In its current strategic plan, MCC has committed to strengthen its efforts to build the capacity of the church and other partners in the collaborative work of relief, development and peacebuilding. This issue of Intersections explores MCC’s capacity building work with partners, including the ways in which partners build MCC’s capacities. “Capacity building” here refers to a broad range of activities that intentionally build on organizational strengths and address organizational gaps so that MCC and its partners might together achieve shared goals. MCC’s accompaniment approach to mutual partnership emphasizes partners determining their own long-term goals and project priorities. Focusing on partner-defined goals and priorities helps MCC ensure the work remains contextually relevant. MCC’s approach to capacity building does not begin from a deficit mentality, recognizing instead its partners’ many strengths as well as the ways in which partners build MCC’s own capacities.

Addressing capacity building with partners is not new to MCC. The initial article below traces decades-long discussions within MCC about partnership, capacity building, mutuality and power. A commitment to capacity-building has flowed from MCC’s long-term commitment to partnerships and to strengthening local churches and community-based organizations in developing sustainable programming, even as MCC has also underscored its desire for mutuality and for its own transformation through partnerships. An internal MCC study conducted in 2019 confirmed that MCC programs actively accompany partners in holistic capacity building, supporting partners in strengthening their governance systems, strategic planning, resource management, financial sustainability and resource mobilization, command of technical tools and networking. MCC staff, the study found, operate as mentors and trainers but more often as facilitators and connectors, linking partners with other organizations in their context and around the world undertaking similar work. Finally, this 2019 study revealed that MCC programs continue to strive for mutual transformation in partnerships with local churches and community-based organizations.

MCC partners have consistently expressed strong interest in building up their local, regional and global networks for shared learning, collaboration in advocacy and gaining access to potential funding. Two studies carried out in 2010 and 2013 by Keystone Accountability of how MCC’s partners assessed its performance as a partner found that MCC’s partners greatly
valued MCC supporting them to build networks and connections, prioritizing such assistance over help in developing administrative capacities and technical skills.

The remaining articles in this issue give insight to the shape of MCC’s current capacity building work. Authors explore different aspects of MCC’s partner capacity building work in Ukraine, Haiti, Nigeria, Nepal, Guatemala, Philadelphia and across Latin America and the Caribbean. Together, the articles highlight how long-term partnerships form the basis for meaningful capacity building with partners, ways in which MCC’s own capacities are built through partnership, the importance of responding to partners’ own priorities for capacity building and the role of networking and peer-to-peer exchanges in building organizational capacity.

Building partner capacity has played a central role in MCC’s programs across several decades, even if the language of capacity building only starts to become more prevalent over the past quarter century. Yet even as MCC has strengthened the skills and organizational capacities of its partners, MCC itself has been shaped and even transformed by these partnerships. Across the globe, MCC and its partners depend upon and learn from one another in the collaborative work of relief, development and peacebuilding.

Martha Kimmel worked from 2017 to 2021 as MCC’s learning and evaluation coordinator and previously served as MCC Nepal food security coordinator.

**Capacity building, presence and partnership**

While explicit discussion of “capacity building” surfaces within MCC in the mid-to-late 1990s, the roots of partner capacity building in MCC go deeper, at least as far back as the 1970s, when shifts within MCC away from program implementation toward partnership with local organizations began. In a series of “Development Monographs,” MCC leaders reflected disillusionment about the ability of international agencies like MCC to bring about development. “Outside agencies do not bring development,” Edgar Stoesz emphasized in 1975. Rather, he continued, development “is an indigenous process going on before [agencies like MCC] arrive. At best [outside agencies] accelerate its pace; at worst they frustrate it.” Rather than building up their own profiles or controlling development processes, Stoesz argued, the “highest goal” for MCC and other international development organizations should be “to strengthen institutions which are locally owned.” The call to “strengthen” locally-owned institutions flowed into later language of “capacity building.” Critical reflection by MCC staff on unidirectional, top-down development efforts sometimes resulted in more radical critiques. MCC Africa director Tim Lind, for example, contended in 1977 that MCC “must from the very beginning abdicate the executive power inherent in its position as implementor or planner.” From this more radical critique of the development enterprise, a missiology of “presence” emerged within MCC, with MCC staff called not to “bring development,” but instead to “be present” within communities around the globe, building relationships that MCC hoped would be “mutually transformative.”

By the late 1990s the language of “mutual transformation,” “presence,” and “capacity building” co-existed within MCC, if sometimes uneasily.
and then updated in 2008, declared that “MCC serves as a channel of interchange by building relationships that are mutually transformative,” while also naming “capacity building” as a priority, explaining that MCC “works to develop locally rooted sustainable capacities in food security, health, education, community services and income generation.”

An MCC Canada-commissioned study completed in 1999 by an external evaluator, Lawrence Cummings, examined how MCC programs globally worked at “capacity building” for local organizations, while noting some internal tension between “capacity building” and “presence” within MCC. MCC Canada had arranged for the study in response to a report from the Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA) that critiqued MCC for paying insufficient attention to building the capacities of the local organizations with which it worked. With CIDA providing significant resources to MCC’s global program, addressing this critique was pressing. Cummings’ study, which built on interviews with staff across MCC and case studies of several MCC programs, named issues and questions that MCC continues to wrestle with as it thinks about partner capacity building today.

The study defined “capacity building” as “the strengthening of knowledge, skills, organizational structures, values, policies and all of the elements that make for effective organizations and communities.” Cummings noted that the language of “capacity building” had in some MCC and broader circles come to be viewed as different from “development,” with the latter carrying neocolonial connotations that the former supposedly avoided. Capacity building, Cummings noted, aimed at “sustainability,” understood as “the ability of organizations to sustain themselves and their activities over a significant period of time.”

Some MCC staff interviewed by Cummings warned of the danger of “imperialistic capacity building.” Was MCC supporting partners in building capacities that they themselves prioritized? “Who determines the capacity?” Cummings asked. “What kind of capacity is being imposed?” some worried. Meanwhile, Cummings observed that in some parts of MCC an emphasis on “presence” meant “giving up rights to establishing” direction: capacity building, in contrast, seemed to represent an attempt by MCC to set direction. Cummings suggested that this seeming tension could be resolved within the context of MCC’s commitment to long-term partnerships. By being “present” in communities for the long haul and by fostering long-term partnerships, MCC could be responsive to the capacity building priorities identified by partners rather than unilaterally imposing MCC’s capacity building priorities on partners.

As MCC collaborates today with churches, community-based organizations and other partners on building their capacities, MCC undeniably brings its own perspectives on what capacities its partner organizations need to strengthen. At the same time, MCC seeks to respond to partners’ priorities for how they hope to enhance their work and their management systems—and MCC recognizes that durable, meaningful capacity building is not a one-way street, but that MCC itself is strengthened, shaped and even transformed through its partnerships. How to foster mutually transformative partnerships, how to follow partners’ leads while also being transparent about MCC’s priorities and directions: these are questions that remain very much alive for MCC today as it collaborates with partners on building capacity together.

Alain Epp Weaver directs strategic planning for MCC.
A holistic approach to capacity building with partners in Ukraine

In Ukraine, MCC actively organizes different events for its Ukrainian partners for them to build their capacities by sharing experiences with and learning from one another, while also receiving trainings on different topics. These capacity building events have assisted partners in analyzing their work from new perspectives. The events also function to build relationships and networks among organizations engaged in similar relief, development and peacebuilding work: partners routinely report that these events are refreshing, revitalizing and affirming. In this article, we discuss how MCC has engaged the Point of Return peacebuilding club by encouraging its participation in MCC-organized partner capacity building events, examining the impact these events have had on the club and on MCC.

MCC has devoted significant attention to supporting peacebuilding initiatives in Ukraine in recent years. The program seeks to build bridges and to promote listening, mutual respect and care for trauma as the undeclared war in Ukraine that started in 2014 and continues today has increasingly shaped Ukrainian society. Unaddressed traumatic experiences from this conflict have changed people’s lives. As MCC’s Ukrainian partners started to respond to the conflict, they recognized the importance of understanding the psychological effects of the war on their own staff and the people they sought to serve. From among MCC’s partners, the Point of Return peacebuilding club was one of the first to respond to the psychosocial needs created by the conflict. Point of Return mobilized to help veterans and victims of the armed conflict readapt to peaceful civilian life through trauma healing and the promotion of tolerance and peacebuilding strategies.

MCC has worked to build Point of Return’s staff and organizational capacities in multiple ways. Starting in 2015, MCC organized a series of peacebuilding trainings for Ukrainian partners dedicated to supporting people suffering from the trauma of war. Point of Return staff joined these sessions, which included trainings led by MCC staff with first-hand knowledge of peacebuilding and trauma healing initiatives in the Balkans. Facilitators from Croatia and Bosnia and Herzegovina shared their own experiences dealing with the consequences of war and in turn encouraged partners to share their knowledge and understanding about the interrelationship between peacebuilding and trauma. Iryna Dmytriv, the founder of Point of Return, reported that the training she attended left her feeling revitalized and ready to continue the difficult work of trauma response: thanks to the training, she observed, “I understood that there was good rain over my Sahara Desert.” These peacebuilding trainings helped staff from Point of Return and other partners emotionally survive and move forward in their work to help suffering people. Olga Babakova, another Point of Return staff person, reported that the trainings equipped her with skills to address her own trauma. Point of Return, like other MCC partners in Ukraine, operate in potentially traumatizing environments: for staff to have the skills to address their own trauma is crucial for these organizations’ abilities to continue their work.

MCC-organized peacebuilding trainings and summits also facilitated networking and knowledge sharing among MCC partners. Point of Return staff valued the chance to get to know new people and learn more about the program initiatives and strategies of other organizations assisting vulnerable
people. MCC has found that formal learning opportunities are not the only form of capacity building: MCC’s partners value MCC-organized learning summits because they give partner staff time to rest, reduce stress and learn from one another.

MCC Ukraine has also organized learning exchanges for its peacebuilding partners, including opportunities for Point of Return staff to visit peacebuilding organizations in different Balkan countries to learn about how they have worked to help communities cope with the trauma of war and its aftermath. Point of Return project manager Sergey Shapovalov valued seeing the fruit of peacebuilding work in the Balkans, sharing that “it was inspiring for me to see how people abroad do this work as they have long-standing experience.”

Point of Return staff have underscored that MCC’s accompaniment model has helped them build capacity, stating that MCC accompanied them “softly but constantly.” Learning how to develop project proposals and progress reports assisted the organization to deepen its skills and grow. Through steady, one-on-one accompaniment, alongside organizing a variety of facilitated trainings and peer-to-peer networking and learning events, MCC in Ukraine implements a multifaceted partner capacity building strategy that strengthens partners’ abilities to work for peace and healing amidst conflict.

Iryna Degtiarova (senior project coordinator) and Andriy Chaus (program manager) work with MCC in Ukraine.

**Long-term commitment to sustainable community development and capacity building in Haiti**

In 2018, a decades-long history of MCC support for reforestation and food security in the Desarmes area of Haiti’s Artibonite Valley culminated in the establishment of an independent Haitian organization, Konbit Peyizan, that assumed responsibility for these efforts. This journey toward independence took place over many years and provides a useful case study of how local organizational capacities can be built over time.

**Where it all began:** Before Konbit Peyizan, there was MCC Desarmes. MCC began working in the Artibonite Department of Haiti in 1982, focusing on community development and working with community members classified by the government as vulnerable. Over 60 percent of Haiti’s labor force is active in the agricultural sector: reliance on agricultural livelihoods is especially the case in this rural part of Haiti where many people are small-share farmers (called *peyizans* in Haitian *kreyòl*). These farmers have traditionally depended on the rains to water their farms, all with the hope of producing enough to feed their families. However, over the past decades these *peyizans* have faced momentous challenges as Haiti’s agrarian landscapes have changed due to deforestation, soil erosion and desertification: agricultural production has decreased while the country’s food insecurity and reliance on imports have increased.

**Assessing the needs:** In the early 1980s, MCC conducted a survey of the Artibonite valley that identified the greatest need in the region as reforestation.
The widespread practice of burning farmlands was depleting soil nutrients, while the common practice of free grazing livestock significantly spurred deforestation. Tree cover in the region and across Haiti also faced massive depletion in these years under the Duvalier dictatorship, as the government cut down trees on the pretext of preventing so-called political rebels from hiding amongst the trees. Additionally, heavy reliance on wood products for household use and commercial sale threatened local trees. Deforestation severely disrupted the soil and water cycle that Haiti’s farmers relied on. Trees' leaves had fertilized the soil and had released moisture that in turn formed rain clouds, while trees' roots held the soil and channeled water into the ground.

**Getting down to business:** In 1983, MCC decided to focus on reforestation and agriculture initiatives in the Desarmes area. The reforestation work was primarily carried out by MCC Haitian staff with training in forestry and managed by MCC staff based in the towns of La Chapelle and Deschapelles. Initially, MCC did not place significant emphasis on rigorously tracking how these initiatives reduced vulnerability in villages in the Desarmes area, but over time MCC began training its Haitian staff to monitor and track that impact.

MCC’s work in the Desarmes area continued throughout and despite the disruptions caused by political upheaval and oppression of the late 1980s and 90s. For much of this period, an expatriate MCC staff person was responsible for planning, monitoring, evaluating and budgeting all activities implemented by the program’s Haitian staff. Then in 1997, in an effort to build local capacity, MCC transferred the role of reforestation program coordinator to Jean Remy Azor, a Haitian from Desarmes who had worked with MCC’s reforestation program since 1982. This change in leadership empowered the MCC Desarmes team which in turn allowed for more effective programming, building of local leadership and stronger community ties.

**Planning, monitoring and evaluation (PME):** In 2014, MCC added Raquel Conde Guevara as PME coordinator to its Desarmes team, tasked to build the team’s capacity to plan for and report on its work in ways that measured and tracked the impact of MCC’s reforestation work. MCC had identified that strengthening the team’s capacities in such outcomes-based PME was needed for better communication of the program’s impact to existing and potential donors. The PME coordinator coached the team on project assessment and design, processes for monitoring and evaluating outcomes and budgeting and reporting processes. The MCC team in Desarmes had previously faced challenges working with international donors such as Canadian Food Grains Bank (CFGB). Through weekly staff meetings and regular workshops on these core project management skills, the team’s capacity to meet the planning and reporting expectations of external donors such as CFGB grew.

**Konbit Peyizan:** In 2018, after three years of MCC providing focused organizational capacity building support to the Desarmes team, MCC Desarmes gained autonomy as an independent organization called Konbit Peyizan. The konbit is a communal agricultural work day in which farmers come together to work on common initiatives: the name Konbit Peyizan captures the new organization’s commitment to collective effort for the sake of food security and sustainable livelihoods. From 2015 until 2018, MCC dedicated significant staff time to providing training and support for the MCC team in Desarmes in developing financial systems and building
capacity in resource mobilization and fundraising, thus preparing the team to become independently established. MCC also worked with Konbit Peyizan to recruit a Haitian from Desarmes to assume organization-wide responsibility for maintaining and further developing PME processes. Finding someone who not only possessed the necessary skills and technical background, but who could also work well with the team, which functioned as a close-knit family, was essential. The recruitment process was fortunately a success: the PME coordinator selected was from the Desarmes area and was familiar with the history of MCC.

**Continuing Efforts:** Konbit Peyizan director Jean Remy Azor expresses pride in the work that MCC and now Konbit Peyizan have accomplished over almost four decades in the Desarmes region. “All the trainings and all the knowledge MCC shared with us are seeds that were planted that today are rising—they are growing and continuing to bear a lot of fruit in the community,” Azor shares. MCC and the now independent Konbit Peyizan will continue to journey together in mutual partnership for the sake of sustainable community development for marginalized communities in Desarmes.

Naomi Docilait is MCC Haiti advisor for monitoring, evaluation and partner capacity building.

## Advocacy, mutual empowerment and capacity building

Transformative change involves work at multiple levels. Humanitarian relief and peacebuilding programs aim both at addressing root causes of conflict and violence and at meeting the needs of vulnerable populations. According to John Paul Lederach, work aimed at these different levels shares a view of conflict as a dynamic process and peacebuilding as diversity of interdependent elements and actions that together contribute to the constructive transformation of conflict.

Holistic change remains remote when policies and other socio-political factors that obstruct programming goals are unaddressed through reflective advocacy. Advocacy represents an essential tool of humanitarian relief, development and peacebuilding programming. Alongside and as part of such initiatives, advocacy aims to change root causes of injustice while ensuring dignity. Advocacy is a necessary tool in the work to achieve wellbeing for the common good, both locally and globally. Through advocacy, organizations like MCC speak truth to power, motivate the agency of actors with capacities for change and coordinate with local partners to collaboratively influence structures and systems both locally and internationally. MCC’s advocacy for peacebuilding in Nigeria provides a useful case study of intertwined advocacy and peacebuilding efforts at the local and international levels. This case study demonstrates that shared learning and peacebuilding aims can mutually empower MCC and our partners.

MCC’s strategic form of advocacy with Nigerian partners weaves together a unique set of stakeholders, including religious actors, and facilitates an authentic space for shared power to influence government policies. MCC’s commitment to asset-based community development lends authenticity to its advocacy efforts. John Gaventa underscores that the task of changing power relationships within a given context entails knowing where and...
how to engage. MCC’s work in Nigeria to nurture holistic change through humanitarian relief, development and peacebuilding is shaped by a rich heritage of Anabaptist values and a history of building trust and prioritizing human dignity. Over the past decades, MCC has built a network of close partnerships with Nigerian organizations that in turn strengthens MCC’s advocacy efforts in the United States.

The collaborative connection between MCC’s advocacy work in Washington, D.C., and MCC’s peacebuilding program in Nigeria has led to deepened engagement by MCC with U.S. policymakers. These connections include advocacy capacity trainings with local partners in Nigeria alongside sharing those partners’ insights with congressional staffers as well as with State Department and USAID officials in Washington. MCC’s partnership with Emergency Preparedness Response Teams (EPRT) to organize student peace clubs in seventeen local government areas (counties) of Plateau State, Nigeria, represents a strong example of peacebuilding collaboration that in turn has strengthened joint MCC-EPRT advocacy efforts. The peace clubs aim to transform the mindsets of youth against all forms of bias and to cultivate trust-building, positive attitudes and mutual relationships. Ethnoreligious and communal violence impact the growth and development of youth academically, economically and morally. Over the years, MCC and EPRT have heard from school officials, community leaders and external evaluators about how EPRT peace clubs have reduced incidences of bullying, communal tensions and ethno-religiously motivated conflict in schools in Plateau State.

MCC advocacy staff in Washington, D.C., meanwhile, have facilitated trainings for EPRT staff on how to advocate for peace within their local political context. These trainings addressed the importance of rooting advocacy in a commitment to human dignity and to informing advocacy efforts by robust analyses of local contextual factors and power dynamics. The trainings also equipped participants with skills to plan and execute local advocacy campaigns that targeted local leaders. Following this training, EPRT successfully advocated with policymakers, traditional and religious leaders and teachers in Plateau State to permit peace education and peace clubs within the college curriculum for the region.

Parallel to MCC’s work with peace clubs in Nigeria, MCC advocacy staff in Washington, D.C., have advocated for a demilitarized response to violence and for increasing poverty-focused development assistance to Nigeria from the United States. EPRT resourced these public policy advocacy efforts by providing MCC information about the context on the ground, which helped build the advocacy narrative around the need for change. MCC’s relationship with EPRT has supported the Washington office’s analysis and understanding of the Nigerian context and the systems of power that shape it.

Mutuality and accompaniment are indispensable pillars on which MCC’s advocacy rests. MCC and its partners help each other to be alert and responsive to contextual shifts and to adapt accordingly as effective agents for change. As MCC and EPRT support each other’s advocacy efforts, we strengthen our capacities to sustain our effectiveness in nurturing a just peace and a better world.

Charles Kwuelum is MCC U.S. senior legislative associate for international affairs.


Building financial capacity for community-based organizations in Nepal

Throughout its 100 years of service, MCC has upheld the importance of developing close, trusting relationships with partners. In Nepal, as in most of MCC’s global contexts, MCC implements projects exclusively through local partners working in highly marginalized communities. While all partners are Nepali non-profit organizations, each has its own unique strategy, structure and capacities. Over the past years, MCC in Nepal has devoted increased attention to building the organizational capacities of its local partners, with a special focus on financial management.

Capacity building is core to MCC’s relationships with its partners in Nepal. Opportunities for capacity growth are particularly important for small community-based organizations with limited funds for professional development. Partners’ capacity building needs and priorities are identified via MCC surveys completed by partner staff coupled with MCC staff members’ on-the-ground observations during project visits. The types of needs identified through this process are often wide-ranging: from technical skills like nutrition and financial management, to broader concepts like leadership and governance and incorporation of key values (like participation and inclusivity) into partners’ operations and programs. Relevant topics are then ranked and incorporated into annual partner workshops and trainings. Depending on the topic and type of event, MCC invites select management staff, project staff and/or board members from the partner to participate.

While MCC has always offered a range of capacity building events to partners, in recent years MCC in Nepal has taken specific steps toward offering more robust financial management capacity building opportunities. It is one thing to simply give financial grants to partners, and quite another to engage collaboratively to ensure transparent and effective use of resources intended for the benefit of those in great need. To help partner organizations grow their financial capacity, the MCC finance team offers a range of support, including monitoring visits, one-on-one mentoring for partner accountants and biannual gatherings for partners’ finance staff.

First, annual financial monitoring visits to each partner’s field office and working areas give MCC staff insights into the partner’s financial management strengths and areas of growth. These visits include formal assessment of the partner’s financial processes and verification of project-specific expenses, records and documentation. The finance team also asks questions about governance and accountability, as these have direct correlations to transparent use of funds. Partner visits also offer informal opportunities for MCC staff to discuss and correct errors, mitigate possible risks and assess project activities and inputs from the perspective of financial efficacy. After each visit, MCC staff prepare a report with recommendations and collaborate with the partner to develop a support plan. This report can be used to follow up and determine areas of growth over the next year.

A key component of a partner support plan is one-on-one mentoring, particularly for organizations whose staff have limited experience in the accounting field. For these organizations, an intensive period of three to five days is set aside during partner visits by MCC staff to focus on accounting
MCC has found that partner accountants tend to have limited opportunities for professional development and exposure to the operations of peer organizations. During Sharing and Learning Together meetings, partner accountants gather for one or two days to share their learnings and the challenges they faced during implementation of MCC-supported projects.”

Financial capacity is a critical component of MCC’s overall focus in Nepal on mutual learning between MCC and its partners. It not only supports transparent and effective use of MCC funds but also supports good governance, policy formation, leadership development and organizational sustainability. Ultimately, opportunities for learning and growth reflect MCC’s commitment to supporting relief and development programs that honor the gifts and dignity of each person.

Asha Nepali Gurung is MCC Nepal director of operations and organizational development. Daphne Fowler served as MCC representative in Nepal from 2017 to 2020.

Mutuality and capacity building with Indigenous partners in Guatemala

Mutuality, accompaniment and capacity building are core tenets of MCC’s work worldwide. These principles, understood within the framework of MCC’s commitment to focus its resources on the most vulnerable populations, are what inform both MCC’s decision in Guatemala to prioritize partnerships with Indigenous churches and grassroots organizations and to pay careful attention to how such partnerships are carried out. The complex ethno-racial landscape and history of Guatemala provide necessary context for understanding how long-term MCC relationships with these organizations...
have produced mutual learning that decolonizes MCC’s work and strengthens local communities.

Guatemala is a culturally, ethnically and linguistically diverse country. Around half of the population identifies as belonging to one of 21 Mayan Indigenous groups. Official government statistics collapse this diversity into four official racial identities: Mayan, Xinca (a non-Mayan Mesoamerican Indigenous group), Garifuna (a Caribbean Afro-Indigenous group) and ladino, with the latter referring to the population with mixed European and Indigenous ancestry who choose not to identify as Indigenous. This ethnographic backdrop is crucial to understanding Guatemala’s history of racial division and oppression.

Over the last 500 years, Indigenous groups in Guatemala have suffered three principal invasions of their ancestral lands: the arrival of the Spanish, massive displacement caused by liberal policies favoring European and ladino plantation owners at the turn of the twentieth century and widespread massacres perpetrated by the government during the 36-year civil war that lasted until 1996. In recent years, Indigenous leaders have identified the increased proliferation of evangelical Christian churches and international NGOs as a fourth invasion and the arrival of mining and hydroelectric megaprojects as a fifth (Batz 1016). The legacy of these invasions manifests in the profound socioeconomic inequality that continues today.

MCC in Guatemala has a history of long-term relationships with partners across five different Indigenous groups, including with the Kekchi Mennonite Church, dating back to the 1980s. Long-term accompaniment with these partners has fostered trust and allowed these relationships to endure significant staff turnover and changes in leadership. Importantly, MCC’s accompaniment model and focus on mutuality have permitted the ongoing strengthening of these relationships despite wariness caused by the above-mentioned so-called “fourth invasion” of NGOs and the ensuing proyectismo, a Spanish-language neologism that refers to the recent wave of development projects focused on short-term outputs in lieu of sustainable and culturally pertinent change.

In the Guatemalan context in which economic migration, climate change, political corruption and cultural imperialism represent increasing threats to Indigenous ways of life, MCC’s commitment to listen to the people where it works is essential. Indigenous partners have helped MCC understand how its areas of work connect to their struggle for cultural revindication. A clear example of this is MCC Guatemala’s support of agroecology projects with its Maya Mam and Ixil partners. Over many years, these partners have taught MCC the importance of food sovereignty. Food sovereignty resists western industrialized agriculture, which relies on pesticide-dependent hybrid seeds and has contributed to an influx of intermediary vendors who sell non-organic produce from other regions at lower prices, undercutting the economic potential of local small-scale agriculture. The work of MCC’s partners centers around organic production, recovering native seeds and strengthening the local solidarity economy. This focus has helped MCC think beyond food security solutions to support interventions that strengthen social cohesion and foster a sense of place while simultaneously combatting chronic malnutrition. While MCC Guatemala generally refers to these projects as agroecology interventions, many of the techniques are better understood as ancestral practices taught as part of a larger struggle to recover and sustain Indigenous campesino identity.
In addition to bolstering MCC’s capacity to connect its work in Guatemala to the local context, mutual learning from accompanying Indigenous partners has informed MCC’s continuous effort to decolonize its work. This effort permeates all dimensions of MCC’s Guatemala program. Planning, monitoring and evaluation activities focus on giving local partners the necessary tools and knowledge to take ownership of these processes and adapt them to their contexts. For example, MCC and partners have redesigned reporting templates based on partner input and have contracted trusted Indigenous development experts for project evaluations. MCC’s eleven month young adult service programs, SALT and YAMEN, place participants with Indigenous partners to form and deepen connections across cultural, linguistic and geographical divides. The new Seed program in the area will place young adults for two years of service with churches and community-based organizations working with Indigenous youth who are navigating the challenges of fashioning their own version of Indigenous identity. Finally, MCC Guatemala recently embarked on a participatory process with its partners to establish a set of ethical standards that connect MCC’s code of conduct to its interactions with local and Indigenous peoples.

Alongside Indigenous partners’ contributions to MCC’s capacity to implement its vision in the Guatemalan context, MCC seeks to strengthen partners’ organizational capacities through culturally relevant accompaniment. MCC Guatemala is committed to serving as an ente articulador (networking body or relational platform). This means facilitating connections and relationships among partners and with outside organizations that lead to capacity building. One example of this work is connecting the Maya Mam and Ixil partners working in food sovereignty to each other, which has led to rich encounters and even direct trainings. Another example is MCC facilitating a workshop led by a Tz’utujil partner with years of experience receiving MCC and other learning tours to train women from a Kekchi church partner on intercultural hosting.

While work remains to strengthen the capacities of MCC Guatemala and its Indigenous partners, a shared commitment to mutual learning and accompaniment has nurtured reciprocity and trust within these relationships over many years. While this trust and mutuality do not guarantee any particular development outcome, they do provide MCC Guatemala a deeper and fuller understanding of the people with which it works. This, in turn, pushes MCC Guatemala to ask the right questions and face the right dilemmas in its own decolonization work and in its mission to contribute to sustainable change through local partners.

James Helmuth is the planning, monitoring and evaluation coordinator for MCC Guatemala and El Salvador.

**Collaborating with partners in Philadelphia for mutual capacity building**

MCC’s program in Philadelphia carries out various ministries of relief, development and peace in the name of Christ. MCC has multiple partners in Philadelphia. One is the Greater Philadelphia Anabaptist Kingdom Builders Network, also known as KBN, a network of Anabaptist churches and

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ministries. The second is the Solidarity Christian Community Development Association (SCCDA). SCCDA primarily assists with the adjustment of status process for Haitian immigrants. In Philadelphia, we provide material relief such as the distribution of food boxes to churches that care for families in need and prison care kits with basic hygiene items for people in prison. We walk with immigrant families in the greater Philadelphia area through our churches, connecting them to services and resources in the city. We raise awareness among MCC’s constituents about the devastating impact of mass incarceration on individuals, families and communities and about the need for humane immigration policies. Through our prison ministry advocate and chaplain, Ron Muse, MCC shares God’s peace in prison. Partnership—especially partnership with Anabaptist churches—is essential in carrying out MCC’s mission in Philadelphia. MCC supports the work of its Philadelphia-based partners by building their capacity to provide direct services to immigrant families, vulnerable communities and formerly incarcerated individuals returning to our community.

Collaborating with partners is important in our ministry of service and reconciliation. Our work of community building is peace work, and this is the ministry of reconciliation—restoring hope and dignity, healing relationships and building community. This is not work you do alone, it is work you do with others. In collaboration with local Anabaptist churches and community-based organizations, MCC serves marginalized families and advocates for the oppressed. Our program works with the church to serve the church—listening to congregations and walking with congregations as we resource each other in our service. This also involves creating platforms to raise awareness amongst MCC’s diverse constituents about the barriers to peace and justice in Philadelphia and highlights how local Anabaptist congregations and partners are working to dismantle these barriers.

One of the ways we have collaborated with and built capacity for our partners in Philadelphia is through our annual Martin Luther King (MLK) Service Day, an event in which MCC and KBN commemorate Dr. King by remembering those in prison too often forgotten by society. The commemoration aims to restore hope and dignity both to formerly incarcerated individuals returning to communities from prison (returning citizens) and to the communities receiving these returning citizens. On this service day, formerly incarcerated individuals share their stories, experience and heart. The event raises awareness of the impact of mass incarceration while connecting congregations to local organizations and networks committed to serving those in prison and returning citizens. In addition, it serves as a platform for our local partners to share of their work in and outside prison. The service day brings churches, partners and community together through the practical act of assembling basic hygiene items into care kits to distribute to prisoners.

MCC’s capacities are also built through this collaboration. In 2020, opportunities from networking at the MLK Service Days allowed our prison ministry advocate, Ron Muse, to expand the services MCC provides people in prison. Muse formed connections that made it possible for MCC to bring formerly incarcerated individuals into prison to speak with and empower people still in prison about possibilities after incarceration. We were also able to distribute over 500 care kits to men and women in prison in Philadelphia. The connections Muse developed at the service day also resulted in MCC being invited into prison to lead MCC’s “You Got Booked” learning exercise with incarcerated individuals: the feedback they gave on this tool sharpened

Volunteers and community members gathered to pack prisoner care kits at an MCC East Coast Mass Incarceration Service Day event at The City School (Poplar Campus) in Philadelphia on January 20, 2020. Attendees of all ages celebrated Martin Luther King, Jr. Day by enjoying performances by local dance groups, exploring the topic of mass incarceration in the United States, hearing from a panel of formerly incarcerated individuals and community leaders and assembling basic hygiene items into care kits for those in prison. (MCC photo/Andrew Bodden)
MCC’s understanding of how to use the exercise more effectively as an education tool designed to raise awareness about mass incarceration and to motivate further engagement and advocacy. Through the MCC-organized service day, MCC fosters collaborative connections among its local partners. It also strengthens its own relationships within Philadelphia’s Anabaptist community and deepens MCC’s ability to advocate in partnership with churches for peace and justice.

The COVID-19 pandemic has also revealed the centrality of collaborative and mutually supportive partnerships to MCC’s work in Philadelphia. During this past year, the need for accessible COVID-19 testing in low-income, immigrant-dense neighborhoods was pressing. MCC has collaborated with a local health clinic to ensure that frequent and free COVID-19 testing was made available to immigrant and other vulnerable families through mobile testing sites. The increased access to testing in turn decreased anxiety while also providing people with information about how to access other health services. MCC also collaborated with other local service providers who assisted families with Workers’ Relief funds available in Philadelphia (emergency direct cash assistance to workers and families impacted by COVID-19 but left out of federal and state relief programs). In total, MCC and its partners assisted over 60 families in accessing this vital resource. In collaborating with local non-profit service providers to respond to the health and humanitarian needs generated by the COVID-19 pandemic, MCC’s networks have expanded and deepened.

The main work of MCC’s program in Philadelphia is to build bridges and connect partners and churches to resources in the community. MCC convenes spaces to bring people together for discussion, education, resourcing and community building. MCC’s capacity to fulfill our vision is also built through learnings in these collaborative spaces. Collaborative partnership is essential to provide effective, meaningful service in the city. In 1 Corinthians 12:17, the Apostle Paul talks about the body and the roles different parts play to function as a body. Collaborating with others is important, but it is also hard work. Collaboration involves visioning, conflict resolution, trust, teamwork, patience, prayer and more: however, when done well, community bonds are strengthened, the capacities of our partners are built and everyone benefits.

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Learning by letting go and linking partners

MCC’s partnership accompaniment model can present challenges for MCC staff as we learn to let go of power. At the same time, shifting from MCC as the doer toward MCC acting as a connector, an organization that links locally-led organizations who in turn build each other’s capacities, offers learning both for partner organizations and MCC.

I have personally experienced the learning that can take place through letting go. In 1996, I moved to Colombia to serve with MCC through the Colombian Mennonite Church’s Justice and Peace organization—JUSTAPAZ—as a highly successful university graduate, but with no practical competency in working for peace in complex and ever-changing situations. My Colombian colleagues...
gave their lives for peace and navigated challenges with boundless creativity, skill and a web of connections that helped change happen. I wanted to be an expert, but little of what I knew was relevant in the context, so I had to release some power and let colleagues guide me. Letting go was not an easy task.

MCC has mirrored this letting go process at the organizational level. When I became the MCC representative in Colombia in 2001, MCC’s global shift from implementing programs in communities around the world toward supporting the work of locally-initiated and -led organizations was well under way. Shifting towards a “partnership model,” or what has recently been termed localization in humanitarian and development circles, required an international non-governmental organization (INGO) like MCC to significantly change its approach. This existential transition is much more complex for organizations than for individuals. Organizations must ask: “What can we still bring to the table? Just money? Who has expertise and how is this shared? Who leads? How do we accompany and build together differently?”

MCC has not been alone in working through this type of transition. While studying the root causes of “development failure” in Asia in the late 1980s, David C. Korten brought insight to these questions and suggested that there are four generations of development strategy. INGOs shift from being “doers” (first generation) towards becoming trainers or mobilizers (second generation). Then, INGOs gradually move towards the third and fourth generation as catalysts and as connectors or networkers. When development organizations change from functioning as external direct actors to become facilitators, they also must let go of some control and power.

MCC programs in Latin America and the Caribbean have tried to take on the role of catalyst and connector by organizing regional partners encounters, among other strategies. Since 2014, MCC has facilitated five learning encounters for the staff of MCC’s partner organizations across the region. These encounters have addressed critical issues with which MCC’s partners are grappling: urban peacebuilding, advocacy, food security, education and migration. Each event brought together an average of 28 participants, from a total of 14 different countries (Mexico, Guatemala, El Salvador, Honduras, Nicaragua, Costa Rica, Cuba, Haiti, Colombia, Ecuador, Bolivia, Paraguay, Canada and the United States). I offer here three key observations about the strengths of connecting partners, based on the post-gathering evaluations by participants of these encounters.

**Learning from diversity:** Partners place high value on these encounters as a space for brainstorming ideas, sharing concerns, learning from the richness of other experiences and discovering diverse perspectives. An average of 75% of participants named idea exchange as the primary value of the encounters. The range of perspectives expressed during partner encounters has sometimes covered the entire spectrum of possibilities. For example, the food security encounter included a participant with little concern about deforestation, many partners actively involved in reforestation and another partner who criticized reforestation as capitalist intervention because forests reforest themselves when left on their own. Not everyone concurred on the importance of addressing deforestation to ensure food security and not all agreed about reforestation as an effective strategy, but everyone learned to imagine the world from other viewpoints.

Partners also learn to appreciate diversity beyond the focus of the encounter. At the migration encounter, a church leader from an evangelical Anabaptist church interacted with other participants who passionately shared from their Catholic or Indigenous spirituality. At the end of the encounter, this church leader shared that the experience led her to see the value of faith writ large, beyond her own theological perspective. Approximately one third of participants in the regional encounters have mentioned these kinds of additional insights, transcending the knowledge gained about a specific topic.

Sharing expertise: When organizing these partner encounters, MCC has structured the agenda to facilitate horizontal sharing between participants instead of primarily listening to outside “experts.” While a small percentage of participants have noted the value of having “experts to validate our experience,” most participants have observed favorably that MCC has empowered them to value their own knowledge and experiences. Comments in evaluations have included “I like the method of sharing from our own experiences as if we were experts,” and “We can learn from the contributions among ourselves. We are similar organizations so we can take adaptable experiences back home.”

Sharing hope: While addressing complex and entrenched socio-economic, cultural and political obstacles to positive social change, despair comes easily. Partners affirm that the MCC-facilitated encounters help them experience hope by realizing that they are not alone. “There are many others doing the same work as I am,” shared one encounter participant. Partners talk about leaving the encounters with “hope, energy, motivation, and new friends and allies.” One participant put this component into perspective by observing that “we need to make sure that everyone has hope in collective efforts, and this [hope] is more important than only providing training and information.”

Giving direction: MCC has been shaped and guided by these partner encounters. Listening to the diversity of participants at the encounters means that we are not building programs on based on the personal whims of MCC or solely on external analysis, but from collective and contextually-rooted voices. In this process, we take steps forward together. For example, the advocacy encounter in 2015 helped identify migration as a thematic priority for MCC, based on partner voices. Subsequently, the migration encounter helped define a succinct message for our work related to migration: “everyone has the right to roots; everyone has the right to dignity.” Together, MCC and our partners have built up our capacities to focus our programs and concentrate energy and resources towards change. MCC partners have helped us to learn how to put theory into practice by sharing power.

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