

The Increasing Need for Authentic Global Anabaptist Partnerships

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Our world faces the worst humanitarian crisis since the end of World War II in 1945. Twenty million people face starvation, according to the United Nations, without an immediate injection of funds. Sixty-eight million people are fleeing war and persecution as refugees, asylum seekers, or those displaced in their own country. Experts in the NGO world say that the increased complexity of global issues requires greater collaboration and partnership to bring about sustainable change in the world.

Each of our Anabaptist mission and service agencies in the United States and Canada needs to stay relevant for our constituencies and supporters, many of whom overlap. Considering our shrinking and splitting denominations, partnership among these mission and service agencies can become more challenging.

How might we “set a table” that clearly recognizes and openly acknowledges what each agency brings to address the needs of the world?

- As US and Canadian mission and service agencies?
- As the Global Anabaptist Service Network?
- As Anabaptist churches in the Global South?
- As the global Anabaptist community as a whole?

What is the niche we each bring to the table? What is our unique expertise? What are the relational and community connections we bring? How might we support one another in recognizing the gifts we each bring to the table, so we can more adequately address the immense needs in our world today?

In 2002, the Mennonite Central Committee (MCC) Board determined that MCC’s International Program should transition to primarily a local partnership model as its preferred mode of operation and move away from projects

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directly implemented and operated by MCC. This came out of an assumption that God's Mission is already at work in the world and we seek to accompany and learn from those who are already part of that mission (churches, church agencies, local NGOs and civil society groups). We bring our resources together with their resources, their knowledge and personnel, walking together with a focus on relief, sustainable community development, justice, and peace-building. Partnering through local groups assumes that there is intrinsically a deeper knowledge, wisdom, and understanding from local personnel on their own needs and solutions than what outsiders bring to the conversation.

Through this local partnership approach, we have seen increased capacity of partners to respond to their own needs directly and a higher level of local ownership of the work, resulting in longer-term sustainability.

In the Chocó region of Colombia, Mennonite Brethren (MB) churches partner with MCC to provide household goods, food, and clothing in response to flooding. These churches increase trust in the community where many have been victims of violence from their neighbors. Through Fagrotas, the church's registered nonprofit, they increase food security with urban gardens and rural farming projects, helping families overcome malnutrition. Once, a heavily armed paramilitary group pressured the Mennonite Brethren churches to pay them a "war contribution" from their rice processing plant. Pastor José Rutilio Rivas responded firmly, "Mennonite churches have been committed to nonviolence and peace-building for centuries. We will not support any armed groups, not even the State Armed Forces. If you force us, we will close this community development project, but we will not support you, even if it costs us our lives." Surprised by this boldness and aware that Mennonites in Colombia have held this position throughout time, the paramilitary commander promised to respect this position, and the community development work has been allowed to continue. Nelly Mosquera, a local MB pastor and theologian, said, "Our work is not only to preach the Gospel, but also to show compassion to the community as servants of God."

Anabaptist churches in the Global South, or in urban centers of poverty in the United States, with poverty visible in their midst, seem to take seriously James 2:16 (NIV), "If one of you says to them, 'Go in peace; keep warm and well fed,' but does nothing about their physical needs, what good is it?" The need to partner with our Global church counterparts with a gospel that integrates word and deed, will only continue to increase in coming years.