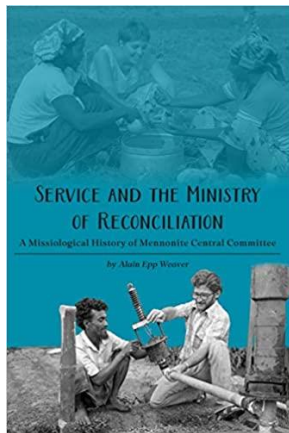


BOOK REVIEW

Service and the Ministry of Reconciliation: A Missiological History of Mennonite Central Committee

by *Alain Epp Weaver*

Reviewed by **Katerina Parsons**



Newton, KS: Bethel College, 2021. \$10.00

My concept of international “service” was first shaped by Mennonite Central Committee’s (MCC) one-year exchange program for young adults, which placed me with a justice organization in Tegucigalpa, Honduras. I spent the next seven years with MCC and MCC partners, first in Honduras and then in Washington, D.C., wondering sometimes whether I was “serving” or merely “working.”

Informed by its identity as a ministry of the global Anabaptist church, Mennonite Central Committee works for “relief, development and peace in the name of Christ” in countercultural ways that promote nonviolence and favor the slow, small, and relational over anything flashy, fast, or sprawling (See the MCC logo at www.mcc.org). MCC funds most of its projects through local churches or civil society organizations and often supports these organizations not just with money but with “service workers,” who may be from any country with an Anabaptist presence.

It is this idea of “service” that is central to Alain Epp Weaver’s slim volume, *Service and the Ministry of Reconciliation: A Missiological History of Mennonite Central Committee*. Developed from a series of lectures at Kansas’s Bethel College on the occasion of MCC’s centennial, the book is written primarily to

provide people familiar with MCC “new ways of thinking about how [their] part of the MCC story fits within broader directions and tensions across MCC’s century-long history” (xiv).

The questions the book raises, however, are relevant to anyone questioning “colonial and racialized assumptions about who is serving whom and where” (60), particularly those skeptical of models of service that send young North Americans to presumably be of some “service” in countries where they do not speak the language or know the culture, to carry out tasks they would likely be unqualified to perform in their hometowns.

Epp Weaver’s rich archival research traces a history of tension between conceptions of service as Christian witness, as relief work following humanitarian principles, as active nonresistance against militarism and war or – as service worker Lydia Schlabach put it in 1950 – as “some glamor, some broadening of experience, some new learning, and a lot of dedication and hard work” (50).

At the heart of this book – and MCC’s mission – is a challenge against service as simply “doing” (4), particularly when that action flows from wealthier countries to poorer countries. “Christian service certainly involves doing, lots of doing,” Epp Weaver writes, “but fundamentally Christian service is about connection to and fellowship with others, discovering ourselves before God in our common need” (9). This definition leads to MCC’s “ministries of presence” over modernization, and peacebuilding over prescriptivism.

It is something MCC workers have been saying for decades. “Unless we learn from the people themselves...who they are and why they see themselves, the world, us and God as they do,” mused Jean Snyder, an MCC service worker in Jamaica in the 1980s, “We have little to offer them but our busyness. And our busyness may, in the long run, have more relevance to our monthly reports than to the lives we touch” (62).

Epp Weaver comes to this view informed by his own history with MCC, beginning with his wife’s and his first placement in Palestine, where they were sent “not with a predetermined agenda but were instead tasked

with building connections and forging relationships” (100). He writes that “Presence, solidarity, connection, relationship, [and] accompaniment” were the “keywords” shaping their orientation to MCC, an organization where some workers joked they should be evaluated by how many cups of tea they shared with neighbors (100). At the same time, he notes, parents of children in the school where they were assigned expected them to teach (100).

This caused a tension, he writes, “in holding together the missiological imperative of being present, on the one hand, with the need to plan for and report on results, on the other,” something he argues “is a tension that has defined MCC more broadly” (100).

This is a significant tension. MCC’s intentionally slow, relational work cannot be scaled to fully meet the needs of a planet facing war, displacement, hunger, and a changing climate that is right now destroying homes and livelihoods. Facing such immense need, MCC’s concept of service as reconciliation and mutual sharing makes the most sense in a context that looks ahead to God’s “kingdom come.”

In Epp Weaver’s telling, the “why” of relief work is not just about feeding the hungry and clothing the naked but is instead “a living and powerful testimony to love at a time when it is most needed” (46). In Syria, for example, MCC’s relief items might have been a drop in the bucket, but through MCC “the church gave an embodied witness to what Syria might yet one day be, and to the coming future in which all will stand in fellowship before God in our shared need” (12).

Service and the Ministry of Reconciliation is not the most exhaustive book about MCC’s history, nor is it the most accessible to someone outside the Anabaptist fold (or whose parlance does not include terms like “missiological”).¹ As a member of the target audience, however, I found new ideas to challenge my own concepts and expectations of service. Others who have worked or “served” abroad could benefit from similarly honest storytelling about their own organizations and who concepts of “service” are understood to encompass.

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¹ MCC’s history is well documented in books like *In the Name of Christ: A History of the Mennonite Central Committee and its Services 1920-1951* by John D. Unruh and *Mennonite Central Committee in Canada: A History* by Esther Epp-Thiessen. An accessible entry point might be [*Pursuing Peace: The Essence of Mennonite Central Committee*](#) by Esther Epp-Thiessen, which is just 39 pages and free online. Those interested in thematic explorations through MCC’s lens might read [*Intersections: MCC Theory and Practice Quarterly*](#), edited by Alain Epp Weaver.