Exploring the Gap Between Mennonite and Indigenous Neighbors: Snapshots from the Story of Native Concerns, MCC Canada[1]

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Introduction

One central theme throughout the history of Mennonite Central Committee (MCC) and Mennonite Central Committee Canada (MCCC) is the shaping of a corporate identity through engagement with the "Other," that is, those seen as outside the realm of Mennonite peoplehood. The ministry of MCC generally represents the positive dimensions of this history – Mennonites reaching out in service and peacebuilding to those in need. Such a stance becomes more difficult to sustain when the "Other" is our next-door neighbor and the interaction is colored by a context of conquest and domination.

The story of the Native Concerns (NC) program of MCCC is, in this regard, the story of an important encounter between Canadian Mennonites and the indigenous "Others" within Canadian society. It marks an attempt not only to provide for the needy but to change a fundamental imbalance of power between Canadian Mennonite settlers and their indigenous neighbors. Throughout its brief history, the program balanced several intricate roles and relationships, emphasizing various ones in various contexts. The program began as a provider of resources and services to indigenous communities, but with a growing emphasis on the role of a witness and advocate on behalf of indigenous communities and, eventually, on the role of a listener and a learner from those communities. While each role was evident from the beginning through the specific programs established and implemented, over time the emphasis shifted more deliberately from the top-down provision of resources and services to the bottom-up reception of new wisdom and understanding. As a result, projects and responses enthusiastically promoted in the 1970s and '80s lost their appeal as times and contexts changed in the '90s.

This paper seeks to present a few images of this story and to hint at some insights arising from a more intensive look at the encounter. The

focus is on the time-frame from the early 1970s, when the program was first envisioned, until the mid-'90s, when drastic organizational change resulted in development of the Aboriginal Neighbours (AN) program to replace NC. A detailed program description and analysis of activities undertaken during those 20-plus years would fill a book in itself; therefore, only a representative sample of activities will be discussed in detail. The author's personal experience with the program in the late 1970s and the '80s must also be acknowledged as another filter shaping the articulation and analysis of this story.[2]

Framing the Gap: Program Vision and Implementation

The Native Concerns program arose from extensive discussions within MCCC in the early 1970s about the best way to assist Native Canadians to "overcome some of their pressing problems," in the words of an internal 1973 discussion paper. The same paper stressed the importance of extreme sensitivity to the motivation behind, and the methods used for, any offer of assistance. Constituency education and awareness-raising must be an essential part of the process.

> If real help is to be given . . . . it must become a matter of desire and a willingness of the individual constituency member. Education is therefore of paramount importance.[3]

The new program was designed to build on current church mission programs and MCCC Voluntary Service initiatives, but with this additional emphasis of working with the constituency to build a stronger relationship with Canadian native peoples.

This discussion formed the basis of a five-point job description given to Menno Wiebe when he was hired as Director of NC in May 1974.[4] The job description did not specify any particular tasks but identified five layers of accountability – to Canadian Native peoples and groups, to constituent churches, to the MCCC Voluntary Service director, to unspecified other programs and networks active on North American indigenous issues, and to the MCCC Executive Secretary. Throughout his two decades with the program, Wiebe, who personified the program more than anyone else, followed through on the spirit of this mandate, developing activities and projects in the context of multiple layers of accountability, of which the

highest level was accountability to the requests of indigenous communities and groups.

In developing the initial vision for an MCC approach to indigenous Canadians, Wiebe and his supervisors framed it as an attempt to build upon and move beyond the work already being done by various Mennonite church ministries. Because of the uniqueness of its organization, MCC could respond to needs on a national level, educate the constituency about needs and issues on a broader scale, and more easily enlist the participation of the required skilled and knowledgeable individuals than any of these church ministries could, whether singly or in cooperation with each other.[5]

MCCC's invitation to Menno Wiebe to take on the challenge of shaping this new approach further demonstrated the desire both to build on the mission work of the Mennonite churches and to create something distinctly different. Wiebe had previously served as executive director of Mennonite Pioneer Mission (MPM), an indigenous mission work begun by the Manitoba Bergthaler churches and subsequently transferred to the Canadian Mennonite Conference. In a 1978 memo to his successor at MPM (by then renamed Native Ministries), Wiebe re-affirmed his commitment to develop a program different from the one he had come from. MCCC could provide at least two unique strengths not available to Mennonite mission programs: the inter-Mennonite nature of MCCC witness, and a wide range of voluntary service personnel. NC would operate only where invited by indigenous communities and by constituent church agencies. Unlike the mission programs, church planting would not be a primary focus. Wiebe added that

> It would be an unforgivable waste of time, energies, and monies to duplicate services. In light of the increasing, very widespread hurts experienced by Native peoples we must waste no time in delineating our services, cooperate where we can and then find ways of allowing the Spirit of God to direct our energies.[6]

Over time, Wiebe articulated and re-articulated this distinctly different form of ministry ever more clearly as a prophetic call to justice, as both a naming and a confronting of the social, economic, and political ills faced by indigenous populations. However, by reinforcing that theme through his prolific writing and public speaking, he also used this prophetic call to critique

Mennonite mainstream society, pointing to the affluence and unquestioned assimilation that stood as a counterpart to the besieged, impoverished indigenous identity almost overwhelmed by Canadian mainstream society.[7] While NC might be seen as a new approach that built upon the activity and relationships fostered by Mennonite mission work, it had also become an agency sharply critical of the social milieu behind this mission, a milieu regarded as increasingly affluent, increasingly individualistic, and decreasingly representative of traditional Anabaptist values.

Program Development in the 1970s

The 1973 concept paper cited above began with a deceptively simple premise: MCC could provide the personnel, expertise, and resources to meet the needs of Canadian indigenous minorities. MCC could build on the experience developed through ongoing mission programs, supplementing it with skilled leadership and training to be provided by specialized Voluntary Service workers and MCCC staff. The premise was hedged with cautions about moving slowly and needing to bring the constituency alongside this movement, but these cautions did not negate the general goal of bringing MCC resources to bear upon indigenous need.

NC's most direct and visible way of meeting this goal was through agricultural and resource development in northern Manitoba and northwestern Ontario, responding to the economic developmental needs of communities that already had some connection with Mennonite mission workers. Program staff and volunteers first tried to replicate in the north specific agricultural and economic activities familiar to the Mennonite constituency in the south. In 1977, Edgar Schmidt, one of the first Voluntary Service workers assigned to the NC portfolio, organized the shipment of calves, piglets, poultry, and goats to two northern Manitoba reserves, and facilitated both the placement of the first summer gardener in Sachigo Lake and the development of the first 10 MCC summer gardens in this northwestern Ontario community.[8]

Schmidt also initiated another project that subsequently developed into one of the NC success stories of the 1970s and '80s – the community-based processing and marketing of wild rice in the northwestern Ontario community of Grassy Narrows. Instead of providing resources directly,

NC assisted with the technology that would best enable the community to develop their own resources. MCCC staff and volunteers developed and assembled a new form of rice huller and a rice parcher that were then taken to Grassy Narrows for testing. By the end of 1977, Wiebe could report that NC was arranging the marketing of 750 pounds of wild rice from several rice-gathering communities.[9]

By 1980, Eric Rempel, who served as Schmidt's successor in the NC resource development portfolio, was able to point to the wild rice project as one of the most successful NC community development initiatives. This project succeeded because it remained small, was tailored to the needs of bands or individuals, and utilized the energy and commitment of volunteers. By viewing "development" as the development of individuals rather than large-scale economic development, NC personnel could listen more attentively to the needs expressed by individuals and respond with appropriate technology and activity.[10] This concern was a particular challenge for Grassy Narrows, where Rempel warned that the project could fail or be taken over by outside interests if turned into a large-scale commercial industry because local managerial skills were lacking. He advocated the development of special machinery and marketing to enhance family-size or multi-family-size wild rice enterprises.[11] Over time, the wild rice project developed further through local community leadership along with MCC technology, management, and marketing assistance. The project was incorporated as Kagiwiosa Manomin Inc., and a processing plant was established at Wabigoon, Ontario, serving harvesters from three northwestern Ontario reserves. The project continues as an indigenous owned and operated cooperative, finding success internationally in marketing its traditionally grown and harvested Canadian wild rice.

Within its first five years of activity, the vision of NC as resource provider and enabler was being shaped by the challenge to listen and respond in a way and on a scale consistent with the situation and expressed desires of indigenous community members. NC staff continued to encourage the development of additional community initiatives based on the values and ideals emphasized through these early projects.

The MCCC constituency was quick to affirm the importance of facilitating and resourcing various forms of indigenous community

development, but for Wiebe the task had to be accompanied and undergirded by both strong political advocacy of indigenous peoples and a vigorous challenge to the ongoing social and political marginalization of this sector of Canadian society. For some of the smallest and most rural Mennonite conferences, the idea of confronting the State and advocating on behalf of non-Mennonite neighbors rapidly became the most controversial aspect of NC activity, directly challenging traditional boundaries between the Mennonite community and the outside world. In deference to the concerns of more traditional MCCC Board members, one of the first NC VS workers, Edgar Schmidt, originally hired as a land rights researcher, was re-assigned to work full-time on some of the resource development projects noted above.[12]

However, the call for justice for indigenous peoples, which included the call to confront Canadian Mennonite participation in structures and systems of injustice, remained the clearest and most consistent message Wiebe presented in his two decades at the NC helm. As he indicated in his January 1976 report to the MCCC annual meeting, advocacy for land rights should not be interpreted as a blanket support for a new form of quasi-national sovereignty but as a plea for mutual respect, a deeper understanding of a unique relationship to the land, and a willingness to stand with indigenous peoples as they struggled to articulate and create new social and environmental relationships of respect.[13]

Wiebe first focused this call for justice in the mid-1970s on the Churchill River Diversion, a series of hydro-electric dams along the Churchill and Nelson River systems that resulted in massive flooding of northern Manitoba indigenous land and resources. When he started working for MCCC, construction was already well advanced and eight northern communities were threatened with the imminent loss of their homes and hunting and fishing grounds. Representing NC, Wiebe joined representatives of other Christian denominations active in these communities to sponsor four days of public hearings in September 1975 – three in Winnipeg and one in the northern community of Nelson House, thereby bringing the issue to public awareness.[14] Over subsequent years, he and NC continued their active support to the Northern Flood Committee, the indigenous organization advocating for the interests of the affected community.

NC indigenous land rights advocacy on the provincial scale opened the door to participation in similar activities on the national scale in the fall of 1976 when, through NC, MCCC became a member of Project North (PN), a national ecumenical coalition. Mennonite congregations and individuals now heard the call for indigenous land rights from church and public advocates in response to large-scale resource development initiatives across the Canadian north.[15] However, a spirited discussion at the June 1977 MCCC Executive Committee meeting about the merits and problems of speaking out on northern flooding foreshadowed the questions that would arise throughout the life of PN: Why are we standing in the way of progress? Should the desires of a few thousands of people hinder the aspirations of millions of Canadians? How long could hunting and fishing economies last in the face of growing industrialization? Should we be standing the way of the creation of new industrial jobs for northerners?[16] The underlying struggle for MCCC in this and in many such debates to come was about how to listen to both the indigenous communities and the constituency backlash.

Alongside the call to help and provide was the call to listen and learn. A theme frequently repeated by Wiebe and other NC staff in reports and presentations was the need to accompany the helping stance with a sincere effort to understand the crises that made this help necessary, to accompany sharing of the Good News with receiving with gratitude the insights and "good news" arising from the indigenous context. A January 1976 report stated it this way:

> [T]he good news must be good news not only for the proclaimers but also for the hearers. Conversely, MCC must indeed also accept the stance of learner and receiver of theological insights held by Native people.[17]

This challenge to listen to the people had to become the basis of any community development initiative or justice advocacy campaign undertaken by NC. Therefore, public education and individual and constituency awareness-raising about indigenous issues and values were inextricably linked to all the work done by Wiebe and his co-workers.

As will be discussed below, one of the best examples of this approach to development and advocacy is seen in the story of the summer gardening program. In the summer of 1977, NC placed a voluntary service worker in

the northwestern Ontario community of Sachigo Lake, as we have noted, to give leadership to a vegetable gardening project, one of the agricultural development projects attempted in northern communities. This project was successful; the volunteer was well received in the community and established 10 gardens. In the following spring, the community requested another summer gardener and several nearby communities also expressed interest. The number of communities involved in the gardening program steadily grew in subsequent years.

During this first decade, Wiebe developed a multi-faceted program shaped largely by the his own involvements and interests as well as by the expressed needs of indigenous communities brought to his attention. A program evaluation completed in the fall of 1978 identified and commended the wide range of activities, including community-based resource development, political advocacy of land rights, and urban pastoral counseling. The evaluation panel also praised Wiebe for

> performing the delicate two-pronged task of relating to two different kinds of people with sensitivity, cross-cultural thoughtfulness and theological thoughtfulness.[18]

In addition to frequent visits to indigenous communities, this delicate task included many presentations at churches, educational institutions, seminars, and other special meetings. Responses to the report strongly supported four general areas of involvement – constituency education, resource development, justice concerns, and other special programming.[19] The panel did raise a concern, however, about potential over-reliance on the constant activity of one person to maintain this liaison between different peoples, a concern with significant implications for the program's long-term viability.

Growth and Institutionalization in the 1980s

Within the next decade, the 1980s, the program solidified its place within the MCCC structures as it was formally situated within the Canadian Programs section and several provinces appointed their own staff persons with NC responsibilities. MCCC stressed resource development as a stronger program priority through the addition of another full-time staff member mandated to promote local wild rice harvesting, processing, and marketing; promote

vegetable gardening; explore animal husbandry and wild life management; and facilitate local industries such as pulp-cutting and beekeeping.[20] Constituency education continued with many more speaking engagements, the development of an NC library, and written and audio-visual resources.

The justice advocacy role also become more institutionalized and visible as MCCC joined other Canadian denominations within Project North in trying to hear and amplify indigenous articulations of needs and goals. PN advocacy and public education on the exploitation of resources amplified concerns raised in the Manitoba northern flooding issue about both the loss of indigenous resources and lifestyles and the southern consumption lifestyles held responsible for this loss. In the early 1980s PN broadened its agenda by advocating the inclusion of indigenous rights in the Canadian Constitution, and by participating as observers in a series of First Ministers conferences mandated to define and interpret this aspect of the Constitution. Through PN, directly and indirectly the advocacy and justice dimension of NC work became more visible than before, a visibility enhanced through Wiebe's term as chair of PN from 1984 to 1986, a time of increasing activity on national constitutional issues.

However, in the 1980s it became obvious that developing an equal partnership would require more equality of interaction than could be provided by a church-sponsored and church-directed social agency. Extensive dialogue with all stakeholders – churches, indigenous communities, and non-indigenous regional support networks – eventually led in 1989 to the creation of a new entity, the Aboriginal Rights Coalition (ARC), which would act in alliance and solidarity with all these partners. While PN had always maintained the importance of acting on behalf of indigenous communities if and when requested, the transformation into ARC took that relationship to a new level of discerning and acting in alliance, a relationship that also challenged NC and MCCC in their interactions with the communities. This relationship was tested further by the growing militancy and activism of indigenous communities in the late '80s,[21] leading to intense debate about MCCC's role and NC's involvement in confrontational situations.[22]

Meanwhile, the summer gardening project, NC's most successful listening and learning initiative, had grown to a grand total of 16 communities across Canada in 1981 and 24 in 1982.[23] Over the next ten years, an average

of 16 communities participated each year (ranging from a high of 20 in 1983 and 1985 to a low of 13 in 1988). In addition to the local community gardener, a steady stream of MCC volunteers tended the plots, which grew from the original one to five in 1978, eight in 1979, and 22 in 1980. The all-time high was 25 in 1982, but the number of summer volunteers remained above 20 until 1988 when it dropped to 16. During the late 1980s and early '90s, the number of volunteers gradually declined to about half of the peak (only 12 in 1992), with an increasing percentage coming from Europe rather than from the North American Mennonite constituency.

The summer volunteers quickly learned that while the overt reason for their sojourn in an indigenous community was to provide expertise in gardening, the underlying reason was to listen, learn, and build relationships with the host community. An informal newsletter, *Weeds and Seeds,* prepared and distributed by the NC office as a way of sharing gardening tips and news, provided frequent testimonials of awe-struck gardeners confronted with new insights and new practices as they immersed themselves in these unfamiliar cultures. In the end, gardeners considered the success of the gardens not terms of the fruitfulness of the plants grown but of the fruitfulness and richness of relationships they gained and the worldview they experienced.

A 1987 history of the program highlights growth in all areas. In summarizing constituency education resources, the report lists five slide shows, a film, three dramas, and two poetry booklets among the materials produced by Wiebe and available for use.[24] The report notes with approval NC collaboration with the interdenominational Project North and its regional affiliates and support network to advocate on indigenous justice and land rights issues at national and regional levels. In addition, the report notes that NC provided support for many NC Voluntary Service workers. Native Concerns had supported and resourced a combined total of 266 workers since the beginning of the NC program, engaged (in order of priority) in education, community development, social rehabilitation, agriculture, health care, social work, research, administration, youth work, and justice advocacy.[25]

Despite the successes, the report noted the danger of a potentially widening social distance between NC and the mainstream MCCC constituency. John Funk, the author, warned that

> The validation of the Native Concerns mandate requires an admission that a third world problem exists in Canada. Accepting this fact recognizes that the forces that created a safe and prosperous haven for Mennonites are also capable of isolating and oppressing a whole nation of people in the name of progress.[26]

Funk saw this tension evident in the constituency's resistance to NC advocacy of indigenous communities and groups in confrontation with various levels of government; solidarity with indigenous leaders could not necessarily be assumed to represent widespread Mennonite solidarity.

Major Changes in the 1990s

While Native Concerns programming for, and interaction with, indigenous communities seemed relatively stable in the early 1990s, an undercurrent of criticism and concern was gaining visibility. For example, a September 1990 report by Robert Miller, Employment Concerns Director for Mennonite Central Committee Manitoba (MCCM), noted the many different opportunities for assisting indigenous peoples in resource development and job creation, but added that the effectiveness of such assistance was hampered both by a confusing overlap of national and regional administrative structures and by inappropriate expectations of relatively short-term financial sustainability of projects rather than the long-term investment needed for social and economic development.[27]

The popularity of the gardening program through the 1980s was not enough to blunt the criticism in the '90s. While the project had facilitated enriching interaction between indigenous communities and individual Mennonite volunteers, it was not fully effective as either a form of local economic development or a type of summer recreational program. Also, for individual volunteer gardeners, expectations of working side-by-side with community members were too often dashed by local assumptions that the gardeners were there to make the gardens for the community. Wiebe acknowledged the difficulty of developing an equitable teamwork relationship, citing the historical predominance of indigenous subservience to European experts and authorities as a significant factor to be overcome.[28]

These critiques and challenges were hotly debated within MCCC in 1992 upon the presentation of Eric Rempel's comprehensive evaluation of the gardening program. After thorough analysis of statistical and interview data, Rempel concluded that, despite the program's popularity through the 1980s, it was not responding to specific community requests and was not stimulating sustainable economic development. He recommended replacing it with a new Native Summer Service program that would encourage volunteers to respond more directly to specific needs, such as recreational programming for youth, as well as discerning more effective long-term economic development ventures rather than touting gardening as a form of that development. Administratively, he called for a shift of responsibility from the national to the regional level.[29] The report's conclusions and recommendations generated a great deal of controversy and debate within NC and the MCCC administration. While all respondents affirmed the enduring value of low-key contact between different peoples, a growing number of MCC personnel and supporters were attracted to the potential for radically re-structuring NC programs and decentralizing administrative authority.

After 1992, the popularity of the gardening program decreased significantly, and summer gardeners proved increasingly difficult to recruit. The program was quietly discontinued several years after Wiebe retired.[30]

The gardening project was not the only forum for Mennonite-indigenous encounter and education. Several intensive short-term listening seminars held in Alberta and British Columbia in the early and mid-1990s provided more opportunities to hear indigenous speakers and gain new insights. However, for many NC volunteers the summer gardening program remained the ultimate experience of cross-cultural immersion and indigenous hospitality.

Another reality also loomed over the debate about what to do with the NC program, namely the increasing limitations placed upon the MCCC budget. Through the early and mid-1990s, the NC budget faced growing pressure as MCC funding priorities shifted towards overseas programming. By 1996, MCCC administrators were convinced that NC could not survive in its current form. A memo from the MCCC executive office sent in April presented the grim news: given the reduction of the MCCC budget by half

and the approximately 40 percent cut in funds for Canadian programming, NC simply could not continue with the current funding level.[31]

Wiebe reacted strongly to the impending changes, calling MCCC to examine more closely the philosophical and theological convictions underlying overt program decisions. The call to justice should not be a matter of deciding between competing priorities because

> our overseas witness to people in desperation is made credible to the extent that we address desperate conditions in our own backyard.[32]

Wiebe viewed program restructuring as a betrayal of the indigenous people who had not been consulted in recommending these changes, a betrayal of the national indigenous agenda that could not be as clearly processed through regional offices and, on a personal level, a betrayal of the person who had personally shaped two decades of NC programming.

Menno Wiebe retired from NC and MCCC in 1997, and within a year MCCC re-structured NC to create a new Aboriginal Neighbours (AN) program. AN was designed to fulfill a much more facilitative and networking role, coordinating a national response to national justice agenda, but acting more as a support to regionally-initiated, community-based programming rather than developing such programming directly.[33] The MCCC response to indigenous communities now involved encouraging local initiatives and building bridges between peoples, not establishing new MCC programs and services. This response did not carry either the same visibility for the Mennonite constituency or the same direct, uncomfortable challenge to respond to poverty and injustice.[34]

Exploring the Gap

Wiebe's original vision saw two very different peoples coming together – original inhabitants and newcomers – in a way that would allow the latter to respond better to the many pressing needs of the former. Effective embodiment of this vision required a deeper understanding of the context and ideals of those to be assisted, as well as the coordinated effort of an entire constituency rather than the isolated action of a relatively few well-meaning individuals. Community development and social assistance had to be accompanied by constituency education and awareness-raising.[35] However,

the closer the contact between these two peoples, the more complex the relationship and the more challenging this task seemed to be.

Near the beginning of his tenure, Wiebe had already acknowledged the

> fundamental differences between European and Native points of view: notions of ownership are at odds, so are the different attitudes to the environment, competition, education, health and religion.[36]

Any form of assistance flowing from one people to another had to be offered in a spirit of respect and willingness to learn from what the receivers could offer the benefactors. However, as the newcomers were invited to experience and learn from an indigenous perspective, they could not avoid having to explain themselves, to answer the indigenous question conveyed by Wiebe in a subsequent report: "Who are the Mennonites?"[37] Instead of simply learning about the "Other" so as to more effectively assist them, the newcomers also had to disclose themselves and become more open to learn with the "Other."

Such self-disclosure could be risky, according to Wiebe, because the answer to the question of Mennonite identity compelled both the acknowledgement of a unique history of marginalization and the mandate to respond to marginalized neighbors in the current context. A 1986 paper, "MCC Learnings From the Native Canadian Scene," deplored the lopsided nature of the relationship between the two peoples and added,

> Until we have adequately declared ourselves by sharing some of our own histories, we are regarded as an extension of the overpowering white world.[38]

The relationship between the two people could only be viewed as unique: culturally as distant as anywhere in the world, but geographically as close as next-door neighbors, as co-dwellers and co-citizens in the same territory. Thus neither the distant outreach of a foreign mission venture nor the easy familiarity of neighborly discourse could be sufficient to cross this gap.

Signs of indigenous renaissance and revival resulted in another complicating factor discussed in the same paper. Indigenous identities could

no longer be defined through the marginalization and fragmentation of a former national society, but had to be treated as something growing and gaining in strength and authority. Alongside the tensions of cultural versus geographical distance lay the tensions of changing patterns of authority and accountability, something that Wiebe suggested could best be addressed if Mennonites took seriously the Anabaptist position of servanthood and shed the authority of the non-indigenous provider of resources and expertise.[39]

However, as the NC program began confront the organizational and financial challenges of the 1990s, the huge question for Wiebe was the extent to which the Mennonite peoplehood was willing both to affirm their historic identity and to commit to the mandate of servanthood service and prophetic witness arising from it. A 1992 paper demonstrates his concern that Mennonite assimilation has resulted in a loss of the distinctive aspects of Anabaptist communal identity and basic religious and ethical values. This assimilative trend was also affecting the Mennonite response to indigenous communities. If a people-to-people mission, rather than an individualized and delegated witness, characterized the earlier Mennonite approach to aboriginal people, for instance, then that culture-to-culture paradigm is now giving way to a service agency approach. Assent given to the work of missions or MCC seems now to be sought within the securities of the bureau rather than the peoplehood out of which the bureau evolved.[40]

Subsequent funding cutbacks and program re-organization only served to reinforce the fears expressed and implied in the 1992 statement. A 1996 Valentine's Day statement further detailed themes emphasized by Wiebe in previous years – the loss of a concept of corporate Mennonite peoplehood built on historical marginalization and a distinctive religious and ethical mandate – at the very time when a strong Mennonite identity was needed to affirm and work alongside the renaissance of an indigenous peoplehood overcoming its own marginalization through its own distinctive religious and ethical values.[41]

Conclusions

Despite the huge social and cultural gap and the immense power imbalance between indigenous Canadians and Mennonite newcomers, the NC program resulted in some notable and dramatic successes. New community-based

commercial ventures, such as wild rice processing and harvesting, provided sustainable livelihoods while still affirming local cultural and environmental values. The call to respect indigenous rights and to settle outstanding land claims fairly was heard in church sanctuaries and public halls across the country. Volunteer summer gardeners learned to appreciate the generosity and wisdom of indigenous cultures in a wholly new way as they worked side-by-side with community members, digging through the soil and planting seeds.

At the same time, the gap between the peoples could never be fully overcome. The vision of a healthy interaction remained more of an individual matter than a communal or organizational Mennonite one and, as such, remained susceptible to the comings and goings of specific individuals. The indigenous question, "Who are the Mennonites?," forced an uncomfortable recognition of the gap and of Mennonite complicity in the lifestyles and economies resulting in contemporary injustice. The desire for a meaningful people-to-people encounter was complicated and distorted by the growing assimilation and loss of a traditional Mennonite peoplehood, even as indigenous communities were regaining their sense of a distinctive peoplehood.

In the mid-1990s, the re-organization of Native Concerns resulted in the new Aboriginal Neighbours program that continued to build on the successes and enduring struggles of NC but without the extensive, nationally visible, and controversial public advocacy and constituent education carried out by Wiebe and his co-workers. However, despite program institutionalization and decentralization, the legacy remains. The gap between Mennonite settlers and indigenous Canadians has grown noticeably smaller as individuals and groups from both sides began encountering each other across the divide, thereby beginning to gain a deeper understanding of their neighbors on the other side.

Notes

[1] The original version of this paper was presented at Menno Simons College in Winnipeg in March 2010 and at the Mennonite Central Committee "Table of Sharing" Conference in June 2010. I am grateful to conference participants and *The Conrad Grebel Review* peer-reviewers for the comments and revision recommendations that helped shape the current version.
[2] The author was a Voluntary Service worker with NC from the fall of 1977 to the summer of 1981, and also participated in Winnipeg-based regional interchurch networks active on NC priorities from 1986 to 1994.
[3] "Native Canadian and MCC (Canada)," undated (probably 1973). Vol. 2475, File EO-85. All volumes and files cited in this paper are located in the Archives of the Mennonite Historical Centre in Winnipeg, MB.
[4] "Job Description," Vol. 3023, File NC-27.
[5] "Native Canadian and MCC (Canada)," undated (probably 1973), 2. Vol. 2475, File EO-85.
[6] "Delineation of Services," memo from Menno Wiebe to Ike Froese, executive secretary of Native Ministries, January 10, 1978. Vol. 3023, File NC-27.
[7] See Menno Wiebe, "Mennonite Response to Aboriginal Cultural Identity," 1992. Vol. 3995, File 1714-R-1992 CA NATI.
[8] The gardening project is discussed more fully below.
[9] Report to MCC Canada Annual Meeting, January 1978. Vol. 3023, File NC-27.
[10] "Some Thoughts of Future Direction for Resource Development," memo to Native Concerns Advisory Council and MCC Canada Administrative Council from Eric Rempel, October 15, 1980. Vol. 3038, File NC-79.
[11] This point is expanded further in a March 1981 report to the MCC Canada Executive Committee, comparing the large investment and the relative lack of community benefit for development of a commercial industry versus extensive community impact at relatively little cost for further facilitation of small-scale enterprises. Vol. 3561, File NC-54.
[12] Native Concerns Report, September 23-24, 1977. Vol. 3023, File NC-27. Schmidt was originally hired to work half-time as a land rights researcher and half-time in community economic development, but was asked upon starting his position to postpone the research because it was considered too controversial for the Manitoba MCC constituency.
[13] Native Concerns Report to the MCC Canada annual meeting, January 16-17, 1976. Vol. 3023, File NC-27.
[14] In the Native Concerns Report to the MCC Canada Executive Committee Meeting, May 30-31, 1975, Wiebe summarizes the background of this issue and plans for the public hearing. Vol. 3023, File NC-27.
[15] The full story of Project North and of the different issues is too much to address in a short article. The complete history of this unique ecumenical project that included participation of Anglican, United, Catholic, Lutheran, Presbyterian, and Quaker national churches working together from the 1970s to the late 1980s remains to be written. Project North was re-

organized in 1989 into the Aboriginal Rights Coalition that remained active throughout the 1990s.

[16] Minutes of MCC Canada Executive Committee Meeting, June 9-10, 1977. Vol. 3023, File NC-27.

[17] Native Concerns Report to the MCC Canada annual meeting, January 16-17, 1976. Vol. 3023, File NC-27.

[18] Emma LaRocque and Larry Kehler, "Native Concerns Evaluation Report to the MCC (Canada) Executive Committee," December 8-9, 1978. Vol. 3023, File 1978, NC-27.

[19] John Funk, "Native Concerns: The First Twelve Years," August 1987, 12. Vol. 4992, File 477-R-1993 CA NATI.

[20] Ibid., 10.

[21] A blockade of oil exploration by the Lubicon of northern Alberta in 1988 and the armed confrontation against development on sacred grounds in Oka, Quebec in 1990 are only two examples of this growing militancy and potential for violence.

[22] See "Principles and Roles for MCC Involvement in Confrontational Situations," undated (probably 1991). Vol. 2004, File 1714-R-1991 CA NATI.

[23] These and subsequent statistics taken from Eric Rempel, "Evaluation of the Native Gardening Program," July 1992. Vol. 3995, File 477-R-1992 CA NATI.

[24] Ibid., 22.

[25] Ibid., 40.

[26] Ibid., 45.

[27] Robert Miller, "MCC and Native Resource Development," September 18, 1990. Vol. 1856, File 447-R-1990 CA NATI.

[28] Menno Wiebe, "To Work 'For' Or To Work 'With' the People," December 22, 1995. Vol. 5057, File 447-R-1995 CA NATI.

[29] Eric Rempel, "Evaluation of the Native Gardening Program."

[30] Personal conversation with Rick Zerbe Cornelson, Coordinator of the Aboriginal Neighbours program, 1998-2003.

[31] "Response to Minutes," memo from Dale Taylor, Executive Office, to Native Concerns Advisory Committee, April 2, 1996. Vol. 5081, File 447-R-1996 CA NATI.

[32] Menno Wiebe, "Valentine's Day Justice," February 14, 1996, 2. Vol. 5081, File 447-R-1996 CA NATI.

[33] Personal conversation with Rick Zerbe Cornelson.

[34] A full analysis of the Aboriginal Neighbours program is unfortunately beyond the scope of this paper.

[35] "Native Canadian and MCC (Canada)," undated (probably 1973). Vol. 2475, File EO-85.

[36] Native Concerns Report to the MCC Canada annual meeting, January 16-17, 1976, 4. Vol. 3023, File NC-27.

[37] Native Concerns Report to the MCC Canada Executive Committee meeting, December 10-11, 1976, 1. Vol. 3023, File NC-27.

[38] Menno Wiebe, "MCC Learnings From the Native Canadian Scene," April 12, 1986, 1. Vol. 4593, File 477-R-1985 CA NATI.

[39] Ibid., 5.
[40] Menno Wiebe, "Mennonite Response to Aboriginal Cultural Identity," 1992. Vol. 3995, File 1714-R-1992 CA NATI.
[41] Menno Wiebe, "Valentine's Day Justice," February 14, 1996. Vol. 5081, File 447-R-1996 CA NATI.

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