

Reframing Mennonite Political Engagement as Christian Formation

Paul C. Heidebrecht

Introduction

For several decades, official Mennonite political engagement in North America has been largely defined by the work of offices operated by Mennonite Central Committee (MCC) in Washington, DC, in Ottawa, Ontario, and at the United Nations in New York City.¹ This work has at times been the source of controversy in the churches that support MCC, and one place to draw the fault line is between those who embrace and those who regret the shift from quietist to activist modes of peacemaking.² The apparently widespread assumption is that Mennonites are now entering the fray of political debates because of a fundamental shift in their understanding of the church's relationship to the world. Where Mennonites were once content to focus on their own business within the life and institutions of the church, and let governmental power do what it must in the world beyond the church's reach, it follows that breaching the boundaries between, or even collapsing, these kingdoms has resulted in a desire to extend the church's influence into the public square. The correlation between an outwardly directed peace theology and an outspoken politics seems clear.

This article draws on the work of MCC's Ottawa Office—a key strand of *Canadian* Mennonite political engagement—in order to argue that there are other reasons why Mennonites should embrace political engagement.³

¹ Established in 1968, 1975, and 1991 respectively. For a discussion of how MCC's supporting denominations have pursued political engagement on their own, and the varying degrees to which they are content to have MCC assume this responsibility on their behalf, see Ervin R. Stutzman, *From Nonresistance to Justice: The Transformation of Mennonite Church Peace Rhetoric, 1908-2008* (Waterloo, ON: Herald Press, 2011).

² This typology was laid out by sociologists Leo Driedger and Donald B. Kraybill in *Mennonite Peacemaking: From Quietism to Activism* (Waterloo, ON: Herald Press, 1994).

³ Reflecting on the intersection of Mennonite approaches to theology and politics in Canada rather than in the United States makes a difference, although space does not permit discussing

A close examination of how this work is actually carried out indicates that the pursuit of public policy influence does not necessarily rely on a Constantinian compulsion to change the world. Rather, political engagement can create space for the church to embody the gospel of peace. The article makes the case that grappling with public policy issues is one crucial way that Mennonites can understand what it means to be people of peace in their own time and place. More than reshaping the moral landscape of society, I will argue that MCC's political engagement has the potential to enliven the moral landscape of its constituent churches.

This article cannot provide a complete overview of the history of the Ottawa Office, much less MCC's political engagement more generally. Helpful reference points in this regard include MCC staff person and historian Esther Epp-Tiessen's book published on the occasion of MCC Canada's 50th anniversary,⁴ the comprehensive evaluation of the Ottawa Office's first 25 years completed by political scientist Mark Charlton,⁵ and the analysis that religion scholar Keith Graber Miller undertook of the Washington Office's first 25 years.⁶ My goal is to describe how the Ottawa Office has functioned in order to make a prescriptive argument about how its work should properly be conceived. My analysis is intended to provoke both those who strongly support and those who quarrel with this dimension of MCC's work to think about it in a different way. This reframing also has implications for other church-related agencies engaged in similar work, as well as for contemporary political theologians and social ethicists in North America.

key distinctions. If my thesis holds for MCC's work in Ottawa, it should be all the more true in Washington and at the United Nations.

⁴ Esther Epp-Tiessen, *Mennonite Central Committee in Canada: A History* (Winnipeg, CMU Press, 2013).

⁵ Mark Charlton, "Evaluation of the MCC (Canada) Ottawa Office" (Report to MCC [Canada] board, April 30, 2001). A similar evaluation after the office's initial three-year trial was conducted by political scientist John H. Redekop: "Evaluation of MCC (Canada) Ottawa Office" (Report to MCC (Canada) board, November 21, 1978). All internal MCC documents cited in this article can be found in the MCC Canada Collection in the Mennonite Heritage Centre Archives in Winnipeg, Manitoba.

⁶ Keith Graber Miller, *Wise as Serpents, Innocent as Doves: American Mennonites Engage Washington* (Knoxville: Univ. of Tennessee Press, 1996).

Situating Political Engagement within the Realm of Advocacy

Within MCC, the expression *political engagement* is often used synonymously with the term *advocacy*. Advocacy refers to efforts to address injustices caused by the systems or structures that rule our existence, of which the institutions of government are a significant part. However, advocacy can also involve engagement with systems and structures other than governments.⁷ Advocacy also includes *public engagement*, sometimes referred to as indirect advocacy, in order to make supporters in constituent churches aware of—and move them to take action to address—the systemic causes of injustice. While political and public engagement often require different skills and resources, they cannot be neatly distinguished. A deep understanding of policy issues and political strategy is required to engage supporters constructively, and grassroots action is needed to reinforce the message shared with policy-makers in Ottawa and Washington. The key point is that the pursuit of public engagement means advocacy is the task not only of the MCC’s advocacy offices but of the broad network of volunteers and supporters who make all of MCC’s work possible. All are properly viewed as advocates.

In recent years, advocacy has been positioned as one of several tools or modes of implementation utilized by MCC in order to achieve larger program objectives, alongside things such as financial grants to partner organizations and material resources.⁸ Advocacy has not been thought of as an end in itself but as the means to a greater end. MCC has not pursued a relationship with the Government of Canada just for the sake of that relationship; the expectation is that this relationship may have a real impact on the communities MCC works with in Canada and abroad. This connection between advocacy and larger program objectives is also evident when advocacy is described as “a

⁷ Other examples include economic, technological, and cultural systems, which are much less tangible than governmental systems, and educational, health care, and military systems, which are often subsumed under governmental structures. Systemic evils such as racism, sexism, and ageism have also been the focus of MCC advocacy.

⁸ In many ways, all of MCC’s relief, development, and peacemaking work is political. This broader understanding of the political is captured in Ronald J.R. Mathies, “Witness and Struggle or Politics and Power: MCC Engages the World,” *Direction: A Mennonite Brethren Forum* 23, no. 2 (Fall 1994): 77-87. A narrower view is evident in John H. Redekop, “The Politics of the Mennonite Central Committee,” *Direction: A Mennonite Brethren Forum* 23, no. 2 (Fall 1994): 63-76.

form of public witness and a tangible way of loving our neighbor.”⁹ MCC is compelled to speak out because of relationships established not only with governments but with diverse partners and communities who lack the same access to power.¹⁰ The priorities and policy stances pursued emerge out of on-the-ground experience, not on theoretical analysis alone, along with the theological commitments undergirding these programs.¹¹ This practical experience is often what gives MCC authority and credibility with policy-makers.¹²

What gives MCC’s advocacy efforts authority and credibility for many within its church constituencies is the ability to effect change. Why pay for an office in Washington, Ottawa, or New York if it makes no difference? As Keith Graber Miller notes, the Washington Office has often framed its response to this question in terms of the tension between being prophetic and being pragmatic, or between the call to be faithful and the call to be effective:

In the Anabaptist-Mennonite tradition . . . faithfulness has long taken priority over effectiveness. Faithfulness is near the

⁹ “Loving Our Neighbor through Witness to Government” (MCC Advocacy Offices brochure, 2009).

¹⁰ For this way of framing MCC’s advocacy work, see J. Daryl Byler, “For such a time as this: The ministry of political advocacy,” *A Common Place* (June 1988): 8-9; Dalton Franz, “Advocacy: A Biblical Calling,” *MCC Peace Section Washington Memo* 25, no. 5 (September-October 1993): 1; and Martin Shupack, “Biblical Basis of Public Witness,” *MCC Peace Office Newsletter* 33, no. 3 (July-September 2003): 4-7.

¹¹ Although it is now common within (and beyond) MCC to say that advocacy grows out of, and is deeply informed by, programmatic expertise, the initial mandate of the Ottawa Office was much broader. See J.M. Klassen, “Statement Regarding and MCC (Canada) Office in Ottawa” (presented to the MCC [Canada] Annual Meeting, Edmonton, AB, January 11-12, 1974). The lengthy list of functions approved by the MCC Canada board in 1974 was updated slightly in 1988 and again in 2002.

¹² This has been confirmed by senior policy-makers over the years, not to mention politicians as prominent as former Prime Minister Pierre Trudeau: “If you were merely a group of 160,000 or less . . . wanting to talk to me about [recognizing mainland] China or about the Canadian Pension Plan, I suppose I would have gotten around to meeting you sometime, but I don’t think I would have been as interested personally. . . . I am interested in the spiritual input that you are bringing into this society, as a group of people who have a certain faith and who are the leaven in the dough.” See Robert S. Kreider and Rachel Waltner Goossen, *Hungry, Thirsty, a Stranger: The MCC Experience* (Waterloo, ON: Herald Press, 1988), 322.

heart of Mennonite theological and ethical thinking, with the background hope that God has structured the world in a way that faithfulness also will be, eventually, effective.¹³

Nonetheless, this has not meant that effectiveness in the short term has been completely ignored. Over the years staffers in all three MCC advocacy offices have been quick to share “success stories” in public presentations and writings.

In his annual reports to the MCC Canada board, William Janzen, the inaugural director of the Ottawa Office, would often conclude his summary of the year’s activity by responding to the question about impact. For example, in 1995 he wrote: “Constituents often ask: ‘Does your work actually change government policy?’ In some instances, the work of the Office has had an effect by itself. At other times our voice is merely added to other voices, but here too some effects can be noted.”¹⁴ In 1990, he noted that “thanks to my assistant, my colleagues, and the grace of God, some worthwhile things have been done.”¹⁵ Now *some effects can be noted and some worthwhile things have been done* perhaps puts things too modestly, but it points to a deeper understanding, namely that for Mennonites changing the world has never been a real temptation. Even at the best of times, incremental change was the most that has been hoped for. In 1987, Janzen wrote that he was “impressed anew by the value of speaking to the government. Clearly, we are not transforming the world, but sometimes we do have an effect. Some people’s lives are better because of MCC [Canada]’s governmental work.”¹⁶ My discussion attempts to demonstrate that framing effectiveness as achieving short-term or incremental progress in the realm of public policy is too narrow, although not for the reasons that might be appealed to by activists or

¹³ Graber Miller, *Wise as Serpents, Innocent as Doves*, 87. See also Shupack, “Biblical Basis of Public Witness,” 5.

¹⁴ William Janzen, “Program Reports for Mennonite Central Committee Canada” (September 1, 1994 to August 31, 1995), 1.

¹⁵ William Janzen, “Ottawa Office Annual Report for 1990,” 3.

¹⁶ William Janzen, “Ottawa Office Annual Report for 1987,” 5. These reports do not gloss over the challenges faced during particularly challenging years; for example, in his annual report for 1977, Janzen wrote: “Sometimes it feels as if one is in between two high walls of concrete, looking for cracks to pry open.” See “Ottawa Office Report to the Mennonite Central Committee [Canada] Annual Meeting, Regina, Saskatchewan” (January 1978), 2.

that might cause quietists to worry. Such a framing lacks ambition because it fails to consider the impact that speaking to government has on the people who support and participate in this activity. The distinction often drawn between faithfulness and effectiveness is false.

Advocacy through Program Connections

One of MCC's most significant impacts has not come through engaging in a power struggle but through creative program partnerships. MCC's ability to affect Canadian government policies has often been the result of grassroots initiatives just as much as strategic political calculation. The scope and scale of this impact is even more impressive when organizations birthed by MCC in Canada are taken into consideration; there have been numerous cases where MCC has spun off projects as they gained traction and required greater capacity to flourish.¹⁷ There have also been many cases where MCC's programming has been supported financially by local, provincial, and federal governments, and this funding relationship has opened doors that MCC staff did not even know existed. Most notably, MCC's international relief, development, and peace work has been funded to some extent by the Government of Canada since 1968, several years before the Ottawa Office was established.

This financial support has not lacked controversy, especially since MCC refused to pursue similar funding from the US government at the height of the Vietnam War in the early 1970s.¹⁸ The primary concern was that financing brings with it strings that enable governments to shape, even if subtly, MCC's agenda around the world. After all, the Canadian government frames its funding relationships with international development and humanitarian assistance organizations in the language of "partnership."¹⁹

¹⁷ Well-known inter-Mennonite or ecumenical organizations that MCC has played an important role in establishing include Mennonite Disaster Service in 1954, Ten Thousand Villages (formerly Self Help Crafts) in the early 1970s, Canadian Foodgrains Bank in 1983, and Christian Peacemaker Teams in 1986. Dozens of other organizations have been birthed by provincial MCC programs working in refugee resettlement, restorative justice, social services, and job creation.

¹⁸ See Judy Zimmerman Herr and Robert Herr, "MCC and the Public Purse: History, Theology and Context," *MCC Peace Office Newsletter* 25, no. 4 (October-December 1995): 1-6.

¹⁹ In the past, MCC's funding was administered by the Canadian International Development

And, as anyone who has administered a government-funded project can attest, this comes with an expectation that partners will apply a standard set of tools for planning, monitoring, evaluating, and reporting on the work.²⁰

However, Canadian government staff are quick to point to the many lessons they have learned from organizations such as MCC, whose collective expertise far outstrips their own. This learning goes beyond insights from particular contexts to include larger policy-level issues. Thus, for example, after many years of engagement by institutional development organizations, at the end of 2012 the Government of Canada completed a five-year process of untying development assistance. Material aid is now sourced solely from local markets, because it has proved to be more efficient and to contribute to better long-term outcomes in developing countries.²¹ In recent years MCC has also participated in consultations with government officials on food security issues in East Africa, disaster response approaches in Haiti, and peacebuilding efforts in Syria.

MCC has partnered with other branches of the Canadian government beyond the realm of foreign affairs. While getting less attention, these connections are much more significant in terms of impact on both MCC finances and government policies.²² For example, in 1979 MCC signed

Agency's (CIDA) Partnerships Branch, renamed the "Partnerships with Canadians Branch" in 2010. Since 2013 this branch has been housed within the Department of Foreign Affairs, Trade, and Development (DFATD), which was itself renamed as Global Affairs Canada in the Fall of 2015. MCC's long-term funding partnership with CIDA ended abruptly on December 23, 2011, after which funding has been secured on a project-by-project basis, mainly through DFATD's International Humanitarian Assistance Program. MCC Canada clarified its terms for a relationship with CIDA in 1973 (updated in 1988 and 1994). See Ron Bietz, "MCC Canada Experience: A Case Study of Government Funding for Development," and "Statement of Values and Guiding Principles Governing MCC Canada's Relationship with CIDA and Use of CIDA Funds," *MCC Peace Office Newsletter* 25, no. 4 (October-December 1995): 6-9.

²⁰ Beyond this practical impact, there have been improvements in MCC programming as a result of Government of Canada requirements such as the inclusion of gender analysis and the assessment of environmental sustainability in project proposals, as well as the ability to scale up peacebuilding projects.

²¹ "Canada Fully Unties its Development Aid," CIDA News Release (September 5, 2008), www.acdi-cida.gc.ca/acdi-cida/acdi-cida.nsf/eng/NAT-9583229-GQC, accessed January 12, 2016. This agenda was pushed for many years by NGOs individually and collectively through the Canadian Council for International Cooperation.

²² Canadian programs have typically relied on grants from federal, provincial, and local

a memorandum of understanding with the Minister of Citizenship and Immigration that enabled the private sponsorship of refugees.²³ Interest for this initiative grew out of MCC's deep roots in assisting Mennonite refugees displaced by revolutions and wars in Europe, and a desire to extend this assistance to vulnerable peoples beyond MCC's traditional constituencies. Since then, MCC's supporting churches have provided assistance for over eighty thousand refugees permitted to resettle in Canada. More significantly, hundreds of religious, ethnic, community, and service organizations have followed MCC's lead in signing formal sponsorship agreements with the government, enabling several thousand refugees to resettle in Canada every year.²⁴ Relationship-building efforts by the Ottawa Office helped shape an innovative approach to refugee resettlement in Canada that continues today.

A final partnership example is in restorative justice. Since MCC first started experimenting with victim-offender reconciliation initiatives in Ontario in the 1970s, numerous additional efforts have been undertaken to expand on and develop alternatives to a justice system based on retribution. Now a restorative justice movement in Canada, the US, and other countries goes far beyond MCC's work. Correctional Services Canada (CSC) has embraced this movement—at least to an extent. Thanks to the efforts of passionate prison chaplains and key administrators, since the mid-1990s CSC has sponsored a nation-wide “Restorative Justice Week” to raise awareness of the importance of utilizing restorative approaches, not only in the justice and correctional systems but in other governmental realms such as education and health care.²⁵ Beyond garnering general support for this movement, CSC has also funded a number of initiatives, as has its parent department, Public Safety Canada, which is responsible for implementing

government sources to a much greater degree than have MCC's international programs.

²³ William Janzen, “The 1979 MCC Canada Master Agreement for the Sponsorship of Refugees in Historical Perspective,” *Journal of Mennonite Studies* 24 (2006): 211-22. See also Larry Kehler, “Making Room for ‘Strangers’: A Review of the Refugee Assistance Program of MCC (Canada) and the Provincial MCCs” (prepared for the MCC [Canada] Executive Committee, December 24, 1980).

²⁴ “Sponsorship Agreement Holders – Sponsoring refugees,” Citizenship and Immigration Canada, www.cic.gc.ca/english/refugees/sponsor/sah.asp, accessed January 12, 2016.

²⁵ “Restorative Justice – A Worthy Approach,” Correctional Services Canada, www.csc-ccc.gc.ca/restorative-justice/index-eng.shtml, accessed January 12, 2016.

a National Crime Prevention Strategy.²⁶ For instance, a few years ago the government approached MCC, offering to fund a pilot project to study the impact of Circles of Support and Accountability (CoSA), an initiative utilizing a core group of volunteers who meet regularly with high risk sexual offenders who have served their prison term and are seeking to re-integrate into communities. This is another case where political engagement, based mainly on relationships with bureaucrats, led to conversations with politicians that impacted policy decisions at a higher level.

These examples of how MCC's program work has shaped government policy and action demonstrate why the line between church and state can be crossed as a result of churches' efforts to address the needs of their neighbors near and far. Bridges are built, not because the church is trying to seize the reins of social control or because the state is trying to control the church. Rather than an inevitable power struggle, political engagement can take the form of creative, mutually beneficial partnerships. In each case cited, political engagement was not only the domain of staff in the Ottawa Office. It included key program staff from other parts of MCC, and relied heavily on the insights and passion of the many volunteers who make the programs function.

This selection of examples is made all the more striking by subsequent policy shifts in the Canadian government in recent years: the amalgamation of the Canadian International Development Agency and Department of Foreign Affairs and International Trade appeared to place Canada's Official Development Assistance at the service of trade interests; revamping the refugee system has resulted in cuts to the number of refugees admitted and the support available to them; and a politically expedient "tough on crime" agenda has cut funds for restorative justice initiatives like CoSA. Indeed, MCC's experience in Ottawa makes the success stories even more dramatic, and suggests that the positive impact of government partnerships is always provisional.

Nonetheless, these kinds of connections are not rare exceptions proving the rule that the state is inevitably coercive and violent. Rather, they confirm that the government's role is often construed too narrowly by MCC's

²⁶ "National Crime Prevention Strategy," Public Safety Canada, www.publicsafety.gc.ca/cnt/cntrng-crm/crm-prvntn/strtg-eng.aspx, accessed January 12, 2016.

church constituencies. Governments can do much more than restrain evil or maintain order, although this is pretty much the extent of their mandate as acknowledged in Mennonite confessions of faith²⁷ and in many MCC foundational documents.²⁸

I am not the first to argue that this construal of government is too limiting. In 2003, William Janzen, the inaugural Ottawa Office Director, wrote:

This low view of the larger society and its institutions [that] has been articulated by our theologians and is evident in our confessions of faith . . . misses some things. [Politics] is about ordering the relations among people, [but also] about the

²⁷ Article 6 of *The Schleithem Confession* (1527) states that “The sword is an ordering of God outside the perfection of Christ. It punishes and kills the wicked and guards and protects the good.” Cf. Article 13 of *The Dordrecht Confession of Faith* (1632): “We believe and confess that God has ordained power and authority, and set them to punish the evil, and protect the good, to govern the world, and maintain countries and cities, with their subjects, in good order and regulation.” Article 23 of the *Confession of Faith in Mennonite Perspective* (1995) states that “In contrast to the church, governing authorities of the world have been instituted by God for maintaining order in societies.” The only exception to this emphasis on a negative ordering function appears in Mennonite Brethren confessions: Article 14 of the *Mennonite Brethren Confession of Faith* (1975) asserts that “We believe that God instituted the state to maintain law and order in civil life and to *promote* public welfare” (italics added). Article 12 of the Canadian Conference of Mennonite Brethren Churches’ *Confession of Faith* (2001) states that “We believe that God instituted the state to promote the well-being of all people. Christians cooperate with others in society to defend the weak, care for the poor, and promote justice, righteousness, and truth.”

²⁸ “The Governmental Work of MCCC: A Framework” states that “MCCC believes the Bible teaches that governments are to maintain a just and peaceful social order and that Christians individually and churches corporately, have a responsibility to assist governments to be faithful in their calling.” “A Commitment to Christ’s Way of Peace” (1993) asserts that “We recognize that governing authorities have an ordering role in society.” Although “Peace Theology: A Visual Model with Narrative Explanation” (developed by the MCC Peace Theology Project) seeks to enrich understandings of the ordering function, this is where it starts and stops in discussing government: “Mennonites have usually viewed the ordering function of government as an institution of the fall. However, this is too limited a view. Even if we could imagine a world free of sin, we humans would still need to order our lives together. We would need rules/laws, structures of decision making, and assignments of differentiated roles.” See Duane K. Friesen and Gerald W. Schlabach, eds., *At Peace and Unafraid: Public Order, Security, and the Wisdom of the Cross* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 2005), 161.

proper distribution of resources, goods, and opportunities, about restraining the human tendency toward greed, about promoting justice and peace, and about supporting the good within an imperfect, 'fallen' community.²⁹

This view has been echoed by several other Canadian Mennonites: theologian James Reimer,³⁰ political scientist John Redekop,³¹ and peace and disarmament activist Ernie Regehr.³² It has also been supported by US Mennonite thinkers such as Ted Koontz, who asserted in 1995 that "government cannot now be equated with the sword. Government does a lot of things beyond the sword-bearing function of maintaining order."³³

However, many Christian ethicists are, like Mennonite confessions, too quick to leap past these many other things that governments do in order to home in on what they see as the essence of government.³⁴ Or, even worse, they are quick to disparage those many other things. Catholic theologian William Cavanaugh writes:

The urgent task of the church, then, is to demystify the nation-state and to treat it like the telephone company. At its best, the

²⁹ William Janzen, "The Mennonite Public Witness in Canada," *MCC Peace Office Newsletter* 33, no. 3 (July-September 2003), 1.

³⁰ A. James Reimer, "An Anabaptist-Mennonite Political Theology," *Direction: A Mennonite Brethren Forum* 38, no. 1 (Spring 2009): 29-44.

³¹ John H. Redekop, "Government, Theory and Theology of," in *Mennonite Encyclopedia*, vol. 5 (Waterloo, ON: Herald Press, 1990). See also John H. Redekop, *Politics Under God* (Waterloo, ON: Herald Press, 2007).

³² "Talking to Ourselves," *MCC Peace Office Newsletter* 23, no. 5 (September-October 1993): 3-4.

³³ Sidebar, *MCC Peace Office Newsletter* 23, no. 5 (September-October 1993), 9. Numerous references in the work of John Howard Yoder could be invoked here. See, for example, John Howard Yoder, *Discipleship as Political Responsibility*, trans. Timothy J. Geddert (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 2003): "The NT does not deal with the state in terms of its role in funding school systems, building roads, administering social programs, regulating postal services, and all the other things that we also think of today when referring to the 'state'" (19); "Participation by Christians in one aspect of the state does not obligate the Christian in any way to participate in another one" (43).

³⁴ For Todd David Whitmore, "many Christian ethicists practice 'veranda ethics': They write from a vast social remove from the issues they address, like poverty and war, as observers." See Todd David Whitmore, "Crossing the Road: The Case for Ethnographic Fieldwork in Christian Ethics," *Journal of the Society of Christian Ethics* 27, no. 2 (2007): 273-94.

nation-state may provide goods and services that contribute to a certain limited order; mail delivery, for example, is a positive good. The state is not the keeper of the common good, however, and we need to adjust our expectations accordingly.³⁵

Not to belittle routine mail delivery or telephone service, but what about universally accessible health care, education, welfare, or pensions? In Canada these four things alone consume well over half the federal budget; the amount is more than three-quarters at the provincial level. And this doesn't include a whole host of other things that the private sector and civil society organizations find difficult to handle, such as infrastructure for public transit and water treatment systems, affordable housing, product safety testing, skills development programs, and parks systems.³⁶

We should not limit ourselves to discussions of essences, but grapple with actualities and particularities. Program connections with government exemplify the ad hoc nature of MCC's political engagement. It does require systemic thinking and analysis—the ability to maneuver within and alongside existing institutions, and even to have a hand in creating new ones—but it does not presume that MCC possesses systemic or comprehensive solutions.

My point is not that government is the be-all and end-all. I agree that Christians must be “realistic about what we can expect from the ‘principalities

³⁵ William Cavanaugh, *Migrations of the Holy: God, State, and the Political Meaning of the Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2011), 42. Although supportive of more active engagement with governments, Gerald Schlabach seems to share an essentialist view: see Gerald Schlabach, ed., *Just Policing, Not War: An Alternative Response to World Violence* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2007), 99. Ted Koontz has wondered about the danger of delegitimizing public institutions, noting that the only thing allowing them “to operate in anything except coercive, oppressive ways, is a consensus that they ought to be there and are doing the right things.” See Sidebar, *MCC Peace Office Newsletter* 25, no. 4 (October-December 1995), 12.

³⁶ This view of government is informed not only by my exposure to MCC's work in Canada but in numerous contexts where governments are dysfunctional, damaged, or absent. These examples express the enormous complexity of nation-building exercises, and the tremendous folly of thinking a few Western experts can map out the best path for reforming, rebuilding, or creating governments in such contexts. The complexity of governing nation states and the particular challenges beyond security issues underline that governing is not a synonym for maintaining order or ruling by force. It includes a great diversity of functions.

and powers' of our own age"³⁷ and that "the expectations that people place on politics are unrealistic" for many problems that we face.³⁸ I also agree that states "constantly exercise power to position themselves as indispensable for social construction and the organization of political architecture."³⁹ Certainly MCC's experience makes the limitations of partnering with governments abundantly clear. Governments are complex, and dealing with bureaucracies can be time-consuming and frustrating. They also have tremendous inertia and therefore cannot react or change direction as quickly as circumstances may warrant. Or they move in the wrong direction; MCC's frame of reference means staff may conclude that the government's vision is fundamentally incompatible. But sometimes it requires shared work, not simply theoretical conversations, to recognize where the worldviews of church and state differ. Again, it is not that program connections with government are risk-free, but they are one way to shape the government agenda without assuming a position of power within government. The pursuit of advocacy does not depend upon a single view of how to navigate the boundary between church and state.

Advocacy through Legislation

In addition to setting policies that guide government programs, elected officials—in the case of the Canadian federal government, Members of Parliament (MPs)—govern by establishing and amending laws. Beyond the criminal justice system, laws regulate businesses and professions, and provide a framework for delivering countless services. They define the parameters within which a society operates and thus epitomize the ordering function of government. Besides getting involved in policy discussions arising from program connections, MCC's Ottawa office has thus always paid close attention to legislation and to the legislative process by which new laws are created and old laws replaced or reformed.

Most bills that attract the attention of the Canadian media and the

³⁷ Cavanaugh, *Migrations of the Holy*, 3.

³⁸ James Davison Hunter, *To Change the World: Irony, Tragedy, and the Possibility of Christianity in the Late Modern World* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 2010), 185.

³⁹ Craig Hovey, *Bearing True Witness: Truthfulness in Christian Practice* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2011), 106-107.

general public are introduced by MPs who serve as the government's cabinet ministers, and with good reason. The Canadian parliamentary system is set up to spend most of members' time giving consideration to these bills, which form the basis of the vast majority of new laws.⁴⁰ MCC staff have also followed the government's legislative agenda with interest, as evident in the many letters and coalition statements collected over the years in the Ottawa Office Government Communications Registry. In contrast to the kind of advocacy made possible by program partnerships, however, MCC has very often played a negative role. MCC has resisted change, rather than instigated it, when convinced the change posed a threat to peace or inhibited the potential for it.

A recent example was MCC's intervention in a bill to implement Canada's commitment to the International Convention on Cluster Munitions, legislation full of loopholes that would undermine the global effort to ban the production, stockpiling, and use of weapons proven to cause excessive harm to civilians during and long after attacks.⁴¹ MCC staff prepared written submissions and testified before a Senate standing committee, urging the government to consider amendments to address the bill's shortcomings. The experience of MCC program partners in countries such as Laos and Lebanon meant MCC had an obligation to do what it could to lessen the harm of the bill. In the end, the government agreed to remove a single word from the legislation—a noteworthy change, but a case where a significant effort by MCC and other civil society organizations could only tweak things at the margins.

A less well-known way to establish a new law in Canada is for individual MPs to propose new legislation through a Private Members'

⁴⁰ Given the dramatic increase in the size of government and the complexity of society, it is surprising that since World War II the Canadian government has created fewer new laws each year. John Diefenbaker's government averaged 59 new laws per year between 1957 and 1963; by Jean Chretien's time in the 1990s that number had dropped to 38. Stephen Harper's government averaged only 31 new laws per year since 2006. In the US, where much more business is conducted through legislation, Congress considers upwards of 5,000 bills per year, of which several hundred are signed into law by the President.

⁴¹ Bill C-6, *An Act to Implement the Convention on Cluster Munitions*, 2013, 2nd Session, 41st Parliament, www.parl.gc.ca/LegisInfo/BillDetails.aspx?Language=E&Mode=1&billId=6263567, accessed January 12, 2016.

Bill. Unlike bills introduced by government ministers, considered “public” because they affect the public in general, bills introduced by individual MPs are considered “private” because they are more limited in scope and concern only an individual or group of individuals. Private Members’ Bills cannot require the expenditure of funds but can confer a right on a person or group, or relieve them of a responsibility.

Despite receiving less attention in Parliament and the media, these bills are far more numerous than government bills, since any of the almost three hundred MPs not in the cabinet can introduce a bill at any time. Yet far fewer of these bills ever advance past the initial stage of first reading, and fewer still receive Royal Assent, the final step to becoming the law of the land.⁴² Since the start of the 39th Parliament, 2,418 Private Members’ Bills were introduced. When the 41st Parliament was dissolved in the summer of 2015, only 68—less than three percent—had received Royal Assent. By contrast, over the same period 476 government bills were introduced, of which 312 became law.⁴³

Given rather bleak prospects for success, why would Parliamentarians bother with Private Members’ Bills? While some MPs may be trying to raise their profile on the national stage by addressing a controversial issue or embarrassing the government, or on a local stage by championing an issue of interest to their constituents, a surprisingly common motivation is that MPs are passionate about something. They want to make a difference. The prevalence of this more noble motivation has been made clear to MCC as the Ottawa Office has tracked the progress of Private Members’ Bills that directly relate to MCC priorities or have the potential to impact program partners. MCC support has been predicated on the conviction that the pursuit of legislation can be a faithful, effective way to work for peace. This support consists, for example, of meeting with sympathetic Parliamentarians to encourage them to second a bill, and encouraging churches to sign petitions

⁴² Since this option first became available in 1910, 278 Private Members’ Bills have received Royal Assent. Even with reforms in 1986 and 2003, it is still a difficult journey and largely depends on the luck of the draw. For details, see *Private Members’ Business: Practical Guide*, 9th edition (Ottawa: Procedural Services of the House of Commons, 2008).

⁴³ The select list of 68 bills approved in the past decade includes more than a dozen establishing official days of recognition for specific people or events, and obscure matters such as recognizing the Canadian horse as Canada’s national horse.

or pursue meetings with their MP. By offering a concrete, focused answer to the challenge that pacifists have nothing to offer to debates over violence and injustice, these bills have become a rallying point and teaching tool.

One example of a legislative initiative long endorsed by MCC is Bill C-363: *An Act respecting conscientious objection to the use of taxes for military purposes*.⁴⁴ Based on ten previous Private Members' Bills introduced in seven different Parliaments, this bill sought to allow conscientious objectors to war to redirect the portion of their income taxes that would otherwise would fund the military.⁴⁵ The story behind these bills may actually go back to 1793, when British-controlled Canada first respected conscientious objection to military service on religious grounds. Precedents for recognizing conscientious objections to paying for the military can be traced to 1841, when conscientious objectors to the militia tax were allowed to redirect these taxes to public works. In the First and Second World Wars, conscientious objectors to war bonds were allowed to buy "peace bonds," whose proceeds were used only for the relief of suffering caused by the war.⁴⁶ The effort to pursue legislation along these lines followed the founding of an organization called Conscience Canada in the late 1970s. Starting in 1983, several Private Members' motions were introduced, calling for the right to redirect the military portion of income taxes to peaceful purposes, and the first Canadian Conference on Taxes for Peace was held in 1987.⁴⁷

After the first bill died when an election was called in 1993, the Coalition of Conscientious Objectors to Military Taxation met with

⁴⁴ 2nd Session, 41st Parliament, 2011, www.parl.gc.ca/LegisInfo/BillDetails.aspx?Language=E-&Mode=1&billId=6253731, accessed January 12, 2016.

⁴⁵ The first was *An Act to establish the Peace Tax Trust Fund* (Bill C-414) introduced by New Democratic Party MP Ray Funk in March 1993.

⁴⁶ Esther Epp-Tiessen and Elaine Bishop, "A Short History of Conscientious Objection in Canada" (MCC Canada, 1991 and 2006). See also the theme issue on "Conscientious Objection" compiled by Esther Epp-Tiessen and Titus Peachey in *Intersections: MCC Theory and Practice Quarterly* 3, no. 1 (Winter 2015).

⁴⁷ Canadians built on similar efforts in the United States that go back to the establishment of the National Council for a World Peace Tax Fund in 1971, and the introduction of the proposed World Peace Tax Fund Act (H.R. 14414) in the House of Representatives in 1972. For background on this history, see Marian Franz, with editors Tim Godshall, David R. Bassett, and Steve Retzlaff, *A Persistent Voice: Marian Franz and Conscientious Objection to Military Taxation* (Telford, PA: Cascadia, 2009).

Canadian MPs and drafted the text for a new Private Members' Bill, the *Conscientious Objector Act*. Meetings were even held at that time with staff in the Finance Minister's office. The draft bill was subsequently revised and introduced in 1997, and has been reintroduced eight more times.⁴⁸ Despite the bill's long history, the core argument remains the same: "Today war is technologically driven and thus capital-intensive. Tax dollars, rather than citizens, are the focus of conscription." Thus our conscientious objector laws need to be updated.⁴⁹

Other peace-related Private Members' Bills that MCC has supported merit equal discussion, including legislation seeking to establish a Department of Peace⁵⁰ and to assist conscientious objectors to wars not sanctioned by the UN who seek refuge in Canada.⁵¹ MCC has also supported bills addressing a broader range of issues, such as regulating the international operations of Canadian mining companies.⁵² The circumstances of all these bills indicate that the pursuit of "pacifist-friendly legislation"—the attempt to legislate peace—is not what it appears to be at first glance. These initiatives are not taken in the expectation that the laws will change anytime soon, or with a naïve trust that changing laws will automatically result in social change.

However, these initiatives are more than symbolic gestures. They are

⁴⁸ Introduced by NDP MP Svend Robinson as *An Act Respecting Conscientious Objection to the Use of Taxes for Military Purposes* in 1997 (Bill C-404), this legislation was reintroduced in 1998 (Bill C-272), 1999 (Bill C-399), and 2001 (Bill C-232). It was reintroduced again by Robinson's successor, NDP MP Bill Siksay, in 2005 (Bill C-397), 2006 (Bill C-348), 2007 (Bill C-460), and 2009 (Bill C-390). NDP MP Alex Atamanenko has carried on the tradition with Bill C-363 following Siksay's retirement.

⁴⁹ Frequently Asked Questions, Conscience Canada website, www.consciencecanada.ca/?page_id=128.

⁵⁰ Bill C-373, *An Act to Establish the Department of Peace*, 2011, 2nd Session, 41st Parliament), www.parl.gc.ca/LegisInfo/BillDetails.aspx?Language=E&Mode=1&billId=6253758, accessed January 12, 2016.

⁵¹ Bill C-440, *An Act to amend the Immigration and Refugee Protection Act (war resisters)*, 2009, 3rd Session, 40th Parliament, www.parl.gc.ca/LegisInfo/BillDetails.aspx?Language=E&Mode=1&-billId=4328439, accessed January 12, 2016.

⁵² One prominent example was Bill C-300, *An Act respecting Corporate Accountability for the Activities of Mining, Oil or Gas in Developing Countries*, 2009, 3rd Session, 40th Parliament, www.parl.gc.ca/LegisInfo/BillDetails.aspx?Language=E&Mode=1&billId=4327824, accessed January 12, 2016. This bill garnered significant public, even global, attention, and almost made it through the House of Commons. It was narrowly defeated in 2010.

pursued because individuals and organizations have felt compelled—or in some cases have even been invited—to frame a moral argument using the language of legislation. For MCC they have provided an occasion to articulate deeply held moral convictions.⁵³ Not the only occasion, to be sure, and legislation is certainly not the first, or the most natural, language with which to speak. But it is not an occasion to be dismissed, because the hard work of bearing witness to one's convictions in this way is itself of tremendous value. It requires not only expertise but careful consultation and on-the-ground experience. It is an opportunity to express a peace church identity when others who embrace nonviolence or are actively working for peace seek input or support. Most important, not only does this effort contribute to public debate, it contributes to internal debate within MCC's supporting churches. It prompts Mennonites to ask themselves what being a follower of Christ in the Canadian context really means. What does it mean to be a conscientious objector to war? What does it mean to say we wish the government would pursue more creative approaches in working for peace and justice? What does it mean to say that we care about our brothers and sisters whose community has been hurt by a Canadian mining company? Without the language of legislation, how would Canadian Mennonites have answered these questions? Would they even ask them? In the words of Stephen Webb, "Christians do not know what they really believe until they publically witness to their faith."⁵⁴

Evaluating Advocacy

Beyond reshaping the moral landscape of society, partnering with the Canadian government in program initiatives and participating in the

⁵³ After all, legislation presumes the possibility of making moral arguments in the House of Commons. The issues debated by Parliamentarians are not confined to the realm of political, economic, legal, and scientific calculation, but also include moral considerations. And however rare they may be, there are times when elected officials make decisions that are not focused solely on their own—or even their nation's—self-interest.

⁵⁴ Quoted by Craig Hovey in *Bearing True Witness*, 186. Hovey notes that Webb "follows Barth, who describes how bearing witness to the content of faith is the way that 'cognizance' becomes 'knowledge.'" This also resonates with Miroslav Volf's argument that the very act of sharing an authentic vision of human flourishing with the world can be a significant form of political engagement. See Miroslav Volf, *A Public Faith: How Followers of Christ Should Serve the Common Good* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2011).

legislative process can enliven the moral landscape of MCC's constituent churches. This kind of political engagement is properly viewed as creating space for these churches to embody what they believe—to bear witness to their moral vision through the process of wrestling with the impact of actual, not theoretical, systems and structures. Our attention is misplaced when we focus on effecting change in governments as the primary objective of Christian advocacy. Advocacy is appropriately understood as moral formation—but this formation occurs primarily in those doing the advocacy, not among the direct targets of the advocacy.

My discussion of program connections and legislation also gives a glimpse into another important dimension of MCC's advocacy: working with other churches, church agencies, and nongovernmental organizations. Indeed, MCC frequently does not speak out on policy issues alone, but alongside others—to learn from them and to amplify MCC's voice. Interestingly, while the rationale for this approach has been framed in terms of effectiveness, that is, because it can “enrich and strengthen” MCC's work and “advance MCC's mission,”⁵⁵ ecumenical collaboration through coalitions such as KAIROS: Canadian Ecumenical Justice Initiatives, the Church Council on Justice and Corrections, and Project Ploughshares has also profoundly shaped MCC's work and mission.⁵⁶

This focus on the formative impact of advocacy for MCC is a perspective that Christian ethicists concerned primarily with building up the church through the formative power of Christian practices will be sympathetic to, although some may find it a stretch to recognize advocacy as a legitimate Christian practice.⁵⁷ Despite their interest in the church, Christian

⁵⁵ “The Governmental Work of MCCC: A Framework.”

⁵⁶ Not only have there been substantive differences on particular issues to negotiate, but MCC has also found itself learning to speak the language of human rights. See Paul C. Heidebrecht, “Looking for the Right Words: Human Rights and MCC Canada's Advocacy Work,” *Journal of Mennonite Studies* 32 (2014): 165-78.

⁵⁷ Craig Hovey's distinction between witnesses and advocates may be a stumbling block to my argument, but it can be overcome. For Hovey, if the witness's words “do not ultimately belong to the witness but to the Holy Spirit, then the witness is not finally responsible for the outcome of those words. The witness is relieved of the functional and operative aspects of his task. . . . The witness faces the temptation to . . . become an advocate. The advocate turns a witness's testimony into a compelling case by weaving together the testimonies of many witnesses and presenting them persuasively to the court.” See Hovey, *Bearing True Witness*, 130-31.

formation is not something that prominent Mennonite theologians ranging from John Howard Yoder to J. Lawrence Burkholder paid much attention to.⁵⁸ Yet hints of a similar sensibility to what I have articulated are found in occasional reflections on the work of MCC. For example, in summarizing his perspective on MCC's witness to government, former Executive Director John Lapp wrote:

These three offices have helped to shape twentieth-century Mennonites. They may be more beneficial in strengthening and refining the conscience of the church than in extending any particular witness themselves.⁵⁹

My emphasis on the formative impact of advocacy on the church may also be a stretch for Christian ethicists concerned mostly about changing the world. I must therefore point out that broader discussions of the evaluation of advocacy confirm my overall methodological point, namely that a closer examination of *how* political engagement happens will enrich the theoretical assumptions of Christian ethicists. Not only churches and church agencies, but think tanks and lobbyists of all types have come to reexamine how they go about working for change today. They realize that trying to measure the effectiveness of advocacy demonstrates the limitations of typical measures

Although advocacy requires more than dogmatics, it is not properly thought of as apologetics. Since it is more about formation, it makes no claims about replacing or competing with other forms of Christian witness, although it also can bear witness to the truth.

⁵⁸ My critique of Yoder draws on Michael Cartwright, "Sharing the House of God: Learning to Read Scripture with the Anabaptists," *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 74, no. 4 (2000): 610; and Joseph Kotva Jr., *The Christian Case for Virtue Ethics* (Washington, DC: Georgetown Univ. Press, 1996), 158. J. Lawrence Burkholder, often turned to when Mennonites seek warrant for active cultural engagement, is seen as representing an opposite pole to Yoder and the "Bender school." This is a misreading of Yoder, although Burkholder does urge a very different kind of approach. See J. Lawrence Burkholder, "What shall we say to the state?" *Gospel Herald* (December 31, 1991): 6-7.

⁵⁹ John Lapp, "Reflecting on Our Public Witness as Anabaptists," *MCC Peace Office Newsletter* 33, no. 3 (July-September 2003): 9. The formative nature of the Ottawa Office's work is perhaps precisely what some feared when it was established: that interacting with the political realm would change Mennonites, but not for the better! Another example is former Executive Director Ron Mathies's description of the "political" nature of MCC's work as "speaking prophetically to ourselves and to our own power structures." See Ronald J.R. Mathies, "Witness and Struggle or Politics and Power," 79.

of effectiveness. This has led Steven Teles and Mark Schmitt to propose that organizations should move beyond attempting to evaluate advocacy initiatives to “focus on evaluating *advocates*.”⁶⁰ The proper focus is “the long-term adaptability, strategic capacity, and ultimately [the] influence of organizations themselves.” Thus evaluations must move beyond considering formal strategic plans or the wisdom of senior leadership to include an advocacy organization’s strategic capacity—the “overall ability to think and act collectively, and adapt to opportunities and challenges.”⁶¹

What this approach means for advocacy organizations and networks is that they must pay more attention to how they themselves are being shaped by their work, and less attention to their impact on policy-makers. Given the crucial roles that volunteers from supporting churches play in MCC’s advocacy efforts (as noted earlier, they too are advocates), they should be part of the assessments of MCC’s work in this area.

Conclusion

Those pursuing political engagement should stop worrying so much about being effective at changing the world, and should concentrate more on the formation of advocates and advocacy networks. The overall thrust is to be less, not more, instrumental in approaching the political realm, and to be more circumspect about the areas in which they can exert control. This is simply another way of getting to the same place that my description of MCC’s approach to political engagement in Ottawa ended. Although not explicitly articulated this way in the past, the best measure of MCC’s advocacy work—of the pursuit of program connections and peculiar legislative initiatives—is *polity* influence, not policy influence. The most profound impact is ecclesial, not governmental or societal.

I recognize that this prescription will complicate the assumptions of

⁶⁰ Steven Teles and Mark Schmitt, “The Elusive Craft of Evaluating Advocacy,” *Stanford Social Innovation Review* (Summer 2011), 42. Support for their analysis is found in such sources as Donald E. Abelson, *Do Think Tanks Matter? Assessing the Impact of Public Policy Institutes*, 2nd ed. (Montreal: McGill-Queen’s Univ. Press, 2009); Jennifer Chapman, “Monitoring and Evaluating Advocacy,” *Participatory Learning and Action Notes* 43 (2002): 48-52; and Harry Jones, “A guide to monitoring and evaluating policy influence,” *ODI (Overseas Development Institute) Background Note* (February 2011).

⁶¹ Teles and Schmitt, “The Elusive Craft of Evaluating Advocacy,” 42.

both quietists and activists, challenging conventional wisdom about what is needed to move Canadian and US Mennonites from non-involvement to involvement in the political affairs of their respective nations. Indeed, this reframing suggests that the work of MCC's advocacy offices is relevant for constituents who hold various views on the proper relationship between church and state. Perhaps viewing political engagement as ecclesial formation may even enable MCC to deepen its rootedness in its supporting churches.

Paul C. Heidebrecht is Director of the MSCU Centre for Peace Advancement at Conrad Grebel University College in Waterloo, Ontario.