Carrying a Weight Beyond Its Numbers: Fifty-Five Years of People-Centered Development in Vietnam

Paul Shetler Fast

When 23-year-old Delbert Wiens was sent to Vietnam in 1954, Mennonite Central Committee (MCC) asked him to set up a program that would serve the people of Vietnam through "a consistently MCC pattern of service."[1] Through fifty-five years of civil strife, international war, reconstruction, and political reformation, MCC's work in Vietnam was remarkably consistent in its fundamental approach and uniquely successful within its context. Faced with the same competing demands as its peers – serving the people, preserving the agency's integrity and viability, maintaining constituency support, and keeping staff safe – MCC made different choices. Its people-centered model had three key elements that separated it from its peer institutions: centering on long-term relationships above program efficiency; maintaining a consistent peace position; and remaining responsive to staff, clients, and constituents. MCC's development approach in Vietnam offers a model of how relief and development programs can be successfully sustained in places of political turmoil, violent conflict, and ideological impasse.

1954-1976: Foundational Choices

MCC and Catholic Relief Services (CRS) were the first two American non-governmental organizations (NGOs) in Vietnam, and in their first few months of service both organizations seemed to be similar in motivation and approach.[2] Both NGOs came on the invitation of the South Vietnamese and United States governments to help with the refugee crisis, a calling some personnel from both agencies framed in terms of supporting a "Free Vietnam" against the communists.[3] Both provided relief aid to refugees, accepted food aid from the United States government via the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), and related closely with Christian communities in South Vietnam. CRS worked with the Catholic Church and MCC with the Evangelical Church of Vietnam, known as the

Tin Lanh Church.[4] However, by September 1954 at the first meeting of the Voluntary Agencies Coordination Committee, a group organized with the US government to coordinate the work of NGOs in Vietnam, it was clear that each agency would take a different path.

While MCC reported that the meetings had "an excellent spirit of cooperation," it also acknowledged that each agency approached the issues differently.[5] The clearest contrast was between MCC and CRS. CRS was comfortable with a close affiliation with the South Vietnamese and US governments and their militaries, meeting with officials regularly to plan and coordinate activities. CRS was interested in being the largest, most comprehensive, and most efficient NGO operating in Vietnam. With a program that had distributed 500,000 pounds of dried milk and provided new housing to 20,000 people within the first month of operation, CRS was accomplishing its goals quickly.[6] MCC, on the other hand, approached its work from an entirely different direction. While it was not opposed to a large program (it had the second largest in Vietnam at the time, distributing more than 42 tons of food aid in its first four months), MCC's peace position and people-centered methodology made it leery of overt political affiliations and committed it to building its program on direct personal relationships.[7] Such an approach slowed down MCC's work, but it was part of developing the "consistently MCC pattern of service" that would come to define and facilitate its activity.

In MCC's first year in Vietnam, its mission seemed fairly straightforward. The leaders of North and South Vietnam had just signed peace agreements for a ceasefire and the country was in the midst of a major humanitarian disaster, with hundreds of thousands of people displaced by the conflict and lacking access to food, shelter, and clean water. A press announcement from MCC in 1954 described the "desperate plight" of refugees in South Vietnam, and explained that MCC had responded by sending "13 tons of canned beef, 10 tons of soap, and a supply of clothing" in order to "alleviate the suffering of the distressed refugees."[8] Many of the people moving from communist North Vietnam to southern "Free Vietnam" were Christians, adding the extra impetus of stopping communism and aiding its Christian victims. MCC entered Vietnam with the main goal of helping the Protestant "war sufferers," but quickly expanded far beyond this

narrow calling to aiding the Vietnamese people with respect to need, not religion.[9]

Although most of MCC's staff and constituents came from a relatively small religious group in Canada and the United States, they were diverse in their worldviews. Some, like the first country representative Delbert Wiens, shared much in common with the broader American culture and the other American agencies working in Vietnam. Like many of his counterparts in other organizations, Wiens was anti-communist and understood his purpose as partially to support South Vietnam against a communist takeover, and saw no possibility of working with or under communist rule.[10] From this ideological foundation, he slowly began developing closer cooperative relationships with South Vietnamese and US government officials, something common to all other NGOs working in Vietnam at the time.[11]

However, these parts of Wiens's ideology and approach were not widely accepted within MCC, and the program would quickly change directions. Between 1955 and 1958 the emphasis changed from emergency relief to longer-term development, while leadership shifted to Dr. Willard S. Krabill, who was uncomfortable with how much the US and South Vietnamese military infiltrated all elements of government activity. Within months of arriving in Vietnam in 1955, he was advising MCC to be aware that to relate closely to either government was to relate closely to their militaries and thus to jeopardize MCC's "Mennonite peace witness" and the possibilities for "a long range" program.[12] To its long-term gain, MCC heeded this advice, and began to differentiate itself more from what was increasingly seen as an imperial American presence.

Krabill's early instincts would help start MCC down a path that it would continue throughout its time in Vietnam. From the mid-1950s on, MCC encouraged staff not to socialize at military bases or use military/government services.[13] Unlike the missionaries and development workers of most other agencies, MCC staff lived in unpretentious, unguarded houses, did their own housework, and ate what the people around them ate.[14] Describing this difference in basic living circumstances during his work in the 1960s, Doug Hostetter wrote: "Our houses are only 200 yards apart . . . but [USAID personnel] have 12 guards, big lights, six-foot walls, sandbags, and barbed wire while our house is in the open, not even a fence around

us."[15] Serving amongst the people and without security protections came with risks that were made real in the tragic kidnapping and eventual murder of MCC worker Daniel Gerber in 1962. However, it appears that Gerber was the victim of an anti-American backlash, not an attack on him personally or on the organization.[16] MCC staff would generally come without a defined job description and be given significant latitude in making contacts, building relationships, and discovering what they were most called to be doing. MCC personnel often saw their mission in terms of "sacrificial service" and were eager to learn the language, build relationships and, as much as possible, integrate into Vietnamese society.[17]

For both pragmatic and theological reasons, MCC developed a close partnership with the local Protestant church, including the building and operation of a major hospital in coastal Nha Trang. The language describing the hospital blended evangelical and development objectives, as was common in MCC writings of the time. However, the clinic was open to all who came (except military personnel) and MCC's role at the clinic was primarily medical. The relationship to the church gave MCC a network of grassroots contacts with which to develop and expand its programming, something critical to an organization that refused to be connected with military and government structures.[18] These connections were so useful that, according to a later MCC evaluation, in the late 1950s and early 1960s MCC's "program pattern [was] pretty well determined" by the boundaries of this relationship.[19]

While this close connection to the church proved useful in many ways and was consistent with MCC's general policy of partnering with local churches, it also created problems. MCC was accused of favoritism in projects for church members, facilitating corruption among church leaders, and supporting close reciprocal connections between the churches and the South Vietnamese government.[20] By the mid-1960s these issues became increasingly significant for MCC staff, and MCC eventually began separating its identity and programming from the Protestant churches.[21]

As the Vietnam War escalated in the mid-'60s, relief, development, and mission agencies from North America began flooding in. Most were confined to Saigon and dependent on the US and South Vietnamese governments for networks through which to work. However, as late as

1965 MCC was still the only Protestant aid agency with staff on the ground in Vietnam. Recognizing MCC's unparalleled network of contacts and substantial experience, a group of major Protestant aid agencies proposed forming a united effort under MCC leadership.[22] To this end, Viet Nam Christian Service (VNCS) was formed in 1966, and MCC worker Atlee Beechy became its first field director. VNCS would become the second largest NGO operating in Vietnam in both personnel and programming, second only to CRS. During the VNCS era, MCC's involvement expanded dramatically in respect to finances, number of staff, and variety of programs. At its peak in 1968, MCC alone had 42 personnel in VNCS.[23] With Beechy at the helm, the partnership operated primarily within MCC's people-centered development model. As he described it, the work of VNCS was built on the belief that "competent and caring persons will make a difference" and that VNCS was "called to be the fellowship of the caring" in Vietnam.[24]

However, as the war became increasingly intense and unpopular, tensions over ideology and approach among the VNCS partners became untenable. MCC wanted to work in smaller, more responsive, projects, grow through personal contacts and relationship building, focus on Vietnam's marginalized peoples, and differentiate itself more from the South Vietnamese and US governments.[25] While there was rarely overt conflict among VNCS partners (MCC, Church World Service, and Lutheran World Relief), the underlying differences did surface dramatically on a number of occasions. One of the most notable occurred when Doug Hostetter, an MCC volunteer working on the border with North Vietnam, raised the ire of the US government. Having seen the war first hand, he believed NGOs should be reaching across political boundaries and working toward peace.[26]

Hostetter's work and friendships frequently brought him into contact with people supporting the National Liberation Front (NLF) – the main southern insurgency group – which aggravated the US military. In 1967, US military officials asked MCC to remove Hostetter from his post and step into line with American policy. This request coincided with a similar conflict between the US military and an International Voluntary Services staff member, creating a heated controversy culminating in a front-page story in *The New York Times* and a fiery meeting between agency heads and the US ambassador.[27] Despite strong opposition within VNCS, MCC backed

Hostetter. The controversy was a major point of division within VNCS about how "political" the organization should be and how much it should adhere to US policy objectives.[28]

When MCC finally pulled out of VNCS in 1972, most MCC staff were eager to return to an independent program that would focus not so much on providing large-scale relief but on developing relationships, building trust, and working for reconciliation and peace in a more deliberate way.[29] As part of this renewal MCC pushed toward clearer non-alignment by refusing to use military transport or services (building on a 1967 decision to stop accepting USAID surplus food).[30] The crystallized logic of MCC's perspective can be seen in this excerpt from the 1973 MCC annual report:

> The goal of MCC is not so much to develop programs as it is to meet and share with the Vietnamese people. The emphasis is placed on people rather than programs, and MCC volunteers are encouraged to develop language skills and receive cultural orientation which will enable them to communicate with the people. Volunteers are encouraged to find ways to express Christian love and concern to help bring about real reconciliation and peace. We are reminded of many areas where we can learn from our Vietnamese brothers and sisters.[31]

This distinctively MCC approach, which had developed over two decades of service, would guide the Vietnam program from this point forward.

The consequences of this re-visioning were many. MCC began moving staff into more rural placements with job descriptions that included investing in relationships. While their main job may have been to teach English or provide medical care, staff members were encouraged to spend time with neighbors, learn about Vietnamese culture and history, and begin to understand the war's impact on the lives of people around them. Out of these relationships grew a desire to reach out to the other side of the conflict, the enemies of the US and South Vietnamese governments. People in all levels of MCC took up these efforts of bridge building and reconciliation. At the grassroots level, Pat and Earl Hostetter Martin sent messages to NLF representatives explaining MCC, its approach, and their work in the area. These efforts were followed by several meetings between Earl Martin and

NLF leaders. The NLF reported that they had already heard much about MCC and its work, and assured Martin that MCC staff would be safe regardless of political transitions.[32]

Beginning in late 1968, MCC began reaching out to North Vietnam through more official channels, most concretely through shipments of medical supplies and material aid, which by 1975 totaled $275,000 worth of goods sent across "enemy lines."[33] Additionally, Atlee Beechy and Peter Dyck of MCC met with NLF and North Vietnamese leaders in embassies in Paris, Algiers, Stockholm, East Berlin, New Delhi, and Phnom Penh.[34] In 1974 MCC was invited to Hanoi by the North Vietnamese government to continue the conversation. Humbled by his reception, Beechy wrote that "we were introduced as Americans, friends who had spoken out against the war, that we were people who were interested in helping all of the Vietnamese people."[35] These efforts sought to make MCC's purpose, mission, and history clear to the NLF and North Vietnamese in order to build a relationship, explore options for cooperation on programming, and seek assurance that a political shift would not jeopardize MCC's programs or personnel. Many within MCC were excited about the progress made at these meetings and felt that these types of personal relationships were critical to developing, expanding, and politically balancing the work in Vietnam.[36]

When the South Vietnamese government collapsed in April of 1975, MCC had the relationships to weather the transition. As North Vietnamese and NLF troops made rapid progress toward Saigon in early 1975, the foreign staff of all but three North American NGOs left the country on US military flights.[37] Many, including the CRS staff, were forced to flee for their lives.[38] MCC did not ask staff to stay through the turmoil,[39] but four MCC workers did: James Klassen, Earl Martin, Yoshihiro Ichikawa, and Max Ediger. Klassen described his decision two weeks before the transition: "We see our staying as part of our commitment to Christ and to His kingdom of peace and reconciliation. In some way, the integrity of our years of witness is tied to our staying with our brothers and sisters through these days."[40] Reflecting on the experience years later, Ediger wrote that staying "was a sign that we trusted [the Vietnamese] and the future they were building . . . our message of Christ's way of peace required that we demonstrate it in our own reactions to the changes and uncertainties around us."[41]

By staying on, MCC workers made a choice at both institutional and personal levels to put their relationships first and to prove that they were in Vietnam for different reasons than those of the US government. The welcome they received, the safety they were granted, and the ability to continue programming through the change in governments demonstrates the success of this approach. MCC was one of only a few agencies still involved at all with Vietnam after April 1975, and by 1976 it was the only one with staff still living in the country. This foundation of trust would prove invaluable in continuing programming through the next twenty years of transition, when few other agencies had the connections, trust, and integrity within the country to keep working.

1976-1989: A Long-Distance Relationship

In the spring of 1975, within the first few months after the fall of South Vietnam, it was clear that MCC's ongoing work would have to take a different form. While the four MCC staff still living in Saigon were treated well by the new government, they were not allowed to set up offices or officially represent MCC. By July 1975 Earl Martin had rejoined his family in Thailand, since it seemed unlikely that they would be allowed to resume residency and work. Ediger, Klassen, and Ichikawa reported that they were "getting along fine and their morale [was] good," but besides teaching English at the local Mennonite church, they had little to do.[42] The new government was eager for a continued relationship with MCC, but reportedly told a delegation that it would be impossible to allow MCC to set up an office when no other agency was granted this privilege. Instead, MCC was encouraged to keep up its relationship and programming through regular visits and delegations that could oversee aid projects.[43]

By November 1975 the first MCC delegation arrived in Hanoi to begin exploring the contours of the new relationship. The Vietnam Committee for Solidarity with the American People, an organization of the Vietnamese government, invited a four-member MCC delegation to tour the newly peaceful country and discuss future programming. According to the delegation's trip report, the first objective was to strengthen institutional relationships and "better understand the suffering and destruction inflicted upon the Vietnamese," with a secondary objective of furthering

programming.[44] The group was warmly received and granted meetings with highly placed people in the new government. This included a meeting with Premier Pham Van Dong, who called for help from MCC and the American people to rebuild and heal Vietnam. Premier Dong emphasized the importance of these personal and institutional relationships because, as he put it, "If you want to have real peace, you must have friendship."[45] In response to their trip, and in spite of the challenges that would accompany any aid to Vietnam, the delegation recommended to MCC that:

> Now is the right time for a major emphasis on assistance to Vietnam. The post-war needs are great. The Vietnamese are eager for assistance. In a few years from now they will hopefully get their economy going again and will be able to meet their basic needs but at the present time we have a real opportunity and responsibility to help.[46]

However, entering into this kind of a long-distance relationship – running programs without staff on the ground and through (communist) government channels – would require a significant deviation from precedent. Within weeks of Saigon's "liberation," MCC was talking internally about how to reorient its programs and externally with peer agencies about cooperation, legal implications, and the risks of channeling aid directly through the governments of North and South Vietnam.[47] By the time of the Executive Committee meeting in September 1975, MCC was ready to take the first steps in this new relationship by approving material aid distribution through government structures if certain requirements were met: "MCC identification will be included on equipment or supplies . . . a report [from the Vietnamese] on how equipment or supplies are finally used . . . [and] permission to visit the projects which have been assisted."[48] Additionally, MCC wanted its "people-to-people emphasis" to be explained to Vietnamese partners, including its desire to have staff working in country, the possibility of an educational exchange program, and the hope of continuing contact with previous MCC partners (including church groups).[49] As MCC's program began operating in this new style, the staff living in Saigon began to pull out, with the last, Yoshihiro Ichikawa, leaving Vietnam in October 1976.[50]

Many of MCC's constituents and staff hesitated to be so involved with a communist government, particularly when MCC had no staff on

the ground. Critics raised questions about the legality of this aid, given restrictions on trade with "enemy states," as well as the relative need in Vietnam compared to other places.[51] As early as the 1974 Annual Meeting in Hillsboro, Kansas, MCC was hearing significant complaints from its constituency about giving aid to a communist state, including impassioned testimonies from survivors of Stalin's Soviet Union.[52] In response to these concerns the Executive Committee approved the following restrictions on aid in 1976: "No cash whatsoever would be sent to the government of Vietnam . . . [and the program would] be funded without the curtailment of other programs."[53] The committee reiterated that "MCC is one of a few agencies having developed and maintained a relationship to Vietnam and the church in Vietnam."[54]

By carrying on this unique relationship MCC believed that its "small voice can carry a weight beyond its numbers" in the work for peace and reconciliation.[55] MCC rightly believed that continuing aid would increase the likelihood that normal programs could be resumed in the future.[56] In a quick summary of the newly reformulated strategy, MCC administrator Vern Preheim wrote: "Our primary interest with respect to Vietnam is to restore broken relationships and to help create new relationships . . . a secondary but very important objective is to provide equipment and supplies badly needed in the reconstruction."[57]

Demonstrating its commitment to Vietnam, MCC promised US $1 million of material aid in 1976.[58] This spending represented a significant increase in the Vietnam budget, amounting to nearly ten percent of MCC's total overseas budget. This initiative was seen as a worthy expense for three major reasons: (1) with its relationships, MCC had a unique opportunity to help; (2) Americans had a special responsibility to mitigate the suffering inflicted by their government; and (3) there was great optimism that Vietnam would recover quickly and soon not need significant aid.[59] The 1976 MCC *Workbook* acknowledged that this giving, both in its administration and quantity, was "a unique exception to MCC program procedures."[60]

Part of this initial push was the "Friendshipment" project, which brought many of MCC's old partner organizations back together and refocused the international media on Vietnam, at least briefly.[61] In 1975 a coalition of agencies interested in reconstruction and normalized relations

came together to form Friendshipment, with Church World Service taking the lead role.[62] The MCC Executive Committee endorsed MCC's participation, arguing that Friendshipment was "both an act of friendship and a way of responding to the urgent needs of Vietnamese people."[63] It also connected MCC with a nationwide effort to raise funding and awareness for Vietnam's continuing struggles.[64] While Friendshipment was a significant program for only a few years, it was considered a success by the participating agencies and the Vietnamese government.[65] Friendshipment also represented one of the first MCC efforts to lobby for normalized relations between the US and Vietnam. This campaign would grow and take MCC into an entirely new line of work – direct political advocacy separated from the immediate context of war. This advocacy work was based in MCC's Washington Office, which had been opened in 1969 to help bring MCC's peace witness to the US government.[66]

From 1975 to 1981 MCC operated its programming through infrequent delegation visits, but in 1981 Louise Buhler was assigned as country representative to Vietnam. This change would help refocus and reenergize the program. Based in Bangkok, Thailand, Buhler led quarterly visits into the country to assess the situation, build relationships, and explore new opportunities. Her work in the 1980s consisted of three interconnected tasks: distributing material aid; developing and maintaining contacts with people inside Vietnam; and serving as an information hub for other international agencies. The increased access, coordination, and personal continuity quickly led to increasing cooperation from Vietnamese authorities, greater access and opportunities for aid, and better monitoring of material aid distribution.[67] During these years MCC focused its material aid to programs in health, agriculture, and education.

The relationships built and maintained with Vietnamese people and government officials by Buhler from 1981 to 1989 would serve as the foundation for later work, and establish the goodwill and trust that facilitated MCC's gradual re-entry in 1989 and 1990.[68] Few other agencies were willing to invest in this vital but laborious process, and MCC's network of relationships with people in Vietnam increasingly distinguished it from other agencies. Its unique situation made it a networking, information, and logistics hub for other agencies and people.[69] In this role it helped facilitate

access and orientation for a number of other NGOs and channeled aid for many more.[70] Janet and Stan Reedy, who would replace Buhler as country representatives in 1989, were shocked at the stream of people coming through the Bangkok office each day to ask Buhler about working in Vietnam, get contact information for a government official, or ask about joining her on one of her trips into the country.[71]

Despite the challenges of running a program without resident staff, concerns about working with a communist government, and the legal hurdles of sending aid to an "enemy state," MCC stuck with Vietnam when almost no other agency did. One of the effort's strongest supporters, Doug Hostetter, argued that MCC should "look at our aid to Vietnam not as benevolence but as our Christian responsibility," since the projects were aimed at repairing what US tax dollars had destroyed.[72] In 1966 William T. Snyder, MCC Executive Secretary at the time, had recognized that MCC had a "special responsibility" in Vietnam, an idea that would stick with the program and continue giving it a high priority within the organization for more than three decades.[73] Capitalizing on its unique situation, MCC expanded its programming with remarkable success, positioning it to take advantage of Vietnam's liberalization in the late 1980s.

1990-2008: New Beginnings

In the mid-1980s Vietnam's economic and political system was clearly failing to create the prosperity and peace that the revolution had promised. The economy was in shambles with increasing national debt, high inflation, decreasing productivity, lack of food self-sufficiency, and widespread malnutrition. Vietnam was isolated from its neighbors and the West by economic embargos and diplomatic ill will. Its former friends in the Soviet Union were caught up in internal affairs and unable to provide promised aid or political protection. Vietnam was ready for change, and began a process known as Doi Moi, a set of radical reforms that would reshape the country. In 1986 the National Party Congress began the process by formally recognizing the role of the private sector, phasing out most subsidies, and encouraging foreign investment from even non-socialist countries. Within two years these reforms picked up pace, with the official decollectivization of agriculture, the freeing of most price controls, and the recognition of long

term land rights. The economy responded rapidly and production surged, changing Vietnam from a rice importer to the world's second largest rice exporter in less than four years.[74]

Growing out of these reforms, Vietnam allowed a cohort of international development agencies back into the country as guinea pigs of liberalization. MCC was among the four agencies chosen by the government, and in late 1988 began making plans to set up offices in Hanoi. The government was still cautious about this process and assigned a liaison officer to facilitate and monitor the work of each agency. The person assigned to MCC was Le Anh Kiet. A talented diplomat and administrator, he not only helped it negotiate the delicate transition but ended up staying with the organization for more than a decade. Kiet affectionately described his work with MCC, noting particularly how the trust that MCC had developed earlier allowed it a smoother transition back into the country than any other organization. Working with MCC was enjoyable because "it was not just about dollars and numbers . . . they wanted to work with the people and they did not mind the hardships of living like the people."[75] In 1990 MCC became one of the first three agencies to establish offices in Vietnam, when Stan and Janet Reedy moved to Hanoi.[76]

In 1989, while the Reedys were still working through bureaucratic red tape, MCC worker Miriam Hershberger obtained a visa from the Vietnamese government to teach English in a university. Her experience is emblematic of the rewards, frustrations, and challenges accompanying this time of transition. Vietnam was eager to bring English education into its schools and was looking for qualified teachers. As the Reedys explained, "teaching English provided a unique opportunity for people-to-people interaction" at a time when the government was still wary of grassroots contact with foreigners.[77] Seizing this opportunity, MCC selected Hershberger, a seasoned English teacher with international experience, to become the first MCC worker since 1976 to live in Vietnam. Janet Reedy described her as well-liked by her students, a "dedicated and hard-working teacher" devoted to her teaching and to "modeling the kind of friendly relationships that are sorely needed between the U.S. and Viet Nam."[78]

Unfortunately, Hershberger's stay in Vietnam was abruptly cut short in what appears to have been a tit-for-tat between the Foreign and Interior

Ministries, as well as a political statement about openness to the West (coming exactly a year after the Tiananmen Square massacre in China).[79] "June 4, 1990, may not be the worst day in my life, but it certainly was one of the most frustrating and humiliating," wrote Hershberger.[80] Early that morning she was confronted by government officials, told to gather her belongings, and taken into the interior ministry building, without any explanation. She was coerced into signing confessions of political sedition, her words twisted to fit the alleged crime. As she described this process of confession and interrogation, "it made no difference what I said or thought; they already had their minds made up about my guilt and this was just a formality."[81] Hershberger was deported from Vietnam without being able to say good-bye to her friends and colleagues at the university, or even to tell the Reedys what had happened. A government-run newspaper printed an article entitled "Why Was The English Language Teacher Miriam Hershberger Deported?" which said she had sent national secrets abroad and used newspaper articles in her teaching with anti-socialist content and views "not in line with the views of our party and government."[82]

Like the kidnapping of Daniel Gerber 28 years earlier, however, this body blow to MCC had more to do with the political context than with MCC or the particular staff member. While the deportation was "a major blow and resulted in a considerable loss of momentum,"[83] it had "no real permanent effect on MCC programming."[84] The government agency in charge of NGO affairs never apologized for the incident, but it did go out of its way to make clear that MCC was a trusted and friendly organization by hosting a large public event in which MCC's long history of work in the country was highlighted and praised. It appears that MCC's local partners were aware of the political dynamics that had created the incident, with little suspicion outlasting the news story.[85] By the end of the year MCC's English teaching program was expanding again, with an agreement to place two more teachers in southern Vietnam.[86]

As the Vietnam program developed, it faced questions of identity and purpose not only from the Vietnamese government but also on several occasions from MCC's North American constituency. In coming back to the country after so many years, MCC again faced the decision of how closely it should and could relate to the Vietnamese evangelical churches. The

government was uncomfortable with outsiders working with the churches, which it still regarded as subversive. MCC's constituency, however, wanted to partner with and support the local church. Within the first year of residency in Vietnam, the Reedys decided to maintain distance from the church in order to avoid being seen "as proselytizing under the guise of giving aid."[87] This position would stand relatively unchanged, coming up in later documents as a decision to give Mennonite mission agencies "leadership" in relating to the church in Vietnam.[88]

As MCC moved toward a balanced relationship with different religious groups, it stirred up more controversy. In 1993, Country Representatives Pat and Earl Martin agreed to a project proposal from a northern village to help rebuild their places of worship: a Taoist temple, a Buddhist pagoda, and a Catholic church. When the Martins wrote an article for the Mennonite Church organ, the *Gospel Herald*, describing the project and asking for responses, they inadvertently sparked a heated debate that became known as the "pagoda controversy."[89] The constituency wrote a flurry of letters to MCC and nearly 60 published letters to the editor in Mennonite media. While some supported what they saw as progressive interfaith bridge-building, many others questioned MCC's judgment and disliked their money explicitly supporting other faiths. "We knew that it might be controversial, but we believed it was the right thing to do," recalled the Martins in 2007, saying that in spite of the reaction "it was a good decision."[90] However, from this point on MCC would tread lightly with interfaith projects.

Following the hesitant period of initial liberalization, the floodgates opened on international aid to Vietnam. While only four NGOs had offices there in 1990, by 1992 115 had programs in the country, and by 1999 that number had exploded to nearly 500.[91] Such activity stands in stark contrast to the 10 agencies that had maintained any contact with Vietnam from 1975 to 1990.[92] According to the Vietnamese government, in 1999 NGOs were disbursing $81 million annually.[93] Alongside this opening to NGOs came a fresh wave of bilateral government-to-government aid, which by 1997 totaled more than $2 billion.[94] With so much activity in the country, the economy taking off with record growth rates, and government reforms producing better public services, the field of international development in Vietnam was changing rapidly. So, too, was MCC's role. In 1992 the

MCC *Workbook* noted that NGOs working on development in Vietnam were finally "receding to proper perspective."[95] By 1994 the *Workbook* reported that "MCC is no longer one of the only North American NGOs active in Vietnam, with a high profile attracting attention and scrutiny. Rather, we are now one of the smallest among many dozens of NGOs and multi-lateral organizations."[96]

As MCC became one agency among many, it began to act accordingly. As opportunities opened, it expanded staff placements to include grassroots projects focused on community development, peace and reconciliation, healthcare, and agriculture. Fewer of these projects had to be channeled through government agencies, and MCC was increasingly free of government surveillance and supervision. In the words of Country Representatives Bruce and Betsy Headrick McCrae, "MCC Vietnam [was] beginning to look more like MCC programs in other countries."[97] Still known for its long history of service, and given significant credibility and respect, MCC was now freer to decide what to do with this investment.[98] With new opportunity and flexibility, MCC deliberately chose to focus its program on its "traditional strengths" of a consistent peace position, creative and responsible service workers, and a "people-to-people emphasis."[99]

In 2007 MCC's program was operating smoothly under the leadership of Lowell and Ruth Jantzi. Lowell had worked with MCC in Vietnam in the early 1970s, so his return in 2003 was in his words "something of a homecoming" and is representative of the program's continuity. According to Jantzi "people know about MCC's long history, and this is to our advantage . . . having that trust and credibility directly affects all aspects of our programming."[100] Tô Thi Bẩy, Director of MCC Vietnam's Peace Building Program, started working with MCC in 2002 because it is "different in the way that it works, it has a long history of working in Vietnam, of working at the grassroots . . . and it is a pioneer in peace work here."[101] Bẩy asserted that MCC gets more out of its small budget than any other organization since "we work more effectively because we work at the grassroots with a participatory approach that people trust and appreciate."[102]

In explaining MCC's unique place among NGOs, Đinh Thị Vinh, a Program Officer since 1997, said that "MCC was and is a bridge between nations" that is a "place of sharing."[103] She explained that "MCC workers

themselves are part of this difference; the way they live and interact with the people is very warm . . . there are no lies between us."[104] Part of what both Bẩy and Vinh found so appealing was that MCC could transfer the ideal of people-centered development to the way it treated its local staff. As Lady Borton, a long-time friend of Vietnam known locally as "The Quaker Lady" for her years of service with the American Friends Service Committee, put it, "MCC has been top quality, displaying a willingness to listen to Vietnamese advice that you don't see in many other organizations. This partnership with local colleagues is the key to successful work, and MCC has always done this."[105]

Carrying a Weight Beyond Its Numbers

What has set MCC apart from other agencies working in Vietnam has not been its budget, structure, or size, but its distinctive approach to people-centered development. This approach has been characterized by the interconnected elements of long-term relationship building, a consistent peace position, and remaining a small, responsive, and grassroots-driven organization. This vision has driven MCC's work, facilitated its success, and allowed it to do things that no other agency could. While the Vietnam program has undergone continuous change and re-visioning since it was started more than a half-century ago, it has maintained a broad commitment to this approach and has been richly rewarded for it.

While there were critics at each stage, their voices have helped balance and ground MCC's work. When some staff became enamored with the communist struggle, MCC's constituency helped anchor it in its roots of nonalignment. When most western agencies forgot about Vietnam, voices in MCC and the Mennonite church called for a renewed commitment to the country and its people. In the mid-1990s, when hundreds of NGOs flooded Vietnam, it was people with personal relationships in the country who saw the unique opportunity for MCC's continued, albeit transformed, work there. One long-standing criticism has claimed that MCC sacrificed too much of its prophetic witness in order to continue its humanitarian projects.[106] However, as Earl Martin wrote in response to this criticism, "the bottom line" is that MCC was able to continue its programming in Vietnam when most agencies were forced to leave.[107] Being more politically outspoken would have

jeopardized its humanitarian work and the relationships it had built. To him, this would have been a sacrifice not worth the cost.[108]

MCC's history in Vietnam is the story of how development work can be successful beyond the weight of its numbers in bringing relief and development in situations of prolonged conflict, difficult peace, and frightening transitions. As Earl Martin described MCC's unique calling in 1975, when he chose to stay through the fall of the South Vietnamese government, "The business of MCC in the world is not purity. The call of MCC is to be there in the most poignant and distressing situations, seeking the way of peace, the way of the gospel in the midst of war."[109]

Notes

[1] "Memo of Understanding: Vietnam Unit 8/16/54," Internal Memorandum, MCC, Microfilm file 2: MCC Executive Committee and Annual Meeting Minutes, Session # 151, August 14, 1947 to Session #226, December 30, 1954. MCC Archive Collection IX-5-1, Archives of the Mennonite Church, Goshen, IN (AMC-G).

[2] Scott E. Flipse, "Bearing the Cross of Vietnam: Humanitarianism, Religion, and the American Commitment to South Vietnam, 1952-1975," Ph.D diss., University of Notre Dame, 2003, 16.

[3] Delbert Wiens, "Report for the Month of November," Internal Report, November 1954, MCC, Microfilm file 2: MCC Executive Committee and Annual Meeting Minutes: Session # 151, August 14, 1947 to Session #226, December 30, 1954. MCC Archives Collection, Box IX-5-1, AMC-G.

[4] Luke S. Martin, "An Evaluation of a Generation of Mennonite Mission, Service, and Peacemaking in Vietnam 1954-1976," in *Vietnam Study Project* (Akron, PA: MCC, MCC Peace Section, and Eastern Mennonite Board of Missions and Charities, 1977), 15; and Flipse, 15-22.

[5] Willard S. Krabill, "The Work of the Protestant Churches in Viet Nam," MCC, personal files of Willard Krabill, Goshen, IN, 1-3.

[6] Flipse, "Bearing the Cross of Vietnam," 131-34.

[7] *Mennonite Central Committee Workbook: 1954* (Akron, PA: MCC, 1954), Relief Section 1-2.

[8] "First Relief Supplies Enroute to Indo-China," Weekly News Notes, September 24, 1954, MCC, Personal files of Willard Krabill, Goshen, IN.

[9] Willard S. Krabill, interview by author, February 20, 2008, Goshen, IN, recording and notes, personal files of author, Goshen, IN.

[10] Delbert Wiens, "Report for the Month of October, October 26, 1954," Internal Report, MCC, Microfilm file 2: MCC Executive Committee and Annual Meeting Minutes, Session

151, August 14, 1947 to Session #226, December 30, 1954. MCC Archives Collection IX-5-1, AMC-G.
[11] Krabill, interview.
[12] Willard S. Krabill, Saigon, Vietnam, to J.N. Byler, Akron, PA, Activity and Program Report, November 12, 1955, 2-4.
[13] Krabill, interview.
[14] Atlee Beechy, *Vietnam: Who Cares?* (Scottdale, PA: Herald Press, 1968), 78.
[15] Robert S. Kreider and Rachel Waltner Goossen, *Hungry, Thirsty, a Stranger: The MCC Experience* (Scottdale, PA: Herald Press, 1988), 144.
[16] Doug Hostetter, interview by author, July 26, 2007, New York, NY; recording and notes, personal files of author, Goshen, IN.
[17] Lowell Jantzi, interview by author, April 29, 2007, Halong City, Vietnam; recording and notes, personal files of author, Goshen, IN.
[18] Krabill, interview.
[19] Martin, "An Evaluation of a Generation," 5.
[20] Ibid., 17-18.
[21] Ibid., 39.
[22] "Churches Weigh Vietnam Position: Discuss Aid to Refugees and Moral Issues of War," *New York Times*, August 21, 1965, 24.
[23] Martin, "An Evaluation of a Generation," 183.
[24] Beechy, 74 and 87.
[25] Martin, "An Evaluation of a Generation," 27-30.
[26] Hostetter, interview; and Martin, "An Evaluation of a Generation," 26.
[27] Bernard Weinraub, "Volunteer Aides in Saigon Dispute: American Welfare Workers Say U.S. Officials Press Them to Support War," *New York Times*, September 15, 1967.
[28] Hostetter, interview.
[29] Max Ediger, "Suggestions for the New MCC Program in Vietnam (The Ediger Papers)," Internal Report, 26 July 1972, MCC, Microfilm file 6: MCC Executive Committee and Annual Meeting Minutes, Session # 337, October 1-2, 1969 to Session #364, September 10, 1973. MCC Archive Collection IX-5-1, AMC-G.
[30] Martin, "An Evaluation of a Generation," 104.
[31] MCC Vietnam Annual Report, 1973 (November 1973), quoted in Martin, "An Evaluation of a Generation," 35.
[32] Earl S. Martin, *Reaching the Other Side: The Journal of an American who Stayed to Witness Vietnam's Postwar Transition* (New York: Crown, 1978), 60-69.
[33] Krieder and Goossen, *Hungry, Thirsty, a Stranger*, 154.
[34] Ibid., 153; and Atlee Beechy, "Hanoi: The Wounds and Paradoxes of War," Internal Report, 4 February 1974, MCC, Exhibit 5B, Session #369, Annual Meeting, January 17-19,1974, Microfilm file 7: MCC Executive Committee and Annual Meeting Minutes, Session # 365, Sept 26-27, 1973 to Session #373, December 11-12, 1974. MCC Archive Collection IX-5-1, AMC-G, 1.
[35] Atlee Beechy, "Message from Atlee Beechy: North Vietnam Visit," Internal Report, MCC, Exhibit 5A, Session #369, Annual Meeting, January 17-19, 1974, Microfilm file 7: MCC

Executive Committee and Annual Meeting Minutes, Session # 365, September 26-27, 1973 to Session #373, December 11-12, 1974. MCC Archive Collection IX-5-1, AMC-G, 1.

[36] Doug Hostetter, "Supplementary Report on Paris, Rome Trip, February 17- March 4 1973," Internal Report, MCC, Microfilm file 6: MCC Executive Committee and Annual Meeting Minutes Session # 337, October 1-2, 1969 to Session #364, September 10, 1973. MCC Archive Collection IX-5-1, AMC-G.

[37] "18 U.S. Missionaries and Field Workers Remained or Were Captured in Vietnam," *New York Times*, May 10, 1975.

[38] Flipse, 7-11.

[39] Max Ediger, "Emergency Situation," Internal Report, September 1972, MCC, Microfilm file 6: MCC Executive Committee and Annual Meeting Minutes, Session # 337, October 1-2, 1969 to Session #364, September 10, 1973. MCC Archive Collection IX-5-1, AMC-G.

[40] "18 U.S. Missionaries and Field Workers Remained or Were Captured in Vietnam." *New York Times*, May 10, 1975.

[41] Max Ediger, "Choosing to Stay When Others Leave," *The Mennonite*, August 8, 2000.

[42] "Asia-Middle East Report," Internal Report, MCC, Exhibit 10, Minutes of MCC Executive Committee Meeting, September 24-25, 1975, Microfilm file 9: MCC Executive Committee and Annual Meeting Minutes, January 15, 1973 to Session #407, September 15-16, 1978. MCC Archive Collection IX-5-1, AMC-G.

[43] Linda Hiebert, "Diary of Visit to Vietnam: November 12-29, 1975," Internal Report, 8, MCC, Exhibit 7, Minutes of MCC Executive Committee Meeting, December 10-11, 1975, Microfilm file 9: MCC Executive Committee and Annual Meeting Minutes, January 15, 1973 to Session #407, September 15-16, 1978. MCC Archive Collection IX-5-1, AMC-G, 5.

[44] Luke S. Martin, Daniel Zehr, and Robert Miller, "Vietnam Trip Report: November 12-29, 1975," Internal Report, 13, MCC, Exhibit 7, Minutes of MCC Executive Committee Meeting, December 10-11, 1975, Microfilm file 9: MCC Executive Committee and Annual Meeting Minutes, January 15, 1973 to Session #407, September 15-16, 1978. MCC Archive Collection IX-5-1, AMC-G, 1.

[45] Hiebert, "Diary of Visit to Vietnam: November 12-29, 1975," 4.

[46] Martin, Zehr, and Miller, "Vietnam Trip Report: November 12-29, 1975," 13.

[47] Don Sensenig, "Report on Visit to Paris for Contacts With Provisional Revolutionary Government & Democratic Republic of Vietnam Representatives," Internal Report, April 22-26, 1975, MCC, Exhibit 5, Minutes of MCC Executive Committee Meeting, May 21-22, 1975, Microfilm file 9: MCC Executive Committee and Annual Meeting Minutes, January 15, 1973 to Session #407, September 15-16, 1978. MCC Archive Collection IX-5-1, AMC-G.

[48] "Minutes of MCC Executive Committee Meeting, September 24-25, 1975," Meeting Minutes, MCC, Microfilm file 9: MCC Executive Committee and Annual Meeting Minutes, January 15, 1973 to Session #407, September 15-16, 1978. MCC Archive Collection IX-5-1, AMC-G, 8.

[49] Ibid.

[50] Martin, "An Evaluation of a Generation," 111.

[51] "Minutes of MCC Annual Meeting, January 22-24, 1976," Meeting Minutes, MCC,

Microfilm file 9: MCC Executive Committee and Annual Meeting Minutes, January 15, 1973 to Session #407, September 15-16, 1978. MCC Archive Collection IX-5-1, AMC-G, 13-14.
[52] Kreider and Goossen, *Hungry, Thirsty, a Stranger*, 154.
[53] "Minutes of MCC Annual Meeting, January 22-24, 1976," 13.
[54] Ibid., 14.
[55] Ibid.
[56] Paul Longacre, "Objectives, Assumptions, Priorities and Strategies for 1976," Internal Report, MCC, Exhibit 4, MCC Annual Meeting, January 22-24, 1976, Microfilm file 9: MCC Executive Committee and Annual Meeting Minutes, January 15, 1973 to Session #407, September 15-16, 1978, MCC Archive Collection IX-5-1, AMC-G, 62a.
[57] Vern Preheim, "MCC and Government Licenses for Aid to Vietnam," Internal Report, January 20, 1976, MCC, Exhibit 4, MCC Annual Meeting, January 22-24, 1976, Microfilm file 9: MCC Executive Committee and Annual Meeting Minutes, January 15, 1973 to Session #407, September 15-16, 1978. MCC Archive Collection IX-5-1, AMC-G, 5.
[58] Kreider and Goossen, *Hungry, Thirsty, a Stranger*, 155.
[59] "Minutes of MCC Annual Meeting, January 22-24, 1976," 13-16.
[60] *Mennonite Central Committee Workbook: 1976* (Akron, PA: MCC, 1976), 59.
[61] "U.S. Groups Seeking Help For Vietnams," *New York Times*, October 3, 1975. See http://select.nytimes.com/gst/abstract.html?res=F00F10FE3C5B157493C1A9178BD95F418785F9.
[62] *Church World Service: 50 Years of Friendship and Cooperation with Vietnam* (Vietnam: Church World Service, 2004), 63-71.
[63] "Minutes of MCC Executive Committee Meeting, September 24-25, 1975," 9.
[64] Ibid.
[65] "Minutes of MCC Executive Committee Meeting, June 15-16, 1977," Meeting Minutes, MCC, Microfilm file 9: MCC Executive Committee and Annual Meeting Minutes, January 15, 1973 to Session #407, September 15-16, 1978. MCC Archive Collection IX-5-1, AMC-G, 14-15.
[66] Paul Toews, *Mennonites in American Society, 1930-1970: Modernity and the Persistence of Religious Community,* vol. 4, The Mennonite Experience in America (Scottdale, PA: Herald Press, 1996), 322. For a fuller discussion of the MCC Washington Office, see Keith Graber Miller, *Wise as Serpents, Innocent as Doves: American Mennonites Engage Washington* (Knoxville, TN: Univ. of Tennessee Press, 1996).
[67] *Mennonite Central Committee Workbook: 1982* (Akron, PA: MCC, 1982), 83-84.
[68] "East Asia Department: Description & Budget: Fiscal Years 1991-1993: Viet Nam," Budget Proposal, MCC, Microfilm roll # 223. MCC Archive Collection IX-5-1, AMC-G, 1-2.
[69] *Mennonite Central Committee Workbook: 1986* (Akron, PA: MCC, 1986), 76-77; and Janet Reedy and Stan Reedy, interview by author, July 18, 2007, Ypsilanti, MI; notes and recording, personal files of author, Goshen, IN.
[70] "Mennonite Central Committee Viet Nam Field Guide: January 1996," MCC, Vietnam File 6. MCC Archives, Akron, PA, 4.
[71] Reedy and Reedy interview.
[72] Hostetter, "Supplementary Report on Paris, Rome Trip, February 17- March 4, 1973."

[73] Larry Kehler, "What Is MCC Doing?," *Gospel Herald*, January 25, 1966, 78.
[74] James Riedel and William S. Turley, "The Politics and Economics of Transition to an Open Market Economy in Viet Nam," *Organization of Economic Cooperation and Development, Development Center* Working Paper No. 152 (September 1999), 13-18.
[75] Le Anh Kiet, interview by author, April 25, 2007, Hanoi, Vietnam; notes, personal files of author, Goshen, IN.
[76] Reedy and Reedy interview.
[77] Ibid.
[78] Stan Reedy, "Sunday, June 10, 1990," journal entry, June 10, 1990, 1-6, personal files of Stan and Janet Reedy, Ypsilanti, MI, 4.
[79] Reedy and Reedy interview.
[80] Miriam Hershberger, "Report on Miriam Hershberger's Deportation from Vietnam," Personal Report, 1990, 1-10, MCC, personal files of Stan and Janet Reedy, Ypsilanti, MI, 1.
[81] Ibid., 2.
[82] Phuc Nguyen, "Why Was The English Language Teacher Miriam Hershberger Deported?" translated newspaper article from *Quan Doi Nhan Dan*, July 28, 1990, 1-3, personal files of Stan and Janet Reedy, Ypsilanti, MI, 1.
[83] *Mennonite Central Committee Workbook: 1990* (Akron, PA: MCC, 1990), 71.
[84] Reedy and Reedy interview.
[85] Ibid.
[86] *Mennonite Central Committee Workbook: 1990*, 69.
[87] Reedy and Reedy interview.
[88] Glen E. Miller, Stephen Gonsalves, and Louise Buhler, "MCC-Vietnam Program Evaluation Report, 1993-1998," MCC, Vietnam Files. MCC Archives, Akron, PA, 4.
[89] Ann Martin, "Follow-up to MCC's May-June 1993 Indochina/Thailand Regional Evaluation," MCC, MCC Vietnam Evaluation, Vietnam File 8. MCC Archives, Akron, PA, 3-4.
[90] Pat Hostetter Martin and Earl S. Martin, interview by author, July 24, 2007, Harrisonburg, VA; notes and recording, personal files of author, Goshen, IN.
[91] Mary Etherton, ed., *Non-Governmental Organizations in Vietnam: Vietnam NGO Directory* (Hanoi: The Gioi Publishers, 1992); and Nguyen Kim Ha, *Lessons Learned from a Decade of Experience: A Strategic Analysis of INGO Methods and Activities in Vietnam 1990-1999* (Hanoi: VUFO-NGO Resource Center, 2001), 13.
[92] Ha, *Lessons Learned from a Decade of Experience*, 12.
[93] Ibid., 16.
[94] Miller, Gonsalves, and Buhler, "MCC-Vietnam Program Evaluation Report, 1993-1998," 10.
[95] *Mennonite Central Committee Workbook: 1992* (Akron, PA: MCC, 1992), 72.
[96] *Mennonite Central Committee Workbook: 1994* (Akron, PA: MCC, 1994), 65.
[97] Ibid., 65.
[98] Miller, Gonsalves, and Buhler, "MCC-Vietnam Program Evaluation Report, 1993-1998," 10-11.
[99] *Mennonite Central Committee Workbook: 1998* (Akron, PA: MCC, 1998), 65.

[100] Lowell Jantzi, interview by author, April 29, 2007, Halong City, Vietnam; recording and notes, personal files of author, Goshen, IN.
[101] Tô Thi Bẩy, interview by author, April 27, 2007, Hanoi, Vietnam; recording and notes, personal files of author, Goshen, IN.
[102] Ibid.
[103] Đinh Thị Vinh, interview by author, April 27, 2007, Hanoi, Vietnam; recording and notes, personal files of author, Goshen, IN.
[104] Ibid.
[105] Lady Borton, interview by author, April 27, 2007, Hanoi, Vietnam; notes, personal files of author, Goshen, IN.
[106] Perry Bush, "Vietnam and the Burden of Mennonite History," *The Conrad Grebel Review* 17.2 (1999): 5-27.
[107] Earl S. Martin, Harrisonburg, VA, Perry Bush, Bluffton, OH, personal letter in response to "Vietnam and the Burden of Mennonite History," June 22, 1998, Vietnam File 8. MCC Archives, Akron, PA.
[108] Martin and Martin, 2007 interview.
[109] Kreider and Goossen, *Hungry, Thirsty, a Stranger*, 150.

Paul Shetler Fast has a Masters of International Development degree from the University of Pittsburgh. He is a Presidential Management Fellow with the Veterans Health Administration in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania.