

Canadian Women's Concerns

Peggy Unruh Regehr

I was asked to speak specifically about the difficulties of the beginning years of Women's Concerns in MCC Canada. That is particularly difficult for me, even now after all these years. I would much rather have spoken about the good and satisfying things that happened – and there were many, many of those – especially in my interactions with women from Ontario to British Columbia. There really was a lot to celebrate in the responses I received from so many women, and even some men. Before I begin, I want to make it clear that my references to “MCC” are to MCC Canada.

It is exactly nineteen years ago, in May 1984, that the binational Women's Concerns Committee met in Winnipeg, where they were also discussing the possibility of establishing a Women's Concerns position within MCC. Esther Wiens from Winnipeg, who was on the committee, had invited me, together with several other Mennonite women from Winnipeg, to join in the discussion. It was an interesting discussion and I entered into it wholeheartedly. Towards the end of the meetings, one member informally suggested that I apply for the position.

I had never considered such a move, as I was happy with my life at that time. But the more I thought about it, the more I knew this was the opportunity of a lifetime to put my deep concerns about women's lives into a context in which I might make a difference. So I applied and was given the task.

The work began very slowly. The Peace and Social Concerns Director, under whom I was to work, was in the process of leaving, and his replacement had not yet been appointed. I struggled to find out just what I was to be doing. I met with various program directors in the office to see where our efforts might intersect. But they were really not interested. I met with women's organizations in the larger community who were addressing women's needs, both within Winnipeg and overseas, to see what their experience was, and where and what I might do within MCC. The early going was extremely slow, and I often became discouraged since the Women's Concerns position had been established without a clear definition of its purpose or task.

Peggy Unruh Regehr lives in Winnipeg, MB, and was Director of Women's Concerns for MCC Canada (1984-89).

One difficulty I faced was that the board was made up of representatives of the various Canadian Mennonite conferences supporting it. But the conferences also felt they had their own theological stance on women, and they did not want MCC to be addressing any issues with theological or life style implications that went counter to that stance. While this was understandable, it also made it almost impossible to address women's leadership roles in Mennonite churches and organizations. Yet that is where my greatest interests lay at the time.

It was not until later that I found the issue I would concentrate on, while not neglecting the others. I attended a one-week Marie Fortune workshop for pastors in Saskatoon and met the first Mennonite woman whom I knew had been abused. Then I found more abused women among MCC staff and everywhere I went. Abuse was not a popular issue within our Mennonite community. But it was one that became, and still is, a major focus for Women's Concerns staff in Canada.

The work I began to do on this issue led me in many different directions. There were always those who either did not want to believe this [abuse] was happening in our circles or just wanted it to go away. But I worked hard, and spoke about it in my presentations wherever I went in the constituency. Very slowly some of the skepticism vanished. And every time I spoke about it, women let me know about their own experience or that of their daughters or mothers. It was heartbreaking to hear their stories. I also began working together with the newly formed Domestic Violence Task Force, with the preparation of the "Purple Packet," the first information we put out.

I also found myself being a confidante to women working within MCC. Some of them also had stories of various types of abuse at home or in their workplaces. Even the MCC office was not always a safe place for them.

One of the most difficult things to deal with was the pressures and criticisms that were focused on me personally because of my position. It seemed easier to be critical of me than to address the real issues – whether from staff, Executive, or Board. Some people were supportive, but their voices were not always heard. Others would have preferred no women's program and no staff person. So I never had a sense of security in what I was doing.

Early on, there was pressure from some board members who wished me out of the picture. I never knew the whole story, but either the Executive or Board passed a motion to put me on probation for a year. I was never told

why, what I might have done wrong, or where I was to improve. It was a probation without any way of my being able to address the issues. As the year ended it was never mentioned, with neither a “yes” nor a “no” for the future. It just seemed like business as usual.

Periodically I also heard from female support staff within the office about their positions within MCC. They were often on Voluntary Service, and even when they had worked for a significant period, it was difficult for them to get on salary. When they did, their pay was low. As a result, when the Hayes Commission salary grid was presented to MCC for discussion, these women strongly opposed it, as it was a particularly male dominant structure with the supposed male dominant characteristics given higher value and higher salaries. But, as I heard recently, it was eventually implemented anyway – something we had hoped to deflect.

I tried to force the issue of women’s pay by asking for a salary for myself. I was the only program director in the Canadian Programs on Voluntary Service. Men at a lower level in the organization were receiving salary after two years, and I thought I should be treated equitably. I wanted mediation but got arbitration instead. The arbitration committee found in my favor and I was finally granted a salary. Then, after only a few months on salary and after a very faulty evaluation procedure, I was told I would be terminated. I suspected those two events were related, though I believe the domestic violence issue also played a major role in it.

At that point I felt I had nothing more to lose in the next months. My efforts with domestic violence issues continued, my support of the women working within MCC continued, and I had tremendous support from many women in the constituency.

Why did I stay as long as I did? First, I felt the work was important, even if it sometimes seemed only symbolic. Nor did I want to let down the women in the constituency who felt it was important for them. I knew I was addressing important issues for women whether at home, at the office, or in the work force; whether they were abused as children or as adult women; whether they were fearful or frustrated, younger or older. They all needed support in some way. Their lives and their concerns motivated me to stay.

Supportive people also helped me through difficult times. I mention them in no special order here. Emily Will in the office in Akron was a special support to me, as were the members of the Canadian Women’s Concerns

Committee and the bi-national committee. They were wonderful to work with. Other women in the Winnipeg office supported me in many different ways. Leona and Peter Penner – new staff people in Peace and Social Concerns – were for some time the persons that Women’s Concerns was responsible to. Their support and encouragement was more than I could have hoped for. There were many others as well, too numerous to mention. Last, but never least, was my husband Walter, who stood by me through thick and thin, who encouraged me and let me know my work was important, and who allowed me to rant, rave, or cry as circumstances warranted. Each of these people deserves some credit for the continuation of the work during those four-and-a-half years.

It was a work that I cherished regardless of what I experienced. I do not ever regret having been involved with it. Personally, it sums up a great part of any legacy I may have left for the future. It may have been ever so small, but it was important to me. While I set the work in motion, it was Kathy Shantz, my successor, who toiled tirelessly on the abuse issue. Reading her summary of what she accomplished over her eight years with Women’s Concerns makes one wonder where she found the time and energy to do everything she did.

I also want to mention Esther Epp Thiessen, who took over during Kathy’s maternity leave, and those who followed her in the Women’s Concerns program – Eleanor Epp Stobbe and Kathryn Loewen Mitchell – who also had difficult times at MCC.

But these women did more than just continue what I had begun. They developed a network of women from across Canada who would carry the agenda forward in the various provinces. Now, nineteen years after the program began in Canada, it is again in jeopardy. No staff person is in place, and with the significant budget cuts coming to MCC, there is again talk of cutting the program, especially since people are still unsure what it should look like. This is unfortunate.

Somehow, the circle always seems to come back to the beginning, and it is necessary for us as women to work again for what we feel is important. Whether that is in a different form from the past or a revamping of the old, there continue to be issues around women’s lives that must be addressed. We need to be constantly moving into the future and its new demands. That is the challenge before all of us, not just the staff people on the front lines. Without your support, the work is just too difficult.