Foreword

Our central focus in this issue is on the fourteenth Assembly of the Mennonite World Conference, held in Bulawayo, Zimbabwe, in 2003.

We present seven Reflections on the event itself – it was more than just an "event," as one commentator points out – plus the Bechtel Lectures given a few months later at Conrad Grebel University College by MWC President Nancy Heisey, and an Introduction by C. Arnold Snyder.

We are equally proud to offer articles by C. Norman Kraus and Thomas Finger that are related to our central focus in stimulating and helpful ways. Rounding out the issue are reviews of several new publications.

We thank all contributors to this issue, and we are grateful for the assistance of Ray Brubacher of the Mennonite World Conference and Susan Brandt of the *Mennonite Brethren Herald*.

Our Winter 2005 issue will be devoted to the most recent Women Doing Theology conference. Future issues now being planned will deal with the work of John Milbank and John Howard Yoder, and with other subjects of interest to the Anabaptist-Mennonite community.

We invite your participation in our forum for thoughtful, sustained discussion of spirituality, ethics, theology and culture from a broadly-based Mennonite perspective.

Stephen A. Jones, *Managing Editor*
C. Arnold Snyder, *Academic Editor*

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The Bechtel Lectures

The Bechtel Lectures in Anabaptist-Mennonite Studies were established at Conrad Grebel University College in 2000 through the generosity of Lester Bechtel. The aim is to make the academic world of research and study accessible to a broader constituency and to build bridges of understanding between the school and the church. The Bechtel Lectures offer noted scholars and church leaders the opportunity to explore and present topics reflecting the breadth and depth of Mennonite history and identity.

Introduction

This issue of *The Conrad Grebel Review* was occasioned by the fourteenth assembly of the Mennonite World Conference, held in the summer of 2003 in Bulawayo, Zimbabwe. It was an assembly that almost did not take place. In the months leading up to it, Zimbabwe did not appear to be a good choice for an international meeting. There were widespread shortages of food and fuel, occasional riots in the streets, high unemployment, a currency shortage, and a mounting social and political crisis. Would non-Africans come to Zimbabwe? If they came, would conditions be stable enough to allow for a celebration of faith?

In the end, the MWC Assembly 14 did come to Bulawayo, and some 7,000 people from more than 60 countries celebrated the wonder and the miracle of it all. The reflections published in this issue were occasioned by Assembly 14, but they take us well beyond the assembly itself. The various contributions speak to different aspects of the question of what it means to be members of a world-wide Mennonite and Brethren in Christ family of faith. Assembly 14 provided a particularly powerful point of focus for answering this question.

The MWC has developed into a significant representative international body, beginning to take its place alongside more established international mission and service institutions. One may say that MWC has developed as it has because Mennonites and Brethren in Christ have wished to respond faithfully to the dramatic changes in membership that have developed over the past century. What these changes mean for the church as a whole are only gradually being understood and assimilated. Writing from the perspective of a Mennonite Brethren church member from Canada who experienced Assembly 14, David Wiebe describes the MWC as something "we desperately need if God is going to get through to us." God's message, he is convinced, will come to the north through "our sisters and brothers from the other hemisphere." Things have not always been seen this way.

At the time of the first MWC assembly, held in Basel, Switzerland in June 1925, no one could have predicted that the MWC would become what it has become today. The locus and focus of the first conference was European and its purpose was historical: to celebrate the 400th anniversary of the

emergence of the Anabaptist movement in Switzerland in 1525. The small number who participated in that initial conference represented only European and North American Mennonite churches.

The historical emphasis of the first session soon was replaced by theological and spiritual foci in succeeding conferences; the international scope grew and expanded slowly. At the fifth conference, held again at Basel in 1952, simultaneous translation equipment was used, with the addresses translated into English, German, and French. Such simultaneous translation has remained a feature of assemblies ever since, although the languages translated have varied. The sixth conference in 1957 at Karlsruhe, Germany witnessed the participation of representatives from twelve different countries.

In describing the MWC in 1957, Harold Bender stated that "The conference is basically an inspirational and discussion conference." He concluded that the regular MWC sessions (at that time held every five years) "can contribute much to the strengthening of world-wide Mennonitism and the effective discharge of its spiritual tasks." (*Mennonite Encyclopedia*, III, 642; see also *ME*, V, 574-75). Bender was right in pointing to the potential contributions of MWC – probably right beyond his own imagining. In the years following, MWC has become a primary agent in the strengthening of a world-wide anabaptist fellowship.

The Mennonite and Brethren in Christ churches of the southern hemisphere, invisible at the first assembly in 1925 and only beginning to be recognized by mid-century, were in the process of quietly growing and developing as churches in their own right. The first MWC assembly to be held in the southern hemisphere (and not without controversy) was the ninth assembly, held in Curitiba, Brazil in 1972. The MWC churches of the south were beginning to be recognized, organizationally as well as in the participation of members from throughout the world. The demographic shift was well underway, with the steady growth of MWC churches of the south now a tangible reality.

Nowhere was the growth of MWC churches stronger than in Africa. In 1900 there was only one BIC church in all of Africa; by 2003, at the time of the fourteenth assembly in Bulawayo, MWC church members in Africa numbered 451,959, narrowly outnumbering MWC members for all of North America (451,180). Furthermore, when the world-wide membership of MWC

was considered, it was clear that the numerical balance had shifted solidly from the north to the south, and the shift was actually accelerating. According to 2003 figures, out of a total MWC membership of just under one million three hundred thousand, Europe and North America combined accounted for slightly less than 505,000, or less than 40 percent of the whole (figures from the MWC web site: www.mwc-cmm.org). It appears that this general trend will continue into the future, since the vigorous growth of MWC churches of the south is not abating, and it is not being matched by growth among member churches in the north. The MWC has taken on increasing relevance as a place where the voices of the increasing majority of our church members are welcomed and heard.

The nature of the Mennonite/Brethren in Christ family of faith has changed dramatically, and this raises numerous challenges that call for reflection and action. The inescapable reality is the increasingly wide diversity of culture, language, and location within this one family of faith. The reality of diversity within a world-wide body raises serious questions:

- Is there a particular "identity" that unites MWC members and churches?
- How is MWC identity expressed in word and action? Said another way, are MWC members and churches united by a theological vision? By a practical vision?
- What does it mean to share the Gospel in widely varying contexts?
- How important are "styles of worship" in establishing and expressing identity?
- What does it mean to share gifts in the face of wide economic disparities?
- What does it mean to incarnate Christ's body in a world that is fragmented politically, socially, economically, and religiously?
- Is it possible for members of the body of Christ to reach beyond cultural barriers to establish a vital fellowship, a working community, that transcends the particular and the divisive? Can faith and love overcome cultural particularity?

Questions such as these are being addressed in MWC, informed by the difficulties and practicalities of church life on a world-wide scale.

In the first of two addresses first presented as the Bechtel Lectures for 2004, Nancy Heisey, current president of MWC, draws both on her patristic studies and her experience in the international church to argue for a practical "catholicity," an inclusivity that respects diversity. The history of the church demonstrates dangers at the "universal" end of the spectrum, as well as at the "sectarian" end. The temptation of universality is to identify Christian language with imperial ambitions; the temptation of sectarianism is to erect tight boundaries and to dismiss those who have not joined this narrowly-defined community. In answer to the question of identity posed by the growing and diverse MWC family, Heisey provides the practical answer that the MWC "family" is rightly made up of all those who *choose* to belong.

Although she stops short of providing defining theological marks to characterize the Mennonite/BIC family of faith, Nancy Heisey does point to common understandings found within MWC member communities: a commitment to the truth in Christ, mutual accountability in communities formed by those who choose to belong to one another as they follow Christ. All of this implies a life of discipleship and a commitment to the ways of peace.

The MWC continues to work actively at the tasks of discerning and naming the distinctive beliefs and practices of its growing family of faith. In 1999 it commissioned a study booklet, *From Anabaptist Seed*, to function as a catalyst for world-wide discussion of the Anabaptist identity of current MWC churches. This booklet is now available in ten languages, and continues to generate study and discussion. As the result of a specific process of discernment, a seven-point document outlining the "Shared Convictions" of MWC member churches was adopted at Bulawayo (this document is reproduced below). Those who have chosen to belong to the MWC continue to discern and define the characteristics of their family of faith.

One of the marks of the early church in the time of Clement, Tertullian, and Origen was that it was a church of martyrs, of faithful sacrificial witnesses. The same was true of the Anabaptist communities of the sixteenth century. In her second address, Nancy Heisey takes martyrdom as her point of departure, reminding us that as aspiring witnesses to the truth, we must re-learn the disciplines of prayer, fasting, and self-denial. Self-sacrifice is not to be carried out in a detached "passionless" way, or out of a "gnostic" desire for self improvement, but rather out of our need for each other. Faithful witness,

even when it is not required to the point of death, still requires a willingness to sacrifice for the love of God and neighbor. This love, in its turn, will be demonstrated in the sharing of gifts.

The Mennonite World Conference has been concerned not only with the theological identity of its community, but also with the practical dimensions of true communion. To help members move from the theoretical to the practical, MWC commissioned Pakisa Tshimika and Tim Lind to write *Sharing Gifts in the Global Family of Faith* (Good Books, 2003), a book that explores the practical dimensions of giving within an Anabaptist framework. Faithful witness cannot be reduced to the extreme of martyrdom at one end, or of simple verbal witnessing on the other. Communion is experienced when gifts are shared; and in order for gifts to be shared, some discipline and sacrifice will be required, Heisey reminds us. When we recall the faithful witnesses of the past, what grows is not despair at loss and difficulty, but rather hope in God's faithfulness.

In order for the sharing of gifts to take place, for communion to be experienced, people have to come into relationship with one another. As the reflections of Barbara Nkala, Dothan Moyo, Thomas Frank, Erv Wiens, Doris Dubé and David Wiebe attest, the assembly in Bulawayo was a powerful occasion of deep communion. Here the gifts of African food and hospitality were generously shared in a time of want, with so many visitors who had come from lands of plenty. Nevertheless, these material gifts, as well as the spiritual gifts of prayer, worship, music, and testimonies of God's faithfulness were shared and enjoyed by all, in a communion of thankfulness and praise.

The Bulawayo assembly was a miraculous "foretaste of heaven," say Thomas Frank and Erv Wiens, an expanded family circle of people no longer strangers, says Doris Dubé. In this setting, Siaka Traore reminded us all that the gifts we offer and accept from one another are judged by their quality, not their quantity. I recommend Siaka Traore's unforgettable story of the African chicken to any who suspect that all this talk about "gifts" is really about prying northern money out of tight pockets. Gifts of any kind that are offered in love, build the body of Christ. But for communion to exist, these same gifts must be accepted and valued in the same spirit of love.

Included in this issue of *The Conrad Grebel Review* are two essays that did not arise directly from connections with either the MWC or the

Bulawayo Assembly. Nevertheless, their subject matter furthers the lines of reflection already begun.

Recognizing the widespread "generic" use of the term "anabaptist" in "Mennonite World Conference circles," C. Norman Kraus considers the question of whether it is legitimate to speak of an "anabaptist" interpretation of Scripture. Central to his analysis is a description of how North American Mennonitism evolved historically into a world-wide, trans-cultural family of faith, at the same time that it was confronting fundamentalism at home and re-discovering its own historical sixteenth-century roots (the latter identified as "Anabaptism" with a capital "A"). Kraus describes lower-case "anabaptism" as "a post-denominational perspective" whose goal is not orthodoxy but rather authenticity in biblical interpretation. He identifies four hermeneutical convictions that characterize an "anabaptist hermeneutical perspective" in continuity with the sixteenth century Anabaptist tradition, distinct from Protestant and Roman Catholic hermeneutics. Central to this perspective is the call for "authentic contextualization of the message and example of Jesus."

Kraus maintains that the anabaptist way of interpreting Scripture provides a dynamic and living way of discerning and translating "the meaning of the life of Christ for the diverse cultures of the world." His observations have particular relevance for the conversations taking place within the MWC family of faith, where the more brittle historical orthodoxies of "Mennonitism" speak with difficulty to the multiplicity of cultural contexts and realities. In concert with Heisey, Kraus envisions a world-wide family of faith defined not by orthodox pronouncements, but rather by faith in Jesus Christ and obedience to his example and command, with room for plurality grounded in dialogue and accountability.

In our concluding article, Thomas Finger approaches the contemporary theme of social justice – or perhaps better said, global injustice – through the lens of sixteenth-century Anabaptist spirituality. When brothers and sisters from the world-wide family of faith gather together, nothing is more evident than the economic disparities that separate us from each other. The proclamation of communion will necessarily confront the scandal of surplus and need co-existing within the same body of Christ. While Heisey notes that the ancient martyr tradition of authentic witness leads through discipline and

sacrifice to the sharing of gifts, Finger notes that the Anabaptist spiritual tradition likewise calls for the uprooting (or crucifixion) of any "creaturely attachments" that prevent a "resurrected life in the world." It is the incarnation of the resurrected one in the body of believers that continues to call us to faithfulness and a closer communion, a path that (the patristic witness and the Anabaptist tradition each maintain) must lead through spiritual renewal and personal sacrifice.

The fourteenth assembly of the Mennonite World Conference in Bulawayo was a noteworthy step in an unfolding story of faithfulness and challenge. Bulawayo brought into clear focus once again the new global reality of Christ's church. In Africa, as in other parts of the world, the painful adjustments of growing beyond the colonial legacy are receding into the past, and the Mennonite and Brethren in Christ churches are blazing their own trails in popular education (religious and practical), church administration, responsible tithing, church planting, grass roots evangelism, and witness. The remarkable story of these developments in Africa has been told by African Mennonite and BIC writers, again under the sponsorship of the MWC, in *A Global Mennonite History: Volume 1, Africa* which was first presented at the Bulawayo assembly. This history of Mennonite and Brethren in Christ churches in Africa, as narrated by Africans themselves, deserves a wide hearing in the MWC community. It is a story of faithfulness that leaves us with the light of hope for the future.

We have much to receive and much to share in the world-wide family of faith. We give thanks to God for the Mennonite World Conference. In a time of rapid global change, it has grown to be a central place where our diversity is embraced at the same time that our unity in Christ is affirmed.

C. Arnold Snyder