

Summer Theme: Service and Learning (MCC)

Joint sermon at TUMC (July 5, 2020)

Peacemaking “in the Name of Christ (Jeremiah 29: 4-7; Matt: 5: 1-9)

Gary:

We want to frame our MCC stories and our involvement in serving and learning around the two Scripture texts that were read for us.

The first one is Jeremiah 29:7. “But seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the Lord on it’s behalf, for in its welfare you will find your welfare”. Jeremiah is still in Jerusalem, but the Babylonians had already taken a large chunk of Israelites into exile. And there in Babylon, were other prophets urging rebellion and resistance. “No”, said Jeremiah, “Seek the welfare of the city” – that is, of Babylon - In its welfare you will find your welfare”. If you seek the welfare of your enemies, you will find your welfare extending. That is a powerful voice.

The second text records the words of Jesus. “Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.” (Matt. 5:9). This sermon by Jesus came in the context of Roman occupation. Surely a leader of the people should foment armed resistance to these brutal occupiers. It must have been startling to hear Jesus preach “Blessed are the peacemakers”.

It seems to Lydia and me that these two texts are central to understanding MCC’s mandate. “Seek the peace of the place where you are or where you may be sent, and “Blessed are the peacemakers”.

But what does that then mean in our world where there are millions of refugees? What does it mean in our immediate context where there are desperate cries of “black lives matter”; “brown lives matter: “Indigenous lives matter”?

“Seek the peace of the city”. “Blessed are the peacemakers”.

Our own personal “MCC” stories seem a bit small in contrast to that of many others of you here in TUMC. And yet, small as they have been, they have made a huge impact on our own lives.

Lydia:

The notion of serving in the “Name of Christ” was ingrained in me from childhood on. My parents lived out their gratefulness for the help given in Ukraine by supporting MCC in many ways. Growing up, my picture of what “service” meant was very practical, hands on service, like working in a soup kitchen feeding the hungry, visiting the lonely in hospitals, sewing quilts for relief and gathering used clothes and money to send to those in need.

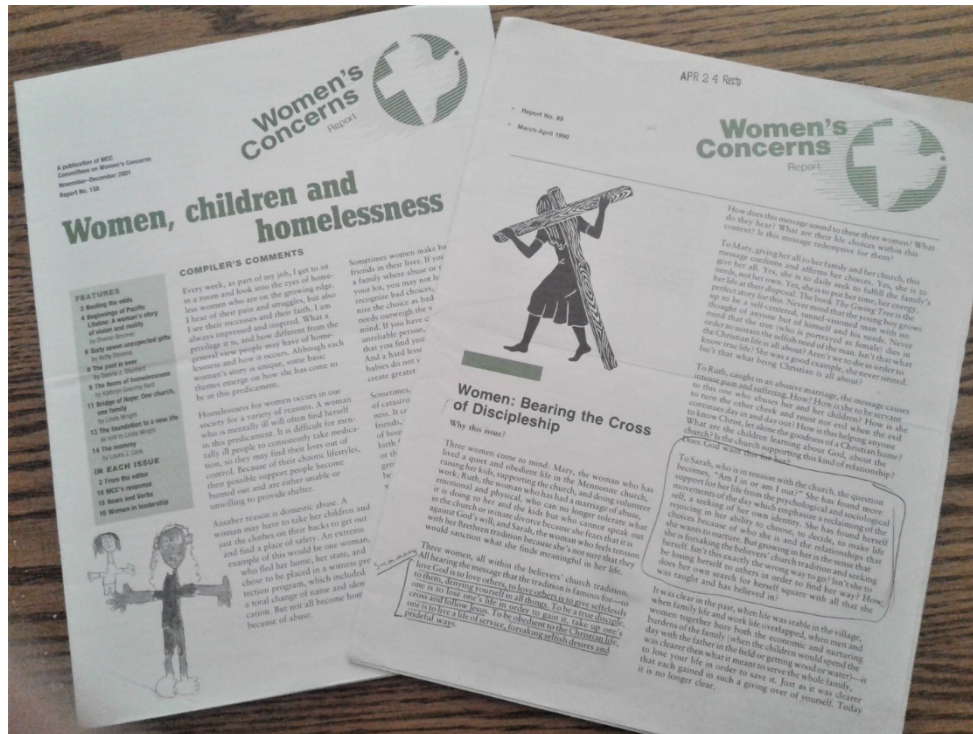
However, my more direct involvement with MCC took a rather different path. This path came about for two reasons:

1. MCC broadened its mandate from service and development to seeking justice and making peace.
2. I discovered that my passions and gifts lay more in the area of theological reflection and dialogue.

The stories I want to tell come out of three distinct times in my life when my work crossed paths with MCC and its programs.

A. “Doing” Peace Theology

In 1972 after years at seminary, Gary became the pastor of First Mennonite church in Edmonton. Somewhat by default, I became a full-time home maker! As a couple, we accepted the roles that society assigned to us. Gary was very busy with really important work! My main purpose became to support him and care for our 3 children, an unpaid, often unrecognized work. Gradually, I became more and more dissatisfied with my life of continual housework and childcare with only a few breaks for some volunteer work in the community. I felt isolated from the theological discussion that I had so thrived on during my college years. It was during this critical time that I discovered a set of periodicals put out by MCC named *Women’s Concerns Report*. For about 40 years from 1973 onward, the Peace Section of the MCC board published these 10-12 page long periodicals written and edited by women.



The format was simple. Women told their stories within a simple editorial framework on particular topics chosen by women. The editors rotated with the theme. The topics were chosen during the occasional meetings in each province and state. I became involved in the Alberta chapter and ended up editing one issue named “God-talk.”

Later, during my early years in Toronto, I was also involved in planning the first “Women Doing theology” conference sponsored jointly by MCC and CGUC, an outgrowth of the Womens’ Concerns Report. The word “Doing” was deliberately chosen because we were beginning to see how words also “do” things, that speaking and naming is a praxis, that words effect how we live and work in our world.

This was a somewhat radical idea at that time. After all, we had accepted the old saying that “actions speak louder than words”. But that proverb also had to be unpacked so that we could recognize the power of speech and its crucial role in peacemaking. I began to see how words can both damage and heal, they too can be violent but can also create justice and peace.

It’s probably hard for younger people to understand what it was like before women’s liberation and feminism began to influence the church. This periodical became a kind of think-tank (and maybe life-line) for me as I navigated the challenges of being a woman who felt a call to serve

but was not sure what this meant in the society and church of the day. The topics treated in this periodical broadened my idea of peace-making to going beyond rejecting militarism or serving the poor to naming sexual abuse, to protesting violence against women, to examining the presence of pornography and racism within our communities. It helped me to see how some of our biblical interpretations, worship and community practises undergirded injustice rather than contributed to peace-making.

This was a critical time in my life when I received many rich gifts from MCC's programs as well as learned to give out of my own giftedness, rather than trying to fit into someone else's patterns of service.

B. "Dialogue" as Peace-making

The phone call from MCC in 1997 seemed innocent enough. Would our fledgling institution (TMTTC) consider hosting several Shi'i Muslim exchange students from Iran? Since hospitality is a core value for us as followers of Jesus, I quickly said yes. I envisioned these students participating in some of our forums, attending our classes and perhaps meeting occasionally for social events or a cup of coffee. The complications of arranging a doctoral program for Islamic students from Iran at the Toronto School of Theology (with its Christian commitments and its university affiliation) did not strike me at first. Only gradually did I discover that it takes an enormous amount of effort to find an advisor who, for the first time in TST's history, will take on a Muslim student. I had to learn to negotiate ways to get the students admitted, to find housing for the two families who came, to arrange schooling for the children, to find ways for the students to dialogue with both the larger Mennonite church and the university and on and on. Fortunately, the Mennonite students at the time embraced this challenge and Susan Harrison, a student in theology and member of TUMC, took on many of the practical elements that needed doing. (student group in the 90's)



This exchange program between MCC and the Imam Khomeini Institute emerged out of MCC's work in Iran following the 1990 earthquake. Ed Martin was the one who arranged for MCC to work together with the Red Crescent Society in Iran to provide relief --without strings attached. The request for an exchange came through the various dialogues Ed had with some of the leaders of that country. He recognized that these kinds of exchanges between people of different religions and different countries, whose governments are not on the most friendly basis, could be seen as an effort in peacemaking.



A term we used for the ongoing dialogue that ensued was “a dialogue of life”, where words were embodied in relationships and common experiences in one another’s homes and culture and geographical space.

This approach continued during the Shi’ah Muslim-Mennonite Christian Dialogues that were an outgrowth of these first student exchanges. We always tried for an equal number of participants and included times of worship, times of sightseeing, times in each others homes and definitely times of eating together.



I visited Iran twice, participated in various scholarly dialogues, spoke in a mosque here in Toronto and had many opportunities for individual discussions. The dialogues branched out to include other institutions and scholars—in fact Christina Reimer from our congregation was supposed to go to Iran this spring but of course wasn’t able to because of the Coronovirus.



I learned many things from this exchange. Most important was that I learned to speak freely about my own faith perspective while listening deeply to the perspective of my friends from Iran. I also learned that dialogue is not easy and is risky. Some of you will remember the protests against this kind of mutual dialogue at a conference in Waterloo that I helped organize! Peace-making through dialogue is slow, patient work but so rewarding!

C. Wisdom as peace-making

It was during the Muslim- Mennonite dialogues that I began to understand the contradictions that MCC workers encounter as they live and work in different countries, where there is often unrest and unstable governments or military dictatorships. I realized that we who believed in non-violence, were protected by the university police when protesters interrupted our meeting.

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In Iran we sat with the dignitaries as our Iranian friends celebrated the revolution and watched as the American flag was burned. What should our stance be in these situations?

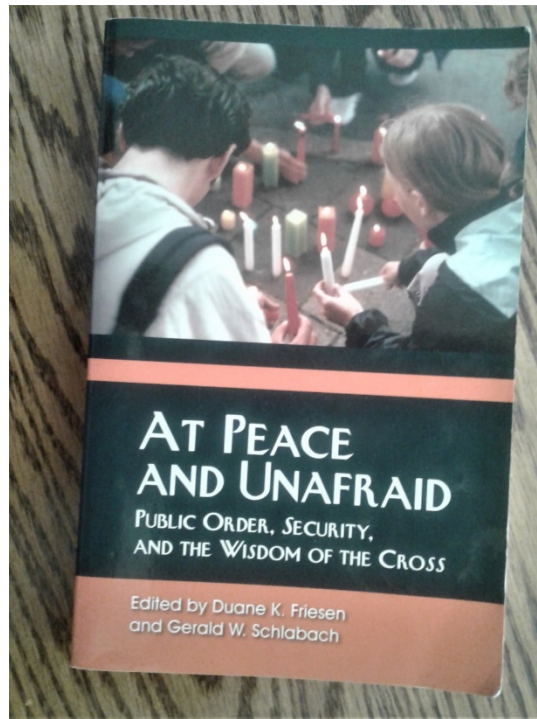


It was during this time that I became a member of the MCC international peace committee. Our work consisted of meeting twice a year for several days, listening to the issues that MCC faced and together with some staff members trying to think theologically about what it meant to be a Christian presence in their particular context.

I remember this scene from one of the meetings: “Look at this pitcher.” Ricardo Esquivia, a Mennonite leader from Columbia, lifted a pitcher of water from the table. “The water in the pitcher represents peace.” But it needs a kind of structure to hold it. He named that structure “institutionality.” It represents the institutions or community structures that a society needs to allow everyone to flourish as they live lives of dignity. (P. 11) This pitcher needs to be appropriately designed to fulfill its purpose. The vessel, that is the “ordering” can be clean and uncorrupted but it can also be corrupt and oppressive.



Thus began a 2 year research project in which our team of 4 people interviewed persons involved in institutions, such as law, policing, education, social work, administration and so on-- asking them what it meant to work toward peace. We held four different consultations in different parts of North America. It ended with an international conference in Akron that eventually resulted in the book, *At Peace and Unafraid, Public order, Security, and the Wisdom of the Cross*.



My own contribution was to note the strand of wisdom within our Bibles and to see how it can contribute to peace-making. Wisdom can be defined as “doing the right thing at the right time in the right place.” Jesus is the prime example of a wisdom teacher who taught and lived out the words, “Blessed are the peace-makers”. Prophetic literature and wisdom literature stand side by side in our Bibles. We need those who speak and act prophetically, but we also need those who are able to work wisely toward just institutions in order to provide security and peace for all.

I remember my Dad’s passion for creating institutions to serve our church but also the larger community—the credit union, the farm cooperative, the various schools such as Canadian Mennonite University and Conrad Grebel University College—places where he as a farmer with broken English in a new country of promise,

Gary:

My family of origin story does not connect with MCC as dramatically as does Lydia’s family of origin story. But it is a refugee story. My father grew up in Siberia, not in the Ukraine. His family lived in the little village of Nikolaifeld on the small Mennonite Suvorowka settlement West of the Black sea. There his father, my grandfather, was the “Aeltester” or bishop.

By the mid twenties his family was desperate to flee to Canada. One part of this desperation was the starvation they experienced, along with the violence, of course. And MCC could not go to Siberia with their soup kitchens. My father never talked about his life in Siberia. It was just too painful for him. One small glimpse into that life came when I realized that he would not, could not, eat any syrup. Why Not? His family in their desperation had survived essentially on watermelon syrup.

On Christmas Eve 1926, 16 year old Dad, and his already very ill mother, and a younger sister, boarded ship to Canada, and a new life. His father was denied his visa, but was able to get his papers and came six months later; however, too late to see his wife again who died in Rosthern on the way to Alberta. Years later we heard that two of dad's brothers and a brother in law who were unable to immigrate, were rounded up by the secret police, along with every adult male in the village, and shot.

There is, in our hearts, a passion for peace and for refugees, and a passion for the work of MCC.

I offer one small MCC story – aided and made possible by TUMC. TUMC gave me a sabbatical leave in the year 2000 so that Lydia and I could spend nearly 6 months in Egypt, loosely under MCC's umbrella. I became the unofficial pastor of the MCC unit and learned how important it is to have a small community of support when you are working at justice and peace in a foreign country. At the end of that time we spent 2 weeks in Iran, sent there by MCC, primarily because of Lydia's relationship with Muslim scholars.



The most “official and formal” meeting in those two weeks were the two hours we spent with Ayatollah Mizbah, the director of the Imam Khomeini Education and Research Institute in the city of Qom. In his opening greeting Ayatollah Mizbah referred to Ed Martin as “opening the door” to the larger dialogue which Lydia was a part of, and to this visit.



“Through him”, he said, “we learned to trust MCC”. Then he startled us, turning to us and saying, “You are the first Christian clerics (he assumed Lydia was a cleric too) in the history of Qom to be invited by, and hosted by this Muslim institute. And it’s all because of Ed Martin and MCC. MCC came to Iran to offer help after our devastating earthquake (which killed almost 100,000 people) – WITH NO STRINGS ATTACHED. They just offered much needed relief help. We trust Ed Martin. We trust MCC.

We also spent a day at the headquarters of the Red Crescent society of Iran, located in Tehran. At first it seemed to us that the director, to whom we were introduced, thought of us as a bit of a nuisance, an interruption to his important work. But when we gave him greetings from Ed Martin his whole visage changed. “Ed Martin – He is a friend. We trust him. We trust MCC. The

director then devoted a huge block of time to show us the massive scope of the Red Crescent Society's work.

Lydia: We leave you with these challenges:

Gary: Seek the peace of the city

Lydia: Blessed are the peacemakers

Gary: In the name of Christ

Both: Here at home and around the world