A feeding kitchen in a lumber mill represents one of the earliest relief responses of the fledgling MCC in southern Russia (present-day Ukraine) in the early 1920s. Hunger stalked communities in southern Russia during these years. Mennonites and their neighbours were bent under the triple burdens of violent conflict, typhus and famine. To this day, thousands of descendants of the families that lived through these conditions a century ago recall how corn meal porridge served in these feeding kitchens symbolized both an outpouring of God’s love from distant sisters and brothers and the difference between life and death for their parents, grandparents and extended family.

In this special centennial issue of Intersections, authors explore ways that MCC has extended relief assistance in the name of Christ in scores of countries around the world over the past one hundred years. Articles cover the breadth of the MCC century: from this first and founding relief effort in southern Russia; to relief and reconstruction efforts undertaken by MCC Pax workers in post-World War II Europe; to partnership with Mennonite churches in Central America and Indonesia in the 1990s and the 2000s in responding to the devastation of Hurricane Mitch in 1998 and the Indian Ocean tsunami of late 2004; to relief and reconstruction efforts in this past decade following earthquakes in Haiti (2010) and Nepal (2015).
Sometimes MCC relief responses to dire emergencies have opened the door to longer-term development work for MCC and local partners. In a few cases, disaster responses have led to the creation of new organizations, such as Mennonite Disaster Service. And sometimes sharing physical, tangible gifts of love has contributed to building peace in communities divided by mistrust and conflict.

Handmade blankets, canned meat, relief buckets, school kits, dignity kits for menstruating girls and women: all play essential roles in the relief element of MCC’s long-held commitment to offering “relief, development and peace in the name of Christ.” These humanitarian aid items are made with loving hands, gathered and packed by volunteers across Canada, the United States and Europe seeking to share God’s love without discrimination with those in need. Meanwhile, MCC has expanded its humanitarian relief efforts over the past decades beyond the shipment of humanitarian aid from the U.S. and Canada to also include the distribution of locally purchased food and non-food items and the provision of cash and vouchers to displaced families. Through this work across the centuries, MCC has partnered with churches and community-based organizations seeking to meet the needs of vulnerable people facing acute hunger and uprooted by war, earthquakes, hurricanes and more. As MCC enters its second century of feeding the hungry and reaching out to help displaced peoples, may it draw lessons and inspiration from its extensive experiences over the past one hundred years of providing relief in the name of Christ.

Rick Cober Bauman is executive director for MCC Canada.

MCC in Russia: the first two months

The decision by Mennonite relief organizations representing diverse Mennonite churches to form a central committee in 1920 created a new approach to relief work among Mennonites. The material and physical devastation suffered by Mennonites during the Russian Civil War convinced existing relief organizations in the United States to pool their resources to help their co-religionists in Russia. The tragic situation of Mennonites in Russia dovetailed with a post-war commitment to relief aid within Mennonite communities. During the First World War, many young Mennonite men worked under the umbrella of the Red Cross and the Society of Friends to uphold the principle of nonresistance and to offer a proactive witness to peace during a time of suffering. After the war, a strong desire to establish a Mennonite-led international relief organization grew. The circumstances in Russia offered the opportunity for Mennonites to organize an independent relief effort on the international stage.

As many retellings of MCC’s origin story emphasize the famine relief of 1921-1922, after the Bolsheviks had established power, one can easily overlook that MCC started its work before the onset of famine conditions. The first two months of relief work in Russia demonstrate the challenges of MCC’s exploratory activities in a rapidly changing environment of civil war. When Orie O. Miller, Arthur Slagel and Clayton Kratz, the first group of MCC relief workers, arrived in Constantinople (present-day Istanbul), chosen as the most accessible point from which to coordinate relief measures into Russia, they represented a very small organization seeking to access a territory with a complex political landscape.
Miller astutely navigated the political and bureaucratic conditions by connecting with American officials and relief organizations on the ground. Even though the group only arrived in Constantinople at the end of September 1920, by the beginning of October, Miller and Kratz were on their way into the Crimean Peninsula with four thousand dollars in their luggage on an American destroyer. As soon as they arrived, Miller reached out to Admiral Newton McCully, who was stationed in Sevastopol to gather intelligence for the United States. Using a letter of introduction procured during their short-stay in Constantinople, Miller received a warm welcome from the admiral, who promised help and support from American state officials, including an offer of moving small amounts of goods on American ships and the use of their radio system for sending messages. Most importantly, Miller obtained another letter of introduction, which helped him to connect with representatives of General Piotr Wrangel's government. These contacts agreed to provide Miller and Kratz with free rail passes in territory controlled by Wrangel's forces for themselves and their goods. They were also given a translator and letters of introduction for their journey. Travelling by train allowed them to arrive the next day in Melitopol, where they were greeted by local Mennonites and attended a service in the local Mennonite church. From there they would continue their journey, spending several days in Halbstadt before arriving in Aleksandrovsk (present-day Zaporizhzhia).

As Miller and Kratz surveyed the needs of the local population, they found that Mennonites still had access to food, at least for one more winter, but they had little of anything else. Miller reported to MCC officials in the United States that “the country is literally stripped of all that civilized people usually consider the necessities of life outside of food. There is no soap, no thread, no needles, no buttons, no shoes, no farming implements, no horses, etc.” Access to clothing constituted one of the direst needs. Most of their clothing had been stolen during the civil war and many people simply had the clothes on their backs. “Just think of wearing all your clothes all the time, probably washing them in the evening in cold water without soap, letting them dry during the night and then put[ting] them on again,” Miller wrote. To address these conditions, Miller and Slagel purchased 4,000 yards of flannelette, six Singer sewing machines, 50 cases of milk, 100 bars of soap and 1,000 yards of bed ticking. For their next trip into the region, Miller also proposed helping the local Mennonite hospitals and establishing an orphanage to help Mennonite children whose parents had died as a result of the civil war.

These initial relief workers struggled to accurately assess the military situation. Before his first trip into Russia, Miller felt confident that General Wrangel, who commanded White Army forces against the Bolshevik Red Army, would maintain control of much of southern Russia (in present-day Ukraine). As Miller wrote to MCC’s executive secretary-treasurer, Levi Mumaw: “The Bolshevists probably have passed the high-water mark in their career and will never be able again to drive [General Wrangel] back, in which case lines to Halbstadt can be opened rather quickly with a little diplomacy.” This interpretation of the situation would prove to be wrong. Soon after Miller and Kratz arrived in Aleksandrovsk, the Bolsheviks pushed through the line, causing a harrowing evacuation from the city. In his diary, Miller described mortar shells exploding two hundred yards from their train car: “I still feel tingling nerves from the experience, not so much from fear for myself and my own body, as from what might have resulted to [my family] so far away, if bursting shrapnel would have severely
wounded or killed me or should we have fallen into the hands of the Reds.” Miller managed to escape from Aleksandrovsk and return to Sevastopol, where he rented office space for their forthcoming relief work and left US$1,200 with the American Foreign Trade for Kratz, who had decided to remain behind and travel back to Halbstadt.

During Miller’s second trip to Crimea in mid-November, the entire operation quite suddenly became completely unfeasible. Although Wrangel’s troops had suffered defeats near the Mennonite colonies, no one had expected that the entire territory of the Crimea would fall into the hands of the Bolsheviks. As he arrived on the shores of Sevastopol, the evacuation of the city was fully underway. Miller had a mere five hours in the city to complete his tasks. Despite such setbacks, Miller showed a talent in reacting on the ground to rapidly changing circumstances. Instead of accepting the cessation of MCC’s work, Miller worked with a local Mennonite leader, Kornelius Hiebert, to devise a plan for work under Bolshevik rule. As Miller understood that it would take time to establish a new system by which MCC could move money and goods into the region, he proposed that Russian Mennonites should gather money among themselves and be issued promissory notes for these contributions which would be repaid once channels could be opened. This money would be used for the relief effort under the authority of Kratz. This idea, however, hinged on the appearance of Kratz. Since they parted ways in Aleksandrovsk, Miller had not heard from the 23-year-old. In fact, no one knew the location of Kratz after he was arrested by Bolshevik officials in Halbstadt. To this day, the fate of Kratz remains a mystery.

The victory of the Red Army forced MCC relief workers to devise a new approach for the region. Establishing a base in Crimea was no longer an option. Negotiations for access to the territory now had to be conducted in Moscow and in Kharkov, the capital of the new Ukrainian Socialist Republic, with Bolshevik officials. MCC humanitarian assistance to Mennonites and others in southern Russia would end up coming through the channels of the American Relief Administration led by Herbert Hoover.

Aileen Friesen is assistant professor of history at the University of Winnipeg.

October 1922. American tractors arrived in Khortitsa, southern Russia, in October 1922. Photo shows the official opening of reconstruction work with government officials on the ground. MCC sent two shipments of 25 tractors to Mennonite settlements in southern Russia in 1922. As part of MCC’s rehabilitation work, Mennonites in southern Russia cultivated a considerable amount of rye and barley. (MCC photo)
Reflections from Pax (1951-1976)

“Being caught in East Berlin without passports, handing out Christmas bundles to the ‘less fortunate,’ living with and learning to know European Mennonite students, eating goat meat with an Arab Sheikh, and seeing the new year in with prayer under the light of Greek stars: this is Pax, this is your experience, this is mine.”—Pax Newsletter, January 20, 1959

Inaugurated in 1951, MCC’s Pax program provided varied service opportunities for hundreds of young men (and some young women) in many contexts around the world, including post-World War II relief and reconstruction projects in Europe, humanitarian assistance to Palestinian refugees in the Jordanian-controlled West Bank, the construction of a highway through Paraguay’s Chaco region and community development work in Greece, Bolivia and Congo. The last Pax workers concluded their service in 1976. For most Pax workers, participation in Pax fulfilled alternative service obligations through the United States’ I-W program. Yet MCC sought for the Pax program to be not only an alternative to military service, a program for “conscripted Christians,” but a proactive form of Christian peace witness staffed by “willing second-milers.”

The excerpts from Pax reports, newsletters and conference proceedings below offer windows into the joys, challenges and motivations of the men and women who served with Pax. These excerpted reflections and reports show Pax workers assessing their efforts as Christian witness, as a proactive form of nonresistance, as an alternative form of service to the United States and as a contribution to anti-Communist efforts. Pax “matrons,” who made homes away from home for Pax “boys,” reflect on how their work of cooking, cleaning and mending clothes offered a Christian witness, even as these Pax women also pushed beyond gendered expectations of service. Finally, these reflections show Pax workers understanding their service as a form of transformative education, a “school of hard knocks” that opened up new understandings of and passions for Christian service.

Pax as Christian service

The Pax man “is a Christian pacifist worker for others in the name of Christ. …At his best, he forgets self, thinking only of others… The Pax man does not build bridges of understanding and goodwill between peoples and communions by lecturing or preaching but through practical demonstration, through hard physical labor.”
—Peter Dyck, “Pax Bridge Builders,” Euro-Pax News, August 1959

“Our men, like St. Francis, are preaching many sermons as they ‘walk’ among the villagers, thereby winning their way into the hearts and confidence of the people. If we were competent in all the technical skills and in all the principles of community development, and failed to reach the Greeks as we have, we could not consider our program a success.”
—William Snyder, “Executive Evaluates Greece Program”

“Since being in Pax I feel that my growth and development as a Christian has been greatly increased, through fellowshipping with young fellows of the same faith and by discussing the Bible with them. Through these discussions we learn to know our Lord better. May the Lord bless us as each one of us labors in His vineyards.”

“All workers who have spent two or more years working in an area of need and with a people in a different land and culture will not return the same as they went. To many of them this is a school of ‘hard knocks.’ …Out of this school there cannot help but come some well-tempered and tried man whom the Church may look to for leadership in the future.”
—Harry Martens
“To me Pax was the ultimate in service. Of course, it meant sacrifice, in name at least, such as losing two years’ income, selling a sharp ’41 Ford, and leaving friends and family. But I knew it would be worth it. The opportunities for adventure, learning new languages and learning about peoples of other culture, and seeing the historic ‘Old World’ were privileges that even the leaders of the program recognized and granted us. So, why not go?... But there was still a deeper reason why I chose Pax, a very basic motive... This was the desire to return God’s love by doing something constructive for someone else. Pax provided just this opportunity.”
—David Burkholder, “Why a Man Goes Pax,”
Youth’s Christian Companion, September 16, 1962

“PAX men should be impregnated with the truth that they are in the first place Voluntary Service people. They are not ‘drafted Christians’, but rather ‘willing second-milers.’ . . . . PAX should not be two years to get over with, but two years packed with opportunities and challenging work. The PAX fellow should grow inwardly and contribute positively during these two years.” —“Pax Operation Suggestions”

Pax as alternative service to country

“To be a patriot means to contribute the best we can to the welfare of our nation and this is our active peace position rather than taking up arms.”
—Omar Lapp, Backnang, Germany, August 13, 1955

“[The Europeans] realize that we are here to help them have a better living, but at the same time realize that we are here instead of being in a branch of the armed forces. We might do well to ask ourselves whether we would be doing this type of service if it were not part of our requirement towards the United States government.”

“These small mountain villages [in Greece] have always been a breeding ground and a no-man’s land for factions participating in the civil war. Communist rebels found security in the mountains above the villages and continued to receive reinforcements from Communist sympathizers located across the border of Yugoslavia less than 10 miles away. The Communist ideology received followers from the ranks of the poor refugee farmers because of their low standard of living. The need for removing the causes of Communism is one of the greatest challenges confronting Christianity today. Removing the causes for war presents a great opportunity for our Peace witness.”—Dwight Wiebe, “Status of Pax Greece 1955”

“I believe that this is the time for the Christian World to demonstrate the Love of God in contrast to Communist fear. This is a real opportunity for us as a Mennonite Church to help meet the needs of our fellowman physically, but minister also to his spiritual need by witnessing of the love of Christ.”
—Arthur Driedger at a home for Hungarian refugees in Klosterneuburg-Weidling, Austria

Pax as peace witness

“We speak glibly of the love of God. We print, ‘In God we trust’ on our coins. But we don’t trust God. We trust machine guns, ballistic missiles and H bombs. We trust in the $40 billion we give each year for defense. We believe that if it weren’t for our armies, evil forces would overtake major portions of the world. So we pay our taxes and hide behind the flimsy
I am a Paxman because I believe that Christ was telling the truth when he proposed that loving your enemies and blessing them that curse you was the way of God. I believe that the love of Christ is practical. Not only can this love work miracles within the heart of an individual. It is the answer to suspicion, fear and mistrust which usually ends in violence.”
—Jim Juhnke, “A Paxer’s Testimony,” May 11, 1959

“What is the Christian’s role and responsibility in this rather confusing business of peacemaking? One thing should be clear: to the Christian peacemaking is not a business but Christian living. It is not a movement but obedience, not a strategy but discipleship, not a position but a Person. Pax is not merely another movement or demonstration for peace. Pax men are living examples for peace, demonstrating the love of God in heart and life. A Christian service program such as Pax is a natural response to God’s love in the face of human need. We are peacemakers because we are His children.”
—Roy Kauffman, “Pax Men as Peacemakers”

“We are still thinking that it is a miracle that bridges are being built over our wreckage and ruins from one land to another, and that we can clasp hands. And these hands are not empty, but filled; the people are helping each other and the difficult and wicked past is being slowly forgotten. We are especially happy to find that the children, who have suffered more than the older people, are being given special consideration by the American friends—another token of a new and sincere human relationship.”
—Letter from the Mayor of Wedel, Germany, to the MCC office in Frankfurt/Main, January 4, 1955

Women in Pax

“Breathes there a PAX man
with soul so dead,
Who never to himself hath said,
Matrons are made in Heaven!”

—“A Tribute to Our Matrons,” anonymous Pax man

“The boys like lots of variety in their meals and are surprisingly adventurous in their eating. They like a clean house, but also one that is livable... Realizing that the matron will never be able to fit into their mothers’ shoes they still want a home away from home. I hope that I was able to give them one.”
—Joyce Shutt, matron in Enkenbach, Germany, “Reflections of a PAX Matron”

“At night I retire to my room and ponder over the day’s happenings. Yes, I have been busy. Not many minutes have been wasted. However, I do not feel satisfied and can’t help wondering: is there really a purpose to my being here? True enough, the fellows like to come in for a substantial meal after a day of hard work. But is making meals and scrubbing floors my sole purpose for being here? I like to think not. Should such be the case, these two years would be wasted time and effort. Then my thoughts turn away from my day’s work and I begin to the think of the fellows They are here because they believe the wrong in this world can never be made right by force and bloodshed. They are here not merely because they don’t believe in war, but because they believe in peace. They are here because they know a Savior who teaches us to love all men and do good unto them. Then I ask myself ask:

Paxman J. Lester Yoder, of Belleville, Pennsylvania, is showing a hog to a Greek farmer in 1962. MCC’s agriculture program introduced purebred hogs to farmers in Greece in the late 1950s, and Pax workers provided training and guidance in hog husbandry. Program participants were required to construct a hog house and sturdy enclosure to qualify for the program.
(MCC photo/V. Cross)
What is my purpose for being here? My thoughts become more settled and I begin to see and understand the purpose. I am here because I believe as the fellows do. Then if I can do anything to strengthen that belief, to make their stay more pleasant, to help them in their effort to build a bit of the kingdom of heaven here on earth, I shall feel that my time has been profitably spent.”
—Anne Driedger, Pax matron in Bechterdissen bei Bielefeld, “This is Not a Dream!” European Relief Notes, January 1956

“I must master the art of saying pleasant things, I must not expect too much from my fellowman, must make my work congenial and pleasant, I must help the miserable, sympathize with the sorrowful, and never forget that a kind word, a smile or a loving deed costs little but are treasures to others. It is not only my duty, but rather my privilege to be and do these things thereby revealing to others that non-resistance is meaningful to me and with God’s help I live it daily.”

MCC Voluntary Service in Korea involves “some glamour, some broadening of experience, some new learning, and a lot of dedication and hard work.”
—Lydia Schlabach, nurse in Seoul, Korea, 1962

“Our fellows do wonderful work on construction of new houses, but haven’t you heard of the MCC girls who help village girls construct and mend their clothing? Pax farmers help village farmers mix feeds and make silos, while lady Paxers acquaint village housewives with new recipes. As men discuss personal problems with men, so women discuss personal concerns with the women.”—Lois Martin, Pax matron in Greece, 1962

**Pax as a transformative school**

“It goes without saying that all workers who have spent two or more years working in an area of need and with a people in a different land and culture will not return the same as they went. To many of them this is a school of ‘hard knocks.’ They are away from comfortable homes, a land of plenty and now living under very modest circumstances and day after day see human need and despair. . . . Out of this school there cannot help but come some well-tempered and tried man whom the Church may look to for leadership in the future.”—Harry Martens, “You Are My Witnesses”

“Mr. Paxman returns home with a hatred for materialism and a passion for peace and social action. He feels he has a gleam of truth that daren’t be lost, and he will try to put it across every chance he gets.”
—By the Editor, “Paxman Come Home,” Youth’s Christian Companion, September 16, 1962

Compiled by Alain Epp Weaver (director of MCC’s Planning, Learning and Disaster Response department), together with Frank Peachey and Lori Wise (MCC U.S. Records manager and assistant, respectively).
A ministry of sharing: shifts in MCC humanitarian aid programming over 100 years

In the summer of 1920, men from Mennonite relief organizations gathered in Elkhart, Indiana to hear of the urgent need for food, clothing and medicine among Mennonites in southern Russia (present-day Ukraine). Compelled to take unified action, they formed Mennonite Central Committee (MCC) to collect and ship food and clothing from the United States to distribute to Mennonites in need. Nearly 100 years later, MCC now serves communities worldwide through relief, development and peace. Since 1920, MCC has shipped an estimated 1.5 million tons of humanitarian resources to over 100 different countries. Shipments have included items such as: new and used clothing and shoes (1920-2012); assorted food, including milk powder, dried fruit and canned chicken, pork and beef, as well as beans, corn, soybeans and wheat donated by farmers (and shipped via Canadian Foodgrains Bank); medical equipment and medicine; “Christmas Bundles” with toys, hygiene supplies, a New Testament and other items for children (1946-78); United States government surplus commodities, including powdered milk, butter and cheese (1954-68); bedding and blankets (1946-ongoing); infant care kits (1961-ongoing); “Leprosy Bundles” (1963-80); and school kits (1979-ongoing). MCC currently collects and ships canned meat, blankets, comforters, soap, hygiene kits, relief kits, infant care kits, sewing kits and school kits.

MCC’s humanitarian assistance program has evolved over the past century in response to the changing contexts of its U.S. and Canadian constituencies and changes in the international context. MCC’s program has also responded to developing perspectives and best practices within the broader humanitarian and development sector. A 1957 report produced by the Material Aid Study Committee stated that MCC had to “seek ways of becoming more effective in this ministry of sharing. As world needs change, we must constantly seek to adapt the resources of our people to meet these needs in the most effective and permanent way.” MCC has shifted toward providing cash grants to local organizations and now ships significantly fewer in-kind kits and blankets and less food from Canada and the U.S. MCC continues to reflect on how it can best deliver humanitarian assistance while at the same time engaging MCC’s constituency in a hands-on ministry.

Humanitarian aid as an appropriate response to human need

A key characteristic of MCC’s current humanitarian assistance program is that it is needs-driven rather than supply-driven, with requests from local partner organizations and a careful analysis of local needs informing MCC’s response. This approach grew from the recognition that in order to be most effective, the items MCC collects and distributes need to align with the priority needs of communities and the capacity of MCC staff and partners. For example, in 1946 MCC shipped more than three million pounds of food and fifty thousand pounds of clothing to France, completely overwhelming the need for these items and the capacity of the program to distribute them. In another example, as MCC increasingly distributed humanitarian aid outside of Europe in the late 1950s and early 1960s, the cold-climate styles of clothing collected from supporters were not appropriate for the mild climates of the Global South and efforts were made to send clothing more suitable to local needs and styles. Clothing collection and distribution gradually tapered

“Collecting humanitarian resources provides the opportunity for MCC supporters to actively and physically engage in the work of MCC, serving as a tool to connect diverse people around a common goal to demonstrate God’s love by sharing from our abundant resources.”

Photograph of a young boy on his grandmother’s lap holding a MCC-supplied can of meat taken in Germany in 1947-48. In 1947, forty-three workers were responsible for the distribution of 4,538 tons of food, clothing, and other supplies in Germany. In the summer of 1947, MCC was reaching approximately 80,000 people in feeding operations. (MCC photo/ Deutscher Zentralausschuss)
off and were discontinued in 2012 because shipping used clothing was no longer in keeping with the best practice of providing quality assistance.

MCC first formalized the principle of needs-driven humanitarian programming in 1957, when a Material Aid Study Committee was appointed to find out what the actual need for humanitarian aid was in the world. Upon recommendation of the committee, MCC committed to adapting the collecting of resources to effectively meet the present need. Again in 1978, an internal report on the role of humanitarian aid concluded that “the nature of the need . . . must influence the response.” Continuing discussions that culminated in 1989 resulted in MCC adopting several principles to guide its humanitarian aid work, including the principle of local partner involvement in planning the distribution and use of humanitarian assistance to ensure that the items shipped met local needs and were an appropriate response within the local context. In the late 1990s and early 2000s, MCC moved to be more deliberate about the assessment, monitoring and evaluation of its disaster response programming, conducting assessments in Ethiopia, Mozambique, El Salvador and other countries to guide its work there. Since 2004 MCC has worked to strengthen project planning in all sectors, including the distribution of gifts-in-kind, to ensure programming is relevant, appropriate and an effective response to human need. As with all MCC relief and development programming, humanitarian aid shipments are carried out at the request of local partners and are based on a prior assessment of needs and priorities.

The role of humanitarian resources in MCC’s relief and development programming

Another source of significant discussion within MCC centered on the role of humanitarian resources gathered in Canada and the U.S. in relief and development programming. MCC increasingly saw the importance of pairing the distribution of humanitarian resources with development programming, such as vocational training or agricultural extension, to address long-term needs. MCC was also concerned about creating dependency among communities on outside help and sought to increase self-reliance through a greater emphasis on development and disaster mitigation work. In the
1960s and 1970s, the role of humanitarian resource distributions shifted from entirely emergency response towards additionally supporting MCC development projects like sewing centers and food-for-work projects. Until the late 1980s, however, humanitarian resource distributions represented the primary mode of MCC's emergency relief programming. Over the prior decades, internal conversations swirled within MCC about when shipping humanitarian resources from the U.S. and Canada was appropriate and when purchasing food and other items locally was a more effective and efficient emergency response.

During this time, MCC was gaining an awareness that poorly directed humanitarian resources were ineffective at best and harmful at worst. A key concern was the potential for large food imports to disrupt local markets and impact the livelihoods of small-scale producers. In response to this concern, MCC in 1978 defined a philosophy and strategy for the use of humanitarian resources collected in Canada and the U.S. The resulting guidelines helped MCC make decisions about what type of humanitarian aid to deliver in response to crises, considering factors such as the price of different items, MCC’s ability to gather and deliver those items, the timeliness of responding to emergency needs and the impact imported items would have on local markets. Substantial increases in the value of MCC's humanitarian resource shipments in the 1980s, primarily due to increased food shipments from the newly formed Canadian Foodgrains Bank (CFGB), prompted ongoing internal discussion on the matter of local purchase versus import of goods from the U.S. and Canada. The discussion came to the forefront in 1988 during what was dubbed by MCC staff as “the Great Debate”—what was the value of MCC’s humanitarian resources program and what priority should it have in MCC’s programming in the coming decade?

Those in favour of continued significant humanitarian resource programming argued that humanitarian resources were a practical way to express care for people in need and build bridges between people and churches. Arguments for decreased emphasis on humanitarian resource shipments highlighted the need for longer-term solutions, stimulation of local economies through local purchase of emergency items and concern for creating dependency on outside aid.”

“Those in favour of continued significant humanitarian resource programming argued that humanitarian resources were a practical way to express care for people in need and build bridges between people and churches. Arguments for decreased emphasis on humanitarian resource shipments highlighted the need for longer-term solutions, stimulation of local economies through local purchase of emergency items and concern for creating dependency on outside aid.”

A Japanese family received this MCC quilt sometime around 1950. MCC and 12 other church agencies joined to provide rehabilitation assistance in Japan through a consortium called LARA (Licensed Agencies for Relief in Asia). LARA distributed about $400 million worth of relief supplies to 14 million people from November 1946 to June 1952. (Chinese newspaper photo)
resources and shipping program at this time led MCC to further define its vision for the humanitarian resources it collected and to adopt guidelines for when such programming was appropriate, with the acknowledgement that “there will continue to be situations where purchasing material resources locally is more appropriate than sending material resources.” This was a turning point for MCC’s relief programming, spurring a gradual shift throughout the 1990s and early 2000s towards locally purchased food and other relief items. In 1999, MCC shipped a record number 120 containers with a value of over US$10.5 million compared to 49 containers with a value of nearly US$5 million in fiscal year 2019.

Currently, MCC’s humanitarian assistance programming most frequently includes locally purchased items. Most significantly, the Canadian government completely untied food aid in 2009, meaning that MCC could now purchase all food locally for projects funded by CFGB and the Government of Canada. MCC’s food assistance program through CFGB represents largest portion of MCC’s humanitarian assistance program, with MCC purchasing food locally while using vouchers and cash transfers to meet emergency food needs. Kits, blankets and canned meat shipped by

Inset: A family in Moscow, Russia, opens a box of food shared with them by Mennonites and Brethren in Christ in Canada and the U.S. In March 1992, MCC shipped 9,000 food boxes to Moscow and St. Petersburg for distribution by an interdenominational relief committee. (Photo/Richard Lord)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>MCC humanitarian resources shipped between 1920 and 2019</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total amount shipped (estimated):</strong> over 3 billion pounds</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Canned meat from MCC mobile canner (1945-2019):</strong> 31.5 million pounds, or over 18 million cans</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Clothing (1942-2019):</strong> 30 million pounds</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Soap (1941-2019):</strong> 22 million pounds</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>School kits (1979-2019):</strong> 2.5 million kits</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Blankets and comforters (1980-2019):</strong> 2.2 million</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Number of countries that have received humanitarian resources shipped by MCC (1965-2019):</strong> 102 countries</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Top five countries receiving humanitarian resources shipped by MCC (1965-1995; by pounds):</strong> Ethiopia, Mozambique, India, Sudan and South Sudan, Bangladesh.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Top five countries receiving humanitarian resources shipped by MCC (1996-2019; by value):</strong> Ukraine, DPRK, Iraq, Jordan, Bosnia</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>MCC humanitarian resources shipped in the last decade (1999-2019):</strong> 1,215 shipments with a total value of over US$107.3 million.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


MCC primarily support institutions (orphanages, hospitals, elderly care centers) and are distributed by local partners in times of disaster or crisis. MCC prioritizes shipments in cases where quality items are not easily available for local purchase at an affordable price. While the role of humanitarian resource shipments in relief and development programming has changed, these resources continue to play an important part in responding to crises, supporting longer-term development work and building bridges between MCC supporters and the communities in which MCC works.

Over nearly a century of striving to meet urgent human needs, MCC has continually reflected on how it carries out this work in order to use its resources effectively and efficiently. While the appropriateness and role of humanitarian resource shipments in the context of MCC’s work have been the subject of much discussion in decades past, MCC has consistently concluded that collecting, shipping and distributing such resources are vital to its mission and vision. These resources provide the opportunity for MCC supporters to actively and physically engage in the work of MCC, serving as a tool to connect diverse people around a common goal to demonstrate God’s love by sharing from our abundant resources.

Amy Martens is an MCC humanitarian assistance coordinator, based in Winnipeg. Tom Wenger is MCC’s material resources coordinator, based in Akron, Pennsylvania.

**“Engaging in a peaceful and helpful activity”: MCC and Mennonite Disaster Service**

Mennonite Disaster Service (MDS), the disaster-relief agency of Mennonite and other Anabaptist churches in the United States and Canada, began at a picnic in Kansas in 1950. As Sunday school members gathered in Hesston to share ideas and food, they expressed a common desire to “seek opportunities to be engaged in peaceful, helpful activity . . . just where we find ourselves.” Through a series of “picnics in the park,” the “Mennonite Service Organization” emerged and began to define itself. Questions arose, widening the circle of interest. Who is available to help? What skills can we provide? Do we have carpenters? Cooks? Typists? Welders? Nurses? Airplane pilots? How quickly can we respond? These questions led to more questions, pushing the boundaries of the organization and enabling it to grow.

The first call for assistance came in May of 1951 when, during a period of heavy rains, the Little Arkansas River flooded and Wichita called for help. By 11 pm that night, 45 men with four trucks had arrived in Wichita to build sandbag dikes. A week later, volunteers were called to Great Bend, Kansas, mobilizing a response to yet another flood.

Mennonite Service Organization continued to grow, expanding out of the Midwest across the United States and Canada. The name changed to Mennonite Disaster Service (MDS), more accurately reflecting the type of service carried out by volunteers. In 1955 MDS became a part of Mennonite Central Committee, an inter-Mennonite relief agency founded in 1920. MDS grew rapidly over the ensuing decade, establishing training schools

Mennonite Disaster Service (MDS) volunteers sisters Hilda and Selma Toews from Steinbach, Manitoba, work side by side to finish drywalling in Little Rock, Arkansas in this 2000 photo. Many MDS volunteers express the long-term benefits of volunteering. (MCC photo/Ted Houser)
for field directors, opening a mobile office in 1956, holding its first all-unit meeting in Chicago, producing a film about its work in 1958, training and assembling rescue teams in 1959 and adding radio equipment in 1960. By 1966, Red Cross officials expected MDS to show up at the scene when natural disasters occurred. Even as MDS expanded, the desire remained to “seek opportunities to be engaged in peaceful, helpful activity… just where we find ourselves.”

My own personal involvement in the MCC-MDS world began early, showing me how people in both MCC and MDS sought to carry out “peaceful, helpful activity.” As the nephew of Paul and Doris Janzen Longacre, I regularly heard stories from their MCC travels in Vietnam and to points all around the world. My father, meanwhile, shared stories of driving busloads of Amish volunteers to clean up after a tornado somewhere in the U.S.

I began as a volunteer with MCC Brazil in 1981 at the young age of 23. After three months of language training, I eagerly moved to the country’s interior and set up my home, ready to engage in peaceful and helpful activities. My assignment was to help set up a farming cooperative. Sadly, the region was in a drought that lasted for seven years. My work changed to digging wells, building cisterns and constructing a large earthen dam. The dam was built by 94 families, mostly by hand. A cash-for-work program of US$20,000 was funded by the Canadian government. Soon I learned that the mayor told people that I was there as a communist. The local people

thought I came to discover gold, while the Catholic priest from Holland said I came to take people out of his church to start my own church. I sometimes felt like the world was against me. I worked during the day, played futebol in the evenings and hunted armadillos at night with the farmers. On the weekends I taught the youth how to play volleyball and we made the Bible come alive with the parables of Jesus. They taught me Portuguese and I introduced drought resistant nitrogen-fixing trees, a better breed of goats for milk production and appropriate technology windmills and hand pumps.

The drought worsened to the point where we were burying children almost weekly due to a lack of clean drinking water and proper sanitation. In desperation, I sent a letter home to my small Mennonite church in Kennett Square, Pennsylvania, to please pray for rain. One night the heavens opened and it poured for days, breaking the drought. Months later, I found out it was the same day the church called a special meeting and literally got on their knees and prayed. God answered our prayers!

In 1992 I began work as MCC’s material resources coordinator. My role consisted of overseeing MCC’s meat canner and coordinating the collection and shipments of relief aid overseas. Daily I dealt with international emergencies of war, famine and natural disasters. Working with our MCC team we would always try to assess what the local resources were and what was needed to rebuild hope. I sat next to Lowell Detweiler, MDS executive coordinator, and observed his work domestically with MDS. Lowell and I viewed MCC and MDS efforts as complementary, with MDS and MCC, historically and currently, sharing much of the same constituency that seeks “opportunities to be engaged in peaceful, helpful activity.”

In 1993 MDS was incorporated as a 501(c)3 non-profit organization, separate from MCC but in keeping with the same spirit of Christian response. This was a year that witnessed an extraordinary amount of disaster response activity as volunteers mobilized to assist the victims of Hurricane Andrew (1992) and the Midwest floods of 1993. Through the assistance and perseverance of the MDS network, the organization continued to grow and increase its disaster response capabilities. Thanks to a solid beginning within MCC, MDS is now a full-grown separate organization that collaborates with MCC as needed. MDS responds to disasters in the U.S. and Canada but will call on MCC for assistance with humanitarian resources such as canned meat and relief buckets, like in the response to Hurricane Katrina in 2005, and for sharing personnel, as in the 2017 response to Hurricane Maria in Puerto Rico.

MDS currently operates thanks to the involvement of more than 3,000 Mennonite, Amish and Brethren in Christ churches and districts. The major contribution of Mennonite Disaster Service is supplying personnel for cleanup, repair and rebuilding operations. This activity becomes a means of touching lives and helping people regain faith and wholeness. MDS’s binational and regional offices are organized to assist its 50 local units in the United States and Canada in the effective operation of disaster programs. MDS has come a long way since people gathered seventy years ago in Hesston, Kansas, for a picnic to discern how they might be of service close to home. Yet the spirit of service and the commitment to be engaged in “peaceful and helpful activity” remains, standing as distinguishing marks of both MDS and MCC.

Kevin King is executive director of Mennonite Disaster Service.
“Before the hurricane, the countries of Honduras, Guatemala and Nicaragua were marred by socioeconomic conditions that increased the vulnerability of many in these countries to natural hazards like hurricanes: when Hurricane Mitch hit, the devastation it wreaked was exacerbated by these pre-existing vulnerabilities.”

Learning from MCC’s relief efforts after Hurricane Mitch

MCC strives to share God’s love and compassion for all through relief, development and peace. Committed to strengthening and supporting local churches and community-based organizations, MCC has focused since its inception on the importance of relationship-building in its relief responses, including fostering relationships of mutuality with local churches. That was true one hundred years ago as MCC responded to famine in the 1920s in southern Russia (present-day Ukraine) and it was true 78 years later as MCC mobilized to accompany Central American churches and other organizations as they ministered to people whose lives had been upended by Hurricane Mitch. In this article I reflect on what MCC learned from the 1998 Hurricane Mitch response.

Hurricane Mitch was the strongest storm of the 1998 Atlantic hurricane season, forming on October 22 and then becoming a category 5 hurricane. After being downgraded to a tropical storm, Mitch hit Honduras, Nicaragua and Guatemala. According to United Nations data, these countries are among the most vulnerable in the world to floods and hurricanes. Mitch carved out a path of destruction in these three countries, tearing through entire communities. In Honduras, officials estimate that over 5,600 people died and 6,000 disappeared who were later declared dead. Economists, meanwhile, assess the hurricane’s monetary damage at around US$6 billion.

In reflecting back on MCC’s response to Hurricane Mitch, we can think about a before and an after. Before the hurricane, the countries of Honduras, Guatemala and Nicaragua were marked by socioeconomic conditions that increased the vulnerability of many in these countries to natural hazards like hurricanes: when Hurricane Mitch hit, the devastation it wreaked was exacerbated by these pre-existing vulnerabilities. For MCC and its partners, after the hurricane meant mobilizing communities to rebuild infrastructure, recover from trauma and discover new ways to live with the environment that decrease community vulnerability to natural hazards like hurricanes. Unfortunately, twenty-two years after Hurricane Mitch, many of the factors that make communities in Central American vulnerable to the destructive impact of hurricanes persist, including land tenure systems that disenfranchise small farmers. Young people under the age of 21 lack memories of Mitch: more broadly, one could argue that Central American societies have forgotten the unimaginable damage hurricanes like Mitch can do, failing to learn the lessons from Mitch.

When Hurricane Mitch made landfall, I was living at and working with SEMILLA, the Latin American Anabaptist seminary in Guatemala, co-directing the seminary’s CASAS language and cultural exchange program. We received little warning about the hurricane’s arrival, and people living in remote communities received even less, with no early warning system in place at that time for hurricanes. [One lesson from Mitch was the need to invest institutional and budgetary resources into early warning systems and disaster preparedness.] I heard about Mitch thanks to a relative attending a conference at Lake Atitlan in Guatemala, who called me late one evening, asking if I could get him on a flight to Honduras, explaining that a powerful category 5 hurricane would soon descend on Honduras. Fortunately, my relative was able to fly into San Pedro Sula on one of the last flights allowed to land in Honduras. Once the hurricane’s rains arrived, the city’s airport was flooded, with water up to the second floor of the airport’s buildings.
The hurricane’s swath of destruction was not limited to the airport: rains flooded practically the entire country, including communities with Mennonite churches, destroying much of the country’s infrastructure.

While I was based in Guatemala when Mitch made landfall, I had previously worked in Honduras, my home country. Specifically, I coordinated emergency relief responses for Proyecto MAMA of the Honduran Mennonite Church. In response to floods in Honduran regions such as Colonia 6 de Mayo, Chamelecon, Las Cuarenta, Guaimitas and Santa Rita, where Proyecto MAMA carried out educational initiatives in collaboration with numerous Mennonite churches, we supported congregations and communities in helping families displaced by these floods relocate to other communities, with Mennonite churches hosting displaced families and offering comfort and distributing food and non-food relief items donated by MCC. Given this previous relief work experience, I joined MCC’s Mitch emergency response in Guatemala, led by Scott and Rhoda Jantzi, MCC’s representatives in the country at the time. Our committee sought to discern how best to match the needs of marginalized Guatemalan communities with the outpouring of donations from Mennonites in Canada and the United States and the desire on the part of these churches to help in practical ways.

Over the course of the coming months and years, MCC and its Guatemalan partners distributed food, blankets and water and offered medical care and emergency shelter. This first emergency stage then gave way to reconstruction, including building and rebuilding homes in Guatemala City and Chiuimila and discerning with communities what the rehabilitation of economic and community life would look like in the long term. MCC programs in Central America also welcomed work-and-learn teams from the U.S. and Canada, which joined local communities in reconstruction work: my wife, Lizette, and I joined one of these work-and-learn teams in the Sabillon Cruz community in Chamelecon, Honduras.

MCC’s Hurricane Mitch response included immediate and longer-term elements. In the immediate aftermath of Mitch, many families did not have food for many days due to the loss of their crops and food stores reserves and because of difficulty in accessing markets (and in food getting to markets). Over the ensuing weeks and months, illness spread across the hurricane-ravaged communities, thanks to water pollution and spoiled food. In the longer-term, families and communities were confronted with the need to rebuild their lives, even as they mourned the loss of loved ones and coped with post-traumatic stress symptoms that were not always diagnosed as such. MCC joined its partners in seeking to respond to these multi-faceted needs.

What did MCC and its partners, including Central American Mennonite churches, learn from the Hurricane Mitch response? Honduran Mennonite pastor Oscar Dueñas’ recollections point to some key lessons:

I was in my last year as a pastor in the Central Mennonite Church in San Pedro Sula, when Hurricane Mitch hit Honduras. We immediately began to get involved in relief work, contacting and providing help to communities with Mennonite churches and to nearby communities to identify emergency needs and make plans for responding to them…

I was hired by CASM (Mennonite Social Action Commission) as the person in charge of organizing the distribution of the material aid CASM had received from MCC and of relief items that CASM had purchased using funds from MCC and other sources. We managed,
planned and coordinated the distribution of humanitarian aid—first in response to immediate needs, and then as part of food-for-work projects in which recipients assisted with individual home reconstruction and with communal cleaning and rehabilitation initiatives. We learned from this response how important solidarity, planning and coordination with local communities are.

Throughout the response, we also felt the support of external organizations like MCC, support to respond to people’s priority needs. While we appreciated the donation of material aid and of money for local purchase of humanitarian aid, we even more welcomed work-and-learn teams not only from the U.S. and Canada but also from Belize, Guatemala, Costa Rica and Colombia: these work-and-learn teams that accompanied us in the reconstruction process showed us that we were not alone.

MCC began with an emergency relief response in southern Russia in the early 1920s that worked with Mennonites there in meeting the basic needs not only of Mennonites, but also of others facing famine. Seventy-eight years later, MCC joined Mennonite and Brethren in Christ churches and other partners in Central America in assisting victims of Hurricane Mitch, both members of Anabaptist churches and beyond—MCC’s partners included the Honduran Mennonite Church and its Proyecto MAMA project (today ACEM), CASM, Amor Viviente Choluteca, CADE, PRODEM, ADP and the Brethren in Christ church. MCC ended up sending over 50,000 relief buckets for distribution through these partners. Meanwhile, MCC organized more than 75 work-and-learn teams from Canada and the United States who went to Honduras and Nicaragua to accompany communities in the reconstruction effort.

As its work wound down, MCC commissioned an evaluation of its Hurricane Mitch response and highlighted multiple lessons.

First, MCC learned that Hurricane Mitch was not simply a “natural” disaster, but was in fact a social and economic disaster. “The impact on people of this natural disaster depends much on the social and economic condition in which they lived,” the evaluation report observed, explaining that the conjunction of natural hazards and social and economic vulnerability compounded risks communities faced. MCC learned the importance of working with churches and community-based organizations in developing disaster preparedness plans.

Second, we learned that while MCC itself is not equipped to be a first-responder organization, churches and other local organizations can be well-positioned to provide immediate assistance, given their knowledge of local community contexts. Commitment to working through partnership, meanwhile, underscored the importance of supporting these local partners in developing disaster preparedness plans.

Finally, the Hurricane Mitch response highlighted a new role for churches in emergency response. “Now more than ever, the Church in general and specifically Christian base organizations are seen as actors of social change,” the evaluation report observed. Since Hurricane Mitch, Anabaptist churches in Central America have greater commitment to developing proactive responses to emergencies and creating local emergency committees that prepare for such disasters.

César Eduardo Flores Ventura is MCC Area Director for Central America and Haiti.
MCC’s response to Hurricane Mitch in Central America

MCC received more than US$5.1 million in donations towards Hurricane Mitch emergency response and recovery efforts in Central America. MCC worked with local church partners in Honduras, Nicaragua and Guatemala, including newly established faith-based organizations, to address the immense humanitarian need caused by this disaster. MCC organized more than 70 Work and Learn Teams that brought over 500 individuals to visit and volunteer in various communities supported by MCC partners in Honduras and Nicaragua. These volunteers came to stand in solidarity with and offer support to affected communities as well as to learn and deepen their Christian understanding of service.

Hurricane Mitch became a rallying point for churches to take an active stance on social issues and extend humanitarian service to non-Christians. Projects grew out of this desire to assist all people in need and to hear from communities themselves how their needs should be appropriately addressed. Pastoral accompaniment was a key component shared across all partners’ programming, which offered emotional and spiritual support to traumatized families and the training of pastors and community leaders to effectively respond to those suffering from trauma. MCC distributed relief buckets and other items but also provided accompaniment, necessary funding and technical support as partners transitioned from emergency response to reconstruction and rehabilitation work.

In Honduras, MCC worked alongside established and new organizations of the Anabaptist churches in Central America. Through these partnerships, MCC supported the construction of roads, houses and churches, established sanitation facilities, founded a community center and farmers’ cooperatives and initiated a reforestation program which transplanted nearly 30,000 indigenous seedlings. Several MCC-supported projects implemented food-for-work activities and attended to basic health needs. MCC partners organized trainings on sustainable agriculture, environmental protection, health-related themes and women’s empowerment. One partner, ADP, focused solely on providing opportunities and resources to women-headed households. Women were given grants to start income generating activities like a market stall for meat or vegetables, a small bakery or a tailoring shop.

In Guatemala, MCC and its partners focused their efforts primarily on food distribution and repairs of housing, roads, sanitation facilities and schools. MCC partnered with Friends Ambassadors Church and Guatemalan Mennonite Church in relocating and housing some of the most vulnerable members of the community.

In Nicaragua, three local partners—AMC, CAE and SELVA—responded to different needs in their communities. For instance, AMC prioritized addressing the health needs of families, increasing their food security and access to livelihood projects. SELVA initiated a reforestation program with schools that replanted trees and established a seed bank, while CAE implemented various food-for-work programs and provided seeds and fertilizers to farmers with access to land.

—Compiled by Rhea Silvosa, MCC research associate.

Though not comprehensive, the following numbers reflect the magnitude of MCC’s response to Hurricane Mitch:

In Honduras alone, more than 120,000 people received humanitarian assistance such as corn, beans, canned meat, rice and non-food items and equipment like clothing, medicines, school kits and tractors. MCC and its partners also distributed 50,000 “hurricane buckets” (relief kits) to affected communities.

At least 2,223 people received training in nutrition, reproductive health, sanitation and hygiene through the efforts of over 41 health brigades mobilized as part of the MCC-supported response.

More than 6,200 people received basic health care services and treatment.

Over 6,000 acres of corn were replanted.

At least 1,092 families received new houses and an additional 593 family homes were repaired and rehabilitated across the three countries.
Lessons from MCC’s response to the 2004 tsunami

In my mind, I always think about “The Tsunami”, with two capital Ts, even though other tsunamis have happened. The tsunami that struck the Indian Ocean on December 26, 2004, became a major before-and-after reference point for my husband, Dan, and me in the course of our 12 years as MCC representatives in Indonesia. Reflecting back on MCC’s tsunami response that continued on over the ensuing years, several lasting learnings come to the fore.

**Context matters:** The tsunami wasn’t just a natural disaster. The Indonesian province of Aceh had been engaged in a civil war for independence from Indonesia for almost thirty years at the time of the Indian Ocean earthquake. The Indonesian president at that time, Megawati Sukarnoputri, had declared martial law the previous year. The government prevented international human rights organizations and humanitarian organizations from entering the province and international news agencies were restricted to the provincial capital. For the first six months after the tsunami, the response took place in a war zone with people suffering multiple traumas. I remember an early visit in Aceh to a displaced persons camp on a sunny wooded hillside overlooking the ocean. Only later did we learn that the people in the camp were terrified by compounded fears—not only of the tsunami they had just experienced, including feelings of deep loss, uncertainty and on-going aftershocks, but also the danger of being near the forest with active fighting happening around them. In the earliest days of the response, we spent time with an Indonesian partner organization working with a group of Acehnese nursing students. I remember the fear and concern as two brave young men prepared to set out in a truck loaded with supplies over the mountains to find a way to Meulaboh through the conflict zone. The opening of Aceh to reporters and humanitarian workers was a contributing factor to a peace accord being signed on August 12, 2005, six months after the tsunami.

**Interfaith connections matter:** Recently, an Indonesian MCC worker came to visit Ohio. When he was asked in a chapel service, “Why did MCC build a school for Muslim people after the tsunami?” his answer was simple. “Because they needed it.” Aceh is known as the “Veranda of Mecca.” Its population is 98% Muslim. Many Muslims in Aceh continue to associate Christianity with the Crusades. MCC made a conscious decision to never hide our organizational identity as Christians who are motivated to help because we follow the way of Jesus. The tsunami was an opportunity for MCC and its partners to introduce a new view of Christians as those who seek the good of others.

**Partnership matters:** Because of the conflict and the isolation of Aceh, MCC had no partners in the province at the time of the tsunami. MCC was committed to working with Indonesian partner organizations rather than running our own operational programs in Aceh. Before the tsunami, through Indonesian Mennonite connections, MCC had been partnering with universities and the interfaith Forum for Peace Across Religions and Groups. Through those Mennonite Indonesian interfaith connections, MCC was able to connect with potential partners. Relationships of trust between Christians and Muslims on Java helped to build relationships of trust with Muslim people in Aceh. In some cases, this happened when Indonesian Mennonites “credentialed” MCC to Muslim people in Java, who then made connections for MCC among Muslim communities and potential partners in
Aceh. Within a month of the tsunami, MCC opened an office in Aceh staffed by MCC workers from Indonesia, Canada and the U.S. The office enabled face-to-face working relationships with Indonesian and Acehnese local partners during the three-year duration of the response. The relationships were often complex and imperfect, but the partnership experience in a time of disaster solidified a way of working that makes sense in a post-colonial era. Groups that partnered with MCC, including the Indonesian Mennonite Diakonia Service, have been strengthened and have grown as a result of their experiences in responding to the tsunami in Aceh.

Social and emotional recovery matters: The unimaginable losses of entire communities from the tsunami brought the important work of trauma healing to the forefront in MCC’s relief work. Since the tsunami, psychosocial support takes priority in many MCC disaster responses, alongside providing water, food and emergency shelter in the early days, and then recovery of livelihoods, education and longer-term shelter in the following months and years. In the early days after the tsunami, no one in Aceh greeted each other in the normal ways. They didn’t even express sympathy for the losses in the usual way. Instead, when people would meet again for the first time after the tsunami, the greeting was, “How many left?” MCC worked with interfaith partners to develop trauma healing approaches for both Muslim and Christian contexts. In the years since the tsunami, those trauma healing approaches have been further refined and developed by MCC partners.

Last year, I spoke to a group of seventh graders about how the Indian Ocean tsunami of 2004 had affected hundreds of thousands of people in multiple countries. I was shocked to realize that The Tsunami that continues to occupy such a prominent place in my memory occurred before that class of inquisitive seventh graders had even been born. Those of us who were part of MCC’s response to The Tsunami will not forget the deep losses nor the new growth that came from that disaster.

Jeanne Zimmerly Jantzi is superintendent of Central Christian School in Kidron, Ohio. She worked for over 25 years with MCC in multiple roles in DR Congo, Nigeria, Indonesia and Thailand.

“The Indian Ocean tsunami destroyed many fishing boats on India’s southeast coast. Together with its Indian partner, the Church’s Auxiliary for Social Action (CASA), MCC provided boats to fishing collectives of four families who had previously not owned their own boats. The fisherman in this photo (full name not available) said that being part of a fishing collective gave him financial independence and security.” (MCC photo/Dirk Eitzen)
Indonesian Mennonites and trauma healing in the wake of the 2004 tsunami in Aceh

The earthquake and tsunami in Aceh which occurred on December 26, 2004, represents one of the deadliest disasters in Indonesian history. The Indian Ocean tsunami killed up to 280,000 people in 14 countries, with the greatest number of casualties in Aceh, where more than 150,000 people died and disappeared. Thousands upon thousands of homes and other buildings were destroyed, with major devastation to infrastructure.

The tsunami displaced tens of thousands of Acehnese. International and Indonesian aid agencies arrived in Aceh to assist. One of these agencies was the Indonesian Mennonite Diakonia Service, or IMDS, established in 2005 by one of the Indonesian Mennonite churches (GKMI Synod). Together with the Forum of Humanitarian and Indonesian Brotherhood (FKPI), IMDS mobilized to provide trauma healing services to displaced Acehnese who had lived through the tsunami. IMDS drew in interfaith volunteers from the theology faculty of Duta Wacana Yogyakarta and psychology faculty from Soegiyopranoto Semarang and Satya Wacana Christian University in Salatiga to help design and implement the trauma response program. Meanwhile, MCC brought in psychologists Karl and Evelyn Bartsch to help prepare trauma response modules and train IMDS staff in trauma-informed programming. Upon entering Aceh, the IMDS team connected with the Al-Muayat Windan Islamic boarding school to review the trauma modules to ensure that the trauma responses IMDS would be promoting would be accepted within the Islamic culture of Aceh. Ustad Dian Nafi of the boarding school proved invaluable in this process.

After extensive consultation, IMDS, with MCC support, published a book containing culturally-rooted trauma healing modules. Entitled The Wounded Healer (Stress and Trauma Healing), this book was developed to train IMDS and other trauma response workers in Java prior to going to Aceh to offer workshops on ways for victims of the tsunami to cope with and recover from trauma as well as to help relatives and neighbors in recovering from trauma. The trauma healing model employed by IMDS included the following components:

On December 26, 2004, an earthquake occurred off the west coast of northern Sumatra which caused a tsunami, a series of large seismic waves, that devastated the surrounding coastal areas killing more than 260,000 people and rendering five million people homeless. MCC responded in India, Indonesia, Sri Lanka, Somalia and other countries with immediate and long-term aid including food, health, housing, income re-generation and trauma counseling. (MCC photo/Dan Marschka)
Safe place: Providing trauma relief required building good relationships with communities traumatized by the tsunami, with good relationships fostering a sense of comfort and trust and strengthening peace within communities by nurturing bonds across lines of difference.

Trauma healing support: Therapeutic initiatives promoted psychological and spirituality recovery.

Spirituality support: Religion was understood to be an important resource in helping communities to cope with and recover from trauma. Muslim volunteers helped to ensure that IMDS’s program offered spiritual support to Acehnese victims of the tsunami that spoke to them from the depths of the Islamic tradition.

Activity support: Trauma healing involves not just the mind and spirit, but also the body. IMDS therefore organized sports, handicrafts and other activities tailored for women, girls, men and boys displaced by the tsunami that energized their bodies and spirits.

Counselor/psychologist assistance: IMDS provided specialized training to counselors and psychologists in Aceh so that they would be equipped to provide trauma healing support to thousands of Acehnese whose lives had been turned upside-down by the tsunami.

IMDS initiated its trauma healing response in Aceh in early 2005, three weeks following the tsunami. Acehnese initially responded to the trauma healing program with suspicion, viewing it as strange, given the deep sadness of loss from the tsunami, to be invited to engage in activities in which they had space to laugh, play and tell stories. Over time, however, they came to value the program, recognizing how the trauma healing activities had improved their lives, building their resilience.

IMDS offered intensive services to tsunami victims who faced particularly intense challenges. One such example was an Acehnese woman whom I will call Tini. Tini felt excessive guilt for losing her one close relative, her sister. Prior to the tsunami, Tini’s sister had left home to buy cooking materials. After feeling the earthquake that led to the tsunami, Tini went out to look for her sister, but couldn’t find her. As the sea water began to rise rapidly, Tini joined others in the chaos in running to higher ground, with people falling, being stepped on and calling out for help, but with everyone paying attention to their own safety. When her sister could not be found following the tsunami, Tini could not bear the sadness and the feeling of guilt for having survived. She struggled with feelings of isolation and had difficulty comprehending how her life could go on. At a friend’s urging, Tini attended an IMDS workshop on trauma healing and then subsequently received intensive psychological support and counseling. Over time, Tini’s spirit of life returned, and she was able to reengage with her community. Tini’s story highlights that effective disaster responses not only attend to the physical needs of persons whose lives have been devastated by war, tsunamis, hurricanes and more, but also pay attention to their psychological and spiritual needs. Over the ensuing fifteen years, trauma healing initiatives have become a standard component of MCC and IMDS humanitarian relief initiatives.

Paulus Hartono is a pastor at GKMI Solo (Gerjea Kristen Muria Indonesia, or Muria Christian Church in Indonesia) in Central Java, Indonesia. He founded and currently serves as the director of Indonesia Mennonite Diakonia Service (IMDS).
MCC’s response to the December 2004 tsunami in Indonesia

MCC provided humanitarian aid to the countries hardest hit by the Indian Ocean tsunami of December 26, 2004: Indonesia, India and Sri Lanka, with some additional support extended to Somalia. The most extensive and sustained response, however, took place in Indonesia, particularly in the province of Aceh.

MCC’s approach to its work in Aceh was intensely relational and flexible, while rooted in MCC’s Christian values. MCC actively engaged the local government in Aceh and paid close attention to project participants’ involvement and participation when planning and implementing projects. Projects included Muslim leaders and considered gender dynamics in the course of project planning and paid attention to meeting the needs of the most vulnerable groups. A program office established in Aceh mere weeks after the tsunami served as the base from which MCC-supported disaster response efforts were coordinated over the ensuing three years.

MCC assisted the work of almost 20 Indonesian organizations as those groups carried out relief distributions and organized recovery initiatives. MCC received over US$21.8M in funding for its tsunami response, including over US$5.7M in matching Canadian government funds.

Over the course of MCC’s multi-year relief and recovery response, 72,000 people, particularly women and children as well as marginalized persons such as the elderly and physically challenged persons, benefitted from MCC’s distribution of humanitarian resources. Additional components of MCC’s Indonesian tsunami response included:

**Shelter:** MCC supported the construction of 548 new houses. Through its partners, MCC also helped build latrines and provided access to clean water and sanitation supplies. Over 16,750 internally displaced people directly benefitted from these efforts.

**Livelihoods:** MCC partners prioritized restoring farmlands damaged by the tsunami to production by clearing lands and cleaning drainage ditches. Around 430 hectares of land were cleared, 24 bridges built and 16,000 meters of drainage ditches and 1,600 wells were cleaned. These efforts helped more than 76,000 people in over 20 villages. MCC also provided support to women, including older widows, engaged in farming activities like cattle raising.

**Education:** MCC partnered with the faculty of education of UNSYIAH to send 342 student teachers to remote tsunami-affected schools for a five-month teaching practicum. It also supported two distributions of school uniforms and basic school supply kits to 2,000 displaced students and assisted in the restoration of 33 classrooms and the construction of a middle-school building in Lhoknga, Banda Aceh. Two MCC workers were seconded to a partner university: these MCC workers created spaces for reflection and discussion among university students about the disaster and the ongoing conflict in the province.

**Psycho-social health:** Around 100 volunteers trained in trauma counseling provided help to traumatized victims living in various camps for internally displaced persons. At least 1,029 people from Aceh and Nias were also supported through a two-year trauma recovery program focused on counseling, a prosthesis support initiative and post-trauma life skills training.

**Health:** MCC equipped mobile health clinics to provide emergency health care to persons displaced by the tsunami. Emergency medical treatment was also provided to the most severely affected communities in Aceh and Nias, including distribution of medical aid kits and medical supplies. Public health and education efforts in schools, including water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH) activities to promote children’s hygiene, were part of MCC’s longer-term rehabilitation efforts in Aceh.

**Peacebuilding:** In addition to sending partner staff to Eastern Mennonite University to participate in EMU’s Seminar on Trauma Awareness and Resilience (STAR), MCC also incorporated interfaith bridge-building efforts into its tsunami response efforts in Aceh. So, for example, MCC facilitated meetings between Mennonite church leaders and Muslim leaders in Aceh, worked in areas controlled by the separatist movement in Aceh and provided opportunities for interactions between Acehnese and Javanese.

—Compiled by Rhea Silvosa, MCC research associate.
Listening (again) to the MCC Katrina Listening Process

Nearly fifteen years ago, Hurricane Katrina inundated New Orleans and other communities along the Gulf Coast of the United States. In a matter of days, more than 2,000 people died or went missing, and at least 1.5 million New Orleans residents fled the city to wait for the water to recede. Almost 500,000 people remain in diaspora—nearly one in three pre-Katrina New Orleans residents—the majority of whom were part of an historic African-American community that has been part of the city for generations. For these and other historically marginalized peoples along the Gulf coast, the impact of Katrina the natural disaster was multiplied by the unnatural and ongoing disasters of racism and other forms of systemic oppression already present in the region. These complex and overlapping issues made responding to Katrina an extremely challenging process, the impact of which continues today.

This article is based on primary source documents and secondary evaluations of MCC’s response to Katrina, which began in the immediate aftermath of the hurricane. As per MCC’s memorandum of understanding with Mennonite Disaster Service, in which MDS responds to disasters in the United States and Canada and MCC responds to disasters elsewhere in the world, MDS undertook the initial Mennonite disaster response to Katrina. Yet it soon became clear that Katrina’s devastation was unprecedented. MDS invited MCC to respond with material and financial resources in partnership with MDS and other agencies. These groups provided a timely response that local partners said effectively met immediate human needs. Later evaluations, however, raised questions about the long-term impact of the humanitarian response. A review of these evaluations reveals how Katrina offers an important yet challenging lesson on how default patterns and modes of institutional operation can at times contribute to furthering harm in a community instead of contributing to its healing.

In the case of MCC’s response to Katrina, a gap between good intentions and actual effect emerged. Evaluations suggested that during the early stages of Katrina, MCC struggled as an institution to contend with deficiencies in its cultural competence and with its internalized racism. In particular, MCC diminished the role that local people of color in affected communities could have in shaping the response. Evaluations found that decision-making that shaped MCC’s response was generally nested in MCC offices far from the community, directed by staff and leadership who were predominantly white, Mennonite and male, rather than with those who had the most at stake in carrying out a response that was fitting to the scale and type of disaster that Katrina was.

After the initial phase, MCC U.S. Peace & Justice staff formed a group called the Katrina Listening Process (KLP) to address the deep and emerging concerns over the devastation of Katrina and MCC’s response to it. The KLP’s vision was to “create mutually authentic and healthy relationships by following the wisdom in local communities in shaping this and future projects . . . and to lovingly challenge the institution to respond in accordance with its commitment to become an anti-racist organization.”

In subsequent months, the KLP carried out interviews and consultations in New Orleans and other Gulf communities. KLP members heard stories of communities of color affected by Katrina, many of whom noted how external material and financial aid during the crisis weighed heavily on
their communities. While many interviewees expressed appreciation for the immediate resources, they also acknowledged that the overwhelming influx of people and resources amounted to what one hurricane survivor called “generosity chaos,” noting how the response increased the burden on their communities. Another survivor commented on the difficulty of dealing with the trauma of losing one’s home, community and land, while also managing the trauma of newly arrived outsiders who sought to help. What was missing in the response, these interviewees said, was an abiding commitment to receive direction from affected communities, and, specifically, to address their concerns about the systemic displacement and dispossession unfolding right before their eyes.

What these affected communities saw as critical to an appropriate humanitarian response was not merely the provision of material and financial aid, but the need for intense advocacy and organizing around core issues of systemic oppression. In the aftermath of Katrina, African-American communities faced the tangible erasure of their community, a reality in which their very homes and neighborhoods were being wiped out. They were concerned about the prevalence of police activity that led to the random arrest and detention of community members. They had anxiety about the increasing interest among newcomers in rebuilding and “revitalizing” a community that was historically their home, a concern that rebuilding would mask gentrification, if not the economic and cultural blockade of historic New Orleanian return. These concerns sadly ended up being well-founded. Good-intentioned responses but wrongly directed actions contributed to systemic forms of erasure and dispossession.

This of course does not mean that the entire story of MCC’s Katrina response is one of harm. The KLP did result in some thoughtful redirection. A discernment process was established, for instance, that would enable local community members to provide input into the unfolding MCC response. Systemic issues were identified and named, shifting the response from meeting immediate needs to following partners who confronted them. Thoughtful staff carried out further listening and sought to craft an anti-racist response. MCC’s Washington, D.C., office became active on some issues connected to Katrina, such as advocating for greater access to low-cost, affordable housing. Nonetheless, the KLP did not have the enduring impact that its participants imagined it would. Many who were part of the process felt that MCC dedicated too little effort to the work of listening and reshaping institutional patterns. Evaluations show that the KLP closed without a clear sense among its members that MCC as an institution had learned from its mistakes.

Despite its limited effect, the KLP offers lessons that MCC grapples with today. It reminds us, for instance, that communities most affected by disasters intimately know what they need. Local knowledge and expertise, especially among the most oppressed and marginalized segments of a community, represent the genius and imagination that are critical for community resilience. One might imagine how a response may have looked, for instance, if poor, African-American matriarchs from one of New Orleans’ powerful and historic communities were taking the lead in determining desired outcomes of humanitarian responses at the beginning.

To adequately listen to the knowledge of marginalized communities depends on MCC’s capacity as an institution for authentic relationships with local communities, including communities of color. The KLP shows that when
an organization is preparing for a long-term project or responding to an emergency crisis, healthy, authentic, anti-racist and actively nurtured relationships matter—critically. Relationships enable the listening that is essential for the most crucial elements of an effective response—and listening is even more critical in the context of disaster.

The KLP also recognized that without internally transformative, ongoing work rooted in a deep commitment to anti-racism, challenging old patterns and habits that under pressure cause harm proves difficult. Lenses and skillsets for working in anti-racist ways need to be widely shared across MCC. In short, the capacity for anti-racist accompaniment depends to a large extent on a MCC’s willingness to struggle with its own cultural patterns and habits of internalized and institutional racism. In absence of such a struggle, there remains inevitable risk of doing harm.

Finally, the KLP shows precisely why institutional memory and the lessons of the past matter. MCC had a unit off-and-on for nearly twenty-five years in New Orleans, carrying out anti-racism work. This history, however, did not extensively shape MCC’s response to Katrina. As another evaluation observed, institutions like MCC must prioritize story-keeping. Lessons of the past must be preserved so that future workers might meaningfully reclaim and learn from them, and thereby better see the pitfalls of patterned paths and institutional habits in the future.

When the next disaster strikes, will MCC respond differently? Some of our learning indicates that we may. One must be mindful, however, of the ways that historical critique is easier than contending with the present. The KLP offers a reminder that a truly anti-racist organization must continually struggle to change. To that end, the KLP and other learning processes like it represent the internal criticism that is necessary for MCC to persist in a difficult struggle towards becoming an institution capable of anti-racist work.

Andrew C. Wright is program director for MCC Central States.

“To adequately listen to the knowledge of marginalized communities depends on MCC’s capacity as an institution for authentic relationships with local communities, including communities of color.”

“The capacity for anti-racist accompaniment depends to a large extent on a MCC’s willingness to struggle with its own cultural patterns and habits of internalized and institutional racism. In absence of such a struggle, there remains inevitable risk for doing harm.”

In October 2005, Mennonite Disaster Service (MDS) volunteers Duane and Joan Kauffman, of Harlan, Kentucky, repair the roof of the children’s center located next to Amor Viviente Church in Metairie, Louisiana. Winds from Hurricane Katrina had torn off many of the building’s shingles. (MCC photo/LaShinda Clark)
Lessons learned from MCC Haiti’s humanitarian relief initiatives after the 2010 earthquake

On January 12, 2010, a massive earthquake struck Haiti, killing well over 100,000 people (some estimates place the death toll much higher), destroying tens of thousands of homes and businesses and severely damaging the country’s infrastructure. Over the ensuing months and years, MCC, which had been operating in Haiti since 1958, undertook a large-scale (for MCC) humanitarian and rehabilitation response. A summary of key facets of MCC’s multi-year earthquake response can be found below. In this article, Herve Alcina, logistics and humanitarian aid coordinator for the earthquake response, reflects on what lessons MCC learned as it joined Haitian churches and community-based organizations in responding to the needs of individuals and communities devastated by the earthquake.

What were successes in the humanitarian assistance distributions after the 2010 earthquake in Haiti?

One of the things MCC did very well after the earthquake was responding quickly. So many people had pressing needs and MCC was there to respond in any way we could. We gave tarps, relief buckets, filter buckets, canned meat, comforters, hygiene kits, emergency food like rice and beans and other items that people needed urgently. We also worked with local committees in the camps. This helped us to be able to work more directly with local people and was a strength of our response.

What lessons did MCC learn from its Haiti earthquake response?

There were so many needs and so much suffering, so we chose to do evaluations after the project was underway and learned that some people had gotten supplies from multiple organizations. Some people received aid when they and their families had not been impacted by the earthquake. We learned about the need to do assessments before projects start, even if it means delaying the project by a few days.
We learned that if we are going to do a response that requires specialized skills, like the construction of houses, we need to make sure that our team has enough capacity to manage highly technical projects. We should focus more on what we are already experts at, and not start to do new kinds of work after a disaster, even if there is a great need.

One of the things that was difficult about the earthquake was programming such large amounts of money. When I look back, I think that sometimes our projects were too large for partners that had never handled projects of that size. Sometimes that created conflict and led to projects that didn’t work as well as we would have liked.

A challenge in distributing humanitarian assistance after the earthquake was that there wasn’t always a strong system of coordination and communication among NGOs. That is something that I think we can always improve on for any disaster response.

How has MCC Haiti integrated lessons from the 2010 earthquake response into more recent emergency responses?

We learned many lessons about humanitarian aid distributions after the 2010 earthquake. Unfortunately for Haiti, we’ve had three disaster responses in the past three years where we have been able to practice applying the lessons we learned. After Hurricane Matthew (2016), Hurricane Irma (2017) and the 2018 earthquake, we conducted rapid field assessments before considering any projects. Carrying out these assessments was very useful and made us more effective in getting MCC resources to people who were the most vulnerable.

MCC Haiti has been working hard over the years since the 2010 earthquake to do more capacity building trainings for our partner organizations on topics such as psychological first aid, how to develop better project plans and how to protect vulnerable people. All of these things have resulted in better disaster responses from MCC and our partners.

Essential learnings from the 2010 earthquake response thus include the following:

- We have learned that we need to build on the expertise and specializations of our staff. We have learned that we aren’t as good at housing projects, so we no longer do them, but we are very good at short- and long-term agriculture work, so we have included this aspect in many of our disaster projects where people lost their gardens and livelihoods.

- We learned that sometimes projects can be too big for partners to manage, and that they need smaller-scale projects that gradually expand, so MCC has worked to build our partners’ capacity more gradually and intentionally with smaller projects that progressively get bigger, instead of seeking to develop really large projects like after the 2010 earthquake, projects that proved hard for partners to manage. This has allowed us to build stronger partners who we are more confident in their capacity to implement larger projects.

- An important lesson that we learned from the evaluation of MCC’s earthquake response is to stay true to our values. MCC in Haiti works with vulnerable people, and sometimes those vulnerable people are harder to get access to—they are farther away from MCC offices and there might not be a road that gets to them. Yet we have worked hard to not forget these isolated communities, even when other NGOs have abandoned them.
Nicholas Mardoché carries a case of canned meat from a delivery truck to a storehouse in Camp Galilee, which became home to many people, including Mardoché, after the January 2010 earthquake struck Port-au-Prince, Haiti. On the afternoon of 12 January 2010, a magnitude 7.0 Mw earthquake devastated Port-au-Prince, the capital of Haiti, and the surrounding areas. By 24 January, there were at least 52 aftershocks measuring 4.5 or greater, causing further damage and slowing recovery. (MCC photo/Ben Dep)

there might not be a road that gets to them. Yet we have worked hard to not forget these isolated communities, even when other NGOs have abandoned them. For example, after Hurricane Matthew in 2017, all the large NGOs went to the south of Haiti, where some of the worst destruction was, but there were also people who lost their homes and gardens in the Artibonite Valley, people who didn’t have a voice to say they needed help, but our partners knew that they needed our help, and advocated for these people so that they wouldn’t be forgotten. MCC responded to them, bringing these communities canned meat, comforters and relief buckets. Through these small actions, MCC stood in solidarity with these often-neglected rural communities and recognized their suffering.

- A major lesson we have learned is to pre-position humanitarian resources, allowing for faster and more efficient relief distributions. Every year MCC Haiti receives a container filled with basic emergency supplies MCC might need if a disaster strikes Haiti again, supplies like comforters, relief buckets and canned meat. We keep these material resources in storage right on our office grounds, so we are ready at any time to respond. This pre-positioning allowed us to respond within 48 hours to a recent disaster. I am proud that we have been able to help people quickly in their time of need.

Herve Alcina has coordinated MCC Haiti’s logistics and material aid responses to the 2010 earthquake, Hurricane Matthew (2016), Hurricane Irma (2017) and the 2018 earthquake.
MCC’s response to the 2010 Earthquake in Haiti

MCC received US$16.5 million in cash contributions and grants towards its humanitarian response in the aftermath of the 2010 Haiti earthquake. An additional US$3 million of in-kind humanitarian aid was distributed as part of MCC’s emergency response, including food aid alongside non-food items such as relief kits, comforters, tarps, bottled water and water filters.

MCC accompanied and supported 29 partner agencies to implement a total of 56 individual projects within the span of about seven years. Informed by partner-driven and gender-responsive approaches that intentionally built local capacity and addressed both immediate and long-term needs of project participants and the wider community, these humanitarian assistance and recovery initiatives were also reflective of MCC’s commitment to tackle root causes and reduce long-term disaster vulnerabilities within Haiti. As such, about two-thirds of MCC’s response consisted of non-emergency response programming focused on socio-economic recovery and the longer-term rehabilitation of affected communities.

Shelter: Through partners like ITECA and Fonkoze/MEDA, MCC provided access to temporary and permanent hazard-resistant housing through construction of new houses and repairs of existing houses, including a resettlement village for internally displaced persons. Local masons were also trained on disaster-resistant construction.

Water & Sanitation: MCC supported initiatives that built latrines for displaced Haitians, along with bathing areas, water catchments and cistern systems.

Food Security & Livelihoods: To increase income and long-term food security of displaced Haitians and host communities, MCC extended unconditional cash transfers, supported cash-for-work schemes, initiated media public awareness campaigns supporting local food production and consumption, provided training on sustainable food production and income generation activities and supported infrastructure projects grounded in local needs, such as irrigation-canal repairs and road construction. Projects also built on existing efforts, such as the fruit tree planting initiative of MCC’s unit in Desarmes in the Artibonite Valley (which after three decades under MCC became an independent organization, Konbit Peyizan, in spring 2019).

Education: Through Canadian government funding, MCC built new classrooms, subsidized the operations of a vocational/professional school and provided university scholarships to 12 students.

Human Rights & Advocacy: MCC promoted greater inclusion and participation of Haitian civil society in the reconstruction process. Its long-standing partnerships with prominent civil society advocacy organizations in Haiti enabled MCC to initiate workshops, forums and trainings on human rights. MCC staff in Washington, D.C., meanwhile, advocated for more just economic policies between the U.S. and Haiti and for more responsive foreign assistance.

Trauma Healing: Some affected individuals and community members received opportunities to participate in culturally appropriate trauma healing activities based on the STAR program at EMU. MCC also assisted in the creation of WOZO—a network of trauma healing trainers—that provides localized trauma healing workshops.

—Compiled by Rhea Silvosa, MCC research associate.

Key Outputs from the Haiti Response

| Over the course of seven years, over 50,000 people received material assistance immediately following the earthquake |
| 800 families received new or repaired houses built to earthquake-resistant standards |
| 200 masons were trained in earthquake-resistant building techniques |
| 2,900 people received training in income generation and sustainable food production |
| 700 students benefited from new or rebuilt schools |
| 2,000 people attended workshops and training on earthquake-related human rights issues |
| 3,700 people attended workshops or information sessions giving support for trauma healing |
Recovery through coordination: MCC and the 2015 Nepal earthquake

The April 2015 earthquake in Nepal is an event etched in the memories of many Nepalis. The immense damage brought on by the 7.8 magnitude earthquake took the lives of nearly 9,000 people, severely injured around 22,000 more and destroyed over 600,000 homes. The earthquake’s epicenter that struck Barpak village of Gorkha district destroyed every house in the village. MCC Nepal’s working districts of Dhading, Lalitpur, Ramechhap and Okhaldhunga were among the regions in Nepal highly affected by the earthquake. In the aftermath of the earthquake, the people of Nepal experienced the effects of trauma and faced the prospect of a long and difficult recovery.

In the weeks following the earthquake, MCC Nepal supported rapid response distributions of emergency food, toiletries and shelter supplies in Dhading, Okhaldhunga and Lalitpur through its existing partner organizations. MCC mobilized an assessment team to survey the damage caused by the disaster and assess the ability of MCC and its partners to respond to recovery needs. MCC launched a humanitarian appeal to its supporters, resulting in about US$3 million raised to address the needs of those most affected by the earthquake. Due to the magnitude of damage sustained and the overwhelming requests from local communities for assistance, the government of Nepal loosened restrictions on international non-governmental organizations (INGOs) wishing to respond, leading to an influx of INGOs seeking to aid communities devastated by the disaster.

Coordination with the government throughout the earthquake response was a learning experience for MCC and our partners, particularly as the government was going through a federal restructuring process. Since MCC was already a registered international NGO in Nepal, our partnerships with local Nepali organizations and MCC’s existing government agreement allowed for a smoother process of obtaining approval from the government body that oversaw earthquake response work in Nepal, the National Reconstruction Authority (NRA). More significant, however, were the existing government relationships that our partners had with local-level government stakeholders. A key part of the enactment of Nepal’s 2015 constitution was a decentralization of power from the federal level to the local level, where our partners relate daily with local government officials and through these relationships receive approval and buy-in from local government bodies for their ongoing development projects.

One poignant example of this close coordination with local government officials comes from our partner, Shanti Nepal, which carried out two earthquake recovery projects related to water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH) in Dhading district. In a discussion of Shanti’s work, Devi Prasad Silwal, the vice-chair of the rural municipality, said, “I can trust Shanti Nepal with my eyes closed. There will be no question about the quality and sustainability of their work.” This praise from the local level of government in Dhading goes beyond words: both Shanti and MCC have noticed an uptick in financial contributions to projects from municipalities now that funds are also being decentralized and more widely disbursed to NGOs from the municipality level.

Solid relationships with local government officials combined with using local structures and groups to plan and manage projects have led to an increase in community ownership of Shanti’s work. For example, one of Shanti’s

---


earthquake recovery projects included the repair of a drinking water system in Baspur village in Dhading district. As with most of its other projects, Shanti involved the existing local mothers’ group and water user committee to aid in the reconstruction and ongoing management of the water system. Mothers’ groups are government-led initiatives that use locally organized groups of women to lead and support community development initiatives. These groups were already in place prior to the earthquake, playing a key role in the local management of Shanti’s work. For this water system in Baspur, the mothers’ group collects money from users each month for maintenance needs and also organizes community education around hygiene and sanitation practices.

The very same advantage of decentralizing political power to the local level also served as a challenge at times during our earthquake recovery project. Our partner, the Rural Institution for Community Development (RICOD), implemented a recovery project in southern Lalitpur district that provided top-up support for housing reconstruction for families who had been certified by the NRA’s engineers as eligible for assistance. This required families to properly file a claim with the NRA for assistance, which was a confusing process for many. The families then needed to rebuild their homes in stages, receiving incremental approval along the way from the NRA after completing each step of the reconstruction process. The complexity of this process led to project delays, and in 2017, in the middle of the reconstruction process, local elections were held in Nepal for the first time in 20 years. In one community where RICOD was working, the newly elected ward chair suddenly demanded that RICOD provide housing support for all households in his ward or they would have to withdraw from working in his community. Despite advocating to this official, RICOD believed the most appropriate and ethical way forward was to transition away from that community towards work in another area. As RICOD sought out a new community in which to work, they faced additional attempts of local government officials trying to influence participant selection, with those officials often prioritizing persons who were not those with the greatest need. Around this time, RICOD began increasing its engagement with local NRA officials, which allowed for greater trust and coordination, eventually opening the door to a new partner community where RICOD was able to successfully implement the rest of its project.

As we think about the lessons learned from our earthquake recovery program, we would summarize our learnings in this way: in an unpredictable context like a disaster response scenario, it is helpful to remove as many barriers as possible for participants to successfully recover from the disaster. Some things, like the implementation of a new federal structure and local elections, cannot be controlled. Yet we can control whether we decide to engage in recovery work that is dependent on successful and timely action of governmental and other actors. Going forward, we would minimize this type of recovery programming because there were simply too many delays and risks introduced into the implementation of the projects. Instead, we would build on the success our partners experienced in this recovery effort through the utilization of existing community groups and networks to carry out recovery projects. Mothers’ groups, water user groups and community-based organizations seemed to be great fits for our partners in the planning, implementation and ongoing management of their projects.

While aspects of these learnings are unique to the context of Nepal, it is an overall reminder that partnership continues to be the best way for us
to respond to local disasters. We view our partner organizations as the primary vehicles for MCC Nepal’s work, and we are discovering that these partnerships are bolstered even further through engagement and relationship building with local government stakeholders and community groups.

Avash Karki is MCC Nepal earthquake program support officer. Ryan Fowler is the MCC Nepal representative.

The use of cash and voucher assistance for protection outcomes in humanitarian assistance

The majority of MCC’s humanitarian assistance programming over the past century has involved the distribution of food and non-food items. However, over the past decade the distribution of cash and voucher assistance (CVA) has become one of the fastest growing types of humanitarian interventions, including within MCC. While CVA has become well-established within MCC and across the humanitarian sector as a tool for improving food security, providing for basic needs and strengthening social safety nets in shock-prone areas around the world, the impact of CVA programs is still being assessed by MCC and other humanitarian actors. This article discusses the promising impact of CVA on protection programming, examining how CVA has the potential not only to improve food and economic security for uprooted and marginalized families, but can also help protect vulnerable groups (such as women, girls and boys) from different types of violence stoked by desperate economic conditions.

Prior to implementing cash and voucher assistance in any context, one must undertake a comprehensive gender analysis to understand the potential impact cash may have on community and household dynamics and on individual safety, particularly for vulnerable groups in that context. In some instances, distributing cash may increase pre-existing vulnerabilities (e.g., contexts in which men in a family control cash resources), leading to negative protection outcomes and placing individuals at higher risk of experiencing harm. In all humanitarian settings, an analysis of pre-crisis gender relations should be included in the gender analysis to gain a better understanding of how expectations around roles and responsibilities would function under normal circumstances and how those roles have shifted in crisis situations. The gender analysis should consult local women, men, girls, boys and other vulnerable groups in order to better inform the planned programming and challenge pre-existing ideas of gender relations and preferred programming that project staff may have. It is particularly important not to assume that gender-based targeting is the ideal strategy in all contexts; in some instances, this type of targeting may reinforce traditional gender norms or place women and girls at increased risk of gender-based violence (GBV).

While the primary use of cash and vouchers in assistance programming often seeks to meet basic household needs (such as rental assistance, household items and food assistance), there are secondary outcomes related to gender equity and protection that can be linked back to the implementation of cash-based assistance. In a recent evaluation of MCC’s voucher assistance programming in Lebanon, many women participating in the monthly food voucher program noted that the voucher had not only had a direct impact on the amount and quality of food their families were consuming, but that


there was also an impact on their feeling of self-worth within the family. Participation in the voucher program meant for these women that they were able to contribute something substantial to the household’s purchasing power, including the ability to choose and purchase food, and that stress levels in the household declined due to the knowledge that predictable monthly vouchers would be available to cover their food needs. While not explicitly linked to reduction of GBV, it is a justifiable assumption that reduced stress levels within the household can contribute to reduced tension and violence.

Other responses undertaken by other agencies, such as International Rescue Committee (IRC), include: providing cash assistance to displaced individuals; helping to replace lost documents in order to gain access to government and NGO services; and providing unconditional cash transfers to adolescent girls with the goal of reducing early marriage, unsafe working conditions and exposure to transactional sex. An emerging use for cash assistance for protection is the use of cash to support a survivor-centered response to GBV. In this type of response, cash is used as part of a broader GBV response programme, in which survivors are provided with psychosocial support as well as cash assistance in order to help survivors access core response services such as safe housing, medical care and livelihoods training that would otherwise be inaccessible due to unaffordable costs or limited financial resources.

In sudden-onset emergencies, cash programming can be used to provide families with short-term cash transfers to promote early recovery and address issues related to protection risks, or issues that will leave individuals more vulnerable to protection risks down the line. In these responses, cash and voucher programming can be used for non-reoccurring expenses, such as replacing roofing material or covering urgent medical needs. Providing a one-time cash transfer on an individual or household basis depending on need can allow households to cover key expenses that may otherwise put vulnerable individuals at greater risk of harm in high stress situations.

In a recent study carried out by the Cash Learning Partnership (CaLP), researchers found that cash and voucher programming had a positive impact on reducing intimate partner violence in 80% of projects surveyed when programmed in conjunction with other GBV activities addressing root causes of violent behavior. Cash assistance was found to reduce tensions within the household related to income insecurity. This type of assistance was also found to delay or prevent early and forced marriage in acute situations where cash was able to alleviate family desperation. However, cash alone was not able to change the underlying beliefs that lead to early or forced marriage, highlighting the need for cash programming to be integrated into a more comprehensive approach to protection.

As cash and voucher assistance programming has become recognized as a growing component of humanitarian response programming, it is important to assess the impact of this assistance in order to achieve optimal results. The use of cash and voucher assistance in protection programming is still an emerging area of programming and research that shows a good deal of promise in providing survivors of GBV and vulnerable populations with additional resources and tangible outcomes around safety and protection in humanitarian assistance programming.

Annie Loewen is an MCC humanitarian assistance coordinator based in Winnipeg.

“Providing a one-time cash transfer on an individual or household basis depending on need can allow households to cover key expenses that may otherwise put vulnerable individuals at greater risk of harm in high stress situations”
MCC, local partnerships and humanitarian standards

During the first MCC response in southern Russia (present-day Ukraine) in the early 1920s, MCC worked with local Mennonite institutions and committees to deliver urgent humanitarian assistance to respond to famine. While the humanitarian landscape has changed dramatically since MCC’s inception, MCC has continued to increase partnerships with local organizations, including local churches, faith-based organizations and other civil society organizations to provide humanitarian assistance to people impacted by conflict and disaster. In the last few decades, humanitarian principles and standards have significantly evolved to ensure more accountability to and ensure the rights of disaster-affected communities. MCC’s strength in responding to humanitarian crises is its wide network of local partners. MCC provides support based on requests from local organizations who are well connected to their local contexts and have access to affected communities. Because these organizations have longstanding relationships in their communities, they can respond quickly to emergency needs and offer assistance that is appropriate and responsive to ongoing needs and is sensitive to contextual challenges.

MCC’s reliance on local partnerships also presents challenges, including in the ability to scale-up, and can cause tensions with humanitarian principles and standards. This article provides an overall summary of key humanitarian standards and the more recent emphasis on the localization of humanitarian assistance. It highlights examples of MCC’s response to various emergencies and how local partners enhance the quality and accountability of humanitarian assistance, while also noting areas of tension and growth.

Accountability to the people and communities affected by disasters stands at the centre of the Core Humanitarian Standard (CHS) adopted by international non-governmental organizations in 2015. Humanity, impartiality, neutrality and independence form the key principles that govern humanitarian action. The CHS builds on earlier humanitarian conventions, codes of conduct, principles and standards developed by the International Federation of Red Cross/Red Crescent Societies (IFRC), the Sphere project and other humanitarian coalitions and standards organizations. The CHS outlines nine commitments which can be grouped into three overall categories: 1) timely access to quality humanitarian assistance which builds local capacities; 2) participation of, communication with and accountability to affected communities; and 3) a commitment to learning and building the capacity and effectiveness of humanitarian actors. The examples and discussion below show how MCC’s approach of partnering with local organizations interfaces with these standards.

At the World Humanitarian Summit in 2017, governments, international aid organizations and United Nations agencies committed to reshape the humanitarian sector, articulated in what has come to be called the Grand Bargain Commitments. One of these commitments is to increase support and funding for local and national organizations in humanitarian action, often referred to as the “localization agenda.” The UN Secretary General called for humanitarian assistance to be “as local as possible and as international as necessary”—this includes a call for private and government resources to support local agencies, rather than relying on large international humanitarian agencies, and to commit multi-year funding to enable better...
response capacity. These commitments are based on the recognition that local civil society actors are often the first to respond to humanitarian crises and are an ongoing presence in their communities before and after these crises.

The first group of humanitarian standards refers to the importance of providing timely, quality and appropriate assistance, including assistance that builds local capacity and avoids harm. The strength of MCC’s relief response stems from its wide network of over 500 local partners. Local organizations are more connected and responsive to the needs of people affected in the communities they serve. Due to MCC’s existing partnerships in Syria, Iraq, Lebanon and Jordan, MCC has been able over the past decade to facilitate its largest response to a humanitarian crisis since World War II. Following the Nepal earthquake in 2015, existing community development partners were able to quickly identify affected communities in remote areas and to identify and address the most urgent needs, despite huge communication and logistical challenges. During the Israeli military’s bombardment of Gaza in 2014, MCC was among the first international organizations to respond to the immediate food and shelter needs of affected people. In countries such as Ethiopia, Kenya and Zimbabwe, MCC’s ongoing agriculture and food security work with vulnerable communities has paved the way for MCC to also respond during food security crises. MCC’s existing community development and peacebuilding partnerships allow it to quickly respond to humanitarian crises because of the pre-existing program these partner organizations have with vulnerable groups.

At the same time, MCC has faced challenges in some large-scale disaster responses because MCC either did not have existing local partners, as when it responded to the Japan earthquake in 2011 and to Typhoon Haiyan in the Philippines in 2013. Following the Indian Ocean tsunami in 2014, MCC worked to form new partnerships in Banda Aceh, Indonesia and Sri Lanka. MCC also built on local partnerships in India with other Canadian NGOs to form a multi-church agency response in southern India.

In the case of the 2010 Haiti earthquake, MCC had a broad network of local partners and significant resources to program. Over the course of MCC’s seven-year response, MCC undertook food security, shelter, water and sanitation and trauma healing responses through partnerships with Haitian organizations. MCC’s wide network of existing and new partners allowed MCC to mount an immediate, significant and multi-sectoral relief and recovery response. However, the final evaluation noted that MCC should have engaged with fewer partners and focused on fewer sectors. In a large-scale disaster response in which MCC raises significant resources and has a wide network of partners with urgent requests, it can be challenging to keep MCC’s overall response focused.

The capacity to provide timely and appropriate assistance depends on whether local partners have active programming and strong relationships in affected areas. When local partners have robust and active relationships with affected communities, they are also more likely to deliver quality and appropriate assistance. Food assistance is one of the most common requests that MCC receives from local partners. Local partners recommend culturally appropriate and quality food assistance. MCC’s local partners can help discern the proper modality of the humanitarian response (i.e., cash, vouchers or in-kind food baskets). When food baskets are identified as the best approach, local partners are well-positioned to determine the make-up of the food ration. Decisions about the mode and type of food items are

“At times, partner requests can be at odds with minimum standards and humanitarian principles. Local organizations are often faced with political and social pressures to respond to as many communities and people as possible, pressures which, if acted on, can dilute the quality of assistance.”

On July 17, 2014, a truckload of food packages were distributed by MCC partner Zakho Small Villages Project at an IDP (internally displaced persons) camp in northern Iraq—most of the IDPs fled the city of Mosul after its takeover by Islamic State group (also known as ISIS). More than 230 heads of household received the packages which contained basic cooking staples such as rice, lentils, oil and other ingredients, as well as some basic hygiene items. Names not used for security reasons.

MCC photo/Ryan Rodrick Beiler
then reviewed by MCC to ensure that they meet Sphere minimum standards, including standards that aim to ensure that households receive the required ration for dignity and survival. MCC and its partners together assess what shape humanitarian assistance initiatives should take, with partners bringing local knowledge about what communities name as the top priorities and about what they understand as appropriate, and with MCC assessing such requests through the lens of global humanitarian standards.

At times, partner requests can be at odds with minimum standards and humanitarian principles. Local organizations are often faced with political and social pressures to respond to as many communities and people as possible, pressures which, if acted on, can dilute the quality of assistance. MCC often pushes local organizations to focus their responses to meet minimum humanitarian standards for fewer communities and households, rather than diluting the response across too many recipients. When faced with overwhelming needs, MCC and its partners must maintain the overall principle of humanity, focusing on meeting the needs of the most affected communities to the necessary standard.

The second group of CHS principles relates to participation, communication and accountability. Affected people must help shape humanitarian responses, provide feedback and lodge complaints while those responses are underway and contribute to the evaluation of humanitarian responses. MCC has worked with various churches, faith-based organizations and other groups to set up or strengthen local disaster committees. These local committees will typically include local church leadership along with required skills, knowledge and representation from the affected community. In the case of MCC’s recent response to the crisis in the Kasai region of the Democratic Republic of the Congo, MCC worked with three Congolese Anabaptist church denominations to set-up local relief committees to develop and oversee the response, a multifaceted response targeting internally displaced Congolese that included food assistance, education support, livelihood recovery, trauma healing and peacebuilding components. The local relief committee offered input into the shape of the response, channeling feedback from youth leaders, the women’s commission of the church, church leadership and local government officials.

In addition to coordinating and delivering humanitarian assistance, relief committees provide invaluable counsel in identifying the priority needs the humanitarian assistance will aim to address and in selecting (or “targeting”) the priority households for receiving assistance. In the case of the Kasai response, the local relief committees, with strong accompaniment from MCC, helped in selecting the geographic areas in which they would respond as well as the priority households to receive assistance. Building on the humanitarian principles of humanity and impartiality, the committees selected households based on need, focusing on the most vulnerable, including households with pregnant or nursing mothers, unaccompanied children, people living with disabilities and the elderly. Diverse representation on relief committees, and particularly the involvement of displaced people themselves, strengthens accountability and the targeting of the response. This relief committee model helps protect church leadership who may be accused of discrimination based on church membership or affiliation or other characteristics (e.g., ethnicity or political affiliation). MCC has also worked hard to ensure there is better gender representation on these committees and worked toward integrating gender analysis into its humanitarian response.
In addition to overseeing the targeting of the response, local organizations also solicit feedback and manage complaints from communities receiving humanitarian assistance. Their presence in the community means that they can receive feedback and complaints more directly and are more accessible than staff from other outside agencies. A growing priority for MCC is to help local organizations set up formal feedback and complaint mechanisms in order to increase accountability to and participation of the affected community, as well as to prevent sexual exploitation and abuse, fraud and corruption. MCC continues to build its capacity to better work alongside local partners to ensure the participation of affected people throughout the assessment, design, monitoring and evaluation process, as part of a broader commitment that MCC’s humanitarian responses be adaptive and appropriate.

Coordination and collaboration are also central to this second group of CHS principles. Local organizations are connected to the communities, organizations and government where they operate and often prioritize coordination with local government. At the same time, large international organizations coordinate through the UN cluster system which can often create barriers to participation from local organizations, including safety, language, social or cultural barriers. As an example, in the case of the Haiti earthquake, the initial UN coordination meetings were held in the MINUSTAH (UN Haiti peacekeeping force) compound, with the meetings conducted in English or French and not Haitian Creole. The meetings were often dominated by representatives of international NGOs from the global North with large capacity and were not accessible spaces for staff from smaller local organizations. MCC sometimes represents its local partners within these UN coordination mechanisms.

The last group of three CHS principles relates to organizational learning, capacity building and the effective use of resources. In 2017, MCC conducted a review of its program planning, monitoring and evaluation system. The findings and recommendations included the need for MCC to continue to increase partner and MCC staff capacity in assessment, design, monitoring and evaluation methods, particularly the use of participatory action research methods. The Keystone survey in 2013—an independent survey of MCC’s local partners—found that partners perceive MCC to be a learning organization and at the same time would like more MCC capacity building support in participatory monitoring evaluation methods.

MCC’s capacity building support helps ensure that MCC will have skilled partners who can adhere to humanitarian standards in the planning, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of humanitarian initiatives. MCC works at partner capacity building in multiple ways, including: a) sponsoring training on humanitarian principles and minimum standards, planning, monitoring and evaluation, and trauma healing and peacebuilding; b) helping organizations set up diverse local relief committees; c) facilitating learning exchanges between different groups; and d) providing significant accompaniment in assessment, planning and reporting. One of the criticisms of working through local organizations is their surge capacity—the ability (or lack thereof) of these small local organizations to scale-up to respond to large humanitarian needs. MCC’s approach has been to start small and scale-up as these partners demonstrate their capacity to manage larger initiatives.

“In MCC humanitarian work over the past decades has increasingly relied on local partnerships, with MCC now almost exclusively working with local partners in disaster response.”

In June 1957, flour and cornmeal were distributed to storm victims in South Korea. In this photo, MCC service worker Joseph Smucker, of Goshen, Indiana helps to lift a tub of flour (weighing about 50 lbs) onto the head of a woman who is also carrying a baby on her back. Each recipient was allotted 5 lbs of flour per family member. (MCC photo)
MCC humanitarian work over the past decades has increasingly relied on local partnerships, with MCC now almost exclusively working with local partners in disaster response. In our experience this model has allowed us to meet humanitarian standards and principles including ensuring an appropriate and quality response, accountability to, participation of and communication with disaster affected communities. MCC continues to build its capacity with long-term local partners, allowing MCC to scale-up over time and increase its capacity to respond to disasters through local partnerships while meeting humanitarian standards. 

Bruce Guenther is MCC’s disaster response director, based in Winnipeg.

Soup being served at a school in Germany, 1947–48, as part of MCC relief efforts at the end of the Second World War. MCC participated in a joint child-feeding program that reached 72,000 children in eight cities in southeastern Germany. (MCC photo/Heinz Wagener)