

REFLECTIONS ON
MENNONITE WORLD CONFERENCE
Fourteenth Assembly, 2003

**“Sharing our Gifts in Suffering and in Joy”
“We Give What we Have”**

Siaka Traore

Introduction

Several years ago, I was somewhat disappointed when for security reasons Mennonite World Conference decided not to hold the meeting of its General Council in Colombia as planned. The gathering was moved to Guatemala. In my view this showed that we were not prepared to live and share in the life situation of our brothers and sisters in Colombia. Once the MWC General Council decided to hold the 14th Assembly in Bulawayo, Zimbabwe, if the conference had been cancelled for reasons of instability, political problems, or otherwise, I would have had to ask where it is that we want to live out our faith. The time is past when we can find anywhere on our planet a place that is totally secure. Security is grounded in Jesus Christ; and we will find complete and perfect security only in heaven. I don't need to remind you of the insecurity in which we live today; the whole world is shrouded in an atmosphere of insecurity.

By holding the Assembly in Zimbabwe despite all the difficulties, we have in a sense redeemed ourselves; we have proved that love is stronger than fear, and we have already put into practice our theme “Sharing our gifts in suffering and in joy.” I am convinced that there would be even more of us here if some people had not been dissuaded from attending. Those who worked to convince people not to come to the Assembly should acknowledge and apologize for their negative role. By coming to Bulawayo we who are here today have acted on faith; we have affirmed our belief that God is in control. If God is with us, what can those who have malicious intentions do against us? God has already started to change the situation in this country for the

Siaka Traore is the Mennonite Central Committee's Peace Coordinator for West Africa and was the first president of the Evangelical Mennonite Church of Burkina Faso. This reflection was first presented to the Bulawayo assembly on “Africa Day,” August 16, 2003.

better because of our decision to come here. Shalom is present here through us. I also have faith that, when we leave, God will continue working for a complete peace, because God finishes what he starts.

The theme of the fourteenth MWC Assembly fits well with the specific context of Zimbabwe and also with the general context of Africa.

Sharing our gifts in suffering and in joy

When we speak of sharing, we imply that there are two or more people involved. Sharing is an act which goes to the heart of who God is. Sharing establishes a relationship between individuals; it creates a communion among them. God – our God – is a God of relationship, of communion, of love, and of sharing. The Apostle Paul presents God as one in three persons, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit (1 Cor. 12:4-6). The triune God is a God who maintains this communion and this relationship of love for all eternity. And he has implanted in each of us this aspect of his nature: communion, relationship, and sharing. This is why God said at the beginning that it is not good for man to be alone. This dimension of the nature of God that is within us allows us to truly see other people. It allows us to see ourselves in others, and others to see themselves in us. When we do this, we can only say, “Let us share our gifts in suffering and in joy.” This desire comes from our hearts because Jesus taught us to love our neighbors as ourselves (Mt. 22:39).

I am because *we* are (1 Cor. 12:12-14)

As Africans, we understand ourselves as part of a community; our existence as individuals grows out of the community and the society. I exist thanks to others; my identity is determined and affirmed only in relationship to others. Because others exist, I exist. This affirmation is drawn from the Bantu concept of “Ubuntu.” Each one of us can be in the “we” or in the “I.” We do not say, “I am because you are.” If we said “you,” it would create a sense of distance, even exclusion. Our affirmation is inclusive: you, people from all over the world, you are a part of us just as we are also a part of you. When we say, “I am because we are,” we want to say emphatically that we, as African Mennonites, are a part of the large global family of Mennonites. Because the Scriptures are the foundation of the Anabaptist/Mennonite faith, we can say with confidence that we are legitimate heirs of all of the Mennonite values.

We do not need to have common or traditional Mennonite names such as Gerber or Yoder to be Mennonite; we are one because of our common foundation in Jesus Christ.

It is good to highlight those of our values which complement each other within our family. Paul said, “For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many are one body, so it is with Christ. For in the one Spirit we were all baptized into one body – Jews or Greeks, slaves or free – and we were all made to drink of one Spirit. Indeed, the body does not consist of one member but of many.” These words are an important illustration of the communion that we experience. Within the body there is an interdependence in which all of the parts are important. The body can develop in a harmonious way only when each part is acknowledged, honored, and respected.

One day during rehearsal the conductor of a large orchestra gave some constructive criticism to the soloist. But she was too proud to accept his critique, and she expressed her displeasure by saying angrily, “After all, I am the star of this performance.” The conductor wisely and firmly responded: “Madame, in this performance there are no stars.” If we can all take to heart the comment of the conductor, we can be a strong and harmonious body. In the mission entrusted to us by our Lord, there are no stars or superstars. The beauty and strength of the body depends upon the contribution of each part, however insignificant.

We give what we have

An African proverb says that a visitor should not weigh the chicken that is given to him. In my culture when friends or visitors visit, you give them a live chicken in order to honor them. They accept the chicken and return it to you so that it can be prepared for their meal. The proverb means that whatever the quality of the chicken that is received, the guest should be grateful rather than critical.

“We give what we have.” In my following comments, this “we” refers to Africa and Africans.

A question that can be asked is: Can anything good come out of Africa? It arises because Africa has always been presented in a negative light. Isn't Africa the poorest continent? The latest report of the United Nations

Development Program shows that the poorest countries in the world are in Africa. Isn't Africa the continent where there is the greatest number of wars and civil conflicts? Are not most of the world's HIV/AIDS cases in Africa? Is not Africa a place of perpetual need, with its hand always outstretched to others for help? Can we as a church expect to receive something from Africa? Could this Africa have something to offer us?

In spite of our poverty as Africans, we say to you, dear friends, that we want to give what we have. It is with humility that we approach you with what we have, and in that attitude we are determined to be participants in the common task to which we are all called. This is what the poor widow was doing when she went to the temple. Even though she did not have enough to live on, she said to herself, "I will give all that I have to my God." By giving everything she had, she went further than we have gone. She acted in faith, and her gift was appreciated by the Lord more than the gifts of the wealthy (Mark 12:41-44).

When we approach you as an integral part of the Mennonite family, it is out of obedience to our Savior and a desire to share in his blessings. Did Paul not quote the words of Jesus in saying, "It is more blessed to give than to receive" (Acts 20:35)? We too want to share the goodness that God has given us. We want our brothers and sisters from the North to accept our chicken – without weighing it, without criticizing it or looking down on it, without comparing it to their chickens. What gifts do we have to give, we who are still indebted to the West for bringing us the Gospel message of peace and reconciliation?

1. Our first gift is our gratitude to all those who gave their lives for the salvation of the people of Africa. In reading the history of mission work in Africa, we cannot be unmoved by the determination of the early missionaries who died in Africa – from diseases such as malaria or from violent acts committed by some of our people. God alone knows how many of them were buried on the African continent. They loved God, as they showed by giving their lives for us. There is no greater love than to give one's life for one's friends. This evening we want to honor their memory by a period of silence.

2. We also want to commit ourselves to cross-cultural mission among those of our peoples who have not yet been reached by the Gospel, in order to complete the task that you have begun. Today many Western countries are also mission fields. We are ready and willing to go to these countries as

missionaries as well.

3. We want to contribute our cultural heritage – songs, rhythms, dances – to the celebration and praise of God. For us as Africans, faith in God is a unified whole. We cannot separate our spiritual life (our relationship with God) from our professional, social, or emotional lives. God is there at the center of everything, and we want to share this dimension of our faith with our brothers and sisters.

4. The human being is sacred for us. Thus we repent for the atrocities committed in Rwanda, in the Ituri of Congo, in Liberia and many other places. These events should not have taken place. Because of the sacredness of human life, we honor our elders; we listen to them and give them a respected place in our societies. The old are cared for and included in the life of our communities. In some other societies this respect is no longer given to older people, and we need to return to our traditional values. Because of the importance of human beings, hospitality is highly valued in most of our cultures. To receive and welcome guests is an honor for the hosts, and a valued part of the African tradition.

5. We are a joyful people, and even in suffering we know how to rejoice. In our situations of difficulties and shortages we have learned to hope – even to hope against all hope. This joy is often lacking among people who appear to have everything. We want to share our joy with others, even in the midst of suffering.

6. We also want to share our natural resources with others. We believe that God has endowed us with these gifts not for our own use, but for sharing with the rest of the human family. We have resources, others have technology, so let us sit and discuss together how all can benefit, in a way that no one is exploited by the other.

Conclusion

My brothers and sisters, together we have much to give. Too often we don't realize what we are capable of doing. We underestimate ourselves when we think that we can't really do very much. God is concerned with the quality of our contribution, not the quantity. Notice how God judges those to whom he has given gifts. His evaluation is not based on the size of their investment, but rather upon their faithfulness, whether with little or with much.

What I regret very much, my dear African brothers and sisters, is our own miserliness, our tendency to present ourselves as needy, as poor, in order to receive the pity of others. We want others – especially our Western brothers and sisters, whom we consider to be rich – to do things for us, even simple things that we are quite capable of doing. We want to keep back our own resources and ask others to come do these things for us. By acting this way in areas where God has already provided us with what we need, we are dishonoring the blessing we have been given. God cannot be pleased with those of us who act this way. The prosperity of others is related to their generosity; they know their scriptures well. Listen to what the Bible says:

Some give freely, yet grow all the richer;
Others withhold what is due, and only suffer want.
A generous person will be enriched,
And one who gives water will get water. (Prov. 11:24, 25)

“We give what we have.” This is a nice statement, and we can be commended for it, but in fact we need to go beyond this and *give our all*. We must follow the example of the Macedonians, who despite their poverty gave to the Christians of Jerusalem beyond what was expected of them (2 Cor. 8:1-5). Like the hymn that says “Take everything, Lord,” let us in fact give our all.

In conclusion, I want to change the “we” in “we give what we have” to refer to the Mennonite family in relationship to the rest of the body of Christ, the church. We must be present everywhere – to the far corners of the earth – more than we have been in the past. We should not just celebrate what is already accomplished; the work that remains is greater than what has been done. The missionary task confided to us must be continued until the end.

As part of the body of Christ, we as Mennonites have Christian values to share with other parts of Christ’s body. These values make up our traditions. Historically we are known as a peace church. The great need of the world today is peace, and the Mennonite churches can make a major contribution in this area through participating in conflict resolution at various levels.

Since our ministry is holistic, we must remain close to the weak and marginalized of our societies to respond to their physical needs. Our commitment to social involvement should go hand in hand with our ministry of the Word. Through us God wants to be present to the nations. Let us be ready to be his instruments. Amen!