Three Epiphanies

A peace-seeking journey with MCC

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It was long after dark when we heard the familiar soft tap on the back door of our small house. Even before we opened the door, we knew it was our friend Ada. About thirty minutes later, a similar tap ushered in Ada's partner James. They always arrived in this way—after dark, silently and separately—to avoid detection.

Our house was a small bungalow in Malaybalay, in the southern Philippines. Dan and I had arrived there in mid-1982 for an assignment with Mennonite Central Committee (MCC). We were to accompany and support Filipinos striving for justice, peace, and human rights in a context where these were sorely lacking.

Dan and I had inherited the friendship with Ada and James from our predecessors, Earl and Pat Martin. The Martins had warned us that folks like Ada and James would shake the foundations of our MCC and Anabaptist commitment to nonviolence. They were right.

Dan and I came into that initial MCC assignment young and naïve. Just out of university, we had limited job experience, and we had no prior international service experience. We had both completed master's degrees: Dan's in Bible and religious studies and mine in Canadian history. We had studied Anabaptist history and embraced—at least intellectually—the early Anabaptists' conviction to "forsake the sword," but our understanding was shallow and untested. Yet MCC trusted us enough to send us into a context where an armed struggle was being waged.

From that initial four-year assignment, I spent most of my working career with MCC in peace-related work. When I wasn't a staff person, I was often serving on an MCC board, committee, or advisory group. My life was immersed in the MCC world. It was within MCC that I discovered my vocation and deep passion for seeking peace and where I experienced the most beautiful and the most heart-breaking encounters in that search. Below I reflect on three distinct epiphanies on my journey.

Epiphany one: Structural violence and the pursuit of justice

Prior to arriving in the Philippines, I was introduced to the concept of structural violence by a Christian Marxist university professor. He described the systems of capitalist and neo-liberal economics that enrich small elites and impoverish the masses and the tools of repression used against any resistance. He explained how violence was not only—perhaps even not primarily—delivered by guns and bullets and bombs; it was also the result of systems that stole the land of peasants and deprived the poor of sufficient food, water, education, or health care. He introduced us to the writings of Gustavo Gutiérrez and the winds of liberation theology that were blowing across Latin America. He had little patience for a Christian pacifism that did not actively support the dismantling of systems of injustice.

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A year later, Dan and I witnessed the very realities of which my professor had spoken. We saw transnational corporations take over vast tracts of land for sugar, pineapple, and banana plantations, pushing peasants to farm steep and erosion-prone hillsides. We observed the International Monetary Fund impose a "structural adjustment" scheme on the country, demanding reductions in government spending on education, health, and social programs, while opening the door to foreign investment. We witnessed children dying of diarrhea and dehydration because families had no resources to go to the clinic. We befriended political prisoners whose crime was seeking to organize a village cooperative. We accompanied workers from the Catholic diocese to remote communities to document the military's assassinations and other human rights violations. We saw clear evidence of American (and, by association, Canadian) diplomatic and military support for a regime that benefited foreign interests and a small local elite. It quickly became clear to us why many Filipinos—especially the rural poor—supported the New People's Army (NPA) and the revolutionary struggle.

Ada and James were organizers for the National Democratic Front (NDF) in the Philippines in the early 1980s. The NDF was a broad multi-sectoral coalition of groups that supported the armed struggle of the New People's Army and its goal of overthrowing the corrupt regime of Ferdinand Marcos and establishing a society based on economic equality

and social democratic principles. Ada and James's job was to connect with middle class people, business leaders, church people, and people from other sectors to gain their support for the struggle.

Ada and James were gifted and passionate young people who had committed their lives to a better future for the poor and oppressed of their country. By aligning themselves with the NDF and the NPA, they had chosen the "preferential option for the poor" and a life of hardship. Their mission was exceedingly dangerous, as they could have been arrested, tortured, and "salvaged" by the Philippine military at any moment.[1] We often marveled at the risks they were willing to take. We knew not to ask too many questions or even to inquire as to their real names.

They let us know that if we were not prepared to work for justice for the poor, our platitudes for peace were meaningless—even harmful.

We nevertheless had numerous deep conversations about "the struggle." For James, Ada, and their comrades, *peace* was a dirty word. *Peace* meant support for the status quo and for injustice and inequality. They had heard too many powerful people urging "peace, peace" with no concern for the structural violence that killed and marginalized so many Filipinos. They let us know that if we were not prepared to work for justice with those living in poverty, our platitudes for peace were meaningless—even harmful. They and many other Catholic friends quoted Pope Paul VI's famous adage from 1972, "If you want peace, work for justice."

After four years in the Philippines, Dan and I returned to Canada. Like many MCC workers, we had been transformed by our experience. We had been confronted with our power and privilege and the colonial systems of which we were a part. We had heard penetrating critiques of naïve and simplistic understandings of peace and peacemaking that did not attend to circumstances of grave injustice. We had been humbled by the compassion, commitment, and courage of faithful Christians seeking to overturn the circumstances of the marginalized. We would never be the same.

1 *Salvaging* was a term used to refer to the summary apprehension and execution by the Philippine military of suspected criminals or political opponents of the regime.

Epiphany two: Confronting abuse and sexual violence

Soon after our return to Canada in 1986, I was drawn into MCC's work with Women's Concerns. The Women's Concerns program had arisen in response to the calls of women within the Mennonite constituency for equality in church and society. As a young adult, I had been inspired by the emergence of Christian feminism. I was delighted that MCC was prepared to address realities of patriarchy and sexism. I got involved as a volunteer, then as a committee member, and then as a staff person at MCC Ontario.

It was inevitable that Women's Concerns would be confronted with stories of women and girls experiencing domestic violence and sexual abuse. MCC Canada Women's Concerns director Peggy Regehr repeatedly said that she wasn't eager to address these topics. But, given the number of women who shared their stories with her, she could not remain silent. Together with others, she committed herself to the courageous and challenging work of naming the realities of domestic violence and sexual abuse in Mennonite homes and churches.[2]

I had to come to terms with revelations that my father was one of those male Mennonite leaders who used his power to sexually abuse someone.

During these years, I took stock of a personal childhood experience of molestation by an uncle and a terrifying encounter in my teens when a man threatened me on a dark sidewalk one night. It was the first time in many years that I had thought about those events and considered their impact on me.

Years later, I also had to come to terms with revelations that my father, Frank Epp, was one of those male Mennonite leaders who used his power to sexually abuse someone. All my life, I had looked up to my father—as a prophetic voice for peace with respect to the Vietnam War, the Middle East, and other contexts. Since my childhood, he had inspired me with his bold speaking, writing, and acting for peace. I wanted to be a peace activist like him. The news of his moral failure devastated me. His betrayal was bad enough; that he was a peacemaker only compounded the pain. In many ways, I am still coming to terms with the contradiction.

2 Other women who played important roles in breaking the silence around abuse in Mennonite circles were psychologist and author Carolyn Holderread Heggen, counsellor Melissa Miller, and theologians Lydia Harder and Carol Penner.

I did not, however, abandon my advocacy work for justice and peace because of my father's personal transgressions. Although I floundered for some time, I recognized that many other people had guided and mentored me into becoming a seeker of peace. I could let go of the tether that tied me to my father and could, rather, cling to a great cloud of peace witnesses—past, present, and future—as inspiration for my work.

But I also learned from feminist theologians that there were some basic flaws in the expression and articulation of Anabaptist peace theology. A peace position that rejected participation in war was seriously deficient if it did not confront gender-based violence and abuse. If Filipinos taught me that peace-seeking must always include justice-making, my Mennonite women friends taught me that a peace theology that critiqued participation in war but turned a blind eye to the violence toward and abuse of women and girls lacked credibility and integrity. They taught me that striving for peace must always involve listening to and taking direction from the vulnerable and the marginalized.

Epiphany three: Finding the pearl of great price

In 2000, now living in Winnipeg, I became the coordinator of MCC Canada's peace ministries program—a position that I held for ten years. From its inception in 1963, MCC Canada had been charged with "tending the flame" of the Anabaptist peace witness, and the peace ministries program is essentially where that role was lodged. I began the job not having a clue of what to do.

I didn't have long to wait, for the events of 9/11 took place within one short year. Soon after that the United States led a "coalition of the willing" in attacking Afghanistan and then Iraq in 2003 for their supposed involvement in 9/11. Canada joined the war on Afghanistan and between 2001 and 2014 sent 40,000 soldiers there to fight; 165 of them were killed.

Suddenly, I found myself having to grapple with issues of war and militarism and with MCC's mandate to uphold Anabaptist peace convictions related to participation in war. Together with MCC Canada's Ottawa Office, we began to advocate against Canadian involvement in Afghanistan and against the significant military spending it entailed. We urged Canada to withstand US pressure to join the invasion of Iraq in

2003.[3] My visit to Iraq in 2002, when the drums of war were already beating, was a formative experience. I will never forget the plea of an Iraqi teacher, "Please, be a messenger of peace."

In addition, a few Canadian Mennonites also urged MCC to advocate for a legal means for conscientious objectors to divert their "military taxes" to a special peace fund. The Ottawa Office had made some headway in pressing the government for a peace tax fund in the 1990s. I regret now that I didn't push harder for MCC to devote energy to that task in the 2000s.

My studies and my devotional life led me to a deeper embrace of Christ-centered nonviolence.

During this time, I was grateful for the collaboration and theological reflection that was shared within my cross-Canada peace network and a binational peace committee that brought together MCC staff and constituents.

I deeply believed that an Anabaptist commitment to peace and nonviolence went beyond conscientious objection to war. And so, as the war receded into the background, I and my network took on other peace issues. With scientists worldwide predicting a climate catastrophe, we developed resources to foster grassroots action to preserve the earth. With MCC's Palestinian and Israeli partners crying for an end to the illegal Israeli occupation, we implemented a campaign to build awareness of the suffering of Palestinians.

This was good and important work. Nevertheless, throughout these years, I felt something was missing. I felt scattered and unfocused; so much of the work seemed reactive. Thinking that more education would help, I enrolled in a master's in theology program to gain deeper theological grounding. I loved those studies. But more important than the head knowledge I gained was the heart knowledge. My studies and my devotional life led me to a deeper embrace of Christ-centered nonviolence. To put it simply, I fell in love with Jesus and his revolutionary embodiment of peace with justice, mercy, and love. I discovered "the pearl of great price" (Matt. 13:45–46).

3 A deeply gratifying project was a Women's Fast for Peace. Eventually, Prime Minister Jean Chretien 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."

I was particularly drawn to the writings of Catholic priest and activist John Dear and his concept of "disarming the heart."[4] Dear emphasizes the importance of linking inner peace with a life of public action for peace and justice. Indeed, he argues that it is only as we allow God to disarm our own hearts that we may become instruments of God's disarming love in the world. My *modus operandi* was to emphasize the latter at the expense of the former. I still find the practice of meditation and centering prayer a struggle, but since that third epiphany I have deliberately sought to ground my acting for peace in my relationship with Jesus. Indeed, I have come to believe that a life of Christian nonviolence is near impossible without a close walk with the incarnate One.

I am not sure whether the discovery of this "pearl of great price" changed my work with MCC's peace ministries program. Looking back, I wish I would have done more to articulate a vision for peacebuilding rooted in the life, ministry, death, and resurrection of Jesus.

Ongoing concerns

The story doesn't end there. I took a two-year leave from MCC in 2011 and 2012 to write a history of MCC in Canada.[5] When I returned in early 2013, MCC Canada's peace program no longer existed. I was assigned to work with the Ottawa Office on more focused advocacy and public engagement campaigns. I found this work meaningful, but I was deeply saddened that the peace program had been eliminated—without a formal program review or any consultation with stakeholders in the constituency.

The rationale given for the change was that a new approach was needed—one that infused specific "peace practices" throughout the organization. This shift reflected movement toward defining peace in MCC more as an operating principle or mode of activity or even a skillset. I believed there was much to commend this new approach. At the same time, I felt the decision flew in the face of the organization's historic mandate and the longstanding commitment to root MCC's peace work in a Christ-centered theological imagination. As I wrote to MCC leadership at the time, I was dismayed that there was no longer a home within MCC Canada for sustained theological reflection on peace and peacebuilding, for equipping MCC staff to articulate that foundation, or for nurturing

4 See especially John Dear, *Disarming the Heart: Toward a Vow of Nonviolence* (Paulist Press, 1987).

5 See Esther Epp-Tiessen, *Mennonite Central Committee in Canada: A History* (Canadian Mennonite University Press, 2013).

MCC constituents and supporters for public peace witness, nonviolent action, and nonviolent resistance.

I continue to hold these concerns. Today, organizations like MCC are increasingly constrained to please their donors, to demonstrate specific results within short timeframes, and to minimize risk. Moreover, MCC workers are increasingly removed from the voices of the people it seeks to serve: the poor, the marginalized, and the victimized. These developments foster neither deep theological engagement nor bold and courageous peace witness. I wonder where the forums are for staff and constituents to reflect and act together within theologically rooted convictions. How might MCC more actively nurture the disarming of hearts and the world? How do the privileged—MCC workers and constituents—work for peace with integrity? How might we center marginalized voices in our work and witness for peace?

Conclusion

As I look back on some thirty years of involvement with MCC and its peace and justice work after leaving in 2018, I am grateful to MCC for the opportunity to learn and grow in profound ways, and I am humbled by the trust that MCC placed in me. I am thankful to have found my vocation in MCC and for the colleagues who mentored and supported me along the way. My hope and my prayer is that MCC might nurture the deep Christ-centered roots that ground, nourish, and give life and vitality to its ministry of peace. My hope and my prayer is that MCC will continue to be a place where the stories, counsel, and admonition of the most vulnerable of God's children shape and challenge that ministry.

About the author

Esther Epp-Tiessen was involved in peace and justice education and advocacy for MCC Canada for most of the years between 1986 and 2018. She is the author of *Mennonite Central Committee in Canada: A History* (CMU Press, 2013).