for my credibility and sanity to keep these challenges in the forefront of our work.

Although MCS faced persistent challenges, we also had many poignant successes. For me, to work with people who were called to be peacemakers was a gift. The people who worked for and collaborated with MCS were committed to mediating, educating, practicing and growing. Together, we were committed to work at our internal conflicts just as we worked with others beyond our doors. We acknowledged injustice and advocated for justice. And we knew our limits: we did not think every case or referral could be addressed by MCS. However, we maintained relationships with others to whom we could refer cases. We were constantly challenging our work and the conciliation field to be anti-racist and anti-sexist in our approaches to conflict and harm.

The most laudable success MCS experienced was the production of conflict resolution resources—books, training manuals, videos and periodicals—that became widely-used within the conflict resolution, mediation and restorative justice fields. Carolyn Schrock-Shenk, while MCS director, joined Lawrence Ressler in editing *Making Peace with Conflict*, a seminal book for churches to understand conflict as neither good nor bad, a resource that encouraged Mennonites (and other Christians) to face and learn from conflict. Schrock-Shenk was also responsible for a video, also directed at churches, called *Conflict and the Church*. MCS published four editions of its *Mediation and Facilitation Training Manual*, a resource used as a core text in many colleges and universities. The fifth version of the manual (*Conflict Transformation and Restorative Justice Manual*), produced jointly with the Office of Crime and Justice, was similarly widely used. And, for 23 years, MCS published a periodical called *Conciliation Quarterly* that highlighted learnings and grappled with challenges from the conflict mediation and restorative justice fields. Although MCS, the Office of Crime and Justice and the Office of Justice and Peacebuilding no longer exist at MCC, their contributions continue to be respected across the conflict transformation and restorative justice fields.

MCS spurred Anabaptist communities in the United States to expand their understandings and theologies of nonviolence and nonresistance. MCS encouraged churches and communities to develop new understandings of and healthier approaches to conflict. MCS named, from the beginning, that addressing conflict or harm without acknowledging systemic oppression is hypocritical. MCS provided a space and opportunity for the non-dominant voices to be heard in venues such as the MCS-produced manual and in *Conciliation Quarterly*. It has been an honor and blessing to be part of MCS’s legacy: my hope for MCC is that it will find creative ways to extend MCS’s legacy of creatively addressing conflicts in ways that take questions of justice and racism seriously.

*Michelle Armster is executive director of MCC Central States.*
The hard work of anti-racism: the good, the bad and the ugly

It seems ironic that I would be writing about MCC’s work on racism from the mid-1990s to the first part of the decade of this century. Our nation finds itself in such troubling times of overt racism and hatred and our churches are struggling how to respond. Why is it so hard for us, as Mennonites, to find ways to address racism? I hope that sharing the story of MCC’s work on racism from within the organization and external work with other agencies can help us understand ourselves. I hope that learning our history will give us the foundation we need to respond and the good sense not to repeat our mistakes.

MCC has worked to address racism from long before the 1990s. MCC, along with other Anabaptist groups, sought to counter racism during the civil rights movement. In the 1960s, for example, Vincent Harding and Rosemarie Freeney Harding led MCC’s Voluntary Service house in Atlanta and became friends with Martin Luther King, Jr. Other Mennonites joined, but in the end, for many Mennonites, the cost of challenging racism was too great. For Mennonites in leadership, engaging in overt activism went too far: although Mennonites at the time did not fully articulate their concern in this way, one can see white Mennonite fear of giving up white privilege. Unfortunately, Mennonite reluctance to undertake the costly work of challenging racist structures led to the loss of the Hardings, two giants in the faith, who had left the Mennonite tradition by 1967, frustrated by Mennonite and MCC hesitancy to combat racism with greater vigor.

I came to work for MCC U.S. in the fall of 1996 as Director of Peace and Justice Ministries. By then, MCC U.S.’s Damascus Road Training was underway under the direction of Regina Shands Stoltzfus and Jody (now Tobin) Miller Shearer. What came to be called Damascus Road developed over the course of a long labor process starting in the late 1980s. In the early 1990s, MCC hired John Chapman part-time to work on MCC becoming more ethnically and racially inclusive, both in its staffing and in its engagement of the full racial and ethnic range of Anabaptist groups.

As we worship, consider the realities of racism in the Anabaptist community, and share ideas and experiences out of our attempts to resist that racism, may our sight be restored…. As we discuss the difficulties of power and privilege, may we be clear and compassionate.”

— Invitation letter to Restoring Our Sight conference, 1995

John Powell, of Buffalo, New York, pins a square of cloth onto a piece of fabric as part of the first night of the Damascus Road conference, “Damascus and Beyond: seeking clearer sight, bolder spirit,” held in Atlanta, Georgia in March 2005.

Damascus Road used trainings about systemic racism to organize teams to work on dismantling racism in their own institutions or congregations. In 2005, Damascus Road was developing a system of chaplains and organizers in order to better nurture teams and link them together. (MCC photo/ Matthew Lester)
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in the U.S. Staff worked to make human resources policies more inclusive. Lynette Meck, then MCC U.S. director, wrote the first draft of a paper entitled Broadening the Vision in August 1994, in which she outlined a future of MCC becoming more inclusive of people of color. These efforts sought to build on relationships with people of color while resisting systemic racism within MCC.

The Damascus Road program started to take more concrete shape in 1994. That year, Tobin Miller Shearer published Enter the River: Healing Steps from White Privilege toward Racial Reconciliation. In 1995, the MCC U.S. Racism Project hosted a conference in Chicago entitled Restoring Our Sight. Invitations went out to leaders in U.S. Anabaptist institutions and in MCC U.S. and MCC Binational. A total of 250 people attended. The invitation letter sent out on March 1, 1995, stated the conference’s purpose: “As we worship, consider the realities of racism in the Anabaptist community, and share ideas and experiences out of our attempts to resist that racism, may our sight be restored. . . . As we discuss the difficulties of power and privilege, may we be clear and compassionate.” This event birthed what we came to be called the Damascus Road process.

That same year, MCC U.S. produced a video, Free Indeed, as a resource for congregations and other groups seeking to learn about white privilege and the importance of addressing privilege in order to dismantle racism. The video became one of the most widely requested videos in the MCC resource library for many years.

When MCC U.S. established the Damascus Road training program, it set as the program’s goals the preparation of teams within all Anabaptist agencies, including MCC, to dismantle racism within our Anabaptist institutions. The focus was looking at the systemic reality of racism. This work, though promising, also became controversial and threatening. In response to our work at becoming anti-racist and in confronting “whiteness” [racialized ideology that produces white privilege], we began to receive threatening letters. Tobin Miller Shearer, director of the Anti-Racism Desk in 1996, got a death threat from a white supremacist group. He also fielded many angry and negative comments from within the church. As a person of color, I found that very frightening. We consistently received pressure from some within MCC to focus on work on interpersonal relationships rather than on systemic issues, because white people were more comfortable discussing interpersonal relationships rather than confronting their own white privilege and the systemic barriers that kept white people in control, not just in society but within church institutions as well, including Anabaptist institutions.

Despite this pushback from various segments within MCC, Damascus Road did make an impact both on MCC and within the broader Anabaptist world in the U.S. This past year, my congregation welcomed Julie Hart as a guest speaker. Julie had been a sociology professor at Bethel College in Kansas when we organized a Damascus Road training there many years ago. When we talked briefly this past summer, Julie shared how her academic training had not previously introduced her to concepts of whiteness and white privilege: the Damascus Road training equipped her with analysis that has now become standard within sociology. Damascus Road anti-racism training has had an impact not only on individuals but also institutions. For example, today we have many more people of color in leadership positions within and on the board of Mennonite Church USA than when this anti-racism work first began. People of color groups, meanwhile, have been able to find places to be heard.


and contribute within Mennonite Church USA in ways that did not happen twenty years ago.

Regina Shands Stoltzfus, Tobin Miller Shearer and I co-authored a book together, *Set Free*, in 2001 while working for MCC U.S. In that book, we named the reality of racism and highlighted how power is used to maintain the status quo. We repeatedly found that many white people named racism as an issue of relationships, while people of color identified the issue of racism as systemic. The truth, of course, is that racism has both relational and systemic dimensions, but it is the systemic piece that affects people of color the most, from access to resources to the toll on our physical and mental health.

The Damascus Road program found that it was imperative for white people to address their racism if the task of dismantling racism could gain traction. The MCC U.S. anti-racism program thus developed a training module entitled *Fire and Clay*, a workshop for white people to confront the white privilege they carry. The first *Fire and Clay* gathering was held in April 2003. People attended, but MCC leadership, for the most part, did not participate. Earlier in June 2002, the Damascus Road program had developed a training called *Set Free* for people of color to work on internalized racism. *Set Free* trainings helped to inspire events like the Hope for the Future gatherings sponsored by Mennonite Church USA, in which people of color began to amplify their voices and make connections to one another to work together on issues that were important to them.

By the first decade of this century, the difficulty of working both within and beyond MCC U.S. to confront racism was taking a toll on people of color, who frequently felt they had to be the bridge builders and teachers for white people. In June 2006, MCC Binational and MCC U.S. jointly hired Rick Derksen, a white man, as coordinator of MCC’s Anti-Racism Accountability Council. Rick did a lot of good work, but by then many people of color tasked with anti-racism work were exhausted. Eventually, after much internal consultation, Damascus Road trainers determined that they wanted to undertake a broader, more intersectional, approach to anti-racism work, while also reaching out beyond Anabaptist communities. These discussions led in September 2012 to Damascus Road spinning off from MCC, becoming part of the independent organization, Roots of Justice.

Anabaptist institutions continue to work with Roots of Justice to hold Damascus Road anti-racism trainings because it has proven so effective in transforming their boards and leadership structures. To be sure, the gains made by this anti-racism work has come at a cost, taking a toll on people of color and white allies. Anti-racism work often faces backlash, with the impact falling most frequently on the people whose voices are marginalized, who are silenced when what they have to say becomes uncomfortable and who are terminated when they become a threat to white institutions. The work within our institutions needs white people to take ownership. Funding must be available for the work if the church is serious about dismantling racism. I pray and hope that MCC U.S. will come forward again in a bold way in its anti-racism work to name and speak against the renewed racist nationalism and xenophobia we are experiencing in our society and in our churches and that MCC will stand with congregations and institutions that are speaking up in defense of those at the receiving end of racism and hate.

*Iris deLeón-Hartshorn is associate executive director for operations of Mennonite Church USA.*
A biblical approach to the work of anti-racism

Martin Luther King, Jr., proclaimed: “There can be no deep disappointment where there is no deep love.” As Christian churches look to understand and confront racism, we can build the body of Christ by “speaking the truth in love” (Ephesians 4:15, NIV) The history of the United States must be examined and owned by the church so that we can address the past and current practices of racism that go against the very scriptures we are called to follow by Jesus himself, when he told the teachers of the law that the greatest commandment is to “‘Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.’ This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’” (Matthew 22:37-39, NIV).

Anti-racism training work is a critical part of our work at MCC. Beginning in the early 1990s, MCC U.S. began its anti-racism efforts through a training program that came to be called Damascus Road (a program that spun off from MCC in 2012, taking on the name Roots of Justice). MCC U.S. remains committed to the hard work of dismantling racism. Over the past three years, I have worked with colleagues to develop a three-tier, biblically-focused approach to the work of anti-racism, a training program that invites both MCC staff and Anabaptist leaders from outside MCC to grapple with biblical texts and to root ourselves in the biblical foundation for anti-racism work. We began rolling out this training in November 2017 with a gathering of eight persons at Nyack College that offered a basic introduction to people who are just now entering the conversation around race or have had a difficult time understanding how racism works. Every one of the tiers follows a three-day model, in which the first day is set up as interactive and experiential and in which participants gather and visit a museum or a national monument that exposes people to the history of race, migration, slavery, immigration and more in the United States. For example, the first training participants visited the Statue of Liberty and Ellis Island (other
times we have visited the National Museum of African American History and Culture in Washington, D.C.) and then gathered for a time of debriefing and identifying historical truths that are often not told in our educational narratives about our past. The three tiers of three-day anti-racism trainings unfold as follows:

**Tier 1: Uncovering the Roots of Race, Racism and Immigration:**
This workshop invites participants to understand the role that racism plays in U.S. history. The training introduces participants to the roots of racism in the formation of this nation, including how the Doctrine of Discovery shaped attitudes and practices towards Indigenous people and how the transcontinental trade in enslaved persons was bound up with the nation’s origins. The training culminates with an opportunity to think about our current national systems and about our own organizations as places to dismantle racism. We also address the role of the church and racism in this training, something that is critically needed as we commit to truth-telling and lament.

**Tier 2: Living in the House We Did Not Build (Focus on Racism and Economics):** This tier examines the intersectionality of racism and economics, especially with regards to the development of wealth. It looks at how laws, policies and classifications have historically created or denied opportunities based on race. Day one of the training is participatory, interactive and experiential. In past trainings we have visited the National Underground Railroad Freedom Center in Cincinnati, where we considered how exploitative economic systems undergirded slavery and the theft of land from Indigenous peoples. Looking at more recent history, we explore practices such as “redlining” in which banks denied mortgages to people based on race and geography, practices that prevent groups from building up wealth. We review case studies on the systemic challenges for people of color in institutions. We identify ways in which wealth (in the form of land, education, cultural capital and more) is created as well as examine Scripture to better understand how our Christian faith addresses these issues.

**Tier 3: The Gift of Agitation for Change (Focus on Policy and Collaboration):**
This tier is still in the development process but will focus on understanding current movements that are challenging inequality in our country’s laws, policies and practices. It will invite participants to identify how they can collaborate with churches, faith-based organizations and other groups in their contexts to challenge racism and create positive change. This training will push participants to respond to the biblical call to act justly and care for the vulnerable. This culminating tier of MCC U.S.’s anti-racism training will equip participants to work towards dismantling racism by addressing the oppressive systems of injustice such as mass incarceration, unjust immigration policies, disparities in access to and the provision of health care and education and more.

The prophet Amos cries out: “let justice roll on like a river, righteousness like a never-failing stream!” (Amos 5:24) MCC U.S.’s three-tiered anti-racism program invites participants to join Amos in calling upon God to let God’s justice that dismantles racism flow upon our nation and our institutions.

Dina Gonzalez-Pina is MCC U.S. ethnicity and gender equity specialist.
Building peace in West Africa

For at least two decades, MCC programs have worked with churches and other actors to promote peace in West Africa, a region that has been marked during this period by sustained interethenic and interreligious conflict, conflict that often turns violent. Motivated by Anabaptist commitment to the gospel of peace and reconciliation, MCC Nigeria officially inaugurated a peace program in 2001. Over the ensuing years, this multi-pronged peacebuilding program in Nigeria and other West African countries has held peace theology courses in seminaries, organized workshops with church leaders on the theological foundations of working for peace and reconciliation in their societies and partnered with a consortium of peacebuilding organizations actively seeking to prevent violent conflict and transform ongoing conflict. This broad-minded approach has earned MCC acceptance among different religious groupings and ethnic nationalities as a committed peacebuilding leader.

The core of MCC’s peacebuilding program in West Africa is a commitment to equip local leaders with knowledge and skills to restore and sustain peace in their communities. Through MCC-supported and -facilitated training, many community leaders have become effective peace activists, educators, mediators and trainers within their religious institutions, organizations and communities. In addition to organizing its own peacebuilding trainings, MCC in West Africa has provided foundational support and accompaniment for the West Africa Peacebuilding Institute (WAPI), the Peace Training Centre in Jos, Nigeria, and Emergency Preparedness and Response Teams (EPRT) in Plateau State, Nigeria, which work at rapid conflict prevention as well as conflict transformation. The EPRT model has had great success: efforts are underway to replicate its work in other parts of Nigeria.

MCC peacebuilding work in West Africa pays attention to the important role that victim survivors of violent conflict can play in sustainable peacebuilding. Many survivors of violence are wounded, bereaved, traumatized, homeless and seemingly helpless: as such, they are often treated as people in need who must be helped, as burdens because they have lost everything or as potential sources of violence, because they may seek revenge for their losses. MCC, in contrast, has adopted a bottom-up approach in its peacebuilding work in West Africa. Building on the fact that peacebuilding requires high levels of commitment and diligence, MCC has also recognized that survivors of violent conflict are also often highly committed and diligent, simply as a matter of survival. Survivors of violence are already energized: the challenge for peacebuilders is harnessing this energy not for fury and revenge but for passionate commitment to conflict transformation. When survivors of violence help to design and implement peacebuilding strategies, their visible anger and energy for vengeance are transformed into constructive energy for peacebuilding. Over time, MCC’s commitment to working with survivors of violence has created a pool of conflict transformation practitioners who are making a difference in their respective communities.

Certainly, working to activate survivors of violence as peacebuilders is challenging. They are often depressed, aggrieved and antagonistic. To establish trust and confidence goes beyond holding a series of workshops and trainings. It is a herculean task that requires uncommon patience and determination. We often take three steps forward only then to fall back two steps. Yet the benefit of working with survivors of violence is enhanced sustainability of peacebuilding efforts.


As a Christian faith-based organization, MCC in its peacebuilding work has been committed to peacebuilding that strengthens collaboration across faiths and ethnicities in the face of forces that seek to divide communities along faith and ethnic lines. This approach has boosted acceptance of MCC by diverse actors in West Africa contexts, as MCC support has been welcomed to enhance local capacities for peacebuilding action. MCC’s peacebuilding approach seeks to build a sense of ownership by stakeholders in peacebuilding work: peacebuilding should not be seen as an MCC initiative that Nigerians and other West Africans join, but as a West African priority that MCC supports. MCC provides social spaces in which stakeholders from different religious and ethnic communities collaborate to build sustainable peace.

Gopar Tapkida is MCC representative for Zimbabwe. He previously served as MCC peace coordinator for its Central and West Africa programs.

Training peacebuilding leaders: challenges faced and lessons learned

As peacebuilding has grown and flourished as an academic field and a practical discipline over the past several decades, MCC has collaborated with Mennonite and Mennonite Brethren colleges, universities and seminaries in the United States and Canada in equipping church and community leaders from around the world with peacebuilding skills and knowledge. Through Anabaptist Mennonite Biblical Seminary, Canadian Mennonite University, Conrad Grebel University College, Eastern Mennonite University and Fresno Pacific University, MCC has sponsored hundreds of students for short-term peacebuilding training as well as academic degrees in peacebuilding over the past three decades (with a significant majority of those trainees studying at Eastern Mennonite University’s Center for Justice and Peacebuilding and its predecessors). During the past quarter century, MCC has also worked closely with groups of committed peacebuilders who sought to organize contextualized peacebuilding training opportunities in their parts of the world. Over the following pages, peacebuilders in African and Asian contexts reflect on the challenges they have faced, the successes they have enjoyed and the
Reflecting together with such a diverse group of Christians provides the opportunity to participate in the kind of reconciliation Paul talks about where those who were once divided are brought together as one in Christ Jesus, providing an actual experience of the New Creation.”

Lessons they have learned from organizing peacebuilding trainings in their regional contexts.—The editors.

Great Lakes Initiative (GLI)

The Great Lakes Initiative (GLI) is a Christian organization seeking the well-being of all citizens of the Great Lakes region of Africa in their pursuit of peace, reconciliation, justice and mercy. Its mission is to mobilize restless Christian leaders, create space for their transformation and empower them to participate in God’s mission of reconciliation in their own communities, organizations and countries. GLI works hand-in-hand with Christian leaders to foster a biblical understanding of reconciliation as God’s mission and the heart of every believer’s calling to be part of God’s work in the world.

The key event organized by GLI is an annual week-long institute. The backbone of the institute involves reflection on a series of five questions over five days:

- Day 1) New Creation: Reconciliation towards what?
- Day 2) Lament: What is going on? What is happening in our region?
- Day 3) Pilgrimage & Hope: Where do we see signs of hope?
- Day 4) What kind of leadership?

Each morning begins with a session that focuses on the scriptural and theological basis for answering these questions. The next session features testimony from a “witness,” someone who lives out these questions on the ground and shares their personal story. These two sessions together (theological and contextual) capture GLI’s incarnational (word made flesh) methodology. Each of these sessions is followed by time for participants to ask questions and share comments, giving space for dialogue and reflection. In the

[Image: Peace club members clean the Ntinda police barracks to raise awareness about the club and promote peace. The peace club is a project of Africa Leadership and Reconciliation Ministries (ALARM), which hosts peace trainings for police officers and boda-boda (motorcycle taxi) drivers to promote peace in Kampala, Uganda. (Photo courtesy of ALARM)]
afternoon, everyone participates in a seminar, in which a smaller group focuses on a specific peacebuilding topic. During the week, participants from the same country meet twice to discuss their country context and what they will focus on in their GLI country chapters after the institute is over.

This space for reflection is made more powerful by the fact that GLI brings together a diverse group of Christian leaders. GLI participants come from more than eight different countries, both francophone and anglophone, speaking numerous African languages. They represent dozens of Protestant denominations and the Catholic church. Some participants are ordained, while others serve as lay leaders in the church. Women and men engaged in a wide variety of Christian ministries take part. Reflecting together with such a diverse group of Christians provides the opportunity to participate in the kind of reconciliation Paul talks about where those who were once divided are brought together as one in Christ Jesus, providing an actual experience of the New Creation.

The week also makes it possible for these diverse Christian leaders to network, learn from one another and pray and worship together. Participants work in demanding ministries in challenging contexts where it is easy to experience discouragement and burnout. Creating a space to reflect together on God’s mission of reconciliation empowers these Christian leaders to return to their ministries encouraged, refreshed and inspired.

The first seeds of GLI were planted when forty Christian leaders from the region met in Kampala, Uganda, in 2006. From that humble beginning, more gatherings were organized in Uganda (2007 and 2008) and Burundi (2009 and 2010) and the first annual institute was held in Kampala in 2011, where it has been located ever since. In 2013, a transition team formed to firmly root GLI in the region, leading to GLI’s registration in Uganda in 2015. During these years of growth, GLI benefited from the support of its founding partners, including MCC, ALARM, World Vision and the Center for Reconciliation of Duke Divinity School.

As a founding partner, with two seats on the GLI board, MCC remains instrumental in helping GLI carry out its mission. In addition to providing financial support for the organization, MCC has also sponsored many participants to attend GLI’s gatherings. MCC has helped identify thoughtful, committed and engaged Christian leaders who contribute to GLI’s mission to be a venue for mutual learning about what reconciliation looks like in the Africa’s Great Lakes region.

From its beginning, GLI committed to build a movement of restless peacebuilders and thus avoid the demands of a founding a new organization. By strategically focusing on leaders who were already operating within organizations, GLI was able to make an impact without having its own organizational structure. Since GLI registered as an organization in 2015 and now has three staff members, it has increased its capacity to deepen its work in the region. However, this does not mean that GLI has given up on the movement aspect of its origins. Instead of delivering participants fixed formulas and established projects, GLI provides comprehensive reflection on what it means to be a believer in a conflict-torn world. We are grateful for the role GLI has played in building an ever-growing network of empowered reconcilers.

*Acher Niyonzigiye is the Executive Director of GLI.*
Great Lakes Peacebuilding Institute (GLPI)

The Great Lakes Peacebuilding Institute (GLPI) is a regional, bilingual peacebuilding institute which has provided training opportunities for peace and development workers from Burundi, Rwanda and the Democratic Republic of Congo (DR Congo) since its founding in 2004. In recent years, GLPI has also received participants from other countries in East, Central and West Africa. Founded by three local organizations—the Ministry for Peace and Reconciliation under the Cross (MIPAREC) in Burundi, Friends Peace House (FPH) in Rwanda and Conseil pour la Paix et Reconciliation (COPARE) in DR Congo—GLPI, with support from MCC, has trained more than 400 participants over the past sixteen years.

GLPI's mission is to develop transformative leadership and peacebuilding skills among civil society leaders serving in countries marred by violent conflict and insecurity. While many countries in Africa have achieved relative stability, for others their potential for growth and development has been disturbed by recurring cycles of violence and repression. GLPI was established to try to break these cycles through the formation of leaders equipped with peacebuilding skills. GLPI brings together individuals committed to acquiring knowledge, attitudes and skills for preventing and transforming conflicts, while gaining new insights into the importance of locally-led processes and the creation of just social structures that bring about more peaceful societies. GLPI's theory of change is that the more individuals trained in the theories and practices of peace, the more processes and structures can be created and sustained which counter the protracted nature of violence in the region.

For sixteen years now, GLPI had achieved significant growth. It started out as a francophone seminar (formerly called the Great Lakes Peacebuilding Seminar) for MCC staff and partners in Rwanda, Burundi and DR Congo, modeling itself on the Summer Peacebuilding Institute (SPI) at Eastern Mennonite University in the United States. Its main training venue has been a month-long October Institute held in Burundi, which offers four one-week courses on conflict analysis, peacebuilding frameworks, trauma healing and peacebuilding and development. Over time, GLPS transformed into a bilingual institute, now called GLPI, offering courses both to Francophones and Anglophones in the wider Great Lakes region.

In 2013, GLPI started offering special modules, apart from the October Institute, which have been hosted in Rwanda as well as Burundi. These special modules offered participants the chance to reflect on the biblical foundations for peacebuilding, learn how to organize and lead youth peace clubs, build skills in leadership and good governance and become proficient in reflective peace practices. Around this time, GLPI began welcoming staff from other peacebuilding and development organizations beyond the circle of MCC and its partners. A regional GLPI alumni network started to develop, aimed at fostering learning exchanges among alumni and improving regional peacebuilding connections.

In 2019, another breakthrough was achieved when GLPI offered a two-track October Institute for the first time in its history: a peacebuilding track and a new organizational and community development track. The peacebuilding track remained the same except for shifting the focus of the fourth course to examine conflict sensitivity and principles of “do no harm.” The development track offers four new courses on organizational and community leadership; fundraising and resource mobilization; project design and management; and
monitoring and evaluation. The introduction of a development track allowed GLPI to attract peacebuilding and development practitioners from across Africa—not only from Burundi, Rwanda and DR Congo, but also Kenya, Uganda, South Sudan, Burkina Faso, Chad, Ivory Coast and Angola. The successful 2019 October Institute opened up new partnerships with local and international organizations and increased the number of participants threefold. This strong desire for development courses at GLPI highlighted an intense desire among African civil society organizations to integrate development and peacebuilding more effectively.

GLPI sees its impact through participants who return to their respective organizations and communities with more positive energy and useful learnings they can incorporate into their daily work. Some participants have created their own organizations that promote peacebuilding and development programs. Some have organized local peace committees, youth peace clubs and savings groups. Others are engaged in leading trauma healing workshops and supporting women in acquiring livelihood opportunities. Still others have become part of local, regional and national structures that promote mediation and reconciliation processes such as the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) or the mediation commission of the East African Community (EAC).

The stories and testimonies shared by GLPI alumni are telling. A women’s rights advocate from Burundi who attended GLPI in 2016 shared: “After GLPI training, I have been organizing trauma healing workshops with women who have been made victims of sexual harassment and have involved them in different livelihood and savings opportunities. GLPI inspired me to understand that we need to find another approach to empower women economically as this is the root cause of their suffering.” A peace journalist from DR Congo who participated in 2017 reflected: “Peace must be an everyday commitment by accepting other people regardless of backgrounds, and this is my daily commitment as a peacebuilder, and I owe much of my inspiration to GLPI.” A development worker from Kenya who attended GLPI in 2019 observed: “I am better in providing advice or support to my organization to produce better actions and exercise more positive attitudes in implementing our food security projects and in achieving more useful impacts.”
The ongoing work of its alumni inspires GLPI to advance its programs in order to reach more peacebuilding and development practitioners. The growth of GLPI has been sustained by the growing dedication of its founding partners, the active leadership of its board and general assembly and the continued support of MCC, both financially and through its placement of MCC staff who assist in GLPI's organizational development. GLPI is now registering as an independent entity after being hosted by MIPAREC since its founding, bolstering its online and social media presence and actively seeking expanded collaboration with regional and national partners. For example, GLPI is now engaging other MCC-supported peace institutes like the Africa Peacebuilding Institute (API) in South Africa and the Peace and Training Center (PTC) in Jos, Nigeria, to identify synergies in the common task of advancing peace education in Africa.

What started as a month-long institute built along the SPI model, GLPI—thanks to local vision and leadership and MCC support—is now expanding into a year-round training institute serving a wider region with participants coming from organizations beyond MCC and its partners, fostering a network of change agents committed to sustainable peace and development in Africa.

Christine Sumog-oy is MCC Burundi peacebuilding coordinator. She has coordinated GLPI since 2017.

Africa Peacebuilding Institute (API)

The Africa Peacebuilding Institute (API) started in 2001, extending the peacebuilding work of Canadian peacebuilder Janet Schmidt. Since then, API has organized yearly training workshops for African peace practitioners seeking to study and reflect on what makes for peace in African contexts. First held in Zambia at Mindolo Ecumenical Foundation, API moved to South Africa in 2013. API envisioned itself as a geographic as well as spiritual “basin” holding and channeling the water of life, the cleansing and powerful energy of peace and reconciliation in the name of Christ. Arising out of this basin, API hoped, would be an alliance of people gathering under the mantle of peace education, study and application, who would work together in a variety of concrete ways for peace in their communities.

Over 500 participants have taken part in API over the past 19 years. Participants include Christian pastors, church officials, teachers and grassroots peace practitioners. Both Christians and Muslims take part in API. Participants primarily come from sub-Saharan Africa countries, representing MCC’s church and community-based partner organizations. API participants are nominated to attend because of their peace-related work or interests in incorporating peacebuilding approaches into their relief and development work. API also welcomes Anabaptist church leaders from across the region in order to equip them in thinking about how peacebuilding is part of the church’s witness.

API has provided short-term intensive training programs on a range of peacebuilding topics, including conflict analysis, conflict transformation, restorative justice, trauma healing, Anabaptist peacemaking and leadership. API has played a critical role in individual transformation. Across the continent, many participants have reported changes of mindset, leading them to become change agents in their communities. For example, some participants who came to API believing in the power of violence became convinced nonviolent approaches are more effective in resolving conflict, with more sustainable outcomes.

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with more sustainable outcomes. API has also offered an opportunity for African participants from different backgrounds to network and learn from one another.

API has certainly encountered some challenges in its trainings. So, for example, participants sometimes at first resist API’s message that working for gender equality is an essential dimension of peacebuilding, rejecting the idea initially on the grounds that the press for gender equality is a colonial import and represents the destruction of African values. Or, to take another example, API participants sometimes also express suspicion of peace committees or peace clubs, viewing them as taking away power from traditional leaders or school leaders in conflict management. For example, some communities in Burundi that adopted peace committees faced resistance from traditional leaders who saw in peace committees the loss of their arbitration powers.

Skills acquired at API have been put to good use. In 2006, for example, in protest of poor democratic practices and human rights violations in many African countries, API participants signed a petition to advocate to the African Union to strengthen democracy on the continent. Skills acquired at API also led to the birth of numerous peace infrastructures, such as the establishment of peace clubs in schools in Zambia in 2006. Peace clubs have now spread to over 13 African countries and have been introduced beyond Africa.

The African continent has a rich tradition of dealing with conflict in peaceful ways. But due to armed conflicts and other forms of violence, those values were eroded in many communities. API has sought to restore traditional peacbuilding values and approaches. For instance, API trainers have explained that working for gender equality is not a foreign import to Africa. Traditionally, women’s wisdom protects and sustains communities because women participate in decision-making. Over time, this traditional valuing of women’s wisdom was lost in many African contexts. Through peace education and initiatives, such as the introduction of women’s situation rooms, women are more and more actively involved in leadership and other decision-making processes. API has also worked to restore the value of circle approaches to resolving conflict and to underscore the importance of the traditional value of ubuntu (I am because you are).”
Ubuntu, xenophobic attacks against African foreign nationals have been on the increase. In response to these attacks, pastor Samson Mataboro, an API alumnus, uses restorative justice approaches. The efforts by Pastor Mataboro and others to promote ubuntu and circle processes for addressing conflict have helped foster spaces in South Africa where South Africans and foreign nationals live together peacefully. There are similar experiences in Kenya, where Kikuyu and Luo children lived peacefully together in the 2007 post-election ethnic violence in Mt. Elgon, thanks to the work peace clubs had done to promote inter-ethnic solidarity.

API alumni are creating safe spaces for dealing with issues of trauma across the African continent. Peacebuilding efforts linked to API have seen former prisoners in Burundi, Zambia, Nigeria, Ethiopia, Rwanda, the Democratic Republic of Congo (DR Congo) and Uganda reconciling with their communities and vowing not to seek revenge against their former enemies anymore. One can say without any doubt that the API is laying a strong foundation for peace in the African continent by raising up people equipped in conflict prevention and resolution, community building and reconciliation based on Christian principles of nonviolence, justice, dignity of the human person and right relationships.

Mulanda Jimmy Juma is MCC representative for its program in DR Congo and Angola. He previously worked as MCC peacebuilding coordinator for southern Africa.

Northeast Asia Regional Peacebuilding Institute (NARPI)

The Northeast Asia Regional Peacebuilding Institute has its ironic beginnings in the service of its director, Jae Young Lee, with the military of the Republic of Korea (ROK, or South Korea) in the early 1990s, when he first become interested in peace. Jae Young had been a marine for 26 months of mandatory military service at the age of 22, service required of all young Korean men. He was stationed along the border between ROK and the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea (DPRK, or North Korea), tasked with watching the North Korean side of the border through a telescope at the western edge of the Demilitarized Zone (DMZ). When the first leader of North Korea, Kim Il Sung, died in 1994, the fate of the entire Korean Peninsula was suddenly thrust into uncertainty, including the prospect of potential war. Jae Young had to spend an entire week in a trench with heavy weapons along with thousands of soldiers at the border to carry out the mission of shooting anybody attempting to cross it. During that week, he began to realize that true peace could only be possible through non-military approaches. No one can achieve peace by pointing a gun at another’s head.

After completing his military service, Jae Young went on to study at Canadian Mennonite Bible College and the conflict transformation program at Eastern Mennonite University (EMU) in Virginia, completing a master’s degree at the latter. After struggling to understand the concept of Christian pacifism, Jae Young eventually came to agree with the Mennonite belief in the gospel of peace. As a result of his military experiences and peacebuilding training, Jae Young developed a firm conviction that peacebuilding training is a more practical way to make peace than investments in the military. In 2001, Jae Young became one of three founding members of the Korea Anabaptist Center (KAC), serving as its peace program coordinator. After witnessing the fragile peace maintained by North and South Korea at reciprocal gunpoint, and realizing that many of the peacebuilding organizations in northeast Asia
were ill-equipped in conflict resolution and peacemaking skills, Jae Young wrote a working paper in 2006 outlining his vision for a peacebuilding training program for community leaders from across northeast Asia.

After a couple of years of discussion with MCC, KAC received a grant in 2009 to pilot this vision. Jae Young traveled to Japan, mainland China and Taiwan to meet people who shared a similar vision: to start a regional peacebuilding institute in northeast Asia. Representatives of several civil society peace groups from all over the region met together for the first time in 2009 to brainstorm what this regional peacebuilding project would look like. These efforts eventually coalesced in the formation of the Northeast Asia Regional Peacebuilding Institute (NARPI), with NARPI holding its first Summer Peacebuilding Training in Seoul and Inje in August 2011. NARPI has organized annual summer peacebuilding trainings in each of the subsequent years, moving the location of the training around northeast Asia. NARPI participants have come primarily from South Korea, Japan, Mainland China, Taiwan and Mongolia.

The NARPI Summer Peacebuilding Training is a 14-day program. Participants divide into three or four courses for five days, from morning to early evening. For the next three days, all participants spend time together on field trips. We have traveled together to a DMZ observatory, to peace memorials and museums, a ger (a traditional Mongolia dwelling in the form of a tent covered in skin and felt), sites of historical massacres and sites of hope. Following the field trips, there is a second week of training, also five days, during which participants continue to learn, divided into three or four courses, before departing for their homes.

Many peacebuilding institutes in the world are located in areas with current or recent direct conflict. While northeast Asia has not experienced intense direct conflict since the Korean War, the unresolved historical conflict (both the Asia-Pacific War and the Cold War) and the structural violence in the region affect people’s daily lives. Through NARPI, we have learned that people want safe spaces to talk about sensitive issues and to share their own perspectives and experiences.
NARPI’s approach to peacebuilding assumes that durable peacebuilding starts at the community level. The bottom-up peacebuilding education approach is slow, but it is also the path for sustainable change. NARPI courses equip participants with both theory and practical skills to implement in their home communities. The field trips are also a powerful part of the training experience. People who have been taught different histories, written to increase nationalism and distrust of neighboring countries, come together to learn history first-hand, often from the voices of the victims of war. We have also witnessed that a new understanding of regional identity can grow from relationship building. Strengthening international relations is not just a matter for governments: it also needs to happen at the people-to-people level.

A simple goal that we have for NARPI is that this regional project will survive for ten years. This year, 2020, marks ten years, so we are nearly there! Survival may seem like quite a low bar to set, but it is also significant, since NARPI is the first regional peacebuilding institute in Northeast Asia, a region where the field of peacebuilding is still quite new.

We have witnessed how NARPI Summer Peacebuilding Trainings have had an individual impact on the participants. Many people apply their learning from NARPI to their work, family and community lives. Some decide to join local peacebuilding efforts or peace studies programs after their NARPI experience. The relationship-building aspect of NARPI has been powerful for participants, serving as the basis from which they start to form a new sense of regional identity. As NARPI grows, the number of returning participants also increases, a sign that this is a valuable time of learning, sharing and networking for people who are seeking to build an alternative future in their communities and in this region.

Several of NARPI’s challenges resemble challenges faced by other peacebuilding organizations. Most years we face a funding challenge. Although a program fee is required from NARPI participants, these funds do not cover all training expenses. We have chosen to keep the program fee relatively low so that NARPI trainings can be accessible to people from all parts of the region. MCC offers scholarship funds each year to provide partial support for individuals who would otherwise not be able to join NARPI.

One unique challenge to NARPI, as a mobile peacebuilding institute, is that the planning each year is shared between the local host and the NARPI administrative team. Distance and language barriers make the planning work more complicated, but we are grateful for lessons learned as we work together to overcome these challenges.

The greatest challenges for NARPI, though, do not come from funding or from technical planning aspects, but from ongoing political tensions in Northeast Asia. We aim to provide safe space for all people who gather at NARPI, but in reality it is impossible to create a completely safe space for everyone. We therefore work to provide the most positive space possible within the realities of our region.

We continue to work toward a dream that one day there will be more peacebuilding institutes than military academies in Northeast Asia. In 2019, Nobuya Fukuda, who hosted the 2017 NARPI Summer Peacebuilding Training in Okinawa, Japan, and has also joined NARPI several years as a participant, opened the Okinawa Bridge Builders Institute (OBI) to offer educational opportunities to explore how to build peace in the colonized and militarized
Mindanao Peacebuilding Institute (MPI)

Mindanao, the second largest island in the southern Philippines, has historically, geographically and socio-culturally been distinct from the rest of the country. It has witnessed colonial control and occupation over the past two centuries, leading to struggles over identity and governance. Conflicts between Indigenous political interests and external stakeholders have caused the area to become a crucible for violence and fear.

Several community leaders from Mindanao participated in Eastern Mennonite University’s Summer Peacebuilding Institute in the 1990s. Together, these trainees formed a critical mass of peacebuilders passionate about promoting peace in strife-ravaged Mindanao. Encouraged by a wide variety of peacebuilding practitioners and scholars, along with collaborative support from Catholic Relief Services (CRS), Catholic Agency for Overseas Development (CAFOD) and MCC, this group of committed peacemakers founded the Mindanao Peacebuilding Institute (MPI) with the mission of bringing together peace practitioners to learn from one another and of equipping people interested in becoming peacebuilders with knowledge and practical skills.

Creating a space for mutual sharing and support among peacebuilding practitioners has been central to the mission of MPI. Participants in MPI workshops learn not only from one another but also from the context of Mindanao, with participants visiting organizations working towards peace on the island and having practitioners from Mindanao teach and share at MPI courses.

MPI holds an Annual Training Institute for three weeks each spring during which an average of 100 individuals from the Asia-Pacific region and

“I would like to change history for my children, the bloody history of conflict in Mindanao,” said Musa Sanguila of Kauswagen, Mindanao island in the Philippines. “We change something for good starting from inside ourselves.” Musa was among 165 participants from the Philippines and 16 other Asian countries attending the Mindanao Peacebuilding Institute (MPI) in Davao City, Mindanao, Philippines from May 1 to 19, 2002. (MCC photo/Jon Rudy)
beyond attend courses in a residential setting. There are courses designed for newcomers to the field as well as advanced and innovative courses relevant to new conflict realities and peacebuilding challenges. Each year, around 20 nations are represented at MPI and this rich diversity is fully celebrated during evening activities. The openings and closings of each week of the Institute are festive, with cultural presentations from Mindanao serving as a highlight. The ambience and structure of the Institute are highly conducive to relationship building for solidarity among peacebuilders.

Besides the annual training institute, MPI strives to provide relevant programs to strengthen peacebuilding. It has conducted a resource-based conflict and peacebuilding training program that focuses on the Indigenous peoples of Mindanao and the hazards they face from the mining industry. MPI continues to tailor training for specific sectors and regional issues. Currently, MPI is implementing a grassroots peacebuilding mentors program to enhance the mentoring ability of on-the-ground peacebuilders as they nurture others in their own contexts. These ongoing training activities are organized and coordinated by a small but highly motivated staff working in the MPI secretariat based in Davao, Mindanao.

MCC has been privileged over the past two decades to be a partner and friend of MPI and its vibrant network of peacebuilders committed to the nonviolent transformation of conflict in Mindanao and beyond.

_Sriprakash Mayasandra is MCC representative for Chad. He has worked for MCC in Palestine and Israel, Syria and, most recently, across Asia as MCC’s regional peacebuilding coordinator for Asia and as interim representative for northeast Asia._

**School of Peace**

Interfaith participants at the three-month School of Peace for young adults from across Asia typically hold a debate as an exercise in fostering critical thinking. Each year the debate resolution is different. One year the resolution was: “It is not necessary to do peacemaking.” Divided into two groups, the fifteen young participants were given a day to prepare to defend or oppose the statement.

As the debate began, those defending the resolution (that is, arguing against the necessity of doing peacemaking) were having a difficult time finding good arguments that could hold up against the opposition. They were losing badly. Then one young woman stood up to make her argument in support of the resolution, offering this argument:

> I live next to a small stream. When I was a child, we used to play in its crystal-clear water. We could even drink it. Later, the stream became polluted with plastic and other garbage. Our parents no longer let us play in it. We thought about finding some way to filter the water to make it clean, but we realized that the water originally was very clean. If we wanted to enjoy the stream again, we would have to investigate where the pollution came from and find a way to solve that.

As a Christian I believe that peace is a gift from God. It is here all around us. But so many people can’t experience it because injustices pollute it. We don’t need to do peacemaking. Rather we need to find out...
In the opening ceremony of the School of Peace in Vishtar, India, Poli Drong of Bangladesh lights a candle from the center flame to place in the open spiral of flowers, symbolizing how the world expands as people learn to be open to those who are different from themselves. (MCC photo/Max Ediger)

Her argument reflected one of the principal tenets of the School of Peace. During our intense three months together, we urge participants to seek the root causes of conflict and non-peace and be willing to work for structural change at the local and national levels. Only when our systems and structures emphasize justice and righteousness for all can God’s peace flow freely to all.

Working for structural transformation is very difficult and requires much analysis and planning. While it may often be easy to respond to conflicts with simple models and projects, the result may not be long-lasting. Our goal must be to be effective rather than busy—and being effective requires creative strategies to address the roots of injustice.

As we explore more deeply the roots of conflict, we find that we must first look at the issue of identity. All of us have multiple identities and no two of us have the exact same identity. This diversity is beautiful and is generally celebrated. However, when any one of us begins to feel that one of our identities, such as a religious, ethnic, gender or ideological identity, is superior to others, the roots of conflict have been laid. Conflicts at the local, national or even global level can grow out of this sense of superiority because it gives us the supposed “right” to exploit or oppress the “other.”

If we recognize that identity can be the cause of serious conflicts, we also begin to realize that violence against others will not bring any lasting solution to conflicts. Identity is a social construct and thus can be changed through creative dialogue. It is of course not easy to transform social constructs, but if we wish to allow peace to flow freely to all, we must start here. This is one way to stop being busy and begin being effective.

Max Ediger directs the School of Peace. He worked with MCC in southeast Asia for about 40 years and now lives in Phnom Penh, Cambodia.
Peacebuilding as presence: MCC assignments in “enemy” contexts

Beginning with the decision by some MCC workers from the United States to remain in Vietnam after the withdrawal of U.S. troops from the country on March 29, 1973, one form MCC’s peace witness has taken has been a witness of presence within so-called “enemy” contexts. Such peace witness included placing graduate students behind the Iron Curtain during the Cold War tasked with connecting to and supporting churches in the Eastern bloc, assigning aid workers to live and work in Iraq before and after the U.S. invasion of the country in 2002, placing more graduate students at an Islamic studies center in Qom, Iran, seconding staff to work with health ministries in Afghanistan and sending agronomists to make extended program support visits to the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea (DPRK, or North Korea). Below are reflections from MCC workers who were involved in such peacebuilding-as-presence initiatives on the joys and challenges they faced.—The editors.

Behind the Iron Curtain

In 1977, during our second year of marriage and study at Fuller Theological Seminary, we were invited to serve in what was portrayed as an innovative, daring, bridge-building peace witness in what was then Yugoslavia. To go behind the so-called “Iron Curtain” was the stuff of myth and spy fiction. We were among the first of what later became a sizeable group called the East Europe fraternity—a group of students who offered a Mennonite presence in at least eight Eastern European countries from 1977 to 1990. Ours was a peacebuilding venture largely comprised of on-the-ground presence and relationship building.

For people in Canada, the U.S. and western Europe, the specter of communism around the globe created widespread and often irrational fear. For Christians, including Mennonites, the fear was complicated by how political and economic threats of communism versus capitalism matched so closely with understandings of religious freedom and the persecution of the church under atheist regimes. For Mennonite church leaders in the United States and Canada to assess that our people were vulnerable to fear and manipulation was both far-sighted and sober. The way they chose to meet that danger was to send volunteers across the borders of the Iron Curtain to study at universities and spend time with real people on the ground—listening, offering friendship, assisting as invited and sharing the gospel of peace by being present and available for collaborative work when possible. We agreed to be among those volunteers, arriving in Yugoslavia in the fall of 1977.

This was truly an educational venture and we had student visas to prove it, but the education was meant to flow both ways. In the East, our message was meant to be that not all Christians see your land and your people as hated enemies. In the West, the educational thrust was to help our people see that real folks live with real challenges in socialist societies, but it is not the end of the world as we know it. A remarkable religious vitality is sustained in faith communities even though constrained by systemic and ideological challenges.

Our assignment, though sponsored by MCC and Mennonite mission agencies, was not formally missionary or relief and development work in the classic sense. An embodied presence on the ground was deemed the most strategic way to work at relational peacebuilding. Sharing the everyday life of ordinary
Christian believers in a communist setting seemed to be our best hope of subverting the fears and overcoming the ignorance of our own people back home. And indeed, as we would return home for brief visits, circulating in our sponsoring communities, people had real questions and showed genuine interest. We were not planting Mennonite churches or starting programs or institutions. We were instructed to come alongside existing communities of Jesus-followers, who became our best instructors. Baptists, Pentecostals, Lutherans, Methodists, Catholics and Orthodox, as well as Muslims and Marxists, were all helpful in showing us their complex realities.

Our assignment included freedom to pursue any contacts which could help us toward our goal. We traveled extensively in several regions, engaged with churches and helped with educational efforts in several schools. In addition to relating to primarily Catholic Croatian and Orthodox Serbian contexts, we spent two years in Muslim neighborhoods of Sarajevo. We were welcomed by active Protestant leaders who quickly embraced and included us in their educational efforts. And since we were not setting up our own programs, we could selectively bolster anything that was constructive, collaborative and designed to serve purposes larger than self-interest.

There were plenty of challenges as well. While we had directors from MCC and Eastern Mennonite Board of Missions and Charities (EMBMC, now EMM) to provide guidance from the distance, and the “fraternity” of our Mennonite peers in other East European settings, we didn’t have formal local partners. We observed freelance operatives from other Western parachurch and mission agencies whose work was not subject to review by any local group and became problematic. We worked hard to maintain relationships that could incorporate local accountability. There was also our own isolation as the only Mennonites in-country, including the need to negotiate what was best for our children in education, community and church life. Meanwhile, although the political ideology was explicitly egalitarian, the general culture was very patriarchal.

It seems clear, looking back more than 40 years later, that the parallel assignments across Eastern Europe accomplished significant components of the goals we set out to achieve. The practical ecumenism of cooperating with people of other faiths was strategically fruitful during the subsequent
war years in the Balkans. That MCC had a presence on the ground was crucial to mobilizing tons of material aid, peacemaking responses and refugee care in Croatia, Bosnia and Serbia in the wake of Yugoslavia’s dissolution. Evangelical faith communities came to see Mennonites as allies. They showed openness to Anabaptist theology and many made tangible commitments to peacebuilding in their local communities. And the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 symbolized the triumph of the hopes we came to share with many people in the region.

Gerald and Sara Wenger Shenk worked with MCC Yugoslavia (Croatia, Bosnia, Serbia) from 1977-83 and 1986-89 (jointly with Eastern Mennonite Board of Mission and Charities, now EMM). Sara went on to serve as president of Anabaptist Biblical Seminary and Gerald as professor of church and society at Eastern Mennonite Seminary.

Iran

As our plane landed in Iran about 20 years ago, my thoughts swirled with hope and fear. What will “blessed are the peacemakers” look like as our family’s daily work in a religiously and politically foreign land? My spouse, Maren, and I had just finished studying Persian, Shi’ite Islam and Women in Islam the previous months at the University of Virginia. We both had seminary degrees. Fear of the unknown swirled around our hope for maintaining and strengthening an MCC peacebuilding bridge of trust in Iran. Many MCCers had visited Iran before to lay a deep foundation of relationships with Iranian partners through earthquake relief efforts and short-term medical work. We were called to be the first MCC staff to take up residence in the country.

Entering Iran meant not only arrival into a religiously and politically different world. It also unfolded within a legacy of no diplomatic relations between Iran and the U.S. and strained Canadian-Iranian relationships. Both Maren and I were bicultural, something that helped us see two worlds. When we landed in Tehran, Maren had to put on a chador (“tent” in Persian) and I had to replace my gold wedding ring with a silver one.

Our presence in Iran as the only Christians living in the religious capital of Qom was marked by hospitality: giving and receiving tea, fruit and words of honor and welcome.”

How do we find and create shared meaning in the presence of our supposed enemies? Respect became a learned behavior in relationships.”

Near the end of one meeting, a student said that he needed to leave early for the “Down with America” rally.” The word for “Down With” or “Death To” sounds a lot like the word for “chickens” in Persian, so I responded, “Do you mean ‘Chickens for America?’ Thank you very much.” He replied with a smile, “It is our seminary’s day of the month and the rally bus is coming soon—don’t take it personally!”

As we sought to build relationships, we focused on listening and answering questions as asked. We met many who wondered, “Why did you come here?” Over time, as trust was built in some relationships, legacy traumas and deep political and religious differences came on the table beside the tea. More time to listen, more words flowed. Some conversations went on for hours. After nine previous years in Egypt and Syria, I had come to enjoy this kind of conversation.
We usually had Friday lunch with other families. Each Tuesday I joined a group studying religions at the graduate level. I taught them some dimensions of Christian history and theology. At the end of each session, I noted one act of faith that changed the world. In one session I shared about Habitat for Humanity. The course coordinator researched Habitat online and came back the next session saying: “We need a Muslim Habitat for Humanity.” Maren spent time with various women at the Women’s University. We both studied Persian in the morning.

What do Mennonites, who seek in their daily lives to live out the politics of Jesus, do when encountering Iranian Shi’ites for whom the Rule of the Jurists (religious leaders) means the merging of national politics and religious practice? Many persons practiced their English with us and my knowing some Arabic helped a lot in conducting in-depth discussions about these differences.

Other MCC couples followed us to take up residence in Iran, while scores of Mennonites from Canada and the U.S. visited Iran as part of MCC-organized delegations. MCC also worked with Mennonite colleges, universities and seminaries in the U.S. in hosting Iranian delegations and in organizing academic conferences in Iran and Canada. Many other forms of encounter emerged, with Iranian delegations going to Canada and Iranian scholars-in-residence appointed for short terms at Mennonite universities in the U.S. and Canada. These delegations and exchanges continued—until the political winds changed here and there.

As I look back 20 years later, I hold more fear than hope. There are many ways to destroy the potential for peace and I am watching it happen stage by stage with increasing fervor on both sides. The Shi’ite legacy trauma of persecution has led to increased militancy in various countries. The U.S. assertiveness in the Middle East has shifted to Iran more intensely through sanctions and threats. There were and are forces very willing to sabotage peace on both sides, those very willing to push open the gates of hell and those working to close and seal them in acts of peacebuilding. We have yet to see the outcome.

Roy Hange worked with MCC for over a decade in Egypt, Syria and Iran. Together with his spouse, Maren, he pastors Charlottesville Mennonite Church in Virginia.
DPRK (North Korea)

MCC’s provision of humanitarian assistance during the 1994 famine in the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea (DPRK, or North Korea) initiated a quarter century relationship and over US$22 million in aid, assistance that has supported disaster responses, agricultural education and pediatric hospitals. While MCC has received wide recognition for this humanitarian work, we might also ask: Have these efforts furthered the “peace” element in MCC’s commitment to “relief, development, and peace in the name of Christ?” This question is critical in the context of MCC’s wider mission, as a lack of peace in the region has shaped life on the Korean peninsula for 70 years.

Prior to the outbreak of the Korean War in 1950, the Korean peninsula thrived for 1,300 years, united under a distinctive culture and language. In the 70 years since, however, ten million Koreans have lived permanently separated from their families. A formal peace agreement to end the war was never signed, leaving the peninsula split by a heavily militarized border and a bilaterally-enforced ban on cross-border travel and communication. Despite near complete isolation from one another, the longing for eventual reunification runs deep on both sides of the divide.

With this broader geopolitical context in mind, I propose to consider how MCC’s 25 years of humanitarian work in North Korea has provided a platform for a reconciliatory “peace witness” in three critical ways: people-to-people contact between North Korea, the U.S. and Canada, advocacy with the U.S. government and education work in South Korea.

First, as in any deep national division, political peace is critical. The absence of a peace treaty is an enormous barrier to a new future in Korea. Yet lasting peace also requires the overlooked work that scholar Cecelia Clegg calls “societal reconciliation” (Clegg 84). Speaking from her research into healing in Northern Ireland, Clegg argues that “there is no substitute for . . . a sustained level of new contact, the act of deliberately seeking out a meeting or encounter with the [threatening] ‘other’” (90). Sustained contact is precisely where MCC’s North Korea work has mattered in relation to what Clegg calls “the will to find out the truth about the ‘other’ [as] an essential dynamic in any reconciling process” (89).

Mutual isolation has created profound misunderstanding between people in North Korea and the U.S. In North Korea, dominant “enemy narratives” of the U.S. include the U.S. military’s indiscriminate bombing during the war and the complicity of U.S. missionaries in violence. But MCC’s relief work has provided a different face of both U.S. citizens and Christians. Over many years of face-to-face monitoring visits, MCC delegations have shared the story of where MCC’s canned meat comes from—not a factory, but from the hands of tens of thousands of volunteers and churches across Canada and the United States.

These encounters also defy the narratives held by many Canadian and U.S. Anabaptist constituencies accustomed only to threatening images of North Koreans. My work with MCC has introduced me to many North Koreans who are caring rather than threatening. I think, for example, of a dedicated tuberculosis sanitorium director who, while compassionately caring for his patients, eventually contracted and succumbed to the disease himself, as well as government officials who witnessed the impact of a U.S. couple’s work.
with cerebral palsy and approved the construction of provincial pediatric rehabilitation centers.

A second critical dimension of MCC’s peace witness in North Korea is political advocacy. Even today, 28,000 U.S. troops are stationed in South Korea. Economic and social collaboration on the peninsula is subject to the mercy of the United States. In 2017, the U.S. State Department banned travel by U.S. citizens to North Korea and the United Nations (under U.S. leadership) instituted sanctions severely limiting imports to North Korea. This threatened the sole avenues for aid to vulnerable North Korean people and endangered future diplomacy. Alongside other faith-based agencies, MCC engaged in direct advocacy to the U.S. government, pushing for humanitarian exemptions and to make signing a peace treaty a top priority in the ongoing U.S.-DPRK negotiations.

The third dimension of MCC’s peace witness on the Korean peninsula is its peace education in South Korea. Amid a hostile climate that has often condemned positive engagement toward North Korea, MCC’s presence has been catalytic as one of only a handful of agencies with work on both sides of the border. One South Korean pastor said his encounters with a Canadian agriculturalist who worked with MCC in DPRK “changed my concept about North Korea from missiles and ever-marching people of nationalistic madness to the same common people like us in South Korea.” Another young South Korean I know had grown up distant from the trauma of the Korean divide. Her indifference was challenged in college when she joined an InterVarsity Korea visit to the China-North Korea border. A boat ride to view the North offered her a sight many South Koreans never see: two North Koreans up close, two soldiers sitting on a beach. “One of them looked exactly like my brother,” she said. “Only then did I understand that we are one people.” This transformative experience led her to MCC’s IVEP program, an experience which shifted her career toward peacemaking.

If, as described here, MCC humanitarian work in North Korea has become a platform for peace witness, we might ask: witness to what? Perhaps to what scholar Marc Gopin describes as a distinctly Anabaptist approach to peacebuilding where true transformation requires building new relationships

During a 1998 visit to Pyongyang, DPRK, MCC staff member Kevin King learns about medicinal plants from Mrs. Kim at the city’s Botanical Gardens. (Photo courtesy of Kevin King)
over many years across divides. Such peace work bears witness to “the inherent moral value of building relationships” across divides and with adversaries where the “moment of relation becomes a moment of religious fulfillment, of imitatio dei, in [the case of Anabaptists] emulating Jesus. The person in relation becomes an end in herself” (Gopin, 242, 246). With U.S.-DPRK relations tense and fraught, such long-term relationship-building is more critical than ever.

Chris Rice is director of the MCC United Nations Office. Editorial assistance was provided by Abby Hershberger, communications and advocacy assistant at MCC’s UN Office in New York City.

Afghanistan

Oh, healing river, the anonymous song writer pens, send down your waters and wash the blood from off the sand. The cleansing power of a mighty river would be needed to wash the blood spilled in Afghanistan in the last two decades. The U.S. military counts nearly 2,400 service members lost. Afghanistan has paid a far higher price, with estimated Afghan civilian and military deaths totaling 100,000.

The opening volley in the war in Afghanistan came less than a month after the twin towers in New York City crumbled into a smoldering heap on September 11, 2001. The initial, publicly stated U.S. goal of the conflict in Afghanistan aimed to force the Taliban to hand over the September 11 mastermind, Osama bin Laden. The conflict continues almost two decades later, even though U.S. forces killed bin Laden in Pakistan in 2011.

For nearly one hundred years, MCC has sought to infuse its commitment to peacemaking into its global relief work. Underlying this ideal is the implicit understanding that all people are created and loved by God. God loves even those some may define as “enemies.”

Modern warfare creates new challenges for peacemakers. The twenty-first century wars waged by the U.S. present indistinct battlefield positions. Armed “enemy” combatants mingle and move along the same streets and highways with unarmed advocates of peace. While no stranger to complex and dangerous situations, MCC considered whether it should place workers in Afghanistan as the conflict escalated. Questions abounded. What are the limits of solidarity with those who have no choice but to live in conflict zones? What is a responsible stance for an international peace organization sending workers to places of dubious security? Does MCC’s long practice of seeking counsel about security from local partners apply in the highly volatile and dangerous context in Afghanistan? Despite these reservations, two MCC workers served with an MCC partner organization in Afghanistan in 2010 after the war began intensifying a few years earlier. Hannah Kirkbride worked with adult education and Glen Lapp worked in health care.

On August 5, 2010, MCC volunteer, Glen Lapp, and others working with MCC’s partner organization in Afghanistan began the journey back home from an eye care expedition to a rural area of Nuristan, in far northeastern Afghanistan. Nonlocal militants met the team when they returned to their parked vehicles. Ten team members lost their lives at the hands of these gunmen. Like MCC workers, MCC’s partner organization’s staff chose not to carry weapons to defend themselves. Investigators never determined a motive for the murders.

MCC is very much involved in peace-building in Afghanistan, and my hope is that MCC can continue along that vein and continue to help this country work towards peace on many different social, ethnic and economic levels.”
—Glen Lapp

God loves even those some may define as ‘enemies.’”
End-of-term preparations were already underway for Glen when he was killed. In a report prepared in July 2010, he articulated a rationale for his presence in Afghanistan: “Where I was [meaning Afghanistan] the main thing that expats can do is to be a presence in the country. Treating people with respect and with love and trying to be a little bit of Christ in this part of the world.”

Even amid human-induced calamity, Glen sought to find hope. “MCC is very much involved in peacebuilding in Afghanistan,” Glen emphasized, “and my hope is that MCC can continue along that vein and continue to help this country work towards peace on many different social, ethnic and economic levels.”

The tragic loss of Glen did not deter further placement of MCC workers in Afghanistan. After a short hiatus, new MCC workers arrived. The loss did heighten MCC’s awareness of new threats. Despite the 40 years of experience in Afghanistan, MCC’s partner organization had and an invitation to the eye care team from locals in Nuristan, the team did not return safely. Strong local relationships and security protocols can enhance security, but they provide no ultimate guarantees.

By the time of Glen Lapp’s memorial service ten days after his death, the hymn, “O Healing River,” had become “Glen’s song” among friends and family. A hearty rendition of the song echoed through the sanctuary at his memorial service in Lancaster, Pennsylvania. For many, the song reflected Glen’s dream. The text envisions a sprig of hope struggling to emerge from the desolation of suffering. No seed is growing in the barren land gives way to hope that deep roots nourish, and tall stalks rise. For MCC, the words of this hymn do not represent wishful thinking, but rather name a vision of what is possible, even in Afghanistan.

Ken Sensenig is associate executive director for MCC East Coast.
Iraq

We often think of two U.S.-led wars in Iraq. One began in January 1991 in response to the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait, ending just over a month later. The second Iraq war began in March 2003 and ended in December 2011. But it is more accurate to say that it was just one long war. The no-fly zones established over northern and southern Iraq from 1991 to 2003 included multiple air strikes and dozens of cruise missiles bombing Iraqi targets, coupled with a debilitating sanctions campaign and a long legacy of depleted uranium.

I arrived in the middle of this long war. From January 2004 to June 2006, I was the MCC Iraq program manager. My job had two components. First, I was to teach English at Babel College, a Chaldean Catholic college and seminary in Baghdad, the Iraqi capital. Second, I was tasked with cultivating relationships with potential MCC partners, whether churches, Islamic organizations or emerging local NGOs. In doing so, I was merely continuing the work that had begun in 1998 with Wanda Kraybill, the first MCCer in Iraq. From 1998 to 2003, Wanda, and later Carmen Pauls and then Edward Miller, were in Iraq as a gesture of solidarity, especially with the churches there. Placing these MCC workers in Iraq was a way of saying: “Not all Westerners share the U.S. government’s position and not all Christians in the U.S. think their citizenship is more important than their baptism.” MCCers worked alongside the Middle East Council of Churches, the Iraqi Red Crescent Society and the Australian branch of CARE to mitigate the effects of the U.S. sanctions and to call attention to the slow violence of depleted uranium munitions, but they did so with limited resources. Importantly, this was a time when there was virtually no Western presence in Iraq. The MCC difference was, first and foremost, simply being there as friend instead of enemy, despite our U.S. citizenship. We took a stand against the sanctions campaign, both as advocates at home in Washington, D.C., and through aid projects on the ground in Iraq.

But after the U.S.-led invasion of 2003, all that changed. Specifically, two things shifted dramatically and both made MCC’s position harder to maintain. First, instead of a few western NGOs with limited resources, Iraq was flooded with western NGOs with billions to spend. Instead of being a lone NGO in defiance of the international community’s aggression, MCC was now just one small cog in a giant aid industry. That industry, as I came to see it after I arrived in January 2004, had three distinct factions. The first were what we might call the “occupying NGOs,” indebted to USAID and the U.S. State Department and (some eagerly, some reluctantly) a key part of the U.S. war effort. The second was what I affectionately called the humanitarian fundamentalists. These were primarily European NGOs committed to the principled tradition of humanitarian neutrality that is best represented by the International Committee for the Red Cross (ICRC) and Médecins Sans Frontière (MSF). The third were the left-wing activist NGOs who were willing to abandon the neutrality of the second group in pursuit of their anti-war agenda.

MCC was an odd fit with these three groups. While philosophically, practically and socially most distant from the U.S. NGOs, we couldn’t get away from the fact that most of the MCCers involved were U.S. citizens. We became closest to the humanitarians and the activist NGOs, but for that to happen they had to overcome their wariness of both our citizenship and of our faith commitments.
The second change was that aid workers were now vulnerable in a way they had not been before 2004. In April of that year, the Iraqi insurgency began taking hostages. A Wikipedia page, “Foreign Hostages in Iraq,” lists over 200 hostages, the vast majority between 2004-2006. At least eight of those were close colleagues of MCC and of those eight, three were killed. It would be convenient if the ones kidnapped were the ones with the closest ties to the U.S. and the invading military coalition. But that wasn’t the case. It was the ICRC compound in Baghdad that was attacked in 2003. In the eyes of the insurgency, we were all enemies. In other words, it became harder to imagine that MCC, or any non-coalition aid agency, was either neutral or on the side of Iraqis. The whole notion of ‘sides’ had gotten scrambled.

Evacuated to Jordan, the humanitarian fundamentalist and activist NGOs had a standard explanation. “Humanitarian space,” the space in which aid agencies could carry out their mission to the most vulnerable, was only possible when aid agencies maintained their distance from the U.S. coalition power and when the U.S. coalition power respected that distance. Since so many NGOs had effectively become extensions of the occupation, whether willingly or because of USAID arm-twisting, that space no longer existed. In other words, the ICRC hadn’t been bombed because it was an enemy, but because the occupying NGOs had so muddied humanitarian space that it was no longer possible to tell the difference between the humanitarian fundamentalists and the occupation. In the space of just a year, MCC went from being the sole inhabitant of humanitarian space, to one of many organizations claiming humanitarian space, to witnessing the end of that space.

Meanwhile, the suffering of our Iraqi friends and colleagues increased exponentially. Caught between the coalition forces and the growing Iraqi insurgency, tens of thousands of Iraqis died and millions were displaced and remain displaced to this day. Those who remained had their lives disrupted and upended in all the countless ways that war wrecks societies—struggles to obtain food, healthcare, education and employment and lives of constant fear.

From my apartment in Jordan in 2005, communicating with Iraqi friends and colleagues by phone and email and learning daily about the deteriorating conditions, we weighed commitments to solidarity with Iraqis alongside the risks. The former won out and MCC agreed to let me return to Baghdad, to an apartment above the flat where members of Christian Peacemaker Teams lived. CPT had never left. But just a week before my return flight, four of those CPTers were kidnapped. One, the only U.S. citizen, Tom Fox, was killed. Fifteen years later, MCC Iraq still does not maintain a presence in Baghdad.

Peter Dula is professor of religion and culture at Eastern Mennonite University. He worked with MCC in Iraq from 2004-2006.
Participants at an interfaith workshop in Abeche, Chad, hosted by Ethics, Peace and Justice (EPJ) in 2016, discuss challenges to interfaith collaboration in their communities. MCC partnered with EPJ for over 20 years in peacebuilding initiatives, bringing Muslim, Protestant and Catholic leaders together to foster cooperation and community resilience. (MCC photo/Mark Tymm)

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