New Sites of Peace

Before, during and immediately after the Second World War, the Mennonite peace position focused on nonresistance and the refusal to bear arms in war. For many Mennonites, this attitude was transformed after 1945. There was a shift from passivity to activism, from isolation to engagement. The earlier Mennonite view that nonresistance primarily involved objection to warfare was replaced by an activist mode of constructive peacebuilding with a wide scope of involvement.

- After T.D. Regehr, *Mennonites in Canada: A People Transformed*

Quaker Ralph Eames and Mennonite pastor David Groh (right) staff the Mennonite Central Committee Ontario peace booth at the Canadian National Exhibition, 1962. The sign behind them reads “The Church in the Nuclear Age.”

The Poppy

"The general impression in my mind is of a nightmare...and behind it all was the constant background of the sights of the dead, the wounded, the maimed, and a terrible anxiety lest the line should give way."

- John McCrae, author of "In Flanders Fields"

The red poppies of Flanders, blooming despite the war-ravaged landscape, left deep impressions on McCrae and other veterans.

The image of the poppy first appeared as a symbol of remembrance in the early 1920s, when Canadian veterans began to be identified with the sale of these artificial flowers.

In 1948, Parliament gave the Royal Canadian Legion the responsibility to preserve the symbol of the poppy against exploitation for commercial purposes, and to keep in trust the proceeds from poppy sales to support veterans.

The Legion states: "Canadians are fiercely proud of our Veterans...and during the period leading up to Remembrance Day, millions of Canadians wear a Poppy as a symbol of national pride and respect, a visual pledge to never forget the more than 117,000 Canadians who made the ultimate sacrifice to protect our freedoms."

The White Poppy

The white peace poppy was developed in the United Kingdom in the early 1930s by the Women's Peace Pledge Union to commemorate veterans and all other victims of war, the pursuit of peace, and to raise funds for peace education work.

Strong proponents of the peace poppy were the Quakers (Society of Friends), whose pacifist convictions led many to resist conscription.

Instead, Quakers organized groups such as the Friends Ambulance Unit (established 1914) with the purpose of "cooperating with others to build up a new world rather than fighting to destroy the old." They volunteered as stretcher-bearers and on ambulance trains, and participated in other forms of relief work to avoid taking up arms.

Wearers of the white poppy choose to wear it either as an alternative to or alongside the red poppy.

The Peace Button

In 1988, pastor Bertha Landers approached Mennonite Central Committee Ontario with the idea for a button to be worn either alongside or in place of the Remembrance Day poppy. Thirty years later, the button continues to spark discussion and opinion.

The Mennonite Central Committee's peace button is not intended to minimize the experience and suffering of veterans who, frankly speaking, deserve much better than what a single day of memoriam can afford.

There exists a very real tension for pacifists in taking part in Remembrance day traditions, including the wearing of the traditional poppy, without simultaneously accepting the premise that violent responses to conflict bring lasting peace. There are many victims of war. Some of them wear uniforms. Some do not. The peace button aims to add to our dialogue as a community – not to minimize it.

- Rick Cober Bauman, Executive Director, Mennonite Central Committee Ontario, *Waterloo Region Record*, November 2015

The original peace button (left) and subsequent designs

The Poppy & the Button

Some years ago, I shared a stage at an elementary school on Remembrance Day with a veteran. I listened as he described a friend whom he had lost in his war. He listened as I shared stores about losses from children who lived in war-torn countries today.

After the assembly, he came to me and said that the best way to honour his fallen friend was to ensure no one else would fall. He shared an inescapable bond with the children about whom I spoke. This veteran had entered the military at a very young age and had lost his childhood, as well, to war.

With tears in his eyes, he took the lapel pin from me—the one that said "To remember means to work for peace"— and pinned it next to his medals.

- Ed Epp, "A Pacifist Honours Remembrance Day," *Waterloo Region Record*, November 10, 2004

Canadian Mennonite photograph

Ying Ying Wang of China and Santiago Gomez of Colombia, participants in Mennonite Central Committee's International Visitor Exchange Program, wore both poppies and peace buttons as they spoke at the Remembrance Day service in Warman, Saskatchewan, 2010

A Peace Button Story

In June 2015, staff from Mennonite Central Committee participated in the Truth and Reconciliation Commission regarding the First Nations residential schools in Canada, of which Mennonites operated several.

MCC brought a display table to highlight the work they were doing to address and provide information about the three Mennonite residential schools in northwestern Ontario. Among other things, this table had on it a basket of peace buttons.

Esther Epp-Tiessen (Public Engagement Coordinator, MCC Canada) remembers the button supply disappearing as quickly as it was replenished. She says "I guess for many of the residential school survivors there, the idea of remembering that experience was ultimately a way of working for peace and reconciliation."

Mennonites, some wearing the peace button, participate in a walk for reconciliation at the final session of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, 2015