



Pan-Canadian Community Development Learning Network Profile of Effective Practice:

Mennonite Central Committee BC Employment and Community Development

Context

Abbotsford, with a population of more than 130,000, is the fifth largest city in British Columbia. Located in the centre of the Fraser Valley, about 70 km from downtown Vancouver, Abbotsford is a city in the country, situated in one of the most productive agricultural areas in Canada. Nevertheless, the city has experienced most of its population growth due to its proximity to Greater Vancouver. With the completion of the

TransCanada Highway in the 1960s, the community became a one-hour drive from

Vancouver's downtown core. Combined with favorable house prices and an appealing rural lifestyle, Abbotsford's location has resulted in rapid population growth, which has continued to remain well above the provincial average for nine out of the last 10 years.



Abbotsford, British Columbia

This Profile of Effective Practice is one of fifteen stories examining how innovative, community-based initiatives are using comprehensive approaches to improve social and economic conditions on a local level.

The profiles were prepared as part of a 2.5-year project of the Canadian CED Network looking at the links between social inclusion and community economic development.

For other profiles, more information on the project and additional resources on social inclusion and CED, see the notes at the end of this document.

Abbotsford has long been a multi-cultural community consisting of people from around the world. This diversity has existed for a number of generations and continues to contribute to the economic and social make up of the city. The City of Abbotsford is home to fifty-eight different ethnic and cultural groups.

History

MCC is a faith-based organization established in 1923 and has deep social justice roots. During the Russian revolution, Mennonites in Russia were experiencing severe oppression. Mennonites in North America banded together to help. When that relief effort was completed, out of gratitude for help that they had received in the past, the organizers and constituency supporting the work decided to continue to provide relief to others in need, and so MCC was established and has gone on to be a peace and development agency operating across the globe. A guiding principle is the belief in peace and non-violence. MCC is evangelical in the sense that “MCC helps whenever there is need, no questions asked, no expectations,” said Ron Van Wyk, Director of MCC BC Employment & Community Development. “We are guided by Menno Simons who stated that true evangelism is to feed the hungry, clothe the naked, welcome the strangers, house the homeless, etc”.

MCC BC Employment & Community Development is a program of the Mennonite Central Committee, British Columbia (MCC BC). MCC is the relief and development agency of the Mennonite Churches in North America. As a faith-based, non-profit agency motivated by gratitude and compassion, MCC works among people suffering from poverty, conflict, oppression, natural disaster, social isolation and marginalization. MCC currently has over 14,000 workers in more than 58 countries worldwide.

MCC BC Employment and Community Development

Year Incorporated – 1968 (Employment & Community Development program established in 1990)

Mission – To enable people and communities toward economic self-reliance by empowering them to discover their gifts, develop their abilities, and mobilize resources to find sustainable work.

Activities – In response to community need:

- Asset Building and Financial Literacy Training
- Employability Skills Training
- Job Search and Job Matching
- Work Place Success Skills Training
- Retail, Customer Service, Restaurant and Hospitality Skills Training
- Career Decision-Making, Counselling and Planning
- Employment Mentoring
- Employment Resource Centres (Abbotsford and Chilliwack)
- Work Experience and Job Coaching
- Enviro-Active Work Experience and Training for Youth at Risk
- Social Enterprise Facilitation
- Micro-Enterprise Development
- Community based action research
- Feasibility Studies and Business Plan Development
- Project/Program Design and Management
- Labour Market Analysis

MCC has been active in BC since the 1940's when Mennonites who had settled the Fraser Valley in the late 20's began to help new Mennonite immigrants as well as collecting material goods for those in need around the world. MCC BC was incorporated in as a non-profit charitable organization in BC in 1968. In 2001, Mennonites in British Columbia worshipped in about 140 congregations from the North East Peace River valley to Vancouver Island, with a total membership of approximately 22,550. Most Mennonites reside in the Fraser Valley and the city of Vancouver.

The MCC BC Employment and Community Development program has thirty-five employees based in four offices, located in Abbotsford, Chilliwack, Richmond and Langley. They manage a variety of programs and social enterprises, serving a diverse population. While MCC BC Employment & Community Development is a program of MCC BC, it operates in a fairly autonomous way with its own accounting department. Although the manager and many staff are not Mennonite, the Mennonite principles are demonstrated in the organization's activities and approach.

Like all MCC programs, The Employment & Community Development program started because

members identified a need in the community. In the late 80's, church members were concerned about high unemployment and responded. The approach taken is to create mutually transformative relationships. As with all ideals to aspire to, there is a reality that the ideal may not always be met. The approach taken was described by Ron Van Wyk as "to come alongside people and see how to help." The organization's first effort was an HRDC employment program, but now funding comes from a combination of federal contributions for service delivery, provincial employment contracts, foundations and a small income stream from social enterprises, as well as an annual contribution from MCC BC.

Activities

MCC BC Employment & Community Development has grown to include a wide range of services, programs and enterprises delivered from multiple locations. The activities include employment programs that in the last year have provided career direction to 380 unemployed people, and 143 people have been matched with suitable jobs. Also, through the Bridging the Gap program, 48 women who survived abuse and violence received counselling, life skills and employability skills training and guidance on next steps to self-sufficiency, including further training/education or employment. The employment services are in high demand; from 1998 to 2002 through the Passport Café and later other programs at the Employment Centre in Abbotsford, over 12,000 participants have received one of the employment-related services.

Future Foundations is an asset development program for low-income working people. The program includes a matching savings plan, financial literacy training and counselling.

Together with Community Futures Development Corporation South Fraser, the Fraser Valley Social Purchasing Portal has been launched. Through this partnership, the Fraser Valley Centre for Social Enterprise has been established. The first major activity of the Centre was organizing the first Fraser Valley Social Enterprise Conference in September 2005.

The organization runs a number of social enterprises including a successful business and training venture, Above the Underground clothing store, which sells unique second-hand clothing. Above the Underground is a retail sales and customer service training program in which participants receive training in a real business setting. This three-month program is designed to enable participants to discover their abilities through work experience. Along with practical work experience, they also receive training in resume writing, job search skills, computer training and specific skills training in retail sales, management and customer service. In the last several years, Above the Underground has had over 250 participants complete the program of which 85% are currently working in the Fraser Valley in the retail, financial and hospitality industries.



'Above the Underground' Store

Again in collaboration with Community Futures Development Corporation South Fraser as well as the local United Way, Sandstorm Design and Glassworks (a local for profit business) a hybrid social enterprise project called ARISE (Abbotsford Recycling Industries Social Enterprise) has been developed. Owned by both traditional businesses and non-profits, ARISE melts and re-

casts recycled glass into long-lasting products such as glass bathtubs, sinks, and wall blocks, all with artistic elements and employing marginalized people wherever possible.



An Ecoworks Crew on the job.

Ecoworks, another social enterprise, provides landscaping contracting work experience and training to youth through projects that protect, rehabilitate and enhance the natural environment. Ecoworks has shifted from a work experience program to a social enterprise, joined by Renoworks, a small home renovation service. Ecoworks & Renoworks continue to provide work experience and skills training to at-risk youth. Ecoworks has recently completed a habitat restoration project for the City of Abbotsford, designed, built and installed a footbridge at a Federal Correctional Facility and rehabilitated trails in a Fraser Valley Regional District Park. Renoworks undertook home renovations including re-roofing and painting.

Ecoworks has successfully bid on a three-year landscaping contract with the Township of Langley.

In 2004 and 2005, Ron Van Wyk, Director of MCC BC Employment & Community Development, Gloria Wolfson, Director of the School of Social Work and Human Services at UCFV and other community development leaders in the Upper Fraser Valley, spearheaded a community-based collaborative research project called *Homeless in the Fraser Valley: Understanding the Needs of the Homeless in Relation to Employment*. The aim of the research was come up with a comprehensive community response in relation to homelessness. Based on the findings of the report, MCC Employment & Community Development in partnership with the United Way of the Fraser Valley has initiated the Fraser Valley Housing Project with the objective of developing an action plan that considers the possibility for community, corporate and government partnerships to address the Upper Fraser Valley's need for sustainable affordable housing. In addition, the homelessness study has resulted in an expanded capacity for emergency shelters in Abbotsford, Mission and Chilliwack, the establishment of the Cyrus Drop-In and Counselling Centre for street youth, the implementation of the first phase of establishing a Youth Safe House in the Upper Fraser Valley and safe beds for street youth in Chilliwack.

Over the past ten years, MCC Employment and Community Development has delivered more than thirty-seven contracts with federal, provincial and municipal governments, valued at over \$22 million for employment and community development activities.

Participatory and Comprehensive Analysis

MCC Employment and Community Development serves a diverse population with many programs and services. Their commitment to social justice is deep and resonates throughout the organization. Executive Director Ron Van Wyk explains that they look at people's lives and see the multifaceted person, who has relationships and may struggle with a number of issues. To focus only on employment, which is the organization's mandate and what they are contracted to do, without assisting in other aspects of the participants' lives would limit the success of the person and the program. The staff always seeks to add value to whatever programming they deliver by acknowledging the whole person and their gifts. This asset-based approach is empowering for all involved and is successful.

This organization is built on an ethos of caring and assisting. The key phrase is to 'come alongside people and advance together with them.' To this end they regularly advocate on behalf of participants to government officials, while recognizing bureaucracies are made up of humans who have their own constraints as well. When mistakes or unfair situations happen, staff will advocate quietly but won't give up until the situation is corrected. By establishing good working relationships with officials at all levels, staff can be effective advocates.

"Work is a central part of our lives. It consumes more than half of our waking hours, provides for our families, uses our gifts and abilities and connects us to community. At MCC BC Employment and Community Development (ECED) and within the context of a changing world, we enable people to find their way in the world of work."

The participatory approach is conveyed by the vocabulary used, such as using the term 'participants' rather than 'clients.' The staff work hard to build constructive relationships with participants, putting the emphasis on people taking ownership and making their own decisions. The staff provides tools and support and celebrates the many small successes. Sometimes participants will make bad decisions and be unable to complete a program, yet the staff doesn't ever close the door to participants. "We would like to believe that people can't burn their bridges to us; some people need more than a second chance; they need third, fourth, and fifth chances and so on. Our faith teaches us to forgive more than once and we believe the same applies to people who have tremendous struggles to overcome on their path to self-sufficiency," Ron states.

While a race, gender and ethnicity analysis is not explicitly stated, all staff work within a culture of respect. The goal is to be a "welcoming place, no matter who they are or where they are from, our task is to see how to come alongside them." The staff itself has some diversity beyond 'pale males' with women at management levels, staff from different ethnicities, including recent immigrants, and people with disabilities.

Staff are carefully selected and trained on ethical principles. When there is a new hire they sign the usual letter of employment and also a code of ethics. During the orientation process, new staff members visit other locations and sections to understand the whole scope of services offered. There are sessions that provide an overview of the history of MCC, how programs have evolved and what the challenges are. The organization is quite flat, in that the highest wage paid is not greater than three times the lowest. This means that administrative assistants and reception people are paid higher than market rate and the senior people paid slightly less than market rate. Staff is the greatest asset of the organization, with an organizational culture that is collegial, not hierarchal.

Policy Lessons and Success Factors

At the provincial level, performance-based contracts have been a challenge. While MCC BC is supportive of the principle of performance, the current government trend has been to move toward stricter program eligibility requirements and narrower views of success. In fact, one job placement program was so restrictive, the organization was losing money offering it and so had to stop offering the program.

The issues with performance-based evaluation are the indicators used, such as placing x number of people based on x number of referrals. But when the set number of referrals is not received, a small pool of participants results and the tendency is to 'cherry pick' stronger participants, to increase the chances of them being ready and able to work at the end of the program. This creates a further barrier for multi-barriered participants. When the organization

Success Factors

- Commitment of staff, without exception staff are very committed to work. We care about our participants- they are not just clients with a number.
- Open door policy from management and we encourage people to come up with ideas, make suggestions, always open to improvement.
- Organization celebrates success, when they get new funding or good news, a cow bell is rung and everyone comes together to hear about it.
- Adding value to government programs but going beyond guidelines to ensure participants have tools and resources needed for success.
- A wide-ranging mix of programs and social enterprises allows flexibility.

works with a participant who has severe or multiple barriers, strictly following the terms of the program would often not lead that person to be successful, as there just isn't enough support. Program staff will go beyond the strict program guidelines to assist people, perhaps driving them to appointments or finding funds to repair their cars. If a participant has a low job readiness score, the staff work harder to help them find employment.

This is part of MCC BC Employment and Community Development's successful approach: adding value to programs and to pushing the envelope. Whatever the obstacle for the participant – day care, transportation, or any other barrier to employment – the staff works with the participant to address it. By providing added value to programs, they can soften the rigid nature of some program structures.

A challenge at the federal government level has been the changes at HRSDC imposing tighter accountability measures that require ludicrous amounts of paperwork for contracted agencies. Recognizing that this directive is coming from high levels, the organization doesn't fight with HRSD office staff as they are only following the rules.

MCC Canada continues to raise awareness about the harmful impacts of Free Trade agreements and the WTO. MCC BC Employment and Community Development works on the ground to provide support to participants in discovering their talents and abilities and finding sustainable work. The organization is very practical and focuses on getting things done. While there is discussion and debate on long-term structural change, they focus on short-term positive change for participants.

It is clear from an organizational point of view that MCC BC Employment and Community Development must diversify funding sources, so they are working hard on strengthening their own social enterprises and building relationships with foundations. Ron Van Wyk states, "We must have diversified funding to allow us to add value to government programs – with only government program funding we are in a straitjacket."

Another key lesson is to respect your staff and create an environment in which staff has the freedom to manage but remain accountable. All staff are skilled in managing risk and are empowered to add value to programs by finding creative helping solutions. The collegial atmosphere extends to community and government partners as well, recognizing that they all have the same goal. By working collectively in community and being supportive of others' role, all members of the community benefit.

Lessons Learned

- Be humble, and know that sometimes someone else can do it better.
- Work collectively in community, be supportive of others.
- Understand that building relationships takes time; you have to sow today in order to reap maybe years later.
- Look for opportunity, but don't be opportunist.

MCC BC Employment and Community Development

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More information on MCC BC Employment and Community Development can be found on their website at: <http://www.mccemployment.bc.ca/>

Sources

Interview with Ron Van Wyk, June 14, 2005

City of Abbotsford website - <http://www.abbotsford.ca/>

Mennonite Central Committee of British Columbia website - <http://www.mcc.org/bc>

Mennonite Central Committee website - <http://www.mcc.org/about/history/>

Mennonite Historical Society of Canada website - <http://www.mhsc.ca>

More Profiles of Effective Practice and other resources on social inclusion are available at: <http://www.ccednet-rcdec.ca/en/pages/learningnetwork.asp>

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