

Taking the Longer View

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Often, Mennonite Central Committee (MCC) measures the end results of its work at the end of three-year project cycles. Only the impact of MCC's specific involvement is measured. As people who've been working with MCC in Indonesia for quite a long time, my husband, Dan, and I are coming to realize that we have a rather unique vantage point in which to appreciate the longer view, or to see the way that God has been working his purpose out over time and through multiple interactions in a particular place.

In late 2012, after twelve years, we handed over our former role in Indonesia to new MCC representatives and moved on to a new role. As our successors work with new projects in Indonesia, we have the opportunity to tell the background stories for these new initiatives. We find these stories to be a fascinating web of interesting connections. It's not just any one seed that was planted, but a result of multiple interactions and acts of God over the years.

In April 2013, MCC partnered with the Javanese Mennonite Churches in responding to seasonal flooding in Central Java, Indonesia. The flooding only affected eight villages, so the disaster hardly registered in national Indonesian news let alone in international news. In the village of Njleper, the community and local church began responding immediately using their own resources, but the needs soon became beyond their ability to cope. In this village of sixty-five families, all of the homes, places of worship and schools were flooded under two meters of water. The newly harvested rice crop was sodden and began to rot. The fish farming ponds overflowed their banks and lost all their fish. The houses, mostly made of wood and bamboo, were severely damaged. After they set up a tent camp, a second flood came, causing the people to need to flee a second time to higher ground.

This type of disaster is often overlooked by the government and by local and international humanitarian organizations. It's too small for them to bother with. And yet this type of disaster is a major crisis for the people who live there and who are most affected. These small responses are where MCC is best able

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to work alongside the church to fill a niche that no one else is filling.

The Javanese Mennonite Synod planned an initial one-week-long emergency response. Within that time frame, thirty-five families received a packet of emergency supplemental food items sufficient for a one-week period. They didn't need full nutrition rations because people from neighboring villages that had not flooded were bringing vegetables and other food items to share with the flood-impacted families. Twelve of the most vulnerable families with small children or elderly members received mattresses. Sixty-five flood-affected homes were cleaned, along with two public buildings and five places of worship. Those were the outputs or results. But those results don't tell nearly the whole story of God at work in that response in the community of Njleper.

In the longer view, this particular disaster response by the Javanese Mennonite Church was quite significant. In Central Java, many Christians live carefully as a minority among the Muslim majority. While one of the other three Anabaptists denominations (the Muria Mennonite Synod) has led the way in their approach to interfaith issues, the Javanese Mennonite Church has taken a more insular stance, with a history of laying low in order to survive and concerning themselves with caring for their own members.

The disaster response was planned together with the whole Njleper community — both Muslims and Christians. The planning was coordinated by Yunarso Rosadono (Dono for short), a young Javanese Mennonite church leader and kindergarten teacher who was a participant in the YAMEN program in 2007–2008. YAMEN is the Young Anabaptist Mennonite Exchange Network of Mennonite World Conference and MCC. Dono first served in Egypt, and then, in 2008, Dono returned to the Javanese Mennonite Church, which had overcome great challenges over the past thirty years. The church struggled through twenty years of conflict among church leaders causing a split in the large denomination of over 43,000 members. In 2001, the opposing parties reached a reconciliation agreement, with the help of mediation provided by MCC. From 2001 through 2012, the church synod board continued to struggle with legal issues and trust issues that were left as a legacy from the years of conflict. It was difficult for church leaders to think creatively and proactively as they struggled simply to survive as a church.

When Dono returned to Indonesia in 2008, seven years after the official reconciliation, his church synod leaders were reluctant to give him any responsibilities. He was young, he wasn't an ordained pastor, and his ideas seemed too new and different. In addition, the church leaders were spending most of their time in court over disputes about church property from the time of the conflict. Not giving up, Dono sought out opportunities to lead and serve within

his local congregation.

Three and a half years later, in 2012, MCC hosted an Asian Anabaptist Diakonia gathering in Indonesia. The Javanese Mennonite Church appointed Dono to attend as one of their two delegates. The other delegate, Hermintono, had been an MCC Indonesia staff person in the 1990s before leaving to become a Javanese Mennonite church pastor.

The Diakonia gathering was an important initiative. In the past, Anabaptist churches in Asia have primarily defined “diakonia” as caring for the widows and orphans within their congregations. The goal of the gathering was to strengthen an Anabaptist theology of diakonia that would result in inclusive, effective service and disaster response actions that would include peacebuilding goals.

The gathering included participants from Indonesia, Vietnam, Japan, Philippines, India, Nepal, China, and South Korea. Three of the speakers — Paulus Sugeng Widjaja, Daniel Listijabudi, and Paulus Hartono — were from the Muria Mennonite Synod in Indonesia. These leaders have frequently interacted with the global church over the years. At this gathering, I took special notes of what these Anabaptist leaders had to say to other Asian Anabaptists.

In speaking of the shared Asian contexts of multiple religions, poverty, and frequent natural disasters, Paulus Sugeng Widjaja said, “Brothers and Sisters, we should not give the privilege of that ‘calling-to-respond’ to only Western people.”

Daniel Listijabudi said: “Diakonia is the struggle to enlarge the circle of neighborliness It is through service that we respond to the story of what God has done for us.”

Paulus Hartono, another Mennonite World Conference and community leader from Indonesia, said, “We live among 100 million Muslims. They won’t read the gospel. We must be the gospel in our lives so they can read the gospel in our lives Transformative diakonia is about relationships. If we have good relationships, where we can talk with each other, then it reduces the risk of violence. We can use words, not violence.”

In the Asia Anabaptist Diakonia Conference, Dono and the other delegate from the Javanese Mennonite Synod were encouraged by the opportunity to network with other Anabaptists from around Asia. They were poised to act. However, Dono and others with the vision to “enlarge the circle of neighborliness” still had no official permission from the leaders in the church to begin responding to disasters as a mission of the church.

Then, one more change happened that laid the groundwork to make the disaster response in Njleper possible. The Javanese Mennonite Synod elected

a new board in the summer of 2012. This is the first new church board since 2001 that has no members who were involved on either side of the past church conflict. The new General Secretary of the Javanese Mennonite Church, Pak Slamet, is completing his Masters in Peace Studies at Duta Wacana Christian University. The Masters in Peace Studies program developed through the influences of Indonesian Anabaptist academics such as Aristarchus Sukarto and Paulus Sugeng Widjaja, who, in turn, have participated in an international Anabaptist cross-fertilization of ideas. From 2006 to 2008, MCC partnered with this Christian university in providing the funding to launch the Masters in Peace Studies program, the first of its kind in Indonesia. The Peace Studies courses also draw on the experiences of MCC partner organizations by inviting active peace workers to speak to classes as guest lecturers.

The Masters in Peace Studies program provided an opportunity for critical thinking and theological reflection for Pak Slamet. Today, in the large 170-year-old Javanese Mennonite Church, which usually kept a low profile as a survival strategy, leaders like Pak Slamet are talking about the “prophetic voice of the church” and the potential for “transformative diakonia” — the idea that service takes us beyond differences and can be a powerful force in God’s kingdom.

This new church board finally gave the go-ahead for Dono and Hermin-tono to form a church department specifically for Diakonia to the broader community — to Muslims as well as to Christians. So in April, when the flooding happened in Njleper, the church responded with accompaniment from MCC. In the short term, sixty-five households received food support or assistance with clean-up for their homes. That number included fifty-nine Muslim families and six Mennonite families. The minority followers of Christ reached out to expand the circle of neighborliness to include their Muslim neighbors.

In years past, when we or earlier MCC workers carefully planned with partners for the Global Family program, the International Volunteer Exchange Program (IVEP), YAMEN, or Serving and Learning Together (SALT) exchange programs or the scholarships for church leadership development or for the Asia Anabaptist Diakonia Conference or for the launching of the Peace Studies program, no one could have predicted the exact long-term results. As Jesus said in the parable of the sower in Matthew 4: “the seed would sprout and grow, the sower does not know how.” The kingdom of God is full of mystery and we, as MCC workers participate in that mystery.

These are not outcomes that have been logically framed or carefully orchestrated to bring change in a predictable way. These are the unforeseen fruits pointing to God’s work through the church and through MCC. The unfolding

of God's story is amazing to watch because it is bigger than the sum of the short-term results.