

“There’s some colonial in my postcolonial”: Community Development Workers’ Perspectives on Faith-based Service Learning in a Guatemalan Context

Geraldine Balzer, Luke Heidebrecht

ABSTRACT Faith-based relief and development organization Mennonite Central Committee (MCC) has been involved in the country of Guatemala since 1976 when they responded to relief needs in light of the devastating earthquake at the time. Since then MCC has invested in a number of communities throughout Guatemala in various capacities, one of which has been the development of service and learning opportunities aimed at exposing and connecting students/participants in the global north with the people and issues within the global south. As researchers of service learning, who are also committed to a faith tradition and have participated in or have been in relationship with MCC in some capacity, we are interested in evaluating how their faith tradition has helped to both construct their practice as well as critique it. One of the aims of our research is to collaborate with MCC practitioners in assessing and examining their current practice of service/learning in Guatemala in an effort to discover ways in which they are creating opportunities for positive societal change – both in the lives of the student/participants and the communities in Guatemala, while critiquing the traditional colonial and neocolonial approaches to development.

KEYWORDS experiential education, faith, international service learning (ISL), decolonization, postcolonial

During a recent trip to Guatemala we had an opportunity to talk with five community development workers who had worked for Mennonite Central Committee (MCC) in various capacities. Of particular interest to our research was the fact that these workers have facilitated International Service Learning (ISL) experiences for several hundred participants from the Global North in three different communities in different regions in Guatemala. Together, these five workers represent a wealth of first-hand experience, both as observers of these intercultural interactions and as facilitators attempting to navigate the complex dynamics of service learning as it impacts host communities that they deeply care about. Also of interest to our research is the *Anabaptist* faith tradition (Klaassen, 2001; Weaver, 2011; Reimer, 2014) to which MCC belongs, due to the fact that we also identify as such. Our personal commitments to Anabaptist values, to be outlined later, inform our decision to invite the above-mentioned participants to this study. We believe that it is our overlapping situatedness with our participants that provides a more immediate relational foundation in which to create a safe space for critical

examination of ISL practice. As engaged scholars we first, want to make visible these moral motivations that have shaped our research wonders and second, emphasize the importance of doing research steeped in relationality (Wilson, 2008; Kovach, 2009). For this paper then, we intend to explore, through the eyes of these five research participants, how MCC, as a faith-based organization, has utilized their tradition and convictions to inform their practice of ISL. Our wonders are as follow: In what ways have their efforts created opportunities for positive societal change – both in the lives of the student participants and the host communities in Guatemala? And, in what ways are their efforts perpetuating colonial and neo-colonial notions of development?

Short History of Mennonite Central Committee

Mennonite Central Committee (MCC) is at the heart of this study and thus it is worth a few words for those unfamiliar with the organization to understand their history, vision, and mission. Broadly speaking, MCC is a global, not for profit organization (NGO) that focuses on three main areas: disaster relief, sustainable community development, and justice & peacebuilding.

The roots of MCC date back nearly one hundred years, when Mennonite refugees were seeking aid and resettlement due to the escalating violence levelled against their communities during the Bolshevik revolution in what are today parts of Ukraine and Russia. Several churches committed to an Anabaptist paradigm in Canada and the United States responded by working together to resettle these refugees. The Anabaptist tradition, which emerged in the 16th century amidst violent religious revolutions, is founded on values of peaceably engaging issues of justice, especially as it pertains to liberating vulnerable peoples. Peace, central to the Anabaptist paradigm has been adopted as a core mechanism by MCC and is, they promote, “a part of everything we do” (MCC “Principles and Practices”). The Anabaptist tradition has since grown from its 16th century European roots and is today practiced in a variety of church denominations around the globe, including Mennonite churches, who form MCC’s primary constituent base. MCC sees itself as a partner in this growing movement and has expanded to work in sixty different countries (MCC “Where We Work”). They develop connections with churches and organizations (Anabaptist or not) in these countries that share their values and strive to invest in ongoing local efforts rather than start new projects. Local participation is vital for MCC, so that “when responding to disasters we work with local groups to distribute resources to minimize conflict. In our development work we consult with communities to make sure the projects meet their needs. And we advocate for policies that will lead to a more peaceful world” (MCC Vision and Mission).

In our experiences interacting with MCC workers one of the most important values espoused is that of being in right and just relationships¹ with all who they interact with, whether that be participants in MCC programs, partner organizations and churches, or communities

¹ This value emerges out of MCC’s commitment to restorative justice work at the local level in all provincial/state/country offices, which has shaped much of the organizational culture. For an overview of restorative justice see Johnstone, 2011; Redekop, 2008; Zehr, 2014.

in which work is being done. To clarify, MCC notes “wherever we work, MCC is on the side of a just peace between societal groups or people in conflict. MCC does not choose one people group over another,” however MCC does ‘take sides’ “against all forms of violence, regardless who perpetrates it” (MCC in Palestine and Israel). This type of relational posturing, while an intangible thing to study, represents an essential dynamic of not just *what* but *how* this faith-based organization involves itself in the lives of people. We think this is important to highlight for this study, since as Susan Walsh (2016) notes, critical research has tended to focus on critiquing *what* is done in community development work while, she says, what is less understood is “the issue of how a development organization’s approach to knowledge, imposed within well-intentioned training activities, might itself have an impact on the social change process. How aid is delivered...can be far more consequential than what is delivered” (Walsh, 2016, p.22). As we engage in a critical analysis of MCC’s service learning with the help of our participants we also hope to examine both *what they do* and *how they do it*.

It is worth making a final note about why MCC has invested in ISL programs since they constitute the particular focus for this study. MCC’s broad investment in relief, development, and peacebuilding work is implemented in various capacities, one of which is creating “opportunities for young people to serve in Canada, the U.S. and around the world” (MCC Vision and Mission). Service learning, or what MCC calls *Learning Tours*, emerged from the above foci as a way of engaging young people in MCC projects in various contexts. Part of the mission of these learning tours, according to their memorandum of understanding presented to each participant is “to be a channel for interchange between churches and community groups,” which is exemplified in tours that “permit conversation with people with whom MCC works” (MCC Memorandum of Understanding). *Learning Tours*, then, focus on learning about contextual issues that pertain to the partnerships with which MCC has developed. For example, *Uprooted* is a tour designed for participants from Alberta and Saskatchewan, hosted by MCC Mexico to explore themes related to migration and peacebuilding. MCC also operates learning tours to contexts such as Israel and Palestine (MCC and Palestine and Israel: FAQ), designed to educate participants about the complexity of conflict and necessity of peacebuilding while highlighting the work MCC is committed too. Tours include elements of learning and service in varying degrees depending on the local partners.

Mennonite Central Committee in Guatemala

Specific to this study is an exploration of MCC’s work in the Guatemalan context. MCC established a presence in Guatemala in 1978 following a devastating earthquake. Responding to the needs created by Guatemala’s precarious geography and the political turmoil resulting from 36 years of civil war brought MCC into communities resulting in partnerships that seek to develop economic stability, food security, the empowerment of women and children, and advocacy for local Mayan groups. These partnerships include the Catholic diocese of *San Marcos*, a women’s cooperative in *Panabaj*, and the youth of the Ixil in *Nebaj*. In both *San Marcos* and *Nebaj*, advocacy has focused on educating North Americans about the exploitative practices of multinational corporations involved in mono-cropping, resource extraction,

and hydroelectric production (MCC Mining Justice). As well, they have partnered with local cooperatives in the Diocese of *San Marcos* to reduce migration by developing local sources of income and improving food security. The small *Panabaj* cooperative has provided additional income for women through the marketing of their beadwork and an active homestay program connected with ISL groups.

Guatemala's proximity to Canada and the United States makes it an affordable destination for groups and MCC Guatemala hosts a significant number of ISL programs annually. ISL groups have the opportunity to visit local projects and work alongside community members in the hope that ISL participants might become advocates for peace and justice (Flickenger, 2010). MCC utilizes two employees in every ISL program: connecting peoples coordinators in each country office facilitate the groups arriving and work alongside the community workers in each location who have developed important relational connections with each of the communities. The opportunity to co-host ISL groups has enabled MCC workers to develop a strong program that incorporates history, context, and local partnerships.

Participants and Methodology

We have used informal and semi-structured interviews with former MCC workers using a case study methodology. We situate ourselves within this research as people who have had prior experiences working and volunteering with MCC's service learning efforts in Guatemala. Geraldine in particular has participated in and observed thirteen service learning trips from 2007-2016 in eight different communities. We want to be honest about this bias in our research and have reflected together on the fact that having had positive experiences we are motivated by a sense of critical diligence rather than critique. Our desire in this study is, at least in part, to partner with MCC workers to critically reflect on ours and their experiences with ISL. The aim is not to deconstruct their practice of service learning, although that may happen along the way, but to evaluate how their faith tradition has informed the construction of their practices and whether it has created greater opportunities for societal change or whether this commitment perpetuates colonial and neo-colonial views of the world. Given our situatedness in this research, our analysis will be written in a dialogic format, which for us is a way to "re-connect" (Martin, 2009, p. 213) with the relationships we have with our participants as well as being a space to demonstrate our own emergent reflects, wonders, and puzzles as we engage our participants' field texts.²

Regarding our participants, the interviews were conducted with five former MCC workers individually and within focus groups. Two of the workers, Adriana and Nancy have respectively served in the role of *Connecting Peoples Coordinator* for Guatemala/El Salvador. In this role they were tasked with organizing the ISL programs and ultimately served as guides and translators for the participants. Three of the workers, Nate, Tobias, and Yasmin had served as *Community Workers* in locations where MCC sends participants of service learning experiences. Three

² Given the relational dynamic of this study we prefer Clandinin and Caine's (2013) use of the term "field texts" rather than "data" (p. 166).

of the participants are American and two are citizens of Central American countries; all had established connections within these communities, were committed to the community's welfare as development workers, and represent the key relational bridge between the participants of trips and members of the community. In each of the interviews conducted a similar set of questions was used within a free form conversational structure.

Postcolonial Theory

Postcolonialism, as a theoretical construct, attempts to analyse and explain the impact of colonialism through thinking and writing “about the cultural and political identities of colonized subjects” (Gandhi, 1989, p.5). Postcolonialism provides a framework to examine power relations that inscribe race and ethnicity through the use of hegemonic state systems such as education. It stands for a “transformational politics,” (Young, 2003, p. 114) and shares much in common with Marxism, socialism feminism, and environmentalism (Young, 2015). Postcolonialism is an appropriate framework for this study because the host communities have been detrimentally impacted by colonialism and the imposition of Western Eurocentrism on their cultural practices. Mayan scholar Jimenez Estrada (2005) speaks of the challenges of doing research in the context of Guatemala where “more than 65% of the population is Indigenous with 23 distinct languages... and where poverty and violence have marked the lives of the majority” (p. 48). As a result of marginalization and discrimination exacerbated by political conflict and violence, many of these communities have been forced “to drop out and reside in ‘internal colonies’ with little or no hope of upward mobility” (Kanu, 2006, p. 8). These communities have responded to this internal colonization through the creation of grassroots organizations aimed at improving communities through the creation of employment, improved education, food security, and health measures. Zavala (2013) notes that these grassroots collectives are “spaces of recovery, healing, and development” (p. 56).

Many NGOs, having worked alongside these grassroots organizations, have also become conduits for ISL initiatives that tend to ‘piggy back’ on these developments, which, unfortunately at times, often perpetuates the narrative of the “*third world*” (Spivak, 1988) by focusing on student learning outcomes (see Larsen, 2016). Postcolonial theory demands a re-focusing when this is the case. When people of the global South are made into subjects for the benefit of someone else's understanding we must name this act as a form of *neo-colonization*. This also amounts to “epistemic violence,” as it constitutes “the colonial subject as Other,” which casts all who fall into the category of the ‘third world’ as homogenous (Spivak, 1988, p. 76). To entertain the postcolonial in research, then, is to become “concerned with the grounds of knowledge – epistemology,” because knowledges are often bound up in Eurocentric and ethnocentric narratives (Young, 2015, p. 152).

Postcolonialism in this context is therefore also concerned with research methodology and argues for approaches that disrupt “the hierarchical relation of power that privileges academic over local, Indigenous knowledges and the production of knowledge that has very little practical value” (Zavala, 2013, p. 57) to local communities. Building our research on this framework ensures that we are attentive to the interpretation of the voices of the

communities and disrupt the power balance caused by colonialism. We see our participants as helpful interpreters for this study, given their relational connections with these communities. Postcolonialism demands that the research *process* should aim to harmonize with the research *goals*, or as Jimenez Estrada (2005) remarks, “research that shows respect and values life and cultural diversity is not merely an intellectual pursuit – it is a necessity” (p. 48). With this in mind the researchers will look for specific ideas, conversations, and themes that emerge, which highlight practical and implementable suggestions for ISL design as it impacts programs and communities.

Analysis and Evaluation

Analysis of the field texts collected from our interviews with the MCC workers have provided us with the categories for our evaluation, which emerged from two broad questions asked during the semi-structured and informal interviews. These questions were aimed at creating space for the practitioners to reflect on their experiences and evaluate MCC’s ISL in Guatemala as well as evaluating the impact MCC’s faith position has on how its implemented. We will attempt to highlight their responses both individually and as they relate to emergent themes, providing context where possible, as well as offering our own reflections on what is being said.

Evaluation of Mennonite Central Committee’s International Service Learning in Guatemala

First, it’s important to name the fact that while each of these former MCC workers helped to plan or facilitate MCC ISL experiences, at the time of the interviews they were *looking back* at their experiences and so their ability to offer critique and affirmation is bound up in this displacement in time. The distance these workers have from their experiences may be a factor (positive and negative) in their ability to be both self-reflective and critically reflective. By way of example, in our focus group interview Tobias Roberts, former community worker in *Nebaj* stated, “I think that we need to be coherent with ourselves, I think the majority of us here, I’m speaking for Nate, myself, and Adriana too, are in some sense products of these (ISL) exchanges.” Here he references Nate Howard, a former community worker who spent time in *San Marcos*, who responded by saying “there’s part of me that wants to say that these trips are one sided, but I’m a product of those kinds of experiences. So there is value there from my perspective. Sometimes, unfortunately, it comes at the expense of communities.”

Three of the five participants, being North Americans, all resonated with this kind of *narrative beginning* (Clandinin and Connelly, 2000) and suggested that while “there’s a lot I can criticize” (Tobias) they also recognize the formative nature of these experiences that shaped them into the critical observers they are today.³ There is no denying the impact of ISL as *pedagogy of discomfort* (Zembylas, 2015) that helps participants “see beyond a reality that, I think, is very closed” (Tobias). It was interesting to listen to our North American participants attend to their past stories, recognizing “disruptions, fragmentations, or silences” (Clandinin and Caine, 2013, p. 173). These ‘fractures’ in their stories are vulnerable spaces to inquire into,

³ For studies that explore the impact on student learning outcomes see: Balzer, 2011; O’Sullivan & Smaller, 2013; Ash, et al, 2005; Bringle and Hatcher, 1999; Keily, 2004; Moley et al., 2002; Pompa, 2002; Smith-Pariola & Goke-Pariola, 2006.

but also hold the most “educative promise” (Clandinin, 2013, p. 76). We note this because we believe, as we listen to the voices of our North American participants, that their becoming *awake* to the tensions in their own stories helps us as researchers become *awake* to the tensions that exist in critically assessing ISL programs.

There is no denying that the impacts of these experiences are different for the ISL participants and the community members. One of our Central American research participants, Nancy, noted that “one group comes looking for meaning and these existential needs whereas the people in the communities are just trying to respond to their immediate needs.” What she points to is in line with what Marianne Larsen (2016) suggests is a lack of problematization with ISL as it pertains to community impact. ISL exposes its entanglement with western and colonial epistemologies exactly when the above-mentioned types of personal transformation of participants are considered its primary goal. Nancy followed by saying that “its quite a luxury” for the North American participants to be in a position to explore the world and their identities. Tobias shared a similar sentiment suggesting that this difference is unavoidable: “it’s a privilege that the other side doesn’t have. When we’re talking about whether it is ‘colonial’ or not, it’s a (colonial) privilege to open your mind, to have your mind opened to experiences and other cultures.”

Is it Colonial? Critical Analysis of MCC’s International Service Learning in Guatemala

Our research participants’ insights led to the emergence of two important questions. The first, *is it colonial?* was something that our participants (and researchers) intuitively wonder in regards to ISL in contexts such as Guatemala. This wonder stems from the recognition, supported by scholars such as Larsen (2016) that ISL tends to “focus entirely upon what the student desires, does and learns” (p. 14). ISL, we believe, exposes its entanglement with colonial epistemologies exactly when the above-mentioned types of personal transformation of participants are considered its primary goal. As an example, Tobias, reflecting on his experiences hosting groups in *Nebaj*, makes note of the Northern participants projections of the assumed reciprocity of these trips, saying “groups talk about building relationships... if you take that word seriously, you’re not building relationships in communities in one or two weeks.” In this statement we hear Tobias deconstructing an archetypal terminological justification utilized by groups to legitimize the reciprocal value of ISL. Interjecting and supporting Tobias on this point, Nate, reflecting on his experiences hosting groups in *La Vega*, adds that this way of seeing ISL “doesn’t make sense from the community’s perspective, or from my perspective.” Together they muse that groups assume they are connecting with communities by simply being there, perhaps playing soccer or interchanging Facebook and email contact. In sum, Tobias says “building relationships is obviously always something that benefits the people who come and receive.”

This discrepancy in perception of the potential mutual benefit of building relationships through ISL is, perhaps, a colonial hangover. ISL programs are, as observed by Larsen (2016) directional and, therefore all too often an exercise of privilege for Northern participants who are given opportunities to do service and learning in Southern communities. Nancy, one of our

Central American research participants rightly suggests that maybe “we should create learning tours that go from the South to the North.” She further names “how much of a luxury it is,” for Northern participants to have these opportunities and their assumption that it has mutual benefits “comes from a logic that is very consumerist.” We hear Nancy, deconstructing the apparent asymmetry she observed during her experiences working with MCC’s ISL programs. She worries that ISL can function as an extractive exercise for Northern participants to “take information and use it for personal fulfilment.”

Tobias adds that the directional nature of ISL programming that Nancy talks about is rooted in and perpetuated by a failure to recognize and address the asymmetry. He says that ISL, for Northern Participants is then just “another form of consumption, you’re not hoarding things but you’re hoarding experiences.” Contradictorily, while participating in a potentially consumptive act, Northern groups express concerns about the possible financial dependencies created because of the resources – monetary and material – that ISL programs bring to communities. Their concerns, says Nate, are “a poor interpretation of what is actually happening.” He was quick to share about his experience observing the community in *La Vega* who worked hard to utilize what little resources they received, such as those facilitated through ISL. Remote communities such as this, says Nate, “are working their ass off to survive,” and they “don’t survive just because a group comes out.” Nancy, who worked with Nate facilitating ISL groups, also commented that this concern is a rather “simplistic explanation” of a perceived behaviour. Instead, she suggests that communities demonstrate resilience and adaptivity as they respond to a form of Northern “exploitation” that has emerged over the years. This exploitation, she implies, is the control over the monetary and material resources that Northern people (participants and organizations, such as MCC) feel as though they must enforce. Our research participants all noted that what the Northern participants label as dependency, is an interpretation that originates from colonialism. To elucidate an alternative perspective, Tobias shared about the impact of ISL on the *resources of the community* in *Nebaj*, which put massive demands on hosts. What resources came into the community as a result of ISL, he noted, “was almost like a kind of payment,” which in his opinion, was a necessary response to the demands of hosting. The assumption that ISL programs fostered dependency in communities is a “very colonial” (Tobias) way of seeing the exchange.

These MCC community workers, our research participants, have articulated the struggles they saw the communities face amidst the presence of colonial and neo-colonial infrastructure and wanted to make note of their resilience and ability to adapt to programs operating in their spaces, such as ISL. MCC, by the nature of working in the context of Guatemala, enter into colonized spaces and we believe the point we hear our participants make is not to demonstrate inconsistencies in MCC’s practice, but to highlight the tensions that exist in doing so.

A puzzle emerges as to whether community members would continue to invite ISL if it were not imposed upon them? How much control do communities have over whether and how ISL operates? Nancy, who worked with MCC in a role that tasked her with ‘connecting peoples’ – ISL participants and community members – was upfront that MCC does its best to communicate as clearly as possible. She reflected that conversations with communities began

“many months ahead,” in order to develop a sense of if and how a particular program might work. “They would always say yes,” she said, although, “given all the power dynamics I would be very hesitant to say that they are always willing.” Tobias muses that communication, especially between “mostly white people” and an “indigenous community” such as those MCC works with in Guatemala is going to be fraught with complexity. We don’t doubt this puzzle requires further investigation. For now, our assessment of MCC’s ISL programs reveals that there still exist some powerful assumptions of the value and impact of ISL from the perspectives of Northern participants.

Postcolonial Possibilities? Forward Thinking about MCC’s International Service Learning in Guatemala

While our research participants highlighted a number colonial entanglements that MCC’s ISL programs in Guatemala continue to be caught up in, we also recognized many postcolonial themes emerging in our conversations. To frame these observations it’s important to note that one of the distinguishing features of postcolonialism is its focus on the historic exploitations, oppressions, and unjust relationships created during the period of colonization. In the context of Guatemala where “more than 65% of the population is Indigenous with 23 distinct languages... and where poverty and violence have marked the lives of the majority” (Jimenez Estrada, 2005, p. 48), applying a postcolonial lens to interpreting historical events in the context of Guatemala demands a recognition of and engagement with the injustices suffered by Mayan Indigenous communities. In any context *postcolonialism* stands for a “transformational politics, for a politics dedicated to the removal of inequality” (Young, 2003, p. 114).

MCC has been working hard to navigate the postcolonial relationships they facilitate between ISL participants and host communities. The *Country Representatives*, Michael and Melissa, who are responsible for maintaining and working with MCC’s partners in Guatemala made a comment in regards to their current ISL efforts that they are restructuring, trying to create more transparency in the way MCC implements ISL. A priority for them is to help make things “clear for both parties” (Michael) and in order to do this they have clarified between two types of groups. The ‘work and learn’ groups are focused on projects with an “emphasis still being on relationship and working together on something,” rather than “oh we’re going there to build a house” (Michael). And, then ‘Learning tours’, which are becoming the norm, are trips where groups visit multiple communities “to get a broader experience” of the context and “focus a lot more on issues of advocacy, issues of raising consciousness” (Michael). What this means for MCC is an emphasis on developing long-term relationships with communities so that ongoing ISL programs can be continually reassessed so as to fit the communities’ needs. It also means, for ISL participants, that MCC is emphasizing “raising awareness in Canada in policy and personal practices that can change the world and can affect communities” (Michael).

MCC’s growing focus on the ‘learning’ in ISL is, according to Adriana, a healthy shift. When asked whether the relational dynamics between participants and communities were different between a work and learn and a learning tour she responded with a resounding

“yes.” Furthermore, when the focus is on learning, she said “I feel that the local communities were then the ones that showed their knowledge and understanding of the situation and how its affecting them directly and the North Americans were somehow brought down a couple levels when they saw that their country was creating these effects. It kind of knocks you to your knees, you know what I mean?” What Adriana is articulating is, we believe, an example of an important postcolonial theme expressed most poignantly by Gayatri Spivak (1988), an Indian scholar, literary critic, and recognized postcolonial theorist, who asks an important question, also the title of her pivotal work; *can the subaltern speak?* Postcolonialism brings to the attention of the powerful the voices of the *subaltern*, who are “at the heart of postcolonial studies” (Young, 2015, p.165). The *subaltern* are, by definition, the ones who are overlooked and undervalued. This turn in MCC’s ISL programs to ‘learning’ is a step towards diminishing the powerful assumptions of Northern participants and creating space for the subaltern voices of the communities they visit.

As an example, Nate speaks of his time working in *La Vega*, an isolated location in the department of *San Marcos* in the Guatemalan highlands. He says of ISL “we were trying to help, encourage, or empower folks to see themselves differently. We were trying to help them see themselves as powerful subjects, political subjects. We were trying to help them see their community differently and see the resources that exist.” Nate reflecting on the North American participants’ reactions to the geography they encountered said they were enamoured with the natural beauty of that place. These awestruck visitors honoured the place where this community was situated and in doing so also honoured the community members’ value of the place. In some cases Nate said that their outward reactions “has an effect of changing peoples’ lens about where they live. It helps them to start to see some of the natural resources.” Adriana, who facilitated a number of these ISL groups in *La Vega* affirmed that “a message I heard often from local people in the communities is that they were just so surprised and impressed that these North American young people would come and care about them and want to see their community... that kind of sense of solidarity that the groups showed was definitely felt by the local communities.” Showing up may be the first step towards solidarity and a first step towards a postcolonial practice of ISL.

Yasmin and Tobias provide a further example of how ISL may become a tool for elevating the *subaltern* voices as they reflect on their experience working in the community of *Nebaj*. This is a remote indigenous community who were actively involved in “resistance to mega projects,” (Tobias) such as mining and hydroelectric initiatives. Yasmin notes of her experiences helping host ISL participants that the people always enjoyed inviting outsiders into their spaces and lives and appreciated an opportunity to “share with them that this is our struggle... this is what we are fighting for.” They believed, she said, that developing allies was an important task in their work of resistance. Both Yasmin and Tobias reiterated three times in their interview that ISL provided a meaningful context for “communities to share their stories,” in part due to the way that MCC “tries to be different in how they facilitate groups,” by working only in communities where they have developed trusting relationships.

We wondered what the trust building process looked like on the ground as ISL participants

met communities for the first time. Tobias and Yasmin explained that first, they would introduce the arriving group to the community leaders and “in a sense ask permission to be there.” Respecting community protocols was a necessity to developing trusting relations, which, unfortunately differed from other groups they encountered that would “bring down their own mission teams,” and “would be giving out candy to the kids and shit like that,” said Tobias. His interpretation of groups entering communities in that spirit was “very visibly colonial.” MCC, in contrast, is aware of the first step, which is “at least going into the communities to talk,” suggests Tobias. Inviting conversation, giving space for the community voices to feel ownership in the ISL program is an empowering act for all parties involved. MCC’s mandate to only work through local partnerships is a further method that ensures a relational posturing in communities. Adriana says that ISL planning was done by “working with the local partner based on their ideas... for the itinerary and even which work projects to engage in.” Positioning community members as essential to the planning of and participation in ISL helped them to develop an enthusiasm towards these programs. “When people have taken ownership of a process, have a vision, and in this process felt their needs are being met,” says Nate, then something “much more important than economic sustainability” is created. He summarizes by saying:

I think one of the most important ways you can use groups well is to complement the existing community processes... if you can empower the community in the process of receiving groups, not just when they come but in all the preparation and all the planning, empowering the community to be the ones to make the decisions, to create the goals, then you will be able to demystify a lot of things where there is often a lack of understanding between the community and the group.

Impact of MCC’s Faith Commitments on the Practice of International Service Learning in Guatemala

One of our intended goals for this study was to explore how MCC’s Anabaptist faith commitments impact their ISL designs. We prefer the term *commitments* rather than *beliefs* since MCC isn’t a faith community that gathers, such as a church, but rather an organization with a history of working with and for people in need. Adriana pointed out that the “faith tradition of MCC,” which is grounded in Anabaptist values emphasizes the “idea of putting our faith into action,” and “being able to do something tangible.” This is something important to note as her statement resonated with each of our research participants in a focus group interview. Anabaptism, like Latin American Liberation Theology share the commitment that “theology comes *afterwards*, it is the second act” (Gutierrez, 1973, p.35). The first act, says Juan Segundo (1976), is a “personal commitment to the oppressed” (p. 81). Likewise, one of the essential Anabaptist convictions is that faith is something that is lived and actively expressed rather than articulated and debated. The use of the word *commitment* itself is the idea that faith cannot simply be a list of beliefs, but rather are “what we think as well as what we hope or feel” (McClendon and Smith, 1994, p.6). Both Anabaptist and Liberation traditions share

the commitment that “every theology is political” (Segundo, 1976, p. 74) and, therefore, they demand a personal engagement. The difference between faith commitments and beliefs, for the Anabaptist or Liberationist, is an explicit acceptance of your relationship to politics (Segundo, 1976).

We draw this connection in part due to the importance, and perhaps unknown, theological overlap both these traditions have and, in part, because our research participants made note of it. Tobias, during his time working for MCC, mentioned being inspired in his Anabaptist approach to his work through the study of Liberation Theology. He said that he found ways of articulating his faith commitments through these traditions, which has helped him to engage the Mayan communities he was living in in a way that was different than a development framework embedded in a capitalist and/or Eurocentric paradigm. The “professional development ideology,” he said, was something he constantly fought against, which, he felt, is imbued with a “colonialist mindset.” Instead, what he found in an Anabaptist tradition was “the idea of “identification with the poor.” A concern for the poor, the oppressed, and the exploited is a central commitment of the Anabaptists, Liberationists, and those committed to Postcolonial theory. This is an epistemological commitment that demonstrates a postcolonial sensibility – a high regard for relationality, especially how relationships are formed between the powerful and the *subaltern* (Spivak, 1988). Postcolonialism argues that epistemologies – the foundations of what we know – are too often either “unwittingly ethnocentric or Eurocentric, or both” (Young, 2015, p. 152). Therefore, as Anabaptist scholar Rene Padilla (1989) says, “once that is seen, the conclusion is unavoidable that what is needed is not economic development but a totally new social order. If oppression-dependency is the real problem, the answer is not development but liberation. Unless the system is changed, development will only benefit the oppressors” (p.37).

So how does a faith commitment, as outlined above, impact MCC’s ISL in Guatemala? Yasmin paints this picture for us:

The values of solidarity, an emphasis of wanting to identify with the poor and their struggles adds a dimension that can lead to a non-colonial approach in coming to Guatemala. Especially when you see other groups that come with faith traditions that limit what they can do. Most of the groups that come through MCC – their faith tradition opens the participants’ worldview to seek to understand the struggles that communities are having against, for example, hydro-electric companies and immediately react defensively as if saying that is fighting against progress or something. It shapes them to be humble I think.

Nate adds to this, saying ISL creates the conditions for participants and community members to meet and what can happen in this collision is the possibility of becoming “*mystica*.” Nate is playing with the Spanish word for *mystic*, which he applies as a verb rather than noun to refer to a person who develops a “passion” or a “commitment” to people. Tobias uses the same word to describe an important trait he sees in MCC workers who are

motivated to “identify with their (community) struggles,” and who learn to “love communities for their way of life that they have and not just because they are doing the projects.” Yasmin, speaking as one of the two Latin Americans in our interview group also said that one of the interesting things about the ISL participants who come with MCC is that “they have a religiosity or spirituality that allows them to understand and appreciate Mayan spirituality.” The epistemological commitment to relationality facilitates the possibility for what we would see as an “organic communion” with peoples (Boff, 1986, p. 19).

The “Anabaptist ideal,” says Nate, is a commitment to people first, especially the oppressed and vulnerable. This ideal has ontological implications. For example, Nate would argue as someone committed to Anabaptist ideals that the “idea of participation trumps the rightness of somebody’s opinion.” In practice, this means that “somebody voicing an opinion is more important than what they are saying,” and while it makes things difficult, it’s essential in “valuing the process.” Nate is connecting the dots between Anabaptist ontology and the practices that MCC implements that give voice and power to the communities they work within as they prepare to host ISL groups. “There was always the tendency to want to control the process,” said Nate, “but to relinquish that was important because this is all about *human* development,” which we realize, after reflecting on his statement, is opposed to simply development that passes over the human. He was adamant that it was more important that the “community was honoured all along the way,” rather than worry that the ISL trips themselves were planned in accordance with Northern expectations. We hear his statements resonate with those of scholars Leonardo Boff and Clodovis Boff (1986) who say that “Liberation theology is a theology *of* the people, done *with* the people, and emerging *from* the people (p. 3).

According to our research participants’ MCC work stands in contrast to other faith-based ISL initiatives for the fact that they do not encourage or invite groups to proselytize. Adriana says of this that “our tradition is not to come in and evangelize... I appreciate that about our faith tradition – it seems a less overt and more hands on and practical, more about connecting with people where they are at.” Yasmin, reflecting on her experience in the *Nebaj* community said that groups who sought ways to proselytize was a “sure fire sign of colonialism.” It’s important, she notes, that groups “come with a faith that doesn’t want to impose their ideas but wants to learn from others, which can be very empowering.” MCC’s approach to ISL centers on creating space to be present with people, building upon faith convictions that value that encounter. Nate says “there are a lot of great tools in this tradition such as “peacebuilding, justice, and simplicity.” Nancy contributes a few more she has recognized, which are “embracing diversity,” and what she calls “multiculturality.” These tools help shape meaningful encounters and, at least for the participants, can guide them to “understand reality for what it is and take the time to work through complexity, recognizing the thousands of dynamics and confusions that exist but still walk forward” (Nate).

Adriana focuses on peacebuilding that she saw as one of the most meaningful for ISL experiences. From her perspective ISL provides an actual opportunity to enact peace. She says that “I reflected on that often with groups, that the act of connecting with someone that is different than you or that you don’t know, learning their life, learning their story, seeing

how they live, that is a strong act of peace, making peace. And it's tangible." One of the goals of ISL from MCC's perspective is to create peacemakers out of the participants. What this means in many cases is that MCC hopes to see participants commit to acts of advocacy. This may sometimes look, as Adriana points out for the Guatemalan context, "advocating for change with policies of mining companies." Or it may mean digesting the experience that you have had and seeking out opportunities to advocate in like-minded areas. The Anabaptist, and particularly Mennonite faith tradition that grounds MCC is about "reaching out to others across borders with tangible resources," says Adriana. ISL can at its best make this a reality and hopefully lay the foundation to construct a "culture of peace."

Conclusion

There is no doubt that institutions from the global north participate in ISL because they believe in its transformative power; the steady flow of groups participating in MCC Guatemala's program bear witness to that. There is also no doubt that ISL is the site of conflicting ideologies and purposes. As our participants indicate, the line between colonizing and decolonizing practices is blurred. Are ISL guests involved in charity or working alongside hosts? As Randy Stoecker (2016) points out "research suggests that service learning can also reinforce stereotypes of the poor, oppressed, and excluded" (p. 5). MCC's commitment to giving voice to the hosting communities is one way that these stereotypes can be countered. Guests from the global north are invited to become advocates alongside vibrant communities that have a vision for their futures. Stoecker (2016) calls for a "form of service learning that 'liberates' those who participate in it whether they come from the higher education institution [or church] or 'the community'" (p.4). By enabling communities to show their strengths, MCC's ISL program liberates local communities by giving them voice; by working alongside vibrant local communities, northern participants are liberated from the "poor but happy" trope that so often accompanies charity work.

MCC belongs to a long tradition of faith that has engaged complexity and tension. In Guatemala today their involvement extends into similarly difficult places, working "in diverse cultures with different religions," notes Nancy of the programs she worked with. She is happy that "our programs personality is made rich because we work with people who practice Mayan spirituality and who are Catholic." It's not always easy to live up to these ideals or expect everyone from within any tradition to abide by these same convictions. MCC has felt the tension to uphold these kinds of values in the context of Guatemala while being pressured by the expectations of both Northern (Canadian and U.S.) and Southern (Guatemalan) Mennonite churches to whom they are accountable. Nancy mentions that sometimes it is "a bit of a fight between the interests of the constituency in the North and the MCC vision of what actually happens here." While these kinds of tensions can ignite potential colonial repercussions MCC is working hard to stay committed to their faith convictions and allow their work to stretch church participants. Nancy offers a helpful reminder that "colonialism isn't specifically connected to Mennonite churches, but is always a part of the relationships between North America and Central America."

About the Authors

Geraldine Balzer (*corresponding author*) is an assistant professor of Curriculum Studies in the College of Education at the University of Saskatchewan. Her experiences teaching Inuit students led to her interest in decolonizing pedagogies and transformative education. Her teaching focuses on ways of disrupting the hegemony of standard English and embracing the diversity of Englishes within our world, incorporating Aboriginal and postcolonial literature into secondary classrooms, and preparing teachers to be advocates of social justice. Her research explores the use of literature for social justice teaching and service learning as a tool for disrupting binaries. Email: geraldine.balzer@usask.ca

Luke Heidebrecht is a graduate student in Curriculum Studies in the College of Education at the University of Saskatchewan. His experiences facilitating undergraduate theology students through service-learning in various communities in Canada, Guatemala, India, South Africa, and Thailand has inspired him to recognize the potential value of interfaith and intercultural learning contexts. His current studies in Education are focused on the theories of postcolonialism and decolonization as tools for shaping service-learning practices.

References

- Boff, Leonardo., and Boff, Clodovis. (1986). *Introducing liberation theology*. Maryknoll: Orbis Books.
- Clandinin, Jean D. (2013). *Engaging in narrative inquiry*. Walnut Creek, USA: Left Coast Press.
- Clandinin, Jean D. and Connelly Michael F. (2000). *Narrative inquiry: Experience and story in qualitative research*. San Francisco, USA: Jossey-Bass.
- Flickinger, Ron. (2010). *El Salvador*. *Global Anabaptist Mennonite Encyclopedia Online*. Retrieved from http://gameo.org/index.php?title=El_Salvador&oldid=121802.
- Gandhi, L. (1989). *Postcolonial theory: A critical introduction*. New York, USA: Columbia University Press.
- Gutierrez, Gustavo. (1973) *A theology of liberation*. Maryknoll, USA: Orbis Books.
- Jimenez Estrada, V. (2005). The tree of life as a research methodology. *The Australian Journal of Indigenous Education*, 34: 44-52.
- Johnstone, Gerry. (2011). *Restorative justice: Ideas, values, debates*. New York, USA: Routledge.
- Kanu, Y. (2006). *Curriculum as cultural practice: Postcolonial imaginations*. Toronto, Canada: University of Toronto Press.
- Kovach, M. (2009). *Indigenous methodologies: Characteristics, conversations, and Contexts*. Toronto, Canada: University of Toronto Press.
- Larsen, M. A. (2016). International service learning: Engaging host communities – Introduction. In Marianne A. Larsen (Ed). *International service learning: Engaging host communities*, (pp. 3-18). New York, USA: Routledge.

- Martin, K. (2003). Ways of knowing, ways of being, and ways of doing: A theoretical framework and methods for Indigenous re-search and indigenist research. *Journal of Australian Studies*, 76, 203-214.
- Menonite Central Committee (MCC) and Palestine and Israel: (n.d.). *Frequently Asked Questions*. Retrieved from https://mcccanada.ca/sites/mcccanada.ca/files/media/common/documents/palestine_israel_booklet_web_ca.pdf.
- Menonite Central Committee (MCC) *in Palestine and Israel*. (n.d.). Retrieved from <https://mcc.org/learn/where/middle-east/palestine-israel/faq/mcc-palestine-israel>.
- Menonite Central Committee (MCC) *Mining Justice*. (n.d.). Retrieved from <https://mcccanada.ca/getinvolved/advocacy/campaigns/mining-justice>.
- Menonite Central Committee (MCC) *Memorandum of Understanding*. (n.d.). Retrieved from <http://mcc.org/sites/mcc.org/files/media/common/documents/mccltmou.pdf>.
- Menonite Central Committee (MCC). (n.d.). *Principles and Practices: Guiding the mission of Menonite Central Committee in the name of Christ*. Retrieved from <http://mcc.org/sites/mcc.org/files/media/common/documents/mccprinciplesandpracticesweb2.pdf>.
- Menonite Central Committee (MCC). (n.d.). *Where we work*. Retrieved from <http://mcc.org/learn/where>.
- Menonite Central Committee (MCC). (n.d.). *Vision and Mission*. Retrieved from <http://mcc.org/learn/about/mission>.
- McClendon, W.M., Smith, J. M. (1994). *Convictions: Defusing religious relativism*. Eugene: Wipf and Stock.
- Padilla, Rene C. (1989). Liberation theology: An appraisal. In Schipani, D. S. (Ed) *Freedom and discipleship: Liberation theology in an Anabaptist perspective* p.34-50. Maryknoll, USA: Orbis Books.
- Redekop, Paul. (2008). *Changing paradigms: Punishment and restorative discipline*. Scottsdale: Herald Press.
- Rutschman, LaVerne A. (1989). Anabaptism and Liberation Theology. In *Freedom and discipleship: Liberation theology in an Anabaptist perspective*. (pp.51-65) Maryknoll, USA: Orbis Books.
- Segundo, Juan Luis. (1976). *The liberation of theology*. Maryknoll, USA: Orbis Books.
- Spivak, Gayatri. (1988). "Can the Subaltern Speak?" In C. Nelson and L. Grossberg (Eds). *Marxism and the interpretation of culture*, (pp. 271-313). Urbana: University of Illinois Press.
- Stoecker, Randy. (2016). *Liberating service learning and the rest of higher education civic engagement*. Philadelphia, USA: Temple Press.
- Walsh, Susan. (2014) *Trojan horse aid: Seeds of resistance and resilience in the Bolivian highlands and beyond*. Montreal and Kingston, Canada: McGill-Queen's University Press.
- Wilson, S. (2008). *Research is ceremony: Indigenous research methods*. Winnipeg, Canada: Fernwood Publishing.
- Young, Robert J.C. (2003). *Postcolonialism: A very short introduction*. New York, USA: Oxford University Press.
- Young, Robert J.C. (2015). *Empire, colony, postcolony*. West Sussex, England: Wiley Blackwell.
- Zavala, M. (2013). What do we mean by decolonizing research strategies? Lessons from decolonizing Indigenous research projects in New Zealand and Latin America. *Decolonization: Indigeneity, Education, and Society*, 2(1), 55-71.
- Zehr, Howard. (2014) *The little book of restorative justice*. New York, USA: Good Books.
- Zembylas, Michalinos (2015). 'Pedagogy of discomfort' and its ethical implications: The tensions of ethical violence in social justice education. *Ethics and Education*. 10(2): 163-174.