

# Celebration, Critique, and Belonging: Commemorating the Mennonite Central Committee

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The centennial anniversary of the Mennonite Central Committee (MCC) is an occasion for festive celebration. Founded in 1920 in Elkhart, Indiana, MCC evolved into a large and complex relief, development, and peacebuilding organization.<sup>1</sup> Over its one hundred years, MCC has left a profound mark on North American Mennonites, including decisively shaping their identity as a “people of service.”<sup>2</sup> MCC bridged vast geographical and cultural gaps by providing spaces for interaction and exchange including facilitating service opportunities for Mennonites in far-flung places around the world and supporting initiatives in Canada and the United States. Turning one hundred is no small achievement. In this paper, we take advantage of this auspicious juncture to think through the dynamics of MCC commemoration.

As anthropologists we are interested in the cultural contours of celebration.<sup>3</sup> Celebrations are composed by and for particular communities. Therefore, the way a community celebrates reveals much about the community in question. Celebration is a “slippery” concept “caught up in a web of notions clustered around ideas such as

ritual, commemoration, anniversary, ceremony, holiday, festival, carnival, and festivity,” each with celebratory potentiality (Rusu and Kantola 2016, 9). For example, carnival is often characterized by chaotic, ludic excess; a ceremonial occasion can be highly orchestrated and poised; a ritual celebration of the Eucharist can involve deep feelings of joy but is rarely frivolous.<sup>4</sup> Even within a single event there can be a range of different interpretations and sentiments. Celebration is marked by a temporal disruption to the normal, mundane patterns of existence for an intense and focused ritual involving collective participation and attention that frequently also delights and entertains. These disruptions provide interesting opportunities to consider complex social negotiations. In Ervin Beck’s analysis, the MCC “relief sales festival” phenomenon should be considered as “performances of identity” in which social groups “express deeply held values and convictions that are given embodied form in festival activity” (Beck 2004, 203–204). The things we choose to celebrate and the ways in which we compose or curate our celebratory events are never random or haphazard.

With rare exceptions, the cultural contours of Mennonite celebrations have received limited scholarly attention to date.<sup>5</sup> This is partially explained by the fact that critical reflection on celebration tends to be something of an unwelcome and annoying pest. Those in the midst of a celebration rarely relish a running commentary on what they are doing.<sup>6</sup> We hope, however, to show that reflection on historical and contemporary Mennonite celebrations of MCC will help illuminate important features of the organization as a “peoplehood movement.”<sup>7</sup> One of our key observations is that the celebration of MCC is frequently combined with critique. As we show, numerous Mennonites over the decades have held that an appropriate way to commemorate one of the most treasured North American inter-Mennonite institutions is by launching into far-reaching criticisms of its ethical, programmatic, theological, and political shortcomings. We explore possible reasons for this fusion of festivity and critique in the celebration of MCC. While this is not a unique pairing, it is nevertheless an illuminating and consequential dynamic for MCC and its North American constituency.

We have selected two sites for our analysis: textual anniversary publications and livestreamed services alongside materials prepared for MCC’s centenary. Over the past fifty years each of MCC’s major anniversaries has been marked with a scholarly publication. Among these were a series of edited volumes and journal special issues derived from anniversary conferences. Similarly, this paper, alongside the other contributions to this issue of the *Journal of Mennonite Studies*, was first presented at the 2021 conference on “MCC

at 100: Mennonites, Service, and the Humanitarian Impulse” hosted by the Centre for Transnational Mennonite Studies at the University of Winnipeg, although, as befitting the pandemic times, it was held online. This propensity to acknowledge MCC’s anniversaries by hosting an academic conference is a notable approach to celebration. We therefore look back at these commemorative markers of MCC’s one hundred years to analyze key themes. Our second site acknowledges that the Winnipeg conference was part of a broader array of events that celebrated MCC’s hundredth anniversary. We think ethnographically about some of the other artifacts of celebration produced to commemorate the centennial—including a range of imagery, texts, and livestreamed services. We analyze these artifacts to assess what their focus, style, and mode of celebration can reveal about MCC at this juncture.

The commemoration of MCC’s centennial anniversary offers a valuable entry point into the socio-cultural analysis of MCC and its Canadian and American Mennonite constituencies. This article participates in celebrating MCC through a critical analysis of textual and digital celebrations. Over the years, MCCers have frequently recognized that MCC is “good to think with.”<sup>8</sup> We agree. In this article, we seek to think with and through MCC to reconsider Mennonite celebrations.

### Textual Anniversaries

Lucille Marr (2003, 16) has rightly argued that the history of MCC has mainly been an “oral tradition.” Yet it is also true that MCC has been bathed in prolific textuality. The sheer volume of writings on MCC is quite staggering. Much of it is substantial, incisive, and engaging. In the following, we analyze a series of textual interventions that mark MCC anniversaries. Consideration of Mennonite textuality is more likely to evoke sombre, if also surprisingly popular, texts like the *Martyrs Mirror* rather than ideas of celebration. Nevertheless, over the years, MCC has been celebrated through a number of landmark scholarly volumes designed to commemorate notable anniversaries.<sup>9</sup>

We focus our analysis on three collections of papers which marked three separate anniversaries: (1) the July 1970 issue of *Mennonite Quarterly Review* celebrating MCC’s fiftieth anniversary; (2) Robert Kreider and Ron Mathies’s 1996 edited volume *Unity Amidst Diversity* celebrating MCC’s seventy-fifth anniversary (alongside the Fall 1995 issue of *Conrad Grebel Review*); and (3) *A Table of Sharing*, edited by Alain Epp Weaver, celebrating MCC’s ninetieth

anniversary (together with a short collection of articles in the Winter 2011 issue of *Conrad Grebel Review*). Each provides invaluable material for scholars interested in MCC. There is not space here to discuss all the papers contained in these volumes. Rather than being comprehensive, we seek an illustrative approach by focusing on selected papers within each volume in order to analyze broader themes and dynamics.

### **MCC at 50: *Mennonite Quarterly Review*, 1970**

The July 1970 issue of *Mennonite Quarterly Review* (44, no. 3) is explicitly located as a textual anniversary commemorating MCC's fiftieth birthday. This is noted on the front cover ("Mennonite Central Committee 1920–1970") and at the top of the contents page ("MCC Anniversary Issue"). The preface, titled "In this Issue," by then editor John S. Oyer opens with these lines:

It is difficult to overestimate the significance of the Mennonite Central Committee, either on the recipients of its aid, on the individuals who participated, or on the churches that learned inter-Mennonite cooperation by participation in its programs. Its role is large and its influence widespread. To one who matured while in the service of MCC after World War II, it has meant a dedication to the work of Christ and the church to a degree simply not possible without it (Oyer 1970, 212).

This special issue was planned by a small committee consisting of Oyer, Melvin Gingerich, and Peter Dyck. The articles were also all written by men with identifiably historic or "ethnic" Mennonite family names. Many of these were dominant figures within ecclesial, educational, and service organizations in the American Mennonite world. The authors included: Guy Hershberger, Robert Kreider, Peter Dyck (whom we are told did not want to contribute an article and so the other organizers "had to twist his arm" into making him write it [Oyer 1970, 212]), John Lapp, Larry Kehler (the only Canadian), John Hostetler, Paul Classen, Melvin Gingerich, and Orië O. Miller, the influential institution-builder who led MCC as its executive secretary in its formative years from 1935 to 1958.<sup>10</sup>

Most of the papers in the issue are detailed and substantive. Many are descriptive, although the contributions by Hostetler and Classen, on "material aid" and "personnel" respectively, are statistics-heavy. The general mood of the papers is decidedly celebratory as is clearly evidenced in Orië Miller's subtitle, "God's Miracle Among Us." Two detailed accounts illustrate this festive tone. Hershberger's historical narrative of the years leading up to the

founding of MCC notes the organization represents “an important milestone” that “symbolizes the recovery of the Anabaptist vision of mission and service” thereby opening the door to “a greater worldwide Mennonite brotherhood” (Hershberger 1970, 213). Hershberger contrasts the activism and energy of Mennonites under MCC with a prior period of American Mennonite “stagnation” and “geographic and cultural isolation,” characterizing its decline from “a robust Anabaptism to an anemic Pietism” (214). According to Hershberger, MCC was born out of an upwelling of Mennonite interest in engaging in active service.<sup>11</sup> This “Mennonite awakening” (225) led to a readiness and expectation that facilitated prompt action after the visit from the Russian *Studien-Kommission* and resulted in the creation of a joint Mennonite relief committee in Newton, Kansas, on July 13, 1920. Writing MCC into the longer stream of Anabaptist history, Hershberger concludes: “The torch lighted by the fathers in the sixteenth century and passed on from each generation to the next burns brightly today and is moving forward, through the MCC—and in scores of ways” (243).

Kreider’s paper on the impact of MCC service on American Mennonites is primarily a compendium of stories celebrating MCC successes. Reflecting his belief that “MCC has had a substantial and salutary impact on American Mennonites,” Kreider offers “more hymns of gratitude than dirges of lament” (Kreider 1970, 245). Focusing on an “explosion” in the growth and expansion of MCC after 1940, he proposes that MCC should be considered as “the most significant of our Mennonite educational institutions” (247). He argues that MCC has been vital for allowing Mennonites to discover a Mennonite identity. It brought Mennonites together across denominational and communal divides, it broadened Mennonite horizons, and it provided an administrative model for a profusion of “satellite programs” (259). Kreider celebrates “friendships” as perhaps “the most important fruit of the program,” and illustrates this by discussing the flourishing of romances that “bridged Mennonite ethnic and denominational barriers” (250). But Kreider also acknowledges the need to attend to “both shadow and light, the negative and the positive” in historical analysis (245). Therefore, he also identifies a series of “prickly” (254) ethical, theological, ecclesial, and humanitarian questions about MCC’s impact. Some of these would have cut close to the bone including, for example, a pointed question about ethical obligations: “To whom do Mennonites owe primary responsibility: our kinsmen or the stranger outside the gate?” (253). Kreider concludes by celebrating the “enormous” impact of MCC on the Mennonite Church but warns against “the peril of self-

righteousness—pride in programs and organizational achievements” (260).

### MCC at 75: *Unity Amidst Diversity*

In 1995, MCC organized two conferences to celebrate its seventy-fifth anniversary. The first was hosted by Fresno Pacific College and the Mennonite Brethren Biblical Seminary in Fresno, California. The proceedings from this conference were published by MCC in *Unity Amidst Diversity: Mennonite Central Committee at 75*, edited by Robert Kreider and Ron Mathies (1996). The second conference was concerned with “The Religious Relief and Development Agency: Directions for the Future.” Held at Conrad Grebel College in Waterloo, Ontario, it included contributions by Merrill Ewert, Paul Hiebert, David Korten, Thomas Jeavons, Bryant Myers, and Vinay Samuel, among others. Conference proceedings were published as a special issue in *Conrad Grebel Review*. While there is interesting material in this second collection about MCC, the Waterloo event was clearly pitched at engaging broader discussions about Christian development. This focus dissipates the celebratory dynamic more clearly apparent in the Fresno material.

*Unity Amidst Diversity* is a substantive and scholarly publication. The 1996 volume contains ten original articles, an editors’ preface, responses to the symposium presentations by John Redekop and Cal Redekop, an abridged record of some of the discussions at the symposium, and the Sunday morning sermon delivered by the Peruvian evangelical theologian Samuel Escobar. The authors included many prominent figures within the Mennonite academic world. Two women authored papers—religion scholars Nancy Heisey and Wilma Ann Bailey. Much of this collection conveys a celebratory vibe but Kreider’s evocation of both “shadow and light” from twenty-five years earlier remains easily discernible. In fact, the penumbral is more prominently located in this publication.

The editors’ preface frames the publication as responding to the “research agenda set forth at the 50th anniversary” which outlined “the historical contours, analytical critiques and ongoing questions of the MCC experience” (Kreider and Mathies 1996, v–vi). The editors refer to Orie Miller’s contribution to the earlier anniversary collection in which Miller anticipates MCC giving testimony to “love of Word and sensitivities to Holy Spirit breakthrough and leading” (Kreider and Mathies 1996, v–vi). The editors argue that this has indeed been the case and they express hope that it will remain so into the future, stating, “One trusts that hindsight at the end quarter

century, in the year 2020, will elicit a similar clarity” (Kreider and Mathies 1996, v–vi). Here theological commitments are framed as the starting point for Mennonites to “celebrate, reflect and recommit” to service through MCC “In the name of Christ.” Yet, the celebratory and critical are never far away from each other. “Questions of MCC and the supporting churches abound throughout the papers” in the collection.

James Juhnke’s chapter, “War and the Mennonite Agenda in the 20th Century,” foregrounds this questioning thematic, pointing to the “profound paradox” that “the Mennonites, a people of peace, have been so happy and so prosperous in the United States, a ‘country made by war’” (Juhnke 1996, 11). Juhnke argues that it was not accidental that MCC was born in the midst of a context of total war. In fact, war fuelled Mennonite organizational efforts, inspired benevolent giving, shaped an ethic of sacrifice, informed the theological discourses, and spurred humanitarian impulses. For Juhnke, “the world of total war shaped and energized us in the 20th century” (16).

Ted Koontz opens his chapter musing that “the word” he thought he needed to speak to MCC at its seventy-fifth anniversary was “blessing”—a delightful discursive act of celebration (Koontz 1996, 91). Accordingly, he concludes his article by comparing MCC to a eucharistic “sacrament” (103). Nevertheless, the majority of his article is dedicated to showing how apparent “commitments” come with manifold “complications.” He notes the tensions of being rich and powerful while seeking to adopt the stance of a “servant” (93–94), argues that many MCCers have sought to be “political apolitically” (95–96), and points to the irony that a peacebuilding organization should “depend either directly or indirectly on a sometimes disguised, sometimes overt threat of violence” (96). Although Koontz insists that his litany of “complications” is not meant to undermine MCC’s “commitments,” his critique is nevertheless incisive.

Nancy Heisey draws attention to the fact that “the stories of women, and of Native Americans, African Americans, and Hispanics who are part of the Mennonite and Brethren in Christ family, are sparsely told in the formal institutional records of this peoplehood,” including MCC (Heisey 1996, 56). Heisey concludes that in its effort to construct an identity that resists the dominant cultures of the US and Canada, MCC “has evolved its own relatively monolithic and exclusive identity” (64), which leaves little room for diversity and difference.

In perhaps the most effusive article in the collection, Donald Kraybill explains that MCC has “received the garnish of praise”

(Kraybill 1996, 19) within the Mennonite community and that it has been the “flagship” of Mennonite identity through the twentieth century. Kraybill’s concluding paragraph is worth quoting at some length:

MCC embodies the basic values that most Mennonites hold in common. . . . It embodies the best of the heritage, stirs the deepest convictions, moves members to action and cultivates collective pride in the best sense of the word. MCC carries the flag that symbolizes the noblest and best of Mennonite virtues. Those close by the ship know that there are spats and squabbles onboard, and many insiders know that the flag more often symbolizes hope than reality. Nevertheless from near and far, the flagship harkens to the best in the Anabaptist tradition and to the fundamentals of the gospel story (38).

The festival of praise Kraybill heaps on MCC is accompanied by words of warning. MCC might be the primary Mennonite instrument for enacting the gospel, and the most important institution for shaping North American Mennonite religious identity, but it is certainly not above critique.

### ***MCC at 90: A Table of Sharing***

*A Table of Sharing* began as a conference in June 2010 in Akron, Pennsylvania (Epp Weaver 2011). It is a large and expansive volume with seventeen chapters. The list of names illustrates growing gender diversity, although most authors had ethnic Mennonite names or could be counted as well-known MCC insiders. In his foreword, Robert Kreider, as the only person directly involved in all three anniversary publications, celebrates the ninetieth anniversary of MCC by announcing it to be “the most beloved of Mennonite institutions” (10). Yet immediately afterwards, editor Alain Epp Weaver’s acknowledgements illustrate what such affection will include, namely, “MCC is distinguished by its support of and openness to critical reflection on its practice. . . . As MCC moves into a period of organizational restructuring and toward its centennial mark, may it continue this commitment to open self-criticism” (Epp Weaver 2011, 13).<sup>12</sup>

Epp Weaver’s introduction allows this promotion of critique to slip into the background. Instead, he adopts Koontz’s eucharistic metaphor to celebrate the economy of gift and generosity that has propelled MCC’s humanitarian, peace, and development work. Epp Weaver delights in “mutual sharing . . . circulating in the economy of God’s overflowing love” which he argues is rooted “in the



excessive grace received and shared in thanksgiving at God's table, the table around which MCCers have routinely gathered with one another and with Mennonites and other Christians around the world" (Epp Weaver 2011, 15).

Esther Epp-Tiessen's chapter on the formation of MCC Canada in 1963 is the first paper in all three anniversary collections to centre Canadian organizational efforts in MCC's history. Epp-Tiessen links her history of MCC Canada's formation with the tensions that surrounded the 2009 New Wine/New Wineskins consultation and restructuring process. The latter resulted in the dissolution of "MCC binational" and the re-location of the Canadian and American national organizations as co-drivers of international programs. Epp-Tiessen traces growing Canadian frustrations in the decade after the Second World War with "Akron" and its perceived "colonial" excesses (Epp-Tiessen 2011, 60). These tensions facilitated increasing momentum for the formation of MCC Canada, a move that Epp-Tiessen celebrates as a mark of an equitable and mutual partnership. But Epp-Tiessen also critiques the way in which Canadian MCC leaders excluded women in the decision-making process and notes that there were limited opportunities for participation of Mennonites and Brethren in Christ who "are not of European descent." She concludes that a key lesson from 1963 "is the need for continual self-reflection as to who is welcome in the circle that defines MCC" (Epp-Tiessen 2011, 61).

In his contribution to the volume, Steven Nolt addresses the widening gap since the 1970s between "plain" Anabaptists (Old Order and culturally traditional Amish and Mennonites) and MCC. Here the critique is not simply a matter of dissent or a question of how to further expand the table but rather of organizational schism. The founding of Christian Aid Ministries in the 1980s created alternative routes of ministry engagement and identity formation for a significant section of MCC's constituency. Nolt perceives "the possibilities and limits" of MCC's relationships with plain people as instructive for the challenges facing the broad coalition of Mennonites under the umbrella of MCC (Nolt 2011).

Tobin Miller Shearer's chapter on "Whitening Conflicts" in MCC between 1960 and 1985 is a systematic critique of the organization as shaped by white dominance, albeit a whiteness that has changed over time. Shearer argues that within MCC, Mennonites of European descent ignored racial identity until "conflicts with people of color forced them to look at themselves." He concludes: "The only certainty we can carry away from the MCC story is that racialized conflicts have taken place and will, for the foreseeable future, continue to erupt" (Shearer 2011, 229). In fact, for Shearer, such

conflicts must be actively pursued. The only way to challenge the “white, male-dominated” nature of MCC is to “seek out racial conflict. Such focused struggle over white identity, and that alone, has been the engine of change within MCC” (231).

As these chapters clearly illustrate and as Alain Epp Weaver’s acknowledgements forewarned, the critical stance occupied by the authors in this volume is expansive. Indeed, for a publication produced under the auspices of MCC, the extent and manner of critique is rightly considered astonishing.

### **Textual Celebrations?**

The three volumes we have discussed attest to a remarkable, sustained, and critical engagement into the nature and function of MCC over the past fifty years. Cumulatively, this corpus indicates key dynamics that are worthy of careful consideration. MCC has been celebrated textually through substantive and critical forms of engagement to mark many of its milestones over its history. That this scholarship represents only a portion of the academic literature on MCC serves to underscore the distinctive scholarly habitus that surrounds the organization. While the development sector in general is often characterized by sharp debates about the means, practices, and ethics of intervention, MCC nevertheless stands out as notable for the ways it has been invested with scholarly attention. These textual celebrations took various forms. We have traced here a confluence of effusive praise and incisive critique. This tension is present in all the volumes discussed and within many of the individual papers. The fact that these textual anniversaries were rendered in the genre of scholarly essays does help account for the critical tone that undergirds many of the papers. Even more significantly, at numerous important junctures, MCC leadership chose to commemorate the organization through the kinds of academic conferences that would generate this critical analysis. The continuity among the volumes over at least fifty years is striking.

While celebration and critique might appear opposing tendencies, we suggest that this is not necessarily the case. A crucial point is that criticism within these volumes is almost always “internal critique” provided by organizational insiders and/or by card-carrying Mennonites.<sup>13</sup> Criticism in these contexts should be understood, alongside effusive praise, as a social means of articulating belonging. Indeed, insofar as the expressions of critique in these volumes articulate a sense of care and affection for the organization and what

it represents, even the most critical contributions can be considered “celebratory.”

### **Centenary Celebrations**

MCC’s celebrations of its one hundred years are still in the making with this special issue as one important artifact of its centennial anniversary conference. The conference was held in the fall of 2021 after a one-year delay due to the COVID-19 pandemic. The same pandemic disrupted other celebrations of MCC’s centenary across the US and Canada. Long-planned celebrations were revised and reshaped for online formats. This demonstrated constituent commitment to persisting with MCC’s centenary commemoration despite the limitations and extra challenges involved. In this section, we focus on these online celebrations.

MCC staff prepared an array of written and video materials for regional entities, churches, and others to use for centennial events, including a diverse collection of worship resources in English and Spanish,<sup>14</sup> short centennial video clips featuring MCC history and testimonies,<sup>15</sup> and a collection of “100 stories for 100 years” organized by theme, region, and decade.<sup>16</sup> The accessible videos were featured in MCC Canada’s centennial celebration, which was livestreamed on Saturday, November 21, 2020, to over two thousand virtual participants.<sup>17</sup> In the US, MCC had planned a three-day celebration in mid-2020 but this was modified to a one-day online event on October 17, 2020,<sup>18</sup> and attended virtually by over three thousand participants. MCC’s four US regional entities held their own events as well. A MCC West Coast Centennial Celebration was held in Reedley, California, on January 18–19, 2020, before COVID-19 restrictions were enacted.<sup>19</sup> Other planned celebrations, meant to be held in conjunction with relief sales, were subsequently cancelled due to COVID (Les Gustafson-Zook, personal communication). Below we consider the MCC Great Lakes centennial celebration held in the location where MCC was initially formed in 1920.<sup>20</sup>

### **MCC Great Lakes Centennial Celebration**

On July 26, 2020, with an anniversary quilt background and a front table holding some simple loaves of bread, two MCC alumni and co-pastors at Prairie Street Mennonite Church in Elkhart, Indiana, led a livestreamed virtual MCC Great Lakes Centennial Service of Celebration. Cyneatha Millsaps and Quinn Brenneke hosted the

ninety-minute service. It began with a musical introduction by the Evangelical Mennonite Congolese orchestra and included ten songs in six languages. In addition to the music, the celebration consisted largely of history and remembrance of the circumstances surrounding MCC's founding and the impact it had on the lives of volunteer service workers and of beneficiaries, told in story format. Even with the constraints of an online environment, there were physical symbols and objects present in the church including two centennial quilts symbolizing how MCC has provided blankets and comforters, taught sewing, and sold quilts to support its work.

For a COVID-times celebration of an organization founded to address wartime suffering, this service had a sombre note. The hosts opened: "This is not the celebration we had planned . . ." The opening words of Ron Byler, then MCC U.S executive director, were dramatically honest: "War. Pillage. Typhus. Hunger. Death." This introduced a reading with stories of the tragic circumstances and suffering in 1920s Russia. Reading from letters and diaries of Russian Mennonites, the hosts invited participants to listen to the voices from that era. In a reference to one such historical letter which mentioned that "we never read so much from Lamentations," the organizers interspersed the historical accounts of MCC workers and Russian Mennonites with readings from Lamentations.<sup>21</sup>

Fourteen brief testimonies of MCC's impact and influence followed. These represented the broad temporal and geographic scope of the agency's work. North American service workers recalled specific moments or aspects of their service terms, members of partner organizations and communities expressed appreciation, and three people recounted their journeys from recipients of international MCC assistance to becoming MCC staff and volunteers in North America. The variety of story-tellers ranged from a woman who received a comforter after the Second World War in Germany to three younger participants in the Serving and Learning Together (SALT) program and International Volunteer Exchange Program (IVEP) participants. Les Gustafson-Zook then led a children's time about his song "My Coins Count," and ended with this summary for young listeners: "This is what MCC has been doing for the last hundred years: trying to make the world more fair, and just." The service continued with a sermon by Dr. Sibonokuhle Ncube, the founding executive director and national coordinator of the Brethren in Christ Compassionate and Development Services in Zimbabwe, an MCC partner. Dr. Ncube inspired MCC constituents to continue to serve God by "doing good" and being "ministers of reconciliation" for the next hundred years. The service concluded with a time for offering/donation, music, and prayer.

## Contemporary Centennial Themes

This MCC Great Lakes service of celebration contained elements in common with several other online events hosted by regional MCC entities throughout 2020. Opening with a reflection on MCC's founding and the growing awareness of wartime conditions and needs among Mennonites in Russia, the event pivoted to testimonies and stories of mutual impact by multiple named participants worldwide, and concluded with a vision for MCC's current and future directions. Explicit institutional critique was less visible in this event than in the textual anniversaries but it was nevertheless present. The centenary celebration format foregrounded, addressed, and responded to recent critiques of diversity and leadership. As with other regional MCC anniversary celebrations, the Great Lakes event had more broadly inclusive representation than the earlier textual anniversaries described above. It also reflected stronger emphases on racial justice, Indigenous relationships, and speaker-leader diversity. This was due in part to the expansion of MCC leadership beyond earlier prevalence of white, male, "ethnic" Mennonites. The modality of broadcast services including sermons, stories, and music also expanded the range of speakers beyond those with professional specialization in academic scholarship, thereby giving stage presence to pastors, congregants, artists, and others.

The livestreamed celebration service opened with an Indigenous land acknowledgement. In the February 2020 MCC Central States celebration,<sup>22</sup> executive director Michelle Armster gave prominence to the little-known stories of two women who led European programs in MCC's early years. In the October 2020 US Centennial celebration,<sup>23</sup> Leonard Dow drew contemporary racial reckoning into the longer thread of MCC history of standing with people who have been marginalized or suffered from oppression and injustice. His ingredients in MCC's "secret sauce" included demonstrating to oppressed people worldwide that their lives matter and, following civil rights leader John Lewis's approach, a willingness to get into "necessary trouble." In this event, former MCC U.S. executive director Lynette Meck described breaking the leadership gender barrier and called for more to be done on racial and ethnic representation within the institution. During that celebration, Ann Graber Hershberger accepted her appointment to be the next MCC U.S. executive director. She concluded with words of gratitude and confession:

Now, as we bring this service to a close, we are grateful: grateful that MCC has much to celebrate, from our beginnings in 1920 to work in fifty countries today. We also confess that we haven't always made the best

decisions as an organization or as individuals in it. We welcome the opportunity to learn and to grow.<sup>24</sup>

These sentences succinctly encapsulate the sentiment conveyed in the centennial services: the celebration of MCC is incomplete unless it is accompanied by some degree of (auto)critique, confession, or self-correction.

The online MCC Great Lakes service concluded with a prayer of thanksgiving that celebrated how MCC motivated churches for Christian service and, in turn, how specific acts of MCC-mediated service influenced, changed, and formed the Mennonite church. In responsive liturgical form, it celebrated with these words: “May God use us and use MCC as Christ’s ambassadors, sharing the good news of humanity’s reconciliation to God through MCC’s ministries of relief, development, and peace. Thanks be to God!”<sup>25</sup>

### **Celebration and Critique**

The cultural patterns of celebrating MCC are illuminating, both for the organization itself and for its relationship with its North American Mennonite constituency. Over many decades, the predilection to utilize scholarly conferences and publications to mark important anniversaries is thoroughly noteworthy. As scholars we delight in, and celebrate, this distinctive and commendable receptiveness to scholarly critique. MCC is indeed good to think with. In continuity with the ethos of these scholarly conversations, MCC centennial services confessed the organization’s shortcomings on racial, ethnic, and gender representation and inclusion even as they sought to address past critiques in these areas. This interweaving of attention to both “shadow and light” is a distinctive feature of MCC festivity. What explains this conflation of celebration and critique?

One possible framing for this dynamic is to point to theological tensions inherent within the Christian tradition. Rowan Williams has proposed that there is an “essential restlessness in the enterprise of Christian utterance” because the life and death of Jesus “open up schisms in any kind of language” (Williams 1999, xiii-xvi). These ruptures guard against attempts at closure. Williams sees a constant movement in Christian theology between celebratory, critical, and communicative styles.<sup>26</sup> He argues that all theology will necessarily move back and forth among these styles because of its inherent mobility. Viewing MCC as a kind of enacted Mennonite theology allows us to consider something of this restlessness within a specific organizational and cultural context. Taken further, it can be

argued that if MCC is no longer hospitable to the movement between these styles—when it ceases to provide space for both critical and celebratory dynamics (and also for faithful communication)—it will no longer function within the Christian theological tradition.

Mennonites and MCC do not have a monopoly on combining celebration and critique. A suggestive comparison is the “American jeremiad” of early New England Puritans as analyzed by Sacvan Bercovitch. Bercovitch argues that the political sermon has been pivotal to American theo-politics. The jeremiad involved sharp and caustic castigation of moral failure while simultaneously celebrating and sacralizing the national identity. This model of “adversarial celebration” provided the essential logics that fuelled mass protests against the Establishment in the 1960s, with their repudiation of racist policies and warmongering and their calls to return to the founding national promise (Bercovitch 2012, xvii). He also argues that this moral interweaving of celebration and critique continues to haunt the politics of dissent characteristic of academia today. For Bercovitch, the jeremiad combined critique and celebration in ways that speak to distinctive national and historical conjunctures. Though attempts at circumscribing theological and social distinctiveness have sometimes buffered Mennonites from wider cultural processes, Mennonites have nevertheless been profoundly shaped by their national contexts.

While these broader dynamics are important, we also argue that specific social and cultural dynamics help shape the distinctive ways in which Mennonites interweave celebration and critique within and through MCC. James Urry has proposed that MCC is the “United Nations” of the North American Mennonite world (Urry 2006, 12). It is the space in which diverse and fragmented Mennonites debate their issues and launch diplomatic (and not-so-diplomatic) broadsides at each other. Part of the function of MCC, therefore, is to provide space for inter-Mennonite conflict. With the Mennonite “peoplehood” chronically fragmented along denominational and conference lines (alongside political, theological, gendered, socio-technological, and geographical divisions), North American Mennonites have few organizational spaces that facilitate opportunities for encounter and negotiation. Just as the United Nations champions an ideology of “humanity” while also embedding a transnational politics of national difference, so too MCC facilitates ongoing identification among American and Canadian Mennonite and Anabaptist communities even as it renders internal differences apparent and contestable. MCC plays a vital role in bringing Mennonites together and allowing their disagreements to be aired. Conflict is inherent to the organization including, and perhaps especially,

when Mennonites gather to celebrate MCC's work. Even critiques directed at matters of policy and practice can be deployed as proxies within theological, ethical, and political arguments.

Conflict and dissension are not necessarily indications of processes of disaffiliation. The articulation of critique can also be a profound mode of expressing belonging. Critique is one of the primary cultural techniques of identification. Receptivity to critique is generally preserved for social group insiders and, as such, the capacity to disrupt, antagonize, and chastise can be considered forms of homemaking. MCC workers serving in overseas assignments are encouraged to conceptualize themselves as good guests who adopt postures appropriate for those who enter into another's house. North American MCCers are foreigners who build warm relationships with their hosts while also conforming to their rules and behavioural expectations. This posture involves a withdrawal of potential criticism for an embrace of a learning stance vis-à-vis the hosts. This ideology of guesthood has the corollary of affording a wider range of emotional and political registers for when MCCers are back home in their familiar spaces in which they belong.<sup>27</sup> It therefore becomes possible and perhaps even necessary to articulate criticism of Mennonite institutions and practices as claims of ownership and belonging. Criticism is one of the primary ways in which Mennonites discursively possess MCC as *their* organization. It is possible, therefore, to see even the harshest of insider criticisms as enacting a technology of celebration.

Internal criticism can also be understood as a mode of confession, an admission of wrongdoing, and a declaration of intent to change behaviour and practices. As confession, critique enacts a performative modesty appropriate for a long-standing historic Mennonite social imaginary as the "quiet of the land." This expresses a broadly shared, anti-triumphalist impulse that honours a "least of these" philosophy. Confession is antithetical to bravado and can therefore be seen as an affective and discursive anti-Constantinianism.<sup>28</sup> Through repeated admissions of ethical failure in relation to the most celebrated institutional carrier of contemporary North American Mennonite identity, Mennonites affirm and embrace a public humility. Internal criticism is therefore an expression of a pacifist ethic insofar as it locates the critic as a perpetual learner in the journey of faithful discipleship. Living in the peaceable kingdom is rarely free of pedagogical reminders of its abeyance, including during times of communal celebration.

Finally, and more practically, the historical fluidity among MCC administrators, service workers, and constituents ensures that messy and ambivalent experiences are impossible to entirely erase



or ignore. Over much of its past one hundred years, MCC has had a firm tradition of sending not only money but also people on fixed-term periods of service. For decades, MCC drew service workers and other volunteers from its Canadian and US constituencies. Upon completion of their service, these individuals returned to their home churches and communities. As a result, stories of success and failure are distributed widely among North American Mennonites. This facilitates a broadly shared understanding of MCC's relief, development, and peacebuilding as involving an "imperfect goodness" composed of both "shadow and light." Even at times of celebration, spokespeople can be confident that the agency's imperfections remain widely known and understood. The capacity for those involved to embrace this paradox is part of what makes MCC so compelling as an object for socio-cultural analysis. The future of MCC rests on the ongoing willingness of all those involved to hold this paradox together in both celebration and critique.

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### Notes

- <sup>1</sup> A "Mennonite Central Committee" was created in 1920 in Elkhart, Indiana, and the one hundredth anniversary in 2020 commemorated this event. Other potential birth dates could be noted, including the birth of MCC Canada and many different regional and provincial MCC organizations. Especially illuminating in this regard is Lucille Marr's (2003) history of the origins and growth of MCC in Ontario and Esther Epp-Tiessen's (2013) history of MCC Canada.
- <sup>2</sup> "Service" is a densely layered Mennonite keyword that has frequently been the object of analysis, reflection, meditation, and theologizing. See Bush (1998), Fountain (2014), Fountain and Meitzner Yoder (2018), Graber Miller (1996), Grace, Ewert, and Eberts (1995), Marr (2001), Mathies (1995), Phillips (2014), Phelps (2015), Phelps (2020), Schlabach (2000), and Toews (1992).
- <sup>3</sup> On the anthropology of Mennonite Christianity, see Fountain (2020) and the other articles in the same issue of the *Journal of Mennonite Studies* (38).
- <sup>4</sup> The etymology of celebration derives from the Latin *celebratus*, which was used in antiquity for the eucharistic service. This usage is maintained with Roman Catholic, Anglican, and other traditions where, for example, the Good

Friday liturgy involves “The Celebration of the Lord’s Passion.” Of course, pointing this out immediately draws attention to the contested and evolving meanings of “celebration.” The use of celebration within the context of eucharistic rites points to a liturgical valence that affords a broader range of affective possibilities than we tend to associate with popular usage of the term today, including deep solemnity alongside ecstatic joy.

- 5 Interestingly, while Beck (2004, 189) analyses the Michiana Mennonite Relief Sale as a “festival,” he also notes that the Mennonites involved in running it do not regard the relief sale as such.
- 6 We are, therefore, especially grateful to the organizers, fellow presenters, and participants at the “MCC at 100: Mennonites, Service, and the Humanitarian Impulse” Conference (September 30–October 2, 2021), hosted by the Centre for Transnational Mennonite Studies, University of Winnipeg, at which an earlier version of this paper was presented.
- 7 For analysis of MCC as a peoplehood movement of North American Mennonites, see Fountain (2011a, 33–66; 2011b, 165–168; and forthcoming).
- 8 This is a quote from Philip’s ethnographic fieldwork on MCC. See Fountain (forthcoming).
- 9 These are not the only textual anniversaries celebrating MCC. For instance, John Unruh’s *In the Name of Christ*, first published in 1952, looks suspiciously like it might have been commissioned in part to commemorate the thirtieth anniversary of MCC. Calvin Redekop (1995) wrote a stand-alone paper in *Mennonite Historical Bulletin* to commemorate MCC’s seventy-fifth anniversary. Some parts of MCC have had anniversary commemorations of their own. There are two anniversary publications for MCC Canada (Epp 1983; Epp-Tiessen 2013), and books commemorating milestones in various country programs (Epp Weaver and Weaver 1999; Yoder 1998), specific operational units (Wiebe 1976; Klassen 1998; Detweiler 2000; Redekop 2001), or constituency-run fundraising initiatives such as relief sales (Hoover and Good 1998). We restrict ourselves to those events commemorating the founding of MCC in 1920 for this special issue of the *Journal of Mennonite Studies*.
- 10 See especially John Sharp’s (2015) comprehensive biography of Miller.
- 11 While Hershberger’s focus is exclusively on transformations in Mennonite moral impulses, an increasingly activist orientation was a widespread phenomenon around this time and fed into a rapid growth in charitable societies and transnational humanitarianism across North America. See: Ekbladh (2011); Hollinger (2017); Curtis (2018); Hu (2018); Vanderbilt (2018); and Fischer-Tiné, Huebner, and Tyrrell (2021). Feener and Fountain (2018) trace a parallel rise of activist religious agendas across Southeast Asia.
- 12 The comment about organizational restructuring is a reference to the New Wine/New Wineskins Appreciative Inquiry consultation process in 2009. The restructuring implications of the process were still being worked through within MCC at the time of the book’s publication, including its bi-national reconfiguration addressed in Esther Epp-Tiessen’s chapter, discussed below.
- 13 This paper, involving both “internal” and “external” co-authors, is an obvious exception. Philip Fountain does have distant Amish ancestry (alongside Swiss and English genealogy), but he does not approach MCC as an “ethnic” Mennonite. Nor is he an organizational insider and, further, is not from either the US or Canada, but a New Zealander. He has roots within the Christian (Open) Brethren movement, and currently worships in an Anglican parish. Laura S. Meitzner Yoder has been involved with MCC since her early years

(through attending Mennonite schools, though she was not from a Mennonite family), and it was this early connection with MCC that drew her to join the Mennonite church as a teenager. She went on to two separate service terms in Indonesia alongside a range of other MCC involvements. She is from the US, has some recently discovered Mennonite ancestry, and also married into the historic ethnic Mennonite stream of her MCC colleague Jeff Yoder. One way to read this paper is as a collaborative attempt to blur the boundaries of belonging as itself an altruistic gifting of attention and care as well as a form of affectionate celebration.

- <sup>14</sup> “With Thanksgiving, We Are Reconciled for Ministry.” <https://mcccanada.ca/media/resources/10640> (accessed Dec. 22, 2021).
- <sup>15</sup> On MCC’s YouTube channel. MCC Canada celebration: <https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLOLHveNnT5Qcd8WEZqjQ0sH5Gq6XzdIZ-> MCC U.S.: <https://mcc.org/stories/video-excerpts-mcc-celebration-2020>.
- <sup>16</sup> <https://mcc.org/centennial/100-stories>.
- <sup>17</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Iralc7ZDREo> (accessed Dec. 21, 2021).
- <sup>18</sup> <https://mcc.org/get-involved/events/celebration-2020-mcc-100> (accessed Dec. 21, 2021).
- <sup>19</sup> <https://mcc.org/get-involved/events/mcc-west-coast-centennial-celebration> (accessed Dec. 22, 2021).
- <sup>20</sup> <https://mcc.org/get-involved/events/mcc-great-lakes-centennial-service-celebration-livestream>; “Order of Worship,” <https://mcc.org/media/resources/9734> (accessed Dec. 22, 2021).
- <sup>21</sup> This service’s text included segments of the worship resources prepared by MCC staff, and the segment on MCC’s historical beginnings (pp. 4–6) was compiled by Mary Raber (Mennonite Central Committee, n.d.).
- <sup>22</sup> <https://mcc.org/centennial/100-stories/weve-come-far-faith> (accessed Dec. 22, 2021).
- <sup>23</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6sfRE7IsboE> (accessed Dec. 22, 2021).
- <sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, at 1:06:50.
- <sup>25</sup> The spoken text was largely taken from Mennonite Central Committee n.d., 3.
- <sup>26</sup> For Williams (1999, xiii–xvi), the communicative movement concerns the articulation and commendation of the gospel with the use of rhetoric drawn from the wider environment. The critical movement is a renewed interrogation of the adequacy of categories and language. The celebratory movement involves a “fullness of vision” and is rightly considered the starting place for theology.
- <sup>27</sup> For an extended discussion of this ideology of “guesthood” as it is enacted in MCC Indonesia, see Fountain (2011b).
- <sup>28</sup> A critique of “Constantinianism”—the desire for Christians to wield the coercive power of the state—has been an important feature of prominent strands of Mennonite theology at least since John Howard Yoder’s early work on the subject in the 1960s.

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