

**Our MCC story: From Doing to Trusting**  
Meditation for Toronto United Mennonite Church  
June 14, 2020  
Bruce and Betsy Headrick McCrae

*Bruce in italics*  
Betsy in regular font

*We are happy to be with you virtually today to participate in your celebration of MCC's 100-year anniversary. Our relationship with MCC has been a very formative factor in our lives and we are honored to be able to share some reflections on this relationship over time with you.*

But first, let us introduce ourselves: I am Betsy Headrick McCrae. I grew up in a small Mennonite community in southeastern Colorado.

*I am Bruce McCrae, grew up in Iowa and Indiana. My dad was, in fact, born and raised in Toronto. But he went to the University of Chicago for theological studies, and there he met my mom. By the time I came along, he was a Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) pastor.*

We met back in the 1970s in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, which was then called Zaire. I was business manager for the MCC office in Kinshasa.

*I was working up country in the city of Mbandaka, at the very first Habitat for Humanity housing project. We were young 20-somethings at the time. Needless to say, it was all a great adventure, an adventure which changed our lives in many ways.*

The scripture passages that we selected for this meditation this morning – Matthew 25:31-40 and Psalm 23 – are probably very familiar to you. I think of the Matthew 25 passage as a Mennonite classic. It is a call to action. Very concrete action: Feed the hungry, provide water for the thirsty and shelter for those without homes, visit and care for those in prison. Doing this is a way of showing our love for God. For me as I was growing up this passage was a clarion call for service with MCC. It still is.

*In my family growing up, there wasn't a lot of quoting Bible verses, but my parents made it very clear that love of neighbor – and especially neighbors who were different from us – was every bit as important as love of God in our Christian faith.*

Those early years of service in the Congo were very active. We were delivering goods and services first-hand. MCC was providing teachers for remote schools, agriculturalists who ran extension programs in the villages, doctors and nurses for hospitals and clinics, supervisors for material aid distribution. I was the one in the MCC office making airport runs, chasing visas, doing the books. We had no locally hired staff.

*Though the Habitat for Humanity project involved many local folks, I was the one – arriving as a 23-year-old – who was running the financial and business side of the project, fortunately alongside another American who was older and more experienced than I was.*

We were actively doing these things we were called to do – feeding the hungry, caring for the sick, providing shelter. The needs were great and we could respond. This was very satisfying. We could follow the instructions of Matthew 25 and do these things for “the least of these.”

*However, as always, the Spirit was moving and things were evolving. In the world. In our thinking about what it means to provide lasting help. In MCC as an organization. By the time we came back to MCC in the 1990s, things had changed.*

In 1993, we and our two young daughters moved to Hanoi, Vietnam; Bruce and I had agreed to be Co-Representatives for the MCC program in Vietnam. This was truly a stretching experience.

*In Vietnam we entered a world which was different from anything we had ever known. A world with a civilization much older than ours. A world with a whole different economic and political perspective. A world that was just opening up again to the West after a prolonged period of isolation. A world of great need but also of fierce national pride and*

*great potential. A world in which what we could bring as outsiders was valued, but also a world in which we, as outsiders, were often suspect and definitely not in charge.*

Fortunately, MCC's expectations of us and the work we could do were different from the 1970s. Instead of doing everything ourselves, we now depended heavily on locally hired staff. They were our contacts and our guides, our cultural interpreters and liaisons. Instead of setting up MCC-run clinics or agriculture projects, we worked through the Women's Union or the Farmer's Union or one of the very few non-governmental organizations at that time.

*MCC still provided food, shelter, education and technical assistance, but now it was indirect. Success depended on how well we could work with local partners. This was much more challenging than just doing it ourselves. Working in partnership demands very different skills. It also requires a willingness to trust that which you do not fully understand. It requires a depth of humility which does not come easily to most of us.*

We Westerners tend to read the Bible in the singular sense. When Jesus says "you," like in this passage from Matthew 25, we hear him talking directly to each of us individually. And this is personally inspiring. "Yes, Jesus, I hear your call! I will do this for you!" But it is much more likely that folks in the context into which he was speaking would have heard "you" as plural. "Yes, we will do this! When we see you hungry and we will give you food. When we see that you are sick and we will care for you." As time has passed and experience informed, service with MCC has changed from singular to plural. It is no longer an "I" adventure. It has become much more of a "we" kind of thing.

*Upon returning to the U.S. after our term of service in Vietnam we both accepted jobs at MCC headquarters in Akron, PA. I got to work out of the Executive Office as Director of Administration and Resources. Betsy was Area Director for MCC programs in East Asia. In these roles we continued to explore what mutuality in partnership really means, to recognize*

*power inequities and biases and to open up previously closed or controlled systems to wider participation both here in North America and in our work around the world. The question now was: how do we continue to be active and fully invested – feeding the hungry, caring for those in prison – without needing to be the ones in control?*

After almost a decade in Akron, we took a break from MCC to do other work. But as we approached retirement age, we began to feel the itch. The itch to get back in the MCC game one more time. We were offered and accepted the shared position of Area Directors for Central and West Africa. In this job we oversee MCC programs in Burkina Faso, Nigeria, Chad, the Congo, Rwanda and Burundi.

*In these countries MCC provides support to local partners – often church-related partners, but not always – who are committed to responding to the needs in their country and their communities. We work with them to find ways to provide relief, development and peace in the name of Christ.*

The Matthew 25 mandate remains the same. However, it seems that there's been sort of a reality check when it comes to what we expect from our work. A reality adjustment. Or maybe it's a grounding of sorts. A grounding of our work in the messy, complicated and sometimes frustratingly intractable situations of people's real lives.

*This takes us to Psalm 23, our other scripture passage for today. This passage is not so much a call to action as it is a call to trust. To trust even in the midst of danger and uncertainty. Nigeria, Burkina Faso, Chad and the Congo all suffer from ongoing incursions by brutal militias which create havoc and terrorize the populations.*

In all these countries, many people have fled for their lives. There are hundreds of thousands of internally displaced people. They are living in refugee camps or in host communities, uncertain when, if ever, they will be able to return home. In all these countries,

there seems to be no easy solution to these ethnic, religious, economic and/or political conflicts, no end in sight.

*In January this year we visited a camp for displaced people in Eastern Congo with our partner organization there, the Church of Christ in Congo. MCC supports their work in agriculture, relief, education and health in two of these camps. Eastern Congo is incredibly beautiful, with lush green hills and valleys and beautiful lakes. But in the midst of this beauty lie muddy, crowded camps full of people who have fled their homes in the hills, because they feared for their lives.*

As we walked through these camps, the words of Psalm 23 kept running through my mind: “Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil.” And “You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies.” I had never felt these words so viscerally. Or felt the depth of these promises. For folks in these camps, who are living in the literal shadow of death, the support they receive from our partner – the agriculture training, school fees for the kids, health care, the chance to overcome the trauma they experienced – is like a table prepared in the presence of their enemies. It is life-affirming and life sustaining and it gives them hope.

*We felt the same thing when visiting northeastern Nigeria. There the Boko Haram militias terrorize communities, chasing people from their homes and causing them to flee with nothing. In this region MCC supports partners who provide trauma healing and also help folks find ways to earn a living. On a visit to our partner organization WYEAHI, we heard the difficult stories of women who had needed to flee for their lives. Through the work of this partner, these women have been able to understand and overcome the trauma they’d experienced. They have been able to establish small businesses to support their families. During our visit one project participant told us, “You know, the Bible says to feed the hungry*

*and care for the poor. You are doing that. You are here with us, because you love God and you love us.”*

And so it comes full circle, or it stays within the circle. Jesus’ call to action in Matthew 25 brings us to places of seemingly intransigent conflict. Along with our partners and the folks with whom they work, we enter the valley of the shadow of death. We walk there alongside them. We feel their pain. There’s little that we can do to solve the big problems. But we can help set the table even if it is in the presence of their enemies. And this is something that provides encouragement and hope and perhaps a better future – for everyone involved.

*Our years of working with MCC have taught us, through our interactions with partners, staff and participants, that God’s presence is very real. We are called to action, to doing, but we are also called to trust. Listen again to the beautiful words of Psalm 23. These are the promises which, after all these years, we have learned to rely on.*

The LORD *is* my shepherd;

I shall not <sup>(a)</sup>want.

<sup>2</sup> He makes me to lie down in <sup>(b)</sup>green pastures;

He leads me beside the <sup>(c)</sup>still waters.

<sup>3</sup> He restores my soul;

He leads me in the paths of righteousness

For His name’s sake.

<sup>4</sup> Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death,

I will fear no evil;

For You *are* with me;

Your rod and Your staff, they comfort me.

<sup>5</sup> You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies;

You anoint my head with oil;

My cup runs over.

<sup>6</sup> Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me

All the days of my life;

And I will <sup>(d)</sup>dwell in the house of the LORD

<sup>(e)</sup>Forever.

Amen.

