

Responding to Racism: Stories and lessons learned from MCC Saskatchewan's work over the years

INTRODUCTION

Over the last year, we have witnessed an incredible rise in public dialogue around racism. George Floyd's death in May 2020 was a startling wake-up call for communities across the globe to consider the scourge of racism within their own systems and societies. The recent discoveries of unmarked graves of children buried on Indian Residential School sites are sending waves of shock and grief across Canada, sensitizing many to the horrors of the Residential School system and its impact.

At Mennonite Central Committee (MCC), this has been a time of reflection upon our community-based work related to racial justice and our internal work to address racism within our organization and ourselves. This article is a reflection on efforts made by MCC Saskatchewan (MCCS) toward addressing racism, both externally with church and community partners and internally within our organization. We observe that good work has been done and that there are shortcomings to acknowledge, lament and overcome.

In this work, MCC is responding to Biblical exhortations around the inherent dignity and equality of all people, love of our neighbours, and pursuit of justice for the oppressed (Gen. 1:27; Isa. 1:17, 58:6; Matt 22:37-39; Luke 4:18-19; 1 John 4:20).

INDIGENOUS NEIGHBOURS

The history of Saskatchewan is marred by unjust actions by the state toward Indigenous peoples, from forced displacement and other punishing impacts of early settlement, to the traumatic legacies of Residential Schools and the 60s Scoop, to modern-day realities in our criminal justice and child welfare systems. The imperative work of reconciliation, reparation and decolonization is a long road.

One of the earliest steps MCCS took were gardening projects on Beardy's-Okemasis First Nation and Sandy Bay First Nation. MCCS volunteers went to plant and maintain gardens, but also to make new friendships which allowed for greater mutual understanding. In Sandy Bay, MCCS formed relationships that allowed us to stand in solidarity with the community as they resisted a detrimental hydro project.

In coming alongside Indigenous communities and supporting their efforts toward peace and justice, we have had to grapple with MCC's history, identity and story as predominantly white settlers on Indigenous lands (Harvey Eagle, 2014). To ethically address colonial violence in Canada, we as Christian settlers must acknowledge our complicity with that violence and, as MCCS's Executive Director Eileen Klassen Hamm has said, "return again and again to humble learning."

MCCS has long-standing allyship with the Young Chippewayan First Nation, a landless band whose reserve land at Stoney Knoll was parceled out among Mennonite and Lutheran farmers. As the Young Chippewayans work toward land justice, MCCS has come alongside in a myriad of ways: facilitating relationship building between Indigenous and settler community members with connections to the same land; raising funds for genealogical research to support the land claim; and helping to raise awareness and advocate for justice for landless bands. Long-time MCCS staffer Leonard Doell has said that this work helped open doors to justice, but justice has yet to be done.

MCCS walks alongside communities in the mode of accompaniment. We come alongside communities and enter into relationships with a posture of listening and learning. We offer support and resources to community-led development and justice efforts. We have shown up and we keep showing up. The strength of our work is in building long-term relationships that create trust.

MCCS has worked with several community partners who address barriers and promote justice for Indigenous peoples. In the 1990s, MCCS was part of a collective involving the Mayfair Housing Corporation, SaskNative Housing and Quint Development to provide accessible housing to Indigenous families. MCC supported the Urban First Nation Healing Initiative which held workshops on healing racism. More recently, MCCS has been an active participant in the reconciliation movement in Saskatchewan; as members of Reconciliation Saskatoon and Prairie Rivers Reconciliation Committee, we help plan and promote events that teach people the true history of Canada and mitigate racist beliefs.

In our accompaniment work, MCCS has been derided for not going far enough. It has been said that we prefer to focus on interpersonal relationships and are less likely to challenge structures. Our partners urge us to go further: to challenge the structures we uphold and are complicit with, and to engage in bolder advocacy.

NEWCOMERS

Since 1979, MCC has engaged in private refugee sponsorship, equipping church and community groups to bring refugees from around the world to safety in Canada. Since 1985, MCCS has helped sponsors welcome approximately 1,000 refugees to Saskatchewan. Through the sponsorship and resettlement processes, long-term cross-cultural relationships are created; this presents a steep learning curve around cultural differences. “Messy things happen in ways that run counter to expectations; it’s about how we handle that” says Migration and Resettlement Coordinator, Mark Bigland-Pritchard. These relationships change Canadians’ thinking about people from different countries and cultural backgrounds in significant ways.

MCC was a founding partner of the Global Gathering Place (GGP), a non-profit organization that provides settlement assistance to newcomers. Former Migration and Resettlement Coordinator Elaine Harder recalls that GGP began by listening to newcomers who articulated the need for a safe space where new friends could gather. MCCS partnered with Forest Grove Community Church and Third Avenue United Church to make it happen. GGP built understanding between those who came to help and those in need by sharing and listening to stories.

MCCS listens to affected community members to determine how to help. However, engaging in charitable work runs the risk of paternalism. While we strive to develop authentic relationships, it can be challenging in the context of power imbalances. This is especially true when we are in service oriented relationships like refugee sponsorship; MCCS is inherently in a position of power. Long-time MCCS staffer Dana Krushel observed “the power imbalances of charitable giving... [we understand] the stakes are high with respect to what we’re giving, the nature and consequences of our decisions”. Some newcomers have glowing praise for the empowering support they experience during resettlement, some have said that they experienced paternalism as their personal agency was not taken seriously.

MCCS has worked with sponsor groups to help refugees overcome barriers they faced due to racism. For example, some landlords refused to rent to refugees. MCCS partnered with the Saskatoon Refugee Coalition to hold information sessions for groups who discriminated against newcomers and

built relationships that expanded understanding. M CCS has also spoken into public policy, meeting with government representatives and encouraging them to listen to newcomers as they developed policy.

This is the kind of justice work MCC has done for decades and are being increasingly challenged to do by both community partners and our current strategic plan which emphasizes public engagement and advocacy around systemic barriers that negatively impact vulnerable people, particularly those uprooted and displaced.

YOUTH

In 2004, M CCS developed a children's program in the Meadowgreen area of Saskatoon, which is densely populated with low-income newcomer and Indigenous families, and at the time was quite under-resourced. Young adults working with M CCS lived in the neighbourhood and created Kids Club, a safe and welcoming space for children, who came in droves for programming. M CCS partnered with the City and other community organizations to help bring resources to the neighbourhood like a playground and community garden. Over the years M CCS's programming grew to facilitate skills-building and peacebuilding components, serve older kids at Youth Club, and partner with Meadowgreen House for All Nations Church.

When the program began, M CCS staff and volunteers admittedly did not have an anti-oppressive lens; we started simply by valuing people. We worked to create safe space where children and youth would not experience oppression because of their background, and brought Indigenous, newcomer, and settler youth together to appreciate each other's diversity. M CCS had a "white saviour complex" at times; we needed to and did learn about the oppressive dynamics of our "helping" and our white privilege along the way. We tried to address racism through inclusion; as former Community Development Coordinator Kaytee Edwards-Buhler says, "we accepted that we are different in many ways, but as human beings we have more in common than we do different." We learned to integrate community voices and take a more community-led approach.

CONSTITUENCY

M CCS's constituents have made it possible for all this work to happen, through prayer, donations, shared initiatives and volunteering in refugee sponsorship, youth programming, the International Volunteer Exchange Program (IVEP) and more. M CCS has confidence in both our community and constituency partners, and we work to create safe spaces for all to enter in and learn. M CCS is made up of many different constituents with many different experiences and worldviews. We want to learn from and challenge each other in helpful ways as we seek together to respond to racism in the context of our mission of sharing God's love and compassion for all.

Many of M CCS's constituents have been leaders in the work. For example, Ray Funk's relationships in solidarity with Indigenous peoples in Sandy Bay and the Young Chippewyan First Nation have been crucial for M CCS's relationship-building and action with those communities. Another example is Mennonite Church Saskatchewan's Walking the Path group, which is leading the way in reconciliation efforts between Mennonites and Indigenous peoples.

M CCS invites community partners to share their experiences with our constituency, Mennonite churches, schools and other organizations. "Stories open up worlds and help bridge divides", says Elaine. Constituents hear new teachings and non-mainstream narratives. People are ready to act when

they have enough information. As Elaine says: “I’ve seen shifts from hesitancy to courage, and from fear to acceptance. This happens because of information and interaction.”

Through the International Volunteer Exchange Program (IVEP), MCCA constituents welcomed young people from countries where MCC has presence around the world to live with them for one year. Friendships formed through IVEP that dissolved stereotypes and assumptions. Key conversations about racial identity and racism happen around the dinner table. MCCA has valued its partnership with AODBT Architecture + Interior Design which placed multiple IVEPers in service opportunities. AODBT’s Principal Charles Olfert shared at MCCA’s 50th anniversary event that he and the Colombian IVEPer they hosted, Diego, held a range of stereotypes about each other’s cultural groups when they first met. Not only did Charles and Diego have a mutually transformative experience working together in Canada, afterwards Charles travelled to speak at Diego’s university in Columbia.

MCCA hosted Chalos in Meadowgreen, an immersive learning experience for youth and young adults from Mennonite churches who learned about new social realities and built new friendships. The youth and young adults learned to recognize their own biases and had transformational experiential learning in community. A special partnership was created between the Fiske-Herschel youth group and the youth who lived in Meadowgreen; they spent time in each other’s communities and forged some long-term relationships. These are the kinds of relationships that help people relate and think differently.

INTERNALLY AT MCCA

Thus far we’ve been discussing MCCA’s work with community and constituency that relates to addressing racism. But what is MCCA doing *internally* to address racism within ourselves and our organization?

MCC staff in Canada received racism training in about 20 years ago through “Broken Circles”, a faith-based initiative to dismantle racism within MCC and its constituent churches. Its starting point was that “racism goes to the heart of the gospel” and it called for the “reject[ion of] structures that exclude on the basis of race and ethnicity”. It was controversial, as some within MCC preferred to “focus on work on interpersonal relationships rather than on systemic issues” that keep white people in control (Iris deLeón-Hartshorn, 2020). “We repeatedly found that many white people named racism as an issue of relationships, while people of color identified the issue of racism as systemic. The truth, of course, is that racism has both relational and systemic dimensions, but it is the systemic piece that affects people of color the most, from access to resources to the toll on our physical and mental health” (Iris, *ibid*).

Over the years, MCCA welcomed local educators to teach our Board and staff about racism: Indigenous partners who, as Leonard Doell describes, “came as gentle ambassadors with hard things to say”. Leaders in MCCA’s Thrift network invited Indigenous partners like Maria Campbell, Monica Goulet and Kathleen Makela to teach them about Indigenous peoples’ worldviews and realities. Elder Walter Linklater spoke to MCCA Board and staff; he was blunt, speaking to Indian Residential Schools’ relationship with Christianity.

MCCA took responsibility for addressing racism within our organization by the creation of an internal Dismantling Oppression Network committee in 2016. Over the last 5 years, the committee has led efforts for MCCA staff to deepen their understanding about racism and its effects with activities such as book studies and film viewings, as well as annual conversations at staff meetings.

In 2019 MCCA staff received training from Becky Sasakamoose-Kuffner, Race Relations coordinator with the City of Saskatoon, who spoke about shifting our lens from a focus on diversity to a lens that transforms us through understanding racism. Her workshop named long-held beliefs about racism and encouraged us to consider ways to address institutional discrimination. Currently, MCCA partners with Saskatchewan's Anti-Racism Network which has afforded learning opportunities for our staff around anti-discrimination response training, understanding colonial structures and their harms, allyship and more.

This is very much a work in progress. MCCA is still a predominantly white settler organization wrestling with what it means to dismantle the societal structures that benefit us and harm people of colour. As Eileen says, "white folks want to talk about these issues in friendly ways while people of colour are saying, 'your structure is supremacy', change it." We are urged to confront the racial privilege we benefit from and are further equipped to recognize and dismantle social and political systems that enable privilege and harm people of colour. By naming white supremacy (that is, a culture that affords social privilege and dominance to white people while largely keeping people of colour on the margins) as the problem, we start to take responsibility for ourselves.

CONCLUSION

The work of dismantling racism is a complex, long-term project. MCCA and its constituents have and will continue to work with community partners and respond to their calls for justice through ongoing accompaniment and advocacy. As famously said by Maya Angelou, "Do the best you can until you know better. Then when you know better, do better." We commit to heeding the lessons we have learned along the way and responding to the community voices challenging us to go further.

Thank you to the former and current Program staff who have spoken into this article – Eileen Klassen Hamm, Leonard Doell, Elaine Harder, Dana Krushel, Kaytee Edwards-Buhler, Heather Peters, Mark Bigland-Pritchard, Myriam Ullah and Randy Klassen – and to former Executive Director Bruno Baerg who inspired it in the first place.