

WATERLOO REGION

# Mennonite Central Committee going strong as it marks 100 years of service



By **Catherine Thompson** Record Reporter  
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**1 of 5** Jon Lebold stands in front of stacks of relief kits destined for Jordan at the Mennonite Central Committee's sprawling warehouse in New Hamburg. The Mennonite Central Committee is marking 100 years of global service. **MATHEW MCCARTHY / WATERLOO REGION RECORD**



WATERLOO REGION — It began as a temporary committee formed in Elkhart, Indiana, in 1920, in response to a famine and typhus epidemic in Ukraine.

One hundred years later, Mennonite Central Committee is going strong. It's a worldwide organization, with more than 1,100 employees, offices in more than 50 countries and projects on every continent except Antarctica and Australia.

The committee was originally formed to set up soup kitchens in Soviet Russia, ship seed and tractors, and provide horses and cows on credit to farmers devastated by war and famine.

Today, MCC's work is rooted in the same compassionate impulse, but has evolved to focus on three areas: providing relief for people caught in crises such as war or famine; development work to improve people's access to food, clean water, health care and education; and peace, with programs to prevent violence and promote peace and justice.

Although MCC has connections all over the world, and its Canadian headquarters are in Winnipeg, its roots in Waterloo Region are strong: the bulk of its 147 Ontario employees work in the region, as do more than half of all volunteers in Ontario.

MCC thrift shops repurpose goods, offer inexpensive items for sale, and raise millions for MCC programs. The thrift centre in New Hamburg has the highest sales volume of any MCC thrift shop in Canada. The annual Mennonite Relief Sale giant quilt auction in New Hamburg has raised millions of dollars for MCC work, and the annual meat canning effort in Elmira produces thousands of pounds of canned turkey that's shipped overseas.

“There's a huge connection and a long history in Kitchener-Waterloo,” says John Head, executive director of MCC Ontario.

MCC's sprawling warehouse in New Hamburg usually hums with dozens of volunteers. But in pandemic times, Jon Lebold is working

alone, co-ordinating a shipment of relief supplies that's leaving for Jordan right after Christmas.

He's readying a shipping container full of basic supplies: infant kits each with onesies and sleepers, soap, socks and a little hat, all wrapped together in a receiving blanket; kits of school supplies; hygiene kits with soap, nail clippers, a toothbrush, comb and towel, bundled in a hand-sewn reusable drawstring bag; and relief kits that pack hygiene items for a family of four into a sealable plastic pail that will go on to have many uses in its new home.

"Even after all the items (in a kit) are long gone, people still have the bags, and they still have the buckets, and they're still of value," Lebold said.

Each kit has been carefully assembled by volunteers, working from home during the pandemic. Tags and excess packaging are removed, to reduce weight, to maximize space in the shipping container, and to produce as little waste as possible in the destination country.

The container will also include more than 1,000 comforters, handmade by volunteers in kitchens and church basements across the country. The popular items will warm a refugee family, serve as a divider wall to give privacy in a refugee camp, and provide some comfort and homeliness. They're tightly baled to reduce space.

"We ship anywhere from 5,000 to 7,000 comforters out of this warehouse," Lebold said. "They're one of the most valuable things we ship."

As with all its international projects, MCC works with local partners in the countries it works in. "They understand the culture and the language, and some of the challenges in that region," Head said.

Those partnerships ensure MCC programs are relevant and will last. "It's not as though we have to say, 'Will this community keep doing MCC's work when MCC leaves?'" said Rick Cober Bauman, head of MCC Canada. "It never was MCC's work. It was work identified by the local community that was a partner with whom MCC could work closely and it continues to be their work long after we leave."

Lebold is the third generation of his family to co-ordinate overseas relief shipments, following the example of his father and grandmother. The work is tremendously satisfying, he says.

“I love that we’re sending our best, and that everything is a gift,” he says. “Our partners say that a lot of people receiving the kits love knowing that we haven’t forgotten about them and their situation.”

In addition to the relief kits, MCC works on a huge variety of programs: clean water in Haiti, sustainable farming in Ethiopia, education programs in Serbia and nutrition classes for mothers in Nepal. Canadian grain farmers and MCC created the Canadian Foodgrains Bank, which last year gave \$38 million in food aid.

Although most of its work is overseas, MCC also works at home, with programs helping sex offenders reintegrate into society after prison, sponsoring refugees, reconciliation work between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples, and support for families dealing with domestic violence.

One recent morning in the basement of Stirling Avenue Mennonite Church in Kitchener, a group of people sat, masked and safely distanced at separate tables, chopping heaps of onions and carrots. They are employees of Raw Carrot, a program that gives people on disability pension the chance to do meaningful work and supplement their income by making nutritious soups sold in local shops.

The program, begun by a Presbyterian church in Paris, Ont., has expanded to several kitchens in Ontario, including the Kitchener one run by MCC.

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Employees make a variety of soups, from the signature carrot soup, to mulligatawny, hearty lentil, spicy sausage and cabbage, and potato bacon. Soup sales cover the costs of the program, said manager Jenn Klassen.

It’s hard to find work if you have a disability, said Allison DaRosa. Other jobs she’s had were too fast-paced and stressful, she said, but at the Raw Carrot, people understand if you need a break sometimes.

The work, and the extra money “helps me to be a little more independent,” she said. “It increases my self-esteem, knowing that I’m needed.”

She also likes that she’s producing a quality, tasty product. “It’s nice that I’m making something healthy and locally made.”

Nick Lang picked up his kitchen skills volunteering in the Working Centre, but says he’s happy to be able to work for a living wage with Raw Carrot. “It allows me to say to people that I have a job. I’m employed, and I make money. It makes me feel more a part of the community.”

Having the extra income means “I can afford presents for my family, or gifts at weddings and things I wouldn’t normally be able to even think about buying.”

The program does more than just provide a job, Klassen said. “I’ve seen people come through and just blossom in confidence.

“Everybody has something to give,” she said. “We’re happy to have a spot where people can belong and contribute.”

MCC is firmly rooted in its Anabaptist Christian faith. “It’s part of our DNA,” Head says. But at home and around the world, “our partners might be Muslim, or might have no faith background, but they align with what we’re trying to accomplish.”

The charity has faced some recent challenges, closing its Ten Thousand Villages shops earlier this year, and the pandemic is expected to hurt MCC revenues.

More challenges lie ahead, as current volunteers age and MCC seeks to connect with younger people who can help, many of whom say they are more committed to causes than to a particular organization, says Head.

But he’s confident looking ahead to the next 100 years, and the role MCC can play. There is important work still to be done, Head says. “The need is greater than ever.”

MCC has made a video to commemorate its centenary: go to YouTube and search for 'MCC@100.'

**Catherine Thompson** is a Waterloo Region-based reporter focusing on urban affairs for *The Record*. Reach her via email: [cthompson@therecord.com](mailto:cthompson@therecord.com)



**2 of 5** Comforters that will be part of Mennonite Central Committee relief kits are compressed to minimize space during shipping. **MATHEW MCCARTHY / WATERLOO REGION RECORD**





3 of 5 A look inside a relief kit at the Mennonite Central Committee warehouse in New Hamburg. MATHEW MCCARTHY / WATERLOO REGION RECORD





4 of 5 Working in the basement of Stirling Avenue Mennonite Church in Kitchener, Raw Carrot employees Russell Ferguson, left, and Allison Darosa prepare carrots for soup. DAVID BEBEE / WATERLOO REGION RECORD





**5 of 5** Working in the basement of Stirling Avenue Mennonite Church in Kitchener, Raw Carrot employee Allison Darosa and other prep staff prepare carrots for soup. **DAVID BEBEE / WATERLOO REGION RECORD**

