

## 6 Why advocate?

Many people ask MCC why we engage in advocacy. Some people wonder about the “political” nature of advocacy and whether such activity is appropriate for Christians. Others wonder if advocacy makes any difference — after all, governments are slow and often resistant to change. Still others are simply drawn to more tangible and more immediate responses to human need.

Here, we offer the main reasons why MCC believes engaging in advocacy is important. We hope these reasons convince you that advocacy is important, necessary, and an expression of faithful Christian discipleship and witness. We do advocacy:

### 1. Because our partners request it of us.

MCC works with all kinds of local partners in Canada and some 60 countries around the world, many of whom are church partners. Scripture reminds us that when parts of the body suffer, all members suffer (I Corinthians 12). And so, when MCC’s partners — Christians, as well as people of other faith traditions — call us to do advocacy on their behalf, we respond as best we can.

Over the years, Indigenous partners in Canada have asked MCC to advocate with them for their treaty rights, for improved housing and water systems, for education funding equal to those levels provided to non-Indigenous people, and more.

For decades, people in Laos and Cambodia have been killed or injured by cluster munitions detonated years after U.S. planes dropped them. Our partners have asked MCC for help not only with providing prostheses for victims and removing cluster munitions still remaining in the soil, but with advocacy for a ban on cluster munitions.



More recently, Canadian-based corporations have emerged as leaders in mining and resource extraction around the world. MCC’s partners in Africa, Latin America and the Caribbean have asked MCC to advocate for laws that would hold these companies accountable for the health impacts, social disruption, economic injustice, and environmental destruction associated with mining activities in their communities.

### 2. Because it is biblical.

The Bible is filled with stories of people who acted as advocates on behalf of others. Shiphrah and Puah, Hebrew midwives, risked their lives by refusing Pharaoh’s order to kill all Hebrew baby boys (Exodus 1). Moses was called by God to issue a clear message to Pharaoh: “Let my people go!” (Exodus 5-12). Elijah confronted King Ahab when he killed Naboth and confiscated his vineyard (I Kings 21). Other prophets repeatedly denounced kings who enriched themselves and impoverished others (Amos, Isaiah, Micah).

**“When the churches and communities that we partner with suffer as a result of the policies and practices of the Canadian government and/or Canadian citizens, it seems only obvious to them that they should tell MCC and member churches in Canada about how that are impacted, so that we can share this information, and urge a change in policy and practice, to help end their suffering. That is advocacy.**

*Bonnie Klassen*

Some biblical characters acted as advocates within political structures, rather than from outside them. Esther pled with her husband, the King of Persia, not to kill her kinfolk the Jewish people (Esther 4-8). Daniel, an administrator for King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon, intervened to prevent the execution of “wise men” who could not interpret the King’s dream (Daniel 2). Some of Israel and Judah’s kings worked for the good of their people, acting justly and caring for the poor and destitute (Psalm 72).

Jesus did not directly confront the Roman political leadership of Palestine, but he certainly was an advocate to the religious leaders of his day. He condemned the Pharisees and scribes as hypocrites who sought glory from people rather than God, and who neglected the weighty matters of the Law. He confronted the powerful Sadducees for collaborating with the Roman occupiers. And when his words did not explicitly challenge the powers, his actions did. He healed on the Sabbath; ate with tax collectors, sinners and prostitutes; touched lepers and menstruating women; and disobeyed Jewish food practices. In the last week of his life, he overturned the tables of merchants and money changers in the temple courtyard, sending a very clear message to the temple priests.

### 3. Because it is part of our historic tradition.

Mennonites in Canada have, for over two centuries, advocated to the government to seek laws, policies, regulations and other governmental actions that would benefit them and their people.

In 1786, when Mennonites came to Upper Canada from the U.S., they requested and received exemption from military service. A century later, in 1873, when Mennonites from Russia sought a new home in western Canada, they sought governmental assurance that they be allowed to settle on land in blocks, run their own private schools, and be exempted from military service.

In 1920, thousands of Mennonites were seeking to escape South Russia because of war, revolution and famine. Canada, however, had closed its door to Mennonite, Hutterite and Doukhobor immigration in 1919. A special delegation, led by Bishop David Toews of Saskatchewan, appealed to both the prime minister and the leader of the opposition to once again open the door. This successful advocacy led to the immigration of nearly 21,000 Mennonites to Canada between 1923 and 1930.



During World War II, numerous groups of Mennonite and Brethren in Christ leaders travelled to Ottawa to negotiate regulations governing conscientious objection, exemption from military service and alternative service.

Throughout their history, Mennonites and Brethren in Christ people in Canada have made it a practice to engage in advocacy for measures that would benefit themselves. Given this history, it seems only right that Mennonites and MCC would also choose to advocate on behalf of others.

## story

**CONSCIENTIOUS OBJECTION**— a refusal to participate in war — has been a longstanding conviction of Mennonite and Brethren in Christ churches. Today, the precedent of history and the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms — particularly Article II which upholds freedom of religion and conscience — are considered the foundation upon which Christian pacifists rely for exemption from military service, should there be conscription in the future. But until the 1990s there weren’t provisions for people who aren’t from a pacifist tradition but who become conscientious objectors (COs) while in military service. MCC played a key role in advocating for CO provisions for soldiers who came to a position of conscientious objection while in military service.

#### 4. Because it can address the root causes of suffering.

As an organization dedicated to partnering with others to alleviate human need, we at MCC learned that it is important to try and address the root causes of suffering and not only their symptoms. While direct service — such as providing food, blankets and relief kits — is essential in contexts of disaster or war, situations of chronic need require different responses. Sustainable community development can be helpful, but where systemic injustice or power imbalances exist, it is important to address these structural problems. Here are just two examples.

For decades, MCC has been working alongside Palestinians and Israelis for a just peace. For many years, much of this work focused on education and vocational training, agricultural extension, irrigation and water recycling, and marketing — this work focused on Palestinians who lived under Israeli military occupation in the Palestinian territories. But increasingly, Palestinians — and supportive Israelis — have called for an end to the occupation. They have also called on the international community to help put pressure on the Israeli government to end the occupation and negotiate a just peace with Palestinians.

Refugee sponsorship and resettlement has been close to the heart of MCC's ministry since 1920 when MCC was founded. In the late 1970s, MCC Canada was the first of many church groups to sign a Private Sponsorship Agreement with the federal government. This opened the door for Mennonite and Brethren in Christ churches to sponsor nearly 5,000 refugees from Southeast Asia; since then, Canadian Mennonites have sponsored refugees from many different parts of the

## story

**RICARDO ESQUIVIA** is a Colombian Mennonite and a human rights lawyer. He has devoted his life to advocating on behalf of people displaced by the activities of transnational corporations and various military and para-military forces. His work confronts powerful people and powerful interests; consequently, his life has been threatened on numerous occasions. The largest threat that he faced, on the majority of these occasions, was arrest by the state. Several times in the past decade, Colombian Mennonite organizations Justapaz and Sembrandopaz have issued international calls for letters, telegrams and faxes to Colombian authorities to ensure Esquivia's safety. On one occasion, Esquivia was brought before government officials and was shown a large pile of letters and other communications. "You have many friends," he was told. So far, Esquivia has not been arrested or physically harmed.



world. Most of these refugees have been seeking to flee war and armed conflict. In both Canada and the U.S., MCC has called on our governments to support non-military responses to conflict around the world, and to address the root causes of violence and displacement so that people do not need to flee their homes.

#### 5. Because we know that it can make a difference.

Advocacy work can be very slow and discouraging, but we can point to stories where advocacy has made a significant difference. Brief stories of success are scattered throughout this toolkit; here is only one.

In 2003 the war drums were beating. The U.S. was preparing to invade Iraq and was looking for other countries to join a "coalition of the willing." Canada was under considerable pressure to join the war. Many Canadians, including Canadian churches, urged Prime Minister Chrétien not to join the Iraq war. Organizations like KAIROS, Project Ploughshares and the Canadian Council of Churches put out newspaper ads, gathering 40,000 signatures. MCC also put out a letter, inviting members of constituent churches to add their signatures. Over 2,000 people signed the letter.

Eventually, Prime Minister Chrétien decided against official Canadian participation in the war. Sometime later he told a Lutheran bishop that the voice of Christian churches had been critical in his decision. He said, "The unanimous opposition expressed by church leaders made a huge difference in the cabinet discussion."