

Submission to:

The Canadian Museum for Human Rights

from the Mennonite Committee on Human Rights

What is the Mennonite Committee on Human Rights?

The Mennonite Committee on Human Rights is a coalition representing a number of Mennonite organizations with interest in human rights. The Committee is charged with the tasks of relating to the Canadian Museum for Human Rights, and engaging the Mennonite community in human rights education. Members of the Committee represent the following organizations:

- The Canadian Foodgrains Bank – Kenton Lobe
- Canadian Mennonite University – Paul Redekop
- Manitoba Mennonite Historical Society – Anna Ens
- Mennonite Central Committee Canada – Esther Epp-Tiessen
- Mennonite Central Committee Manitoba – Peter Rempel
- Members at large – Judith Dueck, Eliakim Sibanda, Wendy Kroeker

Who are the Mennonites?

Mennonite faith emerged from the radical wing of the 16th Century Reformation in Europe. Initially members of the group were known as Anabaptists or “rebaptizers.” Later they became known as Mennonites, after Dutch Anabaptist leader Menno Simons. While Mennonites descend from European German, Swiss and Dutch roots, today’s Mennonites are much more diverse.

There are about 1.5 million Mennonites in the world today in more than 50 countries, with the largest number in Africa. There are approximately 127,000 baptized Mennonites in Canada, with the largest concentrations of Mennonites in Canada found in Manitoba, Ontario and British Columbia. When unbaptized children and youth are included, the number rises to approximately 250,000. A much larger number claim Mennonite roots.

Central to Mennonite theology is that membership in the church community is voluntary. The Mennonite faith is expressed in daily living, and finds its inspiration and guidance in Christ’s teachings of love, service, community and nonviolence. Mennonites seek to be a reconciling presence in human relationships, and reach out, at times at risk to their own lives, to people caught in fear, suffering hate, oppression and violence. They believe that love is the central directing element in all relationships, including a concern for human needs and in response to enemies. Historically, Mennonites do not participate in war, and reject all forms of violence and abuse.

Historical Mennonite Experience with Human Rights Violations

The Anabaptist forerunners of the Mennonites asserted freedom of religion, in particular with respect to baptism, military service and swearing of oaths. The churches and the states of Europe persecuted the Anabaptists for their religious beliefs, and ca. 5,000 Anabaptists were executed in the 16th Century. Some of their Mennonite successors endured restrictions on their religious freedom until the increase in human rights in society permitted the fuller expression of their convictions (e.g., the Netherlands, Switzerland, France, Germany). Other Mennonites migrated to territories over the next two centuries in which the authorities

tolerated their beliefs, sometimes as state-approved "privileges" (e.g., Prussia, Russia, United States and Canada). However, these Mennonite migrations also contributed to the displacement and violation of the rights of the original inhabitants of the land on which they settled. Within their closed communities, Mennonites also struggled with respecting the rights of dissident individuals and groups.

The Mennonites who immigrated from Europe and the United States to Upper Canada between the 1780s and 1860s and from Russia to Manitoba and Saskatchewan between 1873 and 1914 obtained assurances from the governments that their unique religious convictions would be protected; e.g., exemption from public schools and military service. These promised rights were jeopardized at the time of World War I and some Canadian Mennonites emigrated in reaction. At the same time, Mennonites who had remained in Russia were suffering discrimination, violence, famine and disease, followed by outright anti-religious persecution under the new Soviet regime. Thousands immigrated to Canada in the 1920s, but the oppression of the thousands remaining in the Soviet Union intensified through the 1930s and 1940s. After World War II several more thousand Mennonite refugees from the Soviet Union and its expanded territories arrived in Canada hoping for freedom and opportunities.

The experiences of human rights violations have fostered in Canadian Mennonites a deep gratitude for the protection of human rights in Canada, as well as a broad compassion for people whose human rights are now being violated elsewhere. Canadian Mennonites have also developed relationships and empathies for Mennonites around the world, including some whose human rights are being threatened by their governments (e.g., Colombia, Vietnam).

Mennonite Contributions to Human Rights

As indicated above, Mennonites have sometimes benefited from the violation of the rights of others. Within Canada, Mennonite settlers often moved directly onto the land which was taken from aboriginal people. It is important to acknowledge this dark side of Mennonite experience with human rights.

At the same time, Mennonites have been engaged in supporting human rights and resisting human rights violations, not only against themselves, for decades. They have extensive contacts with and grassroots knowledge of communities in crisis, poverty, and need around the world. Below are a few examples involving local, Canadian and international settings:

Article 3 UDHR. Right to life, liberty and security of person

Mennonites believe that war and armed conflict are the greatest threat to "life, liberty and security of person." War not only takes life, it disables and traumatizes people, it orphans children, it separates families, it contributes to hunger, disease and illness, it devastates the natural environment, it diverts resources from meeting human need, and it fosters more war. Therefore Mennonites are deeply involved in alleviating the suffering of war and advocating directly and indirectly for the prevention of war. Mennonite service agencies are found in war zones around the world, distributing relief supplies, providing medical care, assisting refugees and offering trauma counseling. Mennonite organizations facilitate gatherings where enemies can meet face to face and recognize their commonalities. Mennonite colleges and universities are at the forefront in developing curricula for peace and conflict studies, in exploring how conflicts can be addressed nonviolently, and how the root causes of armed conflict and violence in the modern world can be addressed. Mennonite advocates encourage governments to use diplomacy and dialogue in addressing disputes, rather than violent force.

Article 10. Everyone is entitled in full equality to a fair and public hearing by an independent and impartial tribunal, in the determination of his rights and obligations and of any criminal charge against him.

The modern restorative justice movement, which defines justice in terms of healing and the restoration of harms rather than punishment, was begun in Elmira, Ontario in 1974 when two Mennonites, Dave Worth, a Mennonite Central Committee worker, and Mark Yantzi, a parole officer, carried out the first victim offender mediation. Subsequently, victim offender mediation programs were introduced by Mennonite sponsored programs in various parts of Canada and the U.S., then in the rest of the world. Now, for example, every member country of the European Union is expected to have restorative justice legislation in place. As well, restorative justice principles have come to be adopted in diverse circumstances ranging from restorative discipline programs in primary schools to international peacemaking tribunals such as the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in South Africa.

Article 14. Right to seek and enjoy in other countries asylum from persecution

In part because Mennonites have been refugees, forced to flee their homes because of their religious beliefs so often in their history, they have also been active in welcoming refugees. In the 1920's, Mennonite communities in Canada lobbied government to remove restrictive immigration regulations against Hutterites, Mennonites and Quakers. Later, they welcomed 20,000 of their fellow Mennonites who were fleeing from Bolshevik Russia. More were sponsored into Canada after World War II. In response to the desperate plight of the "boat people" fleeing Southeast Asia, in 1979 Mennonite Central Committee Canada negotiated a Master Agreement with the federal government for private sponsorship of large numbers of refugees. This Master Agreement was soon emulated by other Canadian churches and service organizations, facilitating private sponsorship of not only Southeast Asian refugees, but also succeeding waves of refugees to Canada from other parts of the world that continues today. Mennonite churches and communities continue to sponsor and support refugees seeking asylum from around the world.

Article 18. Right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion

Mennonites have historically asserted their right to freedom of conscience by refusing to participate in military service and warfare. Prior to World War II, they sought and received exemptions from all military service as conscientious objectors. During World War II they were able to negotiate an alternative service program for young men of military age. In the 1990's, advocacy by Mennonites led to the establishment of provisions for persons who come to a position of conscientious objection while in the armed forces and seek early release. Mennonites have also participated in advocating for legal options for conscientious objectors to divert the military portion of their income tax to nonviolent peacebuilding initiatives.

The experience of the Mennonites with persecution in the context of violent conflict sensitized them to the effects of such treatment and led to a commitment to work for the rights of others, and to involvement in a wide range of peacemaking activities. These activities include learning from, relating to and supporting national and local peacemaking efforts, placing workers who have special peacemaking skills in national and local institutions and agencies, writing letters of concern for peace and justice to government officials and representatives, sponsoring seminars and conferences that focus in one way or another on the issue of peace, and, more broadly, being a reconciling presence in the midst of interpersonal and group tensions and conflicts in a wide range of circumstances.

Article 25. Right to an adequate standard of living adequate for the health and well-being of himself and his family, including food, clothing, housing and medical care and necessary social services, and the right to security in the

event of unemployment, sickness, disability, widowhood, old age or other lack of livelihood in circumstances beyond his control

Mennonites believe that feeding the hungry is an essential part of living out their Christian faith. Through a variety of organizations and initiatives, they seek to reduce the number of persons worldwide who suffer from hunger. Mennonites volunteer at local food banks and organize community kitchens, gardens and “shared agriculture” enterprises. Internationally they contribute food and money for the purposes of food where immediate relief is required. They support community and agricultural development initiatives which are aimed at improving food production. They also advocate for fair trade rules that dismantle structural causes of hunger. Most recently, Mennonites have become involved in “food charter” movements at the local level and “right to food” initiatives within the United Nations.

The Mennonite Central Committee, as the relief and development arm of the Mennonite Church is involved in development work around the world, in areas such as education, health, agriculture, peace and justice issues, relief work and job creation. Ten Thousand Villages, MCC's Fair Trade store, purchases crafts from developing world artisans and craftpersons and makes them available for sale in North America. The Mennonite Disaster Service contributes to rights to housing and security through its work in response to disaster situations.

In North America, Mennonites are involved with immigration, refugee assistance, job creation, people with disabilities, offenders and victims of crime and more. Mennonite organizations have also done pioneer work in the mental health field, and have contributed to the development of the disability movement.

Mennonite Hopes for the Canadian Museum for Human Rights.

The museum has high potential to influence those who view the stories, learn about human rights and assess their own role in the world today. Hopefully Mennonite stories will be represented and add to the influence. It appears the museum will be organized around holographic images of characters telling their first-person stories and various galleries with clearly defined aims. Films, archival and resource materials that identify stories that support the goals of the museum’s mandate need to be gathered. Fitting in with the museum’s approach they could be organized in terms of first-person narratives. These should be narratives that can help museum visitors address the call to commitment involved in questions such as, “How then must I live?” and “What actions must I take?”

Three kinds of stories could be used:

1. A story of the Mennonite odyssey from Russia to Canada. For example: an elderly Mennonite man tells the story of how he and his family travel on the trans-Siberian railroad. The family ends up in Manitoba where they build a life in Winnipeg’s north end. As a call to commitment, the story should invite people to reflect on how they can maintain courage and commitment in the face of persecution and suffering. This type of story could well fit in the “community of communities” section. It also illustrates how hope can emerge out of suffering.
2. A story of Mennonite work on behalf of human rights. For example: a MCC worker talks about her work in helping to reintegrate youth who were abducted and forced to become child soldiers (or “wives” of soldiers) into their home communities. They would address the question of the call to commitment in terms of: “How can I serve the cause of human rights?” This is a vibrant part of

Mennonite faith today and it can easily be used in parts of the museum that point to the possibility of reconciliation and healing.

3. A story that conveys the spirit of what Mennonite communities have learned about responding to violence and violation. For example: the story of the development of victim-offender reconciliation programs (described above). This story portrays how healing and hope emerge as victims of human rights violations (individuals and groups) name their experience of violation, as perpetrators (individuals and groups) acknowledge their offense, and as communities together take steps to right the wrongs in positive and constructive ways. This spirit of the story is one that points to the necessity of confession and compassion, and the possibilities of forgiveness and reconciliation.

Conclusion

As Mennonites, we believe our approach to peace and reconciliation, our global connections with communities where human rights are violated, our responses to abuse both nationally and internationally, as well as stories arising out of our own history, would all make important contributions to the Canadian Museum for Human Rights.

In conclusion, the members of the Mennonite Committee on Human Rights take the position that

- the basis for the promotion of human rights is their universality: "all human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights" (UDHR Article 1),
- the Museum should be organized around the human rights proclaimed in the Universal Declaration on Human Rights,
- the portrayal of Mennonite experience in the Museum, if included, would be most effective if placed in the context of universal inalienable rights, as well as holding a place in the "community of communities" gallery.

Resources

A. General Human Rights

Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms. <http://laws.justice.gc.ca/en/charter/index.html>.

Human Rights Documentation Centre. University of Ottawa. <http://www.cdp-hrc.uottawa.ca/eng/doc/can-web/index.php> (Canadian websites).
<http://www.cdp-hrc.uottawa.ca/eng/doc/inter-web/index.php> (International websites).

Human Rights Resource Centre. University of Minnesota. <http://www1.umn.edu/humanrts/edumat/> (Educational resources).

HuriSearch: the Human Rights Search Engine <http://www.hurisearch.org/> (Access to 4500 human rights websites in 77 languages).

Province of Manitoba Human Rights Commission. <http://www.gov.mb.ca/hrc/english/links.html> (Links to Canadian and Provincial Human Rights Sites – mostly governmental).

Universal Declaration of Human Rights. <http://www.unhchr.ch/udhr/lang/eng.htm>

United Nations. Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights.
<http://www.ohchr.org/EN/Pages/WelcomePage.aspx> (Human Rights information).
<http://www2.ohchr.org/english/law/> (Human Rights instruments).

B. Canadian Museum for Human Rights

Canadian Heritage. News Release. “Appointments to Advisory Committee on Canadian Museum for Human Rights.”
http://www.pch.gc.ca/newsroom/index_e.cfm?fuseaction=displayDocument&DocIDCd=CJV071609

Canadian Heritage. Public Consultations. “Proposed Content and Programming of the Canadian Museum for Human Rights (CMHR).” http://www.pch.gc.ca/pc-ch/consultations/mcdp-cmhr/index_e.cfm

Canadian Museum for Human Rights. <http://www.canadianmuseumforhumanrights.com/>

C. Mennonite Resources

Global Anabaptist Mennonite Encyclopedia Online (GAMEO). <http://www.gameo.org/>

Global Mennonite History Series.

Volume 1: Checole, Alemu. *A Global Mennonite History: Africa*. Kitchener, ON: Pandora Press, 2003.

Volume 2: Baecher, Claude et al. *Testing Faith and Tradition: Europe: A Global Mennonite History*. Intercourse, PA: Good Books, 2006.

Marshall, Christopher D. *Crowned with Glory and Honor: Human Rights in the Biblical Tradition*. Telford, PA: Pandora Press U.S., 2001.

Mennonites in Canada Series.

Volume 1: Frank H. Epp. *Mennonites in Canada, 1786-1920: The History of a Separate People*. Toronto: Macmillan of Canada, 1974.

Volume 2: Frank H. Epp, *Mennonites in Canada, 1920-1940: A People's Struggle to Survive*. Toronto: Macmillan of Canada, 1982.

Volume 3: T.D. Regehr. *Mennonites in Canada, 1940-1970: A People Transformed*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1996.

Schlabach, Gerald and Duane Friesen, eds. *At Peace and Unafraid: Public Order, Security and the Wisdom of the Cross*. Scottdale, PA: Herald Press, 2005.

Participating Mennonite Organisations

- The Canadian Foodgrains Bank
- Canadian Mennonite University
- Chair of Mennonite Studies, University of Winnipeg
- Manitoba Mennonite Historical Society
- Mennonite Central Committee Canada
- Mennonite Central Committee Manitoba
- Mennonite Heritage Centre Gallery
- Mennonite Heritage Village
- Mennonite Historical Society of Canada
- Peace and Conflict Studies, Conrad Grebel University College affiliated with the University of Waterloo

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