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Drought response
Over the next three years, MCC is supporting a major effort to help farmers in rural districts of Afghanistan respond to drought that has plagued their area for eight of the past 11 years. MCC, through its account at the Canadian Foodgrains Bank, is providing some $246,000 this year to the effort, which will be carried out by MCC partner Medair in the Waras and Markazi Bihshad districts. Through a cash-for-work component, more than 1,500 people will build dams, trenches and terraces, helping to capture and store rain and melting snow. In addition, Medair will train 1,100 farmers on sustainable land and water management practices and 1,100 women on household gardens and nutrition. Households will receive training on food hygiene.

Relief kits
Provide valuable supplies to families whose lives have been disrupted by war or disaster.

Latin America
Young adults in service
Through MCC’s two-year Seed program, which combines academic learning, service and reflection, young adults from Canada, the U.S. and other countries accompany local communities in their work for development and peace. A new Seed team begins work in Colombia this fall, and MCC is expanding the Seed program to Bolivia in early 2014. “You can be assured that many years down the road the communities that received these young people will remember them. And they too will remember what they did,” says Ricardo Esquivia of Sembrandopaz, an MCC partner in Colombia. Hear more from Esquivia and learn about Seed in a three-part video, available at mcc.org/stories/videos/seed-serving-community.

Uganda
Living with Shalom
Through Living with Shalom, an MCC-supported program, young Ugandans such as (from left) Mbabazi Bosco, Brian Kunihira and Joseph Murungi are helping their communities and country build a more peaceful future. Each year, a three-week peace training brings together young people from different parts of Uganda, helping to break down stereotypes and discrimination among ethnic groups. On the final day, new graduates of the program join alumni for a parade. Learn more about this and other Christmas giving projects in the Christmas giving supplement mailed with this issue of the magazine or online at mcc.org/christmas.

A Common Place
Volume 18 Number 4 Fall 2013
Listening to God’s call
J RON BYLER MCC U.S. EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

“Speak, for your servant is listening.” (1 Samuel 3:10)

Through the years, we in MCC have worked to listen to God’s call and the call of the churches that support us, a process that has led us to continue to affirm three main areas of work—disaster relief, sustainable community development and justice and peacebuilding. This issue of A Common Place highlights all three.

For 50 years, MCC has supported education programs in India. As a teacher in Kolkata, Soma Chakraborty shares how education is empowering students to lead productive lives.

Another story highlights how MCC is working with the Brethren in Christ Church in Zambia to train volunteers to care for those living with HIV and AIDS.

In the On assignment column, Michael J. Sharp talks about his work with emergency response and peace and reconciliation efforts in the eastern Democratic Republic of the Congo.

And in the news section, you’ll also read about an MCC project responding to drought in Afghanistan.

Relief, development and peace. We are working to be as nimble as the wind to respond to drought in Afghanistan. Relief, development and peace. We are listening to you, too. Thank you for your faithful support of MCC’s ministries. My hope and prayer is that you will join me in responding like Michael does to his assignment in eastern Congo—‘There’s no place I’d rather be!’

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Opening doors to learning
For half a century, MCC has supported education programs in India—helping create a brighter future for thousands of students and their families.

BY JULIE BELL
PHOTOGRAPHS BY MELISSA HESS

At an MCC-supported school that draws from some of Kolkata’s most impoverished communities, Sweta Mallick stands in front of a chalkboard of English words, demonstrating the day’s lesson on empty and full. With each new word she reads and sentence she writes, whether in English or in her native tongue Hindi, the 7-year-old is mastering skills that her parents never had a chance to learn.

Two hours away in Asansol, a growing industrial city, Fabin Sundi weeps as he talks about his hopes for education for his teenage son Ronald—who through the help of MCC’s Global Family education program and St. Joseph’s High School is able to pursue his love of formulas and dream of teaching math. “I am not so educated, and I want my kids to be educated so they can accomplish something in their lives,” says Sundi, who as a laborer spends his days looking for whatever work he can find.

Since 1963, MCC has supported education programs in India, changing the lives of students and helping to rewrite the future of their families. Today, that tradition continues, with MCC providing some $420,000 to help fund education work in India this year alone—the largest amount MCC spends on education in any country.

The needs, though, also are enormous.
About half of the children who enroll in traditional schools in Kolkata drop out before the age of 12 because of intense pressure to support their families, says Anupa Datta, an education officer for Tomorrow's Foundation Model School, an MCC partner that offers education to street children and children such as Mallick from impoverished communities.

Many join the millions of other child laborers on the streets of the city, where they are vulnerable to abuse, Datta says. Girls may be forced into early marriage so their parents no longer have to support them.

For Tomorrow’s Foundation, breaking the cycle begins with parents, who are asked to come into their child’s classroom once a week. They also meet as a group with the school’s teachers once a month and are represented on the school’s management committee.

Gopa Bhattacharya, coordinator of Tomorrow’s Foundation, says when parents, most of them illiterate, watch their children flourish and learn new skills, they become advocates for education. And as the children succeed, attitudes change.

“So we educate the community as well,” she says. “These children are first-generation learners. If they continue their education they can help other family members. And then they will have children, and they will want their children to go to school.”

The school focuses on active learning, using songs, debate, role play and drama, and emphasizing skills such as critical thinking and negotiation.

It commits to making sure each teacher has no more than 20 students in a class and on Saturdays offers students cultural programs and lessons in areas such as singing, dancing or painting.

Sunita Mallick, Sweta’s mother, watches the results with joy. Mallick, like millions of adults in India, never had the chance for schooling and can neither read nor write.

As her daughter masters lessons in the classroom, Mallick sees her confidence, creativity and imagination bloom — growth that Mallick says she hopes will give her daughter the opportunity to be vocal in speaking out against injustices and to not be dominated within her family or society.

Tomorrow’s Foundation is one of 21 schools, technical institutions and nonprofits that MCC partners with in India through the Global Family education program and other education funding.
Funds provide textbooks, support tutoring, buy computers and desks and meet other needs identified by schools. They pay for teacher training to improve the quality of education and student workshops in topics from gardening to career guidance.

It’s an effort that reaches from preschools to vocational training institutes—making a tangible difference in facilities, educational support and schools’ ability to assist students who could not otherwise afford education.

That includes support that St. Joseph’s High School, a Catholic school in Asansol, can use to fund scholarships, helping pupils such as Ronald Sundi attain a level of education their parents could not. “I want to be a teacher, a math teacher, because whatever I am learning from my teachers, I want to pass on,” Sundi says.

At nearby St. Mary Goretti School, Vidya Kumari Shaw, whose school fees also are supported by Global Family, dreams of becoming a scientist. “I want to invent something new for my country in the future,” she says.

Since the 1970s, Global Family has partnered with vocational training programs, preparing students for careers in fields from engineering and electronics to nursing, teaching and agriculture.

At Don Bosco Self Employment Research Institute in Kolkata, Joseph Raj Williams and other mechanical engineering students put their skills to the test in a school workshop.

Williams, now in his final year of studies, learned of the school from his father—and found it a welcome alternative to seeking employment in the call centers that are one of few options for young people in Kolkata.

Technical training, he says, is one field where after three years of study he feels like he can expect a good job and a secure future. It’s an opportunity that changes not just his life—but also that of his family.

For the 21-year-old, the skills that he is learning today, combined with his Christian faith, give him strength and confidence to pursue the work that will support his parents and sister into the future.

“God does help us in every way but we have to help ourselves,” Williams says. “And I come here to help myself.”

Julie Bell is senior writer and editor for MCC Canada Communications. Melissa Hess is a freelance photographer from Lancaster, Pa.

Give a gift—Education
When you support MCC’s Global Family education program, children learn, communities benefit and lives change. Give through the envelope in the Christmas Giving supplement, mailed with this issue of A Common Place. You also may give online at mcc.org/christmas or by contacting your nearest MCC office (see page 2).
I am a senior teacher at Tomorrow’s Foundation Model School in Kolkata, India, which seeks to improve the quality of life for underprivileged students through education.

I also am a gardener.

Gardening has been my hobby from childhood. Now my daughter and I care for a few flowering plants in my little garden at home.

Mainly, though, I see my classroom as a garden. Here, we can see many types of flowers, and the gardener’s job is to look after them. They are growing up day after day, blooming day after day. And I am cultivating these more beautiful flowers so they serve their communities as beautiful human beings.

My students have lots of problems, including malnutrition and poverty, and often lots of stress at home. But when they come to our schools, our loving schools, they are blooming like flowers and they enjoy it. And we give as much as we can.

I teach grades one, two and three, and my students are from 6 to 10 years old. We use active-learning techniques like debate, role play, drama and group discussions to develop skills in reading, writing, comprehension and numbers.

We work on life skills like critical thinking, negotiation, communication, self-awareness and reasoning, which are necessary to realize one’s self-worth and to become an independent individual.

I believe only education can empower a person to lead a respectful life. If these young seedlings have been enlightened with the power of education, in the future they will become a tree. They will give shelter to others. They will take responsibilities for their community’s development.

I was born and brought up in Assam, a state in northeast India. My father was an executive of the statistical department of Indian Railways, and I attended a Christian missionary school. I had golden days in my school. I not only enjoyed my school days, but also learned many things like discipline and values.

My father passed away when I was 20 years old, and I needed to start supporting my family. I began teaching then.

I’ve been at Tomorrow’s Foundation Model School since 2006.

Before, I worked at different elite schools in Kolkata. I observed that the students there were coming from high socioeconomic groups, and they were getting all the privileges from society. But children from deprived groups do not get support from society, and often not even from their parents.

I felt the urge to do something for them. At that time, I also learned of the work of Tomorrow’s Foundation and approached them.

Involving parents is an important part of what we do at Tomorrow’s Foundation. Without that, we will not be able to do our best for our students.

We ask parents to come into the classroom once a week. Mostly mothers come. This has motivated the children. Children always want to show their best before their mothers.

Parents have told me they couldn’t get the opportunity to be involved in other schools the way they have here and that they have not felt the same ownership of other schools.

The children we serve are from impoverished areas. Some may see them only as first-generation learners who are coming from gloomy places. They may assume these children lack creativity and intelligence.

But that’s not true. They are creative and intelligent. I think my children have full capabilities to do anything, they just need proper guidance. We do that here.

My greatest joy in teaching is when my students learn new things from me as well as when I learn from them.

I believe if I don’t like my job, then I cannot cultivate anything.

I take my job to heart, and that’s why I say I’m a gardener.

Soma Chakraborty, shown with student Ratne Prasad, is a senior teacher at Tomorrow’s Foundation Model School in Kolkata, India. MCC helps support the school’s efforts to educate children from impoverished communities and to involve parents in their children’s schooling. Julie Bell is senior writer and editor for MCC Canada, and Melody Raj is a project officer for MCC India.
A plentiful harvest

Indian farmers learn new techniques to increase rice yields, diversify crops, produce more food and cultivate community.

PHOTOGRAPHS BY MELISSA HESS

In Bolpur and surrounding villages in the Indian state of West Bengal, November is the season for rice harvesting. This 2012 crop is Meru Hansda’s first using System of Rice Intensification, a method that is taught by MCC-supported partner Asansol Burdwan Seva Kendra (ABSK) to help farmers increase their rice yield while using less seed. Rice was traditionally planted in this region by scattering seed. Under the new method, farmers plant in rows and use a single seed per hole. Seedlings do not have to compete for space with other plants and therefore produce more rice. “There is a lot of change,” Hansda says. “This is the best way to cultivate.”

Marwar Orao throws a fishing net into one of five ponds built through an MCC-supported food-for-work project in India’s Jharkhand state. Ponds are vital for irrigation and can be used to raise fish, one more supported partner Asansol Burdwan Seva Kendra (ABSK) to help farmers increase their rice yield while using less seed. Rice was traditionally planted in this region by scattering seed. Under the new method, farmers plant in rows and use a single seed per hole. Seedlings do not have to compete for space with other plants and therefore produce more rice. “There is a lot of change,” Hansda says. “This is the best way to cultivate.”

Bhim Hansda, a field worker for ABSK, and his wife Monica Hansda, a member of a local women’s group, stand in their kitchen garden in the village of Domdama.

This project, which is supported through MCC’s account at the Canadian Foodgrains Bank, also trains farmers in worm composting and seed preservation.
Using sustainable and organic methods to combat pests and fertilize soil gives farmers an alternative to purchasing pesticides and fertilizers each growing season. MCC project officer Achinta Das shows an insect trap supplied by ABSK.

Dry rocky soil in the drought-prone Latehar district of India’s Jharkhand state makes it difficult to grow crops year-round. Indrajit Orao, right, and Marwar Orao show how water from ponds built through an MCC-supported food-for-work project now irrigate farmers’ fields.

In addition to training farmers in new agricultural techniques, MCC partner South Vihar Welfare Society for Tribals (SVWST) helps communities to organize themselves to share resources, work together and participate in programs such as government-funded efforts for rural development. A first step is establishing a farmers’ group, women’s group and youth group in each village. Sapna Tirkey and her 2-year-old daughter Swati join a women’s group meeting in Runungkocha.

In the Ranchi district of India’s Jharkhand state, Hira Mani Sanga (with husband Sunil Sanga, and daughters Sumitra, 7, and Nirmala, 14) holds radishes that she and her family grew on their land. Sanga and her family are part of an MCC-supported project of South Vihar Welfare Society for Tribals (SVWST) that includes training in kitchen gardens, horticulture and animal husbandry.

Through MCC’s partnership with SVWST, a women’s group in the village of Runungkocha learned of a local government program that helped them begin to raise pigs, bringing new opportunity to group members such as Magdali Toppo, right, and Jacinta Tika.
A mission of hope

With MCC support, Zambia’s Brethren in Christ Church is training church members to reach out to neighbors living with HIV.

STORY AND PHOTOS BY EMILY LOEVEN

It’s easy to check in on neighbors on Nellia Mudenda’s street in Choma, Zambia. The red dirt roads in her neighborhood are lined with homes of concrete and cement blocks, all built in close proximity. Most people don’t have cars and spend time each day walking to work or on errands. Some, like Venirenda M’hango, wander through the area and make sure those in need of care for HIV receive it.

It was M’hango who, on one of her neighborhood rounds, noticed that Mudenda and her husband were becoming sicker and sicker and suggested they go to the hospital and be tested for HIV—a move that Mudenda says saved her life.

Through HIV and AIDS prevention and care efforts of Zambia’s Brethren in Christ (BIC) Church, trained caregivers such as M’hango are reaching out to neighbors, educating about HIV and teaching those living with the virus the importance of taking medication on time, eating nutritious food and being open with family and friends about their HIV status.

MCC supports the BIC’s work in home-based care—including a national effort to directly train some 700 caregivers who will each commit to share what they’ve learned with another caregiver. MCC also helps fund BIC assistance for orphans and other children affected by HIV and projects to prevent the spread of the virus.

Mudenda is one of 151 clients whose lives have been touched by the 14 caregivers of the Riverside Brethren in Christ Church in Choma.

When Mudenda first learned she was HIV positive, she was afraid. M’hango once again supported her, telling Mudenda that she could maintain her health if she followed the medication plan closely.

It’s a crucial role. If clients do not follow medication directions carefully, taking each pill at the right time, the treatment becomes less effective.

Mudenda credits her grandchildren with helping her stick to the plan. While many people are afraid to share about their illness, the caregivers encouraged Mudenda to talk about it with her family.

“Before they go to school in the morning, they tell me, ‘Grandmother, it’s seven hours; take your medicine.’ At night again, they remind me, ‘take the medicine,’” says Mudenda, sharing that her husband died in 2008 when his health declined after not following the medication plan.

For caregivers who are HIV positive, such as Obert Hantebera, talking about their own status can help them relate to clients and emphasize the importance of the advice.

Hantebera, like Mudenda, had become ill and was diagnosed with tuberculosis—but had not been tested for HIV until caregivers in the Riverside program suggested it.

After the results came back positive, caregivers continued to visit him, providing moral support and ensuring he took the medication as prescribed. As Hantebera’s health improved, a deacon who runs Riverside’s caregiver program suggested that Hantebera attend caregiver training, and in 2006 he joined the team.

“I saw that I could go and help some others the way they helped me,” Hantebera says.

Today, Hantebera assists with transportation to clinics, delivers medication from clinics to clients’ homes and helps bedridden clients with household tasks. With each act, he’s living out the BIC’s call to minister to those living with HIV or AIDS.

“The church works with HBC (home-based care) clients because it gives hope beyond conventional medicine,” says Ginwell Yooma, director of the BIC church’s compassionate ministries projects. “HIV comes with a lot of stigma, be it self-stigma or stigmatization from others, but the church brings hope beyond anything else! The hope that Jesus came for those the world seems to have neglected.”

Ultimately Mudenda thanks both God and the caregivers for saving her life and for their continued support.

“I know that it’s only God who makes things possible,” she says. “Had it not been for these people, the caregivers, I would not have been here right now.”

Emily Loewen is a writer for MCC Canada.

Give a gift — Hope

Your gift of hope helps change lives where needed most. Give through the envelope in the Christmas Giving supplement, mailed with this issue of A Common Place. You also may give online at mcc.org/christmas or by contacting your nearest MCC office (see page 2).
Eastern Congo coordinator

**Name:** Michael J. Sharp  
**Hometown:** Goshen, Ind. (Waterford Mennonite Church)

**Assignment:** As coordinator for MCC’s work in the eastern Democratic Republic of the Congo, I support the Congolese Protestant Council of Churches and its agencies that work in emergency response and for peace and reconciliation in the region. Their projects respond to the needs of displaced people, support victims of violence and encourage armed groups to demobilize and reintegrate into society.

**Typical day:** I spend about 10 days a month in the city of Bukavu and the rest of the time somewhere in the eastern provinces of North and South Kivu visiting partners, projects, beneficiaries and areas that have been affected by armed violence. Many of the projects are in response to emergencies, which means we try to be prepared at all times to react quickly as a situation develops. This makes life interesting, but not very predictable.

**Challenges:** The context and conditions can be difficult to deal with on a daily basis: the lack of infrastructure, the prevalence of violence and being constantly surrounded by intense suffering. How does one stay connected to what is happening and not be consumed and incapacitated by it?

**Joys:** Places of intense conflict are also places where creative solutions are born and put to the test. If Jesus’ example is for everyone everywhere, what does that look like in eastern Congo, where war has been the norm for 20 years? I get to work on the front line of Congolese ingenuity and faithfulness in response to violence and hardship.

Find your place

**MCC has workers in Africa, Asia, Europe, Latin America and the Middle East, as well as in Canada and the U.S.**

Go to serve.mcc.org or contact your nearest MCC office to learn about current service opportunities.

MCC workers are expected to exhibit a commitment to Christian faith, active church membership and biblical peacemaking.

**Find the words that might help Sadaf at school.**

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**My name is Sadaf Ayub.**

**Age:** 11  
**Lives in:** Asansol, India

I live with my mother, father and 8-year-old sister. My father works in a garment shop and my mother is a seamstress.

My parents tell me all the time that it’s important that I work hard at school and graduate. My father didn’t finish high school because he had to stay home and take care of his six brothers and six sisters. My father had to leave school to help run the family business. I like school because I learn good values, and I also like to play with my friends there. (MCC gives money to Sadaf’s school that helps pay school fees for her and other students and in some cases helps with other needs, such as repairing Sadaf’s house.)

Our house has only one room. During the monsoon season (a time of the year when it rains just about every day), water used to come in. I was worried the roof would fall on us. But now our house is fixed and it’s nice.

**My favorite food:** rice, lentils and vegetable curry  
**My favorite subject:** English  
**What I want to be:** software engineer

Sadaf lives with her parents, Shaheda Perween and Mohammad Shahabuddin, and sister Anam Ayub.

Her mother, a seamstress, works in the family’s one-room home.
This Christmas, give gifts of love and compassion.

This Christmas, honor someone you love with a gift that changes lives, bringing new opportunity to families around the world. We provide cards you can send to friends or loved ones that explain the gift you have given in their honor.

And whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him. (Colossians 3:17)

mcc.org/christmas