

Report to U.S. Conference of Mennonite Brethren Churches – 2020

Mennonite Brethren – a pillar of MCC

By Emily Jones

On December 27, 1944, Mennonite Central Committee's (MCC) executive committee met to discuss how Mennonites might respond to shocking reports of the conditions inside U.S. mental hospitals.

World War II was still raging, and thousands of conscientious objectors exempted from military combat were engaged in alternative service. Among them were 1,500 Anabaptists assigned to serve where most people hoped never to go: U.S. mental facilities.¹

The young men and women were some of the first outsiders to enter these buildings. They came out with terrible accounts of the filthy, inhumane and violent conditions within the hospitals.

In 1922, MCC sent two shipments of 25 tractors to Mennonite settlements in Russia that were devastated by famine. In response to the famine, the American Mennonite Relief (AMR) organization was set up by MCC to distribute relief in Russia. It operated during the 1921–1924 Russian famine period. Under the direction of AMR, grain was sown and harvested, and the returns from the crops were used to feed the starving.



Mennonite Brethren church members who heard these reports were compelled to act. In 1947, MB churches partnered with MCC to build Kings View Homes (now Kings View Behavioral Health Systems), a new mental health facility near Reedley, California. Arthur Jost, a member of Reedley Mennonite Brethren Church, was chosen as the hospital administrator. The Mennonite Brethren community banded together and raised \$20,000 toward building the facility.²

A few years after Kings View Homes was established, the Mennonite Brethren once again partnered with MCC to create Prairie View Hospital (now Prairie View) in Newton, Kansas. It opened in 1954.

¹ John D. Unruh, *In the Name of Christ*, (Scottsdale, Pa., Herald Press, 1952), p. 310.

² Unruh, pp. 315-316.

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These hospitals were markedly different from the facilities that had horrified young conscientious objectors. They provided compassionate, cutting-edge care. In 1968, Prairie View received the Gold Award from the American Psychiatric Association to acknowledge its leadership in progressive treatment for people with mental illness.³

Over the years, Mennonite Brethren continued to serve these establishments as psychiatrists, psychologists and volunteers to help thousands of people seek wellness. Today, both facilities have greatly expanded their offerings and stand as well-respected institutions in the field of mental health.

MCC was formed when representatives of various Mennonite and Mennonite Brethren groups met in July 1920 in Elkhart, Indiana, and pledged to aid hungry people, including Mennonites in southern Russia (present-day Ukraine). The founders of MCC were convinced that “to be biblically faithful one must relieve human suffering.”⁴

None felt more compelled to relieve human suffering than Mennonite Brethren, who had fled Russia to avoid obligatory military service just 40 to 50 years prior. Many of their fellow church members who had remained in Russia were now experiencing starvation and religious persecution in the wake of the Russian Revolution.

Leaning over a wooden quilt frame set up at El Faro, a Spanish-speaking Mennonite Brethren congregation in Reedley, Calif., Paula Luna, Juanita Renteria, Maria Salinas (hidden), Epidia Ramirez, and Bertha Mora sew and talk together in 2007. A group of women gathered weekly at the church to quilt and tie comforters for the West Coast Mennonite Relief Sale, which raises money for MCC’s work.



Peter “P.C.” Hiebert was a Mennonite Brethren educator and pastor and a member of Hillsboro (Kansas) Mennonite Brethren Church. His parents were among those who had fled southern Russia in the 1870s.⁵ Hiebert was elected chairman of MCC at its founding, an office he would hold for 34 years until 1954. He was among those who traveled to southern Russia to aid in the first MCC relief work. MCC opened 140 food kitchens, which fed up to 25,000 people daily. To that point, it was the largest inter-Mennonite relief effort in history.⁶

³ Prairie View, “Our History,” 2017, <https://prairieview.org/about/history/>.

⁴ Robert S. Kreider and Rachel Waltner Goossen, *Hungry, Thirsty, a Stranger*, (Scottsdale, Pa., Herald Press, 1988), p. 24.

⁵ Katie Funk Wiebe and Richard D. Thiessen, “Hiebert, Peter C. (1878-1963),” *Global Anabaptist Mennonite Encyclopedia Online*, June 2010, [https://gameo.org/index.php?title=Hiebert,_Peter_C._\(1878-1963\)&oldid=92016](https://gameo.org/index.php?title=Hiebert,_Peter_C._(1878-1963)&oldid=92016).

⁶ Kreider and Goossen, *Hungry*, p. 41.

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MCC was founded in a time of global conflict, and soon another world war loomed on the horizon. During the First World War, conscientious objectors were often mistreated by the U.S. government. Leading up to World War II, MCC sought alternatives to military service by communicating with government offices in Washington. Through the efforts of MCC and the Historic Peace Churches, Civilian Public Service (CPS) was written into law in 1940. Nearly 12,000 Anabaptist and other conscientious objectors participated in CPS camps, 260 Mennonite Brethren among them.⁷

MCC's Peace Section was formed in 1942. First chaired by Hiebert, the Peace Section provided information on peace-related current events. It also advised and represented Anabaptists who needed to deal with the government in matters such as war and the draft and promoted nonviolence in MCC's constituent groups and the wider world.

In 1970, MCC's Peace Section and MB churches helped Jerry Allen Penner, a member of Balko (Oklahoma) Mennonite Brethren Church, bring a case before the U.S. Supreme Court. Penner had been denied conscientious objector status. When he refused military induction, he received a five-year federal prison sentence. Penner's family and MB churches contacted MCC's Peace Section for counsel. It advised Penner to appeal his sentence before the Supreme Court, agreed to help him file the request and offered to file an amicus curiae (friend of the court) brief on his behalf. With the spiritual, moral and financial support of MB churches and MCC behind him, Penner was acquitted.⁸

Members of the Mennonite Brethren church organize items for distribution to families living in rural communities along the San Juan River in Colombia's Chocó region following severe flooding in October 2016. MCC responded by providing humanitarian assistance through the Mennonite Brethren church to 500 families in 11 rural communities.



Overseas, Elizabeth Wiebe, a member of Springfield Krimmer Mennonite Brethren Church in Lehigh, Kansas, ran a children's program in Neustadt, Germany, where MCC administered postwar relief from 1946 to 1950. MB service continued there after MCC closed its program.

⁷ John A. Toews, *A History of the Mennonite Brethren Church: Pilgrims and Pioneers*, (Hillsboro, Kansas, Mennonite Brethren Publishing House, 1975), p. 350.

⁸ Erwin N. Griswold, June 25, 1970, Supreme Court U.S., Jerry Allen Penner, Petitioner v. United States of America, Records and Briefs of the United States Supreme Court, No. 1532, pp. 1-11.

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In Canada and the U.S., MBs have served on boards, as staff and in volunteer positions, including in grassroots fundraising efforts. A volunteer fruit-drying operation based in Reedley, California, provided nearly 10,000 packages of dried peaches a year to be sold for MCC relief funds.⁹ Mennonite Brethren have organized many a relief sale and stitched many a quilt to be auctioned at the sales.

In recent years, MCC and MB churches have assisted flood survivors in Colombia and Peru, provided food and shelter in the Democratic Republic of the Congo and brought humanitarian aid and peacebuilding resources to the war zone in Ukraine.

Around the world, MCC supports local MB church initiatives. One of these programs is a soccer school in Cali, Colombia, run by Sigifredo Godoy, a member of Iglesia Hermanos Menonitas Luz y Vida (Light and Life Mennonite Brethren Church). The soccer school helps teach youth, who have grown up surrounded by violence, the peacemaking ethic and skills as taught and modeled by Jesus.

In the U.S., MB churches provide a strong base of volunteers for some MCC Thrift shops and relief sales. Mennonite Brethren also engage with immigration issues through MCC education opportunities, such as a leadership learning tour in October 2019 organized by West Coast MCC at the Mexico and U.S. border.

A 2016 photo of Sergey Panasovich, coordinator with the Association of Mennonite Brethren of Ukraine (AMBCU) in Zaporizhzhia, Ukraine, with Maryana Lagoda's son Sasha. Lagoda receives humanitarian assistance from AMBCU. MCC partners with AMBCU to distribute MCC canned meat and hygiene items to people in southeast Ukraine, including internally displaced, elderly and those living near the conflict zone in eastern Ukraine.



“Over the past 100 years, the example and commitment of Mennonite Brethren have helped shape MCC into the organization it is today,” said J Ron Byler, MCC U.S. executive director. “From the courageous and faithful leadership of P.C. Hiebert, to partnerships in areas like peace work and mental health care, to the thousands of Mennonite Brethren individuals who have served and volunteered, we have been greatly blessed by our relationship with Mennonite Brethren. We thank God for a century of partnership, and we pray for many more years of shared service in the name of Christ.”

⁹ MCC News Service, *Drying MCC Peaches the Reedley Way*, 1983.

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Relief, development and peace in the name of Christ

Visit mcc.org/centennial to learn how you can join MCC in giving thanks for 100 years and seeking God's guidance for the future.

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