

Response to Mennonite Central Committee Executives Regarding Anti-racist Accountability

From the Anti-racism Constituent Action Group, October, 2010

Context for this Document:

In response to our concern about an intensifying pattern of people of color leaving MCC on bad terms, our group published an open letter calling for MCC constituents who were concerned about patterns of institutional racism in MCC to withhold 50 percent of their normal giving unless three actions were taken to address the situation. One of the three actions was "that the executive committees of MCC U.S., Bi-national, and Canada have made themselves structurally accountable for their anti-racist actions to independent groups of people of color who are knowledgeable about MCC in North America and able to identify and articulate institutional racism." Last December, our group met with you in Philadelphia at your request. As part of the discussion at the December meeting, we heard you asking "What are you (constituents) asking us (MCC executives) to do in order to be more accountable?" This document is an attempt to respond to your request for further clarification from our group regarding what we mean by accountability to communities of color.

An Emphasis on Communities of Color based in the United States and Canada:

During the December meeting, we heard from leaders of MCC bi-national that you are committed to becoming more accountable to your international partners and to the international church. Based on our own relationships of accountability, we are not in a position to evaluate this commitment. We do affirm this direction and intention -- it is critical that MCC seeks to be accountable in the communities where it is present internationally.

Unfortunately, we did not hear you voice as clear a commitment to accountability to communities of color in Canada and the US. The voices of international communities do not replace the voices of North American communities of color. Oppressed communities worldwide sometimes have common experiences, but there are also very important differences that need to be taken seriously. Different communities of color have different relationships to white supremacist systems because of how those systems have dealt differently with each community. International voices can be and have been used to marginalize the voices of people of color in the US and Canada who have very different relationships to the white power structure.

We made our initial call for the withholding of funds because we are concerned about the experiences of staff of color in MCC who are from communities in the US and Canada. *We want to state clearly again that when we are asking you to improve accountability, we are talking with you about accountability to people of color from communities in the United States and Canada.* We are asking you to *listen* to communities of color in Canada and the United States. We are asking you to find ways to integrate the voices and perspectives of people of color from the United States and Canada into MCC decision-making processes. **We are asking you to make the voices and perspectives of people of color central.** If we cannot understand the realities facing our neighbors down the street, how much more difficult will it be for us to truly listen to those voices coming from across the ocean?

Further Work on Accountability

We would like to paint a clearer picture for you of institutional anti-racist accountability from our perspective. We will reflect on some past examples of MCC's attempts to increase accountability, offer some guidelines and principles for accountability, and suggest possible next steps for action within MCC.

Examples of Accountability in Action

We would like to illustrate what accountability to communities of color in the US and Canada might look like by sharing two recent examples of accountability in action related with the Gulf Disaster Response, with which some in our group were familiar. There are certainly many other examples within MCC from which we could learn and build.

Katrina Listening Process:

MCC has a history of relationships with communities of color in the Gulf Coast, specifically indigenous communities in the river parishes of Louisiana and black communities in New Orleans. However, MCC did not consult or engage these relationships as Hurricane Katrina was approaching nor after it hit the Gulf Coast, nor once MCC began fundraising and responding to the crisis. When people of color in MCC became concerned about the way MCC was responding to Katrina, several people put forward a proposal for a listening process. The Katrina Listening Process (KLP) was designed to better listen to communities of color in determining MCC's response and was a catalyst for corrective action. It was an example of people of color within MCC taking leadership and holding the institution accountable.

Interview excerpts from "Wade in the Water" (the report on the Gulf Disaster Response evaluation) regarding the Katrina Listening Process:

- *"Just having a listening process, just this fact helped push the organization to accountability."*
- *"This is the fruit of the anti-racism effort."*
- *"The KLP meetings were some of the best MCC meetings I've been a part of. We were clear about race dynamics, and there was a focus on keeping a healthy process. We were not agenda driven, which helped keep us from moving forward when we needed to stop."*

Processes like the KLP provide opportunities for MCC to exercise more accountability to communities of color in making decisions about its institutional responses and use of resources, particularly when integrated into the primary decision-making process. Members of the Katrina Listening Process have offered their learnings to help MCC develop listening processes like this in the future. To our knowledge, MCC has not requested further input from this group.

We want to hold up the KLP as one model for accountability that could be learned from and built upon in the future. When an institution attempts a process like the Katrina Listening Process, it provides an important opportunity to "learn through doing." These learnings then need to impact future policy and structure rather than becoming just a dusty report in a file drawer. One of the valuable things learned from the Katrina Listening Process is how accountability processes require appropriate staff time and compensation for those involved. In the case of the KLP, members of the group were in scattered locations and were asked to add this task to their already full job descriptions. Another important learning is that listening processes need to be strongly connected back to the decision-making processes so that what we are is genuinely reflected in our decisions and actions. Otherwise, listening projects can perpetuate institutional racism by asking people of color to be vulnerable in sharing their experiences, only to have that input once again ignored, dismissed or co-opted.

Listening to New Orleans Partners in Awarding of Funds:

A year after Katrina had arrived on the Gulf Coast, a dedicated administrative team was hired for the MCC Gulf Disaster Response (GDR). The new staff re-established previous relationships with persons of color in the Gulf Coast which also led to the formation of new relationships in communities of color.

Administrative staff were consistently overwhelmed by the pressing need for additional resources, especially within communities of color, coupled with complex feedback from old and new partners about the best ways for MCC to share its resources. After another year, the MCC GDR staff decided to establish a moratorium on funding decisions in the Gulf region to make time for listening and accountability to the partners there. When there were difficulties in deepening and maintaining these relationships at a distance and pressure from the institution to move faster, GDR persisted in its commitment to a relationship-based approach. A new position was created for a worker to "listen" to the local community and "discern" how to assist with just recovery efforts already going on in the region.

This is a prime example of an institution taking voices of color seriously enough to slow its own momentum and change course. The next months were spent carefully designing a decision-making process regarding funds that aimed to be more accountable to the community. Initial drafts regarding the criteria for awarding funds in the final funding cycle of the Katrina response were circulated widely among grassroots groups working in New Orleans. Their suggestions for change were taken into account before the final call for grant proposals was published. In addition, the Listening and Discernment worker who had now begun work in New Orleans was able to identify three local persons who were willing to join with GDR staff and evaluate grant proposals. Again, these efforts at accountability were not perfect, but the overall direction was toward greater accountability, and the experience provided challenges and opportunities for further learning and growth in accountability and anti-racist practice.

Interview Excerpts from *Wade in the Water* highlight the importance of the accountability process that GDR staff engaged in within New Orleans.

- *"If you ask me one thing that GDR did that they should do again, it has to do with the people that we hear from, actually listening to people in New Orleans. I would not trade that for anything."*
- *"There was a shift to trying to dismantle dominant white power by supporting grassroots groups there. An accountability group formed with people from local community, especially in New Orleans. The staff got anti-racist training through People's Institute. There was a major shift to relationships with grassroots people listening to people and following their lead."*
- *"MCC's been at the top of my partner list. They take into account what the people are saying and what their needs are. MCCers are open to being educated about what's going on in New Orleans, in a certain place. Most funders don't do this, they use the expert model. Advice I got from women in my village: If you want to be educated, you have to listen twice as long as you talk. If I'm going to talk half an hour, I'm going to listen for an hour. MCC practices this."*
- *"MCC looked for local people on the ground and asked 'what do you need?'"*
- *"The best approach is not to come in with a mindset - you have to hear it from the people. Just asking the question helps get us from the emotional side and embrace reality - we have a need. Them not knowing what to do really helped."*

Why did it take MCC a year to shift to this approach and tend to long-standing relationships in the Gulf Coast, and another year to realize it didn't know enough about what it was doing to stop and assess? Why did staff in the GDR experience marginalization rather than support in the MCC system in their attempts to be accountable? (See *Wade in the Water* for details. What could be done in the future to ensure that other programs don't experience the same learning curve? How can the hard-earned learnings of GDR staff be drawn out to impact structures and policies in MCC regarding accountability?

Guidelines for Accountability

Accountability is an Ongoing Process

We want to stress that in providing the above examples, **we are not suggesting that these processes were perfect examples of what accountability should look like.** Those of us closest to these processes recognize the weaknesses and limitations in them and have ideas about how we might do things differently "the next time around." We see living in healthy, mutually-beneficial, accountable relationships as organic, something constantly in motion, an ideal that we must actively and continuously strive toward. Investing time and effort in processes of accountability provides the institution with opportunities for constant learning and growth in its anti-racist analysis and practice, rather than the accomplishment of "having arrived." We are asking MCC as an institution, and you as its leaders, to demonstrate a commitment to making this effort an ongoing top priority. This includes putting significant time and resources toward becoming more accountable. This is not something that can be "checked off" the list.

Accountability Through Long Term Relationships

The most effective accountability structures emerge organically from authentic relationships built over time and through collaborative struggle. True accountability results from strong networks of diverse relationships. Its hard to make a decision that goes against your community: the people you are spending the most time with, the people whose voices you hear every day. One of the costs of racism for white people is that many of us lack meaningful long-term authentic relationships with people of color from the US and Canada. One of the signs of an authentic interracial relationship is that the person of color has been able to call out internalized racism when it occurs, the criticism has been received, and the relationship has endured. Persons in leadership who do not themselves have these relationships could benefit from recognizing this blind spot and listening intentionally to the voices of other persons who do.

For Whose Benefit?

A core question that must be explored in addressing institutional racism is who the system is benefiting. This includes financially and otherwise. Are programs structured primarily with the needs and priorities of partners or of constituent churches and communities in mind? How do different communities benefit from MCC's work? Where do the dollars go? Who gets to travel? Who gets to dream and implement their dreams? Who is provided the opportunity to connect to and learn from others, to spend time reflecting, to spend time writing? Who gets to tell the stories?

Pay Attention to Structural Power

Who has the structural power within MCC? Who are the faces of the decision-makers? Who holds the purse strings? White leaders of an institution need to be careful that they are not just asking faces of color to approve pre-existing plans and policies. White leaders need to be willing to give up real power and control to others. In order to correct existing realities of power and privilege, people of color need to be given real structural power within the institution. The institution's accountability to communities of color needs to continuously feed into decision-making processes.

It is not enough to seek the approval of token representatives whose voices can be silenced because their status in the institution is at risk when they speak up. Reference groups usually have very little power and as a result are not usually able to hold white-dominated institutions accountable. As their names suggest, reference groups can consult and provide feedback but cannot veto program plans or initiate new ventures. Employees of the institution are also in a tenuous position--how safe are their jobs if they voice opinions that challenge the status quo?

Accountability to *Communities* of Color rather than just Individuals

Racial justice requires the authentic participation of collectives of racially oppressed communities, not just tokenized individuals.

- When we (as individuals or as an institution) listen to some voices of color but not to others, we are likely to listen to the voices that validate the opinions we already have rather than the voices that challenge us. This is a mistake.
- While an individual member of a racially oppressed community in North America who is appointed to a board of directors may bring essential perspectives to the table, she or he may come without clear lines of accountability back to the oppressed community, and by virtue of the appointment, frequently remains beholden to the organization.
- In open processes (including recently, the New Wine/New Wineskins process), people of color are often consistently and intentionally dispersed throughout small groups. This approach serves white participants by providing them access to the voices of people of color while at the same time denying communities of color a corporate voice or presence in a dominant white organization.

If we are to listen to voices representing a broader community, they will not all agree. What is important is to continue listening to a diversity of voices and to pay special attention to those voices that are critical. There is learning there. Holding a variety of perspectives in tension is a balancing act that is challenging and strengthening.

Increase Awareness of How We Impact Communities As We Seek to Be Accountable to Them

Like all communities, communities of color do not have a unitary voice. When MCC provides valuable resources to a community or gives power to certain voices, we can ignite conflict or exacerbate existing conflicts and stresses within the community. The clearer an institution like MCC is about its identity and purposes, the more this conflict can be avoided, or at least engaged in a proactive manner. It is especially important not to pit people of color against each other. Do not use people of color who agree with you to discount or ignore other people of color who are voicing criticisms. Doing so not only leads to the failure to consider criticisms of racism which should *always* be heard and considered - not discounted - but also creates division and dissension within communities of color, thus weakening their power through a "divide and conquer" strategy.

Cultivate an Appreciation of Negative Feedback

As noted above, we learn the most when we listen to those voices that are critical, that offer perspectives that are different from our own. It is much easier for people to "go along" or to withdraw from a dominant institution rather than engaging it by sharing negative feedback. People who are willing to do the hard work of criticizing an institution are providing the institution with a gift. Valuing negative feedback AS A GIFT rather than seeing it as an attack on the institution is critical if we wish to develop authentic accountability relationships.

Decentralize Power

Make sure those on the ground have channels to share knowledge and to affect change at the top of the structures of power. Decisions should not be seen as the sole responsibility of those at the top of the hierarchy. Institutional leaders are not always attuned to the same knowledge and wisdom held by the oppressed communities with which MCC needs to partner. Since combating racism and economic injustice involves challenging structures of power, leaders who are accountable to communities of color sometimes have to be willing to be led in directions that seem risky to them and that stretch them beyond their comfort zone.

Consult Early and Often

If a plan is already in place and money has already been spent before communities of color are consulted, we are already too late unless we are willing to begin again. If we do consult early, we need to continue to reassess our progress along the way. Often institutions will take ideas from people of color and then misinterpret or reinvent them to suit the needs of the white institution.

Transparency about Allocation of Institutional Resources

Communities of color will not be able to hold an institution accountable if they are not provided with useful information about the choices the institution is making in terms of resource allocation. This includes information about expenditures that the institution deems "non-discretionary."

Appropriate and Generous Compensation

People who are asked to advise or consult with the institution need to be adequately compensated for the time and effort that they put in. Inter-cultural knowledge carried by people of color is frequently undervalued.

Draw Deeply from our Collective Wisdom

It is important to take time to consult and learn from those who have experience working in communities of color in accountable ways. Within MCC, this knowledge has been and is among us, but is often not accessed. Principles, ideals, and good intentions--alone, by themselves--will not be enough for administrators or staff embarking on first-time experiences. We need to stand together, learn from each other, and build on the knowledge we already have among us.

Suggestions for Next Steps

What kinds of actions would help us to cause us to celebrate MCC's progress? Here are a number of possibilities we could imagine. Several of these steps would likely inspire some of us to become *passionate* fundraisers for the institution.

1. Hire a multi-racial team of people with significant anti-racist experience to work with the New Wine/New Wineskins group. This team would help ensure that feedback from voices from North American communities of color are being heard and addressed. They also could be tasked with evaluating the extent to which structures of accountability to North American communities of color are built into the new MCC structure. This team would be given the resources to interview past and present staff of color, Mennonite churches of color in Canada and the US, and the communities of color where MCC has a presence in Canada and the US. We understand that that this process is in its final stages of seeking input and that people of color from the US and Canada were invited to participate in the New Wine Skins process. Our perspective is that there needs to be ongoing opportunities for those voices to speak collectively, rather than scattered among table groups and later unrecognizable in the shuffle or as individuals weighing in with their feedback. MCC is in the midst of an incredible opportunity -- organizational change! -- where anti-racist principles can be incorporated throughout the new structures. However, without clear accountability and direction from people of color, MCC is at risk of simply reorganizing itself into new structures of the same institutional racism.
2. Develop clear channels by which people of color and white anti-racist allies working with MCC (whether as staff, board, or partners) can safely voice concerns in a way in which they will be heard and acted upon. Make this process transparent and accessible. Thank people for caring enough to offer their feedback for the improvement of the organization, rather than chastising them or ignoring them. Remind staff regularly that this is how we grow as an organization.

3. Develop an inter-racial, in-house facilitation team that can help identify, manage and facilitate inter-cultural conflict as it arises.
4. Review the process by which board members are appointed. Set a timeline to meet a goal of board make-up of at least 50% people of color. As part of the nomination process, make sure that a majority of the people of color appointed are directly accountable to a group, church, or organization of color. vLay out steps regarding how the board nomination process can shift appropriately, how new members will be oriented, and how boards will be prepared for shifts in their ways of functioning that should accompany an introduction of new voices and perspectives. Consider building in ways for board members to meet in caucus groups, as white people and people of color.
5. Set aside a significant amount of money (\$100,000+) for a process to engage churches of color in Canada and the US. This begins with listening with churches of color regarding how they would like to connect with MCC. Make space for dreaming new ways for the institution to relate to constituent church communities, or for churches to decide not to relate at all.
6. Conduct a review of hiring practices and personnel policies through the lens of church communities of color. Follow through with significant policy changes.
7. Begin an institution-wide effort to make institutional culture more transparent, including having all leadership teams review the March 2005 Mennonite Central Committee Human Resources Joint HR Committee Culture Report, as well as the White Supremacy Culture handout (attached). Ask that institutional leaders report regularly on their efforts to make the changes recommended in the report.

There are many other possibilities. These examples are to give you a sense of the scale of change and levels of commitment we are longing for with regard to MCC's anti-racist accountability.

As a group of constituents, we are not in a position to say in detail what an accountable structure would look like. We would encourage you to ask this same question of many people both within and without the organization who have accountability relationships with communities of color in Canada and the US. Those who already understand your current structures more intimately can offer more specific suggestions for structural change. From what we understand of the document you shared during our December meeting, numerous suggestions have already been offered over the years; the challenge is to implement these suggestions.

There are no panaceas to a deep-seated issue like institutional racism. White power and privilege as expressed in cultural, institutional, and individual forms will persist as long as the systems that sustain them remain in place. Deliberate, focused, and intentional efforts to achieve racial justice can, however, make a difference in specific institutional contexts. Ultimately, we believe that such intentional change in smaller systems can affect change in larger systems as well. We dream that MCC can be a major force for anti-racist change in our world.