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In MCC, people sometimes say: “peace is everything we do.” Perhaps some readers of this issue have used the phrase—whether about MCC or about a different church organization. To say that “peace is everything we do” can feel profoundly right. But what is meant by such a claim?

The inaugural winter 2013 issue of *Intersections* asked the question, “Where is the peace?” Eight years later, the question still feels relevant. If “peace is everything that we do,” does this diminish peacebuilding as a specific body of knowledge and set of practices? Does it devalue our relief, development, immigration or migration work to lump it into peace? Does claiming that “peace is everything we do” lead to fuzzy understandings of MCC’s work? How does the claim that “peace is everything we do” connect to MCC’s vision, mission and core values?

These are big questions. They will not be reconciled today, this year or in this issue of *Intersections*. But this issue of *Intersections* does propose one way to live into the vision that “peace is everything we do” in MCC, moving it from a general (and sometimes vague) claim to a more grounded insistence on using Do No Harm and conflict sensitivity frameworks in the design, implementation and ongoing monitoring and evaluation of MCC’s relief, development and peacebuilding work.

Do No Harm: Mary Anderson’s 1999 book, *Do No Harm: How Aid Can Support Peace—or War*, was a manifesto, calling on the humanitarian relief community to stop doing irresponsible things that fed conflict. While it feels intuitive today, Anderson’s book was the result of several years of bubbling conversation. Post-conflict or post-disaster humanitarian action does not occur in a vacuum. Instead, it unfolds within existing social dynamics and power relationships. Humanitarian aid can either improve or worsen these dynamics. It becomes part of the social context. Anderson proposed that humanitarian work must be guided by the age-old principle of “do no harm” and urged aid practitioners to consider the implicit ethical messages their actions conveyed and the potential conflict around resource transfers that humanitarian assistance can stoke.

Conflict sensitivity: Taking the Do No Harm framework one step further beyond simply avoiding harms (a necessary baseline) demands attention to conflict dynamics within humanitarian relief, development

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and peacebuilding contexts. Practitioners must analyze and consider how they might improve conflict dynamics within a given context. The CDA Collaborative Learning Project (CDA) expanded Anderson’s approach into a conflict sensitivity framework.

The concepts of connectors and dividers are key elements of the conflict sensitivity framework. Practitioners must consider the factors that connect people and then strengthen these social bonds while considering the dynamics in the same context that divide people and fracture community cohesion. These are essential steps in planning relief and development interventions.

There are always elements within a context that already connect people, from shared attitudes, values, symbols and special occasions to common experiences and institutions. A conflict-sensitive development project will build on these existing connectors. Some of these same social elements, however, can also be sites of contention, acting as dividers—so, for example, a communal celebration might bring people together and strengthen social bonds, but it could also become a site for division. This makes it especially important for relief, development and peacebuilding practitioners to do their homework to understand the connectors and dividers potentially at play within a given context. A conflict analysis is an excellent tool to facilitate this homework. A conflict analysis is a style of assessment, dedicated to understanding conflict and injustice dynamics. It’s a critical tool to actualize conflict sensitivity.

In “A Distinction with a Difference” (2009), Woodrow and Chigas define conflict sensitivity as “the ability of an organization to: (a) understand the context in which it is operating; (b) understand the interactions between its interventions and the context/group relations; and (c) act upon the understanding of these interactions, in order to avoid negative impacts and maximize positive impacts.” Conflict sensitivity is different from peacebuilding. Peacebuilding sees a conflict or injustice and confronts it directly. Conflict sensitivity is a framework that any type of work can adopt. It’s a lens that helps all organizations identify conflict dynamics within their contexts and then tailor their work to avoid harm and even build on connectors and strengthen social peace. Without using conflict-sensitive approaches and undertaking rigorous conflict analysis, all initiatives run the risk of doing harm—and could miss opportunities for fostering social good through humanitarian assistance, health, education, food security and peacebuilding initiatives.

Conflict sensitivity today: Today, the conflict sensitivity field is well-developed, with numerous manuals and resources to introduce practitioners to basic concepts such as connectors, dividers and more. The world of conflict sensitivity is constantly pushing itself, aware of the growing complexities of the world around us and eager to meet the moment. Conflict sensitivity complements sectoral best practices for education, health, food security and more and aligns well with core MCC values of practicing nonviolence and seeking a just peace.

The humanitarian relief, development and peacebuilding fields are beginning to use a more intersectional and integrated lens and are keen to breakdown silos that keep them separated. You will find this trend in global language around the ‘triple nexus’ of relief, development and peacebuilding. One could argue that MCC work has exemplified the ‘triple nexus’ for decades. To do relief, development and peacebuilding well, be it in an individual or an integrated manner, one must use conflict-sensitive approaches.

In this issue, you will hear from several MCC projects and partners around the world representing multiple sectors as they practice many conflict sensitivity principles. The authors share how they built on connectors in their contexts, how they considered dividers, how they modified their initiatives when unintended conflicts or unforeseen tensions emerged, and what conflict sensitivity has meant for their work. You will read about choices project leaders made from the beginning that went well, and adaptations that happened later. These articles contain insightful stories of how practitioners have aimed to actively make peace part of their work.

In the future, if you hear “peace is part of everything that we do,” use it as a moment of reflection. Consider how MCC and its partners can and do seek to transform this phrase into reality. Instead of vaguely hoping every path of every initiative results in some undefined form of peace, MCC and its partners must intentionally incorporate it from the beginning in the project design choices we make. We build the road to the destination we desire, and then reflectively traverse it, making necessary changes as we go. Conflict sensitivity is a place to start. It is an accessible approach that everyone can utilize in efforts to not only avoid harm but to also proactively identify potential conflicts that can emerge in the course of relief, development and peacebuilding efforts.

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Conflict sensitivity, ethnicity and selection criteria: a case study from DR Congo

The Democratic Republic of Congo (DR Congo) is the giant of Africa’s Great Lakes region but is also one of the poorest and most unstable countries in the world. Colonial legacies, ethnic divisions, wealth from rare and precious minerals and the covetousness of its neighboring states have caused chronic unrest since the country’s independence in 1960.

Of the many challenges facing DR Congo, ethnic division is one of the most complex. It has direct impact on all MCC programming. Identity dominates Congolese life, where family, clan and broader ethnic identities are increasingly rigid, particularly in times of conflict, and exploited by bad actors. DR Congo has many ethnic groups spread throughout the country who also reside in neighboring countries. Constant contestations of power around social, economic, land and political rights take on ethnic dimensions. Due to this reality, conflict sensitivity—particularly around participant selection criteria and ethnicity—is incredibly important.

Local, national and international efforts have tried to bring peace to DR Congo. Unfortunately, these efforts routinely neglect a fundamental factor: the direct involvement of local actors in the process of finding stability. Congolese organizations exist that are very familiar with the context and its multi-dimensional conflicts. Congolese partners will always be best placed to understand the cultural nuances of the locations in which they operate—they are thus best positioned to plan effectively to ensure that they do not inadvertently exacerbate existing conflicts. MCC’s commitment to working through Congolese partners is distinctive within DR Congo, with many other



Anderson, Mary B. *Do No Harm: How Aid Can Support Peace—Or War*. Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner, 1999.

CDA Collaborative. See conflict sensitivity and Do No Harm resources here: <https://www.cdacollaborative.org/what-we-do/conflict-sensitivity/>.

Woodrow, Peter, and Diana Chigas. “A Distinction with a Difference: Conflict Sensitivity and Peacebuilding.” Cambridge, MA: CDA Collaborative Learning Projects, 2009. Available here: <https://www.cdacollaborative.org/publication/a-distinction-with-a-difference-conflict-sensitivity-and-peacebuilding/>.

Musawu Suzanne, an internally displaced Congolese woman living in Kikwit, DR Congo, watched by her nephew Mulumba Patrick while selling flour as part of a livelihoods project operated by the Mennonite Brethren Church of Congo (CEFMC). Two hundred internally displaced persons (IDPs) received training in business development, management, using credit and strategies for savings, along with small business start-up funds. (CEFMC/Seydou Lusangu)



international organizations implementing their projects directly, reducing their flexibility to adapt appropriately to contextual factors as they develop.

In this article, I examine how three of MCC's Congolese partners use conflict sensitivity methods in their efforts, from project concept and design to implementation, with specific attention to how they select project participants. The Peace and Reconciliation Program (PPR) seeks to reintegrate ex-combatants into communal life, Healing and Rebuilding Our Community North Kivu (HROC NK) addresses trauma within communities scarred by ongoing conflict and the Community of Mennonite Brethren Churches in Congo (CEFMC Kikwit) provides humanitarian assistance to displaced peoples. All three groups use conflict-sensitive approaches in their work

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Ethnic dynamics and conflict sensitivity: Relief, development, and peacebuilding projects that do not use conflict analysis to inform their design run the risk of deepening social dividers within a community, in turn exacerbating existing conflicts and triggering latent ones. Potential dividers within Congolese communities include ethnic differences and unequal access to resources and power. Ethnicity is of great importance because it constitutes a first level of identification and relationships. Ethnicity in DR Congo has become a tool for electoral mobilization as well as the basis for marshalling armed groups who claim to protect ethnic interests. The three partners profiled here approach these sensitivities in different—yet similar—ways.

Since 2006, PPR has worked with former participants in armed groups that were formed based on ethnic identities. In working with ex-combatants, PPR does everything possible to avoid triggering ethnic considerations. PPR avoids considering an individual's ethnic origin as a selection criterion. When combatants decide to give up arms, PPR staff accompany them in the process of integrating into civilian and communal life. PPR works not only with ex-combatants but also with members of the communities into which the ex-combatants will be integrated, helping them prepare to receive new community members. PPR's knowledge of local political, religious and ethnic

dynamics helps it support integration of ex-combatants into communities without creating or exacerbating conflict.

In its trauma healing programs, HROC NK strategically plans activities in multiple locations chosen to prevent accusations that it privileges one ethnic group at the expense of others. In participant selection, it factors in ethnic origin to achieve diverse, inclusive and balanced representation.

For CEFMC Kikwit, as it welcomes displaced Congolese and extends humanitarian assistance to them, consideration of the ethnic origins of potential recipients does not enter the selection process. The church has well-established selection criteria to assist it in selecting individuals most in need, with need serving as the primary basis for someone to receive assistance. These clear and transparent criteria, along with the church's solid understanding of local political dynamics, prevents the church's humanitarian assistance outreach from creating or deepening conflict.

Building connections: Various types of events help community members bond with each other across differences, even ethnic differences. These include weddings, births, baptisms, death and mourning, trainings, sports and cultural activities and community *baraza* (circle of elders). At the local level, such events create cohesion between the different members of the community because the weakest are supported by the strongest. However, some people do not easily identify the connecting elements within the community. Many default to seeing negative dynamics and factors that divide, yet many positive (albeit sometimes unrecognized) factors unite them. MCC's Congolese partners have deployed different strategies to build on and strengthen connectors that smooth over or reach across divides.


PPR works in Kitamba, known to be the stronghold of both foreign and local armed groups. PPR reaches out to members of these armed groups and accompanies them in leaving the groups and in their reintegration process into Kitamba. What the members of communities in and around Kitamba have in common is that they enjoy working together. Many communities have the cultural norm of *salongo*, a communal work day on Saturdays in which community members collaborate on a project that benefits the entire community. Traditional leaders often bless these community activities. PPR capitalizes on this shared community spirit, asking communities to serve as host families for ex-combatants and help them integrate back into civilian life. PPR excels in finding families for ex-combatants who have nowhere to go. By working with host families and ex-combatants, PPR nurtures new relationships and creates spaces for connection and mutual interaction, leading to transformed communal understandings.

HROC's trauma healing work occurs in different locations across North Kivu, as it brings together members of different ethnic, religious and cultural groups to workshops, dialogues, mediations and community listening and discussion spaces that address the legacies of trauma that have scarred communities in the area over years of violent conflict. HROC draws upon the factors that bind these communities together to attract people to its events: long-standing community spirit and pride, a desire for friendship and curiosity about new information. Even in deeply divided communities or when engaging polarized populations—such as the police and youth harmed by police—HROC succeeds in attracting diverse participants. To bring in participants, HROC depends on alumni of its programs to vouch for the effectiveness of its trauma healing training and on being clear and transparent with potential participants about the intent and purpose of the trauma healing initiatives.



Selection criteria properly shared with the community and the applicants will make it clear who is suitable to be selected. This transparency will significantly reduce frustrations within the community and increase community support for the project.”

CEFMC's work in Kikwit with internally displaced people requires high conflict sensitivity as the people in this community are acutely vulnerable and in real need. CEFMC staff are well-known and accepted by all in the community. Using trusted people who are knowledgeable of and sensitive to conflict dynamics within a community to communicate messages and make potentially explosive decisions, such as who will receive humanitarian assistance, is essential, as they know how to build on connectors within the community.

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Selection criteria and conflict sensitivity: As already indicated, establishing the criteria to be used to select participants in relief, development and peacebuilding projects is an essential dimension of conflict-sensitive work. If community connectors and dividers are not properly factored into participant selection, then relief, development and peacebuilding work may fail to meet their intended outcomes and these initiatives might foment conflict and lead to physical and psychological harms. MCC's Congolese partner organizations discussed here work with different groups (ex-combatants, internally displaced people, communities traumatized by violent conflict). Selection criteria will depend on the target group and the broader community context. Throughout the selection process, organizations must consider how the selected mix of participants will build on connecting factors within the community and will avoid worsening the dividing factors.

MCC's Congolese partners have found multiple factors that contribute to positive and effective conflict-sensitive work. First, the involvement of local leaders and/or government authorities is very important. These personalities have influence in their communities. They know the context best. Their involvement will enable them to be impartial and to set criteria that will be accepted by the community and also by the participants. In the case of PPR, which operates in an area where there are armed groups, the involvement of the local authorities is very important to prevent PPR from being seen by the community as an accomplice or even a spy for armed groups.

Second, one must avoid bias in the selection criteria. Put everyone on an equal footing by giving the same opportunity to all, regardless of origin, gender, age and other factors. Selection criteria properly shared with the community and the applicants will make it clear who is suitable to be selected. This transparency will significantly reduce frustrations within the community and increase community support for the project. CEFMC has been impartial in the selection of participants, which is necessary when working with such a vulnerable population such as internally displaced peoples. Impartiality will avoid creating or reviving divisive issues that are the source of many conflicts. There have been rare accusations of partiality, but leaders and community members have called this out. Partners have been able to resolve these issues and restore trust and objectivity through direct and clear communication.

Third, communication to participants and community members must be as direct and clear as possible. This communication must also be made before the start of project activities. Churches and other organizations must communicate their goals clearly, so they are well understood by everyone in the community. Communication in the local language is necessary to allow for a good understanding. Community members should know and understand the selection criteria. If the criteria are known to all, this helps avoid conflicts. Multiple mechanisms to publicize selection criteria within the community are needed.

Finally, kindness and patience are important. Not everyone will be selected for the project. Sometimes those not selected will be upset. Encourage non-participants not to lose hope and listen to their frustration. This attitude can help restrain a desire for conflict and prevent attempts to damage the project's reputation.

Conclusion: If relief, development and peacebuilding organizations do not conduct rigorous conflict analyses and fail to incorporate findings about contextual connectors and dividers into project design, such as participant selection criteria, they risk deepening divisions and creating or worsening conflicts. Local actors are well placed to design and implement conflict-sensitive projects. The criteria used to determine project participants have significant potential for stoking conflict and divisions—paying careful attention to these criteria at all stages of a project cycle is thus imperative. When selection criteria are the product of careful, rigorous conflict analysis, community ownership of relief, development and peacebuilding initiatives is increased, communal bonds within the target community are strengthened and sustainable social harmony is fostered.

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Being sensitive to conflict dynamics in South Sudan

Humanitarian organizations must deploy conflict-sensitive approaches when addressing community needs to ensure that their humanitarian relief efforts not only avoid doing harm but also contribute to social resilience, development and peacebuilding. In South Sudan, MCC's partner organization, ACROSS, has used conflict analysis and conflict-sensitive approaches when planning community-level water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH) projects.

ACROSS is a faith-based organization founded in 1972, with a vision, including during wartime years, of Christ-centered transformation of communities in South Sudan and beyond. As a Christ-centered organization, ACROSS take a holistic approach to transformation, anchored in the so-called Triple Nexus integration of humanitarian, peacebuilding and development interventions. ACROSS's programs are guided by the core humanitarian principles of humanity, neutrality, impartiality and independence.

Key connections: Multiple factors connect people in and around the county of Kapoeta East in the Eastern Equatoria state of South Sudan where ACROSS operates. First, pastoralism is a key source of livelihoods. ACROSS carries out WASH initiatives in pastoralist communities comprised of the Toposa and the Nyangatom groups, with the Jie and the Murle groups overlapping nearby. These groups are linguistically related. Reliance on livestock for livelihoods is also a point of connection. Livestock animals are treasured and serve as financial capital, food and traditional social support systems in Kapoeta. Livestock exchanges are also a key mechanism used in reconciliation and settling of disputes—the exchange of livestock can create and maintain social connections, serving as a key connector with high symbolic significance in and around Kapoeta.

People around Kapoeta are also connected by a changing natural landscape. All these communities are confronted by limited water sources, pasture

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scarcity and depletion, recurring food shortages and problems with natural resource management, climate change variability and new migration patterns. Communities in the Kapoeta region all struggle to navigate the changing landscape. This shared challenge can be a connector—although it can easily tip into being a divider (more below).

Finally, traditional leaders serve as a connecting structure. Traditional authorities both enjoy public legitimacy and are seen as effective, particularly in conflict resolution through applying indigenous law or customs, practices and beliefs. They are trusted community representatives and act as key symbols of a community’s protection, social bonds and unity. These trusted voices assisted ACROSS in mapping underserved parts of the community as part of determining where to carry out this WASH initiative. The trust that traditional leaders have within communities is a positive linkage—involving them throughout the project cycle, from design through evaluation, helps ACROSS ensure that its efforts are sensitive to local conflict dynamics and help it avoid doing harm.

Existing dividers: In designing and implementing its WASH work, ACROSS must be mindful of multiple dividers that generate conflict in the Kapoeta project area. First, the region has witnessed a wave of child abductions, driven largely by criminals who are disproportionately found in one of the ethnic groups, the Murle. Child abductions have morphed into the commercialized sale of abducted children at between 30 and 50 heads of cattle. Some children are abducted during cattle raids and taken alongside the cattle. These crimes divide communities and provoke animosity between ethnic groups as well.

Stress on water and pasture also generates conflict. Given that many people in this area rely on pastoralism for their livelihoods, the most common triggers of conflicts are access to and control of water points and grazing lands.

The final major divider involves cattle rustling and theft. Traditional livestock raiding is influenced by the desire to augment livestock numbers to increase wealth, meet compensation demands and pay bride prices (a form of dowry). Cattle raids can be lethally violent and create significant ongoing conflict.

Project choices: When designing its current WASH project, ACROSS made several key choices aimed at reducing tensions and conflicts within the project communities. ACROSS did not concentrate its boreholes in only one location, an approach that would have led to accusations of favoring one ethnic group over another, but instead provided boreholes in multiple locations, ensuring that different ethnic groups would have access to the water from the boreholes.

In deciding where to place boreholes within specific communities, the locations’ proximity to other institutions was critical. ACROSS wanted to reinforce opportunities for connection. Drilling boreholes near facilities that are for common use, like a school, reinforces sharing and strengthens bonds across different parts of a community. This strategy in turn helps dampen the possibility of violent conflict, as people are reminded of their oneness as they collect water. Given that boreholes provide reliable water, this strategy also reduces tensions and clashes around water for livestock.

ACROSS also considered other factors. First, ACROSS is placing boreholes in a manner intended to reduce opportunities for child abductions. With boreholes located closer to where people live, women will have to travel a shorter distance for water, and children will not be left alone for significant periods,

diminishing the risk of abduction. Women not having to walk great distances for water is a positive outcome. ACROSS also hopes the closer location will lead to girls spending less time on chores, reduce their vulnerability to sexual violence when fetching water far from home and increase their opportunities to attend school.

By placing boreholes near schools, ACROSS sought to encourage families from all ethnic groups to send their children to school, with improved retention rates a desired outcome. ACROSS hopes that, long-term, the time that children from different ethnic groups spend together in school will foster greater inter-ethnic relationship-building and trust.

Moving forward, ACROSS is also providing latrines and sanitation facilities. Changing norms and attitudes around hygiene is challenging. ACROSS is connecting with traditional leadership structures to influence positive hygiene practices. Getting trusted local leaders on board to help champion these new messages will hopefully help these messages travel further and be adopted by communities.

Conclusion: Inclusive and conflict-sensitive programming enlarges capacity for increased community cohesion, local conflict resolution and social and political stability. ACROSS has and will continue to maintain this integrated approach in its WASH programs as it continues to advocate for more resources for the marginalized areas in which it works.


ACROSS's WASH program in Kapoeta has yielded multiple learnings. First, the project reflects the importance of inclusivity across stakeholder groups in project design and implementation. Second, ACROSS has seen the importance of fostering and strengthening connectors that bind people across ethnic difference, connectors that will nurture shared identities and contribute to long-term social peace. Finally, ACROSS advocates for the importance of neutrality, using this principle to guide the selection of permanent investments such as boreholes in neutral areas, such as shared schools.


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Conflict sensitivity, capacity building and peacebuilding education

Since its inception, the Mindanao Peacebuilding Institute (MPI) in the Philippines has served as a resource for peacebuilders. Through its education and training programs, MPI offers courses that are relevant and applicable to grassroots peacebuilders' current contexts as well as reflective of ongoing development in the field of peacebuilding and conflict transformation. To date, MPI has trained over 2,300 peace activists from more than 60 countries through its in-person Annual Peacebuilding Training Program and, most recently, through its Virtual Peacebuilding Training Program. MPI hopes that the knowledge and skills gained from these courses can contribute to building and sustaining peace writ large in Asia-Pacific and beyond.

Since 2014, MPI has included courses and modules on conflict sensitivity and the Do No Harm approach. How has MPI integrated and practiced these concepts in its programming? In this article, I offer my reflections and insights

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Since 2003, MPI has developed course curricula that incorporate and highlight community-based approaches and traditional practices of Indigenous peoples in peacebuilding.”



Lederach, John Paul. *Building Peace: Sustainable Reconciliation in Divided Societies*. United States Institute of Peace Press. Washington, D.C., 1997.

Leguro, Myla and Hyunjin Deborah Kwak. “Unlikely Partners for Conflict Transformation: Engaging the Military as Stakeholders for Peace in Mindanao.” In *Civil Society, Peace, and Power*. Eds. Davis Cortright, Melanie Greenburg, and Laurel Stone. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2016.

into this question based on conversations I have had with my colleagues and my experience working with MPI.

MPI as a conflict-sensitive intervention: MPI’s founding ideals and story are central to the organization’s identity. How MPI operates, deliberates and considers the impact of important shifts in peacebuilding to its mandate and practice are shaped and interpreted through MPI’s genesis. At its core, MPI embodies John Paul Lederach’s description of capacity-building as a process that is “oriented towards expanding what is already in place and available” (Lederach, 108). MPI is guided by a strongly held belief that people can transform their reality.

In the late 1990s, Mindanao seemed to be in the throes of a significant transformation. A peace accord was signed in 1996 between the government of the Philippines and the Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF), an agreement that created the Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao, ending the decades-long conflict with a key Muslim rebel group. The government had also reached a ceasefire agreement with another Muslim group, the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF), to explore the possibility of separate peace talks. Local peacebuilders were hopeful and challenged to be effective in the task of supporting these peace processes.

Around the same time, a group of community leaders and local peace practitioners from Mindanao returned from the Summer Peacebuilding Institute of Eastern Mennonite University (EMU) inspired to start their own training institute. They were encouraged and propelled by discussions they had had with John Paul Lederach, a facilitator and a faculty member at EMU at the time. The idea responded to the growing need for a structure that could provide a platform for continuous learning and capacity-building in peacebuilding in Mindanao and elsewhere. Local and international organizations with a history of working together saw the value of a training institute based in Mindanao and, as such, provided resources and support to realize this vision.

Mennonite Central Committee (MCC), the Catholic Agency for Overseas Development and Catholic Relief Services provided core support for the founding of MPI. Local organizations and individuals also mobilized to support the vision of a peace institute in Mindanao—months of preparatory meetings led to the first annual peacebuilding training that took place in 2000. Ironically, or perhaps prophetically, the first training took place during Philippine President Joseph Estrada’s all-out war in Mindanao.

MPI was the product of people working to create a place where people could be brought together, not only to learn, but to build relationships across divides. It became a venue for building solidarity with those experiencing conflict and violence in their midst. For Filipino participants at that time, MPI provided a space where they could reimagine an alternative reality for Mindanao beyond the violence of the all-out war.

Supporting connectors: How do we at MPI sustain creating spaces for people to come together and learn collaboratively? How do we continue being responsive to the needs of peacebuilders in the country and the region? Are we contributing to societal transformation? Over the years, MPI has taken these questions seriously and has made intentional steps to address them.

First, MPI has a long-standing commitment to the principle of impartiality. MPI intentionally avoids being affiliated with any political faction in our aim to provide a safe space for participants from opposing groups. By modeling the values of inclusivity, hospitality, respect and dialogue, MPI has succeeded in creating patterns of behavior within the confines of the Annual Peacebuilding Training that communicate to its participants that this is a space where they are welcome. This is a place for encounter and dialogue.

In 2005, MPI accepted its first participant from the Philippine military. It was a controversial move as well as a true leap of faith. The military was complicit in acts of violence and human rights violations under the Marcos dictatorship and, thus, regarded with suspicion. Indeed, across many contexts globally, the relationship between activists and peace workers, on the one hand, and state militaries, on the other, are contentious, if not hostile. MPI facilitators discovered that inclusion of this participant from the Philippine military created opportunities for transformed perspectives on the part of all participants, deepening reflections about seeing “others” as fellow human beings. This participant became a peace advocate within the military and opened up new possibilities for military and civilian engagement in the country. (See Leguro and Kwak for a fuller account).

MPI's learning approach is also marked by its support for the development of local knowledge and locally-led peacebuilding in Mindanao. Since 2003, MPI has developed course curricula that incorporate and highlight community-based approaches and traditional practices of Indigenous peoples in peacebuilding. These field-based courses were designed to offer participants opportunities to connect and interact with community members through exposure and exchange visits. Such exchanges make visible the often-invisible contribution of grassroots peacebuilders in the field. It also normalizes the idea that wisdom and knowledge can be gained from grassroots and local peacebuilders in their struggle to transform their community from conflict to peace.

Building institutional capacity: The challenge for MPI in the next twenty years is how it can sustain bringing to life the values and principles of conflict transformation, especially for those who are intimately involved in MPI's daily operations. This is important if MPI wants to stay true to its identity as a resource for peacebuilders.

While there are processes in place that enable those within MPI to challenge and debate institutional and programmatic policies and decisions, it is imperative that those involved in these processes know what questions to ask and can do so. This entails ongoing internal capacity development and ongoing attention to organizational culture and structure that supports transparency, inquiry and analysis.

Indeed, we are constantly reminded that peacebuilding praxis is iterative, dynamic and dialogical. We learn through experience, and through it, we are made aware of gaps in our knowledge and the realization that to be a peacebuilder one must be a lifelong learner and a person open to challenge and change.

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Building connections and working with refugees in Quito

The MCC-supported refugee project in Quito, Ecuador, is a response to the needs of the large number of people who have migrated to Ecuador seeking refuge and new opportunities. The Mennonite church in Quito felt called to follow in the footsteps of Jesus to provide humanitarian aid. In the early years of this ministry, the largest number of refugees arriving in Ecuador came from Colombia, due to forced displacement by armed groups. As the global reality has shifted, so has the makeup of the refugees arriving in Ecuador. Currently, most of the 100 families attended to each month by the Quito Mennonite Church are from Venezuela. Migrants in Quito struggle to find housing and access health services, while also facing xenophobia and racism from Ecuadorian citizens.

In February 2020, women participating in the refugee support project organized by the *Iglesia Cristiana Anabautista Menonita de Ecuador (ICAME)* in Quito, Ecuador, received reusable diapers. (MCC photo/ Annalee Giesebrecht)



Although xenophobia and anti-migrant sentiment was present in Ecuador before March 2020, the pandemic exacerbated it further, destabilizing the economy and stoking anti-migrant violence. Migration to Ecuador continued despite the pandemic, leading to greater competition among both Ecuadorian citizens and migrants for scarce jobs. In 2020, the church's refugee project expanded to serve more than 200 families monthly in response to the influx of migrants. More people came to the church's headquarters asking for assistance and help, increasing the church's visibility in the neighborhood. Neighbors near the church began to complain about the presence of Venezuelans and Colombians outside the church, calling them "criminals." Xenophobic phrases were continually scratched on the church's walls facing the street.

Much of this xenophobic response is due to ignorance, echoing anti-migrant perspectives prevalent in the media. Not a day goes by when the news does not include derogatory headlines about migrants, further polarizing Ecuadorians. The church's refugee project includes several activities that aim to reduce polarization and humanize migrants: we work to create safe spaces for migrants where they can share their stories; we seek to facilitate integration

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between Ecuadorians and the migrant population; and finally, we address xenophobia directly, while also recognizing the needs of Ecuadorians.


Migrants receiving humanitarian assistance from the Mennonite church in Quito desired more spaces for psycho-spiritual support, so the church's women's group opened its arms to migrant women. The women's group meetings offered a safe space for migrant women to share their stories, a place where they could discuss their grief and other feelings, talk about adapting to life in Ecuador and celebrate their successes. Women sometimes used art to express their feelings and communicate their stories. Many migrant women referred to these meetings as a refuge.


Maintaining this meeting space has proven difficult during the pandemic, with mandatory lockdowns, limited options for open-air gathering spaces and precarious access to reliable internet. Even with all these difficulties, the women have met sporadically in parks to share in each other's company, laugh and reflect, regardless of age or nationality. This integration of Ecuadorian women with migrant women has strengthened social cohesion, helping migrant women feel more integrated and supported, while humanizing migrants for Ecuadorians.

Pastor María Helena López Mennonite Church of Colombia has also volunteered with the Quito Mennonite Church to transform the spaces in which new migrants come to the church to register for assistance from a waiting-room-style environment into an interactive, even playful, space that fosters integration and companionship. López and others also organized a space in which migrant children can play, paint and enjoy a healthy snack while their parents register for support. Through these activities, the church sought to make the intake process a humanizing experience, affirming migrants as more than anonymous individuals needing help. Games, painting and other art activities have been important avenues for migrants to express themselves and for the church to express its care for migrants and refugees.

The church's focus on fostering social cohesion between migrants and Ecuadorians through its migrant assistance initiative has led to two important annual traditions. On World Refugee Day (June 20) and Christmas, the church hosts a special lunch where Ecuadorians and migrant families join in different activities. Cooperative games promote integration among all participants, with an atmosphere of joy, celebration and fellowship enjoyed by all.

As xenophobic sentiment in Ecuador has increased during the pandemic, the church has responded in multiple ways. First, the church has expanded its outreach to include Ecuadorian families, providing them with food baskets and other needed items during the most restricted period of the pandemic. Second, the church has worked to improve relationships with Ecuadorian neighbors in the vicinity of the church. Church members and project participants began to regularly clean the space outside the church, including the common areas shared by neighbors. Neighbors have in turn responded positively, with some making significant in-kind donations to support the church's outreach with migrants, due to their appreciation for the church's ministry. Finally, the church has facilitated and participated in online spaces that address and counter xenophobia, including online meetings of women from the *Movimiento Anabautista de Mujeres haciendo teología desde América Latina* (MTAL).

 **We work to create safe spaces for migrants where they can share their stories; we seek to facilitate integration between Ecuadorians and the migrant population; and finally, we address xenophobia directly, while also recognizing the needs of Ecuadorians.”**

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By facilitating positive integration among migrants and Ecuadorians, creating safe spaces to honor migrant stories and attending to the concerns and needs of the Ecuadorian population, particularly during the pandemic, the refugee ministry of the Mennonite Church in Quito has managed to facilitate new relationships and minimize local conflicts, while deconstructing and preventing xenophobia from growing with their church community.

Francisca Pacheco is migrant support worker with the refugee ministry of the Iglesia Cristiana Anabautista Menonita de Ecuador in Quito, Ecuador. Translated by Elizabeth Miller, MCC representative for Colombia and Ecuador, living in Bogotá.

Conflict sensitive relief, development and peacebuilding: a case study from rural India

Water is an engine of change—but water can also be a weapon of conflict in many contexts. Conflict is a normal multidimensional phenomenon that is typically indicative of change within a society. Conflict is everywhere and in all humanitarian relief and development programs. Being “conflict-sensitive” when carrying out water projects simply means being attentive to the social dynamics within which those projects unfold and carefully considering how the projects might fuel existing conflicts, create new ones, or (one hopes) help transform conflicts.

I work with a water project that helps rural communities bring water from hilltop sources down to their villages for irrigation purposes. MCC has supplied funds to local partner ISARA (Institute of Social Action and Research Activities), which, with the help of community members, has planned for and then developed spring water harvesting systems. Villagers supply the labour to build these systems and to clear rocks and brush, thereby turning wasteland into highly productive agricultural land. In this article, I describe the project and discuss the importance of conflict sensitivity in the project design, implementation and ongoing monitoring and evaluation.

Starting work in Sinisingi village: This water harvesting project has unfolded in Gajapati district, situated in Odisha, a state in India. The Saura tribal communities in Gajapati are mountain people that have evolved locally-specific livelihood strategies based on their Indigenous knowledge. Their economy is primarily agriculture-based and highly dependent on natural resources.

ISARA pioneered its water harvesting system in Sinisingi, a tribal hamlet with 37 households—it has since expanded to work in additional villages in Gajapati. From the first meeting with Sinisingi, ISARA carefully listened as the primary step. ISARA found that the majority of village dwellers were eager to participate and passionate about solving their problems by themselves. They held similar values and attitudes, and they wanted to live in a community they could trust.

In building initial relationships with the residents, ISARA had to navigate power dynamics in which several influential traditional leaders tried to dominate conversations and decision-making, allegedly on behalf of the community. Though listening, analysis of discussions, power analysis and



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after one-on-one meetings with all categories of people, ISARA identified these dynamics and pinpointed members of the community that dominated decision-making. Using a Participatory Rural Appraisal approach, ISARA encouraged marginalized and quiet people to speak up and participate in decision-making. It took time, along with regular visits and follow-up from ISARA. ISARA staff had to demonstrate they were invested in and cared about the community to earn the community's cooperation. Eventually, ISARA development officers earned the community's trust, even the trust of those who had disrupted initial consultations by shutting down other voices. Collectively, community members concurred that a root cause of many community problems was water scarcity—and together, they asked ISARA to consult with them on designing and implementing a water harvesting project.

Designing the water program: ISARA chief functionary, Rabindra Nath Patra, proposed a gravity flow water supply system. As the beginning of the process, ISARA explained the proposed design of the pipe layout to village dwellers and involved them in every step. In 2013, ISARA proposed this project to MCC. MCC liked the participatory approach and ISARA's engagement with Sinisingi villagers. MCC had supported ISARA in the past, had been impressed by their previous work and were convinced to support this new endeavor.

ISARA organized Sinisingi residents through a Village Development Committees (VDC) and a Water Users Group (WUG) to construct and maintain the system. Members of the WUG were responsible for water management, such as scheduling water timing to different farmlands as determined by need and agreed-upon priorities. The VDC and WUG also drafted the rules for optimal water collection, storage and distribution.



“ISARA arranged a few conflict role play sessions for the community in which five to eight community members acted out scenarios demonstrating how addressing conflict can lead to positive change.”

In 2017, farmer Sakuntala Pujari harvests lentils near the village of Sinisingi, Odisha, India. Pujari has benefited from a water harvesting system installed by MCC partner ISARA (Institute of Social Action and Research Activities) in the hills above the village. (Photo/Colin Vandenberg)


Post-installation conflict situation learning: The water system was created successfully and was technically sound, designed to allow farmers previously reliant on rain for farming their small gardens and farms and to have regular access to piped water. Households took the initiative to understand the system and slowly rehabilitated small plots of land for agriculture and explored how to best utilize their new piped water. Some energetic farmers rehabilitated their land and put in hard effort to producing large amounts of seasonal vegetables. This motivated other farmers to participate in the program.

At this point in the project, small conflicts began to emerge. A few families who started accessing piped water in Year 2 or Year 3 saw the great success of the energetic farmers from Year 1 and felt a bit resentful. ISARA facilitated multiple discussions with the community to discuss that water is not the only factor in farming success and that hard work, knowledge, farm management capacity and agronomic practices are equally important.

Conflict also emerged regarding pipe layout and usage, even though ISARA had fixed spouts to cover the vast majority of the village. Conflict arose when a handful of farmers tried to fix outlets close to their plots for easy access. As more people joined the water network and starting farming, more spout points were needed, and the locations had to be mutually agreed upon. Sometimes two-to-four families accessed water from one spout to irrigate their crops, a situation that also began to create conflict.

Other situations of water usage highly stressed the system. Several entrepreneurial families established a small-scale traditional brick kiln to make and sell bricks. While a significant achievement for community development, it taxed the water system. A particularly contentious moment arose when some families started rice cultivation, flooding their land for rice paddies, leaving little water for the vegetable growers downstream. In two incidents, rice growers cut into the main pipeline to access more water, leaving insufficient water for others. At times of the day when many people were accessing water from the system for multiple activities at a time, the system would almost collapse. Furthermore, some users connected their latrines to the system, which posed new sewage concerns. All these factors, fueled often by ego, led to misunderstandings and tensions

Throughout this time, ISARA and MCC conducted many meetings to resolve issues as they arose. Instead of pointing out the offenders, MCC and ISARA aimed to promote a strong sense of communal ownership of the water system. However, larger changes were needed to better prevent and resolve conflict issues.

 **A more robust conflict analysis, coupled with better gender analysis, improved water sharing in the village.”**

Resolving the tensions: With hindsight, MCC realized the project had not been designed in as conflict-sensitive a manner as needed. Neither ISARA nor MCC had conducted a conflict analysis at the start of the project. While the technical aspects of the water system had worked perfectly, interpersonal conflict was undermining the project’s success. ISARA had used participatory approaches, but more could have been done. ISARA and MCC made some changes. It was important that whole community play a vital role in the planning and implementation of the water system and to assess the conflict dynamics as well.

More meetings were conducted with MCC, ISARA, village and local leaders and other actors to understand the multi-dimensional nature of village conflicts and to strengthen social connections. One of the most meaningful decisions was when an ISARA staff member chose to live in the village two weeks per month to gain a deeper understanding of the hidden factors behind conflict. This greatly contributed to building good relationship with each member in the village and to identify case-by-case dynamics which led to more trust. ISARA had previous knowledge about tools like stages of conflict, local conflict history and conflict mapping, but they hadn’t properly used these tools—ISARA now began using them. They explored useful new tools such as the behavior change model. ISARA arranged a few conflict role play sessions

for the community in which five to eight community members acted out scenarios demonstrating how addressing conflict can lead to positive change.

ISARA started engaging and empowering more VDCs. About 40% of VDC members were women. More collaboration between smaller groups such as WUG and the VDC helped to reduce power imbalances.

The final changes were technical. It was evident that more people needed access to more water. ISARA changed the spout fitting point for better shared access. Community members used local knowledge to improve water use efficiency, such as making low-cost sprinklers from wastewater bottles and pressure reducers from bamboo, and arranged extension pipes on their own. ISARA also began taking a closer look at gender dynamics in the village. ISARA set up small water tanks and taps near households to better facilitate household washing and cleaning tasks. These steps were positive for women in the village. Overall, a more robust conflict analysis, coupled with better gender analysis, improved water sharing in the village.

While major conflicts around water usage have eased, ISARA still sees occasional household conflicts in these villages. As more families successfully farm their land, household interpersonal differences—often around money and ego—still occasionally emerge. ISARA arranges case-by-case household conflict assessments and coaches families through their issues. In rare cases, ISARA facilitated conflicts related to accusations of magic being used by disgruntled farmers against more successful farmers. To resolve these tensions, ISARA again called the concerned parties to convene together and process their conflicts.


The villages where ISARA operates increasingly experience climate change impacts, as longer dry spells mean less water flow. Less water per unit of land in turn stresses all water users. ISARA and the community are exploring options to manage and adapt to this deeply worrying environmental change.

ISARA is proud that they have built significant trust with the communities. Gradually the program has completed a greater number of water system installations in additional villages, contributing both to community empowerment and improved conflict management. More and more, communities where ISARA works can resolve conflicts amongst themselves.

Reflections and learnings: The ISARA water project management demonstrates the importance of starting small and going slow. This work started out with one water system, which in hindsight was a good thing. Furthermore, small programs allow for and encourage greater villager participation. This in turn makes villagers feel welcome to participate and allows other stakeholders to focus closely on the tensions emerging over time and observe the different conflict dynamics. The small approach is more flexible and allows challenges and conflicts to be identified and corrected early, before expanding the work.

Next, simple technological approaches are helpful for small farmers. Farmers get the opportunity to utilize their traditional knowledge, fostering self-confidence and dignity. It promotes dialogue between teacher and learner. All these steps help to reduce conflict.

In the initial design of the Sinisingi water harvesting project, ISARA and the villagers identified installation of the water system as the ultimate projected outcome that they sought to achieve. In retrospect, ISARA could have built

 **Project design must ask who stands to benefit and how the voices of women and the most vulnerable community members will be heard.”**

social cohesion and conflict resolution outcomes into the project design—doing so would have reinforced the importance of a robust conflict analysis that identifies hidden conflicts within a community, conflicts that can disrupt the success of development initiatives.

No innovation will reach all community members, due to many variable factors. Community members must understand this reality, while working to build trust with one another, confidence in community members' ability to engage outsiders and commitment to work hard to achieve development outcomes. These attitudes help communities address conflict when it surfaces.

Development organizations like ISARA must build relationships with community members. As noted above, one ISARA staff member decided to live among the Sinisingi villagers for a certain interval. Direct, ongoing relationships helped ISARA staff better understand community dynamics as well as participants' priorities.

Conclusion: The technical pieces of any project are important. But for sustainability, one must also consider the relationships involved within the target community. Through a better understanding of community relationships, ISARA successfully worked with the Sinisingi community to identify, analyze and address conflicts that threatened to undermine the water system's successes.

From my own experience accompanying ISARA in its work, I have been convinced of the vital importance of rigorous and ongoing conflict analysis throughout a project cycle, alongside participatory methods that bring out the perspectives of all community members. Without such measures, one can end up designing projects in which resources are controlled by a small minority of powerful community members. Project design must ask who stands to benefit and how the voices of women and the most vulnerable community members will be heard. Asking such questions is essential for conflict-sensitive development.

Pabitra Paramanya is food security and livelihoods support officer for MCC India.

Blurring the borderline and closing the gap

In the last three decades, the Mexico-U.S. border has become a symbol of geopolitical division, but also division along social, religious and political lines in the United States. The close relationship between religion and politics in the U.S. magnifies the gap. The divide continues to grow, fed by partial and partisan news reports and polarizing social media posts that build binary narratives lacking informed perspectives and that create short and incomplete borderlands stories.

To counter such binary narratives, MCC has coordinated Borderlands Learning Tours. These contextualized, experiential learning opportunities introduce participants to more complex narratives. MCC designs these learning tours to expose participants to borderland complexities by hearing directly from those living and working within borderlands realities.

Connecting people is one dimension of our work. We listen to perspectives and viewpoints of those who are working within the borderlands communities.

 **In its Borderlands Learning Tours, MCC is committed to sharing local perspectives in ways that uplift storytellers and their communities and do not turn them into symbols or stereotypes.”**

Borderlands Learning Tours are specifically designed to connect people through highlighting community perspectives and shared experience. As we plan the learning tour around trusted local voices, we allow participants to connect with local communities and vice versa, allowing both parties to learn from one another, albeit for a limited time in the same space. Listening intentionally takes practice, and for someone to speak candidly calls for trust.

To allow for on-the-ground voices and perspectives to not just be heard, but to be honored, MCC strives to maintain relationships, involvement and accompaniment with borderlands organizations and communities during the times between learning tours. MCC's presence in the borderlands for the past two decades has created strong relationships with local communities. In its Borderlands Learning Tours, MCC is committed to sharing local perspectives in ways that uplift storytellers and their communities and do not turn them into symbols or stereotypes. Local perspectives allow for hidden realities to come to light in less polarizing ways.

For example, two of the main actors in the borderland's narratives are the migrant and the Border Patrol agent. Depending on what has informed their perspectives about the border, learning tour participants may arrive with an antagonistic view of one or the other. However, throughout the borderlands learning experience they hear about the intricate ways these two actors are humanized and how at times there are even positive interactions among them. Participants in a learning tour may hear a story from a migrant about how a Border Patrol agent saved her life and hear from an agent a story that humanizes migrants and emphasizes their pain and vulnerability.

As learning tour participants hear from members of borderlands communities, skepticism they bring with them dissipates and mutual understanding begins to grow. The border line starts getting blurry and the focus starts moving more towards the root causes of migration and border life and not on specific persons or groups.

As Christians, we believe that all people are created in the image of God—thus, all deserve human dignity and respect. A foundational element of MCC's Borderlands Learning Tours involves inviting participants to develop a theological and biblical lens to look at migration, bringing biblical stories about people on the move and God's involvement in those migrations to bear on how we think about migration and borderlands today. From Abram's migration through Revelation, Scripture contains countless stories of exile, of people crossing borders towards freedom or captivity and of living as a stranger in a new land. As we plan MCC Borderlands Learning Tours, drawing on biblical narratives and connecting them to the stories of people along the border comes naturally, an exercise that helps create empathy rather than division.

The borderlands are a place of excess. Excess of inhospitableness is everywhere. Within a few minutes at the border, a visitor can see the billions of dollars invested in militarism and the creation of an unwelcoming landscape designed to deter the newcomers with lethal force. However, the border is also a place saturated with hospitality and communities that have made an intentional decision to walk alongside those who pass by. Many faith groups (as well as community-based groups) work deliberately for justice along the U.S.-Mexico border, calling on other Christians to share aspects of their faith with us. In learning tours, participants learn from and are inspired by

 **Learning tour participants and MCC partner organizations who present about their work to MCC learning tours may sometimes disagree politically, yet there is room for connection through faith.”**

 **In a world filled with short social media clips and 15-second news stories, the need for human interaction to blur borderlines and close gaps is ever more urgent.”**

the witness of groups that respond to the biblical call to welcome strangers. Encounters with these communities allow learning tour participants to move from political framings to humane, faith-based responses to forced migration. Learning tour participants and MCC partner organizations who present about their work to MCC learning tours may sometimes disagree politically, yet there is room for connection through faith.

Human-to-human connection and sharing stories are perhaps the most powerful tools in closing the gaps and blurring the lines. Five years ago, we received an email from an MCC constituent who was questioning if “MCC was supporting the crossing of the thousands of ‘illegals’ who were coming through the border” during that period. Our response to the inquiry was for the constituent to consider the relief, development and peace work that MCC was doing in over 50 countries at the time and also to consider coming on a Borderlands Learning Tour. The participant accepted the invitation and during the learning tour his single-story narratives became more complex and were put in question. On the last day of the tour, we heard from the Border Patrol. The agent started by saying that he was a Christian, a Baptist, and that his faith informed the way he treated the people coming across the border with respect and dignity. evening, we visited and had dinner at the home of a family on the Mexican side of the border. The man who cooked our dinner told us the story of how he had been in the U.S. without documentation for some time, was detained and deported. He shared how, at one point in his life, he had smuggled people

across the border. During that time, he encountered Jesus and became a born-again Christian. He continued helping people cross the border, but now would also pray for their safety and reunification with their families in the U.S. At the time of our visit, he had been well established in that Mexican border town, had a family and did not have any intentions of crossing again. He was a member of a Presbyterian congregation.

After hearing these stories, our Mennonite brother and tour participant was no longer fixated on the borderline, the politics of migration, the law or the legality or illegality of specific circumstances, but rather was focused on the humanity and dignity of people. He approached the Presbyterian brother and said, “If you ever cross to the U.S. again, I have a business and you can come work for me.”

In a world filled with short social media clips and 15-second news stories, the need for human interaction to blur borderlines and close gaps is ever more urgent. Through Borderlands Learning Tours, MCC is getting in the gap, building bridges and reconnecting people.

Katherine Smith is the border and migration outreach coordinator for West Coast MCC. Saulo Padilla is the MCC U.S. immigration education coordinator.

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