

Foreword

In a 1971 letter, Mennonite Central Committee (MCC) director for Latin America Edgar Stoesz reflected on what he observed as the three phases of MCC's work in Bolivia. Phase I, Stoesz wrote, involved "living on the outskirts of a Mennonite colony and little more. Phase II was built on loaning MCC workers to various missions."¹ Phase III, he enthused, had been characterized by a robust range of programming under MCC auspices including teacher placement, health services, and agricultural extension.

This issue of *JMS* is the first of two we will publish this year that explore MCC's origins and evolution over the last century, with articles emerging from the fall 2021 "MCC at 100" centennial conference at the University of Winnipeg. Stoesz's chronology, while in some ways specific to the relief agency's history in Bolivia, offers a useful trajectory when considering the articles that follow. MCC philanthropy may have once been grounded in shared ethnic and religious interests, and from that limited mandate, MCC's tentative growth was often initially dependent on the presence of other faith-based agencies and missions, Mennonite and non-Mennonite. Eventually, however, MCC would come into its own as an expansive relief agency with a global scope.

Fittingly, Laura Meitzner-Yoder and Philip Fountain open this issue with an essay exploring the "annoying pest" of critique amidst celebration. They remind us that the 2022 issues of *JMS* and the associated centennial conference are hardly unique. At numerous junctures, MCC has marked anniversaries—events central to its institutional memory and identity—with reflections on the agency's "ethical, programmatic, theological, and political shortcomings."

The subsequent articles by Peter Letkemann and Ad van de Staaij bring readers to MCC's origins providing famine relief in the Soviet Union in the 1920s. While much of this history, and the

individuals involved, may be familiar, each author takes a unique approach. Letkemann casts light on the relatively obscure role of Alvin Miller. Van de Staij offers a provocative counterpoint by engaging in a systematic comparison of Dutch and US relief efforts in the Soviet Union. Though Dutch Doopsgezinden had maintained little contact with the Mennonites who left Prussia for imperial Russia after 1789, they responded to the famine by extending their own aid alongside that of North Americans.

From Soviet–Mennonite negotiations in the agency’s founding years, Ben Goossen turns to entanglements between MCC and National Socialism over the following decades. He considers MCC responses to growing support for Hitler among relocated refugees from the USSR in Fernheim Colony, Paraguay, as well as direct contacts between MCC and Nazi officials. Goossen then reappraises another important moment in MCC history, the agency’s work after the Second World War to move thousands of Mennonites from refugee camps to new homes in Canada and Paraguay, including some that had collaborated or directly participated in crimes against humanity.

The remaining articles in this issue reflect MCC’s rapid growth in the postwar period. As the agency joined the ranks of an ascendant global development sector, a lively debate ensued in MCC circles about the religious underpinnings and secular imperatives of its work. Alain Epp Weaver, in his contribution, examines a 1958 study meeting in which MCC’s interdenominational constituency, and especially leaders of mission agencies, actively debated whether socially progressive service, occurring in the context of the US civil rights movement and rapidly advancing struggles for decolonization, was superseding “evangelistic witness.” He concludes by urging scholars to elucidate “concrete examples of the varied ways that MCC and Mennonite mission board staff connected and interacted in local contexts.” Articles by Anna Holdorf, Jeremy Rich, and Patricia Harms take up this call and provide localized case studies of the shifting boundaries of faith and service in MCC work in Puerto Rico, Zaire (Democratic Republic of Congo), and Guatemala.

As Holdorf shows, Mennonites like Justus Holsinger who were involved in the La Plata Project in Puerto Rico were driven by both an “agricultural heritage” and a “missionary spirit.” Their activities harmonized with US plans to “modernize” the island, and MCC workers often spoke about agricultural change in evangelical terms. Such zeal was not without its pitfalls. At times they misunderstood social relations and patterns of agrarian production. At others, MCCers misread local landscapes as they championed imported

Holstein cattle that floundered on the island's hilly landscape and encouraged the planting of kudzu, soon to be invasive, to control erosion.

Jeremy Rich builds on these themes in assessing SEDA, an agricultural service project involving MCC and the Africa Inter-Mennonite Mission in post-colonial Zaire. As in Puerto Rico, MCC favoured technocratic solutions (such as the promotion of raising rabbits and different breeds of chickens) to social problems. By the 1970s, such an approach was proving increasingly difficult. This was a period in which MCC and mission boards were moving haltingly towards Indigenization/contextualization, and leaders of Congolese Mennonite churches were pushing for greater autonomy and control of resources. Rich captures these dynamics in his analysis of the brief and troubled tenure of SEDA's first locally appointed director Bernard Ngulubi Mazemba.

Patricia Harms shifts our focus to MCC's role in Guatemala. In 1976 an earthquake devastated Guatemala City, and in the early 1980s Efraín Ríos Montt would unleash genocidal violence against Indigenous Mayan communities during the deadliest phase of the country's decades-long civil war. In those years, Harms argues, MCC carefully negotiated its position in relation to the brutally repressive government on which its presence depended, while eventually moving away from top-down and "apolitical" development models of an earlier era. In Appropriate Technology programs that stressed the importance of locally produced knowledge and solidarity campaigns that implicated North Americans in Guatemala's violent history, MCC Guatemala sought to unsettle the hierarchical North-South and provider-recipient relationships of the past.

The final two articles in this issue address the late-twentieth-century history of MCC Canada. Lucille Marr tracks the growth of an MCC presence in Quebec and gives a fascinating portrait of developments among the Frères mennonites (Mennonite Brethren) as described in the pages of their French-language publication *Le Lien*. This included transnational engagement with Mennonites in Manitoba and Fresno, California, and locally generated responses to the shifting social and linguistic terrain of the Quiet Revolution, the HIV/AIDS crisis, and the Kanasatake Resistance. Ryan Patterson closes this issue of *JMS* with a discussion of MCC Canada's relationship to the disability rights movement. Patterson's narrative shows the evolution of Disabled Peoples' International (DPI), following founder Henry Enns and fellow university student Diane Driedger as they worked for the newly created organization through MCC's Voluntary Service program, establishing a humble office in a Winnipeg strip mall from which they planned DPI's first World

Congress in Singapore in 1981. As Patterson argues, though MCC support and networks were critical for this fledgling organization, considerable latitude was extended to DPI's founders in a pattern characteristic of evolving MCC-partner relationships.

MCC, in the words of Phil Fountain, is "good to think with." From the provision of development and relief work in authoritarian settings, to the shifting terrain of faith and service, to the negotiation of hierarchies between service providers and recipients, these ten articles confirm this. Indeed, the discussion has been so fruitful it surpassed the capacity of a single volume. So rather than conclude at this point, I want to close by directing your attention to our upcoming December issue of *JMS*, which will continue in this vein with further historical and contemporary reflections on MCC at 100. My sincere appreciation goes to all the participants in the centennial conference and especially conference co-organizer Alain Epp Weaver, as well as to the *JMS* editorial team, our copyeditors, the anonymous peer reviewers who gave so generously of their time, and the archivists in Winnipeg and Akron who supported this careful research in a period in which travel was often difficult.

Ben Nobbs-Thiessen, Editor

Notes

- ¹ Letter from Edgar Stoesz to Dale Linsenmeyer, Oct. 15, 1971, MCC-Bolivia Office Files 1971, MCC Archives, Akron, PA.