

## **MCC re-imagines future in Western Europe**

June 3, 2020

One hundred years ago, Mennonite Central Committee's (MCC) story began in southern Russia (present-day Ukraine). Diverse Mennonite groups came together in the U.S. and Canada, despite their differences, to help brothers and sisters who were suffering in the wake of revolution.

In the name of Christ, they offered bread, porridge and warm cocoa to starving families, some who had been eating nettles and gophers just to stay alive. The group understood that to be "biblically faithful, we must relieve human suffering."

This "central committee" was only expected to last a few years. But requests for service continued. Following the devastation of the Second World War, MCC's work expanded, stretching across Europe.

In the 1940s, MCC provided food, warm clothing, millions of pounds of canned meat, festive Christmas "bundles" and other relief supplies in places like Germany and England. During this time, MCC also began its refugee resettlement efforts, helping some 5,500 Mennonites travel from Europe by boat to South America, predominantly Paraguay.

In an October 1947 report from Berlin, the impact of these gifts was clear: "Your willingness and eagerness to share your blessings.... the thousands of tons of food, clothing, shoes, soap, medicines and tools.... It has rekindled hope, faith and interest and created new purpose and courage for the future."

Then in the 1950s came a massive rebuilding effort, led by MCC's Pax "boys" (as most were young men). Offering an alternative to military service, Pax arranged for young Mennonites to serve in post-war Europe, helping rebuild war-torn areas and offering a bright spot of hope in places like Germany, France, Austria and Greece.

### **The shape of MCC today**

Today, MCC continues to respond to the most urgent needs in more than 50 countries worldwide. Our attention has shifted from countries in Europe to places like Syria, Jordan, the Democratic Republic of the Congo and South Sudan. People in these locations are particularly vulnerable, especially those who have been forcibly displaced. MCC is prioritizing the allocation of resources to help those who need it most.

Over the decades, our relationship with European Anabaptists has remained strong. But, today, our partnership looks quite different from what it did 100 years ago.

Now, MCC supports local peacebuilding projects through a small grant fund and round-table meetings. We also offer young adult service programs, such as the International Volunteer Exchange Program (IVEP) and Young Anabaptist Mennonite Exchange Network (YAMEN). These are opportunities for young people to serve in other parts of the world, or to come to Europe to serve while being hosted by local families.

Today, rather than offering relief projects for European families, we are partnering with you to serve vulnerable families in other locations. You are sewing comforters, building relief kits and raising funds to help others in need. You are also praying fervently for the work of MCC around the world. Through these acts of service, you reflect the Apostle Paul's words in 1 Thessalonians 3, demonstrating your overflowing love for each other and everyone else.

## **Shifts in Western Europe**

In the past months, COVID-19 has brought some financial challenges to MCC, forcing us to reduce budgets for MCC country programs everywhere, including Canada and the U.S. With an overall reduction of 25% to our international program budget, these cuts have deeply impacted projects and personnel alike. These have been difficult – but necessary – decisions.

We understand the announcement of MCC's decision to close our physical office in France and discontinue the MCC representative role in Western Europe is difficult news to hear. We know you are wondering what these reductions will mean for MCC's work with Anabaptists in Europe. We trust these current financial challenges will bring new opportunities and deeper connections.

MCC area directors for Europe and the Middle East are committed to listening to Anabaptist partners across Europe to imagine what the next 100 years could look like. We believe our century-old relationship will carry us through to a new way of working.

Our relationship will look different than it has before. But we know that, together, we will continue to serve the world's most vulnerable in the name of Christ. While some of our administrative structures are changing, our mission remains the same.

As we listen and imagine a new future together, we are deeply grateful for your faithful support. With you, our worldwide ministry continues. And, today, this ministry is more critical than ever.

### **A new focus**

Almost immediately following the outbreak of COVID-19, MCC began to reshape its projects to address new realities. In southern Malawi, MCC added a handwashing component to a planned food distribution and distributed soap, along with maize, beans and oil to 400 families who had already been deeply affected by Cyclone Idai last year.

In Cambodia, MCC is partnering with local churches to distribute food relief to allow poor households to safely survive a two- to three-week COVID-19 lockdown. Cambodian border closures have resulted in food shortages and dramatic price increases even as the garment, construction and tourism industries lay off workers.

In Lebanon, an MCC partner is distributing COVID-19 hygiene kits to community members who are residents of a low-income neighbourhood, the majority of whom are Palestinian and Syrian refugees. The kits are packed with sanitizing products essential to helping families keep themselves safe from COVID-19. The hygiene kits are critical in these areas because of the density of population and because living arrangements make social distancing difficult. In addition, quality healthcare is limited or is not provided to refugees in this area.

And, of course, MCC's ongoing work in other areas like food security and education are as critical today as they ever were. The director of the UN World Food Program recently said that "the world could face multiple famines of biblical proportions within a few short months."

### **Conclusion**

"How can we thank God enough for you?" says the Apostle Paul to the church in Thessalonica (3:9) in response to their overflowing love. Paul's sentiments match our own, as MCC thinks of each of you and how you are supporting MCC and facing challenges with love in your communities throughout Europe.

Thank you for your ongoing partnership with MCC. If you have any questions or comments, feel free to contact MCC Europe and Middle East Area Directors, Linda Herr and James Wheeler.

*Mennonite Central Committee: Relief, development and peace in the name of Christ*

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PHOTOS Available:



MCC's first relief kitchen in southern Russia opened in Khortitsa on March 16, 1922. This photo, circa 1922, is from Trans-Volga, Russia. (MCC photo)



MCC Pax participants build a home in Salzburg, Austria, in 1961, for refugees from what was then Yugoslavia. MCC developed Pax as a voluntary service option for conscientious objectors to war. By the time the program stopped sending volunteers in 1973, about 1,180 men served in nearly 40 countries around the world. (MCC photo/Wayne Yoder)



Regina Schmid (left) and Margrit Kramer (right) make a comforter at Mennonite Church Schänzli, Muttenz, Switzerland, on January 18, 2020. European Mennonites and friends gathered at events in Switzerland, the Netherlands and Germany to make comforters as part of MCC's The Great Winter Warm-Up. Comforter-making events were held across Canada, Europe, and the U.S. to kick off MCC's centennial year. Volunteers across all locations donated 9,504 comforters in total, far exceeding the goal of 6,500 comforters. (MCC photo/Heidi Rediger)