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# Human rights and the quest for justice and peace

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Thanks to Paul C. Heidebrecht, Director of the Mennonite Central Committee Ottawa Office for compiling this issue of the *Peace Office Newsletter*.

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## Introduction

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by Paul C. Heidebrecht

This is the second issue of the *Peace Office Newsletter* that has focused on the theme of human rights. The July–September issue in 1995 included contributions from theologians alongside perspectives from Southern Africa, China, Mexico, and Burma as it grappled with the question “Are human rights universal?” In the years since, Mennonite Central Committee (MCC) has certainly not resolved that question. At the same time, human rights language has become more commonplace within political discourse and in the media. There are a growing number of academic programs and books on the topic, not to mention organizations and legal frameworks that utilize a rights-based approach. What was once referred to as a movement has become mainstream in much of the world. As one Member of the Parliament of Canada (and committed Christian) recently told me: “If you want to get things done around here, don’t use Sunday School language . . . you need to frame everything using the language of human rights.”

At the same time, there continue to be debates about the appropriateness of a human rights approach. For a variety of reasons this language is still uncomfortable for many both within and beyond MCC. Some remain convinced that human rights fall short of the fullness of what it means to be human as depicted in our theological tradition, or that rights presume an individualistic worldview. And some are suspicious of anything that threatens to subsume particularity and difference, or presumes the superiority of any one worldview.

On the other hand, for many both within and beyond MCC, the language of human rights resonates deeply with their faith convictions. Some argue that it provides a clear way to limit or supersede the power of the nation state as well as other powers that rule our existence. Some have found that it has made it possible to find common cause with other religious traditions in pursuit of justice. And some are convinced that the language of rights is more than a pragmatic second language, but is fully consistent with a biblical perspective.

Given this range of views, it should be no wonder that MCC’s “position” on human rights remains unclear. And given that the contributors to this issue are working in the midst of diverse cultural contexts, it should be no wonder that they provide a variety of perspectives on the use of human rights language. Indeed, they make it clear that lacking a shared or universal understanding of human rights does not preclude the possibility that rights-based language can be helpful in the quest for justice and peace.

The first article by Jennifer Henry describes the way KAIROS unites Canadian churches and church agencies in their work for dignity and rights. Saulo Padilla offers a glimpse into the way MCC’s work in the U.S. is also enhanced by the resources of a rights-based approach.

A concern for human rights has been explicit in MCC’s work in Latin America and the Caribbean for some time, and some of this rich history is captured by Alexis Erkert Depp’s portrayal of the work of Haitian

partners, as well as Bonnie Klassen and Adrienne Wiebe's interviews from Colombia.

In addition, Peter Rempel describes the work of the Winnipeg-based Mennonite Committee on Human Rights, including a visual art exhibit on the right to food. The artwork in this issue of the *Peace Office Newsletter* is courtesy of this exhibit.

The effort to draw upon human rights language in other contexts is a more recent reality, but, as demonstrated by Jim Fine's reporting on the views of MCC's Iraqi partners, it is no less significant. Mulanda Jimmy Juma's article on the Africa Peace Network highlights the way in which human rights language can be consistent with the work of MCC partners even if it is not always made explicit. Finally, Sri Mayasandra's perspective from Asia makes it clear that human rights approaches factor into MCC programming even in contexts where there are concerns about the way they have sometimes been applied.

No doubt readers will be able to think of many other instances where MCC programming addresses human rights both explicitly

and implicitly. To name just one more, a significant priority for MCC's advocacy offices in Ottawa, Washington, and at the United Nations in New York has been to build support for the adoption and full implementation of the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples.

Perhaps some will find the descriptive approach taken in this issue less than satisfying. Collectively, these articles appear to describe the way things are more than prescribe the way they should be. But perhaps the way that MCC holds together a range of perspectives on human rights also has the potential to be normative. As is so often the case within organizations such as MCC, not to mention within the churches to which MCC belongs, our practices often push, prod, and expand our theories rather than the other way around. The question is no longer *whether* or *why* we will use the language of human rights, but *how* we will develop fluency in the many versions of this language in order to use it well.

*Paul C. Heidebrecht is the Director of the MCC Canada Ottawa Office*

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## Ecumenical collaboration in Canada through human rights work

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by Jennifer Henry

**W**omen survivors of rape in the Democratic Republic of the Congo gain legal recourse. An indigenous community in Mexico exercises its choice to oppose mining development. Southern Sudanese vote in a national referendum. Filipino activists are protected from threats of extra-judicial killings. These are some of the diverse contexts in which the human rights program of KAIROS is involved. KAIROS is an ecumenical organization that, since 2001, has united eleven Canadian churches and church agencies (including Mennonite Central Committee Canada) in faithful action for justice.

KAIROS defends human rights in both principle and practice as it strives to better the lives of people around the globe. This places KAIROS shoulder to shoulder with labor organizations, people's movements, legal advocates, United Nations (UN) committees and many governments. On the surface, international human rights legislation can

appear to be a purely secular framework. And yet, when we dig deeper, we find a great resonance with the Christian faith.

After the Second World War, acting on their own faithful convictions, many Christians worked alongside the Jewish community and those of other faiths and played a pivotal role in shaping the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. For them and for Christian activists today, human rights are an expression of commitment to the dignity of all people made in the image of God. That dignity is, as Robert and Alice Evans assert in *Human Rights: A Dialogue Between the First and Third Worlds*, "a reality as a consequence of God's good creation and never-ending love." As people called to further God's justice and love, we recognize and defend the dignity of all persons by affirming norms required for a full human life.

Human rights legislation includes requirements for survival—what we might call basic rights, and also that which is required for life in its fullness—participation and relationship. The framework of human rights legislation is not dissimilar to the peaceful vision of Micah 4:4: “they shall all sit under their own vines and under their own fig trees, and no one shall make them afraid.” Might not the twin covenants of human rights—economic, social and cultural rights, along with civil and political rights—be modern expressions of the dual concepts at the heart of this ancient story?

Human rights are a tool for the betterment of human life, a tool that might comfortably be embraced by Christians as consistent with our core values. When we promote and defend human rights we are transformed from those who seemingly “bestow,” as in the concept of charity, to those who recognize and affirm the dignity which only God gives. When we join with women in Colombia to protect their right to oppose war, or stand with children in Palestine to defend

their right to go to school, we become allies and partners in a common struggle for rights shared by all.

At its heart, KAIROS’ human rights program strives to extend “love of neighbor” by asserting that regardless of race, gender, nationality, culture, social location, political choices or religion there are standards for human treatment that must not be ignored. Because human rights legislation provides a road map of priorities for the betterment of lives, it helps move us from a love only in words to a love in action. Our partners’ requests for solidarity are never for themselves alone, but rather are invitations to join with them, in common cause, to seek the life that God intends—a life of dignity and fullness—for all of God’s beloved humanity.

*Jennifer Henry is the Dignity, Rights and Development Manager for KAIROS: Canadian Ecumenical Justice Initiatives*

**When we promote and defend human rights we are transformed from those who seemingly “bestow,” as in the concept of charity, to those who recognize and affirm the dignity which God only gives.**

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## Immigration education and human rights in the United States

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by Saulo Padilla

Today millions of people live outside the area of the world where they were born. Throughout history, the impact of migrations across the planet has brought the development of positive exchanges among cultures, languages, societies, religions, nations and states. At the same time, sudden environmental, economic, social, and political changes have caused irregular migrations which have the potential to turn into situations causing human suffering, clandestine movements, or the more serious tragedy of human trafficking. People who find themselves caught up in irregular migrations become highly vulnerable, and under such circumstances new norms must be put in place to protect the human rights of these at-risk communities.

In the U.S. the irregular flow of migrants has developed into an environment where migrants’ rights are neglected or denied. This is especially the case for undocumented

workers who are employed under intolerable conditions, while their employers reap the benefits of underpaid labor. Immigrants to the U.S. often face a culture of unwelcome and are forced to live in the shadows of society: under suspicion, in isolation, lacking labor rights, and denied basic benefits and services. The work of Mennonite Central Committee (MCC) in this area is guided by the biblical instruction to welcome the stranger, and supporting human rights is a faithful way to respond to this call.

Lobbying governments for the protection of the human rights of people who are in these precarious circumstances has been central to the work of MCC in the U.S. MCC helps promote and support human rights and seeks to prevent their violations—particularly affirming “the right to life, liberty, and security of the person” (Article 3 in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights). In that spirit, MCC seeks policy solutions that promote oversight mechanisms and

**Immigration policy must seek to address the root causes of migration, and thus reduce clandestine movements and trafficking of humans across borders.**

policies that ensure the access to fair guest programs, access to public health services, fair wages and labor rights, and the unity of migrant families. Meeting the basic human rights of migrant communities necessitates legal frameworks which protect those communities, rather than criminalizing them. Immigration policy must seek to address the root causes of migration, and thus reduce clandestine movements and the trafficking of humans across borders.

In addition to seeking public policy changes, MCC has worked ardently for the past few decades to provide immigrant rights education to migrants and their families who are in search of work, fleeing from persecution, or find themselves in unstable socio-political environments in their places of origin.

*Saulo Padilla is the Director of the Immigration Education Office for Mennonite Central Committee U.S.*

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## Working for human rights in Haiti: A struggle with wide scope and deep roots

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by Alexis Erkert Depp

**How we understand dignity and respect has much to do with how we understand who we all are as created in the image of God.**

Until the first time I went to do an interview in a prison, I didn't think it was possible to break the Haitian spirit," recalled Meagan Peasgood, a Mennonite Central Committee (MCC) worker seconded to RNDDH, *Réseau National de Défense des Droits Humains*, or the National Human Rights Defense Network. "It's that spirit that attracted me to living here—the pride and strong sense of history that prevail over Haiti's difficult reality."

Meagan found herself waiting in a hot, foul-smelling room. The back door opened and a prisoner shuffled in, head and shoulders down, back bent. He didn't make eye contact and never once raised his head. He barely answered her questions. He was nineteen years old, and had been in prison for more than five years after being accused of stealing a telephone. Two years after his arrest he was taken to court, but the judge never saw him. He was transferred to this particular prison after the earthquake in January, 2010, and did not know if his family was still alive.

"I had to tell him that I wasn't there to get him out of prison. I didn't know how to show him that I thought he was a human being, so I offered to call his family for him." Meagan left the prison having absorbed the despair and brokenness of the place. When she returned to tell the prisoner that his family now knew he was alive, she experienced a redemptive moment—he finally looked her in the eyes and thanked her for treating him like a person.

This experience was key to Meagan's coming to understand the importance of RNDDH's work: the tedious but important work of interviewing prisoners, the advocacy work carried out by legal staff in connecting with prosecutors, and following up to make sure that case files exist for each prisoner. Meagan draws hope and energy from the human-to-human interactions that she believes sets RNDDH's work apart from other human rights organizations in Haiti. "How we understand dignity and respect has much to do with how we understand who we all are as created in the image of God. We are all deserving of basic human rights. That's an applicable concept even when you're sitting across from a prisoner that might be charged with raping a minor."

While Haitians have been fighting for their rights since Haiti's inception as a nation of freed slaves at the beginning of the nineteenth century, their ability to exercise political and civil rights has been limited. Indeed, human rights organizations could not function openly for the twenty-nine years that Haiti was ruled by the brutal dictatorships of Francois and Jean-Claude Duvalier between 1957 and 1986.

Nonetheless, even under the Duvalier regimes, clandestine groups of rights advocates fought to regain public freedom. One such advocate was Antonal Mortime, who explains: "On February 6, 1986, Haitians once again proclaimed our liberty in the document that is our constitution and that we call the *Maman Lwa*, or Mother Law,

of our country. That's what tells us that we have our sovereignty." Mortime is now the director of another MCC partner organization, *Plate-forme des Organisations Haitiennes des Droits Humains* (POHDH), or the Platform of Haitian Organizations for the Defense of Human Rights, a collective of eight of Haiti's leading human rights organizations (including RNDDH). MCC Haiti began partnering with Haitian human rights organizations in the early 1990s.

Mortime stresses that from 1987 up to the past decade, "everyone concentrated on the promotion of our civil and political rights because we had lost them; that's why these rights are historically considered more important in Haiti." And yet he notes that Jean Jacques Dessalines, the hero of the Haitian revolution, asked the question, "How will these new Haitians live?" and started promoting economic rights through equalized land distribution." As Mortime puts it, "That's the same question we need to be asking today."

Thus Haitian human rights organizations have increasingly shifted their focus to rights categorized as economic, social and cultural (ESC). According to Mortime, "Since 2000, Haitian human rights activists have realized that if we don't promote our ESC rights, our civil and political rights are also menaced. This is why, today, it's necessary for us to work towards all—the rights of people to food, to housing, to education, to healthcare, and to live in a safe environment. All of this is the package that makes up our sovereignty, that makes up a country where every person is a full citizen."

Kurt Hildebrand, country representative for MCC Haiti, underlines this point. "In recent years, the problems Haitian organizations identify stem more often from an unresponsive government than a repressive one." This is increasingly the case after the earthquake on January 12, 2010, which killed over 200,000 people and destroyed tens of thousands of homes and buildings. As a report by POHDH put it: "It's normal for the earth to shake, but not normal for it have the results it did here; and the way that the State has responded has been even more catastrophic than the catastrophe itself."

It is not only the Haitian government, but the international community—foreign governments, non-governmental organizations, and multi-lateral institutions—that have inhibited the human rights of Haitians in the wake of the earthquake, according to both POHDH and RNDDH. The fundamental

issue they highlight is a lack of sovereignty or self-determination—the need to allow Haitians to decide what is best for their country and themselves. Pierre Esperance, the executive director of RNDDH, believes that one of the largest challenges to human rights work in Haiti is that "the international community doesn't work through Haitians or Haitian civil society to try to reinforce key state institutions. They don't consult Haitians [in order] to correct any of the structural problems in Haiti." With MCC's support, both organizations are currently monitoring international assistance to ensure that it is carried out through a human rights framework that truly takes into account the needs of the people, their fellow Haitians.

Human rights education is an important component to the work of both organizations. Systemic change in Haiti, the kind of change which would afford all Haitians access not only to the right to choose their leaders, but also to secure housing, adequate food and clean drinking water, requires change from the bottom up. It requires that Haitians are aware of their rights and of how to fight for them. In addition to measurable improvements that can be linked to the work of RNDDH such as a marked decrease in prolonged pre-trial detention and rights violations in prisons, Esperance says that Haitians have a better understanding of their rights. "Many citizens now know their rights and responsibilities. And they are also aware of the international conventions in place to protect those rights."

Both RNDDH and POHDH are active reminders that, as Mortime reiterates, "There are many Haitians that want to fight for change. They believe in change. They may just need help in making their voices heard." And so, through funding, material aid, and staff secondments, MCC assists in giving voice to its partners. "We're honored to stand alongside these brave organizations that are defending the rights of all Haitians, especially the most vulnerable and disenfranchised among them," says Hildebrand. But MCC supports human rights work in Haiti in many other ways as well. Esperance reminds us that "It's not just in partnering with Haitian human rights organizations" that MCC supports human rights. "MCC's work in agriculture—that's human rights work. Everything that MCC does in Haiti, directly and indirectly, helps to uphold human rights."

*Alexis Erkert Depp is the Advocacy Coordinator for Mennonite Central Committee Haiti*

**It's normal for the earth to shake, but not normal for it have the results it did here; and the way that the State has responded has been even more catastrophic than the catastrophe itself.**

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# Colombian Mennonite perspectives on human rights: A tool in working for justice and peace

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by Bonnie Klassen and Adrienne Wiebe

**For Colombian Mennonites, the lunch program they operate for children in a marginal neighborhood of Bogota is also viewed as a defense of human rights. The program fulfills the children's "right to food," it is not just an act of charity.**

**T**hreats, torture, forced displacement, and homicide against Evangelical church leaders and members in Colombia are documented and denounced in "A Prophetic Call," which is published annually by two church-related organizations. Perhaps this is the first thing that comes to mind when North Americans think about human rights in Colombia. And yet for Colombian Mennonites, the lunch program they operate for children in a marginal neighborhood of Bogota is also viewed as a defense of human rights. The program fulfills the children's "right to food," it is not just an act of charity, according to Peter Stucky, one of the pastors. These two examples illustrate the comprehensive way Colombian Mennonite, Mennonite Brethren, and Brethren in Christ churches use a human rights approach as a tool for working towards justice and peace. In what follows, three members of these churches describe their understanding of the relationship between human rights and faith.

## **Ricardo Esquivia—Strengthening human dignity**

*Ricardo Esquivia is a lawyer and has been a member of the Colombian Mennonite Church for 50 years. He is the founder of Justapaz, the Christian Center for Justice, Peace and Non-Violent Action. He is currently the Director of Sembrandopaz on the Caribbean Coast.*

In the words of Esquivia, "Human rights and Christian faith are inter-related; they are tools that support one another. Christian faith is, among other things, an ethical proposal. Human rights complement Christian faith. One must have faith—some kind of faith—to promote human rights. We cannot achieve anything without faith.

"In *Sembrandopaz*, we work towards integral human development; not only economic development, but also human dignity. Human beings need to be aware of their own dignity in order to be able to develop. Human rights are one tool that permits the protection of human dignity. We make use of this tool to strengthen the dignity of communities. We not only work with the first generation of human rights, that is, political rights, but also with economic, social and

cultural rights. If economic, social and cultural rights are not developed, then political rights are an illusion.

"We work to build just communities by finding a way for government and community to come together. Human rights are the cement that glues them together. The authorities need to respect human rights and the communities need to understand their responsibilities. Together, rights and responsibilities enable us to achieve fundamental liberties. Some non-governmental organizations (NGOs) focus only on demanding human rights, but if the communities do not understand their responsibilities as well, it is difficult to achieve human harmony. Human harmony arises from an ethical conceptualization of the human being, and there we come full circle back to the need for faith."

## **Jose Rutilio Rivas—Respecting life as created by God**

*Jose Rutilio Rivas is a theologian, farmer, and pastor. Currently he serves as the President of the Mennonite Brethren Churches of Chocó, and is pastor of the Mennonite Brethren Church of Quibdó.*

Rivas points out that "the Universal Declaration of Human Rights affirms the intrinsic dignity and equality of all people. Article 1 states: 'All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights, and . . . should act fraternally with one another.' Article 3 of the declaration states: 'All individuals have the right to life, to liberty, and security of person.'

"The idea of equality and the respect of life among human beings is central to the ministry of Jesus, and ultimately to Christian faith. In Genesis 1:26, God creates human beings in his image, and in Exodus 20, God orders the respect of life and human relations: 'Do not kill.' In the person of Jesus, human rights are made flesh. Jesus gave his own life so that humans can live forever in equality, peace, and security. Jesus taught that loving one's neighbor enables peaceful co-existence based on respect and justice. Thus, Christian faith and human rights are intrinsically related. There are, however, some important differences in the interpreta-

tion and application of human rights and the posture of Christian faith.

“Pastoral work is fundamentally about facilitating the relationship between the individual and God and with one’s neighbors within a context of grace and reconciliation. The practice of justice, the search for peace, and the defense of life through peaceful means, are integral to pastoral work. For example, our church is implementing a program called Peacebuilding through Community Transformation in the Chocó region, with the vision of building spaces of peaceful co-existence.”

### **Alejandra Arboleda—Walking towards God’s peace**

*Alejandra Arboleda is a social worker. She was a student mediator in the Mennonite Brethren United Americas School. Today, she coordinates the Program for Student Mediation of Edupaz, a ministry of the Mennonite Brethren Churches in the most violent neighborhoods of the city of Cali.*

As Arboleda puts it, “The reconstruction of the Colombian social fabric devastated by corruption, social inequality, and death is not an easy task. However, as Anabaptist churches, we are called to work together for life; to move from liturgy to the practical life of the teachings of Christ.

“In *Edupaz*, our faith moves us to intervene socially, not in order to gain church members, but rather so that children, teachers and parents can be peacebuilders, and in some way break the cycle of violence. As Jesus said: ‘The Kingdom of God is close, and it is the children.’ Human rights are an integral part of our faith, and we strive to educate for the respect of rights.

“We facilitate workshops about healthy family relationships, with the hope that no child, woman or man will be the victim of abuse. We focus on learning to value life and to eliminate discrimination based on skin color or social class. We also teach alternative non-violent strategies for conflict transformation.

“Christ invites us to practice a living faith; a faith that proclaims the respect of human dignity without discrimination, because we recognize the image of God in all people. Our faith enables us to swim against the current in neighborhoods where murders are justified ‘because he deserved it’ or in those where the young men join gangs in order to gain respect. We are raising our voices to say that violence takes us away from the principle of life. We work to awaken our communities of faith, so that each day we take steps in the walk towards peace.”

These voices from the Colombian Mennonite and Brethren in Christ churches reveal an integrated understanding of the relationship between faith and human rights that provides a tool in the church’s calling to value life as created by God, strengthen the human dignity of each person, and walk steadily towards God’s justice and peace in Colombia.

*Bonnie Klassen is the Country Representative for MCC Colombia, and Adrienne Wiebe is the MCC Policy Analyst/Educator for Latin America and the Caribbean*

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## **The Mennonite Committee on Human Rights**

When Izzy Asper, a prominent Canadian media magnate, announced plans in 2003 to establish a Canadian Museum for Human Rights in his home city of Winnipeg, a group of Mennonites established an informal committee to ensure that the Mennonite experience of human rights would be included in the museum. The committee of individuals approached the Manitoba Mennonite Historical Society for support and subsequently a new committee, the Mennonite Committee on Human Rights was formed in 2005 with representatives from Canadian Mennonite University (CMU), MCC Canada and MCC Manitoba, the Canadian Foodgrains Bank, as well as the Manitoba and Canadian Mennonite historical societies.

This committee extended its scope to include engaging the Mennonite constituency in reflection on human rights from an Anabaptist-Mennonite faith perspective. Thus it organized a one-day symposium in January 2007, and a six-session evening course from January to March 2008 at CMU, examining and critiquing human rights from the perspective of Anabaptist theology and Mennonite history. Meanwhile, the Government of Canada formally established the Canadian Museum for Human Rights in 2008 with an Act of Parliament, making it the first national museum to be located outside of Ottawa, the nation’s capital. The Mennonite Committee on Human Rights made formal submissions to the museum in February 2008 and January 2010, calling for the museum to organize its exhibits around particular human rights rather than around ethnic and religious groups who want the violations of their rights to be featured. The committee has now shifted its attention to collaborating with the Chair of Mennonite Studies at the University of Winnipeg in organizing a symposium on Mennonites and human rights. The symposium will be held in October 2012, shortly after the Canadian Museum for Human Rights in scheduled to open.

—Peter Rempel, Executive Director of Mennonite Central Committee Manitoba



Artist: Gen Tsuboi (Japan)  
 Title: God's Plan II  
 Medium: kirie (paper cut)

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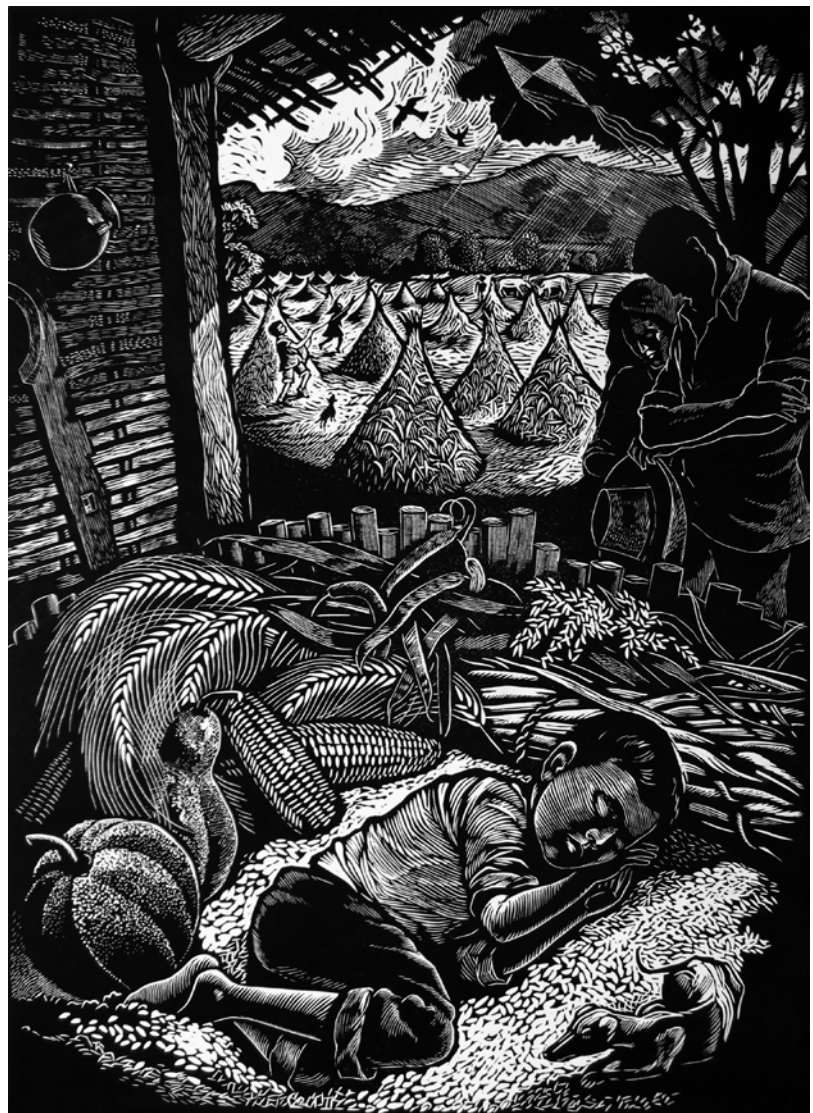
## Just Food: A Faith Perspective on the Right to Food Exhibit

Another major initiative of the Mennonite Committee on Human Rights is a recently launched exhibit entitled "Just Food: A Faith Perspective on the Right to Food." The committee commissioned visual art from nineteen artists from thirteen countries around the world in response to both biblical and human rights declarations about food and the right to food. The exhibit was assembled by Ray Dirks, the curator of the Mennonite Heritage Center Gallery in Winnipeg, and will tour Canada until the end of 2012.

Artwork from the exhibit is shown here.

—Peter Rempel, Executive Director of Mennonite Central Committee Manitoba

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Artist: Alejandro Aranda (México)  
 Title: La oración (The Prayer)  
 Medium: linocut



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# Human rights in Iraq: An inspiration and objective for NGOs

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by Jim Fine

**O**n October 31, 2010, an attack on a Catholic church in Baghdad killed 58 persons. A few days later, a string of explosions took an even higher toll in Shi'a areas around Baghdad. Meanwhile, a campaign of bombings and threats against Christians in Baghdad and Mosul continues. Such examples of widespread violence make it hard to associate Iraq with respect for human rights.

Nonetheless, in my time working for Menonite Central Committee (MCC) in Erbil, Iraqi Kurdistan, I have seen ample evidence of a vibrant and determined grassroots movement. It is made up of people working throughout Iraq to end violence and to build a new, pluralistic society based on democratic principles and respect for human rights. The success or failure of this grassroots movement will go a long way towards determining what kind of country emerges after decades of war, lethal sanctions, and brutal totalitarian rule.

"In past decades there were no human rights in Iraq. People had no idea about human rights." Abdulla Khalid, the head of Al-Mesalla Center for Human Resources Development in Erbil, an Iraqi organization involved in community education and in training other non-governmental organization (NGO) staff, shared these thoughts with me in a recent meeting. Convinced that human rights must be respected in the new Iraq, Al-Mesalla initiated a series of workshops for NGO staff and community leaders. "We based the workshops on international law and human rights standards," Abdulla said, "including the rights of prisoners and women, among others, based on United Nations (UN) documents and international agreements."

Another nation-wide NGO that promotes human rights education is the Baghdad-based Iraqi Al-Amal. Director Hanaa Edwar is convinced that "to rebuild the human being in Iraq we very much need to emphasize human rights principles, including gender-related issues and children's rights. Without human rights we can't build democracy, which requires respect for all citizens, tolerance, and nonviolence." Hanaa believes that Iraqis' understanding of human rights is growing. "People want to change their lives. They have had enough of violence. We have seen an especially positive response to our

human rights workshops among youth and women," she says.

The Iraqi constitution, adopted in 2005 and drawn up in part with the country's authoritarian past in mind, provides a basis for Iraqis to promote human rights. The constitution affirms the freedoms of expression, of the press, of assembly and of "peaceful demonstration." It also guarantees "freedom of forming and of joining associations and political parties" and requires the Iraqi intelligence service to operate "pursuant to the recognized principles of human rights."

But the constitution also says that freedoms must be exercised in a way that does not "violate public order and morality" and that some freedoms "shall be regulated by law," including laws that have not yet been drafted or approved. Furthermore, the constitution does not specify the "recognized principles" that should constrain the intelligence service. Clearly, the status of some human rights in Iraq remains to be determined, and the multitude of NGOs promoting human rights in Iraq face strong challenges.

One NGO staff member working on the rights of detainees reports that officials from the Ministry of Human Rights have pressured legal aid for prisoners offices, established by volunteer lawyers, to close their doors. Another NGO staffer notes that both the central government in Baghdad and the Kurdish Regional Government have accepted Iraqi NGOs in their capacity as providers of humanitarian aid, but are just beginning to get used to the idea that NGOs also serve as advocates and monitors of government actions. Human rights and nonviolence work is not without risks. When one prominent human rights activist was absent when security forces arrived at his home in Mosul to question him, the forces arrested his father and brother and held them in detention for more than a week.

Iraqis seeking to build a new society based on respect for human rights face challenges from sections of the public, as well as from authorities unaccustomed to principled opposition and criticism. "Some reject human rights because of their interpretation of their religion," says Abdulla Khalid of Al-Mesalla. He adds, "Many people believe that some human rights are acceptable in our society, but others, like certain women's

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**Without human rights we can't build democracy, which requires respect for all citizens, tolerance, and nonviolence.**

rights, are not.” Dana Muhammad, head of *REACH*, a large NGO in Kurdistan, explains that one problem in building support for human rights in Iraq is that many people believe that human rights are derived from the Christian Bible. Some religious scholars, he says, try to ground human rights in Islamic theology, but others disagree. “In addition to being seen as derived from Christianity, human rights are also seen by some as Western in origin, since agencies like the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund are always citing human rights norms,” Dana notes.

All of the NGO staff and human rights activists that I have spoken with agree that another obstacle to promoting belief in and respect for human rights in Iraq is the behavior of U.S. and other Western military forces and contractors in Iraq. People ask, as Abdulla says, “where are the rights? We haven’t seen them here. They don’t exist in reality.” Recent disclosures that the U.S. covered up civilian deaths in Iraq and ignored reports of torture by Iraqi forces has deepened public skepticism about human rights.

However, the evidence of governmental failure from every side has also made Iraqi activists more determined to press their case for human rights. At a recent meeting with

officials of the UN Assistance Mission, *Iraq for Iraq* activists called for a UN fact-finding mission on human rights in Iraq to look at the actions of all parties, including U.S. and coalition troops, al-Qaeda, and the Iraqi and Kurdish regional governments. “We need international fact-finding. It is important for us. It will make the politicians aware that everybody should be accountable,” Hanaa Edwar of Al-Amal says. “There are the disappeared, before and after 2003, detainee issues, displaced persons issues, that need to be investigated,” she adds.

All the activists that I have spoken with have also stressed that those outside Iraq who care about human rights and Iraqi society can help by sharing their experience and expertise and, especially, by lobbying their own governments to support Iraqi efforts to build a new Iraq where human rights are respected and protected. With the work of the legion of human rights activists that has sprung up in Iraq, there is reason to believe that the headlines from Iraq can change in the future, shifting from stories of sectarian violence and hatred to reports of truth-telling and reconciliation. With enough international support, the change would be assured.

*Jim Fine is the MCC Iraq Program Coordinator*

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## **Human rights and MCC in Southern Africa: The case of the Africa Peace Network**

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by Mulanda Jimmy Juma

**T**his article explores the way that a human rights-based approach plays a central role in the work of Mennonite Central Committee (MCC) in Southern Africa by pointing to the case of the Africa Peace Network (APN). Based in South Africa, the APN is a non-governmental organization (NGO) that emerged out of MCC’s Regional Peace Network (RPN) in 2009, which was itself launched under my predecessor Carl Stauffer in the year 2000. With more than 10 Associates providing support such as facilitating workshops within local communities, the APN has actively participated in peacebuilding work in Southern Africa and beyond. The growth of this network provides a strong indication that the core principles of a rights-based approach are crucial to MCC.

The work of peacebuilding can be analyzed using different dimensions of a rights-based approach. For example, Jude Rand and Gabrielle Watson used three dimensions in their assessment of Ethiopia, Bangladesh, and Guatemala: power analysis, gender analysis and risk analysis. This analysis can also be done by drawing upon human rights standards. According to the International Council on Human Rights Policy, a rights-based approach “asks whether services or rights are (a) available, (b) accessible, (c) acceptable, and (d) adaptable to context.” These are the minimum standards against which peacebuilding actions should be measured, and can be seen to take into account the overarching principles of universality, non-discrimination, participation, and

accountability. They help to ensure that attention is not only given to the outcome of peacebuilding, but also to the process. The following paragraphs draw upon these four standards in exploring the work of the APN.

The key question concerning the standard of acceptability is whether or not services provided cause harm to the beneficiaries. Cedric De Coning argues that it is “widely understood that peacebuilding activities that are not grounded in the socio-cultural belief systems that shape the worldview of the internal actors cause dysfunction.” The Christian values of reconciliation, nonviolence, and right relationships which guide the work of MCC are closely linked to the African values of *Ujamaa* or *Ubuntu*. *Ujamaa* is an indigenous word popularized by Mwalimu Julius Kambarage Nyerere, then President of the United Republic of Tanzania, that articulates a sense of community among Swahili-speaking Africans. *Ubuntu* is an indigenous word that articulates a collective sense of well-being and responsibility among South African Bantu people, and also underlies much traditional African thinking.

These values have facilitated the acceptability of MCC services in communities where APN members are involved in peacebuilding work, such as Eldorado Park in Johannesburg, South Africa. In this community, APN Associates trained participants, including police officers, in restorative justice practices and community mediation skills that promote both human rights and social responsibilities. The context, tradition and culture of those communities show that peace education based on Christian values is relevant and culturally appropriate. Hence, it is not only acceptable, but also adaptable to the local context.

Adaptability requires that careful attention be paid to the process and context. According to Peter Uvin, “the process by which development aims are achieved is as important as the actual products.” This has been very evident over the past decade as APN Associates have been empowered with different skills as a result of their involvement in MCC peacebuilding work. This involvement included participation in decision-making processes, the conception of projects, and acting as facilitators at the Africa Peacebuilding Institute (API). This is an intensive pan-African peace education program hosted at the Mindolo Ecumenical Foundation in Zambia. It also includes advocating for peaceful structural or policy transformation in Zimbabwe, advocating for communities that have been displaced from their land and homes as a result of the construction of

dam power projects in Lesotho, and building the capacity of the Inter-Church Forum in Swaziland to speak and act in a unified manner in regards to the HIV/AIDS pandemic in their country. This is a strong indication that the process strengthened local capacities, networks and knowledge.

In addition, respect for the dignity of people and their cultures has been observed by adapting services to the setting and needs of local communities. For example, African perspectives and issues such as HIV/AIDS have been incorporated into Christian faith-based peacebuilding curricula, and African men and women of different races, ethnic groups, and nationalities have served as trainers.

Services such as training and funding, as well as spiritual resources such as prayer support, are made available to a community or group in order to meet the needs of beneficiaries. It is important to note, however, that the availability of some resources—for example, friendship—cannot be framed using rights-based language, even though this too has been an important resource shared by Associates and local communities.

Finally, the APN has striven to meet the standard of accessibility. Over the past decade, Associates have been able to facilitate workshops on a variety of topics, including gender, reconciliation, stress management, nonviolence, leadership, HIV/AIDS, conflict transformation, and peacebuilding. Many members of local communities, both men and women, in Southern Africa and across the continent—including Mozambique, Zimbabwe, Congo (DRC), Burundi, Rwanda, Ethiopia, Kenya and Nigeria—have benefited from trainings facilitated by APN Associates.

APN continues to reach out to more individuals and communities through various peacebuilding activities. This progress makes it possible to agree with former Senegalese President Leopold Sedar Senghor’s insistence that there should be no demarcation between human rights and development. Development is simply peacebuilding by another name.

This examination of the APN demonstrates that a rights-based approach to peacebuilding lies at the center of its work, and confirms that high levels of acceptability, adaptability, availability and accessibility have been achieved.

*Mulanda Jimmy Juma is the MCC Regional Peace Advisor for Southern Africa*

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# Community-based critiques of human rights

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by Sriprakash Mayasandra

**Any engagement with international human rights standards must acknowledge the reality of inequity within one's own context**

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From my experiences of living and working in many cultural contexts, I wish to offer some insights regarding the praxis of human rights. I have come to realize that the application of human rights cannot impose values. Instead of a decree imposed by nation states, it needs to be based on a common awareness that is accepted by the people involved. Otherwise it may cause a conflict of cultures and come to be seen by the community as hegemony by outside actors. I believe that pronouncement of such rights as a political edict through legislation without community approval and acquiescence is ineffective and unproductive. Such legislation then languishes in books without applicability and real impact in the lives of people.

Propagation of human rights when perceived as an immediate and drastic challenge to social norms, including faith practices, causes polarization within a society. Such divisions, when extreme, may even result in violent confrontation. Attempts to change social patterns can meet with great resistance when they give rise to suspicion of outside influence—instead of protecting the rights of peoples within a society they may result in further erosion of rights. One example of this is the use of the veil by women in Islamic contexts. When Western preconceptions and opinions about the veil are bound up with human rights language, it is difficult not to see the human rights framework as a vehicle for the imposition of a Western values system. However, perhaps there is also room within the human rights framework for an understanding of and respect for cultures and traditions, which is key for helpful dialogue to bring about any sustainable change. When the catalysts of change come from within the context there is greater credibility and easier acceptance of new ideas.

In my view, human rights need to be understood and applied in relation to the affirmation of human personhood, and such affirmations vary across cultures. How human personhood is expressed is determined by societal norms. Judgment of human personhood based on absolute standards results in double standards that weaken the stance of valuing human beings.

Disparities of educational level, class, and socio-economic status are prevalent in all contexts, and these erode the application of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Such disparities result in a lack of opportunities for some individuals or groups, causing devaluation of their human personhood and thereby violation of their rights. Therefore, there has to be a comprehensive and integrated approach to fostering human rights which includes empowerment, cross-cultural sensitivity and opportunities for people to advance in all spheres of life. This requires long-term engagement with the community—taking time to live in the society, listen to the people, engage in discussions without being judgmental of practices, to share one's own experiences, and allowing room for mutual introspection and growth in a spirit of humility and honor towards the traditions encountered.

Any engagement with international human rights standards must acknowledge the reality of inequity within one's own context, embody a humble attitude, and be committed to a mutual effort to improve the lives of peoples everywhere. For such discussion to bear fruit establishment of trust and a sense of oneness among humans must come from a point of concern and not of blame.

In Asia, Mennonite Central Committee (MCC) focuses on local partnerships and works through them for the empowerment of people. For example, in recent years Vietnam passed a law condemning domestic violence that was rooted in rights-based language. MCC Vietnam's domestic violence program works at a community and family level, helping women understand their rights, and men understand that they don't have the "right" to beat their wives. This way of working seeks community ownership and builds local leadership in addressing issues they deem to be appropriate and acceptable. The goal is to work with an attitude of mutuality that recognizes our own vulnerabilities—it is this kind of posture that helps MCC partners meet the challenges of injustice and disharmony.

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