April 1, 2024 - March 31, 2025

ANNUAL REPORT

MCS Mennonite Community Services of Southern Ontario

faithfully linking resources with needs

Executive Director's Report

"I tell you the truth, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me."
– Matthew 25:40

At MCS, our dedicated staff and volunteers are faithfully serving as the hands and feet of Jesus within our community. Guided by our mission to provide leadership in creating inclusive communities and supporting the integration of newcomers, this past year offered many opportunities to walk alongside individuals and families.

As I reflect on the past year, it is clear that our programs and events consistently reflected our core values of partnership and community. Each initiative helped build stronger connections and a deeper sense of belonging among those we serve.

Our annual Fundraising Banquet, themed, "Preserving what is important to you; shaping the world around you" celebrated our shared mission and welcomed special guest Patrick Friesen. In May several staff participated in the Leamington Networking Conference, engaging in valuable conversations about collaborative newcomer support.

This year we also turned our focus toward senior safety, organizing a series of workshops on fraud prevention. These sessions provided seniors with practical tools and knowledge to protect themselves and remain informed in an increasingly complex digital landscape.

June brought together our community for the Annual Food Fest, a joyful and successful fundraiser celebrating culture and fellowship through food.

Mennonite Heritage Week activities featured the much-loved Soup Cook-Off, a community event that brought people together through shared culinary traditions. We also offered interpreter training workshops, strengthening our ability to serve non-English-speaking newcomers with excellence and care.

A major milestone was reached in October as we celebrated 30 years of FESPA programming. This anniversary marked the impactful work of supporting families. We also celebrated the five-year anniversary of our thrift store's relocation to the MCS Plaza, a milestone for our social enterprise. November concluded with a sold-out radio concert, which brought people together in a joyful celebration of music and client engagement.

Anna Bergen
Executive Director

Throughout the year, MCS remained committed to our vision for an inclusive community where newcomers are integrated. The relationships built have reaffirmed the importance of our work and the ongoing need for inclusive, Christ-centered community-building.

As we look ahead, we remain grateful for the continued support of our volunteers, donors, partners and friends. Together, we are shaping a community where all are welcome, valued and able to thrive.

By Anna Bergen,
MCS Executive Director

Anna Bergen and Susan Loewen at the thrift store Christmas shopping event

Staff Development Day

Board Member Cornelius Knelsen making Chilis Rellenos at a fundraiser

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AYLMER RESOURCE CENTRE REPORT

The Newcomer Settlement Program served 768 families this year. These families are better equipped to succeed as newcomers in Canada.

MCS is the only service provider in Ontario that specifically serves Low German Mennonite families, although immigrants from other ethnicities are also served. This past year, MCS oriented 37 families who were in Canada less than one year, 47 who had been in Canada between one to five years and 26 who entered Canada several years ago, but who accessed Settlement Services for the first time.

Of clients served, 70% originated from Mexico. Bolivia contributed 7%, while Belize, USA and Paraguay lagged behind at 2% of the newcomer base. The remainder came from other parts of the Americas, Caribbean, southeast Asia, Zimbabwe, Ukraine and Netherlands. More clients asked to be served in Spanish than previously because word spread that one staff speaks Spanish. Newcomers are more comfortable speaking directly to the settlement workers rather than through an interpreter.

Interpretation and translation services were one of the top 12 needs identified by newcomers, most commonly for driver's licences, country cards and birth certificates. We did not receive funding to interpret at medical appointments; therefore, the volunteer driver program decreased in use. However, the need for this service remains. At the same time, the medical community identified oral interpretation as a high need. As a result, the Ontario Health Team partnered with MCS for a pilot project to encourage qualified volunteers to interpret at medical appointments. MCS hosted a training day to increase capacity and professionalism among interpreters.

Sue Thiessen and Susie Peters offered an orientation session on Water and Swim Safety at the Park in Aylmer

Citizenship Ceremony

Elizabeth, Heinrich and Peter with their mom Elizabeth Bergen and Citizenship Judge Rochelle Ivre. The young girl, Elizabeth, was asked by the citizenship clerk to cut up the permanent resident card and take the oath of citizenship. She asked, 'why do I get to do that?'. After answering that it was a requirement for everyone 14 years and older, she realized that the clerk and the Judge were treating her as an adult. She was very proud to participate in this important ceremony.

Other settlement topics of orientation, information and supportive services included:

- Understanding and maintaining primary documentation
- Accessing health services / OHIP cards
- Financial information and understanding Canadian banking etc.
- Birth certificates, including amendments to registrations

Arlie Peters with a newcomer couple

- Supporting temporary visitors

The top 3 topics reveal newcomer priorities. First, at the top of most newcomers' minds was to address any status issues. Working relationships with immigration consultants helped MCS address the increasing number of families without status. Second, newcomers asked about medical services. Unfortunately, there were too few family doctors accepting patients and too few qualified interpreters at medical appointments. Thirdly, more parents requested help with birth registration amendments. Community 'helpers' and newcomers themselves struggled to understand how to correctly identify which part of their name belonged in which part of the form. It highlighted the need to familiarize newcomers and helpers to provincial forms. It also highlighted literacy levels among the newcomers.

Overall, funding requirements and targets were met. God provided financial support through government funders and donations from clients and community members. Staff reported that it was a blessing to address the needs of individuals because they were free to do so, not just to meet funding requirements. And clients expressed joy and relief after staff were able to help them. It is rewarding to interact with newcomers, especially when they succeed.

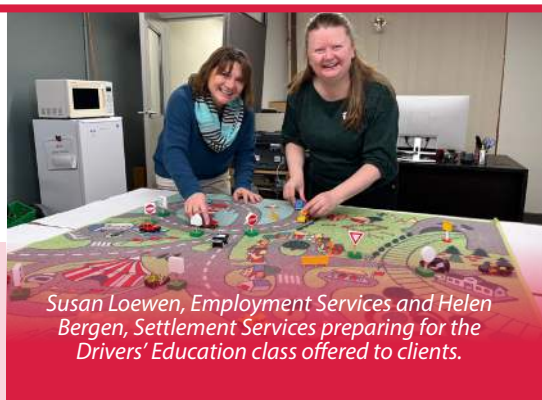
By Helen Bergen,
Settlement Services Manager

5 Volunteers Drove **5731 km**

Volunteers Assisted with **58** Appointments **165** Hours Donated

125 New Families Accessed Settlement Services

Did you know that MCS offered a **5** week drivers education class in Low German to **8** adults?



Susan Loewen, Employment Services and Helen Bergen, Settlement Services preparing for the Drivers' Education class offered to clients.

EMPLOYMENT SERVICES REPORT

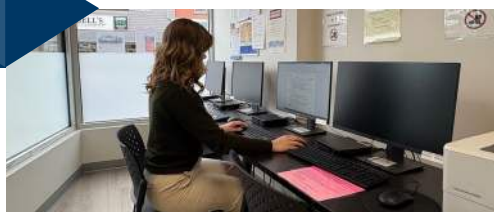
The 2024-2025 fiscal year continued to build on the previous year, with increasing and constant changes to the Employment Services program.

We continue to learn the Service System Manager (SSM) delivery model that has the goal of integrating employment services with other social services in a new Employment Ontario model. This new system aims to be "more responsive to the needs of job seekers, businesses and employers, service agencies and local communities." This means working even more closely with Ontario Works, ODSP and other priority populations. This was implemented initially in January 2024. The last fiscal year has been one of learning, changing, adapting and adjusting to this new model. Challenges include a large increase in administrative tasks and responsibilities, a higher focus on working with priority populations and highly-barriered clients, and an emphasis on connecting more with employers. Guidelines continue to be reviewed and adjusted as the entire network learns how to work within the SSM model while still being client-centred.

Extensive staff training continues to enable us to familiarize ourselves with the new model and how to deliver employment services.

MCS continues to strengthen its community partnerships as a part of providing excellent services. We continue to attend community events, job fairs, present at schools and attend employer events. We are an active member of the Aylmer Chamber of Commerce and the Elgin/St. Thomas Workforce Development Committee and are involved in projects that attempt to navigate the workforce trends and developments.

MCS is hosting a Low German-speaking co-op student enrolled in the Social Service Worker program at Fanshawe College. This allows both the student and MCS to learn from each other and it is a positive step for the future of social and employment services within the Low German community.



Access to free resumé assistance

During all of these challenges there have been successes; employment services continue to be provided for clients respectfully and effectively. Clients continue to have access to free resumes, cover letters, job search assistance and connections to employers.

MCS has also met the majority of its funding targets.

By Susan Loewen,
Employment Manager

1292 employment-related services provided to individuals by MCS staff

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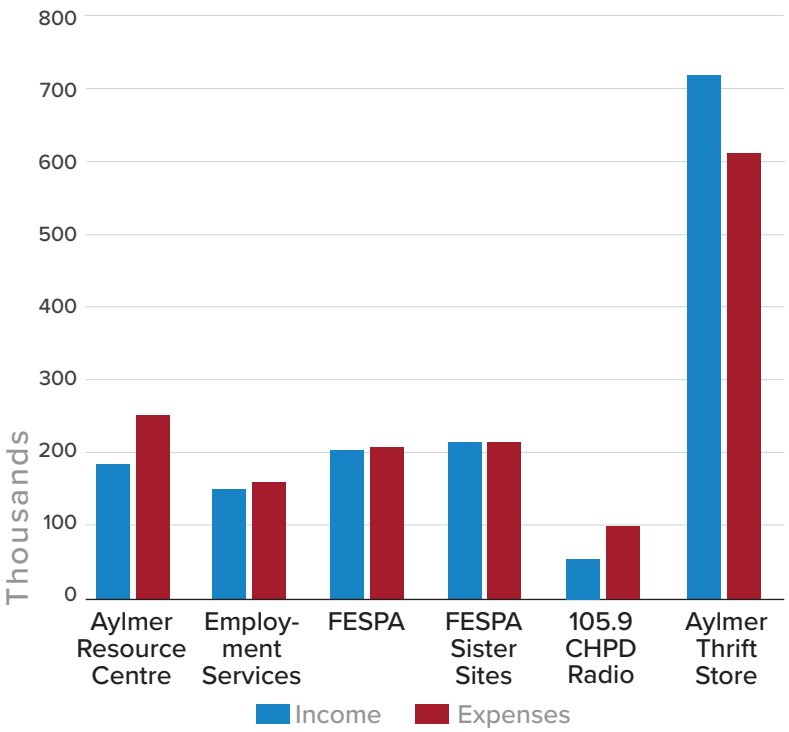
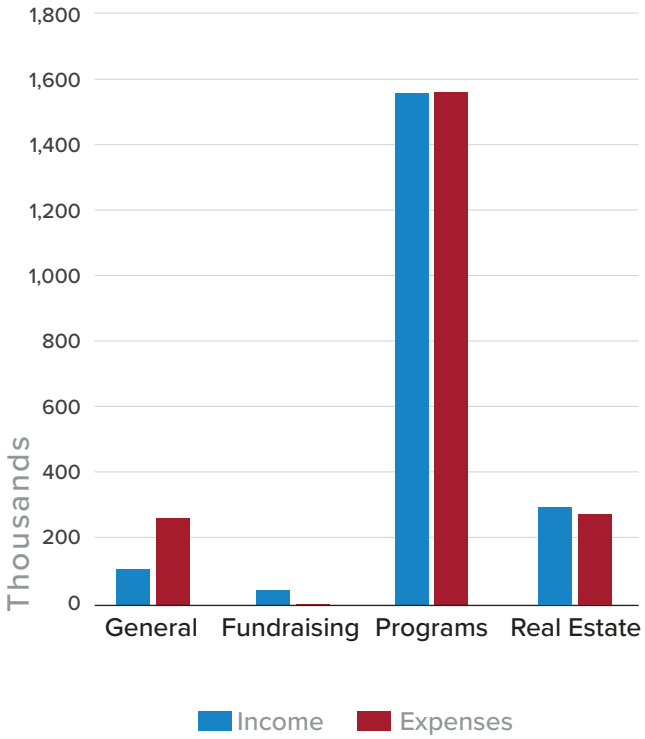
186 Employers Interactions / Job Postings

FINANCIAL REPORT

PROGRAM INCOME & EXPENSES



OVERALL INCOME & EXPENSES



MCS had 42 staff in total last year which includes 10 seasonal and 1 summer student.

FESPA PROGRAM REPORT

"FESPA for me means community, support and compassion." FESPA Student

The Family Education and Support Project of Aylmer (FESPA) is a dedicated space for newcomer women and their preschool children. For 30 years, FESPA has provided three core services in the Aylmer area:

- **FESPA School:** A 19-week program offering English Language Learning (ELL) and life skills education for mothers, along with preschool readiness activities for children aged 0–6.
- **Mom & Baby:** Year-round education and support for pre- and post-natal women and their infants.
- **Family Support:** Ongoing assistance with appointments for registered participants.

FESPA class visiting Aylmer Library

In October 2024, we celebrated the 30th anniversary of FESPA School with current and former staff and students. A highlight was hearing reflections from former

Preschoolers learning through play

We celebrated 30 years of our Family Education & Support Program - Aylmer (FESPA)

FESPA managers and noting how the program had changed through the years.

The year presented new challenges in both reporting and funding. In January, our primary funder, the Public Health Agency of Canada, requested online-only participant surveys to assess how our programs serve the community. This required significant staff time, as many participants needed help due to limited familiarity with technology and surveys.

In February, the reapplication of our primary funding included a new Community Needs Assessment. To meet this demand within the limited timeframe, MCS secured special funding to hire a consultant. Thanks to this support, we completed and submitted the application on time. We remain hopeful it will secure funding for 2026–2030.

One major challenge this year was a local measles outbreak. Several families were affected, prompting us to cancel one week of classes before March break, as well as the March Mom & Baby Group sessions to prevent further spread.

A persistent concern among our families is the difficulty accessing medical and dental care, due to a shortage of local providers. New clinics often reach capacity soon after opening, leaving families with long wait times or few alternatives. Our staff work to stay informed about newly available services to ensure timely referrals and support for those in need.

Despite these challenges, families received meaningful support through the FESPA School, Mom & Baby and Family Support programs. They consistently expressed heartfelt appreciation for the assistance provided. At year-end, students reflected on their experiences. One shared: *"for me it means a great place where they think about the emotional wellbeing of mothers and pamper us even with food."*

By Netti Wall,
FESPA Manager

Mom & Baby Stats:

$7,545 in Grocery Cards Distributed

161 Home Visits

30 Women

13 Babies Born

Family Support Stats:

204 Appointments

12,385 Kilometers Traveled

FESPA School Stats:

33 Women in Attendance

30 Children Ages 0-6 years

DE BRIGJ RADIO PROGRAM REPORT

This year proved to be one of considerable challenges and transitions for the radio, marked by management changes, technical difficulties, evolving advertising strategies and regulatory compliance efforts.

At the start of the year, the radio operated without a dedicated manager. Susie Peters assumed additional responsibilities early on but found the workload too demanding and time-consuming to sustain. Consequently, other staff members continued to carry out day-to-day radio tasks throughout much of the year. In November, we successfully hired a new radio manager, Abram Loewen, who contributed significantly to regulatory reporting and compliance before his resignation in mid-January of the following year.

Nellie Neufeld, Radio Host

Advertising revenue was slow during the year, with only occasional upticks, notably during months featuring public announcements in collaboration with Southwestern Public Health. Overall, despite previous years' gradual growth in advertising income, this year's performance lagged. In response, the advertising structure was adjusted mid-year to better align with the station's audience profile and broadcasting content, aiming to attract and retain advertisers by offering improved value and pricing.

October brought significant technical difficulties when the broadcasting computer ceased functioning due to hardware failure, necessitating the purchase of a new computer to run RadioBoss, our broadcasting software.

We received a mandate from the Canadian Music Reproduction Rights Agency (CMRRA) to submit monthly reports detailing music play data. This task was undertaken by the new manager, who successfully backdated reports covering the previous three years. Additionally, in November, the Canadian Radio-television and Telecommunications Commission (CRTC) initiated a compliance evaluation regarding the station's music licensing adherence.

Two visioning sessions were held during the year to assess and improve programming. The first session on December 3 engaged staff in reviewing current programming and exploring ways to enhance listener engagement by incorporating more live segments and entertainment elements. Budget considerations were also examined. The second session, held on February 6 with board members and staff, sought a broader perspective on radio improvements and strategic direction.


Radio Concert, Daniel & Nellie Froese

This year highlighted the need for stable management, new advertising strategies, strong technical infrastructure and ongoing compliance vigilance. Visioning sessions demonstrated a commitment to evolving programming to better serve audiences.

By Abe Wall,
Director of Social Enterprise and Facilities

Susie Peters, Radio Host

Board of Directors

Rodney Klassen . . . . . *Chair*
Pete Wiebe . . . . . *Vice Chair*
Anna Unger. . . . . *Treasurer*
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Dave Blatz . . . . . *Director*
Anna Bergen. . . . . *Director*
Lisa Klassen. . . . . *Director*
Helen Reimer . . . . . *Director*

AYLMER THRIFT STORE REPORT

$29,200
Christmas Sales

57 Compassion Notes Ranging from $5.00 to $595.00 for a Total of **$8,294**

15,781
Volunteer Hours

122,000 lbs.
Textiles Recycled

Agatha Neufeld, Processing Supervisor

Margaret Reddekopp, Processing Associate

The thrift store demonstrated remarkable resilience and growth during the last year, navigating significant staffing transitions and operational adjustments. Through effective management and strong team dedication, the store exceeded income and expense targets, reinforcing its position as a vital part of the community

In July, the store extended its retail hours to operate from 10:00 a.m. to 8:00 p.m. on Friday evenings. However, in August, the extended hours were shifted from Friday to Thursday evenings. This change proved to be less successful, so we decided to keep extended hours on both Thursday and Friday from 10:00 a.m. to 7:00 p.m. These hours remain in effect.

Seasonal sales this year, particularly for Christmas items, were higher than in previous years, reflecting the store's growth and the dedication of its staff and volunteers.

Though sales targets were met, staffing was a challenge throughout the year with numerous staffing changes: some employees reduced their full-time equivalents (FTE); others increased theirs; some changed roles; and certain positions were reorganized. These adjustments led to significant shifts within the team.

Due to a high volume of donations, coupled with a shortage of volunteers and staff, it was decided in December to stop accepting donations on Mondays. This allowed us to manage the backlog and prepare for the following day more effectively.

To support growth, the processing department was divided into several sub-departments, each assigned to a staff member who, together with volunteers, oversees operations and provides guidance.

At the end of March, the sewing/quilting rooms were cleared out to allow for additional retail space. This added over 500 square feet of retail space.

The thrift store concluded the year on a strong note, generating over $720,000 in revenue, exceeding income projections by $20,000, a success attributed to the hard work and dedication of both the staff and volunteers.

This fiscal year underlined the thrift store's capacity for growth amid change, sustained by an adaptable and dedicated team. Prioritizing staffing stability, volunteer support and optimized retail operations remains critical to ongoing success and further enhancing community impact in the coming year.

By Abe Wall,
Director of Social Enterprise and Facilities

MCS 2024-2025 HIGHLIGHTS

MCS Food Fest

MCS Fundraising Banquet

Thank You To Our Funders:

- Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada
- Ministry of Children and Youth Services
- Ministry of Labour, Training and Skills Development
- Newcomer Settlement Program
- Public Health Agency of Canada
- United Way Elgin Middlesex
- London Regional Employment Services
- Community Services Recovery Fund
- Canada Summer Jobs
- Kindred Credit Union
- Faith Communities
- Individual Donors