Gilberto Flores

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My approach to John Kampen's paper arises from the experience of individuals, churches, and communities in Central America in general, and in Guatemala in particular. This experience has guided them in their search for a life-given identity. Mennonites in Central America see themselves as heirs of the first Anabaptists, without appealing to a particular biological inheritance. Their affirmation is of a theological nature, and their identity is bound to faith. With that identity in mind, they have survived the harshness of suffering, persecution,

and rejection. I approach Kampen's paper with the inheritance of an identity that arises from this different reality, and therefore with a perspective that enriches the already abundant worldwide Mennonite-Anabaptist heritage.

It is obvious that Kampen's paper is written from a white perspective. His paradigms are relevant for the main stream of Mennonites but not for 'other' Mennonites who come from different backgrounds and do not identify themselves as part of an ethnic Mennonite group in particular. These 'others' are part of the Mennonite church rather than part of an immigrant European group. The point of convergency is theological and is a matter of Christian faith rather than biological origin.

When I listen to John, I recall memories of Mennonite churches in Central America that are mainly poor churches, that work with the poor, and that walk with them. Many times the poor, the indigenous people, and women experience threats to their rights and suffer greatly. In such circumstances Mennonite congregations do not have time to talk about survival. They cannot dedicate much time to that type of reflection, because reality demands that they direct their efforts to announce peace and justice in favor of those whose rights look trampled. The Mennonite church and the community are tightly connected by an urgency to provide a sense of hope to their members.

Kampen uses certain words that I would like to highlight in my response, words related to identity: Ethnic, Ethnicity, Tribe and Global Tribe, and Myth, Religious Ideology, Meta-narratives. All these words bring to mind remembrances of a pilgrimage, a journey of churches, people, and communities who experienced pain, rejection, racism, and even death because of their characteristics and beliefs. Because they perceived life with different paradigms than others.

In that social context the Mennonite church in Central America walked alongside these people. Immediately the church thought about service and so helped them to survive. Pastoral care, solidarity, and an intentional presence in the midst of conflict were also part of the church's response. In the process, the church was confronted by the authorities and other powers, and society in general asked about the church, Who are these people that act in this manner? This helped the church to examine itself and discover a vacuum of identity, and to look for answers and a solid foundation to establish and express the reason for the church's presence in that part of the world. So, how does a

church survive without defining why it exists in a specific place? How can it maintain its identity if in its task the church becomes a-historic? For the Mennonites in Central America this was vital.

People in the church and outside it began to wonder about the existence of the Mennonite church in the midst of a huge confusion of churches and exotic religious groups. How could the Mennonite church be something valuable and integrated in a society with enormous contradictions? For example, in Guatemala, more than sixty percent of the population is composed of different ethnic groups, speaking more than thirty-five different languages. And most live in poverty. The middle class is not strong enough to become an important component of the social equilibrium. But a small segment of the population – three to five percent – are wealthy and rule the country like private property. This minority sees itself as the dominant culture and creates an unjust, fragmented society without compassion and solidarity.

Once, some people from communities where the church was trying to serve asked: What sort of church are you? What kind of people are you? On another occasion, in a violent and dangerous situation, a person who was trying to discourage people from attending church exclaimed: *Por el amor de Dios, qué hacen ustedes aquí*? (For God's sake what are you doing here?) *Esto es peligroso. Es mejor si se van, aquí no pueden hacer nada*! (This is dangerous! It is better if you leave now, you can't do anything here.) Such questions and observations were important at the beginning of a journey for the Mennonite church in Central America in the midst of social violence, persecution, fear, and death.

These questions from other people led the churches to ask themselves, Who we are? Where do we come from? Where do we find roots? What sort of people are we? All these questions brought a sense of urgency to Mennonites to define their identity. We are "Mennonites," but this is a word devoid of meaning if it is just a name, a title, a sign on the facade of a building. This name needs a strong frame, and the church needs to find this frame. The link between Central American congregations and North American mission agencies is clear but a frame of reference from North America does not work. Culturally the Mennonite church in North America sends its message and its messengers wrapped in the robe of the dominant culture of the rich and powerful. This has political and ideological implications that contradict the different environment

of the poor and dependent countries. These contradictions grow when those who send their message and messengers fail to incorporate into their meta-reality that they are not the only Mennonites, when they fail to include in we those who demand their own space to recreate Mennonite and Anabaptist according to a different paradigm.

A negative reaction occurred because the churches, denominations, and mission agencies from North America were associated with the dominant culture and were seen to benefit from it. It is difficult build bridges between these two different realities. If the churches in Central America wanted to survive, they needed a strong identity in order to pursue a new level of participation, acceptance, and witness. Also, if Mennonites want to participate in the social process, they need to approach other groups with a clear definition of themselves. Mennonites in Central America live in the middle of poverty and socially disadvantaged people who suffer violence and persecution.

Here the words used by Kampen become important to me, not just for sociological reasons but because they are necessary for engagement in a productive dialogue with others, not because we need to survive but because we as a church are to be instruments of liberation for others. The task for the churches in Central America was to search for their roots in order to provide a point of reference to help define and shape their identity, and thus become capable in mission. And so the church began dealing with four main streams of identity:

1. The Bible as the root of beliefs and ethics, and as a paradigm for human life and a guide for a people's pilgrimage.

2. Anabaptist history in the sixteenth century as a meta-narrative, a religious ideology, as a strong ethos link, as an example of the urgency of mission, and as an ongoing inclusive community.

3. The indigenous communities, because they were in the midst of suffering with a sense of mission, hope, patience, and courage. As an ethnic group, they appeal to their ancestors, and their traditions and religious patterns, because they were strongest as a community when the suffering was strongest.

4. A sense of "global ownership" offered by the international community, a commonality expressed in a common faith, a common

> theology, acceptance when differences appeared, something strong which never died or disappeared.

All these things happened in the middle of a vital situation, not in a setting of tranquility. The interaction between these elements was extremely dynamic: action, reflection, and transformation were the tools used in this process.

In his paper, Kampen, refering to Donald Kraybill, says that traditional ethnicity in North America was formed on the basis of martyrdom, codified in the *Martyrs Mirror*. For some Latin American communities including Mennonites, these words are an exact reference to their reality. These groups were shaped by the reality of suffering. But a difference is rooted in the last part of Kampen's paragraph when he notes that martyrdom was replaced by "humility as an organizing idea for Mennonite and Amish self-perception." The difference comes not from the definition of humility but from the awareness of how the church in North America used this good and exemplary attitude to become passive. This is not how the Latin American churches and communities who embrace Anabaptist theology identified the concept. In critical moments, they used the ideas of ethnicity, myth, religious ideology, and meta-narratives to became combative and prophetic. Anabaptist history gave them many of these elements. And the theology and biblical basis with which Anabaptism challenged the powers and political systems in the sixteenth century were used in Central America to create a bridge between these sociological poor communities of faith and Anabaptist communities of the past. This is an amazing engagement with history. It is a deep anchor that remains a strong component in the identity and hope for survival of these communities. This may help explain why these communities do not consider themselves to be an entity separate from the Anabaptist legacy. They never say, "the Anabaptists did," as documents written in North America usually say. Instead they say, "we the Anabaptists did."

Kampen uses words such as Globalization, Urbanization, Assimilation. "McWorld" to describe the essentials of a new order where a global economy, high technology, and fast communication is turning our world into a small village. This new world system affects the poor communities directly. I want to tell you a story which I hope will show both the dilemma facing communities where globalization has arrived and the critical importance of the Mennonite church's role.

There is a small town called Chimaltenango in Guatemala. It is a tranquil community where the majority of the population are *cackchiqueles,* an ethnic group with an agricultural tradition. These *cackchiqueles* work mostly on their very small family farms and produce food for their consumption. The leftovers are sold for income and permit them a limited margin of economic resources used to buy things they can't produce. One day, this community received a huge surprise: several cloth factories were coming to town! Suddenly there were people from Korea and Taiwan looking for houses to rent or buy, maids to work for them, and construction workers to build their factories. All these things changed the face of the town and produced fears and hopes at the same time. What good news for a community with a high level of poverty! Where the youth had no job opportunities, now jobs were coming to town! The young people abandoned school, especially girls between thirteen to eighteen years old. The men abandoned their small farms in order to gain real money and become consumers. The salary range was low, the hours of work long. The people had no time to spend with their families. The church became secondary and many traditional values changed. Perhaps the sole benefit for the people was a small amount of cash in their pockets.

A friend of mine, a sociologist, observed that: "The consolation from globalization for those people is a little bit of cash and a sense of a regular job in the middle of a circle of poverty. The people can buy goods and consume, but you can see the deterioration of their community. Their very identity as a community is in danger." The consequences for them are evident: violence and unconformity; more poverty; fewer children, especially girls, attending school; continued abuse of workers; and so on. The consequences for wealthy countries are equally evident: less cost to produce goods; goods cheaper to buy; more capacity to compete in the global market; more money in the bank.

The reaction from the churches and community leaders began with a new approach to the Bible, a different presentation of the gospel, more involvement in political issues, and a quest for the *cackchiqueles'* cultural roots and an active, prophetic kerygma: Jesus the Prince of Peace demands that the powers and principalities, expressed in this kind of economic system, respect the life and unique reality of the people God creates. Mennonites talk about survival in North America. But in this response and illustration we have

meaningful examples of Mennonites from another reality. Might it be incorporated into the North American meta-narratives as well?

In the context of the global village, North American Mennonites who affirm their strong biological links with the Anabaptists of the twenty-first century should recognize that they cannot talk of their survival without counting the rest of the world's Anabaptist Mennonites. The Anabaptist-Mennonite theological and ecclesial identity will survive if it transcends the purely biological and affirms the strong interdependence that the global churches are proposing.