



# REFLECTIONS AND GLEANINGS:

A LEARNING DOCUMENT OF THE GLOBAL MENNONITE  
PEACEBUILDING CONFERENCE AND FESTIVAL



JUNE 2017

“Resist not evil, turn the other cheek, love your enemies...”

**MATTHEW 5:38**

“The sword is outside the perfection of Christ.”

**SCHLEITHEIM CONFESSION, 1527**

“Render to no one evil for evil or cursing for cursing...Put the sword into the sheath...beat the swords into ploughshares.. Even, if necessity require it, flee for the Lord’s sake from one city or country into another, and suffer the spoiling of our goods; that we must not harm any one, and, when we are smitten, rather turn the other cheek also, than take revenge or retaliate.”

**DORDRECHT CONFESSION, 1623**

## **PRESENT DAY**

- Nonresistance
- Defenselessness
- Conscientious Objection
- Alternative Service
- Restorative Justice
- Peacemaking
- Conflict Transformation
- Peacebuilding

These are some of the words that have framed the Anabaptist/Mennonite call to be a part of God’s peace-able kingdom. A call Mennonites have heard from the 16th century through to the 21st century.

For this conference, we used the term *peacebuilding* as an umbrella term intended to embrace this history and the wide variety of peace-related work that it has generated.

# GATHERING INSIGHTS



■ This learning document gathers together insights, observations and reflections from the Global Mennonite Peacebuilding Conference & Festival held in June 2016. Content is drawn from notes taken by volunteer notetakers, the listening team and conversation café team members. The document quilts together ideas and motifs made visible through discussions, presentations, artistic works and events in an effort to support broader learning from the conference about Anabaptist/Mennonite peacebuilding.

The document is structured around four questions:

- Who are Anabaptist/Mennonite peacebuilders?
- What do (or did) we do?
- With what issues do we wrestle?
- Where are we going?

For those interested in more detailed content from conference presentations, a special edition of *The Conrad Grebel Review* (Fall 2017 edition) features some of the papers presented in full as well as profiles of many of the peacebuilding initiatives presented at the conference and festival.

## Document contributors:

Chinenye Bolaji Chukwuma-Nwuba, Reina Neufeldt, Marlene Epp, Listening Team, Conversation Café Team, Aurrey Drake

**Anabaptist/Mennonite organizations represented at the conference** engaged in or studying peacebuilding included: Anabaptist Initiative for Psychosocial Attention to Victims of Armed Conflict and Other Forms of Violence (CEAS), Anabaptist Mennonite Biblical Seminary, Anabaptist Network in South Africa, Bartimaeus Cooperative Ministries, Bethany Theological Seminary, Bethel College, Bluffton University, Canadian Mennonite University, Christian Peacemaker Teams, Duta Wacana Christianity University's Centre for the Study and Promotion of Peace, Eastern Mennonite Seminary and Eastern Mennonite University, Goshen College, Honduras Mennonite Church, Justapaz, Korean Anabaptist Centre, L3Group, MENCOLDES—Fundacion Menonita Colombiana Para el Desarrollo, Mennonite Board East Africa, Mennonite Brethren Centenary Bible College (India), Mennonite Central Committee (Bangladesh, Canada, India, Laos, Nigeria, South Africa, United States, Zimbabwe), Mennonite Church Canada, Mennonite Church Eastern Canada, Mennonite World Conference, SEMILLA—Latin American Anabaptist Seminary, Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam. Plus representatives of different churches from Canada, the United States, and the Netherlands.

# GLOBAL MENNONITE PEACEBUILDING CONFERENCE AND FESTIVAL BACKGROUND



■ The Global Mennonite Peacebuilding Conference and Festival was held to explore traditions and contemporary expressions of Anabaptist/Mennonite peace beliefs and practises, to bring together academics and practitioners to learn from each other, to give expression to peacebuilding ideals through the arts, and to assess and re-envision Mennonite peacebuilding practise.

203 people met together at Conrad Grebel University College to explore Anabaptist/Mennonite peacebuilding. Participants came from Switzerland, Netherlands, Germany, Iraq, Philippines, Laos,

South Korea, Indonesia, Thailand, India, Bangladesh, Nigeria, Tanzania, Zambia, Democratic Republic of Congo, South Africa, Honduras, Colombia, United States, and Canada.

The event featured: 30 concurrent sessions that involved individual or group paper presentations, roundtable discussions, panels and interactive activities; three plenary speakers the opening day; two banquet speakers; morning storytellers; seven installations of visual art, photography, and sound; as well as an evening concert and play. There were three morning worship sessions, and a closing plenary led by a

listening team comprised of three surprising pairs.

Finally, and importantly, drum circles welcomed participants to Grebel's campus at the start of the conference and prior to an evening banquet in which the challenge of settler-indigenous conflict in Canada was explored. Conrad Grebel University College is located on the traditional territory of the Neutral, Anishnawbe and Haudenosaunee peoples; the area is part of the Haldimand Tract, the land promised to the Six Nations that includes six miles on each side of the Grand River.



Admiring "A Tribe Called Mennonite," paintings by Lisa Schirch.



Part of the painting "Green Line," by Rhonda Harder Epp.



Theresa McGregor of Mino Ode Kwewak N'gamowak carries a drum made by Christopher Miller of Attawapiskat.



We give you this stone to keep while you are here. Feel the weight. Its texture. See its colour. Its imperfections and pock marks. The stones, like the contributions people will make at this conference are beautiful in their variations—each has its own story to tell and will become part of ours if we attend to it.” - **Reina Neufeldt, GMP Co-Chair in Plenary 1**

## ■ EVERY STONE TELLS A STORY | PART 1

by Listening Team members Jeff Gundy and Andrés Pacheco Lozano

*I looked at the stones, then chose a small, smooth one.*

*Nonresistance, peacebaking, restorative waters, conflict conflagration—layers and levels of theory and suffering, loss and privilege, victories and defeats.*

*We keep struggling to find “positive tensions” and/or bridges between our reasoning on peace and the different realities we are part of.*

*We love those in far corners of the earth better than we love our inconvenient children.*

*It seems still easier to talk about difficult topics of peacemaking, negotiation, and conflict resolution with governments, political parties, even soldiers than it is to talk within our own traditions about our past, demanding topics and what we label “moral issues.”*

*Would you rather be a button, a hook, or an eye?*

*When the children ask, “What are the stones?” what will we tell them?*

# WHO ARE ANABAPTIST/MENNONITE PEACEBUILDERS?



“We learn not only from the people we admire but also from those we would rather despise.”

“We may not be that distinctive yet it seems important to keep explaining who we are.”

“In the process of helping, Anabaptists need to let go of preconceived notions, status and privilege and rather, put the face of Jesus on the other.”

“Our stories and the meanings we have found in them shape our peace work.”

“We heard that Mennonite faith and theology is present and important in Mennonite peacebuilding work. Faith is where peacebuilders find strength and hope to continue.”

## **DESCRIBED POSITIVELY:**

- Learners
- Educators
- Artists
- Helpers
- Healers
- Disciples
- Reconcilers
- Problem-solvers

## **DESCRIBED NEGATIVELY:**

- Conflicted
- Unequal
- Silent
- Triumphalist
- Wounded and traumatized

## **Peacebuilding from a Peace Church Narrative**

- Non-resistance: progressives and traditionalists in places like Prussia
- Conscientious objectors and difficulties therein (WWII)
- Radical discipleship; rooted in life and teachings of Christ (e.g. infant baptism, swordless)
- Commitment to community

- Pastoral
- Prophetic
- Pragmatic
- Pacifist
- Humble and humbled
- Spiritual
- Transformed
- Ambitious

- Rigid and challenged by change
- Flawed
- Blind to ways in which we may oppress or harm

## **Historical Healers**

- Anabaptist surgeons, midwives and healers spread the Anabaptist faith in Switzerland

## **Historical Conflict**

- Martyrs Mirror—our (?) history
- 500 years of church conflict; our secrets make us sick.
- Experiences of being a minority, oppressed, refugees

# IMAGES AND METAPHORS THAT GUIDE US

New ideas lead to new metaphors which change language which brings change. Some metaphors we heard over the conference:

- What trees can teach us: to move from the branches to the roots, towards systemic violence.
- Decolonization: the act of tearing down the colony.
- To have roots and wings.
- Sitting-standing-laying down.
- Aikido: one hand up in resistance and one hand reaching out in friendship.

**Photo by Krista Johnson Weicksel**

Drawing from "Stories in Art from Iraqi Kurdistan" exhibition, initiated by the Mennonite Heritage Centre Gallery and brought together by Kathy Moorhead Thiessen of Christian Peacemaker Teams Iraqi Kurdistan.



# WHAT DO ANABAPTIST/ MENNONITE PEACEBUILDERS DO?



## **CREATE ART AND TELL STORIES**

- Photograph: peacebuilders and peacebuilding, surviving conflict, objecting, resisting and persisting.
- Illuminate lines that divide through paintings and prose. Explore our own stories of conflict for what we learn about peace from within.
- Sing and perform stories that amplify voices. Listen for the divine together.

## **ECUMENICAL AND INTERFAITH ENCOUNTERS**

- Shape (and, in turn, are shaped by) engagements on peace with religious groups and the World Council of Churches.
- Engage, based upon ecumenical and interreligious commitments to peacebuilding in Nigeria, Bangladesh, India, Philippines, Indonesia, Israel and Palestine, the United States, Canada, Colombia, Honduras, Iran, the Netherlands.

## **LIFESTYLE AND LIVELIHOODS**

- Respond to ecological crisis/ crises—locally and globally.
- Come together around land; pursuing productivity and cooperation.

## **ACT AND ADVOCATE**

- Support immigrants, migrants, displaced, conscientious objectors, women affected by violence, oppressed groups, grassroots communities, against empire.
- To transform indigenous-settler relations.
- Be present.
- Pursue justice, healing, peace and non-violence.

## **LISTEN AND DISCERN**

- Alone and together.
- On theology and positive practices of the church; lessons and failures of living and engagement.

## **PARTNER AND NETWORK**

- Connect to support and learn from one another by geographic location, religious affiliation and focus.
- Support grassroots, traditional methods of problem-solving

## **EDUCATE, ANALYZE, EXPLORE**

- Support youth and peace clubs.
- Teach history, theology, conflict transformation, peacebuilding, trauma awareness, resilience—conflict and peace transcend disciplinary lines.
- Topics we explore include: spirituality, emotions, trauma, pedagogy, identity, cross-cultural engagement, restorative justice, inclusion and exclusion, politics, decolonization, violence, gender, rhetoric, hermeneutics, lament, imperialism, human rights, grace, obedience, German anti-Semitism, restorative solidarity, and more.





## ■ EVERY STONE TELLS A STORY | PART 2

*Slow violence. Sacrifice zones. Distant powers extracting wealth from the prehistoric layers of the planet.*

*Laugh, cry, sing. Go back to work. Is it violent to desire that your loved one desire to live?*

*The eye sees too much to comprehend. We need instead to listen.*

*¿Cuáles son los lenguajes que empleamos para construir la paz? ¿Es el inglés el lenguaje de la paz? ¿Sigue siendo nuestra diversidad—en término de lenguas—una razón o excusa para no escucharnos, para no hablar o para reducir el tiempo que podemos hablar? What are the languages that we use to build peace? Is English the language of peace? Is still our diversity—in terms of languages—an argument or excuse to not listen to each other, not to dialogue or to reduce the time we can talk?*

*We are made in a wonderful way.*

*We cannot ignore our wounds.*

*May we practice justice, love kindness, walk gently with our God.*

*Hemos entrado en la exploración de nuestros propios miedos, heridas y traumas—cosas que hemos escondido, tapado o pasado por alto por el “bien común”. We have entered in the exploration of our own fears, wounds and traumas—things we have hid, covered, or neglected for the “greater good.”*

*“I will only ask God to forgive them,” said Miriam.*

# WITH WHAT DO ANABAPTIST/MENNONITE PEACEBUILDERS WRESTLE?



## **BROKENNESS**

- War comes to us! Genocide comes to us!
- Violence against mother earth—“what happens to her happens to us.”
- Receive stories of war atrocities in silence, tears, mourning and lament. Silence is preferable to arrogant pretexts.
- We’re living in a crucified land.
- Hallelujah things fall apart.

## **COMPLEXITY THAT CALLS FOR INTROSPECTION**

- Peacebuilding rooted in the cross and resurrection is not rooted in reason. Non-violence is not always reasonable. Peacebuilding is first the work of God.
- COs in WWII worked in residential schools.
- History is the stories we choose to tell.
- Most aid workers are “settlers.”
- Be prepared to jeopardize your own position—peacebuilding is decolonization.
- A stolen person on stolen land.

- What does it mean to do justice, love kindness and walk humbly in varied contexts .
- I have never held a pencil in my hand—how do I draw a picture of peace.
- Transforming or surviving the state?


## **CHALLENGES THAT DEMAND RESPONSE**

- Visa refusals to ten conference registrants. Peace includes naming violence—the loss of stories is an act of violence.
- When we accept imperial propaganda we unwittingly legitimize brutality.
- The whiteness of kindness and programmatic arrogance.
- To grasp on to a smallness that does not make us smaller.
- Our churches in North America are on Treaty land—we are all Treaty people.
- Settler privilege—we need to decolonize the system.
- Are we willing to be real and messy with each other? How will people view us 500 years from now?

- Connecting specialists, generalists and churches, progressives and traditionalists.

## **BLIND SPOTS?**

- Preference to look outside ourselves and our communities.
- Uncomfortable relating to the military and to government.
- Uncomfortable with power—suspicious of it and try to minimize our own.
- Are Mennonites sometimes too nice—hiding conflict in ways that produce problems.
- Self care.
- Racism.
- Thinking beyond ethnic and national boundaries.



Part of the painting "Green Line," by Rhonda Harder Epp

## ■ EVERY STONE TELLS A STORY | PART 3

*The theory of redemptive suffering rarely comforts those who suffer.*

*We have the challenge of preserving the tension between walking in lament or silence (with those that are suffering or have experienced traumas) and creating conditions for restoration, healing, reconciliation...*

*Shall we lie down among the dead? Shall we rise?*

*Who will be the conscientious objectors in the war against women?*

*We have learned that there are different dimensions or levels when we need still to address and explore in terms of what peace means. Open military and armed violence has been for long time our main focus, but we need to explore other "territories" just as much.*

*My living room has dandelions growing in it.*

*We are small, we know little, and we are connected to everything else.*

*We have remembered how important it has been to walk in peacemaking with other people, other faiths and religions, how they have helped us make broader our sense of peace and how we have helped make the topic of peace a central one in the ecumenical movement.*

*The erotics of violence will destroy us.*

*Can we learn the erotics of peace, the desire and the practice of justice?*

*La erótica de la violencia nos va a destruir. ¿Será que podemos aprender de la erótica de la paz, del deseo y práctica de la justicia?"*

# WHERE ARE WE GOING?



## IMAGINATION THAT OFFERS HOPE

We heard stories and initiatives that featured creative responses to conflict and violence:

- Calling for a decade to overcome violence.
- Reaching out to the ruling military and the militants at the same time—there is capacity in our theology to try crazy things.
- Israeli soldier in response to help: “You’re just making my heart hurt.”
- Offering an alternative narrative to Canada’s celebration of the anniversary

of the 1812 war.

- The Colombian military and revolutionary leaders ask for prayer and forgiveness.
- Islam taught at a Christian school in Somalia.
- Pastors building relationships by caring for the dead in the midst of gang violence in Honduras.

## IDEAS AND VISIONS FOR THE FUTURE

- Embracing living with less.
- Getting rid of systemic imbalances, structural violence, materialism.
- Christocentric risk-taking.

- Embracing the relational ethics of Ubuntu (I am because we are) and Agape.
- Generational thinking.
- Bringing together our practice and specialized knowledges more deliberately (theology, reconciliation, conflict transformation).
- Intersectionality (church, church organizations, spirituality, head, and heart).

*Conversation Café Team*



Gathering on the Conrad Grebel University College patio early Friday evening before the banquet (June 10, 2016).

# POST-CONFERENCE REFLECTIONS ON GLOBAL MENNONITE PEACEBUILDING



Marlene Epp and Reina Neufeldt



■ When planning the Global Mennonite Peacebuilding Conference and Festival, we noted that prior to the conference there had been no gathering that brought together academics and practitioners to engage in dialogue and information-sharing on the theory, theology and practice of Anabaptist/Mennonite peacebuilding around the world. Mennonites, known globally for their historic peace position and, more recently, for proactive conflict transformation and peacebuilding theory and practice (e.g. Sampson and Lederach 2000), had not taken the time to engage, reflect and take stock together. Where have Mennonite peace commitments been, what we have done, what has changed, and where we are going? As well, what were our successes and what were our failures?

A unique feature of the conference was, then, its inclusion of a broad array of voices, representing different types of work, locales and approaches to Anabaptist/Mennonite peacebuilding—from artists to activists, scholars to church workers, mediators to mentors. The three days of rich sharing from many perspectives was a strength, yet it also made it difficult to identify clear lessons or consistent trends. The responses to the questions of who are we, what do we do, with what do we wrestle, and where are we going, are provided on the preceding pages in a format that draws on the words and ideas of conference participants and presenters. In this final reflection, we offer a few themes we noticed that suggest points of learning about Mennonite peacebuilding as of 2017 in our own words.

First, those engaged with Anabaptist/Mennonite peacebuilding tend to cross simplistic categories of identification, such as scholar or field worker, activist or theologian, artist or pastor; instead we are artist-theologians, musician-practitioners, poet-scholars and more. This suggests that the important connections between theory and practice, creativity and field-testing, scholarship and activism, nurture and shape the ways in which Mennonites approach peacebuilding.

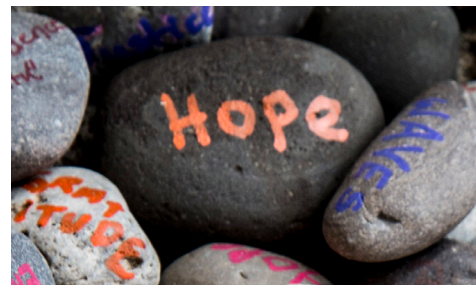
Second, there is greater openness amongst Mennonite peacebuilders to recognize and grapple with our blind spots and shortcomings. Numerous presentations and conversations at the conference recognized

limitations and challenges, such as those related to Mennonite settler identities, colonialism, racism, sexism, patriarchalism, and triumphalist pacifism. While the challenges are old, what is new is the degree to which people openly name and discuss the challenges, and are active in responding to the limitations.

Third, there is recognition that Anabaptist/Mennonite peacebuilding, while distinct in some ways that arise from our history, also shares much in common with other entities that yearn and work for peace. Mennonite peace work is shaped by its evolution; as historian Royden Loewen has noted, “Mennonites have seen peace, in sequence, as a ‘privilege,’ a ‘right’ and then as a ‘responsibility’” (Loewen, 2015). This transition reflects an ongoing re-positioning with respect to negotiating Mennonites’ exemption from military service and move to more proactive conflict transformation, peacemaking and peacebuilding. Mennonite peacebuilding is also arguably marked by “empathetic solidarity” (Klager, 2015), whereby our history as martyrs and victims of violence and persecution affect our ability to listen to and engage with the suffering of others. These observations were reinforced in the discussions and presentations at the conference, and yet it is also clear that Anabaptist/Mennonites partner with many other individuals and communities who also embody empathic solidarity and see their commitment to building peace as a responsibility rooted in their faith teachings such as in the Philippines, in Colombia, and in Nigeria.

Fourth, and finally, we offer the observation that Anabaptist/Mennonites around the world, because of their religious beliefs put into practice, have been at the forefront of developing peace and conflict studies programs, and peacebuilding institutes and organizations. These endeavors mean that Mennonite peacebuilding makes important contributions to a growing field of study and praxis that increasingly has an impact on local and global conflict transformation.

We are frequently asked, will the Global Mennonite Peacebuilding Conference and Festival happen again? It might. If it does, it will be different. It isn’t ‘owned’ by us and could happen in many different settings around the world. It was a privilege to provide a space for some new conversations and some continuing dialogue, all of it exciting, complicated, and challenging. If all who participated learned just a little, were inspired more than a little, and became more committed than ever to be a peacebuilder, then it was a grand success!



**Shalom.**

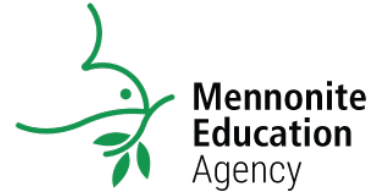
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140 Westmount Road North | Waterloo, Ontario, Canada N2L 3G6  
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