

Presentation Abstract
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Faith-Based Organizations Engaged in the Social Economy: Phase II
The Role of Catholic Religious Orders and the Mennonite Community

Lead Researcher: **Bob McKeon Ph.D.**
 St. Joseph's College, University of Alberta

Research Assistants **Deb Schrader, Faculty of Education, Univ. of Alberta**
 Anika Loewen, St. Joseph's College, Univ. of Alberta

Introduction

Today in a time of economic crisis and uncertainty, many see the social economy movement as holding great promise for creating a more just, sustainable, participatory and inclusive society in Canada and internationally. Over the years, local communities in all regions of Canada have organized cooperatives, credit unions, and other types of “third sector” community economic development organizations to provide needed jobs and access to goods and services. Often faith-inspired individuals and organizations have been significant players in the initial development, growth and ongoing life of these Canadian social economy (SE) initiatives. Important examples include the Catholic inspired Antigonish and DeJardins movements and the Protestant Social Gospel movement..

This research project is the second part of a two-part research program investigating the recent contributions of faith communities to social economy initiatives in Canada. This research is being conducted through the B.C-Alberta Social Economy Research Alliance (BALTA). BALTA is funded through the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada (SSHRC). This project has also received financial support from the Catherine Donnelly foundation.

The first part of this research “Faith-Based Organizations in the Social Economy in Western Canada” was completed in 2009.¹ This first paper described a growing consensus among major Christian churches in Canada around issues of economic justice and community participation. This consensus was seen in shared ecumenical statements and social action organizations and coalitions. These church statements provided a critique of dominant economic systems and ideologies in Canada, and called for creative alternatives with new approaches that could better incorporate Christian ethical values. Commentators, such as Gregory Baum, saw social economy approaches as being good examples of creative alternatives that embodied

¹ “Faith-Based Organizations Engaged in the Social Economy in Western Canada” 14 November 2009. Available at the BALTA website www.socialeconomy-bcalberta.ca

Christian ethical values better than other economic models. Writing in 1998, Murray MacAdam documented examples of ways Canadian Christian churches and religious organizations were supporting community economic development.²

The first research paper studied 37 social economy organizations in Western Canada in 2009 with a connection to faith communities. The research showed faith-based organizations (FBOs) engaged in the social economy played different roles, serving as funders, lenders, housing providers, job creation, service providers, “fair trade” retail sales and employment training.

**The Research Project: “Faith-Based Organizations in the Social Economy: Part II
The Role of Catholic Religious Orders and the Mennonite Community”**

The research in the first study indicated that some of the most consistently successful faith-based approaches to the social economy over the past fifty years were those of Catholic religious orders and Mennonite organizations. While these represent two quite different religious traditions with distinct histories, theologies, and church organizational structures, they are similar in that their SE FBOs appeared consistently across different SE sectors and geographical regions. Both of these faith-based approaches have stood the test of time and have been replicated in many different settings, both in Canada and internationally.

A major goal of this project is to try to understand why the SE approaches of these two faith traditions have been so consistently successful. What do the individuals and organizations from these faith communities consistently bring to their social economy work? How does their religious faith grounding sustain their social economy work?

The research proceeds through three stages: 1) a literature review and online search; 2) interviews with representatives of specific religious orders and Mennonite organizations; 3) interviews with representatives from specific social economy projects that have been initiated and supported from within these two faith traditions.

² Murray MacAdam, From Corporate Greed to Common Good: Canadian Churches and Community Economic Development (Ottawa: Novalis, 1998).

Both the Mennonite organizations and the Catholic religious orders have dynamic histories of change and ongoing development that are linked to the histories of their respective church traditions. Significantly, the decade of the 1960s was a key time of transformed social economy engagement in both religious traditions.

Catholic Religious Orders and the Social Economy

Male and female Catholic religious orders have existed in the Canada since the earliest days of New France. While existing under a single system of international church law, each specific order is unique with its own founder, charism, area of ministry, and internal constitution and rule. In 2004, the Canadian Religious Conference reported approximately 18,000 women and 4,000 men who were members of 200 religious congregations.

Religious orders are self-governing to a large extent, control their own financial resources, and generally make decisions about their types of ministry and locations for ministry. Historically, religious orders have been organized to meet the social and spiritual needs of their specific time and place. In North America, most of the women's orders and some of the men's orders operated schools, hospitals and social service institutions such as orphanages.

The decade of the 1960s was a time of major change for religious orders and the whole Catholic church. Much of this change was associated with the Second Vatican Council which ran from 1962-1965. One of the outcomes of Vatican II was a call for Catholic religious orders around the world to embark on a process of reform and transformation. They were asked to review their present organizational structures and practices in light of the foundational message of scripture and their founding charism, and to do this in light of the needs of today's world. This review was to be far reaching including models of governance and decision making, priority areas for ministry, ways of community living, and use of financial resources.

Another outcome of Vatican II was a call for the church to be more present in contemporary society. This engagement was closely tied to Vatican II's affirmation of Catholic social teaching and its emphasis on action for social justice and a special concern for the poor.

Many of the religious orders that went back to their founder's vision discovered that concern for the poor was a priority from the start, but that sometimes over the years this concern had been forgotten. As the religious orders revised and rewrote their constitutions, a corporate commitment to social justice was often emphasized.

Many of the women's orders moved away from their historic commitments to schools and hospitals, and explored new ministry options. As part of a global Catholic focus on mission to the Global South in the 1960s, religious orders in North America took on assignments in Latin America, Africa, and Asia, often in very poor communities struggling with major issues of social injustice. While this concern for the poor often involved urgently needed short term charitable outreach, it also came to include more proactive community organizing and social economy initiatives as well as participation in public advocacy and protest.

Stories of Canadian Religious Orders

In this research, we contacted representatives from ten religious orders. Nine of the ten were women's orders. In our presentation, we will focus on the Sisters of St. Joseph (CSJ) of London, Ontario. This community traces its origin to France (1659) and London (1869). As the community grew, sisters moved to Edmonton (1922), Yellowknife (1953) and Peru (1962). In the years after Vatican II, many sisters moved out of the traditional works of education and hospital ministry into parish and local community social service outreach. The CSJs were one of the founding investors in the Canadian Alternate Investment Cooperative (CAIC). They were involved in the startup and ongoing support of social housing organizations in Edmonton. They are presently involved in the startup of a Microloan and Matched Savings pilot project for low income women and men in London. Their Community Directional Statement (2007-2011) speaks of integrating "contemplative spirituality and systemic justice as a foundation for transformation in all relationships." We will make reference to other religious orders including the Sisters of Service who have established a charitable foundation which funds community-based housing, environment and education initiatives.

Social Economy Projects Supported by Catholic Religious Orders

We will talk about briefly about two social economy projects. One is the Canadian Alternate Investment Cooperative (CAIC) which was founded by Catholic religious in the 1970s, and now includes over 30 Catholic religious orders and ecumenical partners as supporting members. CAIC has a loan capital fund in excess of \$7 million dollars, and has provided loans to affordable housing projects, community loans funds, cooperatives, and community economic development initiatives all across the country.

Another example is Edmonton Inner City Housing Society. This is a community non-profit society which has been supported by several religious orders over its 30 year life. Medical Mission Sisters helped facilitate the initial organizing and visioning, the Oblates (OMI) provided a loan for an early mortgage, the initial board Treasurer was a CSJ, and sisters from other orders have served on the board and made significant financial contribution over the years.

Mennonites

There are about 200,000 Mennonites in Canada. The first Mennonites to arrive in Canada came to Ontario in 1786. Several waves of Mennonite immigrants came to Canada from Europe between the 1870s and the years after World War II to escape the social disruptions of European wars and revolutions. Many Mennonites in Europe and in North America lived in self-enclosed, economically self-sufficient rural communities, seeking to live separate from the dominant culture. Mennonites sought to live a life with a radical Christian ethic, including a commitment to non-violence and exemption from military service. By the 1950s, Canadian Mennonites increasing were moving into urban settings, and increasingly engaged Canadian mainstream economic, political and cultural institutions.

Historically Canadian Mennonites have had a strong sense of community and mutual assistance. In the twentieth century, they often established social economy organizations including cooperatives and credit unions within their communities.

Mennonite Service Organizations

While all Mennonites share a foundational Anabaptist theology, there are many distinct Mennonite churches, conferences and groupings of local congregations in Canada. Many members of these different Mennonite churches have come together to create inter-Mennonite service organizations..

North American Mennonites organized the Mennonite Central Committee (MCC) in 1920 to assist fellow Mennonites in Russia suffering in the social turmoil following years of war and revolution. MCC sent relief and redevelopment assistance to Europe after World War II. MCC Canada (MCCC) was founded in Canada in 1963 through the merger of nine regional inter-Mennonite service organizations. Five provincial MCC organizations were also established extending from BC to Ontario. Around this time, the focus of MCC shifted from primarily serving fellow Mennonites in need to a broader commitment to serving all in need internationally and at home. MCCC has had a strong international development focus. After 1963 MCCC and provincial affiliates established a Canadian program which often included social economy approaches. Canadian MCC volunteers serving overseas returned to their home communities and became part of local development initiatives. By the 1980s, Canadian projects often included a community development approach, where MCC organizations sought to gather local resources to address local issues with the MCC organization seeking to step back at the appropriate time.

Another inter-Mennonite service organization is the Mennonite Economic Development Associates (MEDA). MEDA was set up in 1952 to assist Mennonite settlements in Paraguay with economic development projects, many of which were to follow a social economy model. In later years, MEDA has expanded to countries around the world.

Social Economy Projects Supported by Mennonite Service Organizations

Momentum in Calgary was organized in 1991 as an employment program of MCC Alberta. It grew and expanded its activities to include small business training, a micro loan program, financial literacy programs and personal development accounts. Additional government and charitable program funders were brought on board. Momentum in 2009 offered 17

community economic development programs and employed 40 staff members. The organization started as a faith-based organization with supporters and partners from the community and has grown into a secular organization that continues to hold on to core Mennonites values in the life of the organization. What started as “MCC Employment Development” is now named “Momentum”.

A smaller scale example is Sam’s Place in Winnipeg supported by MCC Manitoba. Sam’s Place grew out of a network of MCC thrift shops. There was an abundance of donated books, so the idea of a used book store arose. This developed into a neighbourhood community centre. MCC Manitoba bought and renovated a building. Sam’s Place became a community centre with books, food, local musicians, story tellers and speakers. A social economy approach is being used to expand services such as community catering. There are many other MCC SE stories. One final story is the ecumenical Jubilee Fund in Winnipeg which received substantial startup funds from both Catholic religious orders and MCC in Manitoba.

Initial Conclusions from a Work in Progress

We will end the presentation with some initial observations and conclusions. Both the Mennonite organizations and the Catholic religious orders have been successful in drawing from a tradition of strong religious beliefs and values to a community development process involving a wide group of community players leading to viable social economy initiatives. These faith organizations changed and transformed themselves over time. By the 1960s they were well positioned to engage in SE initiatives. Both Mennonite organizations and the religious orders developed strong international connections in the global south, so that each employed key leaders and SE practioners with international experience in their Canadian SE projects. Both types of groups found ways of institutionalizing founding charism, mission and values into effective multi-generational organizations that were not overly dependent on charismatic individual leaders. Both Mennonite organizations and Catholic orders had a strong appreciation and commitment to community in their internal operations. Certainly the religious orders in the

transformational changes coming from the Vatican II years developed skills in community change facilitation, shared group decision making, leadership development, and conflict resolution. Both types of faith groups learned to trust in the community development process so that they were willing to hand over projects they had initiated and invested substantial human and financial resources to local community organizations.

The presentation ends with a question about the future. Several of the Mennonite organizations and projects were in a time of generational change as long time leaders were retiring. Many of the religious order are facing a future of shrinking membership and organizational capacity. One question is whether the wider Catholic community can continue this contribution to SE animation and support with a much reduced presence of religious orders?