

No Longer Strangers: The Family Circle has Widened

Doris Dubé

Who can measure the impact of an event with the magnitude of Mennonite World Conference Assembly? Who can tell where it will lead the continental church in the next few years? Who can point out how this gathering impacted the church? How much should the opinions of several individuals, expressed independently of each other but consistent with a specific view, be considered as a probable trend in any direction? Do we dare to take the views of a select cross-section of our community and highlight them as opinions of a specific constituency? Some of these questions defy answers. Yet we dare, because we keep on receiving unsolicited comments from varying angles.

In Zimbabwe, the Africa 2003 conference bags and the “Sharing our Gifts in Suffering and in Joy” T-shirts still continue to shout “I was there.” They are a symbol of what the church participated in. There are, however, many more subtle changes that impacted pockets of individuals across the church population. We will never know about all of them because they have not been given voice. It would be an impossible exercise to try to do that. We can only talk about what we are seeing, witnessing, and hearing. Many people still ask, “When are you bringing another big conference to Zimbabwe? That was good, you know! A real special time. You should do that again!” Others come with a different slant: “You know, we need to plan to have workshops and seminars at our conferences in future. It would bring more pleasant variety to our gatherings. Not everyone enjoys business sessions. Giving alternatives and choices will enable more people to participate in church life. You saw how it was at the Assembly.” Or, “I enjoyed the fellowship but wish there was more preaching than what we got. It was a great meeting but there was not enough preaching of the Word.”

The Brethren in Christ Church has always had a strong following in this part of the country; however, the ability to host the Assembly at the time

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when it did gave it a new stature in society. Now it is [known as] “that church which hosted a HUGE gathering during the time when the country was facing lots of shortages. How on earth did they do it? How did they feed all those crowds? And the buses! Did you see all those beautiful comfortable buses that flooded the city? The BIC Church really must have means!” True or not true, it is amazing to look back and remember the shortages that characterized those days and the abundance of that one week.

On Sunday, 9 May [2004], the BIC Church’s urban congregations had a combined service at an open stadium. Part of the program was the singing of the BIC Choral Sounds. At the end of the service they sold food as a fundraiser. Already they are preparing to attend the next gathering, wherever it will be. They would like to attend, together with a number of urban pastors they hope to host. This is a wonderful desire shared by many. Goodness knows how many other people are dreaming and planning. If the present momentum is not lost, many Zimbabweans will be at the next Assembly. At that same service Bishop Danisa Ndlovu encouraged all church members to make an effort to buy and own the BIC church fabric. (The BIC church in Africa has never owned a fabric design, unlike so many denominations in Zimbabwe.) Though this was initially a private project by sixteen women prior to the Assembly, it has since been donated to the church. Before the Assembly we only had our black and white uniforms, now we can have variety. Even men can sew a shirt.

This is not all that the BIC church now owns. Many people gained the kinds of gifts not measurable in terms of quantity. People met those of other continents and countries. They talked and made friends. Others renewed old friendships. Relationships have been built or strengthened. Now letters, e-mails, and telephone conversations are happening across the continents. Among the young people who participated in the Global Youth Summit, lots of dialogues are still taking place.

Recently Mennonite Central Committee Zimbabwe needed to place four SALT (Serving And Learning Together) workers in host families for 2004 - 2005. In next to no time all four were assured of homes with BIC church people. The reason was that the hosting during the Assembly and the interaction that took place has reassured people here that hosting a non-Zimbabwean is not such a problem after all but rather an extension of the

family of believers. We are no longer strangers. Many say even if we were to travel worldwide we would also experience open doors, because MWC has members on every continent. The family circle has widened.

During a recent wedding, a group of young couples talked about a change of attitude that has crept up on them unawares. Without setting out to do so, they found out in the course of a conversation that they are all challenged to emulate high standards in all aspects of their lives. They talked about the measuring stick of setting standards that came out of the Bulawayo Assembly: organizational standards in any aspect of commitment, programming for any event, preparing to host guests, giving detail to plans, etc. The people who witnessed thousands being registered for the conference, being fed daily, and being transported to and from home efficiently are now striving to live up to a standard of excellence in their own ventures. The people who struggle with keeping time are making a determined effort to be punctual. The people who just moved from day-to-day are now planning their time. Why? Because for a few days during the Assembly they experienced the pleasure of well-managed assets and resources, and they enjoyed it. Now they are applying it to life.

It is ten months after the Assembly. Reflecting on last August still brings a warm feeling. We were privileged to share our joys and suffering with the world church. We came out of it comforted. We are not an isolated suffering African country. We are part of a wonderful caring family. When we were at the lowest part of our history, our brothers and sisters came and ministered to us.