

MCC – Lifestyle of Learning

Those of you who stuck around for some lobby time last week may have noticed that MCCers like to tell stories. In fact, it's a big part of the 100-year MCC alumni culture. For this reason, I am going to build my reflection today around some stories of my eight years with Mennonite Central Committee.

In our present season of heightened awareness of white privilege I will aim to identify how that was also a factor in my MCC experiences as I share some of what I have learned while in service with MCC.

By way of background, I first served with Mennonite Central Committee at the ripe age of 25 when I moved to Botswana in 1986 to take on the role of Administrative Assistant for Mennonite Ministries. We were an integrated and collaborative group of plus or minus 35 adults and 25 children serving with MCC and Africa Inter-Mennonite Mission. Our team included flying mission pilots, curriculum experts, community development workers, Bible teachers and sewing teachers among others. For the most part we worked alongside African Independent Church leaders as they had invited us to the region.

In my role I was responsible for book-keeping for two agencies, managed a guest house and maintained a fleet of around 20 vehicles – typically 15 of which were white Toyotas.

Being next-door to Apartheid era South Africa flavoured much of the work that was done, although not all. We supported exiled South Africans and South African church leaders in their bid for peace and justice but we were forbidden from entering their country due to MCC's anti-apartheid stance.

On to my first story...

The Parable of the Proud Baker:

Less than 12 hours after arrival in Botswana I was shuffled off to a village about 45 minutes away from the capital of Gaborone for a 3 month village live in. It was to be a time of language and cultural learning before beginning my office job back in the city. I had a basically furnished bedroom to myself in a three room cement-block house owned and occupied by a senior couple and their 18 month old great granddaughter. We had no running water or electricity. The outhouse was one of several smaller buildings in your yard. My host family did not speak English but a young Motswana university student was hired as my language tutor.

It was in this village that I learned my first complete Setswana sentence: "Ke rata go bina" – I like to dance, as I was invited to attend a Friday night disco where the loud diesel generator was drowned out by the sounds of dance music pulsing under the amazing canopy of southern hemisphere stars.

One day, after I had been with this family for about 2 weeks, I was handed a packet of yeast and my host mother pointed to the kitchen hut and said “boroto.” I was also provided a small crumpled bag half filled with flour, a metal basin and some salt. Around this time, homesickness was starting to kick in. I began to make the bread in the very dark mud hut that was the kitchen. As I kneaded the dough, I could peek out the slit between where the walls ended and the tin roof began. I spied cattle herded along the sandy village streets. I watched people go in and out of the small general store across the way. And I was thinking to myself – “you know, most of my friends can’t even make bread with a recipe and here I am making it without a recipe in this rustic mud-dung kitchen with a wood stove.” I was feeling a bit self righteous and pretty proud of what I was able to accomplish.

After kneading, I set the bowl down on the ground in the warm sunshine to rise. Not long after, my host mother came by, lifted the tea towel covering the basin and began to berate me. Aside from moving the bowl up to the roof to keep the dogs out, I had no idea what I had done wrong. She was clearly displeased and I ran to my room to hide my tears.

Later that day, when it was time to bake the rolls that I had reluctantly formed on cookie-tin lids, my host mother went to another storage hut and pulled out a full new bag of flour. I had mistaken the flour I was given as the constraint as I carefully mixed the dough ensuring not to add too much water and get it too wet. In reality, the issue wasn’t the amount of flour at all. I was too naïve to know that it wasn’t worth the firewood required to heat the oven to bake only a small batch of bread.

How far someone had had to go in search of that precious fuel didn’t even cross my mind. What did I know of scarcity economics in Africa?

Story #2...

Walking in Jo’berg while white:

During the period of my village live-in, I was invited to participate in a most formative and exceptional opportunity. I secured South African visa prior to leaving Canada before the South African government could associate me with MCC. With that visa in hand I was able to join a learning tour arranged by the South African Council of Churches for students from Stellenbosch University. Relaying the experiences of those 10 days would exceed TUMC sermon’s time allocation.

Instead, the story I want to highlight, is actually a shameful one for me to relate. Before the tour began I was staying in the home of Willie Cilliers, a leader in the SACC in Johannesburg. While out for a walk early one morning, I found myself in the vicinity of a train station – the commuter train from SOWETO had just arrived and dozens of labourers were descending into the city to begin their jobs as domestic workers, gardeners or factory employees.

Personally, I was terrified. I had never before encountered a human wall of black people walking toward me and here I was alone in a strange city in just such a situation. I steeled myself and put on what I hoped was a brave, sure and friendly face.

But what actually happened shamed me to the core. This wave of humanity split like the red sea before me to allow me clear passage – these people were not a threat to me. I don't know if I was perceived as a threat to them but their deference was unmerited on my part. The discomfort of privilege my skin colour bought me that day has ridden with me ever since.

Decades later while living in West Africa, this time as the Representative for MCC Burkina Faso and Chad, I was constantly treated, not as a woman, but as a man. Because of my skin colour, education and leadership role, I was invited into the circle of male privilege. From the head-bonking traditional greeting reserved for men in Burkina to holding hands in friendship with a Director at the Chad Council of Churches – I was effectively held above the station of my African sisters. Through grace, none of those sisters ever showed me disdain for how I allowed myself to behave.

I reflect on the strength of character it took for Jean Maribe, the middle-aged Gaborone guesthouse matron, to have to report to a 25 year old Canadian kid. Today this looks utterly horrible in my mind's eye. We loved and respected each other and worked well together but I regret the system that assumed I should be her manager.

Part 3...

Not in the MCC Manual

Much of the good work MCC does is well documented. In the language of international development there are many measurable indices tracked and reported quarterly. That is one of the main administrative roles of an MCC Representative. Today, I will not dispute any of those truths. MCC does great things with a very modest budget and is supported widely for this work.

What isn't talked about much is how hard it is to be an MCCer.

Was it difficult to have MCC cover our travel, health and living expenses? No – certainly not. Was it difficult to have MCC pay my child's expensive school fees, way beyond what I could have afforded in Canada, while living in one of the least developed countries in the world? In so many ways - YES.

Back in Botswana we had what we called the "Mrs. Friesen test." (nothing to do with Margaret) Essentially, it was our own version of a litmus test to see if a typical pew donor, let's call her Mrs. Friesen, would have wanted us to spend her donation that

MCC allocated to our personal enrichment on a particular movie or social activity. Was paying to sit by the hotel pool and sip Coca-Cola more or less virtuous than sitting in the air conditioned theatre watching “Back to the Future?” Mrs. Friesen kept us grounded and connected to the source of our volunteer sustenance.

Do I do the same when I am now living on “earned”, rather than donated, funds? How much do we recognize that our livelihoods are also gifts from God that we don’t necessarily earn?

Living even a modest lifestyle while surrounded by extreme poverty takes a toll. It requires a lot of self reflection and coming to terms with being uncomfortable much of the time. One’s eyes are always open and there are constant opportunities to learn. While riding together on a bus with some suspicious kids trying to scam a few cents from anyone they could, a wise mother said to me, “don’t blame them, it’s just the poverty that makes them do that.” I also recall a pastor-friend telling a young boy in Ndjamena that it was Ramadan and it was not good to steal during the Holy month. (Luckily I was able to self-edit and keep my response to myself when I wondered if it was okay to steal when it wasn’t Ramadan.) Do you ever wonder if the Ten Commandments are harder to keep if you are poor?

One time I was trying to strike up a casual conversation with an artisan in Burkina Faso and raised the warm temperatures as a neutral topic – after all it was the hot season and daytime highs were over 40 C. Any good Canadian knows how to chat about the weather. Well, this Burkinabe would have none of it and promptly told me that the temperature is not an issue to think about when you are hungry. He was right, of course and I felt sufficiently chastised for my position of privilege.

And yet, this was the same city where every passer-by is invited to share a stranger’s plate of food. “Vous etes inviter” is often heard along the roadside. You are invited. We have been invited to share.

It takes stamina and humility to volunteer with MCC. I often refer to my five years in West Africa as five continuous years of crisis management. Some were external crises that affected many people, so jumping in to ensure MCC volunteers in far-away Chad were safe during a civil war and then pulling MCC resources to help our partners respond to the fallout of the war was all in a week’s work. Discovering, analyzing and responding to financial fraud on the part of a long-serving MCC employee took its toll significantly more. Supporting volunteer families brought such great satisfaction and wonderful relationships. Sending a family home against their wishes was gut wrenching.

Each MCC position is a 24-7 experience, responsibility and opportunity to learn. I don’t think it’s possible to thrive in these positions without a strong faith and supportive community. TUMC sent Sunday School resources for me to teach a class in English to Sarita and a group of other kids in our home on Sunday afternoons. But I know the meditations in the teacher’s guides were so important to me each week

too. They were culturally familiar to me and quenched a thirst that remained after attending worship services that didn't always meet my needs.

And finally...

Some Stories not in the Headlines

Being the hands and feet on the ground, where civil unrest, disease and extreme heat were constant companions also came with great opportunities for joys. Sarita asked me to share with you that her time in Burkina Faso was a very positive experience. She thrived in her small international school, made lifetime friendships with peers from around the world, and embraced learning opportunities in our local community. One significant highlight for her was bonding with baby Theo during their weekly orphanage visits. She helped Theo take his first steps in that orphanage. These are cherished memories for Sarita.

For me, sometimes the joys often felt unearned. Touring a camp for internally displaced people after devastating floods in Ouagadougou and attending a ceremony where MCC's material aid contributions were distributed would put me in the VIP seats. I was proud to be helping in this way, yet knew that I was just the local face for donors back home. The thanks should be yours more than mine.

Last week Tobi asked the kids about some memorable MCC projects which our offerings have supported in the past. Peace clubs were mentioned and she noted that they might be something a little more difficult for us to get our heads around.

I want to conclude with two final stories that reflect MCC's peacemaking efforts from my experiences for I think these exemplify how MCC has a unique approach to relief, development and peace building in the name of Christ.

The first took place in Botswana. It all started, for me, with a knock on the door at 2:00 am. Two single women on our team were at the door, having driven two hours south from the village where they lived and worked with African Independent Churches (or AICs). Karen (not her real name) had just been raped by a man who lived in the same compound and they came to my home for support and as a starting ground for the process to follow. How this woman and the family of Mennonites and AIC members around her moved through this tragedy is remarkable to this day. Of course there were medical issues to deal with and trauma healing services provided to Karen locally and internationally. However, what was so impressive was how Karen sought justice in a peaceful and culturally appropriate manner. There were months of meetings between elders from the perpetrator's family and Karen's surrogate uncles (including one woman) – some American and some African. In the end, I believe Karen would say she felt justice had been done without the involvement of a modern judicial system. This man understood, accepted consequences and apologized for what he had done. He and his wider family also made financial donations to causes that supported other female victims and agreed

to abide by other conditions that helped Karen build trust and live in peace in her chosen community. A church service of healing and reconciliation allowed all of us to move forward after tragedy.

A second story involves peace building on a larger scale. The country of Chad has encountered much unrest and civil war. A bit of geographical context – Chad shares borders with Libya, Niger, Sudan, Nigeria, Cameroon and the Central African Republic. The Darfur crisis involved weapons and guerrillas crossing the border from Chad.

Like many countries in the sahel, Chad is experiencing rapid desertification due to climate change and the growing population struggles to exist with fewer natural resources. Add in ethnic differences, religious tensions, a militarized government and life can be pretty precarious. I recall several occasions when Chadians would find out I lived in Burkina Faso. They would inevitably say to me “Ah, you can have development in Burkina because you have peace there.” Most Chadians were longing for peace and peaceful leadership.

MCC had long been supporting partners in the Chad Council of Churches, and in particular funding a Director of Peace initiatives. During my time with MCC in West Africa a miracle happened in Chad that gives me goose bumps even today.

The Council, with support from MCCer Doug Enns, initiated the first ever conference on inter-faith dialogue in that country. It had a bumpy start when the three invited parties, the evangelical churches, the Catholic church and the Islamic Association had different ideas on whom to send. But by the second year, the annual conference was one the three groups anticipated highly. The leaders from these groups spent 7 days together in dialogue, prayer and building friendships each year and met informally between conference dates.

Not long afterward, the President (who is Muslim) asked the Christian churches to pray for him and the decisions he would be making about the conflict in Darfur. Some time later, he created a new role in his government – a Christian spiritual advisor to government to parallel the Muslim one already in place.

Yet smaller stories were popping up too. A small church in a predominantly Muslim neighbourhood in Ndjamena had been defaced by some local youths. Their Imam stepped in to bring the youth back to the church to work at reparation and engagement with church members. The Imam credits his experience at the inter-faith dialogue sessions with inspiring his actions as he was able to empathize with, and even love, the church leaders and members.

And in 2010, the inter-faith group planned a national day of prayer for peace in Chad. The stadium was filled to capacity with both Christians and Muslims praying side by side for peace in their country and the region. I know this tradition has carried on – thanks be to God.

I am grateful that MCC has provided the opportunity for a lifestyle of learning. I end this time of storytelling by sharing some scripture written by Paul to his young colleague Timothy (2 Tim 3:14-17). I think it speaks to the relationship between learning some difficult lessons along the way in order to become a better servant of God.

“But as for you, continue in what you have learned and have become convinced of, because you know those from whom you learned it, and how from infancy you have known the Holy Scriptures, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus. All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the servant of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work.”

AMEN

Proverbs 1:1-9

1 The proverbs of Solomon son of David, king of Israel:

²for gaining wisdom and instruction;

for understanding words of insight;

³for receiving instruction in prudent behavior,

doing what is right and just and fair;

⁴for giving prudence to those who are simple,

knowledge and discretion to the young—

⁵let the wise listen and add to their learning,

and let the discerning get guidance—

⁶for understanding proverbs and parables,

the sayings and riddles of the wise.”

⁷The fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge,
but fools despise wisdom and instruction.

⁸Listen, my son, to your father's instruction
and do not forsake your mother's teaching.

⁹They are a garland to grace your head
and a chain to adorn your neck.

2 Timothy 3:10-17

A Final Charge to Timothy

¹⁰You, however, know all about my teaching, my way of life, my purpose, faith, patience, love, endurance, ¹¹persecutions, sufferings—what kinds of things happened to me in Antioch, Iconium and Lystra, the persecutions I endured. Yet the Lord rescued me from all of them. ¹²In fact, everyone who wants to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted, ¹³while evildoers and impostors will go from bad to worse, deceiving and being deceived. ¹⁴But as for you, continue in what you have learned and have become convinced of, because you know those from whom you learned it, ¹⁵and how from infancy you have known the Holy Scriptures, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus. ¹⁶All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, ¹⁷so that the servant of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work.