

# Canadian Advocacy Research Project

Executive Summary

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Central  
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## Executive Summary

### 1. Introduction

The Ottawa Office of Mennonite Central Committee (MCC) Canada launched the Canadian Advocacy Research Project in January 2014. The national research project was carried out in partnership with provincial MCCs and the Centre for Community Based Research (CCBR).

The research project was intended to gauge levels of support within the MCC constituency for advocacy that is directed to the Canadian government. The Ottawa Office wished to better understand the perspectives of MCC constituents on advocacy, while also building greater support for its advocacy work.

*“This is important research for MCC. A better understanding of supporters’ concerns and support for advocacy to government will help make this important work more effective.” – Carol Thiessen, Canadian Foodgrains Bank*

### 2. Overview of MCC Advocacy

The idea of an Ottawa Office was first discussed in 1969; a year after MCC US established the Washington Office. The Ottawa Office eventually opened in 1975. Political advocacy to the Canadian government has become the main purpose of the Ottawa Office. This includes engaging the constituency on advocacy topics. The Ottawa Office believes its advocacy will support and enable MCC’s mission of relief, development, and peace-building.

Currently some topics that the Ottawa Office addresses includes: peace in Syria, mining justice, cluster munitions, and amendments to the Citizenship Act. The Ottawa Office advocates on these issues by writing letters to the government, presenting oral and written testimony to parliamentary committees. The Ottawa Office also hosts annual seminars for university students on various topics, and produces resources such as the annual Peace Sunday Packet.

### 3. About the Research

The Canadian Advocacy Research Project had two related purposes:

1. To assess the commitment that Canadian MCC supporters have to advocacy that is directed to government.
2. To engage the MCC constituency in Canada in such a way that builds the commitment and collective capacity of MCC and its supporters to pursue this type of advocacy.

There were three main research questions that helped to fulfill the research purpose:

1. Where does MCC Canada experience its strongest support for advocacy?
2. Where does MCC Canada experience its strongest resistance for advocacy?
3. How can the MCC constituency in Canada be better engaged to pursue advocacy?

The research itself used an engaging approach that followed the principles of community-based research in being relevant, participatory and action-oriented. The research was also exploratory and qualitative – it considered the in-depth opinions of diverse MCC constituents while not claiming to be representative of them. Three methods were used to gather information over the seven months of the project (January-July 2014).

*Key informant interview:* 13 individual telephone interviews held with people who held a “balcony view” of MCC and its advocacy.

*Focus groups:* 17 focus groups with a total of 130 participants held in high density Mennonite/Brethren in Christ regions across the country.

*Document review:* A limited document review conducted considering MCC program documents and MCC websites.

## 4. Understanding of Advocacy

People are very familiar with MCC and its development, relief and peace work. However, it was somewhat surprising to find that many in the MCC constituency have limited awareness of MCC’s advocacy work or how it undergirds and supports other MCC work. Even more people are not aware of the specific work of the Ottawa Office.

During the interviews and focus groups, many people gave their opinions about what they thought MCC means by the word “advocacy”. The most common definitions (in order of strength of opinion) included:

- Advocacy as speaking truth to power
- Advocacy as awareness raising
- Advocacy as something different from self-interest lobbying
- MCC’s advocacy as distinct from the advocacy of others

Participants also offered why they thought MCC engages in advocacy. The three main reasons included:

- In response to Biblical mandate
- To bring distinctive Anabaptist perspective
- To address complex systemic issues

## 5. Support for Advocacy

Most participants generally thought that support for MCC advocacy has grown over time and across issues. In particular, people said that support among the younger and more educated generation is growing. In contrast, others thought that support for MCC’s advocacy has waned along some denominational and generational lines. Support for MCC’s advocacy is not so straightforward given the diverse MCC constituency.

*Topics:* Some topics of advocacy generate more support than others. The topics that seem to garner the most support across the MCC constituency include:

- Topics where people see human need (consistent support for refugees, natural disasters; some support for war and violence, environmental issues, First Nations issues, Middle East issues) Topics where people have personal experience
- Topics that are current in the media
- Topics that are further removed geographically

*Approach:* Support for advocacy also depends on the approach – on how MCC advocacy carries out its advocacy. The approaches that seem to build the greatest amount of support include:

- When people in need are fore-grounded

- When issues are illuminated in a sustained way
- When broad-based engagement happens

*Reasons:* A number of reasons were given for why people support MCC's advocacy. The main reasons include:

- Because of the Biblical mandate to pursue justice
- Because it is consistent with following Jesus
- Because it is in keeping with Anabaptism
- Because MCC has earned the trust

## 6. Resistance to Advocacy

The voices that consistently question or oppose MCC's advocacy are a relatively small portion of the full MCC constituency. However, these voices can be strong when and where there is resistance to advocacy. A lack of support for MCC advocacy could reflect lack of awareness or indifference, as much as outright resistance. There was general agreement that opposition to advocacy could be present in younger and older people alike.

*Topics:* Some topics generate more resistance than others. These topics include:

- The Israel/Palestine conflict
- First Nations issues
- Mining
- Caring for the environment
- Interfaith dialogue and other ecumenical activities

*Approaches:* Resistance for advocacy also depends on how MCC advocacy carries out its advocacy. Approaches that generate the greatest amount of resistance include:

- When advocacy is seen to be partisan
- When MCC is out of sync with its constituency
- When approaches are not very engaging

*Reasons:* There were many reasons given as to why people resist advocacy. The six main reasons held by some in the MCC constituency are listed below. The first three reasons deal with general orientations to advocacy that span across specific advocacy issues. The remaining three reasons focus on resistance as it relates to specific advocacy issue.

- Because people avoid dealing with issues of social justice
- Because people think churches should not play an active political role
- Because people think the church should focus more on evangelism
- Because MCC's position goes against people's own political leanings
- Because people are benefiting from the status quo
- Because sometimes there are different theological interpretations on a single issue

## 7. Engaging People for Advocacy

Many ideas were offered about how MCC could better engage people for advocacy. The most frequent suggestions were clustered into four main sections. Some suggestions are aimed at all MCC constituents, while others are

targeted at specific sub-groups. The suggestions usually address some source of resistance. Taken together, they provide a way forward for MCC to build on its historic advocacy engagement.

### **Build a Community of Common Understanding**

The first main cluster of suggestions deal with MCC's approach to advocacy engagement. MCC needs to engage people in such a way that they feel a valued part of a larger community of faith. Four pathways to building this community of common understanding are listed below. The first two pathways make sure that a significant portion of MCC supporters are consulted on advocacy issues, while the remaining two suggest that MCC's advocacy engagement can be a reconciling force within the MCC constituency.

- Convene people together more often
- Include a range of constituents' voices
- Work to build bridges
- Listen to those at the heart of the issue

### **Frame Advocacy "in the Name of Christ"**

The second main cluster of suggestions deal with the character of MCC's advocacy engagement. For most (but not all) research participants, MCC's advocacy needs to be clearly Christian. MCC should frame advocacy conversations and develop advocacy positions in a way that is informed by Christian theology.

- Be grounded in the Bible
- Be Prayerful
- Uphold and strengthen MCC's commitment to peace-building
- Include evangelical viewpoints

### **Convey Information with Impact**

The third main cluster of suggestions deal with how MCC's advocacy work is communicated. These suggestions are grouped in six areas. The first three suggest how MCC can better connect people experientially with advocacy issues (connecting to people's *hearts*). The remaining three suggest how MCC can implement a better communication strategy (connecting to people's *heads*).

- Through the telling of personal stories
- Through learning tours
- By emphasizing local issues
- By providing more and better information
- By being realistic
- By giving people concrete ways to respond

### **Be Bold and Prophetic**

The fourth and final cluster of suggestions deal with the spirit in which MCC should conduct its advocacy engagement. MCC can be bold and strong in its advocacy because it has a Biblical mandate to promote peace and justice. It also has much prayer and material support from its constituency and a solid reputation resulting from years of serving the marginalized. MCC should risk being prophetic. There may be moments that MCC's advocacy rouses people to imagine the world as God would want.

- Leverage existing MCC credibility to grow advocacy
- Partner with others
- Pursue a long-term vision

## 8. Conclusion

Participants of this research project gave many valuable insights into MCC's advocacy. Combined they helped fulfill the project's goal of assessing the commitment of MCC's constituency in its advocacy work. Reflecting on the research project's findings as a whole, three main themes emerged:

- Support for MCC advocacy is stable and growing, even if there are pockets of resistance. MCC has a strong foundation upon which to build/expand its advocacy engagement.
- There are a variety of tensions and contradictions in the findings that reflect the healthy complexity of advocacy work both in content and in approach. MCC can play a role in exposing these dilemmas as opportunities for creative dialogue.
- A surprising proportion of MCC supporters are unaware of MCC's advocacy work and how it supports its relief, development and peace-building activities. MCC can more broadly communicate its advocacy work and why this work is important in fulfilling its mandate.

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