

## COMMITMENTS AND COMPLICATIONS IN DOING GOOD

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There is no shortage of "commitments and complications" in the work of Mennonite Central Committee (MCC) nor of stories and experiences which illustrate both. But much of what needs to be said about those things has already been said, at least for those who know MCC well. And something in my spirit rebels against thinking again mostly about the problems, the complications and the failures.

As I prepared this article I kept asking myself (and God), "What is the word I should speak to MCC?" And I kept hearing the word "blessing"—blessing MCC, thanking it for blessing me and many others, and calling it to the task and joy of blessing those with whom it comes in contact. Sharing God's blessing—that, more than serving, is MCC's calling.

I will return to this theme of blessing, but I want first to note the contexts out of which MCC has come and in which it finds itself currently, and to reflect on some of MCC's distinctive commitments. In particular, I will connect MCC and its life with the life of its supporting Mennonite constituencies in North America.

### BECOMING ESTABLISHED

Beginning in the latter part of the nineteenth century, Mennonites in North America began to come out of their isolation. One major expression of this new identity was the building of institutions, particularly educational institutions and mission/service institutions.<sup>1</sup> MCC is a product of this institutional flourishing.

At the time of MCC's birth, Mennonites were living on the margins of North American society; some had only recently arrived and nearly all lived away from the major urban centers. They were also culturally and educationally isolated from the majority of the society. A recent study of Mennonite sociology by J. Howard Kauffman and Leo Driedger, *The Mennonite Mosaic: Identity and Modernization*,<sup>2</sup> emphasizes how, even

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1. See, for example, James C. Juhnke, *Vision, Doctrine, War: Mennonite Identity and Organization in America 1890-1930* (Scottsdale, Pa: Herald Press, 1989), especially chapters 5 and 6.

2. (Scottsdale, Pa: Herald Press, 1991).

in the last quarter century, Mennonites have become "modern." This has entailed massive shifts in education, social and economic status, geographic location, self-perception, and profession. Much of the history of Mennonites in twentieth century North America could be written in terms of the theme "becoming established"—indeed, very solidly established. Instead of viewing society from the position of outsiders, Mennonites are increasingly involved in all aspects of modern life and are increasingly comfortable with it. In return, Mennonites are increasingly respected by neighbors and professional associates.

An important symbol of Mennonite respectability is *Money* magazine's recent high rating of MCC compared to other development agencies.<sup>3</sup> Together with regular reports that some of our colleges are among the country's educational "best buys," such recognition suggests that our institutions have succeeded in calling themselves to the attention of the establishment. Our Mennonite institutions are right up there with Walmart—a good place to find a bargain!

At the same time, it is clear that not all is well with the Mennonite institutions that have flourished in this century. They sometimes are a heavy weight to carry, something noticed most in struggles to meet budgets. Part of this weight is a natural result of the greater sophistication which comes along with institutional maturity. Despite many benefits, this sophistication also requires more administration. One indicator, the changing nature of personnel deployment, from 1973 and 1993, suggests that this tendency is also evident within MCC (Table 1).

Most Mennonite educational and churchwide agencies face serious financial struggles. In addition, much of their support comes from a relatively small group of unusually wealthy persons—donors who are "cultivated" by an increasing number of "development" persons.<sup>4</sup> Churchwide agencies in particular have seen cuts in their financial support, even as Mennonite prosperity increases and as Mennonite giving overall increases. The evidence suggests a noticeable shift among Mennonites toward local charitable giving—and to living more comfortably.<sup>5</sup>

3. Marguerite T. Smith, "The Best Charities in America," *Money* (Dec. 1993), 128-40.

4. A biennial gathering for Mennonite and Church of the Brethren development personnel sponsored by the Mennonite Foundation and the Brethren Foundation draws between 100-120 people.

5. According to figures gleaned from the *Mennonite Yearbook* by Stanley Kropf of the Mennonite Church General Board, total Mennonite Church (MC) giving to congregations, calculated in constant 1993 dollars, increased from \$41,474,573 in 1963 to \$110,470,731 in 1993. However, the percentage going to churchwide agencies decreased from 29.6% of the total to 4.8% of the total. In constant 1993 dollars, that means that churchwide agency support went from about \$12,276,473 in 1963 to about \$5,302,595 in 1993.—Stanley Kropf, "Mennonite Church Congregations Disbursements as Reflected in the Mennonite

Table 1<sup>6</sup> A Comparison of MCC Personnel Deployment, 1973 and 1993

	1973	1993	Change from 1973 to 1993: No. of Workers	Change from 1973 to 1993: Percent
Total Workers	750	935	+185	+25%
Overseas	505	389	-116	- 23%
Salaried	86	275	+189	+220%
% of Total Overseas	67%	42%		
% of Total Salaried	11%	29%		

Yet despite decreasing financial commitments to other churchwide agencies, MCC has continued to generate enthusiastic support. To what might this be attributed? No doubt it has something to do with MCC's adaptation to the trend toward localism, by increasing staffing of regional offices and by finding ingenious ways to involve people locally. In addition, MCC's "service" orientation and image is probably more acceptable to many Mennonites under the age of 50 than is "mission," which to some seems old-fashioned, imperialistic or arrogant. MCC also benefits from generations of teaching which have inspired a service mentality in Mennonites that can survive, at least for a time, after the theology which nurtured it loses its hold on people.

Assuming my observations have some relationship to reality, a crucial question arises: Can MCC survive and thrive *on the basis of Mennonite support* into the twenty-first century?<sup>7</sup> The increase in MCC's overhead, the shift among Mennonites to localism, a cooling of service or discipleship theology either in the direction of secular "self-

Yearbook," unpublished information sheet compiled from financial reports submitted by congregations, October 1994. Approximately one-third of this decrease to churchwide agencies may be accounted for by a change in reporting and recording procedures. Nevertheless, the shift is significant.

6. Numbers are from 1973 *Mennonite Central Committee Workbook*, 140 and 1993 *Mennonite Central Committee Workbook*, 145, (Akron, Pa: Mennonite Central Committee). This shift in staff composition reflects not only increased administrative overhead but also a changing MCC understanding of its mission. Recently this includes using more local people, doing more education in North America and facilitating more "reverse mission." Nevertheless, the figures suggest to me that MCC is a less lean organization now than it was in 1973.

7. MCC could gradually become less connected to its Mennonite roots and develop its own constituency, as many colleges and universities begun by churches have done, and as American Friends Service Committee has done to a greater degree than MCC.

fulfillment" movements or in the direction of a personal faith which is more comfortable with a "health and wealth" gospel than with a "servanthood" gospel, and growing Mennonite accommodation to "establishment" values and lifestyles—all of these pose significant challenges for MCC's future viability.

#### COMMITMENTS AND COMPLICATIONS IN DOING GOOD

I turn next to an impressionistic list of several commitments and complications in MCC's doing good. In each case the complications I raise are not meant to undermine the commitment, which I support, but to help us consider how to live it out more authentically.

##### *On Being a Rich, Powerful "Servant"*

**Commitment:** MCC operates from a "servant" posture, wanting to aid and to walk humbly with those with whom it works, not dominating them or "lording it over" them. This servant stance takes shape in the attitude MCC seeks to instill in its workers. It is also embodied in an emphasis on developing program in response to the needs and desires expressed by local people. Further, it is reflected in MCC's preference for working together with local churches or other local organizations where possible, rather than creating its own institutions.

**Complications:** Sometimes the focus on servanthood has obscured the fact that MCC and its workers have power. MCCers often have more power or, more accurately, a different kind of power than the persons or institutions with whom they work. As MCC's motto makes clear, the organization does in fact represent "a Christian resource for meeting human need." This resource comes (or does not come—MCC decides) in the form of money and personnel (i.e., power). We do not help ourselves or others by pretending that we do not hold power and do not exercise power. There is a tension between being a servant—wanting to do the will of those we serve—and still having the ability to decide. As an Argentine Mennonite pastor put it, "You put me in an impossible position when you ask me for my vision—and you are the ones who have the money. The one who pays the piper calls the tune."<sup>8</sup> Often MCC "serves" in a way more analogous to a parent "serving" a child or a professional "serving" a client—holding power to decide whether to serve in a certain way or not—than to that of a "servant" serving a master who has the true control.

8. Nancy Heisey and Paul Longacre, *Final Report: Mennonite International Study Project* (Elkhart, Ind.: Mennonite Board of Missions, 1990), 31.

Two stories will illustrate the complications of simply "being a servant." I remember an early 1970s discussion in the MCC Executive Committee of a request from some African churches for help in building a seminary. The churches had learned from a previous generation of westerners that the way to educate is to build institutions. But by the time the proposal arrived in Akron, our western Mennonite conceptions about how education should be carried out, at least overseas, had shifted. We were convinced that a less institutional and more non-traditional form of theological education—that is, education by extension—was preferable. However, we also wrestled with the fact that our refusal to fund an institutional seminary and our willingness to fund an alternative type of theological education would be yet another form of colonialism. Once again, we would be implying, "We know better than you what you need, and if you want our resources you will do it our way." Still, we were hesitant to help build the seminary that the African leaders wanted since their desire for it seemed to be shaped by a western colonial mentality which looked to formal institutions to solve problems. In the absence of substantial long-term outside funds and personnel, plenty of evidence suggested that large western-style institutions were often a burden to younger churches, rather than a resource to them. We also knew that providing long-term support perpetuates dependence. Down which path lies servanthood?

Another example comes from the Philippines. While my family and I were there teaching in a Protestant seminary, we learned about some of the conflicts in the independent Filipino denomination with which we served. The mainline American Protestant denominations whose missionaries and money had run all of the church's institutions until about twenty years prior had removed most expatriate personnel in response to Filipino calls for autonomy (also in response to shrinking budgets). The policy of those mission agencies now was to have almost no personnel present, but to provide funding—in recognition that resources were distributed unequally around the world and that funds were something Americans could provide. The policy was also adopted in the name of relinquishing power, rather than dominating or interfering in the life of the national church. However, we learned that simply "dumping" these funds on the national church, without strings or guidelines or North American workers on the scene, intensified the normal conflicts within any church, since whoever controlled the central church apparatus controlled all these foreign funds—funds which constituted a significant portion of the financial resources available to the Filipino denomination. The power represented by money inevitably "interfered" with the life of the national church. Down which path lies servanthood?

We cannot avoid the issue of power by saying that we will simply respond to the desires of local people. There are an enormous number of local people and an enormous number of organizations with which we could potentially become partners. Even if we decided simply to do whatever we could to follow through on the desires of the people we listened to, we would still need to choose which persons to listen to. Choice about where we invest our resource is unavoidable. And choice is something that is not available to any but rich and powerful "servants."

We must be clear with our partners about what our own priorities and convictions are. We ought not hesitate to factor our own convictions into our listening and deciding in an explicit way. This is a simple matter of honesty. An honest recognition of our power and of our priorities will help make our servant stance more responsible and helpful. Yet, coming to understand and accept our power and the responsibility which it entails dare not mean abandoning a posture well captured in the word "servanthood" as we relate to those with whom we walk.

#### On Listening

**Commitment:** MCC is committed to listening to those with whom and for whom it works.

**Complications:** Different voices direct MCC's attention in various directions. Overall, perhaps the clearest tension is between the voices of those with whom we work on the field and the voices of our constituency in North America. For example, North American Mennonites give generously to emergency relief, whereas people overseas most often want support for longer term projects. In addition, MCC workers have their own various voices and perspectives which must be heard.

Of course the primary way of dealing with this problem is to facilitate more communication among the different voices shaping MCC's direction. However, that is not cost-free since more communication requires more travel and more personnel—that is, more time spent interpreting what is being done rather than doing it. MCC's strong church connectedness to North American Mennonites is a great strength which I would not want to give up. MCC should be an arm of the Mennonite churches, not independent of them. But this church connectedness yields its own frustrations. How to facilitate communication and listening without becoming excessively top-heavy is a substantial challenge to MCC's future viability.

#### On "Empowering" People

**Commitment:** MCC seeks to empower people, enabling them to shape their own lives and futures.

**Complications:** Much of MCC's work has been on behalf victims of various disasters. These disasters include dramatic events such as wars or natural calamities or long-term disasters such as economic disparities, exploitation, poor education and inadequate technology. This focus of MCC's work has often caused us to see the persons with whom we work as "victims." Coming to view the needy as "victims" has been helpful in at least one important respect. It removes some of the stigma laid on the poor by people who claim that "it is their own fault."

In seeking to empower people, we have focused increasingly on the systemic and structural causes of problems. We have taken to heart the sentiments embedded in the slogan, "Give people fish and they'll eat for a day, teach them to fish and they'll eat for a lifetime." We have also attended to the question, "But what if they are denied access to the river?" Because we hear this question ringing more loudly, we now pay more attention to public policy questions. Our institutional life represents increased awareness of the complications along the road to empowering people. This focus on the structural and systemic is good.

But along with the external changes we promote, empowering people often seems to require internal changes in those with whom we work. Perhaps the most empowering thing we can do for people is not to provide technology or even to remove a political or economic barrier blocking access to the river, but to help nurture in people a sense of their own value, worth *and* efficacy.

Of course, we have long stressed this point. But this perspective gets lost sometimes in our structural analysis and our stress on the responsibility of outsiders for the problems in many parts of the world. This can lead to a disempowering attitude on the part of the needy: "If others have caused our problems, and if we are simply victims of their injustice, we are powerless to change our situation. You must change it on our behalf."

There are morally important grounds for being reluctant to stress this "complication" to empowerment. In the North American political climate, it offers us rich westerners an easy way to deny any responsibility for the conditions under which many suffer and, worse, to deny that we can assist in their empowerment. This analysis can lead to the comfortable conclusion on the part of the rich: "It is *their* problem. We are not responsible, and there is nothing we can do."

Still, a "victim" mentality is disempowering. While resources at hand are often very meager and while people dare not be blamed for their victimization, sometimes giving assistance even in the form of political advocacy seems only to increase feelings of dependence and inefficacy. At best, such help does not highlight the resources already at hand.

An example comes from MCC experience in a Filipino village. MCC workers reported that almost everyone there participated vigorously in the weekly national lottery. If I recall correctly, the MCCers working there estimated that the amount of money from the village going weekly into the lottery was likely greater than the annual MCC program budget in that village.<sup>9</sup> A crucial question for empowerment is how to help people see the resources which are at hand and become more willing and able to use them productively. How can we do this without blaming the victim?

#### *On Being Political Apolitically*

**Commitment:** MCC's response to human need includes addressing matters of public policy since government policies often are crucial in causing or minimizing the needs we encounter.

**Complications:** One complication is that an apolitical heritage clashes with this awareness that politics shapes human well-being and that concern for "meeting human need" cannot ignore politics.

Other complications arise since political judgments about public policy entail not only normative value judgments which we can derive theologically and ethically from the Bible and our tradition (at least theoretically), but also judgments about what are often very complicated matters of fact, and about theories of cause and effect. For example, we might agree that the presence of absolute poverty in many parts of the world is morally unacceptable in light of our productive capacities, yet disagree about what governmental policies would be most effective in eliminating that poverty. Should we, for example, support "free trade" or should we oppose it—assuming that our primary concern is with the policy's effect on the poor?

We need to accept the fact that when we discuss public policy questions we are not only making theological and ethical judgments but judgments about complicated factual matters. Perhaps if we did so we could deal with one another in our disagreements more charitably and find ways to converse more fruitfully.

9. This is not intended as an attack on Filipinos. The desire to end poverty suddenly and magically through the lottery is a North American phenomenon as well.

Another complication arises from a substantial difference between the political orientation implicit in MCC programming in many places and the political orientation of most North American Mennonites. Generally, MCC programming has been more sympathetic to left-of-center political and economic thought than our constituency has been.<sup>10</sup> While some distance on matters such as this is to be expected, given the different windows through which we view the world, the gap seems large and filled with emotion, as evidenced in recent responses to Washington Office Director Daryl Byler's analysis of the 1994 U.S. election results.<sup>11</sup>

A final complication. For decades MCCers have heard the call to go speak to our governments, especially the U.S. government, about the problems we observe in other parts of the world. It is a call we dare not ignore. Yet, to what extent do we believe that Washington actually shapes things around the world? Indeed, to what extent do we believe that government is capable of bringing about much positive social change? These questions arise from our heritage which stresses the importance of an alternative community—not government—for moving toward God's reign. They also arise in the thought of neo-conservatives who stress the limitations of politics and the futility of believing that politics can answer the most fundamental issues with which society needs to deal.<sup>12</sup> Such thinking apparently has much resonance in our constituency, which we would do well to heed—and engage—seriously. We dare not ignore our friends around the world who tell us to address American public policy. But at what point do we do them a disservice by focusing on political advocacy instead of working beside them to change what can be done in the immediate context?

10. This left-of-center orientation is reflected in my experience of how MCC related to governments in the Philippines as compared to Vietnam and Cambodia.—Ted and Gayle Gerber Koontz, "Reflections on MCC Program in Kampuchea and Vietnam as Compared to MCC Philippines Program," unpublished report, April 1, 1989. It is also reflected in MCC Washington office judgments about countries like Cuba. See, for example, Peter Dula, *Pacifism After Babel: Does It Stretch or Will It Break?* (M.A. Theological Studies thesis, Associated Mennonite Biblical Seminary, Elkhart, Ind., 1995), 15-18 for a critique of MCC interpretation of Cuba. It would be interesting to compare the positions on key issues of members of Congress whom majorities of Mennonite voters support with MCC Washington Office tabulations of the frequency with which those members agree with Washington Office positions. My suspicion is that those members receiving the most Mennonite votes would disagree rather consistently with Washington Office positions.

11. Byler's article appeared in several Mennonite papers. In the *Gospel Herald* it was titled "Do Mennonites Want to Send a Message to Washington?" and appeared on December 20, 1994, p. 5. Numerous responses appeared over several months following.

12. One recent expression of this view is Don E. Eberly, *Restoring the Good Society: A New Vision for Politics and Culture* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Books, 1994).

### On the Military

**Commitment:** MCC is committed to carrying out its work independent of the military and in a nonviolent fashion. MCC opposes violence.

**Complications:** Almost everywhere, our lives, and the work of MCC, depend either directly or indirectly on a sometimes disguised, sometimes overt threat of violence. From MCC's origin in the revolutionary milieu of post-World War I Russia, to relief work in Europe following World War II,<sup>13</sup> to work in Southeast Asia during the Vietnam war,<sup>14</sup> to more recent debates over how to think about military interventions in Somalia and Haiti,<sup>15</sup> MCC repeatedly bumps up against the seeming fact that our work often requires some kind of cooperation with the military, or at least its protection. The questions are practical: how to get supplies where they are needed? They are also theoretical: how do we regard something on which we seem to depend but in which we cannot in good conscience participate? When military intervention seems necessary to stop massive suffering, do we support it, do we remain silent on the public policy question of whether or not such intervention should take place, or do we actively oppose such intervention? Or do we deny that it is ever possible for military or military-like actions to actually protect human life?<sup>16</sup>

### On Peacemaking

**Commitment:** MCC is committed to peacemaking and to broadening understandings of and opportunities for peacemaking activities in many aspects of MCC programming.

**Complications:** As sociologists Leo Driedger and Donald Kraybill have amply documented in *Mennonite Peacemaking*, Mennonite under-

13. See Peter and Elfrieda Dyck, *Up From the Rubble* (Scottsdale, Pa: Herald Press, 1991), passim.

14. See, for example, David Leaman, "Politicized Service and Teamwork Tensions: The Mennonite Central Committee in Vietnam, 1966-1969," unpublished paper available at the Mennonite Historical Library, Goshen (Ind.) College.

15. I am aware of a more extensive literature among Mennonites on Somalia than on Haiti. See the following: J. R. Burkholder and Ted Koontz, "Keeping Our Calling Clear: When Armed Force Is Used to Make Relief Work Possible" and John Paul Lederach, "Toward a Sustainable Peace in Somalia," both in *Gospel Herald*, Jan. 12, 1993; J. Lawrence Burkholder, "The Dark Side of Responsibility," *Gospel Herald*, March 16, 1993; J. Denny Weaver, "We Must Continue to Reject Just War Thinking," *Gospel Herald*, April 27, 1993; Marv Frey and Ed Epp, "Are We Being Swayed by a 'CNN Theology' of Peace?" *Mennonite Reporter* (Feb. 8, 1993), 7; unpublished letter dated March 1, 1993 from Ted Koontz to Epp and Frey; Mark W. Charlton, "Pursuing Human Justice in a Society of States: The Ethical Dilemmas of Armed Humanitarian Intervention," *Conrad Grebel Review* 12 (Winter 1994), 1-20.

16. This issue was at the center of the controversy among Mennonites regarding Somalia, reflected in the literature cited in the previous note.

standings of peacemaking have shifted substantially.<sup>17</sup> MCC's understandings have shifted with it. From the early 1940s through the mid-1970s the central activities of MCC in the area of peace had to do with providing alternative service for young men conscripted through the Selective Service System. Now we speak of "peacemaking" rather than "nonresistance" or "pacifism," and we understand our peacemaking mandate much more broadly than we did earlier. Overall, I am profoundly grateful for this shift.<sup>18</sup>

In broadest strokes, I see two emerging emphases growing out of Mennonite concern with peacemaking. The first is an emphasis on a just society as a prerequisite for peace. Hence the slogan, "If you want peace, work for justice." The concern for social justice has been central in MCC programming, including much of its political witness. It grows naturally, inevitably, rightly, out of a walk with those on the margins. Justice concern has also sometimes brought MCCers in close contact with groups that seek justice, but that believe justice in their contexts can come only through violence. The tension between pursuing a just social order and being committed to nonviolence has been tested in many settings and is a central ongoing complication in MCC peace commitment. This is a tension at least as old as the debate between pacifism and "just war theory." It will not be wished away or rendered entirely irrelevant by new rhetoric or by new techniques of social struggle. There is much to be grateful for in the learnings of the last decades about the viability of nonviolent struggle for social justice, and there is every reason to do all we can to support and encourage such struggle. Our engagement in such struggle is a major step toward an increasingly authentic peace witness. Yet I believe we undermine our peace witness if we accept uncritically, "If you want peace, work for justice." To do so is to make our commitment to peace (nonviolence) subservient to our commitment to achieving justice. It therefore also makes our commitment to nonviolence contingent on our ability to prove the superiority of nonviolence in achieving justice in every case. I doubt that this can be proven. And I am sure it is not the reason we are to be nonviolent.

The second major trajectory in the peacemaking area is mediation. This also stands in contrast to our previous more withdrawn, responsive peace witness—the simple refusal to fight. In mediation we take the

17. *Mennonite Peacemaking: From Quietism to Activism* (Scottsdale, Pa.: Herald Press, 1994).

18. MCC, perhaps more than any other single Mennonite agency, helped foster and stimulate the shifts in peace theology which are described by Driedger and Kraybill. More than anything else, the experience of MCC workers and workers under other mission agencies caused a shift to a more activist and a broader definition of what commitment to Christ's way of peace means.

initiative to intervene directly in conflicts, seeking peaceful solutions. This development is also a wonderful outgrowth of our concern for peace, a sign of a deeper appropriation of the gospel of peace. Yet it is not without complications. I point to only one. While there may be no *necessary* tension, sometimes an increased concern for social justice and a concern for peacefully mediating conflicts appear to pull in opposite directions. A "justice" orientation leads naturally to siding with the oppressed in a conflict, while mediation (or at least some mediation roles) requires a kind of impartiality regarding conflicting parties which might appear to ignore questions of the relative justice of each side's claims. What is the relationship between "justice advocacy" and "good offices" in peacemaking?

#### On Word and Deed

**Commitment:** MCC seeks to embody, not "preach," the Christian gospel in its programs, showing Christ's compassion in life. At the same time, MCC is unapologetically Christian.

**Complications:** MCC has confronted many complications related to its explicitly Christian identity, particularly in areas where other religions, especially Islam, are dominant. The struggle is to be clear about our identity, open about explaining who we are and what we believe, and yet respectful of and acceptable to another culture and religion. In such contexts MCC has sometimes been hesitant to *speak* of Christian faith and invite others to faith.

In addition, MCC's "service" image has attracted some workers who are interested in serving but who may be quite unclear about their own faith or personally hesitant to "speak" their faith. Sometimes MCC has been rightly accused of "hiding the light under a bushel."

Should word and deed, "service" and "mission," be separated? In theory? In practice? In persons? In a "service" agency and in "mission" agencies?

#### MCC AND THEOLOGY

This paper was prepared for a session on "theology" at an MCC seventy-fifth anniversary conference. Yet the assignment I was given and much of what I have said so far would fit more naturally into a session on "politics" or "development theory." What might be said about "theology" in relation to what MCC does or has done, or what MCC is or how it understands itself? MCC has spent less time thinking about its theology than about complications in doing good. Our program has emphasized work over words. Explicit theologizing, apart from "peace theology," has not been a high priority. Our theology has been mainly

lived, not spoken; implicit, not explicit; assumed, not taught—though there are some notable exceptions.<sup>19</sup>

What follows is intentionally stark because I want to highlight a point and stimulate discussion of it. I hope the starkness and oversimplicity of it is neither distracting—causing us to discuss mainly the accuracy of the analysis here instead of where we want to head theologically—nor hurtful. No institution is more dear to me than MCC. Yet with caring comes critique.

#### MCC's Theology: "A Christian Resource for Meeting Human Need"

What is MCC's most fundamental commitment, theologically? Because there are variations it is hazardous to generalize. My comments will inevitably be more autobiographical than comprehensive, especially since I have not made a systematic study of what is recorded of MCC's theology. Although what follows reflects my theological pilgrimage, I am confident that it is not entirely idiosyncratic.

**Commitment:** MCC is committed to discipleship, to following Christ in life, especially to serving "the least of these" in tangible ways.

This commitment is reflected in MCC's origins, history and program. Why do we have an MCC anyway? Because there are needy people, because we know that as followers of Jesus we are to serve as Jesus served, sharing our resources, and because we need a vehicle for connecting resources with need. While MCC's slogan, "A Christian resource for meeting human need," is not exactly a theological statement, it does reflect a theology of discipleship, servanthood and active expression of concrete caring which is MCC's most fundamental theological commitment.

#### Observations:

1. MCC can be viewed as the premier institutional expression of the "Recovery of the Anabaptist Vision" theology articulated by Harold S. Bender and others. Bender's understanding of the essence of the gospel as centered on discipleship and love (or nonresistance) found its best institutional expression in MCC.<sup>20</sup> A theological articulation of a

19. See particularly Gerald W. Schlabach, *To Bless All Peoples: Serving With Abraham and Jesus* (Scottsdale, Pa: Herald Press, 1991) and *And Who Is My Neighbor? Poverty, Privilege, and the Gospel of Christ* (Scottsdale, Pa: Herald Press, 1990); and C. Norman Kraus, *A Theological Basis for Intervention Ministries*, Occasional Paper No. 20 (Akron, Pa: MCC, 1994).

20. The third component of Bender's interpretation was the church as a disciplined community.—Harold S. Bender, "The Anabaptist Vision," *Church History* 18 (1944), 3-24. To cite Bender here is not to deny that the elements of this theology were already present

uniquely Mennonite faith and an institution to embody it grew together. Bender's vision did not stress words (worship, evangelism, mission) or religious experience (conversion, piety), but ethical living. So did MCC. Though I can not prove it, I suspect that this congruence between a powerful mid-century theological stream and MCC's program has been a crucial source of MCC's vitality.<sup>21</sup> For decades now, many Mennonite youth have simply assumed that "service" is central to Christian faith and that a program such as MCC's is the vehicle through which they should express their commitment to serve.

2. Both MCC's slogan and the theology of discipleship accent the difficulty and cost of being Christian. Discipleship theology stresses the need to accept hardship, even suffering and death, in walking with Christ, while MCC's slogan urges us (in more modest fashion) to help meet human need. In either case, being Christian is hard work.

3. MCC's theology, like the "Anabaptist Vision," stresses the horizontal, rather than the vertical. Indeed, one might suggest that in a strict sense the theology here is more ethics (systematic thought about right living) than theology (systematic thought about God), though to separate the two is problematic, especially from an Anabaptist perspective. But in clear contrast to some other theological traditions the accent here is on right human relations and not on worship.

4. As Bender's articulation of a Mennonite theological perspective began putting Mennonite thought on the intellectual map, so Mennonite service through MCC began putting Mennonites on the cultural map. Both were important steps encouraging Mennonites to come out of their ethnic enclaves and to engage the world more creatively. They were

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in many Mennonite communities, or to claim that it was limited to "the Goshen School." On the contrary, these themes were widely present already in a great variety of Mennonite groups. Bender and his associates' largest contribution was to articulate, systematize and focus strands that were already present. Though from our perspective at the end of the century, mid-twentieth century leaders like Bender and Guy Hershberger may appear rather inwardly focused, in their context they were leading the church to a wider engagement with the world. The "discipleship" theology which came to the fore around mid-century was far more activist and outgoing than most previous North American understandings of Mennonite Christian faith had been. This is perhaps evident most clearly in Guy Hershberger's *The Way of the Cross in Human Relations* (Scottsdale, Pa: Herald Press, 1958).

21. There were certainly other sources as well, especially in the early years. Most important was the government requirement (kept much longer in the U.S. than in Canada) to do either alternative service or military service. But the facts that MCC's programs did not collapse with the end of the military draft in the United States in the mid-seventies and that many Canadians also volunteered for service programs suggest that, at least over time, a "theology of service" developed which sustained commitment to active discipleship in the form of MCC service.

also steps toward gaining respectability.<sup>22</sup> "Meeting human need" is something unquestionably admirable. Who can object to our doing good—not talking much, just helping others? Obviously at points MCC has found itself at odds with our culture. But in general MCCers do not face the persistent oddness of proclaiming a peculiar gospel that missionaries must face. Our oddness as MCCers is more often admired than scorned. For some of us it was just plain less embarrassing to be an MCC volunteer than a missionary, to plant corn than to plant churches, to teach math than to teach that Jesus walks with us in our brokenness and gives new life and hope.

Complications: This theology has undergirded a marvelous flourishing of service among twentieth century Mennonites. It has led to enormous blessing. Nothing I say in what follows should be taken to minimize the contribution of MCC or this theological posture which has been central to its work. Nevertheless, there are still more complications in the experience of MCC. These complications can be attributed at least in part to this theology.

1. This theology invites paternalism. We are servants, helping others in ways that they are unable to help themselves. We have; they are needy; we give them what they need. In a deep way the patterns of our thinking may contribute to the very sense of disempowerment which we seek to overcome. The perspective reflected in MCC's slogan is one of scarcity, which suggests that people are unable to deal with their own needs. Obviously, we have worked hard at moving beyond this kind of paternalism. Yet it seems deeply rooted in our theological underpinnings, as well as in our normal human propensity to view ourselves more highly than we ought.

2. This "servanthood" theology can lead to a focus on the centrality of *our* work and therefore become a major burden as Stephen Dintaman has argued.<sup>23</sup> This possibility has been verified in my experience and in the experience of other MCCers I have known. As Gerald Schlabach

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22. A question worth exploring is this: To what extent has the Mennonite service ethos been shaped by the desire to gain acceptance, especially given our obvious and awkward relationship with the broader society when wars come? This need for respectability is a theme touched on by James C. Juhnke in his historical studies of Mennonites in the early part of this century *Vision, Doctrine, War: Mennonite Identity and Organization in America, 1890-1930* (Scottsdale, Pa: Herald Press, 1989) and *A People of Two Kingdoms: The Political Acculturation of the Kansas Mennonites* (Newton, Kan.: Faith and Life Press, 1975). In his unpublished paper "War and the Mennonite Agenda in the 20th Century" presented at the MCC 75th anniversary conference in Fresno, Juhnke argued that MCC has been dependent on America's wars, and wonders what the likely absence of serious American wars means for MCC's future.

23. Stephen F. Dintaman, "The Spiritual Poverty of the Anabaptist Vision," *Conrad Grebel Review* 10 (Spring 1992), 205-8.

has recently written, a servanthood theology which is based on our power will "grind us into dust."<sup>24</sup>

While some of the burnout which is common for MCC workers is attributable simply to the difficult situations in which they work, our theology may also sometimes be to blame. A theology which puts us directly in touch with such deep needs and charges us with responsibility to meet them is a theology which encourages burnout. The fact is that we usually will not change the world—at least not significantly or at least not in ways we can see. If our task is to "meet human need" and at the end of our term the need is greater than it was when our term began, we are set up for disappointment, failure, guilt and embitterment. If, on the other hand, we are fortunate enough to be in a situation where we make substantial difference, we might be in danger of the opposite threat of thinking that somehow by our own ingenuity and hard work we have met the needs of others.

3. Perhaps the most central problem with a servanthood theology and with MCC's slogan can be highlighted by asking these questions. "To what does this theological stance turn our eyes?" And, "What do we see where we turn our eyes?" This theology directs our attention to human action (discipleship) and human need. It causes us to see *ourselves* and other human beings first and foremost, not *God*. In addition, it focuses our attention on the scarcity and pain of human life out there in the needy world. Although MCC's slogan highlights our own resourcefulness in contrast to the world's need, what happens when we find ourselves the needy ones, as inevitably we will when we encounter the hurts of our sisters and brothers and their hurts call to our minds our own hurts? Sometimes we find that those we serve minister to us in our weakness, that giving and receiving go both ways, that often we receive more from those we "serve" than we give to them. This is an important grace that many of us have received through MCC.

Nevertheless, "Where is God in this?" While I do not want in any way to remove God from human interactions—where, of course, the Incarnation implies that we most fully encounter God—I do want to point out that it is not necessary to believe in God or to have any kind of theology in order to believe that we give and receive from others. A good humanism can support such a view.

24. Gerald W. Schlabach, "People on a Bus: Some Confessions," in Ted Koontz, ed., *Godward: Personal Stories of Grace* (Scottsdale, Pa: Herald Press, [forthcoming]). The essay by Anna Kreider Juhnke in *Godward* also makes the point about the burden of servanthood when we do it on our own power as does Susan Classen's *Vultures and Butterflies: Living the Contradictions* (Scottsdale, Pa: Herald Press, 1992).

Where is *God* in this? More specifically, where is celebration of God's bounty, in contrast to our finitude and scarcity? Where is the recognition that our discipleship is not first or mainly a response to human need but rather a response to God's graciousness and God's abundance? Where is the linking of service to worship, a linking suggested in some of our language—*Gottesdienst* and worship service?

The "servanthood theology" behind MCC is a distorted theology. In seeking to articulate a distinctive Mennonite perspective, one which emphasizes discipleship and ethics, we are in danger of losing sight of what lies behind ethics and behind discipleship.

Of course, despite, or even because of, this distorted theology many have come to know grace and to see discipleship as rooted in a response to God's abundant love and care, usually through being broken by the weight of discipleship on our own strength. Even a distorted or partial theology can lead to an appropriation of God's good gospel. After all, God is gracious! But is there a better way of thinking about why we have MCC, a better way of conceptualizing our work theologically?

An additional practical reason for asking this theological question is that the force of the Anabaptist Vision theology is nearly spent, in my judgment. I doubt that a major church program can be sustained into the future on the basis of a theology which may no longer claim the hearts of the young. While this theology has undergirded a wonderful flourishing of service for several generations, it is essential to re-root the plant of service in the deep rich soil of the Christian gospel.<sup>25</sup>

#### CHANGING LENSES:<sup>26</sup> A MODEST THEOLOGICAL PROPOSAL

##### *MCC as "A Christian Resource for Sharing God's Blessing"*

We do not need to reinvent theology from the ground up. We simply need to look with a different lens, to focus some things which are already there. This refocusing should zoom in first on God and on God's marvelous resourcefulness—God's blessing—rather than on humans and

25. Although I have no way to know whether a decline in the force of Anabaptist Vision theology for young adults is the cause, there has been a very substantial increase in the age of MCCers. The 1973 *Mennonite Central Committee Workbook*, 135 reports that it is "surprising to note the average age of the in-service volunteer to be a mature 26.3 year." The 1994 *Workbook*, 153 shows the average "total in-service" age to be 39. In 1994 overseas workers were the youngest group of MCCers with an average age of 36 and Canadian staff were the oldest, averaging 43. This increase in average age is not due only to a lack of younger volunteers. Part of the reason is the demand for more highly trained and specialized volunteers. Nevertheless, such a sharp increase in age seems troubling for the future.

26. The phrase is from Howard Zehr, *Changing Lenses: A New Focus for Crime and Justice* (Scottsdale, Pa: Herald Press, 1990).

our needs. It should "see" that the fundamental point of discipleship is to appropriate and to reciprocate God's blessing.

Help in this refocusing can be found in some recent MCC devotional publications which reflect my interest in "blessing." One is *Worldwinds: Reflections on the Blessed of the Earth* by Earl Martin and Pat Hostetter Martin.<sup>27</sup> The second is *A Dry Roof and a Cow: Dreams and Portraits of Our Neighbors*.<sup>28</sup> A central theme of the first book is the blessing we receive from the poor. It is repeated in the introductory statements to the second volume by John Lapp and Henri Nouwen. Both remind us that to "serve" means not only the readiness to give but also the expectation to receive.

Such a radical openness to reciprocity requires a deep sense of security. It requires that we let go of our ability to manage, to be in charge. As Henri Nouwen writes, it requires knowing the blessing: "You are greater than your fearful heart, you are loved deeper than your parents could ever love you, you are safer than any money can ever make you, you belong to God from eternity to eternity, and nothing created can ever take that away from you."<sup>29</sup> Surprising to us (though not to Jesus), such a sense of blessing is often present among the poor, particularly the kind of poor by whom MCCers are blessed. We can learn from them that we too are blessed by, and safe with, God. Yes, we are blessed by those we "serve."

As we come to know more and more deeply God's blessing of us, we also are empowered to become vehicles for sharing that blessing with others. While those on the margins of society often bless us, we who are privileged in many ways are empowered to bestow blessing on them also. I mean here something beyond meeting concrete needs, though I do not mean that blessing others is necessarily in conflict with meeting human need as we have normally thought of it. Blessing others very often must include "meeting human need." Yet it is possible to "meet needs" without bestowing a blessing. It is also possible for us to bless someone deeply or be blessed deeply by them without any specific, concrete "need" being met.

Central to the development task is blessing people, rather than only helping them. It is through coming to a sense of being deeply blessed, loved, cared for and empowered, that people—whether rich or poor—come to a positive and life-giving, energizing center for their lives which can enable personal and social transformation. The deep sense of

27. (Scottsdale, Pa: Herald Press, 1990).

28. Edited by Howard Zehr and Charmayne Denlinger Brubaker (Akron, Pa: Mennonite Central Committee, 1994).

29. "Introduction" to *A Dry Roof and a Cow*, 10-11.

neediness, scarcity and dependence which is bred into many of the world's marginalized can most adequately be overcome as they see themselves valued, cared for and blessed. Often those of us in power, if we use that power well, are in a good position to extend this blessing, not only because we have "things" to distribute but also because in many settings we rich educated westerners have "authority" to define reality—what is good, what is bad, who is capable, who is incompetent. This authority often gives us far more power to bless or to curse than we are comfortable acknowledging.

My thoughts about the centrality of "blessing" to our mission have been sparked most by Henri Nouwen, especially in his book *The Return of the Prodigal Son*, an extended reflection on Rembrandt's painting.<sup>30</sup> Nouwen was drawn to the painting because he felt himself the youngest son, yearning to be received and held, sustained, secure, not daring to hope for a blessing, yet most deeply needing that acceptance from his father. Nouwen notes that we all sometimes need the embrace of the father, being blessed even though we do not "deserve" the blessing.

He goes on to report how someone pointed out that he was more like the older son. He was the responsible, capable, hard-working, dutiful son who had "earned" everything that he had, who "deserved" it and yet did not know the father's blessing—even though it had been offered in the quiet form of a good life shared—and so found himself resentful of the younger son's blessing. The older son: self-righteous, judging the wastefulness of his brother, responsible, tight-fisted.

Yet another friend suggested to Nouwen that, no matter the degree to which he might be the younger son and the older son, what the community needed from him most was for him to be the father. He resisted, because he saw the pain of the father, a pain which he needed to embrace if he was to give a blessing. The father: one who holds his children's hurts, the world's hurts, in himself and yet extends to all the blessing.

What might happen if we were to conceive of MCC as a "Christian resource for sharing God's blessing?"

1. In the context of the story of the prodigal son, reflecting on ourselves as instruments for sharing God's blessing might remind us that we are not only one of these characters, nor are those we relate to only one of the characters. We might be given eyes to see that even in MCC we are the prodigal son, wasteful, erring, begging acceptance from those we have wronged. We might see our need of being blessed or forgiven. We

30. Henri J. M. Nouwen, *The Return of the Prodigal Son: A Meditation on Fathers, Brothers, and Sons* (New York: Doubleday, 1992).

might see that we too are the older brother—judgemental and unforgiving, sometimes in relation to those we serve, sometimes in relationships to our churches and supporters. We might also see how we both are already the father and are called to become the father, the one who blesses. We might even see more clearly how we, like the father, are also blessed, even as we receive into ourselves the hurt of those we bless. We might see MCC as the old one with certain resources to be distributed, the one who gives over the resources, the blessings, and with them the power that goes with controlling resources and blessing. We might see our mission as giving over the power to pass on the blessing.

2. Doing so might help us to always ask ourselves the question, "What can be more important in development than giving a blessing, an affirmation in saying 'You are good, I trust you, I bless you, I give my estate to you?'" If we are good parents, this giving of a blessing is what we do to our own children as they grow, as they leave home and have their independent lives, and again as we die. If we are good children, it is also what we give to our parents, throughout our lives and as they die.

3. Doing so would help us remember why we think it is important to include the personal dimension in our "service," rather than becoming mainly a funding agency. Blessings are given and received primarily through people.

4. Reflecting on ourselves in MCC as a Christian resource for sharing God's blessing and for blessing all God's children would be a way for us to refocus our attention on God's abundance. There is enough of what matters most. We are among those being blessed. When we are aware of our being blessed, we will have enough to share the blessing with others.

We might even conceive of MCC work as sacrament, as eucharist, as Christ's life, body and blood which we take, bless, break and give—and of course receive.<sup>31</sup> Conceiving of our work as eucharist, an action through which God's blessing of all God's children comes, may root MCC's work more firmly in the heart of Christian theology and excite a new generation of volunteers and supporters.

Like eucharist, theology begins with God's gift. Discipleship is a response to it. Our life begins as a gift from God's abundance and is

31. See Henri J. M. Nouwen, *Life of the Beloved: Spiritual Living in a Secular World* (New York: Crossroad Publishing, 1994). Of course, dangers of paternalism lurk in this eucharistic image in its traditional priestly context. Much depends on the relationship between "priest" and people. From our experience in the Philippines, the contrast in image between a "people's priest" officiating at the table outdoors in a remote parish-run health clinic after a four hour hike and a priest officiating in the cathedral in Manila is instructive.

lived in the midst of God's provision and goodness, not first and foremost in the context of neediness and scarcity.

Complications: I think of three complications that might arise from this theological perspective. First, how can we come to see ourselves as living in abundance and responding to God and neighbors out of gratitude and generosity when we also live in awareness of such pain, poverty and suffering? The answer lies in appropriating deeply into ourselves the truth of the gospel which claims that the most powerful power in the world came to us in the form of a helpless baby and that that power overcame the powers of this world through the helpless act of dying on a cross. It lies in appropriating into ourselves the truth of the parable of the mustard seed, which tells us to concentrate not on the size of the seed but on the size of the tree which will result.<sup>32</sup> It calls on us to spread with abandon the seeds of God's reign, trusting God for the growth of those seeds. Yes, we are called to help nurture the growth within us and within others, carefully cultivating the young plant and not allowing the weeds to choke it out. But most fundamental is to know that God gives the growth.

Causing this theological perspective to orient the everyday lives of those within MCC cannot be mandated. It requires conversion. But much can be done to foster this spirit among our workers. Central to living out this theological perspective is coming to have eyes to see and ears to hear the breaking in of God's reign in the small things that occur in the midst of struggle. By how we converse and report, we can encourage people intentionally to watch for those hopeful small things and to recognize God's power and goodness in them. Having such eyes and ears can grow out of regular patterns of quiet reflection during which we intentionally look and listen for God.

A second complication has two sides. One is the danger of giving a cheap blessing which says "Bless you" and then leaves you without food or shelter. The other side is the danger of many programs designed to help the poor—the danger of feeding or meeting a need without giving a blessing. These are twin dangers, especially for those of us who live as rich among many poor—although most of us rich Christians are especially in danger of the first, if we attend to the poor at all. The genius of someone like Mother Theresa is to feed *and* to bless. Food without blessing. Blessing without food. Neither is the true blessing of God that MCC is called to share.

32. This last point is made by Alan Kreider in his essay in *Godward: Personal Stories of Grace* (Scottsdale, Pa.: Herald Press, [forthcoming]).

The third complication is closely related. It is the temptation to which so much of the American "health and wealth" theology succumbs: a refusal to see the neediness of the world. Averting our eyes, or saying that the life of poverty includes its blessings and therefore we ought to leave those who suffer alone in their "blessing," are distortions even more serious than the ones which come with servanthood theology. To counteract them a perspective which holds together service and blessing needs to be cultivated. According to Jesus, it is not those who call "Lord, Lord" or who talk most about blessing, but those who do acts of loving service who receive the blessing. This is also the testimony of MCCers' experience—it is in their contact with the marginal that their lives are blessed. A focus on God's blessing will not lead us away from servanthood if we understand the biblical relationship between blessing and servanthood. The gospel message is that we are blessed when we turn to our often needy neighbor. There we find Jesus.<sup>33</sup> Our service is not finally drudgery—though there is plenty of that along the way—or pain. The gospel promises that a life of servanthood is a life of being richly blessed. Those who lose their life for my sake, Jesus says, will find it, while those who seek to preserve their own life will lose it.<sup>34</sup> Discipleship is the path to abundant life—not to being "ground into dust"—when we walk it with Jesus, not by ourselves. If we understand incarnation we will know that we cannot turn our eyes toward God without looking into the eyes of our neighbor, for that is where we see God most clearly. But when we see our neighbor as we focus our eyes on God, we see first not our neighbor's need but God enfleshed—One to be blessed, One who blesses us.

MCC as "A Christian resource for sharing God's blessing." God before (not instead of) humans. Abundance before (not denying) need. And sharing (not giving *or* receiving). Might this be a helpful theological lens through which to see MCC?

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33. Matt. 25:31-46.

34. Matt. 10:39.