The Suffering Church Built Like an Ark

Carol Penner

What does it mean to be a people shaped by suffering? It means we cannot look at our history and our theology without pain, without anguish, and without a deep sense of wonder. This much is clear after hearing what has been shared at this consultation. I want to begin to answer this question by beginning with my own history.

I love the Mennonite church, and I love the congregation in which I was raised. But I want to tell you about my experience of being in that church as a child and young person. To describe the atmosphere of the church services as 'funereal' might be an overstatement, but they seemed solemn to the point of dourness, at least from the perspective of a young person. The people themselves were not always that way. Some were very joyful, especially those who worked with children and young people, but that joy was rarely communicated in worship. There was an oppressive atmosphere that many young people simply could not tolerate, and many left the Mennonite church.

I stayed in the church until I went away to Canadian Mennonite Bible College. Only there was I given any coherent sense of Mennonite history. At CMBC I first heard about different waves of Mennonite immigrants and that those coming in the 1940s and '50s had had very different experiences from those of earlier migrants. In short, I had to leave the church in order to hear the stories that helped me to understand it. I learned I had grown up in a church of survivors. I had been raised by a group of people who had escaped a repressive regime and a painful past.

In 1966 my church built a new building, and my father took me to see the work in progress. I was five years old, and I still clearly remember the huge beams standing against the sky – it looked exactly like the picture of

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Noah's ark I had seen in Sunday school. The finished building looked even more like an ark, with a wall that sheltered the entrance from the street. Looking back now, these sorts of images make sense. It is no wonder this design appealed to my community, because so many of its members felt like they had escaped.

I have read and heard stories about the Soviet era, and they have filled me with compassion for the people I worshipped with all those years. Arnold Neufeldt-Fast suggested that the heart of the Mennonite church is found in worship. I would agree, and the heart I grew up with was broken. It felt funereal because so many people were in mourning. The further tragedy is that so few could, or would, talk about it.

The poet David Waltner-Toews has created a character named Tante Tina, and in one of the poems about her life, she says "maybe God is in the story hiding like meat in a fleisch piroshki . . . ."[1] I did not hear the stories; not at home, and not at church. Only as I've come to understand the history of my people have I come to understand the theology that was given to me. Completing her sentence, Tina says "and when we open the bun, God is on us checking to ask how we are caring for the beautiful vineyard." The question is not just about how and whether and which theology carried people through the Soviet experience, it is also about how we are doing now. How is current Mennonite theology, shaped at least in part by Soviet suffering, meeting the needs of people in the church today?

The church is a place where we come to hear the gospel, to hear good news. What kind of theology helped carry people through the Soviet experience? We have certainly seen that in many cases, people's faith helped them to survive. But the collective story also includes people with different faith experiences. We most often tell stories of people in the church who went through the Soviet experience and emerged as positive, loving, and godly. The church tends to privilege the success stories of those whose faith sustained them. The stories of those who abandoned their faith or whose questions still haunt them are rarely told.[2]

Beyond examining the suffering years themselves, it is also important to realistically appraise how the Soviet experience subsequently shaped church life in Canada. In thinking about this, I quote theologian Christine Gudorf:

> [I]t is certainly dangerous – and also cruel – to assume that suffering inevitably leads to real life, to joy, to meaning, to wholeness. For suffering destroys. It kills, it maims the body and the spirit, it produces despair and evil . . . . History continues to demonstrate that if there is a lesson to be learned from suffering, it is that many violated persons become violent, that those treated inhumanely often become inhumane, and that some, when left without hope, kill themselves in despair. Suffering both kills and deforms. The message of the gospel is a hope-filled response to this truth – not a negation of it. [3]

We should not assume that suffering left Mennonites unscathed. Suffering is absorbed into the bloodstream, it becomes a part of the way you live your life. I wonder how realistically we have looked at Canadian Mennonite communities, particularly in the years after the Soviet experience. There are implications when one builds one's church like an ark. For instance, how much did the suffering in Russia and the Soviet Union contribute to ethnic insularity and racism among Mennonites in Canada? How did it foster suspicion and hatred towards people who were not like us? Did we build a church like an ark because we felt we were saved or because we wanted to keep people out?

People still come to church to hear good news. People are still suffering. In Canada we have not undergone the colossal breakdown of society that people who lived through the Soviet experience did, but our suffering is still real. There are victims of violent crime in our midst, there are survivors of torture and refugees from civil war who have fled from other countries. For the past several years I have worked for Mennonite Central Committee with those who suffer in abusive family situations. Violence still happens, and there are still victims who sit in Mennonite pews looking for a theology that will help them become survivors. Mary Ann Hildebrand comments on the theology of suffering she has observed in the Mennonite church and the effect it has on survivors of abuse:

> Faithfulness is measured in terms of how well we are able to put up with our oppression and victimization. The glorification of suffering, servanthood, and the loving-your-enemy model of turning the other cheek have helped to acculturate women to abuse.[4]

One of the challenges I have faced as a theologian is trying to unravel why Mennonite churches have been so consistent and dogmatic in telling battered women to return to their abusive husbands. On the surface, it does not seem to make sense. Mennonites have a long history of fleeing from violent situations. One could logically assume that they would be at the forefront of the women's shelter movement. This is obviously not the case. So I have tried to unpack our theology of suffering, looking at hymns and theological texts, exploring our theology of the cross.

Related to the topic of theology is the question of how Mennonites use scripture. Waldemar Janzen speaks of the forward thrust of the biblical story, while Arnold Neufeldt-Fast calls for a new theology of truth-telling. What has puzzled me is that Mennonites have not latched on strongly to the concept of liberation as expressed in the Exodus. I agree with Mary Anne Hildebrand's suggestion that the Mennonite theology of suffering has focused almost entirely on endurance issues. Jesus' crucifixion (and a heavenly resurrection) are held up as paradigms for victims searching for good news.

This viewpoint contrasts starkly with the theology of other groups of people who have suffered. The story of the Exodus, for example, is a well known paradigm for African-Americans who suffered under slavery. Similarly, Jesus' stories of healing and his treatment of outcasts are pivotal in current literature about abuse issues. In these cases suffering is not something to be endured but something from which one can be liberated by the power of God. Why have Mennonites not claimed this story of liberation as our own? I wonder if the Soviet experience has not shaped our theology so deeply we still cannot use these stories. Yes, there was deliverance: God did deliver Mennonites from an evil Soviet system. But when one reads the stories about escape from Russia, the Soviet Union, and Germany, there is ambiguity in that deliverance, there is guilt in that escape. The reality was that Mennonites were delivered but many loved ones were left behind. The Exodus is a joyful story because all got out together.

The Mennonite theology I have read suggests that our theology of suffering is changing. Will new theologies comfort those who still have memories of the Soviet experience? Will those who create new theologies learn from, or simply discard as outdated, the theology that sustained people through horrific times? Being a people of suffering means that we have to eat a lot more fleisch

piroshki. We need to hear more stories, not just to understand what happened, but to ask what we're doing with our beautiful vineyard today.

Notes

[1] David Waltner-Toews, "A Request from Tante Tina to the Mennonite Women's Missionary Society to put Salman Rushdie on the Prayer List," *The Impossible Uprooting* (Toronto, ON: McClelland & Stewart, 1995), 92-93.
[2] A good example of a book examining a variety of theological stories is Pamela E. Klassen, *Going by the Moon and the Stars: Stores of Two Russian Mennonite Women* (Waterloo, ON: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 1994).
[3] Christine E. Gudorf, *Victimization: Examining Christian Complicity* (Philadelphia: Trinity Press International, 1992), 72.
[4] Mary Anne Hildebrand, "Violence: A Challenge to Mennonite Faith and Peace Theology." *The Conrad Grebel Review* 10:1 (Winter 1992):78-79.