

Advocating for Peace:

Stories from the Ottawa Office of Mennonite Central Committee, 1975 – 2008

By William Janzen

Introduction

In 2008, when I retired as the director of the Ottawa Office of Mennonite Central Committee Canada (MCCC), my supervisors, Don Peters and Lois Coleman Neufeld, encouraged me to write up stories about the work I'd done. At first I hesitated; some parts of the work seemed too complex; other parts too mundane; and altogether it was so diverse. How could one present it in the form of stories? But when I reviewed the reports that I had written for the MCCC Board over the years I began to feel that perhaps something could be pulled together. So I made an outline and started writing. Then one aspect of the citizenship work with the Mennonites from Mexico became much, much larger than I expected, as is described near the end of this collection. Eventually, however, I was able to return to this project.

This collection of stories may look like a personal memoir but I believe it is more. The work was not mine personally; it was that of MCCC and its supporting churches who, in those years, numbered approximately 600. And since it involved issues of government it was a particular kind of work. Not that appealing to governments was new to Mennonites. They had done it for centuries. But most often they had done it for themselves, asking for land where they could settle and build their communities, for exemption from military service, and sometimes for special schooling arrangements. By the 1970s, however, MCCC felt that it should also appeal to governments for the sake of other people. Mennonites had a considerable history of working to alleviate the needs of others in hands-on practical ways, but to appeal to government for the sake of other people was relatively new. The Ottawa Office was a primary mechanism to advance this purpose. These stories capture some of what that involved.

This new orientation in MCCC was in keeping with other changes. Canadian Mennonite people were moving to cities, seeking more education, and entering more professions. As well, they were taking on more governing responsibilities by, for example, getting elected at municipal, provincial and federal levels and serving as civil servants, even as judges. The historic virtue of "being separate" was receding and the work of helping to provide good governance in the larger society was more widely accepted. There were other new winds. The role of American church leaders in the US civil rights movement and in the opposition to the US war in Vietnam inspired many. In Canada, Protestant churches were looking anew at the causes of poverty and injustice both at home and abroad. And the Catholic world, helped by

the Second Vatican Council of the mid-1960s, was changing too. This ferment led to the formation of a number of Canadian ecumenical coalitions to do research and advocacy on issues of justice and peace.

MCCC had already taken steps in this new direction in the late 1960s and early 1970s. It had participated in some ecumenical initiatives and sponsored certain activities in Ottawa on its own, including research projects on immigration and military issues. However, the question of establishing an Office in Ottawa was viewed with caution. Alongside hopes that such an Office would significantly advance work on peace and justice issues, there were fears that it would address political issues in ways that would cause division among the churches who, only in 1963, had joined in forming MCCC. Despite these misgivings, in 1974 the MCCC board decided to set up an Ottawa Office for a three-year trial period. I started work in 1975, not altogether confident about how to deal with the different concerns at a practical level.

In preparation I read as widely as I could, about Mennonite theological perspectives, about the work of other churches including that of the Social Gospel movement early in the 20th century, and about a range of current political issues. Before long I also learned that there were significant organizational complexities in MCCC. In these years MCCC was setting up other offices too, including an Aboriginal Concerns office, a Victim-Offender Ministries office, and an Overseas Services office, each with a mandate that included advocacy on the governmental aspects of their issues. In addition, MCCC was in several coalitions such as Project Ploughshares which worked on issues of militarism. This meant that quite a lot of MCCC's governmental work was being done by these offices and coalitions. What role then could the Ottawa Office serve? Would I be able to help those other offices with the governmental aspects of their work? Were there issues not covered by those other offices that MCCC would want me to work on? One conclusion I drew is that I would have to be flexible and quick to adapt.

The ambiguities about my role continued, but as one year led to the next and the next, I always felt that what I was able to do was genuinely worthwhile and that, despite some frustrations, I was fortunate for the opportunity to be in this work. But it remained very diverse. That is evident in this collection of stories. Some stories reflect a short term involvement. Others are about work that went on for years. The issues include matters of war and peace, international relief and development, refugee needs, Canadian domestic issues, and various aspects of MCC's service programs at home and abroad. At times MCC also wanted to address issues because of the concern about them in its supporting churches, or the implications they had for MCC as an organization, or the historic desire to help fellow Mennonites in difficult situations.

Even though these stories cover a range of activities, this collection is not a full history of the Ottawa Office. It does not cover my work of representing MCC on the boards and committees of various

coalitions nor that of writing for Mennonite publications or speaking in churches. It deals with advocacy activities where I had a direct role and only with those that lend themselves to stories. In total there are about fifty stories. They are organized thematically, not chronologically. Each issue discussed in these stories has an historical and political context. Also, in many instances MCC was working on issues with its on-the-ground service programs. I have tried, for each issue, to describe enough of the historical context, and enough of MCC's broader involvement, to make our Ottawa work understandable.

Writing up these stories has reminded me of my indebtedness to countless people. Unfortunately, I can mention only a few. First are my assistants. For most of my years I had only one, but the three people who served in this role the longest are Freda Enns, Joanne Epp, and Monica Scheifele. Second are my supervisors, J. M. Klassen, Daniel Zehr, Marvin Frey, Dave Dyck and the two mentioned at the outset. Third are several people on the MCCC board who, in my early years, provided special support. These include Frank Epp, Siegfried Bartel and Leonard Siemens. Also to be thanked are the churches whose steady support made this work possible.

In many instances the issues we worked on have not gone away. Some, such as global hunger, have eased, but refugee numbers are way up and war, now often within countries rather than between them, continues, while climate change is adding major new dimensions. These developments make it all-the-more important that people of goodwill respond as fully as possible. Perhaps these stories can encourage people to do that through whatever avenues may be open to them, including that of supporting modest organizations like Mennonite Central Committee.

Some people may wonder about the name: is it MCCC or MCC? In a strict sense I was employed by the MCCC organization, that is, Mennonite Central Committee Canada. But it is very common to refer to it as MCC since it is an integral part of the family of MCC organizations, the first of which was started in 1920 as a joint effort by churches in the US and Canada. Both the specific and the general uses of the term are evident in these stories.

The publication of this book was helped by a modest grant from MCCC while Christian Snyder of Pandora Press did the detailed work of seeing it through. I am grateful to both.

William Janzen
Ottawa, Ontario
February, 2019

Dedication

To Marlene Toews Janzen, a teacher at a Mennonite high school in Winnipeg who was appointed to the MCCC board in 1980 and who, two years later, agreed to marry me. For her steady support in the work and her encouragement in our life together, I will always be grateful.

Table of Contents

Introduction

1. Letters to New Prime Ministers
 2. Capital Punishment
 3. Refugees
 4. Foreign Policy, Development, and Peace
 5. Vietnam and Cambodia
 6. Palestine and Israel
 7. Iraq
 8. North Korea
 9. The USSR
 10. Other International Work
 11. Constitutional Reform
 12. War Criminals
 13. Abortion
 14. Conscientious Objection
 15. Other Social Issues
 16. Amish Milk Cans
 17. Organizational Maintenance
 18. Mennonites from Mexico
- Concluding Comments