



## *The Conrad Grebel Review*

Winter 2011



### **The Mennonite Central Committee at 90** CASE STUDIES AND PERSPECTIVES

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• ARTICLES • LITERARY REFRACTION • BOOK REVIEWS

# ***The Conrad Grebel Review***

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## Foreword

In this issue we are pleased to offer four articles related to the celebration of the 90th anniversary of the founding of the Mennonite Central Committee. These articles were originally presented as papers at a two-day conference held at Akron, Pennsylvania in June 2010. Three of the articles examine aspects of the history of MCC activity in India, Vietnam, and Canada, while the fourth offers a biblical perspective on the ministry of both MCC and the church in general.

We thank Alain Epp Weaver, Director of the MCC's Program Development Department and organizer of the conference, for bringing these papers to our attention -- and for assisting us in the production process. He is also the editor of a volume of additional papers from the conference bearing the same title as the event itself: *A Table of Sharing: Mennonite Central Committee and the Expanding Networks of Mennonite Identity* (Cascadia, March 2011).

We are equally delighted to present in this issue "God is Closer to Poetry than Religion," a Literary Refraction by Julia Spicher Kasdorf. Also included are book reviews on a variety of subjects (these and other new reviews are posted at [www.grebel.uwaterloo.ca/academic/cgreview/reviews.shtml](http://www.grebel.uwaterloo.ca/academic/cgreview/reviews.shtml)). We are grateful to all our authors, peer-reviewers, and book reviewers, as well as our Literary Editor Hildi Froese Tiessen and Book Review Editor Arthur Boers, for their contributions to this issue.

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The Fall 2011 issue will be devoted to a discussion of the newly-published *Nonviolence – A Brief History: The Warsaw Lectures*, a set of addresses given by John Howard Yoder in 1983. Other upcoming issues will include articles such as "Destructive Obedience: US Military Training and Culture as a Parody of Christian Discipleship" and "Ecopacifism and the Anabaptist Vision," and the annual Eby and Bechtel lectures given at Conrad Grebel University College.

Jeremy M. Bergen  
*Academic Editor*

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## Calcutta Connections: Mennonite Service in India

*Earl Zimmerman*

Mennonite service in India reaches back to the beginning of Mennonite mission efforts at the end of the nineteenth century. The story is picked up here with the first joint Mennonite and Brethren in Christ relief effort during World War II. This in turn led to the first involvement of the Mennonite Central Committee (MCC) in India. Mennonite service there is the story of compassionate relief programs in response to unimaginable suffering caused by human and natural disasters. It evolves within the social contexts of the transition from colonial India ruled by the British Empire to the post-colonial world of independent India and, more recently, in a world shaped by economic globalization.

The focus of Mennonite service in India gradually shifted from disaster relief and material aid to community development in the 1960s. This change included the establishment of a permanent MCC India office in Calcutta and the formation of an Indian Mennonite counterpart known as the Mennonite Christian Service Fellowship of India (MCSFI). By the end of the 1970s, MCC India stopped implementing its own projects in order to work in partnership with Indian organizations and schools that shared its values. Increasingly, most of these partners were not related to the Mennonite and Brethren in Christ churches in India. In more recent decades, MCC has sought to improve the quality of its project planning, monitoring and evaluation. It also began to apply peacebuilding, social justice, gender equality, and environmental screens to all projects.

For its part, MCSFI had to negotiate even more difficult transitions during this half-century of dramatic change. Its constituent Indian churches went through the wrenching shift from the colonial era dominated by foreign mission agencies to the post-colonial era of independence that was thrust on them more quickly than anyone had been prepared for. It led to leadership struggles, protracted litigation over property, and the forced closing and restructuring of mission-era institutions.

Even in the midst of such struggles, the story of Mennonite service in India offers us a legacy of hope that has transformed the lives and faith of

many. When we take a long view of the past century of Mennonite service in that country, as this article seeks to do, the social and spiritual growth that has taken place through these efforts is clearly evident.

### **Beginnings in Colonial India**

Seven missionaries met in Champa in central India in the spring of 1942 to initiate a joint relief effort in response to the rapidly growing humanitarian crisis on the sub-continent during World War II. It was the first collaborative social endeavor involving all the different Mennonite and Brethren in Christ mission groups serving in colonial India. Their respective missions had begun working around the turn of the twentieth century and, although it could not have been known to those meeting in Champa, this was already the twilight of the colonial era.

Their first order of business was to form the Mennonite Relief Committee of India, representing five different Mennonite and Brethren in Christ missions. Some of these committee members had served in India for many years. P.W. Penner, the treasurer of the newly formed organization, was a General Conference Mennonite Church missionary who had worked for forty years in what is now the state of Chhattisgarh. He sent a cable to the MCC office in North America asking for a monthly contribution of 3,000 rupees (US \$1,000) a month for their proposed relief efforts.<sup>1</sup>

The Japanese had conquered neighboring Burma, forcing many native Indians living there to flee across the border into India. Some Indian soldiers fighting at the front deserted to the Japanese in the hope of eventually driving the British colonial government out of India.<sup>2</sup> Social conditions were growing increasingly desperate.<sup>3</sup> A severe cyclone and tidal wave then hit the Bengal coast in October 1942. These tragedies were compounded by food supplies being shipped to the warfront, wartime price inflation, and the indifference of the British colonial government. Even so, there would have been enough food available if a system had been in place to deal with the crisis. None existed. People with means hoarded food and local Indian bureaucrats enriched themselves, leaving the poorest exposed. Historian Lawrence James writes:

Calcutta in particular acted as a magnet for the most vulnerable: landless laborers, widows, deserted wives, children and the

aged flocked to the city in desperate hope of finding relief. Many died within sight of well-stocked shops. Beggars swarmed into the city, traveling by train but without tickets, and making it impossible for the authorities to discriminate between opportunists and the genuinely needy. Smallpox, cholera and malaria proliferated among the underfed, adding to a death toll which was officially put at 1.5 million between mid-1943 and mid-1944. It is more likely that the total was nearer 3 million.<sup>4</sup>

MCC responded by immediately forwarding the funds requested by the Mennonite Relief Committee of India (MRCI). Two MRCI representatives visited the most severely affected areas in Bengal and decided to give direct relief aid. Indian Mennonite and Brethren in Christ volunteers from central India traveled to Bengal to help.<sup>5</sup> In addition to depending on these short-term volunteers, MCC appointed two North American service workers and increased its relief funds to 5,250 rupees (US \$1,750) a month in 1943. They were soon serving a population of 8,000 people through the distribution of rice, milk, clothing, and medicine. Severe famine conditions were improving by the end of 1944, and the need for direct relief aid was drawing to a close.<sup>6</sup>

There was some thought of ending the MCC presence in India because conditions were improving, but other considerations weighed in favor of staying. These included the fact that Calcutta<sup>7</sup> was near the warfront in Burma and Assam, the possibility of using Calcutta as a base for future relief efforts in China and Java, and the ongoing rehabilitation needs in desperately poor communities in Bengal. Four more North American service workers were sent.<sup>8</sup> Reconstruction efforts included rebuilding houses, organizing an industrial school, continued aid distribution, a dispensary, and small scale livelihood projects. The various programs touched the lives of about 2,000 to 3,000 people. In addition, several MCC service workers were recruited to serve in social projects related to various Mennonite and Brethren in Christ mission stations.<sup>9</sup>

Another social crisis developed in East Bengal (now the country of Bangladesh) in 1946. Thousands of Hindus were driven from their homes in this predominantly Muslim area, and the local government was very slow in responding. There were mass burnings and lootings of villages with many



forced conversions; many fled, and their situation as refugees was desperate. Two newly arrived MCC service workers were seconded to the Indian Red Cross to help set up refugee camps. The initial plan was to help displaced Hindus return to their villages, but the force of political developments was leading to the brutal partition of colonial India.<sup>10</sup>

Tensions boiled over in Calcutta. The Muslim League, positioning itself to form a separate Muslim state, called for a day of “Direct Action” on August 16, 1946. The morning began in eerie quiet and then the worst riots between Hindus and Muslims ever remembered in India broke out. Muslim League and Congress cadres had been secretly preparing for this confrontation, a politically manufactured event that brought the entire city to its knees. Electrical power was cut; shops, schools, and offices were shuttered; buildings were reduced to rubble; at least 4,000 people were killed and more than 10,000 were injured.<sup>11</sup> The violence kept spreading in rural Bengal. Mahatma Gandhi, the legendary nonviolent campaigner for Indian independence, arrived in November 1946 and stayed until March of the following year. He and his band of followers crisscrossed Bengal, often walking for long hours, holding prayer meetings, and consoling victims. It was a last, desperate attempt to stem the tide of events, but there was little that he or anyone else could do.<sup>12</sup> Lines of partition between the newly created states of Pakistan and India were hastily drawn. Between half a million and one million people were killed in partition-related violence, and some twelve million more were forced to migrate between the two newly created states.<sup>13</sup> Gandhi refused to join the Indian independence celebrations in New Delhi on August 15, 1947, choosing instead to remain in Calcutta fasting, praying, and spinning. He thought the nationalistic festivities were perverse in the face of all the recent and continuing human suffering.<sup>14</sup>

### **Relief Efforts in Independent India**

There was an expectation that Mennonite relief efforts in response to the humanitarian crisis during World War II would end after the war was over. The refugee crisis caused by the partition of India and Pakistan changed any thought of ending such efforts. Instead, MCC and the Indian Mennonite Churches responded to the needs of refugees in the cities of Calcutta, Delhi, and Amritsar by distributing food and clothing and by giving medical

assistance. The situation was most severe in Pakistan; two MCC service workers were sent there to work in refugee camps around the city of Lahore.<sup>15</sup>

The relief units eventually closed in 1949 after the worst of the partition refugee crisis was over, but several MCC workers continued in service assignments related to the various Mennonite and Brethren in Christ mission stations in India.<sup>16</sup> The trend toward independence in the Indian churches made it apparent that MCC was uniquely positioned to facilitate coordination between the various Mennonite-related church groups. Edward and Helen Benedict, a Quaker couple, served as part-time MCC field representatives from 1955 to 1962.<sup>17</sup>

During these years several MCC service workers served at the Barjana Community Agricultural Service Project run by the Brethren in Christ Mission Board in Bihar.<sup>18</sup> Others were sent to work on building projects in Katmandu with the United Mission to Nepal.<sup>19</sup> Refugees kept streaming into Calcutta, and the state government of West Bengal asked MCC to take responsibility for relief work at a large refugee colony outside the city.<sup>20</sup> A poultry project was started in cooperation with India's Department of Agriculture, and a canteen was established for hungry students at the University of Calcutta.<sup>21</sup> This mix of relief and humanitarian assistance projects continued throughout the 1950s.

### **Laying the Foundation for a Long-Term Presence**

It was becoming increasingly evident in the 1960s that foreign mission programs, which had proliferated throughout India during the colonial era, were no longer welcome. The Indian government was reluctant to renew missionary visas, gravely affecting the operation of Mennonite mission churches, schools, and hospitals.<sup>22</sup> In response, a group of concerned church and mission leaders, including P.J. Malagar, the first ordained Indian Mennonite bishop, met during the Mennonite World Conference held in Kitchener, Ontario in 1962. They decided that Orie Miller, MCC's executive director, would travel to India the following year to consult with the Indian Mennonite and Brethren in Christ churches and missionaries in order to consider the future of Mennonite service there.<sup>23</sup>

A meeting was called in Calcutta with representatives from all six different Mennonite and Brethren in Christ church groups, both missionaries

and nationals—the first time there had ever been such a meeting. According to Bishop Malagar, it was “a great milestone in the development of the idea of inter-Mennonite cooperation in India and much needed interaction between a North American organization like MCC and the Indian churches.”<sup>24</sup> Several basic operational decisions were made that would set the future course of Mennonite service in India.

It was decided that an all-India organization of Mennonite and Brethren in Christ churches was needed to continue the relief efforts begun during the war years. The new organization, given the name Mennonite Christian Service Fellowship of India (MCSFI), would also have an expanded role in helping member churches come to a better understanding of their heritage and in facilitating a joint witness, including peace education. The city of Calcutta was chosen as the operating base for the joint effort that would emerge.<sup>25</sup>

The newly structured program was envisioned as a joint endeavor. MCC would support MCSFI by funding the position of a director who would work with the Indian churches. The director would be the counterpart to the MCC director in India, who would represent the overseas churches. A very close working relationship between the two directors was anticipated.<sup>26</sup> This new partnership would encounter many obstacles in the coming decades.

Vernon Reimer had recently arrived in India to take on the responsibilities of director of MCC programs. He related exceptionally well to the Indian churches and would function in this role for the next ten years. Margaret Devadason was hired as a national staff person in the following year and would become a long-serving MCC India administrator. The national staff would grow to a total of sixteen people by the end of the decade, and would double again in the next decade.<sup>27</sup>

The program began with a strong component of material assistance, but this gradually shifted to a mix of agriculture, health, income generation, education, disaster response, and peacebuilding projects.<sup>28</sup> MCC India stopped implementing its own projects in the 1970s and began working in partnership with various mainline Protestant, evangelical, Catholic, and civil society Indian organizations that shared its development values and goals.<sup>29</sup> MCC India always included a strong urban component in its work, especially through its educational scholarship programs, which made it a

well-known and respected institution serving the schools and needy families in Calcutta.

MCC India developed a competent and very loyal staff who have been deeply committed to MCC faith-based values such as: (1) solidarity with the poor; (2) working with integrity and transparency with partners; (3) serving all people regardless of gender, caste, or creed; (4) working for peace with justice through nonviolent means; and (5) caring for all creation through environmentally sustainable development practices.

However, the location of MCC India in Calcutta was at a considerable distance from Mennonite and Brethren in Christ churches in central India, making it difficult to build strong working relationships with those churches and contributing to the fact that relatively few Indian Mennonites have served on its staff. Even so, a few long-term national MCC staff from Mennonite background developed a deep interest in nurturing a stronger Anabaptist theological perspective in their churches.

The foundation of MCC India in 1963 and its growth in the following decades would follow a paradigm shift from colonial era sensibilities to post-colonial sensibilities. The colonial mission enterprise was envisioned as bringing the Christian faith and Western civilization to native Indian communities,<sup>30</sup> and the North American Mennonite and Brethren in Christ mission agencies working in that era tended to fit uncritically into colonial-era sensibilities and social structures. This changed to a paradigm of “development,” where the task was seen as transferring knowledge and resources from the “developed world” to the so-called “underdeveloped world.” The ’60s and ’70s were widely heralded as the decades of development.<sup>31</sup> This ideology, and the neo-colonial global economic structures undergirding it, shaped the work of MCC India. MCC took up the burden of development even though it strove to serve in a way that connected people and empowered local communities. Mennonite faith values also contributed to keeping a critical distance from the nationalism that informed the development paradigm.<sup>32</sup>

### **Background to the Formation of MCSFI**

A complete picture of the formation and subsequent development of MCSFI must be understood in relation to earlier Mennonite and Brethren

in Christ mission programs in colonial India. All the missions had engaged in evangelism and church planting as well as famine relief, healthcare, and education. These efforts included establishing hospitals and primary and secondary schools. Those who converted to Christianity were almost entirely from very poor *Dalit* or outcaste backgrounds. Becoming Christian usually meant being ostracized and sometimes forcibly evicted from their former villages and social networks in predominantly Hindu rural India.<sup>33</sup> Consequently, these first Christians were almost completely dependent on Mennonite and Brethren in Christ mission stations for both their social network and their economic base of support. It was fairly common that as many as 85 percent of local Christians relied on the missions for salaries and support for their livelihood.<sup>34</sup> The stations themselves were almost completely dependent on foreign financial resources.

Foreign missionaries came to India out of a deep sense of religious dedication and at enormous personal cost, including frequent illness, emotional trauma, and even death.<sup>35</sup> Yet they lived in rural India in a way that set them apart from the surrounding communities. They built expansive mission stations, including personal dwellings (“bungalows”) that had six to eight rooms with high (14 to 16 foot) ceilings, surrounded by a wide veranda. Each missionary family hired a large staff of servants at nominal wages. This placed them in the class of foreign *sahibs* or masters within the socially stratified world of colonial India.<sup>36</sup> There was scant recognition of the contradictions entailed in their association with British imperialism.<sup>37</sup> The missionaries were completely in charge of churches and mission stations. After the first generation, considerable emphasis was placed on nationalizing churches and mission institutions and on making them self-supporting. This was done under the prevailing mission paradigm of self-propagation, self-government, and self-support, known as the “three-self” movement.<sup>38</sup> It was a process filled with many pitfalls and no easy solutions.

The movement toward self-government and self-support was well underway in the 1960s and partly impelled the creation of MCSFI. (This may help explain why MCC administrators were reluctant to give too many external funds to MCSFI in the following decades.) By the middle of the 1970s all the former mission churches and institutions were turned over to national control, and the foreign mission boards were rapidly phasing out

their work. MCC was the only remaining North American-based Mennonite agency with a significant presence in India. The speed and scope of the transition was traumatic for the Indian churches: a secure albeit paternalistic world had passed away, and an independent but more precarious world had emerged.<sup>39</sup>

### **The Development and Ministry of MCSFI**

Bishop Malagar, a gifted and promising Indian church leader in the post-colonial era, was appointed as MCSFI's first director, a position he would hold for the next eighteen years. MCC gave MCSFI an annual grant of US \$2,500 to cover the director's salary and related expenses, with the understanding that the Indian churches would gradually assume this financial obligation.<sup>40</sup> Although MCSFI was conceptualized as a national organization, its first board had five North American members and only three Indian members. The first chairman, vice-chairman, and treasurer were all North Americans.<sup>41</sup> The ability to give up control never comes easily, even for followers of Jesus with a theology of servant leadership.

The agenda of the new organization had these aims: (1) to promote Christian service in the spirit of Christ; (2) to work at disaster relief and the alleviation of human suffering; (3) to strengthen the fellowship of its associated churches; and (4) to promote evangelism and a Christian peace witness.<sup>42</sup> It was a bold and perhaps impossible task for a newly created organization representing six different church conferences spread across a huge geographical swath of the country. These churches spoke Hindi, Telegu, Bengali, and various regional dialects, and they had no prior experience of working together. Bishop Malagar and his family moved to Calcutta to take up his new position as MCSFI director, but things got off to a bumpy start when his family could not adapt to their new life there and had to move back to their home town of Dhamtari in central India. The bishop would subsequently make endless overnight train journeys between Dhamtari and Calcutta to do MCSFI work.<sup>43</sup>

The next several years saw a flurry of joint MCSFI and MCC disaster relief work in various parts of India, with volunteers from different Mennonite and Brethren in Christ churches traveling to assist these efforts. Bishop Malagar reports that "MCC sought the help of the churches and the response of the churches was immediate and intense."<sup>44</sup>

A major venture, ostensibly through an MCSFI and MCC India partnership, was the establishment of a hospital in a refugee settlement twenty miles north of Calcutta. This effort came in response to a request from the Bengal Refugee Service in cooperation with the West Bengal Health Department.<sup>45</sup> A separate MCSFI medical board was formed in 1964 to oversee the enterprise. Various logistical and financial difficulties kept getting in the way, but the Shyamnagar Christian Hospital finally opened in 1971.<sup>46</sup> Bishop Malagar saw the venture as having good intentions but an unfortunate outcome. Initially, he was the only Indian serving on the medical board; all the others were North American missionaries serving in Mennonite and Brethren in Christ hospitals. The bishop said he “mostly listened and did not say much during board meetings.” Gradually, more Indian Mennonites began serving on the board as North American missionary doctors and administrators left the country.<sup>47</sup>

The plan had been to involve the Indian churches directly, but getting church members to move there to serve the hospital and the surrounding community was difficult. There was a constant turnover of staff and administrators, and people from the community were never involved or brought into confidence.<sup>48</sup> The medical board eventually decided to close the hospital and turn the property over to the West Bengal government in 1979. A final indignity occurred when Bishop Malagar was appointed as secretary of the medical board in order to sign the legal transfer papers, even though he deeply regretted the need for this action.<sup>49</sup>

Several additional joint MCSFI and MCC India efforts in that period included service assignments in other parts of Asia. An Indian couple served in Vietnam under Vietnam Christian Services. Another Indian family served in Bangladesh. In the 1980s a medical team from the Dhamtari Christian Hospital went to Cambodia, and a doctor couple from the hospital served there for several years.<sup>50</sup>

A major MCSFI undertaking was promoting the peace witness of Mennonite and Brethren in Christ churches. Bishop Malagar arranged for Norman Kraus, an American Mennonite theologian, to teach at Serampore College in 1966-67. Kraus traveled and spoke in Mennonite and Brethren in Christ churches across India during that time, and kept returning on peace education assignments with the Mennonite churches in following years.

Reflecting on these experiences, he wrote that he had “a feeling that ‘peace witness’ in India means first of all sharing God’s infinite loving patience with people who think of almost everyone as a potential enemy.”<sup>51</sup> India has known incredible exploitation from both local elites and foreign conquerors and colonists that has fostered deep-seated distrust and a reluctance to share or delegate power. A common tragedy is that historically injured people tend to re-inflict injuries on each other; long-standing wounds must be healed in order to create a vibrant Christ-centered peace witness characterized by trust and mutual respect.

Bishop Malagar thought the Mennonite peace witness needed more radicalism and involvement in real-life situations. He lamented that no Mennonite or Brethren in Christ missionary in India ever became nationally known for his or her peace stance. Furthermore, the mission boards and MCC never saw fit to help Indian Mennonites establish a peace center. He wrote:

We have undertaken no “peace mission” and joined no “peace march” protesting against nuclear holocaust. We have not espoused the cause of the poor and downtrodden for social justice. We have lacked passion for the redress of injustices and the cessation of exploitation. We have accepted too easily the corruption in the government and society. We have been too placid and acted in a withdrawn manner. Possibly the Indian Mennonites need to develop their own genius in this field rather than just become too intelligent in Anabaptist history and theology.<sup>52</sup>

The most consistent and highly valued activity of MCSFI throughout its history was organizing all-India church conferences, trainings, and retreats as a way to build fellowship between Mennonite and Brethren in Christ churches and to encourage each other in their Christian faith. It is hard to overstate the significance of this ministry during a most difficult period in the history of these churches.<sup>53</sup>

### **Assessing MCSFI as an Organization**

The energy of MCSFI, including the number of activities it was involved in, was clearly in decline after its first decade. Organizationally it had not



grown beyond the position of the director, which still depended on foreign funds. Member conferences were often in arrears of the annual dues they had agreed to contribute, bringing into question the depth of grassroots support in the churches.<sup>54</sup>

Assessments of MCSFI's organizational viability go back to a self-study conducted in 1975. Representatives from each member conference all expressed their appreciation and support for MCSFI. There was considerable concern that MCSFI was not as active as it had been and that member church conferences were not giving adequate support. The consensus was that MCSFI should "remain largely a fellowship of churches, sharing needs and resources and seeking to strengthen each other."<sup>55</sup> The self-study did not bring substantial changes. Bishop Malagar resigned as director in 1981. Rev. R. S. Lemuel, a Mennonite Brethren leader, became director from 1981 to 1993. Bishop Shant Kunjam, a Mennonite Church of India leader, then served as director from 1993 to 2002.<sup>56</sup> Both of them had even less success in reactivating the ministry of MCSFI or in developing its capacity as a service agency. Their job involved the difficult tasks of relating both to a far-flung, often bickering church constituency and to generally critical MCC India staff and directors.<sup>57</sup> MCSFI, however, maintained the vital roles of bringing Mennonite and Brethren in Christ representatives together semi-annually to discuss shared interests and of organizing events that kept the churches in relationship with each other. It provided the one common forum for developing an Anabaptist identity, witness, and service among these churches.

A major consultation was held between MCSFI, MCC, and CIM (Commission on International Mission) in 1991 with the purpose of reviewing MCSFI's work. In retrospect, the consultation failed to address the real constraints to the growth of MCSFI and its ministry. A telling indication of the tenor of the consultation is a paper on "dependency" presented by a North American participant. The author wanted to move beyond a relationship of dependency to one of true reciprocity and partnership, but the way he defined dependency reflects American values of independence and self-sufficiency rather than the more communitarian Indian cultural values. Furthermore, the author proposed no concrete plan for creating more reciprocal and mutually accountable partnerships.<sup>58</sup> On a different note, an

Indian Mennonite Brethren leader at the consultation wrote:

We Christians in India love the Lord but the command to love our neighbor seems to escape our attention. There is a need to have some programmes for the non-Christian community around us, supported primarily by the churches of India. This will provide a much stronger witness and we shall be fulfilling the command to love our neighbor.<sup>59</sup>

One way of assessing the inertia in MCSFI during those years is to see it in relation to substantial shifts in its external environment. The traumatic transition from a colonial to a post-colonial world and its effect on Indian churches has already been mentioned. This transition created organizational and leadership challenges that many could not handle constructively. In addition, MCC India was MCSFI's major partner and source of funds in the 1960s and '70s. During this era MCC India had implemented various relief and development projects, often in communities where there were Mennonite and Brethren in Christ churches. But MCC India would profoundly alter this way of working.

In 1978 Bert Lobe, then serving as MCC India director, told the MCSFI annual general meeting that MCC was changing its method of operation. It would no longer administer programs itself but instead would move toward partnerships with indigenous organizations. According to Lobe, "our objective is to provide consultative advice and financial assistance to projects which are well organized, committed to true development, and work towards self-reliance with the support of the surrounding community."<sup>60</sup> MCSFI did not have the necessary staff or organizational capacity to implement projects itself, and no effort was made to help it develop such capacity. During the following decades, MCC India instead worked at Mennonite and Brethren in Christ related community development through small conference-level organizations. Organizational weakness, financial mismanagement, and internal church tensions kept them from performing according to MCC, external donor, and Indian government expectations. Consequently, these partnerships were gradually phased out, and the conference-level organizations were disbanded or continued to exist in name only.<sup>61</sup>

It became expedient for MCC India to work in partnership with larger or better organized Indian service agencies that had the capacity to respond

to disasters in an efficient and timely way and that could handle large projects in accordance with external planning, monitoring, and evaluation requirements. Eventually only a small fraction of the total MCC India program would be done in partnership with MCSFI or the Mennonite and Brethren in Christ churches.

Several Mennonite and Brethren in Christ related schools, hospitals, and student hostels have continued serving their communities with local resources, but the fiscal and organizational viability of most of them has been precarious. Failure to help build the organizational capacity of both MCSFI and local Mennonite and Brethren in Christ service agencies greatly constrained MCC India's ability to do quality relief and development work with the churches. Various MCC administrators have felt frustrated by this, because MCC sees itself as the service arm of the global Mennonite and Brethren in Christ churches. More recently, a concerted effort has arisen to help MCSFI develop its capacity to do relief, development, and peacebuilding programming. Rev. Emmanuel Minj, who became MCSFI director in 2002, had prior experience as an administrator in a major Indian company and was deeply committed to the life and service of Indian churches. His background was well suited to the needs of MCSFI at this juncture.

Under Rev. Minj's administration, MCSFI has established an office at a church center developed in cooperation with Bihar Mennonite Mandli in Ranchi, Jharkhand.<sup>62</sup> Initial steps to build the organization faced difficulties, but organizers were gradually able to recruit a small staff that has successfully managed several projects in partnership with constituent Indian churches and MCC India. These include a rural water project in Jharkhand, peace training for local churches, HIV/AIDS training, and vocational education scholarships through Mennonite and Brethren in Christ conference offices. They also coordinated several disaster relief projects. When the Kosi River flooded and displaced two million people in the state of Bihar in 2008, MCSFI organized a major relief response that included the efforts of local Brethren in Christ volunteers. In addition, MCSFI has set up all-India retreats and conferences for Mennonite and Brethren in Christ churches.<sup>63</sup>

MCSFI conducted another organizational assessment in 2009. Unlike previous assessments, this one included no representatives from

North American Mennonite mission agencies. Instead, delegates from the constituent Mennonite and Brethren in Christ conferences met in Ranchi, Jharkhand. The meeting was facilitated by an Indian Mennonite consultant. Participants affirmed that MCSFI will relate to its constituent church conferences in mission work through a partnership model. It will function like any other partner of MCC India, with special consideration for MCSFI's ability to do wholistic mission work. MCSFI will also work independently of MCC India and build partnerships with other bodies and funding agencies.<sup>64</sup> This reflects the growing maturity and organizational strength of MCSFI and its constituent churches. In turn, it bodes well for the future of Mennonite service in India.

### **Indian Social Realities**

The social situation in India has changed dramatically since representatives from Mennonite and Brethren in Christ missions met in 1942 in response to the humanitarian crisis created by World War II and the Bengal famine. Famines have been a cyclical part of India's history when the monsoon rains fail. Since independence, however, the Indian government has been able to respond to such crop failures in ways that averted mass famine. That in itself is a significant achievement.<sup>65</sup> At the time of Indian independence in 1947, public health services were in shambles, life expectancy was a mere 32.5 years, a public education system was almost nonexistent, and literacy stood at only 17 percent.<sup>66</sup> In comparison, life expectancy in 2005 had increased to 63.5 years. Basic education continues to be woefully inadequate, but the literacy rate in 2005 climbed to 61 percent.<sup>67</sup> Practically no economic growth occurred throughout the entire colonial period, but the economy began to grow slowly in the decades following independence and has been growing at a robust 6 percent a year since 1991. It has increased to an even more phenomenal growth rate of 8 or 9 percent in the past few years.<sup>68</sup>

Such economic growth has created a whole new middle class, but the persistence of a huge underbelly of extreme poverty remains a critical social problem. According to World Bank figures, extreme poverty declined from 60 percent of the population in 1981 to 42 percent in 2005. However, the total number of people living below the extreme poverty benchmark of US \$1.25 a day increased from 421 million in 1981 to 456 million in 2005.<sup>69</sup> People

from oppressed tribal and *Dalit* or outcaste groups (especially women and children) are the most destitute.

Migrating to large urban centers in search of menial work is the only choice for many poverty-stricken people. For example, Kolkata (formerly Calcutta) remains a magnet for economic refugees from the surrounding states that are among the poorest in India. The city had a population of about 4 million when MCC India began working there in the 1940s and is a megacity of 15 million today.<sup>70</sup> In the '40s thousands of Hindu refugees from East Bengal camped out at the Sealdah railway station several blocks from the present MCC India office; they had no other place to go, but the city eventually absorbed them. Today poor immigrants from Bihar, Orissa, and Bangladesh keep finding their way into Kolkata, one of the world's poorest, most congested, and most polluted major cities. Impoverished new arrivals live on the streets, earn something through menial labor, save a little, and eventually find a relatively more secure life. Poverty on the streets looks the same, but it involves a continual turnover as new immigrants replace those who move one rung up on the social ladder.<sup>71</sup>

### **Mennonite Responses**

Social service has always been at the heart of Mennonite and Brethren in Christ efforts in India. Such service is theologically rooted in the understanding of God as creator and of God's care for the whole creation. It is also rooted in Jesus' teaching that serving each other is central in the kingdom of God (Luke 22:24-30). South American Mennonite theologian Alfred Neufeld writes: "We serve as Christ serving others. A culture of service is necessary to respond to so many urgent human needs: lack of health, education, food and family; spiritual and economic poverty; the need for companionship, comfort and joy."<sup>72</sup>

The program of MCC India is rooted in this theology of service. From the very beginning, MCC India has helped Kolkata's impoverished masses find a better life. Education assistance has been central to an effort that also includes health and income generation projects. On a given day of the week, the children of poor laborers and domestic servants line up outside the MCC India office to apply for and receive educational scholarships. One of the most consistent ways in which poor families have lifted themselves out of poverty has been through the education of their children.

The other side of the coin is addressing the needs of rural India that force poor villagers to migrate to urban centers like Kolkata. India is dependent on the monsoon rains for the water necessary to grow crops, yet more than 70 percent of India's rainfall runs off into the sea.<sup>73</sup> MCC India's rural development work responds to this challenge with projects designed to harvest water through catchments and check dams and to use it to extend the growing season. Introducing vegetable farming helps to diversify cropping, supplies better nutrition, and provides an alternative source of income. The formation of self-help groups seeks to empower women, youth, and farmers through micro-credit schemes and rights-based approaches to development. Sloping agriculture technology is employed; it involves soil conservation and revitalization through contouring fields, planting trees along field perimeters, inter-cropping, and using organic compost. Still other projects work at rural health and HIV/AIDS programs. More recent projects focus on peacebuilding in response to communal and interfaith violence. Gender, environmental, and peacebuilding screens are applied to all projects.<sup>74</sup>

MCSFI has recently partnered directly with MCC India through the implementation of rural water, peacebuilding, HIV/AIDS, and vocational education projects, and disaster relief. Such projects have seen collaboration with Mennonite and Brethren in Christ churches. An ongoing challenge is how to collaborate effectively across geographical distances, linguistic divides, and distinct conference cultures among constituent churches. MCSFI has also sought to nurture Anabaptist faith and witness, including a Christian peace witness, among these churches. A recent peacebuilding effort is the creation of a "Centre for Peace Studies" at the Mennonite Brethren Centenary Bible College in Andhra Pradesh. The Centre teaches practical conflict mediation skills and Anabaptist peace theology to seminary students, and plans to serve as a resource for Mennonite and Brethren in Christ churches.<sup>75</sup> Another activity has focused on peacebuilding in the Kandhamal District, Orissa, after Hindu militants attacked Christian churches and villages in 2008. The Brethren in Christ conference in Orissa is spearheading an ecumenical effort to bring interfaith harmony to villages through conflict mediation training, youth activities, and organizing local peace committees.<sup>76</sup>

**Discerning the Future**

The 2009 gathering of Indian Mennonite and Brethren in Christ church leaders in Ranchi to assess MCSFI may be a landmark in the development of Mennonite service in India. It demonstrated the churches' growing maturity both within Indian society and in the global fellowship of Mennonite and Brethren in Christ churches. These churches were now at a very different place than they had been when the missionaries met in Champa in 1942 to organize a joint response to a humanitarian crisis. Delegates at the meeting in Ranchi strongly reaffirmed the value of collaborative Mennonite social action in India. Their decisions showed their appreciation and support of MCSFI's growing capacity as the joint service arm of the churches; MCSFI would work in partnership with MCC India but also form other significant partnerships or initiate self-standing service projects. They also reflect changes within the global socio-political order as countries like India and China become increasingly significant economic and political powers. Such developments call for structural changes within the global church.

In 2007 MCC began a global "Appreciative Inquiry" process called "New Wine/New Wineskins" designed to "engage all MCC stakeholders in discerning God's direction by creating a unifying vision and revised structure for MCC." The purpose of such envisioned restructuring is to better share "God's love and compassion for all 'In the Name of Christ' by responding to basic human needs and working for peace and justice."<sup>77</sup> One hoped-for outcome is to change the current structure of MCC international programs with the long-term goal of creating more national and multi-nation entities.<sup>78</sup> This has ramifications for future service. One can imagine MCC India eventually becoming a self-standing Indian entity in collaboration with other national entities that form a more globally structured MCC, rather than functioning as the country office of a North American agency.<sup>79</sup>

Whatever the future may hold, the global fellowship of Mennonite and Brethren in Christ churches can learn from, and draw on, the rich legacy of the past mission efforts. The centrality of service is part of that legacy which can inspire renewed activity today. For example, while India has made enormous social progress since independence, masses of people still live in debilitating poverty. Working with these people and helping to empower

them will remain central to Mennonite service in India in the foreseeable future.

North American and European mission agencies need to repent of their past associations with colonialism in India and other parts of the world, but we can learn from that experience. The Indian independence movement, along with many other independence movements in the global South, ushered in a post-colonial world. Yet new forms of domination persist in the global political and economic order. We will, therefore, want to pay attention to the ways in which early Mennonite and Brethren in Christ mission efforts were compromised by their association with the colonial world of British India. We should read it as a cautionary tale. Might our generation be as uncomprehending as they were about how mission programs, service projects, and people-to-people church relationships are distorted by present ideologies and power imbalances? This requires a continuing conversation in the global church.<sup>80</sup>

If we can see further, it is partly because we are standing on the shoulders of our Mennonite and Brethren in Christ forebears. Their service in India is a story of bridging worlds and struggling together to be followers of Jesus. It has involved the challenges and joys of building partnerships that empower poor and marginalized people. Through such efforts, they have grown in their ability to link hands ecumenically and across religious divides. Yes, it has included failures such as an inability to understand or trust each other, an unwillingness to relinquish power when necessary, not fully recognizing how dominant political and economic ideologies have shaped their imaginations, and having good intentions without sufficient planning or foresight. Yet people have persevered, grown spiritually, and developed their capacity to serve faithfully in exceptionally difficult situations. By doing so, they have given us a fertile legacy that can inform future Mennonite and Brethren in Christ service in India and around the world.



## Notes

<sup>1</sup> “Minutes: Joint-Meeting of all Mennonite Missions working in India on Relief work at Champa, C.P., April 9, 1942;” Archives of the Mennonite Church, Goshen, IN [hereafter AMC], Box IX 28-1 MCC India 1/4.

<sup>2</sup> Lawrence James, *Raj: The Making and Unmaking of British India* (New York: St. Martin’s Griffin, 1997), 573-78.

<sup>3</sup> An immediate concern was the dire situation of war evacuees as well as German and Italian prisoners of war being held in India. Letter from W.W. Bell of the YMCA to Rev. Penner, August 21, 1942. AMC, Box IX MCC India 1/17.

<sup>4</sup> James, *Raj: The Making and Unmaking of British India*, 579.

<sup>5</sup> P. J. Malagar, “Reminiscences, Observations and Comments Regarding Mennonite Central Committee India/MCSFI” (unpublished paper in the Historical Library & Archives: Research Center for Mennonite Studies in India, Shamshabad, Hyderabad [hereafter HL & A]), 1.

<sup>6</sup> “Minutes: Mennonite Relief Committee of India, Champa, C.P., January 10, 1947;” AMC, Box IX 28-1 MCC India 1/4. An 11-page paper titled “History and Present Status of the MCC Program” is attached to the minutes. This paper was read by Martin Schrag, secretary of MRCI, at the 1947 meeting. The minutes do not identify who wrote the paper.

<sup>7</sup> The city’s name was changed from anglicized spelling of “Calcutta” to the more Bengali spelling of “Kolkata” in 2001. In this paper I use the former spelling in historical references and the latter in contemporary references.

<sup>8</sup> The four service workers were Harold Sherk, R.C. Kaufman, Clayton Beyler, and J. Lawrence Burkholder. Sherk and Burkholder then also helped provide relief in China. See “Minutes: Mennonite Relief Committee of India, Champa, C.P., January 10, 1947;” AMC, Box IX 28-1 MCC India 1/4; “History and Present Status of the MCC Program,” 2.

<sup>9</sup> Still others were recruited for a planned ministry in Java. “History and Present Status of the MCC Program,” 3.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 4-5.

<sup>11</sup> Yasmin Khan, *The Great Partition: The Making of India and Pakistan* (London: Penguin, 2007): 63-66.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 69-70.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 6.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 151-52.

<sup>15</sup> MCC shipped 41 tons of food and clothing to India in 1947, and two more carloads of cereal were on the way. See the Archival Records from the *Mennonite Central Committee Workbook: 1947*. MCC Archives, Akron, PA.

<sup>16</sup> Archival Records from the *Mennonite Central Committee Workbook: 1949*. MCC Archives, Akron, PA.

<sup>17</sup> The Benedicts were serving with the United Mission Society in Calcutta. During those years the MCC office was located at Lee Memorial Mission, a Methodist church center at Wellington Square in Calcutta. This connection explains why the United Missionary Church in India has been active in Mennonite circles and became a member of the Mennonite World

Conference even as its parent United Missionary Church in North America left its Mennonite heritage. See *Mennonite Central Committee, India: Six Decades of Building Hope, 1940-99*. MCC India Library, Kolkata.

<sup>18</sup> Archival Records from 1958\_08EX. MCC Archives, Akron, PA.

<sup>19</sup> Archival Records from 1956\_08EX. MCC Archives, Akron, PA.

<sup>20</sup> Archival Records from 1959\_03EX. MCC Archives, Akron, PA.

<sup>21</sup> Archival Records from 1959\_08EX. MCC Archives, Akron, PA.

<sup>22</sup> P. J. Malagar, "Original Vision of MCSFI: Its Implementation," paper presented at the MCSFI/CIM/MCC Consultation, Lee Memorial Centre, Calcutta, Nov. 15-16, 1992. MCC India Library, Kolkata; also in HL & A.

<sup>23</sup> P.J. Malagar, "Reminiscences, Observations and Comments," 2.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 2-3.

<sup>25</sup> Rev. Alfred Rees, a United Missionary Society missionary, presented a persuasive challenge to include an urban social ministry in the city of Calcutta. This seems to have swayed the decision to keep Calcutta as the base of operations. Ibid., 3.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

<sup>27</sup> *Mennonite Central Committee, India: Six Decades of Building Hope: 1940-99*. MCC India Library, Kolkata.

<sup>28</sup> MCC India gradually became one of the biggest and strongest MCC country programs in the world with annual budgets of between one to three million US dollars. (Information gathered from various annual reports in the MCC India Library, Kolkata.)

<sup>29</sup> A. C. Lobe, "MCC India – History, Program and Method of Operation," paper presented at the May 5, 1978 annual general meeting, MCC India MCSFI files, Kolkata.

<sup>30</sup> This way of depicting their mission efforts is delightfully depicted by a photograph on the inside cover of the book *Twenty-five Years with God in India* (Berne, IN: Mennonite Book Concern, 1929). The photograph shows missionaries in a 1920s-era automobile meeting Indian natives riding on elephants. Underneath the picture is this paragraph: "The East coming out to meet the West. Since early history, the East had been out on a great quest. Her spices, pearls and material treasures do not satisfy. Her holy rivers, holy writings and her holy men do not satisfy. 'How shall they hear without a preacher? How shall they preach except they be sent?'"

<sup>31</sup> Akhil Gupta writes, "Development discourse makes people subjects in both senses that Foucault emphasizes: subjected to someone else by a relationship of control and dependence and tied to one's own identity through self-knowledge. 'Developed' and 'underdeveloped' are not just terms that indicate the positions of nation-states in an objective matrix . . . . They are also, and to my mind far more importantly, forms of identity in the postcolonial world." Akhil Gupta, *Postcolonial Developments: Agriculture in the Making of Modern India* (Durham, NC: Duke Univ. Press, 1998), 39-40.

<sup>32</sup> An informative book on Mennonite development perspectives is Richard A. Yoder, Calvin W. Redekop, and Vernon E. Jantzi, *Development to a Different Drummer: Anabaptist/Mennonite Experiences and Perspectives* (Intercourse, PA: Good Books, 2004).

<sup>33</sup> An insightful chapter on this sociological phenomenon is by Saurabh Dube, "Issues of Christianity in Colonial Chhattisgarh," in Rowenda Robinson, ed., *Sociology of Religion in*

*India* (New Delhi: Sage Publications, 2004), 231-55. The chapter was originally published in *Sociological Bulletin* 41.1 & 2 (1992): 97-117.

<sup>34</sup> James C. Juhnke, *A People of Mission: A History of General Conference Mennonite Overseas Missions* (Newton, KS: Faith and Life Press, 1975), 35.

<sup>35</sup> P. J. Malagar, *The Mennonite Church in India* (Nagpur: The National Council of Churches in India, 1981), 33.

<sup>36</sup> John A. Lapp, *The Mennonite Church in India, 1897-1962* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1972), 74-75. As I visit these former mission stations today with Indian Mennonites, someone will invariably mention that the missionaries lived like royalty. One church leader recalled the awe he felt as a little boy when he visited their homes and saw all their servants and the manicured lawns.

<sup>37</sup> For example, the General Conference Mennonite missionaries used the authority of the British Chief Commissioner to persuade the local Indian king to lease them a suitable eight-acre tract of land for their mission station. See Juhnke, *A People of Mission*, 22-24.

<sup>38</sup> P.J. Malagar, *The Mennonite Church in India*, 41.

<sup>39</sup> More research needs to be done on the reasons behind this rapid transition. The Indian government's refusal to renew missionary visas was certainly the primary reason, but there also appears to have been declining support for such mission efforts among Mennonites in North America. A excellent account of the transition in one conference is contained in a thesis submitted to the Union Biblical Seminary, Pune by Sushant Rajat Nand, "Bharathya General Conference Mennonite Church in Chhattisgarh, From 1980-2005." MCC India Library, Kolkata; also in HL & A.

<sup>40</sup> Archival Records from 1963\_03EX. MCC Archives, Akron, PA.

<sup>41</sup> Memorandum of Association of Mennonite Christian Service Fellowship of India, Certificate of Registration No. S/ 8816 of 67-68 Government of West Bengal. MCC India MCSFI files, Kolkata; also in HL & A.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid.

<sup>43</sup> The children had to switch to a new language of instruction in school and were not able to adjust to "city congestion, traffic, and rotting garbage." The whole family got dengue fever and their youngest son required emergency hospitalization. See P.J. Malagar, "Reminiscences, Observations and Comments," 3-4.

<sup>44</sup> Such work involved a cooperative network of other organizations such as Lutheran World Service, Oxfam, and CASA (Church's Auxiliary for Social Action). Pooling funds and personnel was a common practice. A significant disaster relief project was conducted in response to a devastating cyclone that struck the Chittagong area of present-day Bangladesh in 1963. Ibid., 4-5.

<sup>45</sup> Archival Records from *Mennonite Central Committee Workbook: 1964*. MCC Archives, Akron, PA.

<sup>46</sup> *Mennonite Central Committee: 50 Years of Service in India* [1993]. MCC India Library, Kolkata.

<sup>47</sup> In his reminiscences of these events, Bishop Malagar wrote, "It was the saddest day when we had to bury our hopes since we had not given the Indian Mennonite churches any chances, even a chance to consider taking over, to add insult to injury I was appointed secretary of

the board to effect the actual transfer and to sign the instrument of legal transfer which I did very reluctantly.” See P.J. Malagar, “Reminiscences, Observations and Comments,” 8. See also “Minutes of the MCSFI Medical Board Meeting,” January 20, 1979. MCC Archives, Akron, PA.

<sup>48</sup> Efforts to turn the hospital over to the Emmanuel Hospital Association proved futile because the government had not given the medical board a clear lease agreement on the property. A.C. Lobe, “Secretary’s Report to the Mennonite Christian Service Fellowship of India Medical Board Annual General Meeting,” February 19, 1979, MCC Archives, Akron, PA.

<sup>49</sup> Malagar, “Reminiscences,” 8.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid., 5. See also Emmanuel Minj, “A Brief History of MCSFI.” MCC India MCSFI files, Kolkata.

<sup>51</sup> Archival Records from *Mennonite Central Committee Workbook: 1966*. MCC Archives, Akron, PA.

<sup>52</sup> Malagar, “Reminiscences,” 7.

<sup>53</sup> MCSFI also functioned as the host agency for international meetings and conferences, including the 13th Mennonite World Conference Assembly, held in Calcutta in 1997. Emmanuel Minj, “A Brief History of MCSFI.” MCC India MCSFI files, Kolkata.

<sup>54</sup> MCSFI did not even have an office for several years. The MCC India director had asked that the office in the MCC building in Calcutta be vacated because of concerns that the Indian government would think MCC India was directly involved in the teaching and evangelistic ministries of the Mennonite and Brethren in Christ churches. Letter from David Gerber, MCC Director, to MCSFI Executive Committee Members, May 15, 1999. MCC India MCSFI files, Kolkata. A year earlier Gerber had written a confidential three-page memo in which he expressed serious doubts about the continuing viability of MCSFI as an organization. See “MCSFI and the Future,” April 20, 1998. MCC India MCSFI files, Kolkata.

<sup>55</sup> They affirmed the objectives of MCSFI as: (1) social services, relief, and development; (2) evangelism and church planting; and (3) the distinctive teaching of the Anabaptist faith such as peace and witness. Report of the MCSFI Self Study held on May 2, 1975 at the Lee Memorial Centre, Calcutta. MCC India MCSFI files, Kolkata; also in HL & A.

<sup>56</sup> Emmanuel Minj, “A Brief History of MCSFI.” MCC India MCSFI files, Kolkata. More research needs to be done on the period in the history of MCSFI. Rev. R. S. Lemuel especially worked on strengthening relationships between the various conferences. Files for the years when he was director are contained in HL & A.

<sup>57</sup> One of the most critical observations I found in my research reads, “MCSFI was set up by MCC in the 60s and continues to be dependent on MCC funding however limited. Is it any wonder that it be so? It was not created because the grass roots felt a need for it, and they still don’t see its importance. It is MCC’s baby whether we like it or not. Whether the churches want the responsibility of adopting a lazy spoiled baby is not yet clear. Neither is it clear if the baby will mature into adulthood with no support from underneath and a parent ashamed to claim him.” See Fred Kauffman, “Reflections on Korba Meeting MCC/MCSFI,” Oct. 20, 1980. MCC India MCSFI files, Kolkata.

<sup>58</sup> Dr. Glen Miller, “Dependency,” MCSFI/CIM/MCC Consultation, Nov. 15-16, 1991, Calcutta, India. MCC India Library, Kolkata; also in HL & A.

<sup>59</sup> Dr. P.B. Arnold, “Keynote Address,” MCSFI/CIM/MCC Consultation, Nov. 15-16, 1991, Calcutta, India. MCC India Library, Kolkata; also in HL & A.

<sup>60</sup> A. C. Lobe, “MCC India – History, Program and Method of Operation,” paper presented to the May 5, 1978 MCFI Annual General Meeting. MCC India MCSFI files, Kolkata.

<sup>61</sup> MCC India director Edward Miller raised these issues related to the capacity of the Mennonite Brethren Development Organization (MBDO) in Andhra Pradesh to handle a development project. His concerns include the fact that MBDO has filed no tax returns and appointed no external auditor, the Mennonite Brethren churches are not even contributing to the director’s salary, and the past failure of MBDO to do completion reports on relief activities. Miller also reports that past MCC India development partnerships with four other Mennonite local conference organizations were closed because of their mismanagement and failure to complete projects. He insists that any MBDO project funded by MCC would have to be through MCSFI and with prior MCSFI approval. See letter from Edward Miller to Darren Duerksen, August 25, 2003. MCC India, MB Church and MBDO file, Kolkata.

<sup>62</sup> Neil Janzen, “Mennonite Central Committee Management Trip to Ranchi, Jharkhand,” July 17-18, 2007. MCC India MCSFI files, Kolkata.

<sup>63</sup> Emmanuel Minj, “A Brief History of MCSFI.” MCC India MCSFI files, Kolkata.

<sup>64</sup> The consultation affirmed that the mission of MCSFI includes the following activities: (1) intra and inter-conference fellowship, (2) meaningful engagement with other communities and religions, (3) peace and justice interventions, (4) facilitating the empowerment of vulnerable and marginalized communities, (5) disaster relief and rehabilitation, and (6) working to enhance and revive the Anabaptist and Mennonite movement among its constituent churches. “MCSFI – Looking Ahead Policy Statement,” adopted at the Joint Consultation on Mission and Service at Ranchi Jharkhand on March 4, 2009. MCC India MCSFI files, Kolkata.

<sup>65</sup> Jeffrey D. Sachs, *The End of Poverty: Economic Possibilities for our Times* (New York: The Penguin Press, 2005), 175.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*, 174-76.

<sup>67</sup> Dan Smith, *The Penguin State of the World Atlas*, 8th ed. (London: Penguin Books, 2008), 124-25.

<sup>68</sup> Edward Luce, *In Spite of the Gods: The Strange Rise of Modern India* (New York: Doubleday, 2007), 39.

<sup>69</sup> New Global Poverty Estimates – What it means for India: <http://www.worldbank.org.in/> (accessed on Aug. 1, 2009).

<sup>70</sup> UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Population: <http://www.un.org/esa/population/> (accessed on Aug. 1, 2009).

<sup>71</sup> Robert D. Kaplan, “Oh! Kolkata!” *The Atlantic* (April 2008) <http://www.theatlantic.com/doc/200804/kolkata> (accessed on Aug. 1, 2009).

<sup>72</sup> Alfred Neufeld, *What We Believe Together: Exploring the “Shared Convictions” of Anabaptist-Related Churches* (Intercourse, PA: Good Books, 2007), 134.

<sup>73</sup> Luce, *In Spite of the Gods*, 338.

<sup>74</sup> *MCC India Annual Report 2008*. MCC India Library, Kolkata.

<sup>75</sup> Rev. I. P. Asheervadam, “Concept Paper: Centre for Peace Studies of the Mennonite Brethren Centenary Bible College.” MCC India MCSFI files, Kolkata.

<sup>76</sup> General Plan Format: “Orissa Communal and Interfaith Peacebuilding, Dec. 8, 2009 (MCC India Orissa files, Kolkata). Both the Centre for Peace Studies and the Orissa peacebuilding effort involved a partnership between MCC India, MCSFI, and area Mennonite and Brethren in Christ conferences.

<sup>77</sup> <http://mcc.org/newwineskins/> (accessed on Aug. 1, 2009).

<sup>78</sup> Ibid.

<sup>79</sup> An external matter that may force MCC’s hand in making MCC India a self-standing entity is the Indian government’s reluctance to give work visas to expatriates to serve as directors of MCC India. A more positive factor is that national service agencies are legally able to access resources within India while branch offices of foreign agencies are not able to do so. Such restructuring also raises the matter of the relationship between MCC India and MCSFI. Might we even envision the merger of MCC India and MCSFI into one Mennonite service agency?

<sup>80</sup> For pertinent insight into ways in which colonialism and structures of power shape Christian mission and theology, see Joerg Rieger, *Globalization and Theology* (Nashville: Abingdon Press), 2010.

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

*Paul Shetler Fast*

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

### **1954-1976: Foundational Choices**

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

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

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

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



narrow calling to aiding the Vietnamese people with respect to need, not religion.<sup>9</sup>

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Hostetter. The controversy was a major point of division within VNCS about how “political” the organization should be and how much it should adhere to US policy objectives.<sup>28</sup>

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

### **1976-1989: A Long-Distance Relationship**

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

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

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

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

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

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



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

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

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

Part of this initial push was the “Friendshipment” project, which brought many of MCC’s old partner organizations back together and refocused the international media on Vietnam, at least briefly.<sup>61</sup> In 1975 a coalition of agencies interested in reconstruction and normalized relations



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

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

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

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

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

### **1990-2008: New Beginnings**

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

In explaining MCC’s unique place among NGOs, Đinh Thị Vinh, a Program Officer since 1997, said that “MCC was and is a bridge between nations” that is a “place of sharing.”<sup>103</sup> She explained that “MCC workers

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

### **Carrying a Weight Beyond Its Numbers**

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

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



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

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

## Notes

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

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

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

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

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

<sup>6</sup> Flipse, "Bearing the Cross of Vietnam," 131-34.

<sup>7</sup> *Mennonite Central Committee Workbook: 1954* (Akron, PA: MCC, 1954), Relief Section 1-2.

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

<sup>9</sup> Willard S. Krabill, interview by author, February 20, 2008, Goshen, IN, recording and notes, personal files of author, Goshen, IN.

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



# 151, August 14, 1947 to Session #226, December 30, 1954. MCC Archives Collection IX-5-1, AMC-G.

<sup>11</sup> Krabill, interview.

<sup>12</sup> Willard S. Krabill, Saigon, Vietnam, to J.N. Byler, Akron, PA, Activity and Program Report, November 12, 1955, 2-4.

<sup>13</sup> Krabill, interview.

<sup>14</sup> Atlee Beechy, *Vietnam: Who Cares?* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1968), 78.

<sup>15</sup> Robert S. Kreider and Rachel Waltner Goossen, *Hungry, Thirsty, a Stranger: The MCC Experience* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1988), 144.

<sup>16</sup> Doug Hostetter, interview by author, July 26, 2007, New York, NY; recording and notes, personal files of author, Goshen, IN.

<sup>17</sup> Lowell Jantzi, interview by author, April 29, 2007, Halong City, Vietnam; recording and notes, personal files of author, Goshen, IN.

<sup>18</sup> Krabill, interview.

<sup>19</sup> Martin, "An Evaluation of a Generation," 5.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 17-18.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 39.

<sup>22</sup> "Churches Weigh Vietnam Position: Discuss Aid to Refugees and Moral Issues of War," *New York Times*, August 21, 1965, 24.

<sup>23</sup> Martin, "An Evaluation of a Generation," 183.

<sup>24</sup> Beechy, 74 and 87.

<sup>25</sup> Martin, "An Evaluation of a Generation," 27-30.

<sup>26</sup> Hostetter, interview; and Martin, "An Evaluation of a Generation," 26.

<sup>27</sup> Bernard Weinraub, "Volunteer Aides in Saigon Dispute: American Welfare Workers Say U.S. Officials Press Them to Support War," *New York Times*, September 15, 1967.

<sup>28</sup> Hostetter, interview.

<sup>29</sup> Max Ediger, "Suggestions for the New MCC Program in Vietnam (The Ediger Papers)," Internal Report, 26 July 1972, MCC, Microfilm file 6: MCC Executive Committee and Annual Meeting Minutes, Session # 337, October 1-2, 1969 to Session #364, September 10, 1973. MCC Archive Collection IX-5-1, AMC-G.

<sup>30</sup> Martin, "An Evaluation of a Generation," 104.

<sup>31</sup> MCC Vietnam Annual Report, 1973 (November 1973), quoted in Martin, "An Evaluation of a Generation," 35.

<sup>32</sup> Earl S. Martin, *Reaching the Other Side: The Journal of an American who Stayed to Witness Vietnam's Postwar Transition* (New York: Crown, 1978), 60-69.

<sup>33</sup> Krieder and Goossen, *Hungry, Thirsty, a Stranger*, 154.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., 153; and Atlee Beechy, "Hanoi: The Wounds and Paradoxes of War," Internal Report, 4 February 1974, MCC, Exhibit 5B, Session #369, Annual Meeting, January 17-19, 1974, Microfilm file 7: MCC Executive Committee and Annual Meeting Minutes, Session # 365, Sept 26-27, 1973 to Session #373, December 11-12, 1974. MCC Archive Collection IX-5-1, AMC-G, 1.

<sup>35</sup> Atlee Beechy, "Message from Atlee Beechy: North Vietnam Visit," Internal Report, MCC, Exhibit 5A, Session #369, Annual Meeting, January 17-19, 1974, Microfilm file 7: MCC

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

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

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

<sup>38</sup> Flipse, 7-11.

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

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

<sup>41</sup> Max Ediger, "Choosing to Stay When Others Leave," *The Mennonite*, August 8, 2000.

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

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

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

<sup>45</sup> Hiebert, "Diary of Visit to Vietnam: November 12-29, 1975," 4.

<sup>46</sup> Martin, Zehr, and Miller, "Vietnam Trip Report: November 12-29, 1975," 13.

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

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

<sup>49</sup> Ibid.

<sup>50</sup> Martin, "An Evaluation of a Generation," 111.

<sup>51</sup> "Minutes of MCC Annual Meeting, January 22-24, 1976," Meeting Minutes, MCC,

Microfilm file 9: MCC Executive Committee and Annual Meeting Minutes, January 15, 1973 to Session #407, September 15-16, 1978. MCC Archive Collection IX-5-1, AMC-G, 13-14.

<sup>52</sup> Kreider and Goossen, *Hungry, Thirsty, a Stranger*, 154.

<sup>53</sup> “Minutes of MCC Annual Meeting, January 22-24, 1976,” 13.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, 14.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>56</sup> Paul Longacre, “Objectives, Assumptions, Priorities and Strategies for 1976,” Internal Report, MCC, Exhibit 4, MCC Annual Meeting, January 22-24, 1976, Microfilm file 9: MCC Executive Committee and Annual Meeting Minutes, January 15, 1973 to Session #407, September 15-16, 1978, MCC Archive Collection IX-5-1, AMC-G, 62a.

<sup>57</sup> Vern Preheim, “MCC and Government Licenses for Aid to Vietnam,” Internal Report, January 20, 1976, MCC, Exhibit 4, MCC Annual Meeting, January 22-24, 1976, Microfilm file 9: MCC Executive Committee and Annual Meeting Minutes, January 15, 1973 to Session #407, September 15-16, 1978. MCC Archive Collection IX-5-1, AMC-G, 5.

<sup>58</sup> Kreider and Goossen, *Hungry, Thirsty, a Stranger*, 155.

<sup>59</sup> “Minutes of MCC Annual Meeting, January 22-24, 1976,” 13-16.

<sup>60</sup> *Mennonite Central Committee Workbook: 1976* (Akron, PA: MCC, 1976), 59.

<sup>61</sup> “U.S. Groups Seeking Help For Vietnams,” *New York Times*, October 3, 1975. See <http://select.nytimes.com/gst/abstract.html?res=F00F10FE3C5B157493C1A9178BD95F418785F9>.

<sup>62</sup> *Church World Service: 50 Years of Friendship and Cooperation with Vietnam* (Vietnam: Church World Service, 2004), 63-71.

<sup>63</sup> “Minutes of MCC Executive Committee Meeting, September 24-25, 1975,” 9.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>65</sup> “Minutes of MCC Executive Committee Meeting, June 15-16, 1977,” Meeting Minutes, MCC, Microfilm file 9: MCC Executive Committee and Annual Meeting Minutes, January 15, 1973 to Session #407, September 15-16, 1978. MCC Archive Collection IX-5-1, AMC-G, 14-15.

<sup>66</sup> Paul Toews, *Mennonites in American Society, 1930-1970: Modernity and the Persistence of Religious Community*, vol. 4, The Mennonite Experience in America (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1996), 322. For a fuller discussion of the MCC Washington Office, see Keith Graber Miller, *Wise as Serpents, Innocent as Doves: American Mennonites Engage Washington* (Knoxville, TN: Univ. of Tennessee Press, 1996).

<sup>67</sup> *Mennonite Central Committee Workbook: 1982* (Akron, PA: MCC, 1982), 83-84.

<sup>68</sup> “East Asia Department: Description & Budget: Fiscal Years 1991-1993: Viet Nam,” Budget Proposal, MCC, Microfilm roll # 223. MCC Archive Collection IX-5-1, AMC-G, 1-2.

<sup>69</sup> *Mennonite Central Committee Workbook: 1986* (Akron, PA: MCC, 1986), 76-77; and Janet Reedy and Stan Reedy, interview by author, July 18, 2007, Ypsilanti, MI; notes and recording, personal files of author, Goshen, IN.

<sup>70</sup> “Mennonite Central Committee Viet Nam Field Guide: January 1996,” MCC, Vietnam File 6. MCC Archives, Akron, PA, 4.

<sup>71</sup> Reedy and Reedy interview.

<sup>72</sup> Hostetter, “Supplementary Report on Paris, Rome Trip, February 17- March 4, 1973.”

<sup>73</sup> Larry Kehler, "What Is MCC Doing?," *Gospel Herald*, January 25, 1966, 78.

<sup>74</sup> James Riedel and William S. Turley, "The Politics and Economics of Transition to an Open Market Economy in Viet Nam," *Organization of Economic Cooperation and Development, Development Center Working Paper No. 152* (September 1999), 13-18.

<sup>75</sup> Le Anh Kiet, interview by author, April 25, 2007, Hanoi, Vietnam; notes, personal files of author, Goshen, IN.

<sup>76</sup> Reedy and Reedy interview.

<sup>77</sup> Ibid.

<sup>78</sup> Stan Reedy, "Sunday, June 10, 1990," journal entry, June 10, 1990, 1-6, personal files of Stan and Janet Reedy, Ypsilanti, MI, 4.

<sup>79</sup> Reedy and Reedy interview.

<sup>80</sup> Miriam Hershberger, "Report on Miriam Hershberger's Deportation from Vietnam," Personal Report, 1990, 1-10, MCC, personal files of Stan and Janet Reedy, Ypsilanti, MI, 1.

<sup>81</sup> Ibid., 2.

<sup>82</sup> Phuc Nguyen, "Why Was The English Language Teacher Miriam Hershberger Deported?" translated newspaper article from *Quan Doi Nhan Dan*, July 28, 1990, 1-3, personal files of Stan and Janet Reedy, Ypsilanti, MI, 1.

<sup>83</sup> *Mennonite Central Committee Workbook: 1990* (Akron, PA: MCC, 1990), 71.

<sup>84</sup> Reedy and Reedy interview.

<sup>85</sup> Ibid.

<sup>86</sup> *Mennonite Central Committee Workbook: 1990*, 69.

<sup>87</sup> Reedy and Reedy interview.

<sup>88</sup> Glen E. Miller, Stephen Gonsalves, and Louise Buhler, "MCC-Vietnam Program Evaluation Report, 1993-1998," MCC, Vietnam Files. MCC Archives, Akron, PA, 4.

<sup>89</sup> Ann Martin, "Follow-up to MCC's May-June 1993 Indochina/Thailand Regional Evaluation," MCC, MCC Vietnam Evaluation, Vietnam File 8. MCC Archives, Akron, PA, 3-4.

<sup>90</sup> Pat Hostetter Martin and Earl S. Martin, interview by author, July 24, 2007, Harrisonburg, VA; notes and recording, personal files of author, Goshen, IN.

<sup>91</sup> Mary Etherton, ed., *Non-Governmental Organizations in Vietnam: Vietnam NGO Directory* (Hanoi: The Gioi Publishers, 1992); and Nguyen Kim Ha, *Lessons Learned from a Decade of Experience: A Strategic Analysis of INGO Methods and Activities in Vietnam 1990-1999* (Hanoi: VUFO-NGO Resource Center, 2001), 13.

<sup>92</sup> Ha, *Lessons Learned from a Decade of Experience*, 12.

<sup>93</sup> Ibid., 16.

<sup>94</sup> Miller, Gonsalves, and Buhler, "MCC-Vietnam Program Evaluation Report, 1993-1998," 10.

<sup>95</sup> *Mennonite Central Committee Workbook: 1992* (Akron, PA: MCC, 1992), 72.

<sup>96</sup> *Mennonite Central Committee Workbook: 1994* (Akron, PA: MCC, 1994), 65.

<sup>97</sup> Ibid., 65.

<sup>98</sup> Miller, Gonsalves, and Buhler, "MCC-Vietnam Program Evaluation Report, 1993-1998," 10-11.

<sup>99</sup> *Mennonite Central Committee Workbook: 1998* (Akron, PA: MCC, 1998), 65.

<sup>100</sup> Lowell Jantzi, interview by author, April 29, 2007, Halong City, Vietnam; recording and notes, personal files of author, Goshen, IN.

<sup>101</sup> Tô Thi Bầy, interview by author, April 27, 2007, Hanoi, Vietnam; recording and notes, personal files of author, Goshen, IN.

<sup>102</sup> Ibid.

<sup>103</sup> Đinh Thị Vinh, interview by author, April 27, 2007, Hanoi, Vietnam; recording and notes, personal files of author, Goshen, IN.

<sup>104</sup> Ibid.

<sup>105</sup> Lady Borton, interview by author, April 27, 2007, Hanoi, Vietnam; notes, personal files of author, Goshen, IN.

<sup>106</sup> Perry Bush, "Vietnam and the Burden of Mennonite History," *The Conrad Grebel Review* 17.2 (1999): 5-27.

<sup>107</sup> Earl S. Martin, Harrisonburg, VA, Perry Bush, Bluffton, OH, personal letter in response to "Vietnam and the Burden of Mennonite History," June 22, 1998, Vietnam File 8. MCC Archives, Akron, PA.

<sup>108</sup> Martin and Martin, 2007 interview.

<sup>109</sup> Kreider and Goossen, *Hungry, Thirsty, a Stranger*, 150.

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# **Exploring the Gap Between Mennonite and Indigenous Neighbors: Snapshots from the Story of Native Concerns, MCC Canada<sup>1</sup>**

*Neil Funk-Unrau*

## **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.<sup>2</sup>

### **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.<sup>3</sup>

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.<sup>4</sup> 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.<sup>5</sup>

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.<sup>6</sup>

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.<sup>7</sup> 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.<sup>8</sup>

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.<sup>9</sup>

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.<sup>10</sup> 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.<sup>11</sup> 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.<sup>12</sup>

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.<sup>13</sup>

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.<sup>14</sup> 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.<sup>15</sup> 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?<sup>16</sup> 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.<sup>17</sup>

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.<sup>18</sup>

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.<sup>19</sup> 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.<sup>20</sup> 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,<sup>21</sup> leading to intense debate about MCCC's role and NC's involvement in confrontational situations.<sup>22</sup>

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.<sup>23</sup> 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.<sup>24</sup> 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.<sup>25</sup>

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.<sup>26</sup>

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.<sup>27</sup>

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.<sup>28</sup>



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.<sup>29</sup> 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.<sup>30</sup>

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.<sup>31</sup>

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.<sup>32</sup>

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.<sup>33</sup> 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.<sup>34</sup>

### **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.<sup>35</sup> 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.<sup>36</sup>

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?”<sup>37</sup> 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.<sup>38</sup>

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.<sup>39</sup>

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.<sup>40</sup>

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.<sup>41</sup>

## **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

<sup>1</sup> 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.

<sup>2</sup> 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.

<sup>3</sup> “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.

<sup>4</sup> “Job Description,” Vol. 3023, File NC-27.

<sup>5</sup> “Native Canadian and MCC (Canada),” undated (probably 1973), 2. Vol. 2475, File EO-85.

<sup>6</sup> “Delineation of Services,” memo from Menno Wiebe to Ike Froese, executive secretary of Native Ministries, January 10, 1978. Vol. 3023, File NC-27.

<sup>7</sup> See Menno Wiebe, “Mennonite Response to Aboriginal Cultural Identity,” 1992. Vol. 3995, File 1714-R-1992 CA NATI.

<sup>8</sup> The gardening project is discussed more fully below.

<sup>9</sup> Report to MCC Canada Annual Meeting, January 1978. Vol. 3023, File NC-27.

<sup>10</sup> “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.

<sup>11</sup> 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.

<sup>12</sup> 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.

<sup>13</sup> Native Concerns Report to the MCC Canada annual meeting, January 16-17, 1976. Vol. 3023, File NC-27.

<sup>14</sup> 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.

<sup>15</sup> 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.

<sup>16</sup> Minutes of MCC Canada Executive Committee Meeting, June 9-10, 1977. Vol. 3023, File NC-27.

<sup>17</sup> Native Concerns Report to the MCC Canada annual meeting, January 16-17, 1976. Vol. 3023, File NC-27.

<sup>18</sup> 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.

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

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 10.

<sup>21</sup> 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.

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

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

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 22.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 40.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 45.

<sup>27</sup> Robert Miller, "MCC and Native Resource Development," September 18, 1990. Vol. 1856, File 447-R-1990 CA NATI.

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

<sup>29</sup> Eric Rempel, "Evaluation of the Native Gardening Program."

<sup>30</sup> Personal conversation with Rick Zerbe Cornelson, Coordinator of the Aboriginal Neighbours program, 1998-2003.

<sup>31</sup> "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.

<sup>32</sup> Menno Wiebe, "Valentine's Day Justice," February 14, 1996, 2. Vol. 5081, File 447-R-1996 CA NATI.

<sup>33</sup> Personal conversation with Rick Zerbe Cornelson.

<sup>34</sup> A full analysis of the Aboriginal Neighbours program is unfortunately beyond the scope of this paper.

<sup>35</sup> "Native Canadian and MCC (Canada)," undated (probably 1973). Vol. 2475, File EO-85.

<sup>36</sup> Native Concerns Report to the MCC Canada annual meeting, January 16-17, 1976, 4. Vol. 3023, File NC-27.

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

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

<sup>39</sup> Ibid., 5.

<sup>40</sup> Menno Wiebe, "Mennonite Response to Aboriginal Cultural Identity," 1992. Vol. 3995, File 1714-R-1992 CA NATI.

<sup>41</sup> Menno Wiebe, "Valentine's Day Justice," February 14, 1996. Vol. 5081, File 447-R-1996 CA NATI.

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## **In Search of Divine Wisdom: Perspectives on the Church and MCC from Old Testament Wisdom<sup>1</sup>**

*W. Derek Suderman*

As one form of the church in ministry, the Mennonite Central Committee (MCC) has wrestled with how to describe and understand the relationship between the particular faith tradition from which it emerges on the one hand, and its engaged stance beyond this community on the other. Unfortunately, these two options can sometimes be portrayed as distinct or even mutually exclusive: *either* MCC should remain faithful to its particular Mennonite perspective *or* it should adopt a more generic, inclusive perspective in order to broaden its appeal and potential influence.

Supporters of the first option may place a high priority on explicitly articulating the theological basis for their work, and may prove somewhat hesitant to cooperate with other organizations or groups that do not share such an orientation. Those more inclined to the second option often highly value relationships with others interested in similar issues, and may see an explicitly theological orientation as an unnecessary stumbling block to such partnerships. Understood within such a framework, the particularity of the Mennonite tradition may be seen by some as dispensable baggage that MCC should throw overboard, while others may insist upon the centrality of a theologically explicit perspective and view anything less as compromised and flawed.

I believe such a choice reflects a false dichotomy that should be dismantled, and suggest that Old Testament wisdom provides a valuable resource for moving beyond such an impasse. A robust view of biblical wisdom offers a perspective for understanding and articulating how the church and its organizations embody a particular view of the Christian gospel, while recognizing that divine wisdom also lies beyond the church. Instead of requiring a decision between two incompatible options, wisdom and particularity coexist in a dynamic relationship that moves in both directions. Deepening our understanding of, and commitment to, the particularity of

the Christian gospel leads us to live out this particularity, which in turn reflects a distinctive form of wisdom, while modeling alternative practices and engaging in debate, even without explicit theological articulation, prompts interest in our particularity by people outside the church. In effect, lived particularity embodies wisdom, and embodied wisdom testifies to particularity.

In this paper I discuss three aspects of OT wisdom that prove especially relevant for the church and its organizations such as MCC about the relationship between wisdom and particularity. First, the OT provides examples where wisdom is recognized as such beyond cultural, ethnic, national, and religious boundaries. Second, the OT addresses specific issues in both a particular mode that explicitly links them to a broader narrative and a wisdom mode that participates in an inter-national, inter-cultural, and inter-religious pursuit of wise living in which theological particularity remains implicit. Third, Deuteronomy describes the essential link between its particular perspective and the wisdom it reflects, and insists that the locus for this wisdom lies in a committed, obedient people. After discussing these elements and their concrete implications, I briefly reflect on my experience with restorative justice and point to specific MCC program areas to illustrate the interpretive potential of this perspective.

As an expression of the church's ministry, MCC can challenge the broader Christian body and the "world" both to move beyond mere tribalism and to avoid adopting a generic or a-religious perspective. A major challenge, however, lies in recognizing that MCC is not uniquely called to this task but does so as part of the broader church. This suggests that MCC should not simply seek to develop, reflect, and embody its own wisdom based on its laudable 90-year history, but should rather see itself as yet another way in which the church with its 2,000 years of history and experience seeks to embody the gospel in our time and place.

### **Recognizing Wisdom Beyond Boundaries**

The Bible portrays Solomon as renowned for his wisdom,<sup>2</sup> and in so doing provides a remarkably broad perspective on what "wisdom" entails. The biblical narrative associates Solomon with judicial acumen (1 Kings 3:16-28); literary and musical composition (1 Kings 4:32); and knowledge of

the natural world, including biology, zoology, botany, and the like (1 Kings 4:33). In a paradigmatic account of his wisdom, the Queen of Sheba arrives in Jerusalem with her impressive retinue in order to test him.

Though often unnoticed, 1 Kings 10 portrays an intriguing encounter between *two* intellectual giants, since the passage assumes the Queen of Sheba, as someone capable of testing Solomon, to be wise herself. While she comes ready to ask “all that was in her heart/mind” (v. 2), Solomon responds to all of her queries. The account then states that the Queen “sees all of the wisdom of Solomon,” which is then listed: “the house that he had built, the food of his table, the seating of his officials, and the attendance of his servants, their clothing, his valets, and his burnt offerings that he offered at the house of the LORD” (vv. 4-5). This list broadens still further the categories of wisdom associated with Solomon to include architecture, cuisine, administration, fashion, and even religious observance and ritual. Upon witnessing this impressive array of knowledge and insight, the Queen is left breathless (“there was no more spirit/wind/breath in her,” v. 5).

Two elements of this account stand out. First, the Queen of Sheba is able to both test and recognize Solomon’s wisdom *as an outsider*. Second, and related to the first, there is no indication that the Queen converts to follow the Israelite God. Indeed, her response suggests the opposite: “Blessed be the LORD *your* (not my/our) God . . .” (v. 9). Thus, while both the narrative introduction and conclusion make sure to attribute Solomon’s wisdom to God (1 Kings 10:1, 23-24), the Queen recognizes it without subsequently becoming a worshiper of the LORD. In effect, this account provides an example where divine wisdom is seen and even praised by someone outside the boundaries of a particular social, cultural, national, ethnic, and faith community.

While we may celebrate the idea that others could recognize the wisdom of an ancient Israelite king and perhaps, by extension, our own faith tradition, we should note that such recognition can move in the opposite direction as well. Though much ink was spilled in the last century debating its Solomonic authorship, the book of Proverbs itself is attributed both to Solomon and to other sources.<sup>3</sup> Though these latter named figures remain largely unknown, an entire section of Proverbs appears to derive from a foreign, Egyptian source. Ever since its publication in 1923, the “Instruction

of Amenemope”<sup>4</sup> has prompted great debate because of its apparent similarity to Proverbs 22:17-24:22 in vocabulary, theme, setting, and style. I will not rehearse the comparison here but only quote the conclusion reached by an eminent OT scholar: “As a basic observation it may be said that there is practically unanimous agreement that the work of Amenemope influenced the collection that begins in Prov. 22:17.”<sup>5</sup> Whatever the nature of this influence, it is significant that Proverbs draws upon this Egyptian document, since it demonstrates that “foreign” material was accepted as wise and brought into the Bible itself.

However, while most scholars agree that this section of Proverbs derives in some way from the “Instruction of Amenemope,” it would be a mistake to see it as the mechanical copying of material from an Egyptian source or to portray it as a pale imitation. Rather, this passage reflects both a partial incorporation of foreign wisdom and a process of selection, shaping, and reorientation. In effect, Proverbs recognizes wisdom “out there,” but evaluates and incorporates it within its own system and tradition. To deny a connection between these two documents, or simply to identify commonalities without noting key differences, fails to acknowledge this element of discernment.

Some people may be comfortable with the idea that the Queen of Sheba recognized Solomon’s wisdom but then balk at the notion that elements of Egyptian wisdom were *also* recognized as wise and even incorporated into the Bible itself. Others may enjoy the possibility that foreign material was included in the Bible and employ this to downplay the particularity or uniqueness of the latter, or to imply that religions or cultures are ultimately compatible or even fundamentally the same. Neither perspective proves adequate, however. On the one hand, as a community that believes in a creator God who forms *all* people in the divine image, we should not be surprised to encounter wisdom in the traditions and teachings of others, whether in the polytheistic context of ancient Egypt or in other religious traditions or secular societies in our own day. On the other hand, concentrating solely on similarities minimizes or even fails to see the significant differences between these documents and their broader contexts.

Thus, OT wisdom presents a double challenge and opportunity for the contemporary church and its organizations such as MCC. The Queen of

Sheba account underscores the possibility that wisdom may be tested and recognized beyond the limits of our community, while Proverbs provides a biblical warrant to seek, recognize, and critically discern divine wisdom wherever it may be found, inside our particular faith community/tradition and beyond its boundaries. Ultimately, true wisdom derives from God, even if and when this is not recognized by those who reflect it; at the same time not everything purported to be wise “out there” is so. While the potential of divine wisdom exists within other traditions, this possibility must be discerned and evaluated in light of the revelation we have received.<sup>6</sup>

### **Engaged in Dual Discourses**

Like the double challenge noted above, the OT also values distinct modes of articulation that prove relevant here. As has long been recognized, the Pentateuch provides an intriguing mixture of narrative and legal precepts. Rather than disconnected elements, legal material lies embedded within the narrative plot of the Pentateuch, as reflected immediately in the introduction to the Ten Words (commandments): “I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery; you shall have no other gods before me . . .” (Exodus 20:2-3). This introduction places the legal material to follow within the context of deliverance described in the preceding narrative, and thus presents the giving of the law as the culmination of the Israelites’ march from bondage – not into individualistic freedom but into *true* freedom, which consists of serving God and obeying the divine will.

Connections to this broader story are not limited to the law’s introduction. The legal material itself also appeals to this broader context in motivational clauses stating *why* these laws should be followed. To cite one striking example: “You shall not wrong or oppress a resident alien *for you were aliens in the land of Egypt . . .*” (Ex. 22:21). In effect, appeals to the larger narrative provide a precedent and motivation to listen and obey. As this statement and many others indicate, law is not a negative counterpoint to grace in the OT, but rather obedience implies a living out of the deliverance already experienced. While people often grant that biblical law is embedded in the “great story” of God’s people, this narrative also leads to the giving of the law as yet another instantiation of grace. If we

want to speak of a narrativizing of law, we must also see that the Pentateuch legalizes its narrative.<sup>7</sup>

In contrast, wisdom material reflects a distinct mode of articulation. Where biblical legal material and the prophets frequently refer to the patriarchs/matriarchs, the Exodus account, wilderness wandering, and other aspects of salvation history, this entire motif is notably absent from Proverbs. The word “Egypt,” for instance, appears only once in the book, and then in an adjectival rather than storied manner: “I have decked my couch with coverings, colored spreads of *Egyptian* linen . . .” (Prov. 7:16). In Proverbs references to the distinctive Israelite narrative or story characteristic of Pentateuch and prophetic material has all but disappeared – or at least has become implicit rather than explicit.

To cite one example, Deuteronomy and Proverbs each address the issue of removing boundary markers twice and, in doing so, illustrate the contrast between the mode of articulation each reflects:

'Particular' mode (Pentateuch)	'Wisdom' mode (Proverbs)
<p><u>You must not move</u><sup>8</sup> your neighbor's <u>boundary marker</u>, set up by former generations, on the <i>property</i> that will be allotted to you <i>in the land that the LORD your God is giving you to possess</i>. (Deut. 19:14)</p> <p>“Cursed be anyone who <u>moves</u> a neighbor's <u>boundary marker</u>.” All the people shall say, “Amen!” (Deut. 27:17)</p>	<p><u>Do not move</u> the ancient <u>boundary marker</u> that your ancestors set up. (Prov. 22:28)</p> <p><u>Do not move</u> an ancient <u>boundary marker</u> or encroach on the fields of orphans, for their redeemer is strong; he will plead their cause against you. (Prov. 23:10-11)</p>

Both of the verses in Deuteronomy reflect a direct, pivotal connection to the particular story of the Israelite people. While initially the first passage seems virtually parallel to its counterpart in Proverbs, the second part uses several key terms related to both the promise and eventual entry into the land. First, the term “property” (NRSV) or “inheritance” (KJV, NAS) appears repeatedly to depict the shift from landless wandering to occupation

beyond the Jordan River, with Numbers and Deuteronomy anticipating this divine gift and Joshua describing the fulfillment of the promise.<sup>9</sup> Whereas “inheritance” focuses on the nature of the land as a divine gift, the verb “possess” depicts the Israelites’ entry into the land and their role in actively claiming the promise.<sup>10</sup> Finally, reference to “*the* land” linked to these two key terms confirms that this verse does not reflect a generic usage but rather one linked to the Abrahamic promise of land in Genesis (Gen. 12:1, 7; 15:7, 18), where the latter two terms also appear together:

Then he said to him [Abram], “I am the LORD who brought you from Ur of the Chaldeans, to give you *this land to possess*.”  
(Gen. 15:7)<sup>11</sup>

Appearing in a key scene near the end of the book, the second verse warning against moving a boundary marker in Deuteronomy also reflects the narrative plot of the Pentateuch. Here Moses gathers the people together for a covenant ceremony to prepare for crossing the Jordan. The people’s response, “Amen,” signals their commitment to these teachings and acknowledges the consequences of neglecting them. Thus, where the initial passage signalled its connection to “salvation history” through its use of several key terms, the second appears within a pivotal moment of the narrative itself.

In contrast, neither case in Proverbs reflects a link to the particular, ongoing narrative of the Israelite people. What’s more, both of these verses in Proverbs also appear in the section linked to the “Instruction of Amenemope” earlier, and appear to have a parallel there as well.

Amenemope 6, 7:12-15	Proverbs 23:10-11
<u>Do not move markers</u> on the <u>borders</u> of a field or alter the position of the measuring line. Do not be greedy for a cubit of land or encroach on the boundaries of a widow. <sup>12</sup>	<u>Do not move</u> an ancient <u>boundary marker</u> or encroach on the fields of orphans, for their redeemer is strong; he will plead their cause against you.

The Proverbs passage refers to a strong “redeemer” or “avenger” (*go’el*) who may intervene on behalf of the orphan, and so reinforces the

earlier warning that the LORD will act on behalf of the grieved party (Prov. 22:23). While other material here has direct parallels in Amenemope, this earlier verse is unique to Proverbs and reorients the material under the sovereignty of the LORD. Nonetheless, while reference to the LORD would certainly call to mind the Exodus account for an Israelite audience – after all, this is the foundational narrative in which the name “I am who I am” or “I will be who I will be” is revealed to Moses (Ex. 3) – Proverbs does not make any explicit reference to the particularity of the tradition. It is worth noting that Amenemope also shows concern with the plight of the orphan and the widow, a common theme in Ancient Near Eastern material more generally. Like the landmark issue, this concern is not unique to the Bible, but the *reason* for it is frequently linked in a unique way to the particularity of the tradition, as we noted in reference to the motivational clauses within the legal material.

Thus, not only do the passages regarding boundary markers in Proverbs lack an explicit connection to the “salvation history” routinely referred to in the Pentateuch and prophets, they have direct counterparts within the Egyptian document where concern with removing landmarks also appears. Given Israel’s Ancient Near Eastern context, such similarities should not come as a surprise;<sup>13</sup> such a connection should not be downplayed or treated as secondary but celebrated. While it would be a mistake to suggest that this reflects a universalism where all religions or faith systems are fundamentally similar, it does provide a point of contact where external wisdom was recognized as something to be cherished.

As we have seen, warnings against removing boundary markers appear in both Proverbs and Deuteronomy as well as in the Egyptian “Instruction of Amenemope.” Where the legal material explicitly and repeatedly lays out the particular theological grounding of its tradition, in Proverbs this link remains understated and implicit. Indeed, the lack of such connections reflects a wisdom mode also found in Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs, and Job that contrasts significantly with the particular mode of the Pentateuch. While this has historically led wisdom material to receive less attention and to be seen as less important, this need not be the case. Rather, the book of Proverbs participates in a broad international, inter-religious wisdom discussion. Indeed, this wisdom mode provides a biblical



framework for our contemporary discernment of wise living and for joining in common cause with non-Christians on issues of mutual concern, whether ecological matters, peace-building, or whatever else, neither insisting on prior theological agreement or conversion nor sinking into a lowest common denominator approach that denies particularity.

The contrast I have outlined challenges the church and its organizations like MCC to articulate arguments in distinct modes of discourse. On the one hand, we must articulate our common faith and pursue its implications, taking the theological claims of the Christian tradition seriously without diluting its language or equating rich faith terminology with generic so-called equivalents. On the other hand, in certain contexts we may do well to adopt a wisdom mode of discourse that temporarily puts aside explicit appeals to the internal particularities of the tradition. This does not imply rejecting the particular (unless “temporarily” becomes “permanently”), but rather moves from an explicit to an implicit depiction.

### **Wisdom Embodied in a People**

Deuteronomy links the possibility of wisdom to the particularities of tradition – and the locus of this link is the people. Two key verses from Deuteronomy 4 provide the basis for our discussion:

I now teach you statutes and ordinances for you to observe in the land that you are about to enter and occupy. <sup>6</sup> You must observe them diligently, for *this will show your wisdom and discernment to the peoples*, who, when they hear all these statutes, will say, “Surely this great nation is a wise and discerning people!” (Deut. 4:5-6; emphasis added.)

A few things are worth noting here. First, while we might expect the term “those” near the beginning of v. 6, the term “this” is significant. What draws the attention of the nations are not the commandments themselves or even the story that is shared. First and foremost, the nations respond to observing these commands embodied in the life of Israel. Only then, once *shown* their wisdom, do the nations hear the statutes and proclaim “what a great nation.” They come to recognize the wisdom of Israel not by what is “on the books/scrolls” but by its incarnate obedience.

Second, the nations do not respond to specific individuals but to a

“wise and discerning *people*.” Though not obvious in English, the pronoun “you” in v. 6 is plural, which emphatically underscores this communal element. Wisdom visible beyond this particular group is embodied in life but also in community.

Third, the word “hear” can be understood in two ways. The first way sees the nations recognizing Israel’s wisdom through the life of the people and then hearing the statutes. However, the term “hear” (*shama*) is the same word as “obey” in biblical Hebrew, so that while we may tend to separate these elements, in Deuteronomy cognitive listening is not distinct from enacted obedience. If you hear something but do not obey it, then you did not “hear.”<sup>14</sup> Thus, it is possible that the nations come to regard these statutes as wise not only by hearing them but by *really* hearing them, or obeying them themselves. In this reading, discerning wisdom moves beyond a spectator sport to an invitational engagement, where recognizing the wisdom of this way of life includes the implicit invitation to join in.

Deut. 4 describes how the nations will regard Israel as a “wise and discerning people” through its obedience to the laws of the Pentateuch; this group embodies its wisdom by living out a distinct calling. Since the wisdom recognized by a watching world lies in the articulation and enfleshment of this way of life, neglecting this particularity results in the loss of wisdom, as is demonstrated later in the book.<sup>15</sup>

This discussion challenges the church and its organizations like MCC in several ways. First, by living and working in a particular manner out of its distinctly Christian – and even specifically Mennonite – perspective, the church embodies wisdom that may be seen as such by “the nations.” Deuteronomy encourages us to be confident that we have wisdom to share and that, as in the Queen of Sheba account, this may be recognized beyond ourselves. Second, it warns against allowing the particularity of this perspective to be lost. It is one thing to consciously, strategically, and temporarily allow particular theological claims rooting wisdom to be implicit rather than explicit. It is quite another for a wisdom mode to supplant the particular by making it secondary, optional, or replacing it altogether. Deuteronomy warns that the danger is, once this root is diminished or forgotten, that the wisdom associated with it disappears as well.

Perhaps the most significant challenge Deuteronomy raises is its

insistence that wisdom is embodied in a people. For MCC, this raises the issue of self-understanding: is MCC its own people or is it *part* of a people (the church) called to embody divine wisdom in the world? While Deuteronomy outlines a division of labor where distinct groups have different roles, responsibilities, and expectations (Aaronide priests, Levites, kings, prophets, and judges, to name a few), there is no para-people who embody this particular wisdom while running alongside but without being part of Israel.

Thus, this perspective suggests that it is problematic to consider an organization like MCC to be a para-church agency – one that runs parallel to, but is not ‘of,’ the church. To substitute MCC for the church or to distinguish its wisdom from that of the church, introduces an unnecessary tension that effects an impoverished view of the church and its calling. While a persistent temptation, this perspective should be avoided.

### **Wisdom at Work**

Mennonites have long been at the forefront of what was initially identified as “Restorative Justice.” I am writing this paper in Waterloo, Ontario, where the innovative actions of Dave Worth and his colleagues led to the first Victim Offender Reconciliation Program (VORP). In what follows I describe how the wisdom perspective described above has been helpful for understanding my own journey with respect to restorative justice, and I suggest how it may offer a useful perspective for considering other areas of MCC’s involvement as well.

#### *Restorative Justice:*

##### *Reflections on Searching for and Encountering Wisdom*

After studying at Canadian Mennonite Bible College, I applied to work with the John Howard Society, an agency working with offenders in local penitentiaries. During my interview I was informed that the organization was committed to “restorative justice” and I was asked to describe this approach. Though I had never worked in the field before, I summarized what I had learned about OT law in a course with Waldemar Janzen – taking out all the God-language and explicit references to biblical material. At the conclusion of the interview I was told that I had responded to this question better than any other applicant and was immediately offered the job. Looking back, this

experience seems to reflect a successful attempt at moving from a particular to a wisdom mode.

Upon accepting the position I was given Howard Zehr's book *Changing Lenses*,<sup>16</sup> which articulated the agency's orienting perspective. Zehr contrasts a retributive model of justice with a "restorative" one that he explicitly derives from the Bible, drawing heavily on OT law. While I was surprised that a secular NGO would adopt its approach from an explicitly Christian resource, here was an example where the wisdom of a faith-filled perspective was found compelling beyond its own particular community.

In my role with the John Howard Society I made presentations regarding restorative justice for various audiences. When addressing a church community I would explain how this approach to justice emerged from an understanding of Exodus 22 and its appeal to "repay/pay back/make restitution" (which, as I learned later, translates the verb form of the Hebrew noun *shalom*). In addressing lawyers or parole officers I would describe how an approach seeing crime as an offense against a victim that must be addressed makes more sense than one portraying it as an offense against the state (and in Canada, the Queen!) that must be punished. I would provide statistics about recidivism rates and the inordinate cost of imprisonment, and I would push for a view of the criminal justice system that moved beyond portraying it negatively as a system whose function is to "lock up the bad guys" to depicting it positively as a system whose goal is to promote a safer society. In these and other ways I argued that a restorative perspective offers an improved alternative over the court system and its frequent use of incarceration as a default "solution" to the problem of crime.

Although I advocated for restorative justice in both contexts, the theological basis for doing so was explicit in one and "bracketed out" in the other.<sup>17</sup> For those with a common faith basis, the Christian and specifically Mennonite tradition provided a point of contact and allowed for a profound engagement of the Bible and each other with respect to a pressing contemporary issue. For us, restorative justice was not simply a strategy to be employed but an approach that grew out of and continued to reflect an attempt to live faithfully in light of our biblical tradition. At the same time, appeals to biblical principles were not convincing in a court of law or with its officers. Indeed, a whiff of theology in this second context may well have been enough to immediately disqualify it from consideration,

even if the rationale and perspective of restorative justice proved convincing. For me, this experience was a poignant example of being engaged in “dual discourses.”

Later, I was exposed to aboriginal perspectives on restorative justice. Reading *Returning to the Teachings* by Rupert Ross,<sup>18</sup> I was struck by how much the Canadian aboriginal viewpoint he articulated resonated with material in Zehr’s book, and how different both of these positions were from the dominant criminal justice paradigm in North America. The communal perspective and focus on addressing wrongs done to the victim contrasted sharply with the common emphasis on individual rights and the clash of lawyers, as well as the goal of punishment, method of incarceration, and relative silencing of both victim and offender within the court system. Encountering “circle sentencing” as practiced in the Northwest Territories and “family group conferencing” from Australia and New Zealand – both of which grew out of local aboriginal perspectives – also made a significant impression on me,<sup>19</sup> since these approaches saw a broader social context than mediations between one victim and one offender. I was left to ponder how insights from these approaches could benefit the VORP model, where the wider circle of those affected by an offense was much less involved or even recognized. This interaction with viewpoints derived from beyond my tradition, in this case aboriginal perspectives from Canada, New Zealand, and Australia, enhanced my perspective. In doing so, it also provided a concrete example of how “foreign” wisdom could be accepted as such, and prompted me to return and re-evaluate my own tradition.

Potential links to OT wisdom do not end there. During a brief stint working with young offenders, troubled teens, and teenage mothers, I was constantly asked by co-workers what prompted my interest in conflict resolution. Their questions offered an opportunity to state explicitly how my commitment grew out of my faith and worldview – in which they proved quite interested. I was persistently thrust into witnessing to my faith, an experience which showed me that adopting a wisdom mode represents neither a one-way street nor a matter of shoving faith under the carpet to avoid inconveniencing or offending others. Rather, in my experience adopting a wisdom mode often prompts people to ask about the basis of

your commitment and gives you a chance to articulate what grounds your perspective and practices. Like the nations in Deut. 4, others may recognize certain practices as wise, which then prompts interest in the undergirding faith(fulness) from which the practices emerge.<sup>20</sup> Rather than choosing between two poles, lived faith and wisdom represent two sides of the same coin and should not – cannot! – be separated.

As this overview attests, OT wisdom has helped me to understand my experience in the field of restorative justice. It has also strengthened my attempt to live wisely according to my own tradition, to recognize wisdom beyond it, and to make common cause on specific issues with both Christian and non-Christian colleagues.

### **Possibilities for Further Exploration**

The preceding description of OT wisdom not only resonates with my own interaction with restorative justice but proves helpful for understanding the work and vision of the church. I believe such a perspective also sheds light on different areas of MCC's involvement and its own self-understanding.

For instance, a wisdom perspective has explanatory value for considering MCC's role at the forefront of the expanding "fair trade" movement. First, the idea of developing self-help products emerged from a particular tradition, and it is worth exploring further what elements within the Mennonite tradition gave rise to this idea and its implementation. Second, while fair trade emerged from the Mennonite tradition and especially the work of MCC, this approach has gained traction outside this particular community, so that other groups, organizations, and agencies have adopted, adapted, and developed their own versions of it. People from outside the tradition have seen the value and wisdom of fair trade and have increasingly adopted it as their own. What grew from Mennonite soil has spread beyond this "experimental plot," to use a phrase from John Howard Yoder.<sup>21</sup>

And the list goes on. As an arm of the church, MCC has been involved in development work, agricultural innovation, peace-building efforts and training, human rights advocacy, environmental concerns, aboriginal issues, inter-faith dialogue, cooperation across religious traditions, and many other things. In each area, the issues and tensions discussed above appear, so that, in my view, a wisdom perspective may well offer a helpful way for

conceptualizing and articulating MCC's role and approach.

The wisdom perspective insists that we resist a false dichotomy, where MCC and the broader church must *either* be faithful to (and promote) a Mennonite Christian perspective *or* be open to insights beyond this particular tradition. Similarly, it guards against the temptation for MCC to see itself as its own people or as a para-people that runs alongside, but is not ultimately 'of,' the church. In contrast, it is important to realize that the impetus for engaging in such issues has been nothing other than attempting to live faithfully and wisely as followers of Jesus. And, as this paper suggests, it is also important to see that the OT remains a vital witness for doing so. Indeed, one crucial way to follow Jesus' example is to recognize the ongoing significance of what we call the "Old Testament" but what for Jesus were the only Scriptures he had.

### **Conclusion**

The OT wisdom tradition offers a helpful perspective for considering the complex relationship between valuing the particularity of the Christian, and specifically Mennonite, tradition and being open to discover divine wisdom beyond it. As OT wisdom material attests, Ancient Israel participated in an international, inter-cultural, and inter-religious dialogue in search of wise living that recognized the permeability of such boundaries to divine wisdom. By extension, this insight pushes us to accept the possibility that our wisdom can be recognized beyond our own tradition, and also requires us to be willing to discern wisdom in the traditions of others.

The OT reflects both particular and wisdom modes of discourse. In contrast to the Pentateuch's repeated reference to the particularities of the Israelite tradition, Proverbs' wisdom mode allows its faith commitments to remain implicit. This provides a biblical precedent for cooperation with other people, cultures, and religious groups on issues of mutual import without insisting upon prior theological agreement or conversion, but also without resorting to a lowest common denominator. Finally, Deuteronomy insists that wisdom is embodied in a people committed to discern and follow the divine will, so it is vital to understand that distinctive wisdom requires particularity, which in turn provides the basis for discerning divine wisdom beyond itself.

At the outset I identified a tension between seeing the Mennonite particularity of the church and its organizations such as MCC as expendable and insisting that an explicit theological orientation be central. I have suggested that the difficulty does not lie in choosing one option over the other but in refusing to split the two asunder. By embodying Mennonite/Anabaptist theological perspectives and acting as a catalyst for recognizing divine wisdom lying outside the Christian fold, the church and its agencies such as MCC can demonstrate that these are not mutually exclusive but integrally related.

Embodying particularity inevitably leads to interaction with those beyond ourselves, and this interaction gives us an opportunity to re-evaluate our own tradition. Making a unique contribution to a broad wisdom discussion requires particularity, while the distinctiveness of the Christian tradition leads us to search for ways in which our perspective may be enriched by persons and perspectives outside the church. While one side or the other may be stressed in specific contexts or with respect to specific issues, the dynamic relationship between wisdom and particularity should be a significant source of creativity and inspiration – one to be celebrated rather than feared.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> I originally presented a version of this paper at the “Table of Sharing” conference celebrating the 90th anniversary of the Mennonite Central Committee in Akron, Pennsylvania on June 13-14, 2010. My thanks go to Alain Epp Weaver who coordinated the conference, the many participants who interacted with an earlier version of the material presented here, and the anonymous peer-reviewers of the present version of the paper.

<sup>2</sup> There has been ongoing debate regarding the historicity of such attributions, including the claim that there is no historical connection between Solomon and wisdom (see James L. Crenshaw, *Old Testament Wisdom: An Introduction*, revised and enlarged [Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1998], 35-44). Our interest here lies in the biblical portrayal of Solomon rather than in an historical reconstruction.

<sup>3</sup> Headings within Proverbs refer to several people, including “the officials of King Hezekiah” (25:1); Agur, son of Jakeh (30:1); and King Lemuel, whose contribution is further described as “an oracle *that his mother taught him*” (31:1). Such notations precede contemporary authorship debates by millennia and complicate simplistic views of Solomon’s relationship



to the book. Even in contemporary settings, the role and function of an ‘author’ of a cookbook or some other collected anthology may well be different from that of a novel, history book, or science experiment. For an overview of complications related to contemporary views of authorship, see Michel Foucault, “What is an Author?” in *The Foucault Reader*, ed. Paul Rabinow (New York: Pantheon Books, 1984), 101-20.

<sup>4</sup>James Bennett Pritchard, “The Instruction of Amen-Em-Opet,” in *Ancient Near Eastern Texts Relating to the Old Testament* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton Univ. Press, 1978), 421-24.

<sup>5</sup>Roland E. Murphy, *Proverbs*, Word Biblical Commentary, vol. 22 (Nashville: T. Nelson Publishers, 1998), 290.

<sup>6</sup>While the focus here is on OT wisdom, the prominence, significance, and implications of the NT’s identification of Jesus Christ with both cosmic wisdom and the wisdom of God incarnate (*logos, sophia*, etc.) often goes under-appreciated. For a helpful attempt at tackling this issue, see Thomas R. Yoder Neufeld, “The Invisible Curriculum – On Being Wisdom’s School,” in *Mennonite Education in a Post-Christian World: Essays Presented at the Consultation on Higher Education, Winnipeg, June 1997*, ed. Harry Huebner (Winnipeg, MB: CMBC Publications, 1998), 129-43.

<sup>7</sup>For a Jewish scholar’s brief but compelling critique of how Christians tend to play narrative against law, along with an alternative proposal, see Adele Berlin, “Numinous *Nomos*: On the Relationship Between Narrative and Law,” in *“A Wise and Discerning Mind”: Essays in Honor of Burke O. Long*, ed. Saul M. Olyan and Robert C. Culley, Brown Judaic Studies, no. 325 (Providence, RI: Brown Judaic Studies, 2000), 25-31.

<sup>8</sup>Underlining marks where the phrase “move/remove a boundary marker” appears in both contexts using exactly the same terms. The Hebrew verb form is slightly different, which accounts for the difference in translation between “you must/shall not” and “do not.” Italics have been added for emphasis.

<sup>9</sup>The term *nachalah*, the noun form of the term “allotted,” appears 224 times in the OT and 46, 25, and 50 times in Numbers, Deuteronomy, and Joshua respectively. Thus, more than half of the term’s appearances occur within these three books to identify the plots of land beyond the Jordan described as “inheritance” to various Israelite groups.

<sup>10</sup>The verb *yarash* appears 71, 29, and 27 times in Deuteronomy, Joshua, and Judges respectively, again representing more than half of its 232 occurrences in the entire OT. The prominence of this term here is further reinforced when contrasted with 11 occurrences in the Psalms, the book with the next highest total. Though very significant, the issue of God commanding the occupation of the land and the slaughtering of the Canaanites lies beyond the scope of this paper. For a classic early study in this regard, see Millard C. Lind, *Yahweh is a Warrior: The Theology of Warfare in Ancient Israel* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1980). For an excellent recent effort, see the forthcoming commentary by Gordon H. Matties, *Joshua*, Believers Church Bible Commentary Series (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 2011).

<sup>11</sup>Although obscured in translation, the Hebrew idiom employed here (“... the land, this one...”) explicitly refers to “the land,” and then further emphasizes it with the indicative pronoun “this.”

<sup>12</sup>The translation here is taken from Nili Shupak, “The Instruction of Amenemope and Proverbs 22:17-24:22 from the Perspective of Contemporary Research,” in *Seeking Out the*

*Wisdom of the Ancients: Essays Offered to Honor Michael V. Fox on the Occasion of His Sixty-Fifth Birthday*, ed. Ronald L. Troxel, Kelvin G. Friebe, and Dennis R. Magary (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2005), 218. Determining the extent of correspondence between the two documents proves more complicated than comparing Deuteronomy and Proverbs, since Amenemope is written in a different language and writing system. The ANET translation differs slightly, as it begins with “Do not carry off the landmark at the boundaries of the arable land....” (Pritchard, “The Instruction of Amen-Em-Opet,” 422).

<sup>13</sup> For various precedents to biblical material in the broader Ancient Near Eastern context and an attempt to engage the theological implications, see Peter Enns, “The Old Testament and Ancient Near Eastern Literature,” in *Inspiration and Incarnation: Evangelicals and the Problem of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2005), 23-70.

<sup>14</sup> Thus, the *shema*’ (“Hear O Israel, the LORD our God is LORD alone....,” Deut. 6:4) does not refer just to cognitive belief but represents a call for embodied obedience. It could be translated “Obey, O Israel....” While the NRSV suggests that the blessings and curses in Deut. 28 depend on whether the people will “obey” (Deut. 28:1, 2, 13) or “not obey” (Deut. 28:15, 45), the term here is the same as “hear” in chapters 4, 6, and elsewhere.

<sup>15</sup> In direct contrast to the present passage, Israel is called a “foolish and senseless (literalistically translated, ‘not-wise’) people” in Deut. 32:6, precisely because it has forgotten its particularity.

<sup>16</sup> Howard Zehr, *Changing Lenses: A New Focus for Crime and Justice* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 2005).

<sup>17</sup> I have adopted the phrase “bracketed out” from my former advisor, Gerald T. Sheppard, to describe how the internal particularity of the tradition has been consciously and temporarily removed to engage in what I have called “a wisdom mode.” For an example of his use of this phrase, see Gerald T. Sheppard, “Wisdom,” in *The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*, vol. 4, ed. G. W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988), 1074-82.

<sup>18</sup> Rupert Ross, *Returning to the Teachings: Exploring Aboriginal Justice* (Toronto: Penguin, 2006).

<sup>19</sup> Kay Pranis, Barry Stuart, and Mark Wedge, *Peacemaking Circles: From Crime to Community* (St. Paul, MN: Living Justice Press, 2003); Gale Burford and Joe Hudson, eds., *Family Group Conferencing: New Directions in Community-Centered Child and Family Practice* (New York: Aldine de Gruyter, 2000).

<sup>20</sup> From an OT perspective, playing lived “works” off against a cognitive “faith” is largely non-sensical. The Hebrew term often translated as “truth” (*’emeth*) and then interpreted in an abstract, philosophical sense shares the same root as *’emunah*, which means ‘faithfulness.’ While I suspect the same could be said with respect to the NT and Paul’s appeal to faith as well, I will leave this issue to my NT colleagues. Once recognized, this link between ‘truth’ and ‘faithfulness’ suggests that both faith and making a “truth claim” requires discipleship, while embodied particularity also makes a claim about what is true.

<sup>21</sup> Malinda Berry’s paper on “organic theology” presented at the MCC conference in June 2010 suggests a similar dynamic with respect to several cookbooks that have emerged from the Mennonite tradition. What she describes as organic theology resonates well with what I describe here as “a wisdom mode.” See her “Extending the Theological Table: MCC’s World

Community Cookbooks as Organic Theology” in Alain Epp Weaver, ed., *A Table of Sharing: Mennonite Central Committee and the Expanding Networks of Mennonite Identity* (Telford, PA: Cascadia, 2011), 284-309.

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## **‘God is Closer to Poetry than Religion’**

A LITERARY REFRACTION BY JULIA SPICHER KASDORF

*Introduction by Hildi Froese Tiessen, Literary Editor*

In 1990 a young female poet was among the relatively few American Mennonites to attend “Mennonite/s Writing in Canada”— the first of five international conferences on Mennonite/s Writing. The inaugural conference took place in Waterloo, Ontario; it was followed by two conferences at Goshen, Indiana, and then two more at Bluffton, Ohio, and Winnipeg, Manitoba. The sixth conference is being planned for Harrisonburg, Virginia in 2012.

Julia Kasdorf, this American poet who now teaches creative writing at Penn State, had not yet published *Sleeping Preacher*. Her award-winning, landmark work in American Mennonite writing would appear two years later, in 1992, and would be followed by *Eve’s Striptease* in 1998. But there was no question that this young woman was a writer, and that she was interested in conversation about things literary. In Waterloo in 1990 – more than twenty years ago – she encountered an established novelist who would become her “conversation partner in support of the writing life”: Rudy Wiebe, the acknowledged “father” of contemporary Mennonite writing. They began a friendship then, and a literary correspondence that continues to this day.

When last year Wiebe invited Kasdorf to speak at his church – Edmonton’s Lendrum Mennonite Brethren Church, where Wiebe has remained an active and beloved member since his return to Canada from Goshen College some forty years ago – she delivered the sermon that follows. During that visit to Alberta, Kasdorf and Wiebe – sharing among their many shared interests a fascination with the voices of early Anabaptists – began to collaborate on poetic translations of some Anabaptist hymns. One of these translations, “The 78th Song from the *Ausbund*,” was published in *Tongue Screws and Testimonies: Poems, Stories, and Essays Inspired by the Martyrs Mirror*, edited by Kirsten Beachy, with a foreword by Julia Kasdorf (Herald Press, 2010). In what follows Kasdorf offers language in the form of a sermon (a term delightfully identified in the *Online Etymology Dictionary* as meaning “a stringing together of words”). Who better than a poet to engage us thus?

\* \* \* \* \*

*In August of 1984, a handsome man in a clerical collar sat beside me on a People Express flight out of Pittsburgh. I was bound for Newark, for my final year at Washington Square University College (New York University), to a boyfriend I had thought I might marry but about whom I had been feeling deeply ambivalent. The British Anglican priest would continue on to London, to Oxford, where he planned to defend his dissertation. Before our drink orders were even taken, I confessed my hope to become a poet and said I was considering Mennonite seminary after college.*

*“Don’t go,” he said simply. “You’ll find that God is closer to poetry than religion.” Then he proceeded to relate his own regrets.*

*“And another thing,” he advised, handing me my bag, which he’d carried off the plane, “Don’t marry someone you don’t really love.” Then he disappeared into the crowded airport. David Byrd. If “angel” means only a carrier of divine messages, he was one. I took my bag and turned to embrace the boyfriend who had come to meet me, a bit late and direct from Sunday brunch with his new girlfriend and her mother. We broke up as the bus made its way back to the city.*

*Odd for me to remember this now, a Mennonite and confirmed Episcopalian and also a poet who has preached at least two sermons in Mennonite churches. The first time, I was invited to speak of anything or just read poems, but I felt it important to work from the assigned lectionary texts. I make a habit of reading the Daily Office and like to ponder the spaces between set passages, thinking through ancient relationships. Writing within the constraint of the lectionary schedule resembles writing against the constraints of poetic form: it ties you to tradition and sets immediate limits that force invention. On the occasion of the sermon printed here, Pastor Chris Friesen asked me to preach a sermon that would contribute to a series on the Holy Spirit, and he sent a set of scripture passages from which I could choose.*

*I think of the sermons mostly in genre terms. The sermon is an oral form, which may be composed in writing – I couldn’t do it any other way – but which must be delivered with the body; it is made for performance like a play. In this way, it resembles poetry’s preliterate roots. Sermons are often inflected with the rhythms of spoken language, and they persuade with feeling and image as well as rhetoric. Growing up, I loved most those*

*sermons that ended with a poem or a tuneless reading of a hymn text. And now I find, though it may be strange to admit, that I love writing sermons.*

### **Dry Bones and the Breath of Forgiveness<sup>1</sup>**

The hand of the Lord came upon me, and he brought me out by the spirit of the Lord and set me down in the middle of a valley; it was full of bones. He led me all around them; there were very many lying in the valley, and they were very dry. He said to me, "Mortal, can these bones live?" I answered, "O Lord God, you know." Then he said to me, "Prophecy to these bones, and say to them: O dry bones, hear the word of the Lord. Thus says the Lord God to these bones: I will cause breath to enter you, and you shall live. I will lay sinews on you, and will cause flesh to come upon you, and cover you with skin, and put breath in you, and you shall live; and you shall know that I am the Lord." So I prophesied as I had been commanded; and as I prophesied, suddenly there was a noise, a rattling, and the bones came together, bone to its bone. I looked, and there were sinews on them, and flesh had come upon them, and skin had covered them; but there was no breath in them. Then he said to me, "Prophecy to the breath, prophecy, mortal, and say to the breath: Thus says the Lord God: Come from the four winds, O breath, and breathe upon these slain, that they may live." I prophesied as he commanded me, and the breath came into them, and they lived, and stood on their feet, a vast multitude. Then he said to me, "Mortal, these bones are the whole house of Israel. They say, 'Our bones are dried up, and our hope is lost; we are cut off completely.' Therefore prophecy, and say to them, Thus says the Lord God: I am going to open your graves, and bring you up from your graves, O my people; and I will bring you back to the land of Israel. And you shall know that I am the Lord, when I open your graves, and bring you up from your graves, O my people. I will put my spirit within you, and you shall live, and I

will place you on your own soil; then you shall know that I, the Lord, have spoken and will act,” says the Lord. (Ezekiel 37:1-14, NRSV)

When it was evening on that day, the first day of the week, and the doors of the house where the disciples had met were locked for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood among them and said, “Peace be with you.” After he said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord. Jesus said to them again, “Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you.” When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, “Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained.” (John 20:19-23, NRSV)

The familiar passage from Ezekiel is a text for our times, a tonic for bodies that are oppressed and displaced – or for hearts and minds that are disturbed or depressed, dwelling in the depths. To these dry bones the prophet utters a few words commanded by God. Then, suddenly, the bones stir and lift and find a way to bind themselves together with other bones and tendons; and then, marvelously, they become shapely, enfleshed and clothed with skin. But these bodies cannot breathe until the prophet, once more commanded by God, pronounces:

“This is what the Sovereign Lord says.  
Come from the four winds, O breath,  
and breathe into these slain, so that they may live.”

The breath enters the bodies, and they rise, alive.

What is the meaning of this vision, which Ezekiel dreamed along a grand canal of Babylon, less than 500 years before the birth of Christ?

That God can raise up the hopeless, that God would restore life to the Hebrew people who were so weary and broken-hearted they resembled the living dead: zombies, shell-shocked, the post-traumatic stress disordered – each culture and generation has a different name for beings who appear to be alive, but who have no vitality. These displaced captives, relocated about 86 kilometers south of modern Bagdad, had no hope. But life would return,

the prophet promised, which for these people also meant that God would restore their land and security – their bodies would not only rise up, but they would also abide safely in the place they call home – at least for a time. And indeed, the future of Judaism lay with these exiles, not with the ones who remained back on the land.

In Ezekiel's dream, the resurrection of dry bones comes by way of language, spoken first by God but repeated for human ears by the prophet, so that healing is Divine but mediated by human means. God pulls the animating breath from the Four Winds; that is, from all of Creation, from every corner of God's good earth. The gesture of breathing life into human forms echoes the story in Genesis, when God launched a new world populated with creatures formed in God's image, infused with God's breath. At the same time, the passage points ahead to the gift of the Holy Spirit. God repeatedly says that these acts are performed "so that you will know that I am the Lord . . ." or "that I, the Lord, have spoken . . .," and again, "so that you will know that I am the Lord."

The repetition of this statement admits how difficult, how nearly impossible, it is to feel or sense anything about God from the valleys of human despair. And so this breath, which animates and brings hope to dry bones, this voice which promises the exiles a home, demonstrates God's loving care for us.

In the New Testament, with Jesus walking among the people, it should have been easier to ascertain something about God's abiding presence. But not so on the evening of that first day of the week after the crucifixion, when the disciples huddled like refugees behind locked doors, grief-stricken, bereft, except for the unbelievable stories brought by the women. Disoriented and mourning, the disciples suddenly saw Jesus or perhaps first heard his voice, "Peace be with you." Jesus showed them the wounds on his hands and side – his material body – and we are told that the disciples were "overjoyed" upon seeing their Lord.

Here, before them, Jesus stood resurrected as surely as those dry bones danced in the valley of Babylonian captivity. But that was not all. Jesus said, "Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, I am sending you." With this, he created another kind of diaspora as he breathed the Holy Spirit into them.



Then he said a remarkable thing: “If you forgive anyone his sins, they are forgiven; if you do not forgive them, they are not forgiven.”

So, the breath that passes from the resurrected body of Jesus into the bodies of his disciples is not merely the animating force of mortal life – which would have been spectacular enough – but a very particular kind of wind. This is the Holy Spirit, and at least in this passage, all we learn about the Holy Spirit is that She grants believers the awful authority to forgive sins or to withhold forgiveness.

Can this be true? Honestly, I can’t quite believe it.

I have to recall a date that is as infamous among Pennsylvania Amish people as 9/11 is for the rest of America: October 2, 2006, the day a troubled milk truck driver walked into a one-room schoolhouse at West Nickel Mines, separated the female pupils from boys and adults, and then killed six girls and wounded four more before killing himself. At the time, the story was endlessly retold in the global media as the tale of a peculiar community choosing forgiveness instead of revenge. One Amish man, his back to the TV camera, said, “How can we not forgive when Christ has forgiven each of us?” It happened that this horror occurred on Yom Kippur, and several rabbis were moved to comment: Jews, they said, are taught that only God can forgive sin. Victims may ask God to forgive the offender (as Jesus, from the cross, asked God to forgive), but we cannot do this ourselves, and certainly not on behalf of dead victims or in response to a killer who cannot repent because he is dead. Jews, they said, are commanded to remember instead.<sup>2</sup>

At the time, I was more inclined to lament another instance of violence against girls than to praise Amish non-resistance. Instead of celebrating “forgiveness,” I wanted people to face this act of gendered violence and regard it in relation to a culture of systemic sexism. (Just a week earlier a nearly identical school shooting had targeted girls for violation and death in a similar fashion in Colorado.) I was frankly skeptical about the speedy resolution afforded by “Amish grace” that the world found so appealing. It seemed to me that forgiveness was not a choice on that occasion but a deeply engrained cultural habit of mind, an immediate response from a religious community that could imagine no other alternative in the face of such violence. I guess I wanted to take advantage of the option to withhold

forgiveness that Jesus also offers.<sup>3</sup>

Which reminds me of a certain Russian Mennonite great-aunt, grown old in western Canada, who, at the mention of Stalin, used to say in her Russian-German inflected English, “Give him the gospel, and off with his head!” There may be a complicated kind of forgiveness in that sentiment.

Consider what the gift of the Spirit meant to the disciples at that particular moment: these men had watched leaders of the larger Jewish community, in cahoots with occupying Roman forces, humiliate, torture, and kill their beloved teacher. Now they reasonably feared for their own lives. On his return, the first gift Jesus gave to them was the ability to forgive or to refrain from forgiveness. In other words, this power that was once only God’s fell into human hands exactly when the disciples needed it most.

Forgiveness is not simply done, nor does it deny the wrong that has been committed. We see this clearly in chapter 21 of John’s account, a tacked-on second ending to the Gospel which relates a story that scholars say was not witnessed by John himself but was likely added for the literary purposes of narrative closure. Jesus demonstrates the process of forgiveness when he meets his disciples again by the Sea of Tiberias. There, we’re told, Peter decided he needed to go fishing, and the others joined him. After a luckless night on the water, a stranger called from the shore and suggested they dip their nets on the other side of the boat, and the nets came up groaning. In that instant, one of the men recognized the figure on the beach to be Jesus, and Peter must have, too, for he instantly grabbed his tunic and jumped into the sea. Maybe he jumped eagerly, to swim ahead of the boat, but I wonder whether he wasn’t also afraid. Was it shame that caused Peter, who had denied Jesus three times, to cover his naked body and leap out of sight, as Adam and Eve once hid in the garden?

On the shore, Jesus built a fire and served grilled fish and bread – real food for men working the night shift – and yet this gesture also resonates with the Last Supper. When they had finished eating, Jesus asked Peter three times, “Do you love me?” – one time for each instance Peter denied him in the high priest’s courtyard. And with each response in the affirmative, Jesus replied, “Feed my sheep.” In other words, if you love me, you will preach the gospel and care for people as I have cared for you, body and soul. By the

third time Jesus put the question to him, Peter had become offended. It is not easy to be reminded of one’s failures; nor is it easy to accept and integrate forgiveness.

The episode concludes with Jesus predicting Peter’s martyrdom: “Follow me.” According to tradition, Peter did follow Jesus, even to death on one of Nero’s crosses. But for Christians, especially in those early years, martyrdom always meant resurrection.

Pagan sources marvel at the Christians’ fearlessness before death. Of the early Christian martyrs, Grace Jantzen, the late British philosopher of religion, who also identified herself as an exile from a small Mennonite Brethren village in the Saskatchewan bush, has noted that they “resisted imperial power at the very place where it was most concentrated – in the arena.” Roman power was grounded in an ability to rule fatally and efficiently around the world; back in Rome, empire demonstrated its glory in great, public spectacles of death. But the Christian martyrs, because of their confidence in the resurrection of the body, displayed an astonishing and exasperating fearlessness in the arena.<sup>4</sup>

“Unless a grain of wheat fall to the ground...”

Ten days after the shooting, Amish leaders asked a Mennonite neighbor with heavy equipment to raze the schoolhouse before dawn. By noon, the scene of the crime was graded and planted with grass and clover seed.

Resurrection, by analogy and in the context of the Gospel reading, is associated with forgiveness: forgiveness of Peter, forgiveness of the Romans and Jews, forgiveness of all of us who don’t know what we’re doing half the time. Forgiveness is neither denial nor the desire for tidy closure so that we can get on with more pleasant matters. Genuine forgiveness faces the facts of the offense, grapples with their meaning, yet gently works like the breath of life in the valley of dry bones to grant a new start to both victim and offender. And further, we are commanded to pray, “Forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us.” We are commanded, in other words, to choose forgiveness, to choose life so that we and our children may live. (This forgiveness does not assume forgetting; survival of an individual or a culture depends upon memory, the meaningful narration of life experience.)

What kind of life? Already there is enough blood in this sermon to float

a navy: Babylonian exile, two crucifixions, the Roman arena, Mennonite migrations, Stalin, school shootings. The Holy Spirit can mysteriously breathe hope into all of those dark valleys and memories, so that, in the words of the prophet Ezekiel, “you may know that I am your Lord.” Yet, we know She also works quietly, in simpler ways.

We associate the Holy Spirit with grace in both senses of the word: with mercy and with beauty; we identify Her with voice, with the provocative or soothing words of the prophets. When our own words fail us in prayer, the Spirit intercedes. She is a wind that blows where it will, gathering breath from the four corners of the earth or fanning the flames of Pentecost. The Spirit grants new life: signaled by the waters of baptism and the waters of birth. She engendered the Incarnation and remains the sustaining presence of God in the world, comforting the broken hearted and building relationships through inspired acts of charity and forgiveness – which leads me to an ordinary chapter from the book of life: the everyday wisdom of my own mom.

My mother attributes to the Holy Spirit intuitive hunches: the urge to phone one of her friends, only to find that the woman has just gotten a sudden shot of bad news. She believes the Holy Spirit works to feed and comfort people through our labors, through the delivery of covered dish dinners, for instance, if only we attend to Her nudges. Scholars debate and point to the Gnostic gospels where Jesus states that his real Mother is not Mary but the Holy Spirit. They cite the feminine gender of *ruach*, the term for “spirit” in Hebrew, as well as similar terms in Aramaic and Syriac – although the Greek word for “spirit” is neuter and the Latin, masculine. (The French word for “cabbage” is masculine, too, so I’m skeptical of a linguistic argument.) More important to me is seeing that the work of mending relationships and binding community, of creating beauty, the work of feeling rather than avoiding emotion, of nurture and support, of patience and encouragement are all traditionally associated with the feminine – whether those qualities are embodied in the lives of women or men. This is why I refer to the Holy Spirit as “Her.”

The Spirit is not human, of course, but the gendered pronoun matters to me in the same way that the risen body of Jesus mattered. This is how

we know ourselves and others in the world; this is how we were created by God: male and female, he or she. This is how God came to us – in the form of a particular human being – and this is how Jesus appeared to his disciples – as a man with five wounds. The breath of life in Ezekiel was not drawn from anywhere or nowhere, but from the Four Winds. And the Holy Spirit, that busy, multi-tasking member of the Trinity, always at work in the world – urging us to comfort the afflicted, to trouble the comfortable, to teach and to nurture, to mend relationships, to make safe spaces of hospitality, to knit dry bones, and to heal real bodies – of all things, and not least, She grants a measure of value to the kinds of work that women have traditionally done, labor that is typically undervalued and often unpaid.

I wonder whether women’s work would seem less humble or demeaning if we esteemed it as Holy. Can we all – men and women – like Jesus cooking breakfast for his disciples on the beach – join in the domestic labors of the Holy Spirit in the world, not out of mere necessity or duty but also joyfully, out of desire?

“Do you love me?” Jesus asks. Then feed my sheep.

One of my poems anticipated these thoughts – and hinted at the cost of such holy work – almost two decades ago, the mind of poetry preceding the mind of rational discourse as it often does:

### **What I Learned From My Mother**

I learned from my mother how to love  
the living, to have plenty of vases on hand  
in case you have to rush to the hospital  
with peonies cut from the lawn, black ants  
still stuck to the buds. I learned to save jars  
large enough to hold fruit salad for a whole  
grieving household, to cube home-canned pears  
and peaches, to slice through maroon grape skins  
and flick out the sexual seeds with a knife point.  
I learned to attend viewings even if I didn’t know  
the deceased, to press the moist hands

of the living, to look in their eyes and offer  
sympathy, as though I understood loss even then.  
I learned that whatever we say means nothing,  
what anyone will remember is that we came.  
I learned to believe I had the power to ease  
awful pains materially like an angel.  
Like a doctor, I learned to create  
from another's suffering my own usefulness, and once  
you know how to do this, you can never refuse.  
To every house you enter, you must offer  
healing: a chocolate cake you baked yourself,  
the blessing of your voice, your chaste touch.<sup>5</sup>

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> This sermon was written for the morning service at Lendrum Mennonite Brethren Church in Edmonton, Alberta on May 16, 2010. I am thankful to Rev. Charles Hoffacker, now serving St. Christopher's, Carrollton, Maryland, and formerly interim priest at St. Andrew's Episcopal Church, State College, Pennsylvania, for his thoughtful reading of an earlier draft that enabled me to complete this one.

<sup>2</sup> I do not wish to suggest a false dualism that pits Jewish justice against Christian grace, an opposition that in crude forms contributes to anti-Semitism. Later in this sermon, I allude to Deuteronomy 30:19: "choose life," a rich and graceful inheritance of the Hebrew tradition.

<sup>3</sup> For a full discussion, see Julia Spicher Kasdorf, "To Pasture: 'Amish Forgiveness,' Silence, and the West Nickel Mines School Shooting," *CrossCurrents* 59.3 (Fall 2007): 328-47.

<sup>4</sup> Grace M. Jantzen, *Foundations of Violence* (London and New York: Routledge, 2004), 333-36.

<sup>5</sup> "What I Learned From My Mother" from *Sleeping Preacher*, by Julia Kasdorf, © 1992. Reprinted by permission of the University of Pittsburgh Press.

Megan Shore. *Religion and Conflict Resolution: Christianity and South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission*. Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2009.

How did Christianity influence the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) process? Unlike any of the other books on South Africa's transition, Megan Shore's *Religion and Conflict Resolution* asks an important question about Christianity's influence on the TRC process and systematically answers it. In the tradition of Scott Appleby's *The Ambivalence of the Sacred*, Shore demonstrates how some religious leaders in South Africa drew on Christianity, first to justify racist apartheid, while others later used Christianity to help foster personal, communal, and national truth-telling and reconciliation.

People both laud and denounce South Africa's TRC process, noting its successes and flaws in moving the country out of apartheid tyranny. Some see the TRC as a "model" that could be exported elsewhere, to countries like Afghanistan or Colombia that remain divided and war-torn after decades of violence. Others see the TRC more as a "miracle" resulting from the distinct leadership of Nelson Mandela and TRC Chair Archbishop Desmond Tutu.

Shore offers an analysis of Christianity's ambiguous role in the TRC process. On the one hand, the TRC successfully guided South Africa through the perilous post-war context and created an atmosphere safe enough for perpetrators to "confess" the truth of their crimes in exchange for amnesty. By drumming the "reconciliation" mantra, the TRC effectively contained potential chaos seen sporadically through street justice where apartheid's perpetrators were "necklaced" with burning tires.

Religious leaders hold a tremendous ability to influence people through moral language that resonates with people's basic values. In South Africa, the call for people to reconcile became a surround-sound campaign, with preachers linking faith with political transition every week and on radio stations across the country. Religious institutions are widespread and provide places for meetings, and their hierarchical structure allows for connecting local people to national and international offices and communication structures. The TRC used churches as meeting spaces to hold hearings on human rights violations. In many ways Christianity infused the entire TRC process.

On the other hand, the TRC process sold short the dream of a just South Africa. By focusing more on reconciliation than on justice, the process did not lead to the intended financial reparations promised to victims. In most cases, victims received only the “truth” of what happened in exchange for their cooperation in the process. But restorative justice requires offender accountability or “truth” along with real and adequate reparations. Many argue the TRC process did not lead to interpersonal victim-offender reconciliation or any real sense of justice.

Most troubling is that the TRC process did not extend beyond addressing individual harms. Addressing the needs of individuals who had lost loved ones to torture and violence during apartheid was an important first step. But addressing the structural violence of the state was an essential part of moving the country toward justice. Today, economic justice remains elusive in South Africa because the TRC process did nothing to hold those who benefited from the apartheid system to account for their wealth garnered from decades of economic privileges bestowed on whites.

Some criticize the role of Christianity in the TRC process as pacifying demands for increased perpetrator accountability or greater economic justice. Shore notes the Christian discourse of forgiveness and reconciliation emphasized social stability and nonviolence while it “delegitimized civil resistance . . . [and] punishment for prior human rights violations and provided the new leaders with the means to consolidate power”(147).

To human rights scholars like Richard Wilson, the TRC conflated religious values and processes with secular nation-building processes. Shore alludes to Wilson’s conclusion that human rights lost out to forgiveness.

At the end of the day, South Africa’s transition was an experiment. The TRC offers real lessons in the power of a religiously inspired process of “truth-telling” to transform a nation’s tolerance for untruths. The TRC process also offers some lessons in humility and prompts a commitment to “we can do better than this” – both in South Africa’s ongoing process for real social justice and in other countries that can learn from South Africa’s successes and failures.

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John D. Rempel, ed. *Jörg Maler's Kunstbuch: Writings of the Pilgram Marpeck Circle*. Kitchener, ON: Pandora Press, 2010.

With this twelfth and latest volume in the Classics of Radical Reformation (CRR) series, the Institute of Mennonite Studies editor John Rempel and his team of translators offer for the first time in English a collection of writings by what has been called the Marpeck Circle (Pilgram Marpeck and his associates). It is based on the critical German edition published in 2007, *Briefe und Schriften oberdeutscher Täufer 1527-1555: Das "Kunstbuch" des Jörg Probst Rotenfelder gen. Maler*, edited by Heinold Fast.

This collection was not the product of recent scholars but of the 16th-century Marpeck Circle itself. One of the Circle, minister and painter Jörg Maler, delivered his own handwritten, edited copy to a Swiss bookbinder in 1561. The German edition of 2007 is based on half of this original book, which survives in the Burgerbibliothek in Bern, Switzerland. Names, places, and dates attached to these writings indicate that they were circulated among Anabaptist congregations in South Germany, Moravia (now the Czech Republic), and Switzerland during three decades in the mid-16th century.

The *Kunstbuch*, as we have it now, includes 56 writings. Sixteen pieces were by Marpeck. Eleven were by other ministers in the Marpeck Circle, including Marpeck's closest associate, Leupold Scharnschlager, and other formative figures – Hans Hut, Hans Schlaffer, and Leonhard Schiemer. Maler himself wrote six pieces. Several are anonymous. These writings include treatises, devotional statements, confessions (of faith and sin), didactic poems, sayings, and a good number of dated pastoral letters offering counsel, teaching, spiritual direction, and encouragement to congregations and individuals.

Examples of pastoral letters include Marpeck's letters to the Swiss Brethren concerning their rigid discipline and causes of conflict; Jörg Maler's letter encouraging Ulrich Ageman to make a full commitment to Christ; Hans Bichel's letter to Sophia von Bubenhofen, who was burdened with guilt; and prisoner Hans von Halstatt's letter of comfort while awaiting his death.

Rempel provides introductions for each main piece and an introduction to the entire collection. He lays out historical and theological contexts,

relates the various texts to one another, provides summaries, and offers open-ended interpretive comments and questions. These introductions are very informative and insightful, and make the writings accessible, particularly to the nonspecialist.

The editor compares this collection to “an album of photographs of a family and its friends over a period of thirty years” (31). The “family” and “friends” depicted here represent one expression of urban Anabaptism. It’s an expression with theological reference points that include the Apostles’ Creed, the doctrine of the trinity, Anabaptism reflected in the Schleithem confession, and the thought of Pilgram Marpeck. Evident in Marpeck’s writing are his concepts of discipleship and church framed in the incarnation, and his search for unity while avoiding the pitfalls of legalism and spiritualism.

Nevertheless, this collection also reveals diversity and tension. Jörg Maler inserts frequent qualifying glosses and confesses his tension with absolute prohibition of the oath. Marpeck takes issue with the Swiss Brethren in their rigid church discipline and even tells one congregation that it is not a true church. Scharnschlager allows for the holding of public office if a person faithfully follows Christ. Several authors represent other traditions (Catholic, Lutheran, and Spiritualist). There are also an apocalyptic prophecy and a militaristic allegory of Christ as emperor. A few pieces refashion older works of medieval mysticism.

To read the *Kunstabuch* is to listen in on conversations among a group of Anabaptists of the 16th century. They talk with one another, Maler adds his comments and glosses, and either he or others add footnotes that cite related Scriptures. This volume is a sample of *gemeinde theologie* but not mere abstract theologizing. To be sure, it greatly expands our understanding of the life and thought one group of Anabaptists, but its theological reflections are embedded in testimonials, confessions, and pastoral letters. In Rempel’s words, they are “impassioned attempts to be the body of Christ faithfully and to trust God utterly in the midst of terrifying insecurity” (31).

Originally intended to instruct and nourish ordinary Christians, this translation is now offered to us for the same purpose. This makes the *Kunstabuch* more than a composite of historical theology. After 500 years, these writings continue what Maler predicts in his introduction: “Many a

divine mystery lies in this book; if you so desire, it will illuminate your heart, courage, and understanding. Therefore make room for it with heart's devotion" (34).

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Gerald W. Schlabach. *Unlearning Protestantism: Sustaining Christian Community in an Unstable Age*. Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2010.

Schism is something that seems to be almost second nature for Mennonites. When one reflects on the traditional stability and unity of the Mennonite community in the midst of the assimilating pressures of the broader society, this seems counter-intuitive. Gerald Schlabach identifies "the Protestant dilemma" as the source of the instability that plagues Mennonite churches in particular and Protestant churches in general.

Before the Protestant dilemma, there was "the Protestant principle" (as articulated by Paul Tillich): "because all human institutions fall short of God's standard, they are always subject to 'prophetic' critique and reform" (24). But when this principle becomes the foundation of community life, the result is "the perpetual *unmaking* of community life." The modern world and the modern Protestant church undermine tradition and authority by elevating individualism into a primary virtue. This turns the virtue of the Protestant principle into the vice of the Protestant dilemma (as articulated by Stanley Hauerwas): "a form of social life that undermined its ability to maintain the kind of disciplined communities necessary to sustain the church's social witness" (41).

The two practices that Schlabach sees as vital to avoiding the corrosive individualism of the Protestant dilemma and sustain a community of faith are those of stability and dissent. To articulate these practices, he turns to the examples of the Mennonite and Roman Catholic traditions. Mennonites have managed to develop a tradition of *dissent* that is also a *tradition* of dissent. That is, while dissenting from the structures of the violent world order, Mennonites have built "a community enjoying significant discipline

and cohesion to offer a collective witness sustainably over time” (73).

Yet this tradition of dissent has not been enough to prevent schism even within the Mennonite tradition. So Schlabach turns to the Benedictine tradition. The Rule of St. Benedict includes a vow of stability, to remain with a particular monastic community for life (apparently “church shopping” was a problem in the early monastic community). Schlabach brings the Benedictine practice of stability outside the walls of the monastery into contemporary life and applies it to marriage, congregational life, engagement with our neighborhoods, and even care of the earth.

Combining the practice of dissent as manifested in the Mennonite tradition and the practice of stability as seen in the Rule of St. Benedict produces loyal dissent – a commitment to participate constructively in one’s community through good times and bad, to hold together the tension of obedience and prophetic critique. Applied within a tradition, loyal dissent can begin to undo the Protestant dilemma by holding together the tension between fidelity to community and prophetic critique and reform.

Since the Protestant dilemma is in many ways the dilemma of the modern world, a church that practices dissent and stability can also offer a witness to the wider world, being both a stabilizing influence in a world of change and a dissenting community in the face of injustice. How to dialogue without destroying, how to change with fidelity, how to harmonize new knowledge with ancient wisdom, and how to model unity in diversity are (or can be) characteristics of the church that are desperately needed in global civil society.

Schlabach goes much deeper into both the Mennonite and Roman Catholic traditions than can be outlined here. John Howard Yoder, Guy F. Hershberger, Goshen College, and the Concern Group, all discussed in the book, will be familiar to Mennonite readers. The stories of Yves Congar, Dorothy Day, Archbishop Oscar Romero, and Joan Chittister will likely be less familiar but no less engaging. By rooting his proposal in lived examples, Schlabach provides models for how loyal dissent is actually practiced in the imperfect world of the church.

One of the keys to the author’s program is the role of sacramental practices as a way for Mennonites to maintain their unique character and witness without returning to an ethnic sectarianism or falling into a generic

Protestantism. Despite the importance of sacramental practices as communal practices of stability and dissent, Schlabach fails to develop them beyond a cursory mention. Perhaps the general aversion to sacramental language among Mennonites was the reason for this failing, but by de-emphasizing sacramental practices (which are by nature communal) in favor of individual practices of stability and dissent, Schlabach is in danger of undermining his own project. If Mennonites are to practice stability within their own tradition and within the broader Christian traditions, they must be willing to open up to the practices of those traditions.

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Alvin Dueck and Kevin Reimer. *A Peaceable Psychology: Christian Therapy in a World of Many Cultures*. Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2009.

How can Christians working in the field of mental health better address the suffering of the marginalized and cultural other in a manner true to the calling of Christ? In this volume Dueck and Reimer offer a thoughtful, accessible, and refreshing response to this timely question that will appeal to a readership beyond those working in the mental health area.

The question of how best to provide therapy to an increasingly diverse client population has garnered considerable attention in the field of psychology in recent years. However, as the authors point out, the analyses and proposed responses tend to be inadequate, given the superficial level of the discussion.

In contrast, Dueck and Reimer tackle the question from a deeper epistemological perspective, beginning with a deconstruction of the discipline of psychology. In examining its social and historical roots, they reveal the potentially damaging impact of standard psychological practice on the well-being of the cultural other. Specifically, in identifying the discipline of psychology as a product of the enlightenment and western culture, they challenge the universalist assumption that western psychological knowledge can transcend particular cultural, religious, and political traditions.

While recognizing the potential value of western psychological

concepts and practices, Dueck and Reimer argue that widespread and uncritical imposition of them across cultures represents an ongoing “empire mentality” and constitutes a violence done unto the often vulnerable other. This violence is magnified, given the assumed apolitical nature of psychology and the largely unacknowledged power differential between the western therapist and the marginalized, cultural other.

Having convincingly demonstrated that the dominant approach to therapy in the West is inherently violent when blindly imposed upon the cultural other, the authors propose their vision for a “peaceable psychology” in keeping with the message and model of Christ. This vision begins with recognition of both therapist and client as embedded within particular traditions and belief systems, each with unique perspectives and resources relevant to addressing suffering.

Dueck and Reimer argue that a significant power shift inevitably occurs when therapists no longer demand that clients meet them within the objectivist, non-religious world in which therapists are taught to reside. Opting instead to humbly enter and explore the clients’ worlds of meaning, the therapist seeks to help clients identify and access the healing resources available to them. Thus, a peaceable psychology is “an encounter between local narratives where two people, each with their particular traditions, are engaged in conversation” (13).

I appreciated the breadth and the depth of the authors’ analysis, the weaving together of ideas from a range of disciplines, and the illustrative use of examples. Further, I endorse the authors’ call for a more collaborative, inclusive, and deeply respectful approach to therapy; indeed, it is in this light that I offer my critique of the book.

First, while Dueck and Reimer’s approach may be unique in its theological grounding, their general vision for a “peaceable psychology” is less so. I concur that the portrait of psychology offered is representative of the dominant perspective; however, an increasing number of therapists are critical of mainstream psychology. These therapists, influenced by constructionist and postmodern ideas, and drawing on a range of therapeutic traditions such as Narrative, Existential, and Feminist approaches (among others), similarly use as a starting point the client’s complex and contextualized worlds of meaning. A recognition of these traditions and an exploration of

the similarities, differences, and potential linkages between them and the authors' ideas would strengthen the book's collaborative message.

Second, the inconsistent use of the word "religious" in the text diminishes the overall message of inclusiveness. The word is employed broadly at times to encompass the range of religions, while at other times it is used as a synonym for "Christian." I expect that readers who do not identify themselves as Christian would find this presumption offensive and exclusionary, potentially limiting the book's broad appeal as a result.

Finally, given that the primary and intended audience is Christians in the field of mental health, it is quite appropriate that most of the examples offered involve Christian therapists. What is less clear is why the vast majority of these examples include clients who are also Christians, albeit of different cultural backgrounds. It would have been instructive and in keeping with the book's central thesis to better illustrate what a peaceable psychology looks like for a Christian therapist working with clients of other religious traditions.

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Donald Heinz. *Christmas: Festival of Incarnation*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2010.

Do we really need another book about Christmas? With this new volume Donald Heinz has carefully carved up a unique literary dish for those who care about Christmas. It is not a sentimental picture book, a call to recover the "real meaning" of Christmas, or a rant against commercialization, but a well-researched social history of the Christmas festival. Heinz's primary argument is that the evolution of Christmas as a religious festival "displays the risky course of Incarnation in the world" (124). Incarnation is God becoming human. Christmas, the festival of Incarnation, is divine mystery "incarnated" in material culture.

Heinz likens the two-thousand-year history of Christmas to an

unfolding theatrical production in three acts. Act 1 concerns the sacred texts that describe the incarnation of God into human flesh. The author exegetes the biblical narratives of Matthew and Luke but spends most of the book on the remaining two acts.

Act 2 describes the church as the continuing extension of the incarnation on earth and the primary festal house of Christmas. Christmas as a Christian holy day was declared in 354 C.E. as Christian worship became public. Heinz sees it as only natural that the pagan festivities surrounding the winter solstice and Sun worship would become a worship of the Son.

Is Christmas then the triumph of religion in the world or its ultimate degradation? Heinz's answer seems to be that it's simply part of the risk of incarnation. Christmas, as the incarnation, blends the secular and sacred, spiritual and material, divine and human, and therefore will inevitably also attract "detour and diversion" (66). The dual theme of incarnation runs throughout the book but is perhaps articulated most clearly, and sometimes controversially, in the chapter on theology. "The incarnation implies a dangerous freedom with regard to all human cultures," says the author. "God appears open to every human form. Being a first-century Jewish male, for example, is not definitive. Even faith itself, the heart's grasp of God, comes clothed in culture and does not float above history" (89).

In Act 3 Christmas is incarnated into the homes, streets, and shopping centers of the world. Although Heinz writes as a Protestant, he wonders whether Protestant suspicion of material culture has resulted in the acceptance of a secular, and hence not seen as idolatrous, material celebration. He regrets that "snowmen, reindeer and mountains of gifts pile up where religious ritual and image have been banned" (111). Nearly all cultural artifacts have been embraced by the Christmas festival: gifts, lights, trees, decorations, literature, feasting and drinking, saints, visual art, and music. Heinz sees this not as "syncretism" but as the "remarkable ability of the Incarnation to acculturate itself to every imaginable setting, as in the poet Hopkins' notion that Christ plays in a thousand faces" (156).

Although the author admits that there is a "highly permeable membrane" between Christmas as a holy day and Christmas as a holiday, he argues that the "generous material culture of Christianity is not a fall from a spiritual golden age, but a fuller realization of the religious core



of Christmas” (221). Today, Christmas finds itself positioned between the two competing worldviews of Christianity and consumer capitalism. Heinz believes that liturgy with visual art and music may be the key to keeping alive the meaning of incarnation during the festival.

Christmas was only declared as a “holy day” in the fourth century as part of the shift toward Christianity becoming the official religion of the empire. Records of church activities before this are scant because of the church’s minority persecuted status, but the question remains: Did the early church celebrate any other events in the life of Christ besides the Lord’s Supper? Heinz does not touch on this question but jumps from the birth narratives right into the fourth century. Christians in a radical tradition will be wary of uncritically embracing any aspects of Empire, including Christmas.

Despite this missing link, *Christmas: Festival of Incarnation* is a refreshing read that cuts a fine path between recent universalizing sentimentalities in the popular media and somber jeremiads against consumer capitalism. Considering the incarnational theme of the book, it is ironic that it is not written in a more popular, accessible vernacular. However, pastors and teachers will appreciate this volume as they do the work of translation for congregations and students.

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***The Conrad Grebel Review*** is an interdisciplinary journal of Christian inquiry devoted to thoughtful, sustained discussion of spirituality, ethics, theology and culture from a broadly-based Mennonite perspective. Published three times a year, each issue usually contains refereed scholarly articles, responses to articles, informal reflections and essays, and book reviews. The Review occasionally publishes conference proceedings as well. Submissions are sought which, in subject and approach, will be accessible and of interest to specialists and general readers.

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Articles are original works of scholarship engaged in conversation with the relevant disciplinary literature, and written in a lively style appealing to the educated, non-specialist reader. Articles must be properly referenced, using endnotes, and should not exceed 7,500 words. The Review follows the Chicago Manual of Style.

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