

COUNCIL OF MISSION BOARD SECRETARIES: AN EXPERIMENT IN INTERAGENCY COORDINATION

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The driving force which led to the founding of a forum for consultation among the Mennonite and Brethren in Christ mission agencies and, in turn, between this group and the Mennonite Central Committee (MCC) was the uneasy relationship between the several mission boards and MCC as the pan-denominational relief and service agency.

This tension proved multifaceted. It stemmed, in part, from the inevitable differences which emerge when two organizations collaborate, each with its distinctive tradition, mandate, policies, constituency and ethos. Another source of tension was lack of clarity and unity concerning a philosophy of Christian service. Some parts of the MCC constituency were more deeply affected by the Fundamentalist perspective, which made a sharp separation between proclamation and service—and discounted service as a form of Christian witness. Other parts had been more open to some of the emphases of the Social Gospel movement, which, in its extreme form, elevated service to top priority. Although the constituency consistently rejected both of these extremes, nonetheless reactions tended to be conditioned by influences from these two poles.

BACKGROUND

Mennonite and Brethren in Christ churches took their first steps to organize for mission—both foreign and domestic—toward the end of the nineteenth century, the heyday of Western colonialism and a period of rapid advance by missions from the West. This advance was marked by a clear sense of “territory” governed through comity agreements. By 1911 all of the larger groups had formed official mission boards, and two inter-Mennonite boards were founded.¹ Especially in the case of the missions sent to central India during 1898-1900, the initial phase focused on providing emergency relief, since a massive famine gripped India at this time.

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¹ See survey by Wilbert R. Shenk, “Growth Through Mission,” in *Mennonite World Handbook*, ed. Paul N. Kraybill (Lombard, Ill.: Mennonite World Conference, 1978), 23-31; and Melvin Gingerich, “North American Mennonite Outreach 1890-1965,” *MQR*, XXXIX (1965), 262-79.

In 1920 another organizational development took place. The several Mennonite relief committees which were sending aid to Russia decided to join efforts and thus formed the Mennonite Central Committee. Several features marked this innovation. First, it was inter-Mennonite, bringing together all of the larger Mennonite groups plus a number of smaller ones in order to send assistance to the people in Russia. Second, MCC was organized as a specialist agency to deliver emergency relief assistance. Third, MCC was organized to serve in an area where no constituent mission board had worked and where there was no prospect of ever sending a mission. Fourth, this was conceived to be a temporary step in response to a particular situation. In the course of the years, however, each time it was felt that MCC should be disbanded, a new need arose which required its continuation.

The Mennonite Church had kept its own relief committee intact throughout these years. During 1937-40 the Mennonite Relief Committee had fielded a team of six volunteers to serve the needs of victims of the Spanish Civil War.²

In 1939, with the world already headed for world war, it was apparent that the churches would require major structures to administer programs for conscientious objectors to perform alternative service as well as aid the victims of war.

Up to this time few questions had been raised concerning the relationship between the mission agencies and MCC as a relief agency. However, Orie O. Miller, executive secretary of both MCC and Eastern Mennonite Board of Missions and Charities of Lancaster Mennonite Conference, called attention to incipient problems in relating MCC's foreign relief work to that of the constituent groups' missions overseas at the annual MCC meeting in December 1943. Miller was concerned to forestall problems by taking appropriate steps in advance. That discussion produced agreement that a spiritual ministry and full-scale mission work ought to be encouraged as follow-up.

The Mennonite Church began laying plans in 1943 to conduct a voluntary service (VS) program. Beginning in the summer of 1944 several summer VS programs were carried out, and by 1946 this led to a regular VS program. When MCC also decided to launch a voluntary service program, the Mennonite Church requested that MCC not conduct such a program on its behalf or with Mennonite Church resources. Parallel programs were bound to lead to tensions among agencies which depended on the same supporting churches for workers and funds. Only wise statesmanship could avoid costly confrontation. But there was no immediate follow-up to Miller's appeal.

Meanwhile, within MCC itself tensions had emerged. Workers commissioned to serve "In the Name of Christ" found themselves confronted with

2 "Mennonite Relief and Service Committee, *ME*, III, 635-37.

calls to minister to spiritual needs, yet they worked under the constraint of a mandate focused on meeting material and physical needs only. This produced frustration within the MCC ranks.

By 1949 MCC was already several years into a massive relief program in Europe. With the emergency phase coming to an end MCC faced the question of what the focus of the next stage should be. MCC requested several Mennonite and Brethren in Christ mission boards to assist in a study of the future of MCC's work in Europe. Underlying this action was the assumption that the mission boards were the proper channels for planning programs of church extension.

A delegation of six representatives of Mennonite and Brethren in Christ mission boards participated with MCC leaders in this study in Europe from July 29 to August 14, 1950. Four Mennonite mission agencies had already established or would soon establish mission programs in Europe in addition to the continuing MCC program.

Also in 1950 the MCC Peace Section convened a consultation at Winona Lake, Indiana, including representatives of Mennonite mission agencies, to hammer out a statement of the theological basis for peace witness broadly acceptable to all elements in the Mennonite and Brethren in Christ family.

In 1955 the MCC Peace Section sent Melvin and Verna Gingerich to Japan on a two-year assignment as peace missionaries. By that time four Mennonite and Brethren in Christ missions were at work in Japan. Eventually it became clear that the missions were not agreed concerning the tactic of bringing a peace witness specialist. Indeed the Mennonite Brethren articulated a position opposing it. After the Gingeriches returned to the United States, Melvin met with the staff of the Mennonite Brethren Board of Missions at Hillsboro, Kansas. The MBs outlined clearly the basis of their opposition to what the Peace Section was attempting to do. They argued that peace is integral to the Christian gospel and should not be separated from the total discipling process that is to go on in the life of the church. They felt that bringing in a specialist in peace, from outside their own mission, created a wrong dichotomy.³

In 1957 the MCC Relief Study Committee of the Eastern Mennonite Board of Missions and Charities produced a report which affirmed the validity of a Christian relief ministry but revealed apprehension about certain matters.⁴ It was taken as axiomatic that proclamation of the gospel is a function of the church. The report insisted that MCC was not the church but a "community of denominations." MCC's character therefore precluded its functioning as a

3 Correspondence: Melvin Gingerich to J. Harold Sherk (MCC Peace Section), Mar. 6, 1958; Waldo Hiebert (Mennonite Brethren Board of General Welfare and Public Relations) to Melvin Gingerich, Apr. 14, 1958; Melvin Gingerich to Waldo Hiebert, Sept. 25, 1958.

4 Eastern Mennonite Board of Missions and Charities, 1957.

mission whose mandate is to found churches. Yet the report also accepted the principle that relief service ought to be carried out cooperatively between the mission boards and the relief agency.

After this formulation was accepted, the crucial question then became: How do we determine when an emergency situation has passed and a program has moved into the phase of long-term rehabilitation and development? The underlying assumption was that opportunity for proclaiming the gospel is minimal during an emergency, while rehabilitation and development programs open the way for a full-fledged Christian witness. At this stage it was felt, responsibility should be transferred to a mission. What was needed was to determine as early as possible when the emergency phase had passed and the rehabilitation phase had started, in order to place full program responsibility with a mission rather than a "nonchurch" relief agency.

Both the Eastern Board report and Mennonite Brethren response to the Peace Section program in Japan implicitly recognized MCC's ecclesiastical status to be of fundamental importance in working through program relationships. MCC did not openly disagree with this interpretation. Indeed it was at MCC's initiative that the mission boards were invited to give counsel with regard to the future of program in Europe. The mission boards remained apprehensive over the difficulty of establishing and maintaining theological integrity and accountability. Although there were several well-established examples of inter-Mennonite mission agencies which had founded churches, no one—from any side—suggested a means of safeguarding the theological integrity of a relief agency. The unstated assumption was that this issue simply could not be addressed.

The years immediately following the end of World War II in 1945 saw rapid expansion of Mennonite and Brethren in Christ programs, both through mission agencies and relief and service programs. By 1957 pressures were mounting to create a vehicle through which problems and issues affecting relationships might be ironed out, information about each other might be shared and certain tasks carried out together; for both missions and service were strongly affirmed by the same supporting constituency. It was up to the program agencies to smooth out working relations and synchronize policies.

COUNCIL OF MISSION BOARD SECRETARIES FORMED

The founding meeting of the Council of Mission Board Secretaries (COMBS) took place on May 15, 1958, but this event was interwoven with other initiatives and was hardly as clear-cut and decisive as this factual report might suggest.

On December 14, 1956, and January 25, 1957, the MCC Executive Committee, the Peace Section and the secretaries from the constituent mission boards met to discuss a proposal that Paul Peachey, a member of the Peace

Section and a professor of sociology at Eastern Mennonite College, had made for a "Joint Mission of Christian Testimony." Peachey's plan was designed to be a direct response to heightened East-West tensions at the time of Russia's occupation of Hungary. It called for delegations of church leaders to make representation to governments in order to appeal for fresh peace initiatives. The January 25 meeting agreed to refer the proposal to the mission boards for counsel, "that, in any such mission, the total witness involved in the Anabaptist vision should be kept in view. . . ."

As noted above, during this year the Eastern Board was engaged in drafting a report by its own Relief Study committee. The Mennonite Brethren, critical of the Peace Section's work in Japan, reported that they would not participate in the proposed "Joint Mission of Christian Testimony." MCC called for a study meeting to be held the following year on January 24, 1958, around the theme "Relationship of the MCC Relief and Service Program and Mennonite Missions." At this meeting the MCC chairman, C. N. Hostetter, Jr., spoke on the "Function and Scope of MCC," and four mission board representatives responded to the theme—A. E. Janzen, Paul N. Kraybill, J. D. Graber and Andrew R. Shelly.⁵

The mission agencies "grew up" during the "imperial" period, when great emphasis was placed on territory as defined by comity arrangements. Now they were confronted with an agency whose formation was in a different context and which had accumulated few ongoing obligations to local churches and institutions. MCC was an agency mobilized to respond to human need in a world where the mass media daily reminded the public of all sorts of human tragedies. The threat this posed to the mission boards was candidly faced in these responses. A. E. Janzen said it was "the conviction of the Mennonite Brethren Board of Foreign Missions that in certain areas MCC has and is by circumstances extending its activity beyond the scope of its purpose and that this factor is beginning to work negatively upon MCC and the MB church activities."⁶ J. D. Graber emphasized that "Mennonites believe in the unity of faith and life." Historically, Mennonite missionaries had consistently engaged in both proclamation by word and demonstration of the gospel by deed. But Graber criticized the facile assumption which he heard being made that a relief or service program naturally paves the way for the founding of a church. He asserted, "I would not agree that this points up a function of MCC in its mission board relationship, i.e., that MCC should actively seek out places in the

⁵ C. N. Hostetter's address was subsequently published as "MCC—Its Scope and Function," *Report* (Akron, Pa.: MCC, Summer 1959), 8-11. Paul N. Kraybill's response was published as "The Relationship of the Mennonite Central Committee Relief and Service Program and Mennonite Missions," *MQR*, XXXIII (1959), 60-68. The other responses were not published.

⁶ Statement by A. E. Janzen, "M.B. Position Towards the Relationship of MCC Relief and Service Program and Mennonite Missions," Jan. 1958, p. 1.

world to start relief and service programs with the expectation that mission boards will follow along.”⁷ Graber rejected this “forerunner” role on both missiological and strategic grounds.

Paul Kraybill and Andrew Shelly urged closer cooperation between the mission boards and MCC, and Shelly identified several criteria for deciding to act in concert. But the board representatives did not speak univocally. Shelly, for example, advocated the forerunner role for MCC, while Graber—speaking out of his long years of experience in India, where the church had been built on a foundation of famine relief—vetoed it.

The Findings Committee Report of this discussion included seven observations and recommendations. Recognizing the growing network of relationships and the potential for overlapping, the report recorded the “need for a facility or a way by which the MCC and constituent mission boards may come into a closer working relationship. To that end we recommend that in the near future the MCC Executive Committee invite representatives of the constituent mission boards to meet with the MCC Executive Committee for the purpose of arriving at a mutual understanding as to working relationships.” The report then went on to observe: “We sensed a conviction that the urgencies of our world missionary task emphasized the value for Mennonite mission boards relating themselves together in a joint consultative body but which preferably would be outside the structure of MCC.” Alluding to some of the criticisms that the board representatives had made in their papers, the Findings Committee urged the MCC Executive Committee to review its personnel policies and administration of material aid programs and to maintain “a program in the context of a Christian witness, guarding against a program becoming only a humanitarian or social effort.”⁸

The initial meeting of mission board secretaries which had been urged by the MCC Study Meeting took place on the following May 15. J. D. Graber was elected chairman pro tem and Paul N. Kraybill, recording secretary, for the meeting. No formal organization was effected at this time. The chairman and secretary pro tem were recognized as the Continuation Committee of the Mission Board Secretaries until the next meeting.

This first meeting was devoted to three items. First, A. J. Metzler, of the Mennonite Publishing House, reported on literature needs worldwide. Second, the mission secretaries discussed how they might organize “a continuing means of fellowship and sharing with an emphasis on avoiding any formal organization and the preservation of the distinctive emphasis of each par-

7 J. D. Graber, “Mennonite Central Committee and Mission Board Relationship,” Jan. 1958, p. 3.

8 MCC Study Meeting, Findings Committee Report, Jan. 24, 1958.

ticular group.”⁹ Thus they enunciated a basic principle which would govern future relationships. The third matter was to respond to a request from William T. Snyder, MCC executive secretary, that the secretaries discuss the concerns which arose out of the January 24 MCC Study Meeting. The group identified five themes: MCC’s role, the relation of relief and witness, the problem of social service, mission occupancy and strategy, and personnel. But this response did little more than summarize what was already contained in the four papers which had been delivered at the January 24 meeting.¹⁰

On the following day, May 16, the mission secretaries and the MCC Executive Committee met in conjoint session. This pattern of meeting—the mission secretaries alone on the first day and with the MCC Executive Committee on the second—was followed until 1969. Increasingly, it came to be recognized that this awkward arrangement should be abandoned in favor of a meeting of mission secretaries and their administrator counterparts from the MCC staff.

In the conjoint meeting of May 16 the focal issues were the relationships between the mission boards and MCC, and the statement of concerns which the mission board representatives made in response to the January 24 MCC Study Meeting. William T. Snyder urged the mission boards to organize themselves into a “Council of Mennonite and Affiliated Mission Boards” that would meet regularly and function as the primary clearing house for mission-MCC concerns.

MCC continued to take the lead in developing this relationship with the mission boards. On July 17 William T. Snyder and C. N. Hostetter, Jr., representing MCC, met at Salunga, Pennsylvania, with J. D. Graber and Paul N. Kraybill, representing the mission boards, as called for by the May 17 MCC Executive Committee action “for consultation regarding the next steps in joint consideration.”¹¹ One of the conclusions reached in the July 17 meeting was “that it is necessary to study continually the subject of mission-relief relations including mission occupancy and strategy in order that new occasions in both the mission and MCC work be understood and a clear sense of direction be realized.”¹² This group then prepared an agenda for meetings of the mission secretaries, conjoint mission secretaries/MCC, and the MCC Executive Committee to be held September 18-20, 1958.

When the mission secretaries met on September 18, their agenda included a mix of items referred to them by MCC and matters with potential interagency interest. The major item on which MCC sought mission board counsel was the possibility of sending a delegation to China. The mission secretaries

9 Report of meeting of Mennonite Mission Board secretaries, May 15, 1958, p. 1. The informality of the group was reflected in their hesitation to call the record of their meeting “minutes.”

10 *Ibid.*, Exhibit II.

11 MCC Executive Committee, May 17, 1958, minute 10.

12 William T. Snyder memorandum, July 23, 1958.

replied with a four-point memorandum emphasizing the importance of such a delegation being made up of non-U.S. citizens and preferably comprised of individuals of Asian origin. MCC also presented a fresh "Peace Witness Proposal," which went beyond the program being carried out in Japan. Orie O. Miller had drafted the proposal during his visit to East Asia earlier in the year and "recommended to continue in longer-term expansion planning from present Tokyo base." Miller predicated his proposal on financial participation in the project by the mission boards and designed it to encompass the region from Japan and Korea in the northeast to India in the west and Indonesia and Australia in the south and southeast. The mission secretaries reacted with considerable reserve ("Peace witness is a part of the total Gospel witness. We have questions about the danger of this type of program tending to separate the peace testimony from the rest of the witness") coupled with a note of repentance ("We recognize that as Mission Boards we have not given as much emphasis as we might to peace").¹³

The secretaries spent time on the substantive issue of missionary training at the college and seminary levels.¹⁴ Erland Waltner represented the Associated Mennonite Biblical Seminaries. A. J. Metzler again spoke to the group about literature needs. Although the primary relationship for the mission secretaries would continue to be with MCC, periodic consultation with a variety of other agencies and institutions became a regular feature.

The next meeting of the mission secretaries took place on April 30, 1959. On the organizational level they dealt with two matters which began to define the group's identity. First, the committee clarified its role in endorsing a proposal. It was concerned that endorsement not be misconstrued. It was agreed that the committee's imprimatur "should not be interpreted as endorsement of any specific project but rather of the general principle of special missionary training or whatever the case may be."¹⁵ In such cases the endorsement was given by the committee as a whole and not particular boards. The committee also acted to regularize its organizational procedures by choosing a chairman and secretary on alternate years, thus providing for both rotation and some continuity.

But the two major items were matters that MCC referred to the committee: the role of MCC in interchurch aid and a Peace Section proposal. The former resulted in a basic statement of guidelines.¹⁶ With this statement COMBS encouraged MCC to render service through other churches. The guidelines counseled MCC to respect existing lines of relationship between missions and churches and to respond in ways that would help church groups to develop

13 COMBS, Sept. 18, 1958, minute 15.

14 *Ibid.*, minute 13 and Exhibit IV.

15 COMBS, Apr. 30, 1959, minute 5.

16 Conjoint MCC/COMBS, minute 14.

self-responsibility and would "stimulate the church to actively seek to work out its own problems and needs." The statement argued that "interchurch aid should seek to broaden the vision of the receiving church, stimulating it to evangelism and sharing rather than selfishness and dependence on others. An interchurch aid program is not brought to fruition until the motivation and convictions of the givers are perpetuated in the recipients." The committee cordially noted: "We are happy to encourage a limited amount of interchurch aid as a part of our church's total participation in the church universal, particularly as and where the witness of the church can spiritually strengthen and enrich other groups." This measured response to the ecumenical challenge was consistent with the position that most of the mission boards were taking toward cooperation with other Christian bodies.

The other major concern was the role and mandate of the Peace Section, especially as this related to Japan and to Asia more generally. The Peace Section had met on February 10 and had drawn up a fresh proposal to the mission secretaries with regard to peace witness in Japan. In an effort to overcome the continuing objections from the Mennonite Brethren, the Peace Section urged "the boards themselves to carry the peace witness through a combined approach . . . and independent of the MCC/Peace Section."¹⁷ The secretaries responded with several "guiding principles that might clarify relationships and procedures." They acknowledged that it is in the purview of the Mennonite and Brethren in Christ missions and churches in every country to "integrate the message of peace with the total message of the church." Any peace witness, they felt, must be closely coordinated with mission boards and churches.

With respect to Japan the secretaries identified several alternatives: (1) continue the peace witness as a Peace Section project but in close relationship with the mission boards; (2) make it a project jointly sponsored by the mission boards and the Peace Section; (3) let it become a project sponsored by one board and the Peace Section on behalf of the total Mennonite constituency; and (4) have one board assume responsibility for the project by appointing someone to staff it. The committee endorsed the Peace Section's judgment that a peace witness in Japan should be continued, but they felt the need to take the matter back to their respective boards for counsel.

In the conjoint MCC/COMBS meeting immediately following, the need for broader vision with regard to peace witness was underscored in a paper that Melvin Gingerich delivered on "The Need for a Peace Witness in the Orient."¹⁸ Gingerich set the challenge within the context of the Asian revolution, which derived its inspiration, in part, from the revolt against the West's

17 COMBS, Apr. 30 - May 1, 1959, minute 16 and Exhibit II.

18 Conjoint MCC/COMBS, May 1, 1959, minute 7 and Exhibit II.

long domination and exploitation of Asians. This climate of revolt defined the context in which North American missionaries had to work. Gingerich pointed out, for example, that American missionaries in Japan labored under a cloud of suspicion that they were secret agents of the American government. In view of the prevailing misconceptions Gingerich issued a challenge:

Needless to say this requires from us as Christ's representatives in the Orient a very clear presentation of our peace convictions as part of our evangelistic message. To preach Christ is to invite the unconverted to come to Him for salvation and to become His disciples. To extend the call to faith and discipleship to the unconverted demands that we explain what is involved in being a disciple. We cannot clarify discipleship without explaining what it means to take up the cross and follow Christ in all human relationships. This involves presenting Him as the Prince of Peace when we call for faith in Him.¹⁹

Gingerich buttressed his challenge with a variety of observations, all of which reinforced his "conviction that we and others who share this understanding of Christ's way of peace are confronting one of the unique opportunities of history." Gingerich made a forceful plea.

The conjoint meeting endorsed the visit that William T. Snyder and Paul N. Kraybill were to make to Asia, including Japan, shortly thereafter and urged them to gather insights which might lead to a more workable pattern of relationship and program.

At this meeting Oris O. Miller also put before the mission secretaries his vision of a pan-African Mennonite and Brethren in Christ coordinated program, with Leopoldville, Congo (now Kinshasa, Zaire), "as prospective center and base." His challenge was that the missions "meet to consider ways and means to mutual help in the larger confronting tasks."

Several things resulted from this challenge. Miller had successfully placed Africa on the Mennonite and Brethren in Christ agenda for the next decade. Eventually, in response to this suggestion, a meeting of African Mennonite and Brethren in Christ leaders was held. In addition Miller proposed that a peace witness effort be initiated in Africa "(1) for the Mennonite Churches and missions in Africa, as they might be interested; (2) for studying of general conditions in Africa which might affect the peace witness and (3) giving a larger peace witness."²⁰

Immediately following the April 30 and May 1 meetings Snyder and Kraybill left for Asia. They met with mission leaders in Osaka, Japan, to discuss the future of the Peace Section's program. This meeting provided occasion to discuss the substantial differences in outlook between the Peace Sec-

19 *Ibid.*, Exhibit II, p. 2.

20 Conjoint MCC/COMBS, May 1, 1959, minute 18.

tion and the missions. The Peace Section argued "that a peace witness is needed in the Orient in order to strengthen our Mennonite testimony and also to witness to the larger body of Christendom." This challenge seemed especially urgent in light of the long association between Christendom and militarism, a matter on which the churches had been notably silent: "We as Mennonites have an obligation to share our convictions with other Christians in order to stimulate conviction and help to strengthen the impact of Christianity."²¹

The missions agreed with this basic point but approached the matter largely from their local perspectives. The four Mennonite and Brethren in Christ groups were not cooperating in other ways, and some harbored fears about openly identifying "peace" with the message of evangelism. Without making the point explicit the Peace Section was challenging this dualistic thinking which separates the gospel from ethics and salvation from discipleship. But when the matter was resolved it was done through organizational compromise rather than theological discourse. Three of the boards working in Japan (Brethren in Christ, General Conference and Mennonite Churches) formed a Japan Peace Section Advisory Committee, and one of the boards was charged with the responsibility of appointing a missionary to assume leadership for the peace witness.²²

At the request of MCC Paul Kraybill, representing the mission boards, had also visited Korea to evaluate the potential for some form of longer-term Mennonite witness. By this time MCC and the Eastern Mennonite Board of Missions and Charities had reached an agreement that the latter would carry on a conventional mission program in Vietnam, while MCC would continue its efforts with relief supplies and medical services in association with the Evangelical Church of Vietnam (Christian and Missionary Alliance).

The next initiative came from the Peace Section but represented the culmination of various discussions, including the mission secretaries' April 30 meeting, about sending a peace mission to Africa. The proposal was to commission Henry N. Hostetter, mission secretary for the Brethren in Christ, to a year-long "itinerant peace witness ministry" among constituent churches throughout Africa. The proposal went on to say, "This service is understood to be in connection with other spiritual ministry including Bible conference work and evangelistic work as the churches may desire."²³ COMBS adopted the proposal and convened a special joint committee of mission secretaries and Peace Section representatives in March to work out the full program for Hostetter's Africa Peace Mission.

21 Paul N. Kraybill report to COMBS, May 1959.

22 COMBS, Sept. 30, 1959, minutes 5, 6 and 7.

23 Conjoint COMBS/MCC, Nov. 6, 1959, minute 18.

At the May 5, 1960, meeting the group discussed and responded to a request from the Mennonite World Conference (MWC) Executive Committee for advice in organizing the 1962 assembly at Kitchener, Ontario. COMBS urged MWC to provide for full and equal participation in the conference by "Mennonite Conferences throughout the world" and to "give serious consideration to the missionary implications of the conference theme and [see] that every attempt be made to define missions as a concern of the world-wide church and not as a North American or European enterprise, i.e., mission rather than missions." COMBS suggested that sectional meetings be organized to enable those interested to pursue topics in depth. For the mission section the group asked that the following topics be included: interchurch relationships, nationalism and partnership.²⁴

During this meeting two secretaries reported on recent developments of wider interest. Vernon Sprunger noted that the urgent issue before the Congo Inland Mission (later Africa Inter-Mennonite Mission) was the integration of mission and church. Out of his recent visit to India J. D. Graber could report that, after nine years' experience of working with an integrated structure, the church had asked the mission board to remove responsibility for medical and educational institutions from the church and to create alternative structures. Both of these issues would dominate mission thinking for the next decade.

The group also took note of the impending merger of the International Missionary Council and World Council of Churches and the possible implications this might have for interchurch relations on the various continents. Some constituent groups were active in the National Association of Evangelicals in the United States, and some were members; but several individuals were acquainted with key leaders in both conciliar and nonconciliar camps. The underlying concern was to keep channels open and exert a mediating influence when and where possible.

The Peace Section/peace witness item which had been on nearly every agenda since the first meeting of the mission secretaries in 1958 continued to play a dominant role. But another initiative was also emerging: regional associations of constituent churches. In the conjoint meeting of COMBS and the MCC Executive Committee on May 6, 1960, J. D. Graber reported on the "Regional East Asia Conference of Mennonites." The minutes do not define which churches and countries were encompassed in this conference, but Graber did make clear that there was no interest in anything other than a loose fellowship arrangement and that it was to be seen as "inter-church" and not "inter-mission board." The primary object, it was felt, should be to encourage greater interchange among the churches and throughout the region.

²⁴ COMBS, May 5, 1960, minute 6.

According to the procedure adopted earlier, a new secretary for the mission secretaries had been elected at the May 5 meeting. Apparently this change had resulted in some loss of momentum. The group did not meet again until the following May. The minutes note cryptically: "A request had come to the Continuation Committee, suggesting that consideration be given to the desirability of providing for as much continuity as possible in the organization of the group."²⁵ An ad hoc group was asked to propose a more satisfactory organizational model.

Members introduced several new topics during the meeting: the best response to communist advance, contacts that might be made with the churches in Cuba, witness to the Muslim world, implications of the Peace Corps for missionary service, and the relationship to the European Mennonite Evangelization Committee (EMEK). The group responded to an invitation to participate in planning a Brethren-Friends-Mennonite conference on "Peace Witness in Christian Missions" to be held in 1962 by appointing Paul N. Kraybill to the planning committee.

At the conjoint COMBS/MCC Executive Committee meeting on May 11-12 Henry Hostetter reported on his Africa assignment. Out of that experience he confirmed that it was essential to coordinate any peace witness with "the life and witness of the entire church" and recommended that the next step be the convening of a conference of leaders of African Mennonite and Brethren in Christ churches "to discuss the meaning of discipleship in today's Africa." The body assigned responsibility for arranging such a conference to the Eastern Mennonite Board of Missions and Charities through Paul Kraybill.

During this meeting MCC briefed the mission secretaries on plans to develop an international education program in sub-Saharan Africa and the Caribbean under Robert S. Kreider's direction. MCC was developing this idea in consultation with the Council of Mennonite Colleges and also sought the goodwill and endorsement of the mission agencies.

Peace Section initiatives continued to intersect with that of the mission boards. Within Japan the transition had been made to a peace witness staffed by a missionary and administered by one of the mission boards with assistance from the Peace Section. Meanwhile the Peace Section was promoting the Asia-wide peace program introduced several years earlier. Once again this was producing some misunderstanding and resistance from the side of the mission boards. In their May 20, 1961, meeting the Peace Section acknowledged: ". . . we may have projected too far our own considerations in this matter without adequate consultation with the mission secretaries."²⁶ In effect, the Peace Section recognized that it had to start over if it was to win mission boards' support for this venture.

25 COMBS, May 11, 1961, minute 15.

26 Conjoint MCC/COMBS, Sept. 15, 1961, Exhibit I.

At the May 10, 1962, meeting a more formal structuring for the mission secretaries' organization was finally introduced. The name adopted was "Council of Mission Board Secretaries." Membership was defined as follows: "The Council of Mission Board Secretaries shall be made up of members designated by the Mennonite and Brethren in Christ Mission Boards, administering mission programs overseas, choosing to cooperate in council activities. Each board may appoint two members on the council." The purposes were fourfold: communication between mission boards, sharing experiences and developing working relationships as desired, reporting program planning and development so as to avoid duplication, and serving as a channel for conjoint meetings with MCC.

The council placed clear limits on its authority. Existing essentially to counsel and advise, it had no power to make decisions which would bind individual boards. The guidelines called for three officers: chairman, vice-chairman and secretary. In the interest of greater continuity the secretary was eligible to serve multiple terms.

Earlier in the year, from March 28 to April 1, the study conference which Henry Hostetter recommended following his six-month visit to Africa was held at Limuru, Kenya, under the theme "The Christian in Modern Africa."²⁷ The conference statement recognized the value that such a continental gathering can have, and the recommendations included a call for a follow-up meeting to be held in Rhodesia within two years. The conference also called for establishment of a continuation committee comprised of one representative from each participating church. Visitation between churches was an immediate goal. The conference emphasized the importance of strengthening convictions concerning discipleship and peace. No further action was taken to create a more permanent organization in Africa.

27 The Limuru Study Conference served a catalytic function by awakening Mennonite and Brethren in Christ churches in Africa to one another. Donald R. Jacobs observed "One thing came clear at the meetings and that is that the Africans are keen on a closer fellowship of Mennonite and Brethren in Christ Churches right across the Continent. We Europeans tend to think more locally. But we must give them the ball and let them carry it" (COMBS correspondence, Jacobs to Paul N. Kraybill, Apr. 3, 1962). Elmer Neufeld had reported that not everyone favored the gathering of people from such great distances. The Mennonite Brethren took the position "that they should rather emphasize fellowship with evangelical Christians in their immediate church areas" (Neufeld to Edgar Metzler, Apr. 10, 1962). Later John B. Kliewer, MB missionary, reported to Elmer Neufeld that "the conference in Kenya last year made a great impression upon Paul Nganga, who was privileged to attend. His report in turn made an important impression upon our church conference. I believe this is something which could be of great blessing to the Mennonite Churches in Africa" (Kliewer, AMBM, to Elmer Neufeld, Oct. 24, 1963). All of this was set against the backdrop of organizing efforts by both the ecumenical All-Africa Conference of Churches and the Association of Evangelicals of Africa and Madagascar. In addition, every mission and church was caught up in the sociopolitical maelstrom sweeping the continent. Elmer Neufeld commented following Limuru "There is obviously much unfinished business in the whole matter of mission-church integration" (Neufeld to Metzler, Apr. 10, 1962).

During this time a consultation process was set in motion concerning the launching of new programs of witness in Muslim countries. MCC's involvement in Jordan seemed to provide one opening, and several mission boards considered this possibility.

In May 1962 MCC submitted to the mission boards the Robert Kreider report and recommendations for establishment of the Teachers Abroad Program (TAP). COMBS responded warmly to "the careful way in which the TAP program has been developed, particularly in light of clearance of relationships to mission and church areas overseas." COMBS also reiterated cautions about avoiding competition in recruiting workers and stated that Mennonite mission institutions were not to be served by TAP. COMBS named two representatives to the advisory committee of MCC's TAP.

Up to this point we have been tracing key developments, relationships and dynamics. After four years of experience the council adopted guidelines. Meetings became more patterned and certain issues kept recurring. The focal point remained what it had been from the beginning—the mission board-MCC relationship.

In the December 13, 1962, meeting the council observed:

The past five years experience in a new relationship between the boards and MCC was noted with much appreciation. It was commonly agreed however that in light of our experience and in light of continuing administrative relationships in areas where mission and relief interests merge, that we should explore further with our boards and MCC the possibility of a study or review of mission-relief relationships. We hold a common conviction that our relief work should maintain a spiritual witness; yet not be a mission agency. Our boards are active in programs that combine a service emphasis. In a sense these are paradoxes and a careful, periodic review of this philosophy and its implications for administrative procedures and relationships would seem to be in order.²⁸

Subsequently the conjoint MCC/COMBS meeting considering this matter appointed a committee of four to plan for this study. The study conference was set for May 7-8, 1964, under the rubric "Relief, Service, and Missions Relationships Overseas." Ninety-seven representatives of the Mennonite and Brethren in Christ agencies, conferences, boards and colleges participated. The formal fruit of the conference was a policy statement which addressed "Overseas Program Relationships." The statement brought together several observations: every Christian must witness by word and deed; when service is rooted in the gospel, it will bear the fruit of the gospel; MCC has been thrust into roles and relationships with Mennonite churches overseas, and it is legitimate that MCC be the channel between North America and those churches; regional associations are emerging in Asia, Africa and Latin

28 COMBS, Dec. 13, 1962, minute 8.

America and symbolize the desire for new forms of fellowship regionally and internationally; and new MCC programs like TAP may signal closer integration of MCC and mission board programs.²⁹

In light of those changing realities and relationships COMBS defined the role of its constituent agencies: to provide for long-term follow-up to MCC work where required; to develop consultative relationships with emerging regional groups in Asia, Africa and Latin America as well as with EMEK; to plan area conferences and sponsor fellowship team visitation; to share program, policies and ideas within COMBS and consult with MCC.

The third part of the statement discussed four ways that mission boards might cooperate with MCC in appointing workers for evangelistic or pastoral ministry within MCC programs. The policy statement gathered up some of the learnings out of the previous several years of discussion and brought clarity and order to understandings at that time. It remains a key document in the evolving mission board-MCC relationship.

COMBS now shifted the focus of its energy for the next several years to the development of regional associations in Asia, Africa and Latin America. The Limuru Conference, noted above, laid the groundwork for a follow-up meeting. This took place March 3-10, 1965, at Bulawayo, Rhodesia (later Zimbabwe). This group took the name of Africa Mennonite Fellowship but later modified it to Africa Mennonite and Brethren in Christ Fellowship (AMBCF).

With MCC's assistance the churches in India formed the Mennonite Christian Service Fellowship of India (MCSFI) in 1964. At the same time, several leaders in Asia, encouraged by COMBS and MCC, were also dreaming of an Asia Mennonite Conference. P. J. Malagar from India was at the forefront of that vision.³⁰ This group finally met October 12-18, 1971, when the First Asia Mennonite Conference was held at Dhamtari, M.P., India, around the theme "Good News for Asia Today." A total of 270 delegates from India, other Asian countries, Europe and North America participated.

The occasion for representatives from Latin America to meet was different from that of either Asia or Africa. Urie Bender, as literature consultant for the Mennonite Board of Missions, had proposed a consultation to study the need for a literature entity for Spanish-speaking Latin America. COMBS endorsed this idea and pledged administrative and other support for its implementation. The Latin American Mennonite Conference met February 12-18, 1968, in Bogota, Colombia. Although the conference was valued as an occasion for fellowship and sharing of information, the group also made clear that it had no other purpose.

29 COMBS, May 20, 1965, minute 7 and Exhibit III.

30 COMBS, Oct. 15-16, 1964, minute 14.

In 1965 the Council of Mennonite Colleges created an International Education Services (IES) program and appointed Henry Weaver, Jr., as secretary. At that time a new advisory council for international education services, which brought together the advisory council for MCC's TAP and the CMC's new IES, was organized. A consultation, patterned after the 1964 study conference on relief and missions, was held May 26-27, 1966, concerning international education. No ongoing cooperative program emerged out of these efforts, however. Goshen College moved ahead and created its own Study-Service Trimester program.

The next major consultation was one initiated by MCC and sponsored by the Council of Mennonite Colleges, COMBS and MCC on May 26, 1968. The theme was "Hunger and Population Pressures." This consultation gave impetus to MCC's subsequent special program priority of food production and eliminating hunger.

The last consultation of this kind was held May 19-20, 1971, at North Newton, Kansas, on the theme "The Christian Worker in Revolutionary Situations." This meeting took place at a time when the Vietnam crisis consumed much energy. Mission and service workers faced dangerous situations in other parts of the world as well. It was felt that fresh guidelines were needed for the orientation of all workers. Out of that study conference came the first of four policy statements, "Christian Conduct in Situations of Conflict."³¹

The 1964 consultation had proved to be a watershed. The problem which called COMBS into being in 1958 had been resolved on the organizational level—even if the underlying theological and ecclesiological issues had not been fully addressed. With this change in atmosphere and growing security in interagency relationships, the nature of consultation between MCC and COMBS gradually shifted. The focus was increasingly directed away from frictions between MCC and the mission agencies to common goals and challenges. Periodically the policy guidelines adopted in 1964-65 were reviewed.

In October 1968 Paul Kraybill and William Snyder discussed the guidelines again. Snyder observed "that the statement has been the basis of our work during the past four years. Both MCC and the boards' assignments have been part of one witness."³² Snyder called attention to several instances of close collaboration between MCC and a mission board—Zaire, the Middle East, India, Vietnam. But MCC was urging greater integration. What exactly was desired was not spelled out. And the lack of parallelism between COMBS and MCC was a real—though unacknowledged—issue. COMBS was a council of

31 The other statements are "Aid to International Students," "Giving—From the Head with the Heart" and "Christian Conduct and Intelligence Agencies." These are available as pamphlets from the Council of International Ministries.

32 COMBS/CMC/MCC, Oct. 4, 1968, p. 3.

autonomous agencies. MCC was a program agency in its own right. Neither Snyder nor anyone else could produce the conceptual breakthrough called for.

Nevertheless the matter did not rest. A year later Kraybill and Snyder brought to the conjoint COMBS/MCC meeting a communication from the MCC Executive Committee calling for a review of the pattern of meetings so as to avoid repetition and overlap. Specifically, this called for (1) dropping the annual conjoint COMBS/MCC Executive Committee meeting in favor of ad hoc consultations devoted to special themes; (2) replacing COMBS with an overseas ministries council to be made up of administrators; (3) a semiannual meeting with the purposes outlined in the present COMBS guidelines but rewritten to encompass all North American Mennonite and Brethren in Christ ministries overseas; and (4) proportional membership based on the number of appointed workers overseas. In the ensuing discussion some COMBS members argued that for symbolic reasons important to their constituencies the present arrangement should be continued. The following day the conjoint COMBS/MCC meeting unanimously agreed "to continue COMBS as a separate organization, drop the meeting with the MCC Executive, and meet semi-annually for a joint session with MCC overseas administrators together with other agency representatives, followed by a separate session of COMBS as desired."³³ For the time being, the matter was thus laid to rest.

During that discussion one other idea surfaced which later became an important feature of the organization. Paul Longacre, of the MCC staff, suggested that regional task forces would be a way to provide for better coordination of activities and interests in the various regions. As a matter of fact, one such task force was already meeting at that time. Although not officially recognized by COMBS, a Middle East task force met in conjunction with the semiannual meetings of COMBS. This group began to identify issues needing study and encouraged Frank H. Epp to do research and writing. Three books by Epp resulted from that ad hoc committee's interests: *Whose Land Is Palestine?* (Eerdmans, 1970), *The Palestinians* (Herald Press, 1976) and *The Israelis* (Herald Press, 1980).

In 1969 the MCC Peace Section was restructured. Two members of COMBS were included in the review committee. When the new structure was adopted, it called for COMBS to name two representatives to serve on the Peace Section. This move assured full participation by the mission boards in Peace Section planning and decision making, noticeably bridging the gulf which had existed between the mission agencies and the Peace Section.

COMBS-MCC continued to play a role in relation to the work of Mennonite World Conference. Following the pattern established at Kitchener, Ontario, in 1962, Mennonite World Conferences in 1967 and 1972 included a

³³ Conjoint COMBS/MCC, Oct. 3, 1969, minute 10 and Exhibit V.

mission section as a part of the program. COMBS took considerable responsibility for organizing this activity.

Signs of the changing world context continued to appear. The urgency and importance of making international gatherings more representative became a necessity. Following the 1972 World Conference at Curitiba, Brazil, the presidium established a travel fund to ensure greater participation in MWC by non-Western delegates. COMBS became the channel for mission board support for this project. When the presidium met at San Juan, Puerto Rico, in July 1975, discussion focused on the need for revised relationships between the North American and European churches, which had been the sending base for Mennonite missions during the previous 125 years, and the churches of Asia, Africa and Latin America, the majority of which were the product of that missionary sending. Robert L. Ramseyer addressed the presidium on "The Anabaptist Vision and Our World Mission." Takashi Yamada made a response to the Ramseyer presentation.³⁴ The goal was to focus the attention and energies of the church worldwide on the mission of Christ while dealing responsibly and sensitively with obsolete patterns of relationship.

COMBS had come to play three roles by 1970: (1) a context for *consultation*; (2) a vehicle for *joint action*; and (3) a setting for *study*. Although it is less easy to document from the minutes, the missiological leadership of such veteran mission administrators as J. D. Graber, J. B. Toews and Henry N. Hostetter shaped the setting for discussion of the major issues of the day. In this climate certain forms of joint action became possible.

One of the most satisfying cooperative ventures was the Major Medical Pool (overseas). In the December 16, 1965, meeting COMBS took up the question of how to provide coverage for workers who incurred expenses for health care beyond that provided by the usual medical care plans of the COMBS agencies. Several alternatives were considered, but nothing seemed satisfactory. Finally in 1968 the group asked Edgar Stoesz to draft a plan. Stoesz submitted his draft proposal to the conjoint COMBS/MCC meeting on May 8, 1969. The group approved the plan with instruction to Stoesz to visit each agency office and work out certain details. By October of that year the plan was in operation. Through the Major Medical Pool large medical costs were spread out among all member agencies on a pro rata basis. Mennonite Indemnity, Inc., administered the pool gratis.

The passage of time brought changes in administrators in the mission and service agencies. Some of the concerns and viewpoints which had determined policies in the first years were replaced by fresh ideas and interests. For example, the large-scale consultation sponsored by COMBS, MCC and the Coun-

³⁴ The Ramseyer paper and Yamada's response were published in *Mission Focus*, IV (1976), 1-14, and republished in *Anabaptism and Mission*, ed. Wilbert R. Shenk (Scottsdale, Pa.: Herald Press, 1984), 178-201.

cil of Mennonite Colleges between 1964 and 1971 had demonstrated declining value as a vehicle for addressing issues.

The October 9, 1970, COMBS minutes for the first time take note of a Southern Africa task force.³⁵ This group emerged in response to growing concern for Southern Africa. Several COMBS member agencies and MCC commissioned a survey of the region by Donald R. Jacobs, recently returned from East Africa, and James E. Bertsche, serving with Africa Inter-Mennonite Mission in Zaire. MCC already had a contingent of teachers in Botswana, but the Bertsche-Jacobs report and recommendations set the stage for wider Mennonite cooperation in Botswana, Lesotho and Swaziland.³⁶ Later MCC began work in the Transkei also.

In 1972 a group interested in Bangladesh began meeting.³⁷ Bangladesh had experienced devastation through a typhoon that year, and massive emergency programs were needed to help the victims. MCC had been working in Bangladesh and was open to enlarging its program in cooperation with other Mennonite and Brethren in Christ agencies. The Mennonite Brethren Board of Missions/Services general secretary, Vernon R. Wiebe, was eager to explore possible new opportunities which might be administered cooperatively, and helped bring together the several interested agencies for consultation. This committee continued to meet periodically for several years.

Program development in both Bangladesh and Southern Africa provided the occasion for consultation and cooperative program in several instances between mission agencies and MCC. These developments placed demands on the old COMBS structure which it could not easily meet. It was becoming increasingly clear that COMBS as originally set up had met its objectives and that a new forum was needed to serve the present and future needs. The last formal meeting of COMBS was held on October 10, 1974. The following year the group was reorganized into a single forum for consultation among all Mennonite and Brethren in Christ agencies with program interests overseas. The new Council of International Ministries was launched December 7-8, 1976, as successor to COMBS and the COMBS/MCC consultation.

35 COMBS, Oct. 9, 1970, minute 4.

36 Don Jacobs and James Bertsche, "Southern Africa Study," May 1970.

37 COMBS, May 17-18, 1972, minute 24.



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