Intersections

MCC theory & practice quarterly

Representing relief, development and peacebuilding
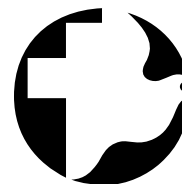
MOTIVATION: CHRIST   ACTION: COMPASSION   GLOBAL SERVICE   SIMPLICITY

Much of the world we encounter comes to us mediated by representations. From complex arrangements of images and stories to the subtleties of typography, color and form, representations inform our understandings of people and places that we cannot access directly.

The topic of representation inevitably raises questions of perception, intention and power. This is especially true when representation is guided by a communications strategy, which is, by definition, constructed to convey particular messages to specific audiences. This issue of *Intersections* explores MCC's approach to representation and some of the ethical questions that organizations like MCC confront in their communications and fundraising efforts.

Representations of individuals and communities—particularly in the form of images and narratives—sometimes diverge from how the subjects of these representations understand themselves. In reporting on its work with partners, MCC positions itself as source for reliable information about underrepresented parts of the world—communities recovering from disasters, living through difficult conditions or facing injustice. MCC therefore bears a clear responsibility to provide accurate and trustworthy accounts to its audience.

Everything that MCC produces contributes to narratives about MCC, its partners in program, the people who benefit from this collaborative work and the people who support MCC in multiple ways. Different communications initiatives have different emphases—the impact of a project, the agency of project participants, the values and commitments of supporters and the systemic factors and ways in which MCC's audiences might be implicated in a problem (and how they might be part of a solution).

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A major task of MCC's communications and donor relations staff has always been to determine what kind of stories to tell. Photographs can quickly convey complex meaning and can reinforce values of trust and transparency. For these reasons, photography has been a key element of MCC's storytelling strategy since the organization's earliest days.

But communication is never simply an act of transmission and photography has never been neutral. Not only has the camera been a valuable tool in the creation of state propaganda, it also played a key role in European colonial expansion. By representing non-European lands as blank slates and by cataloguing non-European peoples according to racial hierarchies, colonizers convinced themselves of their own ethno-cultural superiority and their right to land and resources. Colonial photography represented Indigenous peoples as less developed, exotic or depraved. The stillness of the photograph also lent a fixed quality to constructions of non-Western peoples, allowing Europeans to position such populations in contrast to a narrative of development (with colonized peoples presented as static, homogenous and infant-like in contrast to the supposedly dynamic, diverse and advanced West).

For international nongovernmental organizations (INGOs) based in Europe and North America, the 1980s were a pivotal time of education and awareness around power and representation in communications and fundraising. Photography's problematic history was an essential part of the conversation. MCC's own internal discussions of communications practices, with a heavy emphasis on photography, date back at least to 1983. From the beginning of these discussions, MCC appears to recognize that photography "in the field" brings with it questions of power, dilemmas of cultural difference and opportunities for peaceful collaboration. Photographers like Howard Zehr regularly cited their medium's potential for meaningful cultural exchange and collaboration, while acknowledging image-gathering as a potential source of exploitation and conflict.

However, conversations about how to portray an organization's work generally stop short of asking a more fundamental question about power: to whom are communicators and fundraisers accountable? Historically, those portrayed by INGOs have often had limited agency in decisions around their representation, and organizations have not typically been accountable to subjects for the use of their stories and images. The communications preferences of INGOs and their implicit beliefs about fundraising efficacy have long been the primary determining factors for decisions about representation.

To an extent, MCC has distinguished itself among INGOs through a long history of critical reflection about photography and representation. But questions about the ethics of representation remain active as MCC adjusts to new forms of communication and to new contexts and challenges for communications and fundraising. As MCC approaches its centennial year, this issue of *Intersections* seeks to root itself in an ongoing legacy of self-reflection and continue this conversation by asking how ethical considerations about representation interact practically with various aspects of our work.

Jonathan Dyck is a graphic designer for MCC Canada. David Turner is MCC Manitoba communications coordinator.

MCC and visual identity

Brands are most often recognized by their logos, but for most organizations a brand has more to do with expressing a shared ethos and value system. When it is working well, a brand's visual language should support and reflect the intangible characteristics that define it. MCC's brand is no exception. Beginning with photographs of famine in the post-World War I Soviet Union, MCC has relied on visual content to share stories of need, assistance and cross-cultural exchange. This emphasis on visual story-telling continued to guide the development of MCC's brand identity in the 1970s and 1980s, as MCC worked to standardize a branding system that would be versatile enough to accommodate an expanding roster of programming. This article provides a brief overview of MCC's visual brand, exploring some of the rationale behind design decisions that continue to influence MCC's communications and fundraising work in the present.

MCC emblem logo.
Figure 1.

MCC mark, incorporated into logotype.
Figure 2.

Symbols and typography

Along with images that accompany stories, MCC's visual identity is defined by the typefaces, colors and symbols that frame its content. In its nearly one hundred years, MCC has been represented by only two different logos. The first, designed by Arthur Sprunger in the 1940s, combined recognizable symbols and hand-rendered type into an emblem logo. Here, each component remains static and distinct, with a clear hierarchy in the arrangement of the symbols (see fig.1). The elements continue in the second mark, developed by Kenneth Hiebert, but they have undergone a radical transformation (see fig. 2). Drawing on Swiss design—a style based in simplicity, functionality and objectivity—Hiebert created an abstract logomark that has remained relatively unchanged since it was first used in 1970, the year of MCC's fiftieth anniversary.

Upon adoption of Hiebert's logomark, MCC's style manual explained some of the thinking that guided its development: "An attempt has been made to create a symbol which utilizes the universal language of the visual. It was intentionally designed to require a moment of very active participation by the viewer to understand its content." The mark was later paired with sans serif typefaces (first Univers and later Helvetica) for a signature, now commonly referred to as the "MCC logotype" (fig. 2). While Helvetica's extreme legibility makes it appear more neutral and commonplace, the MCC mark's unique fusion of symbols (cross and dove) invites scrutiny. Aesthetically, the two are well matched. They belong to the same strain of modern design, resulting from attempts to reduce complex sets of symbols to recognizable forms that are at once unified, concise and evocative.

MCC's Graphic Standards Introduction from 1987 echoes this attempt to balance accessibility with engagement, particularly when it comes to

> **An attempt has been made [with the logomark] to create a symbol which utilizes the universal language of the visual. It was intentionally designed to require a moment of very active participation by the viewer to understand its content." — MCC style guide, 1981.**

creating promotional images. "The symbol and graphic standards set the tone for our publicity as being simple, honest and direct on the one hand and imaginative and participatory on the other. Graphics which both clearly inform and stimulate to new understanding and action are the goals of the publicity program."

Photography as collaboration

Along with the graphic standards (including the mark, typography and a strong emphasis on grid-based layout), photography is a crucial part of MCC's brand and has played a major part in helping MCC locate a middle ground between accessibility and meaningful engagement for its audience. *Feeding the Hungry*, the popular book by two of MCC's founders, P.C. Hiebert and Orie O. Miller, combined more than a hundred haunting images with reports from MCC workers in Russia. As Robert S. Kreider and Rachel Waltner Goossen noted in their book, *Hungry, Thirsty, a Stranger*, these reports—originally news releases sent from the early Scottdale, Pennsylvania, headquarters of MCC to editors of church papers—were the first iteration of MCC "information services," now known as communications.

> **As cameras became more ubiquitous in the 1970s, so too did MCC's reliance on it workers and alumni for visual, oral and written content that could be circulated among constituents."**

Over the years, photo-gathering for MCC has taken many forms. As cameras became more ubiquitous in the 1970s, so too did MCC's reliance on its workers and alumni for visual, oral and written content that could be circulated among constituents. Through the eighties and nineties, Howard Zehr helped develop photo guidelines for MCC workers and regularly contributed a column to *Intercom*, MCC's newsletter to MCC staff and alumni. These guidelines stressed the collaborative nature of photography: they encouraged photographers to work with their subjects and even suggested that MCC photographers invite those who are being represented to take ownership of the process.

Zehr's columns, meanwhile, alerted MCCers in Canada and the U.S. to the ways in which photography can help build bridges, or just as easily establish cultural hierarchies and reify harmful stereotypes. With their images, wrote Zehr, MCC photographers should "seek to convey respect, not arouse pity, to humanize rather than depersonalize," to instill a sense of partnership and inspire their audience to action.

From images to application

Photos have traditionally served as hooks for fundraising and advocacy initiatives or as anchors for reporting. As a field report from 1994 puts it, "Photographs are a good way of letting people see for themselves what is happening." Although the straightforward objectivity of this statement appears naive, visual transparency remains the goal of MCC photography. MCC's current photography guidelines describe it as a "documentary" approach, where "the photographer is unobtrusive and the subject is depicted as naturally as possible" so that photographs "communicate on an emotional level, bringing the viewer closer to what is portrayed."

But the meaning of a photograph, not least the intention of a photographer, changes as soon as it is used in a design application. Every promotional piece that MCC produces decontextualizes and recontextualizes its subject matter in some way. For this reason, MCC's photo guidelines stress the importance of captions and permissions (including location and names of those pictured, as well as connection to

MCC's work and the photo credit), stating that "use of MCC photographs should accurately represent the context in which they were taken" and that "MCC photographs must appear in a context connected to MCC." These are important safeguards, but they can only go so far.

In store poster, 2017. *Figure 3.*

MCC increasingly produces promotional material (for entities such as Thrift shops, relief sale committees and more) where captions are regarded as inappropriate and clunky and are therefore simply left off. (See figure 3, designed by Barefoot Creative, and fig. 4.) These kinds of pieces focus on real participants in MCC's work, but in these examples, their images are not being featured to fill out a story. Rather they are meant to be representative of people benefiting from MCC. To try and counteract this, MCC Thrift shops recently created shelfcards (fig. 5) to supplement poster designs (fig. 3) featuring the same individuals, with the original photo backgrounds left in and contextual information provided. However, it is hard to measure the success of initiatives like this, especially because shops have the option of whether or not to display these sorts of materials.

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Above: Booklet, 2016. *Figure 4.*
Right: Shelfcard, 2018. *Figure 5.*

Learn more

Hiebert, Kenneth. *Graphic Design Processes: Universal to Unique*. New York: Van Nostrand Reinhold, 1992.

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Kreider, Robert S. and Rachel Waltner Goossen. "Reporting the MCC Experience: Images and Posters." *Hungry, Thirsty, a Stranger: The MCC Experience*. 193–209. Scottdale: Herald Press, 1988.

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Zehr, Howard. "The Photographic Metaphor." *Intercom* (March 1991): 5.

---. "Photographing People of Color." *Intercom* (May 1991): 6.

Looking ahead

MCC could once take for granted that its primary audience would be the individuals and congregations of constituent churches. In that context, MCC was responsible for designing materials that would sometimes use images without accompanying captions, thus leaving out biographical and contextual information about the people represented. In many cases, this was done to challenge preconceived ideas about poverty, conflict and inequality (see figures 6 and 7). Today, as the reach of MCC's brand grows, the use of images will likely continue as a foundation of MCC's brand identity, but that identity will just as certainly continue to evolve with its audience.
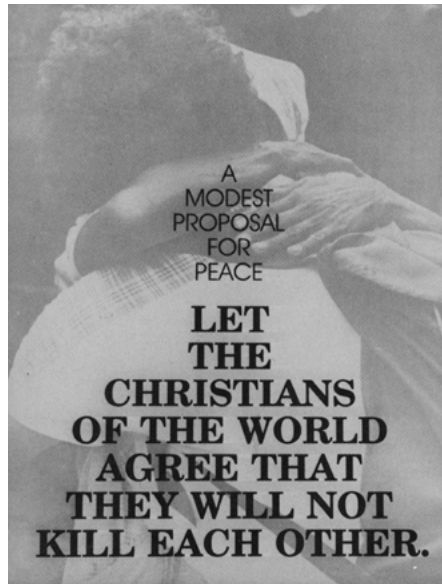
Poster, 1984. *Figure 6.*
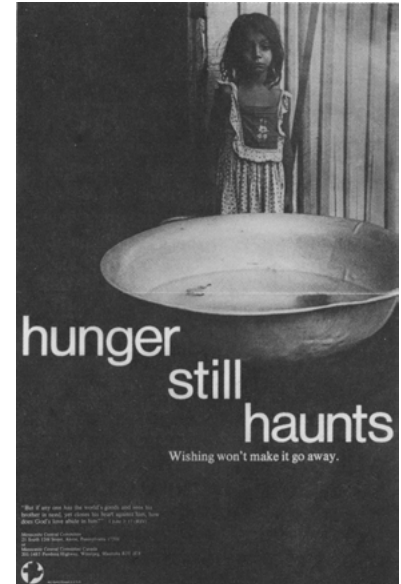
Poster, 1983. *Figure 7.*

MCC continues to promote high standards in photography, as is evident in the storytelling focus of publications like *A Common Place*, news articles on the MCC website and even in flagship promotional pieces like MCC's annual calendar. Advertising and wide-ranging marketing initiatives require compelling images to broaden MCC's audience and find new donors. But the tensions addressed in this article will continue to raise questions for MCC staff. How will MCC's critical approach to representation and photography inform future communications and fundraising efforts? And how, in turn, will MCC's shifting priorities influence the standards of its visual identity?

Jonathan Dyck, MCC Canada graphic designer, designed and illustrated Unsettling the Word: Biblical Experiments in Decolonization (Winnipeg: CommonWord, 2018).

Photography as constructed reality

Photography is often seen as a medium that portrays an objective reality, showing the truth of a situation. Yet the subject, framing and composition of a photograph are all shaped by the subjective choices of the photographer. In other words, every photograph tells a story about the version of reality it is portraying. What is included in the frame (and what is left out), what the photograph makes its central focus and

even the angle used to picture the subject all influence what message a photograph conveys.

The job of coaching program staff, volunteers and partner staff to make photos that are useful to MCC's communications and fundraising work requires teaching culture, values and composition. Photographers need to learn what kind of photos MCC constituents in Canada and the United States will find engaging and inspiring and what MCC's own internal values are around how people and projects are represented in images. This means showing project participants as active agents of change in their families and communities, even in times of adversity. Action shots, with smiling expressions, or portrayals of positive social interactions, represent the photographs used most often in MCC's communication materials. Furthermore, effective MCC photographs must be grounded in strong technical composition, such as use of light and framing.

Having adequate nutrition is especially important for those living with HIV. Loans, such as the one that allowed Padam Tondon in Argakanchi District to buy day-old chicks, are a critical part of helping people with compromised immune systems earn enough to eat well and care for their health. (MCC photo/Leah Reesor-Keller) *This photo shows the care that Padam Tondon has for his chicks. It defines him as a caring farmer-entrepreneur, rather than as someone whose life and livelihood has been jeopardized by HIV.*

> **" Instead of portraying people as needy victims, we portray people who are experiencing difficult situations, yet are resilient and capable of acting toward a better future."**

In my work making photographs of MCC projects in Nepal and in coaching MCC Nepal staff and partners in making photographs for MCC use, I emphasized two main points. First: every photo tells a story. We tell stories about people who are triumphing over adversity, who have hopes and dreams for their future and who are taking action in their homes and communities to make positive change. The photos we make tell a story of Nepalis who are facing difficult circumstances, but who are resilient and capable, actively working for a better future for themselves and their country. Second: MCC is a partner in this work, not the owner of it. We show this through photographs that portray project participants as active and engaged rather than as passive subjects. Captions are also an important part of this, naming all people pictured in a photograph and explaining the role of the partner organization. Many partner organizations rely on MCC communications channels to help them share about their mission and work with the wider world. By agreeing to be photographed, or by providing photographs for use, both project

participants and partner organizations are trusting MCC to tell their stories in a respectful way.

Yet there are tensions to be addressed as well. MCC's preferred style of photography can at times clash with photography practices in other organizational cultures. In development organizations in Nepal, photographs are often used as evidence that project activities were completed. It is not uncommon for photographs to accompany a financial report as supporting documentation to back up the expenses made.

Uramila Chepang brought her daughter Muna (3 years) to the monthly under-5 children weighing campaign run by Shanti Nepal staff and volunteers in Yarbang, Dhusa VDC, Dhading District. (MCC photo/Leah Reesor-Keller) *This picture was never used by MCC communications—it doesn't fit the active-positive style.*

Nutrition volunteers Angela Chepang and Mini Maya Chepang calculate data from a monthly weighing campaign in Dhading District, as Babalal Chepang waits to learn if his 2-year-old daughter Supana is within the normal weight range for her age. (MCC photo/Leah Reesor-Keller) *This photo, from the same event as the event on the left, was published in* A Common Place. *It shows people active and engaged, and provides geographic context with the steep hills and Himalayas in the background that emphasizes the remoteness of the location.*

Therefore, in the local organizational culture, the purpose of a photograph is to show that participants attended a training, or that relief supplies were delivered to survivors of a disaster. Evoking an inspiring emotion in the observer is less important than providing a visual proof that resources reached the intended beneficiaries.

Another common use of photographs in the culture of Nepal's development organizations is to show the "neediness" of a situation to provide a justification for funding activities. When new staff members joined the MCC Nepal team, they required coaching and training in MCC's culture of photography. Rather than focusing on documenting project activities, MCC focuses on telling impact stories of the positive changes happening in people's lives because of their new access to resources. Instead of portraying people as needy victims, we portray people who are experiencing difficult situations, yet are resilient and capable of acting toward a better future. We show people who, with the support of MCC and partner organizations, act to bring positive change. My main coaching tool in training new staff members to take photographs for

MCC was to look at photographs together in MCC calendars or other publications and ask the question "What story does this tell?" We then did the same exercise together looking at photographs taken by the staff members of local projects.

Cultural clashes in photography can also occur for social reasons. For example, in the case of Nepal, the general preference for photography is posed and formal, with the subjects dressed in their best clothes, and often with serious expressions. Many homes have family portraits like this on their walls. When a photographer for MCC wants to take spontaneous photos of people working their fields, or doing other manual labour, it can be uncomfortable for the persons being photographed since it is at odds with their preferences for how they want to present themselves in a photo. To address this, it is important for the photographer to understand and respect a person's right to refuse to be photographed. This might also mean waiting for someone to go change out of their work clothes so that they can be photographed in their best clothes rather than their old clothes, even if the photos will still be taken of the person working in their field or tending their animals.

On a day hike in the Kathmandu Valley, I once took a photograph of some women carrying loads of manure from a pile by the road to spread in a nearby field. They were talking and laughing together as they worked, and it made a beautiful picture with their colorful clothes against the dark brown manure. When the women realized that I had taken their picture without asking their consent, they were very angry with me. I was a foreign stranger and had taken a photograph of them doing work that they were not proud of and felt demeaned by. I deleted the photo to respect their wishes.

In contrast, when I visited farming projects with MCC partners, the people I interacted with were receptive and willing to be photographed working in their fields. They knew and trusted the local partner staff members who had organized my visit. They knew who I was and why I was there. Often on these visits we would meet people at their homes and hear their stories of how they were involved with local projects, and then they would give us a tour of their farm, always willing to give a demonstration of working in their field or caring for their animals. The open communication and trusting relationship helped to break down cultural barriers so that people were open to being photographed in MCC's action-oriented, positive style. If the photographer can succeed in explaining the purpose of the photos and how they will be used, and if they can explain the reasoning for why an action shot is more helpful to MCC than a posed shot, the person or group being photographed is usually willing to transgress their cultural norms to help the photographer achieve the desired photo.

Even after all the value sharing, cultural interpretation and relationship-building work has happened, a photo will only be useful if it is also clear, in focus and well-framed. This requires that the photographer have a basic knowledge of photographic techniques, such as making sure the subject is not back-lit, and finds ways to compensate for the glaring mid-day sun in outdoor photos. In the end, an effective photo may look like a candid snapshot, but it is the result of many conscious and unconscious choices by the photographer to tell a particular story.

Leah Reesor-Keller was a food security advisor for MCC in Nepal from 2012 to 2014 and then MCC representative for Nepal from 2014 to 2017.

> **MCC's preferred style of photography can at times clash with photography practices in other organizational cultures.**

Partner and participant responses to photographs in Haiti

The community of Wopisa is high in the mountains in Haiti's Artibonite department and is only accessible by a walking path that requires several ascents and descents, including scaling a waterfall. This challenging environment necessarily limits access to the community by government and aid agencies. Wopisa is extremely vulnerable to damage from natural disasters, erosion and waterborne diseases such as typhoid and cholera. MCC significantly increased our working presence in this community in 2016 following Hurricane Matthew through agricultural livelihoods and latrine projects. Photographs from Wopisa have been used in MCC materials promoting reforestation and latrine projects, most notably in last year's Christmas giving catalogue. For this article, I made the trek up to Wopisa to get some feedback from project participants on how their images have been used to generate support for MCC. I also spoke with MCC's Haitian staff to get their feedback about how these images have been used and about how MCC uses photographs of project participants in general.

MCC's work in Wopisa is managed out of our office in the town of Desarmes, where MCC has been working since the 1980s. The current work is Wopisa is part of a three-year disaster response project started after Hurricane Matthew. Most of MCC's other work in Haiti's Artibonite department is part of a five-year project funded by Canadian Foodgrains Bank (CFGB). All these projects, many of which are in communities as remote as Wopisa, receive weekly visits from MCC staff members, mostly Haitian nationals. MCC agroforestry technician Michelet Elisamar says that in the community of Kabay, which is part of the CFGB project, the trust built over the course of MCC's long relationship with the community means project participants feel comfortable having MCC staff take their photos for promotional purposes.

In Wopisa, community leader Previl Pierre echoed that his gratitude for MCC's work in his community means he has no problem having his photo

> " **Pierre advocated for balance in representation: he wants outsiders to see both the difficult and the beautiful aspects of life in Wopisa."**

Previl Pierre's photo was used in the 2017 Christmas Giving catalogue to advertise giving to latrine-building projects. (MCC photo/Annalee Giesbrecht)

used to generate support for MCC, but also said he would be happy to collaborate with anyone making an investment in the community. He sees MCC's photographs as providing a way for donors and supporters elsewhere to understand the reality of life in his community. To that end, Pierre advocated for balance in representation: he wants outsiders to see both the difficult and the beautiful aspects of life in Wopisa. He also expressed a feeling of abandonment by the state and international organizations, a sentiment MCC staff hear frequently when visiting remote communities: "they don't even know we exist." Pierre hopes that by sharing photographs of his community, MCC can help raise awareness of the struggles they face on a day-to-day basis. When asked how he felt about photos of his community being used to support latrine projects in other countries, he said he had no problem with this because "Haiti is not the only country that has problems," and would also be supportive of photos from other countries being used to support projects in Haiti.

Melise Michaline and Louis Vivra, two of the subjects of the second photo, echoed many of Pierre's sentiments. When I asked them what kind of photos they wanted to see of themselves, both mentioned *work*. Louis said he likes to see photos of himself working hard, "like a *peyizan*." [The Creole word *peyizan* (French *paysan/ne*) is generally translated "peasant," but has roughly the same cluster of meanings that the Spanish *campesino/a* has elsewhere in Latin America: both in the pride taken by self-identifying *peyizan*, and in the way it has been mobilized in the service of discrimination and resistance.] Melise, similarly, said she doesn't like to see photos where people aren't working. Both said they liked simple, dignified portraits as well.

However, not all MCC photos are taken in communities where we have pre-existing long-term relationships, including some of MCC Haiti's most widely circulated disaster pictures. After a disaster like an earthquake or

Melise Michaline and Louis Vivra were featured in a photo used in MCC's supplement to Canadian Foodgrains Bank's quarterly newsletter and in the 2017 Christmas Giving catalogue to advertise giving to reforestation projects. (MCC photo/Annalee Giesbrecht)

Learn more

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hurricane, MCC Haiti staff work to communicate the context and reality of people affected by the situation and to share this information as quickly as possible with the wider MCC audience. These early stories and pictures are more about contextualizing and personalizing the crisis and are less project-connected. Our goal is to produce these stories in the first 72 hours after the disaster, before projects are developed or approved. Jean-Remy Azor, program coordinator in the MCC Desarmes office, acknowledges that this requires MCC staff to be very clear with community members about why we are taking photos and especially about what we can and cannot promise. For example, after Hurricane Irma caused flooding and landslides in the Artibonite department in the fall of 2017, MCC worked with local authorities to visit some of the people affected within 48 hours. MCC staff made sure to explain that the purpose of our photos was to show our constituents the damage that had been caused, but that we did not yet know whether we would be able do a project in that area. This kind of clear, transparent communication is necessary to avoid misunderstandings which have the potential to cause considerable conflict in situations where people are already extremely vulnerable. Transparency and clear communication with project participants are essential to ensure that we maintain the positive relationships MCC has worked so hard to build in the communities in which we work.

I cannot claim that the responses I received to MCC photographs on my visit to Wopiya represent a thorough or objective assessment of how Haitians view MCC's photography and communications efforts. I may have received very different feedback had I visited people who were photographed shortly after a disaster, or longer-term MCC partners who have welcomed MCC photographers and writers multiple times. In addition, I conducted these interviews both as a foreigner and as a representative of a funder of community projects. So, while the feedback I received was generally positive, it is important to keep in mind that all individuals have their own preferences as to how they would like to be photographed or whether they would like to be photographed at all. Every context is different. My hope is that if we approach photography and communications in terms of collaboration and relationship-building and are continually engaged in honest self-reflection, we can ensure that the stories we tell are meaningful, honest and respectful of those with whom we work.

Annalee Giesebrecht is MCC's advocacy and communications coordinator in Haiti.

Does fundraising need pity?: representation and donor response

In the 1980s, millions in the Global North were exposed to shocking images of famine in East Africa. It was certainly not the first time that such stark, desperate portrayals of hunger and poverty had been widely published, but it marked a new level in the proliferation of a certain type of imagery adopted in the service of fundraising appeals. The images showed widespread death and devastation. Subjects were usually visibly malnourished, sick and depicted as passive and alone. In the years that followed, these fundraising tactics received deep criticism: for their over-simplification and decontextualization; for their attempt to appeal to charity rather than rights and justice; for the unequal relationship they suggested between the receiving victim and the heroic Western giver.

Similar photographs of Mohammed Asirmo, a pastoralist in Afar, Ethiopia and his son Rashid Mohammed convey different meanings based on differences as simple as the angle from which the photo was taken. While the top image is likely to instil pity in its audience, the image below suggests empowerment and dignity.

The photograph taken from a low angle was selected for use in an appeal letter, sent to MCC donors in July, 2016.

But these efforts had worked, countered the defenders of these images, arguing that many thousands of lives had been saved through the ensuing humanitarian response.

In the years that followed the famine of the mid-1980s, many relief and development organizations moved away from this sort of negative, one-dimensional portrayal of those who participate in and benefit from their humanitarian efforts, often adopting codes of conduct to guide their communications efforts. Most organizations have begun to employ more positive imagery, attempting to portray dignity and agency in those pictured. Yet the question persists: by avoiding images that show devastation and provoke pity, have organizations raised less money for their work? If a fundraiser's primary concern is maximizing an organization's ability to respond to crisis, is the loss of humanitarian capacity worth the less tangible virtue of using more positive imagery?

Responding to this line of questioning requires taking a step back and asking whether such a trade-off has in fact occurred. Do donors respond more to a particular type of appeal? Thanks to a young and rapidly-developing field of social science research, we can explore these questions with more precision, studying why people choose to give and what factors accelerate or mitigate the impulse. By better understanding donor

Learn more

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Banfield, Jillian C. and John F. Dovidio. "The Role of Empathy in Responding to Natural Disasters." *Analyses of Social Issues and Public Policy* (2012): 276–279.

Hudson, David, Jennifer VanHeerde-Hudson, Niheer Dasandi and N. Susan Gaines. "Emotional Pathways to Engagement with Global Poverty: An Experimental Analysis." University College London, 2016.

McManus, Jessica L. and Donald A Saucier. "Helping Natural Disaster Victims Depends on Characteristics and Perceptions of Victims." *Analyses of Social Issues and Public Policy* (2012): 272–275.

Oppenheimer, Daniel M. and Christopher Y. Olivola. *The Science of Giving: Experimental Approaches to the Study of Charity.* Psychology Press, 2011.

behaviour, we may find a model for effective fundraising communication that prioritizes positive and dignified representations—and we can also turn our attention to what happens *after* a decision to donate is made.

Fundraising appeals attempt to trigger particular cognitive or emotional responses in their audience. In recent years, the study of "helping behaviour" has led to some agreement among researchers that *empathy*—which is predictive of charitable giving—is composed of both affective (emotional) and cognitive dimensions. Giving decisions tend to be driven by either one or the other, but affective giving decisions comprise the bulk of responses to a typical charity appeal.

It might be tempting to pretend that these emotional processes do not matter, and to suppose that donors *should* simply give based on a reasoned determination of doing what's right. It may also be tempting to suppose that a particular organization's audience is special and somehow immune to these affective processes. But this would not accurately reflect the social and cognitive landscapes in which organizations like MCC work, contexts in which affective processes influence the majority of donations.

Deborah Small has cited several studies that demonstrate how people respond more generously to those with whom they feel affinity. One factor that contributes to "felt closeness"—*similarity*—is dependent upon social and cultural conditioning through "in-grouping." Studies grouping people into an "in" group and an "out" group found more generous feelings among subjects toward in-group members. Surprisingly, this tendency held even when these groupings were completely arbitrary. The "categorization of others as belonging to the same social group as oneself"—no matter how spurious the in-grouping—"arouses feelings of greater closeness and responsibility, and augments emotional response to their distress."

This social science research finds that individuals engage in different levels of processing and decision-making depending on the perceived similarity of a "victim." Out-group members are likely to be processed more abstractly, with less emotional response (see Kogut and Ritov). These "cold cognitions" are less likely to motivate people to give than emotions, which create a "mental spotlight," initiating an internal process that calls for immediate action.

Feelings of similarity or dissimilarity contribute to other cascading effects on a potential giving decision. When an individual perceives those affected by a disaster as dissimilar rather than similar, the impulse to help is interrupted in at least three distinct ways. First, feelings of dissimilarity can affect perceptions of how severe a situation is. Second, those feelings influence perception of the adequacy of whatever response is already in place. And finally, feelings of dissimilarity increase the likelihood of viewing those affected by a negative situation as responsible for their own suffering.

When an audience believes the subjects described in a fundraising appeal are at least partly responsible for their own situation, not only are the effects of empathy reduced, but a different set of emotions is also triggered: victims perceived to share responsibility for their situation tend to generate negative affective reactions, which further dampen altruistic impulses.

Individuals' giving behaviour is also sharply influenced by their perceptions of others' behaviour. Social norms have great power to sway individual behaviour and that social information can either encourage

action or promote inaction. One study found that "downward" social information—the awareness that others are *not* giving or are giving little—can have twice as much impact as positive social information. In other words, if individuals perceive that others are not responding to an appeal, that information has double the influence on their impulse to give than if they perceive that others around them *are* responding.

While humanitarian organizations may launch crisis appeals as isolated events, concerning themselves with maximizing revenue on each individual appeal, their messages have always been received within particular social and psychological contexts. Before a viewer has the chance to react to the specific visual choices made by an organization in its fundraising appeals, these contextual and emotional factors are already at play, biasing the viewer either toward or away from a donation decision.

These social forces present interesting prospects for the creative communicator. Through their communications efforts both during and prior to an appeal, organizations have opportunities to encourage feelings of similarity, reduce social distance, use social information to encourage positive behaviour and counteract prejudice—positive outcomes on their own which also increase the likelihood of donor response.

The various determinants of giving behaviour, such as the dimensions of social distance identified by Deborah Small, are closer to spectrums than they are dichotomies. There is room to nudge an audience in a desirable direction. For example, studies have found that proactive in-grouping through an appeal can positively impact giving behaviour. In other words, fundraising that frames recipients as similar and proximate rather than as helpless, distant and "other" may in fact prove more effective.

It would be misleading to deny the effectiveness of pity-based appeals. They are proven to work. They are not the only fundraising strategies that work, but they may be the *easiest* fundraising strategies that work. David Hudson and Jennifer vanHeerde-Hudson measured the impacts of various emotional pathways triggered by fundraising appeals and found pity-based appeals to be effective at increasing giving decisions by provoking both anger and guilt. The emotion of "hope" was a similarly strong predictor of giving behaviour but was much more difficult to trigger than pity. However, when they extended their analysis to look at the impact on their audience after an appeal, a different picture emerged. After measuring the links between different emotional responses and their impact on decisions to give, Hudson and vanHeerde-Hudson also measured potential long-term effects on givers. They found a clear pattern where those who felt pity were likely to make an immediate giving decision, but also expressed reduced confidence in their gifts making a difference and a reduced sense of hope for the future. In other words, they gave to ameliorate an uncomfortable, temporary feeling, but in the process, they became less likely to give in the future. Humanitarian organizations interested in cultivating a strong, sustainable donor base should be concerned not just with immediate results, but with the long-term effects of their fundraising efforts.

No serious humanitarian organization should allow itself to define its communications objectives solely in terms of a dollar amount. A fundraiser's first concern may be the bottom line, but the real impacts of their public communications extend beyond an organization's revenue sheet. An organization's decisions about how to portray its work carry real-world implications not only for itself, but for both potential donors

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and the beneficiaries of its work. The ethical weight of these decisions should never be forgotten.

Raising funds by telling other people's stories is a complex endeavor, but for the organization willing to question its habits and learn from research, there should be a clear conclusion: successful fundraising and dignified portrayals of beneficiaries do not need to be mutually exclusive—and they may go better hand-in-hand.

David Turner, MCC Manitoba communications coordinator, lives and works on Treaty One territory.

Advocacy as translation: representing partner voices

MCC Canada's Ottawa Office engages in advocacy to government on behalf of, and together with, MCC partners in Canada and around the world. We often describe our work as a two-sided coin. One side is political engagement. This is the work we do to speak directly to government and to the political system: through letters, face to face meetings, written or oral presentations to committees and more. The other side of the coin is public engagement: this is the work we do to help our constituents hear the stories, understand the issues and become advocates themselves.

We have found inspiration in the words of Samantha Baker Evens, a mission worker in Cambodia, who wrote: "We are not 'a voice for the voiceless'—we lend our privilege as a megaphone." In the Ottawa Office, we like to think of our advocacy work as amplifying the voices of our partners.

In representing the message of our partners to a wider audience, we often find that our work requires *translation*. We need to express the message in a way that both Canadian parliamentarians and constituents can understand and, we hope, act on. With parliamentarians, we translate concerns into the language of law and human rights; with constituents, we use the language of biblical theology and concepts such as justice, mercy and compassion.

We hope that in our translation we are bearing faithful witness to the advocacy message our partners urge us to speak. But sometimes we ask ourselves: Does it really do that? Sometimes we wonder if our decisions about how to represent these voices is weakening or distorting their message. We wonder if, in our efforts to make the message work in the Canadian context, we are losing the essence of what our partners ask of us. A few examples illustrate this dilemma.

Some years ago, an MCC group travelled to Guatemala to learn about the activities of Canadian gold mining giant, Goldcorp, in the San Marcos region. While there, we heard about the mine's contamination of water and soil, its tearing of the social fabric of the community and its failure to adequately consult with Indigenous people regarding the use of their land. We learned how the mine had devastated the community. At the end of the week, we sat together with local people who said clearly to us, "This mine is destroying our lives. Get rid of it."

> **" Sometimes we wonder if our decisions about how to represent these voices is weakening or distorting their message."**

Our hearts sank. We knew there was no way we could get rid of the mine. We were only a small nongovernmental organization with a handful of advocacy staff. And, although we were part of a larger coalition back in Canada, we simply had no capacity or mandate to take on a mining corporation. What we could do was commit to pressing for changes in Canadian law that would make it much more difficult for companies like Goldcorp to act like it had in San Marcos.

Working with other advocacy groups back home, we had some success in pushing for corporate accountability. The Canadian government made it mandatory for companies to report all payments made to local authorities to gain mining contracts, with the aim of eliminating bribery. It also created the office of an independent ombudsperson to hear and adjudicate complaints by people harmed by Canadian corporate activity in their countries.

In that instance, we translated the messages we heard from MCC partners in Guatemala into requests for action that made sense and were achievable within the Canadian political system. We didn't attempt to get rid of the mine. Should we have?

As indicated above, we also translate for our constituents. We do that, we say, to move people gently from their comfort zone and into their "learning zone," rather than thrusting them into a "panic zone." We translate our partners' advocacy messages so that these messages can be heard by constituents who may feel deeply anxious or threatened when their worldview is turned upside down. An example from MCC's work related to Palestine and Israel illustrates this dynamic.

In 2005, Palestinian civil society—including some of MCC's Palestinian partners—initiated a call for boycott, divestment and sanctions against Israel until it complies with international law and universal human rights principles. From this call has emerged a global grassroots movement for boycott, divestment and sanctions, popularly known as BDS. Palestinians and their Israeli allies have urged the international community to engage in academic and cultural boycotts and to undertake economic measures such as divestment and sanctions in order to bring about an end to the Israeli occupation of Palestinian land, to achieve equal rights for Palestinian citizens within Israel and to respect, promote and protect the right of Palestinian refugees to return to their homes and properties. Over the years, some of MCC's partners urged MCC to participate in and promote the BDS campaign. The Kairos Palestine document from 2009, written by Palestinian Christian leaders, also urges churches around the world to explore divestment and economic and commercial boycotts of goods related to Israel's military occupation. Over more than a decade, MCC has organized learning tours for church leaders to Palestine to hear directly from Palestinian Christians and from Palestinians and Israelis working for peace, including from people who have pressed Mennonites to join the BDS movement. Some MCC boards, meanwhile, have taken steps to divest from companies connected to oppression of people, including the Israeli military occupation. Yet MCC has also determined that it will not take a position on the BDS movement, but will instead use other language and strategies to call for a just peace in Palestine and Israel.

A current campaign led by MCC in Canada is called "A Cry for Home." The campaign calls for safe and secure homes—and a safe and secure homeland—for both Palestinians and Israelis. It invites Canadian

Learn more

For information on MCC's *A Cry for Home* campaign, visit MCC's website: https://mcccanada.ca/cry-for-home.

Above: Materials produced by MCC Canada for the *A Cry for Home* campaign, 2018.

constituents to consider the situation of Palestinian children in military detention and urges them to act by raising this issue with their Member of Parliament. Our hope is that the plight of Palestinian children will open the hearts and minds of both constituents and politicians, while also providing an entry point into the larger and deeper reality of occupation and oppression. How should MCC balance diverse, sometimes conflicting, partner perspectives on potentially contentious advocacy issues like this? How should MCC balance these various calls from partners with the diverse perspectives of its supporters?

As indicated at the outset, in "translating" for our constituents, we try to represent the messages of partners so that they can be heard, understood and acted upon by our constituents and to maintain strong support for MCC. Like many Christian nongovernmental organizations, MCC works hard to maintain a strong support to carry out its work of relief, development and peacebuilding in the name of Christ. Traditionally, MCC could count on strong and steady financial and other support from Anabaptist churches and households. Today, that support cannot simply be taken for granted. MCC must work hard to seek out and sustain its support. Thus it might feel easier to emphasize MCC's relief and humanitarian assistance work over more potentially controversial initiatives, including advocacy work.

As Anabaptists in Canada and the U.S., we do not want to hear that we are implicated in other people's suffering, whether through lifestyle choices, racial privilege, distorted theology, colonial history or support for unjust government policies. Advocacy messages that imply complicity—or that simply point to the realities of systemic injustice—not surprisingly sometimes encounter resistance. Yet it is often these very realities that partners call us to address. It takes courage for organizations like MCC to act out of solidarity and call for justice when doing so may harm the bottom line. I am grateful for the times MCC has acted courageously.

In summary, advocacy together with and on behalf of our partners requires that we translate their concerns so that politicians and constituents in Canada can comprehend and act on them. Doubts and questions about how we represent their stories will—and no doubt, should—always remain with us. Nevertheless, we hope and pray that our translation bears faithful witness to our partners and helps to amplify their voices and ultimately leads to greater justice and greater peace.

Esther Epp-Tiessen worked for MCC for over 28 years, most recently as public engagement coordinator for MCC Canada's Ottawa Office.

Sharing stories and images from the Kasai crisis

For the last year, MCC has been responding to the humanitarian crisis in Kasai region of the Democratic Republic of Congo (D.R. Congo). MCC has been trying to increase awareness of MCC supporters and the broader Anabaptist community about this low-profile and significant humanitarian crisis. In order to mobilize resources to meet urgent needs, MCC has shared stories and images of people who have suffered horrific violence and remain very vulnerable. This article draws on my personal experience leading MCC's response to the Kasai crisis, including collecting stories and images of displaced people, and will explore the

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dilemma of collecting and sharing stories and images of people affected by humanitarian crises.

The conflict in Kasai erupted in 2016. What started as primarily an anti-government movement evolved and exploited historical ethnic tensions and political allegiances. At the height of the crisis, 1.4 million people were displaced; entire villages have been destroyed and over 3,000 people have been killed. Many Congolese have witnessed and directly suffered terrible acts of violence. Last year the United Nations declared

Kanku Ngalamulume, 10, lost his entire family to violence in Kasai. In Tshikapa, where Kanku lives, Congolese Mennonites are distributing food packages of maize flour, beans, oil and salt, and hygiene supplies for women. Planning is underway to offer trauma healing workshops and to support the education of displaced children. MCC and other Anabaptist groups are supporting the churches' efforts. (MCC photo/Mulanda Jimmy Juma)

D.R. Congo a Level 3 crisis—the most severe humanitarian crisis. While the humanitarian situation is grave and deteriorating, there has been little media coverage of the crisis in D.R. Congo overall, let alone the crisis in Kasai. Thus, it is critical that MCC collect and share compelling stories and images to mobilize supporters and raise awareness.

MCC has given high priority to this response because of the scale of the crisis and due to the historical and ongoing relationship between MCC and the large number of Mennonite and Mennonite Brethren churches in the region. To date, MCC has allocated over US$1 million to provide food assistance, hygiene items, shelter and educational support in partnership with Congolese Mennonite and Mennonite Brethren denominations. In this response, MCC has worked in partnership with various other Anabaptist mission agencies who also want to mobilize their church members to respond. This puts additional pressure on MCC to collect powerful images and narratives to share with other agencies.

MCC staff have gathered photos, video and stories in various locations in Kasai. Due to logistical challenges, MCC staff gathered this material while also undertaking other activities, including during the situation assessment carried out to determine needs and available resources and

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during the planning and implementation of the relief response. MCC communications policy requires that individuals give permission before their photos are taken and an explanation is provided for why MCC is collecting the photos. While some people were asked to tell their stories, others came forward on their own. Overall, displaced people from Kasai were very willing to share about their experience and to have their photos taken. They shared painful stories of fleeing their villages and seeing family members killed. They were also able to communicate their priority needs, including food, health care and education for their children.

Agnès Ntumba carries a sack of corn flour and oil she received during a distribution by Communauté Evangélique Mennonite (ECM; Evangelical Mennonite Church in Congo). (MCC photo/Mulanda Jimmy Juma)

The presence of visitors in the community and being invited to tell one's story can provide hope to people in desperate circumstances—a hope that other people around the world will hear about their situation and be moved to provide support. At the same time, soliciting stories from people in crisis can also raise expectations that the community will be provided with assistance. While the response was at the planning stage, no promise of assistance could be provided; however, it could be viewed by some that telling one's story would lead to a greater chance of being selected to receive humanitarian assistance.

During the assessment and planning phase of the response, I was able to visit several communities and hear the stories of community members. But due to limited resources, the security situation and logistical challenges, MCC was not able to assist all who shared their stories. As an example, I travelled with local church leadership to one remote village which was still an active military zone and not accessible for humanitarian assistance. In this case, providing food assistance could have potentially endangered the lives of people—two weeks later, there was a massacre in the village. In other cases, due to limited resources, MCC prioritized resources for the most vulnerable. This meant that some

> **The entire family was delighted to see their story and photos; knowing that others have heard their story and seen their faces can bring joy and restore dignity to uprooted people.**

people who contributed to the fundraising effort by sharing their stories of displacement did not receive support from MCC.

In some instances, MCC is able to share the published stories and photos back with families. MCC interviewed Agnes Ntumba during the first distribution of food and education supplies in Kabwela. During a follow-up visit, I was able to show the images to her and her family that were printed in *Mennonite World Review*. The entire family was delighted to see their story and photos; knowing that others have heard their story and seen their faces can bring joy and restore dignity to uprooted people.

Gathering stories, photos and videos of people displaced by an active conflict presents significant logistical challenges and raises ethical questions of how to collect this material in a transparent fashion and without making promises or raising expectations. Facing these challenges and addressing these questions are essential parts of MCC's work to meet basic human needs. By sharing the stories of people affected by the Kasai crisis, MCC has been able to slowly increase the number of displaced Congolese families from Kasai who receive assistance.

Mulanda Jimmy Juma is the MCC representative for the Democratic Republic of the Congo and Angola.

Communications principles in the day-to-day work of fundraising

In *Representations of Global Poverty*, Nandita Dogra advances several critiques of international nongovernmental organizations (INGOs) public fundraising and advocacy messages. Some of Dogra's key areas of concern include:

- the inclination of INGOs to use negative messages that highlight needs, crisis and disaster and that paint a picture of weakness, inferiority and dependence;

- a tendency for INGOs to focus on their own achievements;

- the portrayal of the developed world as 'active givers' and the majority world as 'passive receivers';

- the erasure of complexity and context when INGOs communicate about relief and development to such an extent that they end up communicating 'safe' and overly simplified messages that do not say much.

Dogra's critiques are serious and INGOs must grapple with them. In this article, I analyze my own practice as someone who has extensively communicated to MCC's donors, using Dogra's concerns as a guide.

MCC's brand guide, which addresses many of Dogra's critiques, provides basic information meant to shape the "communications of all MCCers", including donor relations, or fundraising, staff. The priority in all MCC communications is to "share stories and information about our international programs and the people we serve in order to actively engage donors in our work, to broaden people's worldview and to increase our

Learn more

Dennison, Luke. "New phase of lawlessness grips Congo's Kasaï region." *IRIN*. August 28, 2018. https://www.irinnews.org/special-report/2018/08/28/new-phase-lawlessness-grips-congo-s-kasai-region.

More information about how MCC is responding to the Kasai crisis is available through MCC's website: https://mcccanada.ca/stories/supplying-food-people-displaced-violence-kasai.

donor base." MCC messaging aims to: focus on people ("characterized by dignity, agency and value"); reveal both need and strength ("We report honestly about the needs we encounter while affirming the dignity and agency of each person"); and show compassion, as modeled in Jesus' concern for the poor and marginalized.

Donor emails, however, are a ubiquitous form of communication that fall outside of MCC's formal and edited communications and are not always consistent with the standards outlined in MCC's brand guide. For this study, I reviewed 118 donor thank-you emails that I sent to MCC donors between January 3 and 13, 2017. Roughly one in six emails (19 out of 118) had an "impact report" attached, supplementing the content of the email with more detail.

In reviewing each of the emails I had sent to donors, it became clear that many of Dogra's critiques applied to them. The emails are short and give minimal detail, especially those without a link to an impact report. They are generic and simple, avoiding complexity and context, echoing Dogra's criticism of simplified, "safe" messaging. In the few words used in the emails (50 words per email was typical), the main actors are the donor ("*your* generous gift", "know that *your* gifts have made a real difference"; all emphases here and below are added for this article) and MCC ("your partnership *with us*", *MCC's* work, "as *we* respond"). The project partners, communities and participants (i.e., "beneficiaries")—central to the story of MCC's relief, development and peacebuilding projects—are rarely mentioned. Furthermore, while compassion makes an appearance, the emails do not balance need and strength in alignment with MCC's stated guidelines when beneficiaries are included ("*those in need* around the world"; "refugees in crisis"; "your gifts have made a real difference in the lives of *families in need*").

What implications does this analysis have? From a fundraiser's perspective, it would be unrealistic and problematic to stop sending these short thank-you emails or to substantially lengthen the thank-you emails to include everything named in the brand guide that is important to communicate. Either course of action would overlook some critical realities: we need to say thanks and we only have about 11 seconds to do so.

We need to say thanks because, along with our communications guidelines, we are committed to the Associate of Fundraising Professionals code of conduct and ethical code, which mandates timely stewardship (including acknowledgement and thanks for the gift). And saying thanks is itself one of the communications principles from our brand guide: "we take every opportunity to acknowledge and thank supporters who make our stories possible." Donors are a central part of the story of MCC's relief, development and peacebuilding work, and they should know this!

There are some significant challenges that donor relations staff face in this critical work. For one, people's attentions spans are short. Litmus Email Analytics has shown that the average time that people spend reading an email is 11 seconds. Another challenge is the sheer volume of emails required if we want to thank everyone who makes a gift. In 2017, approximately 7000 unique donors in Ontario alone made financial contributions to MCC. The combination of short attention spans and the need to reach out to so many donors lends itself to a short email. Put another way, a short email directly correlates to a higher number of donors

receiving a thank you and actually reading it (assuming the same number of hours invested in the task). The result is an imperfect solution (a brief email) to an imperative (the need to say thanks).

The question thus becomes: how might we improve the imperfect imperatives that are donor thank-you emails? A 50-word email will never avoid all of Dogra's critiques (a short email must by its nature be an oversimplification), nor do justice to MCC's own communication guidelines. But there are some simple tweaks to these short emails that are possible, such as avoiding negative messages that highlight needs or crisis. And as we saw with 19 of the 118 emails analyzed in this study, fundraising staff can quite easily attach impact reports that align with MCC's brand standards (balancing needs with strength and highlighting the agency of beneficiaries and implementing partners rather than the achievements of MCC) and also address Dogra's critiques. While it does not completely resolve the tension among Dogra's critiques, short attention spans and limited staff time available for donor engagement, a clear improvement and next step for fundraising staff is to more consistently attach impact reports that align with MCC's brand guide to donor thank-you emails whenever possible.

Allan Reesor-McDowell worked as MCC Ontario donor engagement manager and currently serves as executive director of Matthew House Ottawa.

Closing the loop: accountable communications in a digitally-connected world

In March, shortly after a group of MCC staff travelled to Syria, MCC Canada Executive Director Rick Cober Bauman wrote a reflection featuring the story and photo of a woman we had met. We used a pseudonym to protect her identity. Four days later, we received an email from the MCC representatives to Lebanon and Syria that the woman, Rahaf Abdo, had seen the story on Facebook (after a friend shared it with her) and she wrote to request that we use her full name.

It was an easy change to make, but a good example of how storytelling changes in a more digitally connected world. MCC has long reflected on whose stories we are telling and what role partners and participants play in shaping those narratives: new forms of digital communications prompt renewed consideration of such questions. MCC has an opportunity to hear directly how our stories are seen by the people featured in them. This will be an especially valuable lesson for a communications team, and an organization, that is overwhelmingly white and from Canada and the U.S.

For many years, the stories MCC told were primarily distributed in print and in person (at church meetings, for example). If there was feedback from the people in the stories, it would come much later. Today it is easy for the people featured in the stories to read the posts and articles and watch the videos we have made about them—and for those people to tell us what they think.

This can be a positive experience for everyone when the stories are told well. When we shared the story of Boniface Anthony, a peacemaker in

❝ Today it is easy for the people featured in stories to read the posts and articles and watch the videos we have made about them— and for those people to tell us what they think."

Nigeria, on Facebook, he commented on the post, writing: "Thank you MCC for sharing my story and [I] hope it will inspire others to join the peacebuilding train."

But sharing stories online can also lead to painful lessons, sometimes learned publicly. Recently we posted a story on a school that brings together students who are Jewish-Israeli and Palestinian citizens of Israel. The original headline to the story was "Jewish, Arab children learn together." When the story was posted on Facebook, two commenters criticized the headline. One comment took issue with using the general term Arab because they felt it erased the Palestinian identities of the children, while the other felt the headline and was incorrectly comparing a religion (Judaism) with a nationality or ethnicity (Arab). After internal conversations between communications and program, we took the story down, reassessed the language and wrote a new headline.

Taking criticism publicly on social media or the web for communications mistakes doesn't feel good. But the opportunity to get that feedback quickly and directly from the people featured in our stories, or who are part of those communities, is an important opportunity to improve MCC's communications.

Online communication also provides opportunities for international MCC partners to share their stories directly—for MCC to amplify their voices, while also telling MCC's story of collaboration with them. This is an area where MCC can and should do better. We have started to share more stories online and on social media from staff and from participants in young adult exchange programs. But this content continues to consist primarily of stories from around the world told by white people in the U.S. and Canada. MCC could seek out and share more content created by MCC's local partners and participants in our programs (although that would of course mean dedicating some of MCC's limited time and resources for communications to such efforts). We have on occasion used content produced directly from partners, such photos from Syria. But there is space for improvement on this score.

The internet continues to break down the barriers between organizations and the people with whom they work and serve. MCC needs to continue to grapple with the question of how much we can or should shape the narrative and how much to let go and allow the individuals and communities with whom we work to both inform our stories and tell their own.

Emily Loewen is digital content coordinator for MCC.

Mennonite Central Committee

Relief, development and peace in the name of Christ