2012 BECHTEL LECTURES

"Blest Be the Ties That Bind": In Search of the Global Anabaptist Church

Lecture Two
What Hath Zurich to do with Addis Ababa? Ecclesial Identity in the Global Anabaptist Church

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On January 22, 2012, Rafael Erasmo Arevalo, a Mennonite pastor from Santa Rosa de Copán, Honduras, was beaten and killed following an evening worship service he had led with a congregation in the nearby town of Veracruz.[1] The murder took place on World Fellowship Sunday, a day designated by Mennonite World Conference as an occasion for Anabaptist-Mennonite congregations around the world to remember that they are part of a global family of faith. The tragedy that unfolded that night, and the ensuing reports in the church papers, brought into focus not only the painful reality of senseless violence; it also raised a host of questions about the meaning of the "global church."

The Anabaptist tradition has understood—rightly, I believe—that the most basic context of the Christian life is the local congregation. Here brothers and sisters in Christ gather for singing, Bible study, admonition, discussion, and prayer. Here they eat together, work together, and share in each other's joys and sorrows. The Body of Christ, the tradition has taught, is not an abstraction but a living reality made visible in the face-to-face relationships of real people.

Around 4,500 people are murdered each year in Honduras. Clearly, Mennonites in North America do not grieve for each of them. So, why, given

[1] Cf. Ron Rempel, "Honduran Pastor Murdered," *Mennonite Weekly Review*, February 6, 2012, 1. Online at: www.mennoworld.org/2012/2/6/honduran-mennonite-pastor-murdered/ (accessed July 17, 2012).

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our local view of the church, should we take particular notice of Arevalo's death? Just how am I—or my congregation at Berkey Avenue Mennonite Fellowship in Goshen, Indiana—connected to the Iglesia Evangélica Menonita Hondureña or to the congregations Arevalo served in Santa Rosa de Copán or Veracruz? Or, to frame the question in both a chronological and a geographical context: What hath Zurich to do with Addis Ababa? What hath Goshen or Waterloo to do with Santa Rosa de Copán?

The roughly 1.2 billion Catholics around the world recognize, at least in theory, that they are joined together through the spiritual authority of the pope, the teaching office of the church, and the sacrament of Holy Communion. The 68 million Lutherans are united by a common commitment to uphold the Augsburg Confession. The Anglican and Episcopalian bishops who represent their worldwide fellowship of 85 million members all claim an authority anchored in a doctrine of apostolic succession that links them all the way back to the apostle Peter who received that authority directly from Christ. To be sure, the ties holding these groups together are often contested; but they nonetheless provide a theological understanding of a shared global identity for which there is no clear parallel among Anabaptist-Mennonite groups. At some fundamental spiritual level Mennonites generally recognize that we are indeed "united in Christ" (1 Cor. 12; Eph. 2:13-16), or that we are "one in the Spirit" (Eph. 4:3-6). But at a more practical level, what are the bonds that connect the Mennonite congregations gathering for worship in Indonesia, Benin, Taiwan, Mexico, South Dakota, and Honduras? What does "World Fellowship Sunday" mean in a tradition with an impoverished theological vocabulary for describing the church beyond the local congregation?

In the first of these Bechtel Lectures, I argued that the tendency to division and schism has been a significant problem within the Anabaptist-Mennonite tradition. Although recent ecumenical engagements with Catholics, Lutherans, Reformed, and Pentecostal groups suggest that Mennonites are becoming more sensitive to questions of unity within the Body of Christ, an even more pressing challenge for contemporary Mennonites in North America, I argued, would be a commitment to seek reconciliation with those groups closest to us—that is, groups within the Anabaptist-Mennonite tradition that were the products of church division

within our own family. In this lecture, I want to explore another dimension of ecclesial unity within this tradition by focusing attention on the dramatic growth of the church outside Europe and North America. In light of the rapid expansion of Anabaptist-Mennonite churches in the Global South, new questions emerge regarding the ecclesial ties that bind us together as a global fellowship.

From one perspective, it may appear as if the manifold variety of groups now making up the "global church" only further compound the fragmentation I lamented in the previous essay. From another vantage point, however, I would suggest that the global character of the Anabaptist-Mennonite tradition today offers new ways to think about ecclesial unity. The missionary experience of needing to contextualize the gospel—as well as the visible markers of faithfulness—into dramatically different cultural settings, for example, could help Mennonites in North America relax their grip on the relatively narrow range of markers that now anchors their distinctive identity. The remarkable growth of indigenous churches, at a time when many Mennonite groups in North America are static or declining in number, could prompt a more radical reassessment of the focus on "boundary maintenance" that has often exacerbated the impulse to division. And the very variety of expressions of faith and life in the global church could help Mennonites in North America pursue a deeper sense of unity closer to home.

The argument that follows will unfold in three basic steps. Following a brief historical account of the phenomenal growth of the Anabaptist-Mennonite fellowship during the second half of the 20th century, I will propose several images or metaphors that may be helpful in making sense of this reality. More substantively, I will conclude with a constructive theological argument as to why and how Mennonite congregations in North America could be renewed by a more conscious embrace of their brothers and sisters in the Global South.

Globalization of the Anabaptist-Mennonite Tradition

By the end of the 17th century the movement of radical reform that made Anabaptists synonymous with the Peasants' War of 1525 or the Münster debacle of 1535 had settled into a cluster of sober-minded, self-disciplined,

nonresistant congregations, worshiping at the edges of public culture in urban regions of the Netherlands and northern Germany, and often in secret in the rural territories of southwest Germany and Switzerland. Here, the principle of believers baptism kept them outside the officially established culture of the state church. The ensuing religious, cultural, and political marginalization of Mennonites in Europe (and later in North America) led many groups to recreate their own miniature versions of the *Corpus Christianum* —what John Howard Yoder once called "corpuscle Christianum"—where faith and culture fused into patterns of Christian identity that were inseparable from family identity and folk traditions.[2] Compared with other Reformation groups, the descendants of the Anabaptist movement remained a tiny minority. At the beginning of the 20th century, there were perhaps 225,000 baptized Anabaptist-Mennonites in the world. Apart from a handful of converts in Asia and Africa, virtually all of them resided in Europe (150,000) or North America (73,000).[3]

During the second half of the 20th century, however, all this began to change. Indeed, from the perspective of a 500-year-old tradition, the demographic transformation that has been taking place in the Anabaptist-Mennonite fellowship over the past 30 or 40 years is nothing short of phenomenal. By 1978, the Anabaptist family had grown to 610,000 members—with only 95,000 in Europe; a sharp increase to 315,000 in North America; and even more dramatic growth in Asia, Africa, and Latin America (from 3,000 to 200,000).[4] Today, only three decades later, the shift in the church's center of gravity from North to South—a transformation that scholars such as Philip Jenkins, Lamin Sanneh, and Mark Noll have documented so insightfully for the larger Christian church—has continued.[5]

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[2] John Howard Yoder, "Anabaptist Vision and Mennonite Reality," in *Consultation on Anabaptist-Mennonite Theology,* ed. A. J. Klassen (Fresno, CA: Mennonite Brethren Biblical Seminary for Council of Mennonite Seminaries, 1970), 2-46, 8.

[3] Wilbert R. Shenk, "Mission and Service and the Globalization of North American Mennonites," *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 70, no. 1 (Jan. 1996): 7-22, 8.

[4] Ibid., 10.

[5] The literature on global Christianity is vast and growing rapidly. For a basic introduction see Philip Jenkins, *The Next Christendom: The Coming of Global Christianity* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 2004); Lamin Sanneh, *Encountering The West: Christianity and the Global Cultural Process: The African Dimension* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1993); and Mark Noll, *The New Shape of World Christianity: How American Experience Reflects Global Faith* (Downers Grove, IL:

In 2011, Mennonite World Conference identified nearly 1.7 million baptized Anabaptists in 227 organized bodies, living in more than 80 different countries. Of these, only around 50,000 live in Europe, some 400,000 in North America, and the rest—well over a million—are part of the global Anabaptist fellowship. In 2002, the Meserte Kristos church of Ethiopia surpassed the number of Mennonites in the US to become the largest group, with Anabaptist groups in the Congo not far behind. Currently, Mennonite Church USA, Mennonite Church Canada, and their Mennonite Brethren North American counterparts—groups that have long pictured themselves as the organizational, financial, and intellectual centers of the Anabaptist tradition—constitute barely nine percent of the global Anabaptist fellowship.

The forces driving this growth are complex. Every individual group, of course, has its own story and context. But three distinct themes offer a small window into the dynamics behind this transformation.

1. "They Seek a Country"

One source of globalization—often overlooked by Mennonites in the US—has been the diaspora of German-speaking Mennonites, many of them fleeing their homelands as refugees of government oppression or the ravages of wars. Thus, for example, in the early 1920s when provincial governments in Canada began to insist that Russian Mennonite immigrants teach their schoolchildren in English, several thousand Old Colony, or Reinländer, Mennonites immigrated to Mexico, followed several years later by another immigration of Sommerfelder, Bergthaler, and Chortizer Mennonites from Canada to the "Green Hell" of the Paraguayan Chaco. At about the same time in South Russia, the Bolshevik Revolution destroyed dozens of prosperous Mennonite colonies, forcing many of those who did not die of violence or starvation to flee as refugees—mostly to Paraguay and Brazil, and later to Uruguay and Bolivia. Those who remained behind faced the trauma of World War II, and then the iron-fisted policies of Stalin, who wanted to eliminate all forms of ethnic identity, especially those associated with religion. So, in the 1940s and 1950s, more Mennonite refugees fled, settling mostly in South America.

These Low German-speaking, colony-oriented Mennonites of Russian

IVP Academic, 2009).

origin have been joined in recent decades by several thousand émigré Beachy Amish and conservative Mennonites from the US who share their separatist convictions. Today, at least 150,000 of these Mennonites are scattered across Mexico, Central America, and South America.[6] The most conservative among them have established thriving colonies in isolated settings where they continue to speak German dialects and maintain the religious traditions and folkways of their European ancestors. The more progressive-minded have begun to settle in cities. The children and grandchildren of the immigrants are now fluent in Spanish and Portuguese, and many groups have demonstrated a deep interest in connecting with local cultures through missions and social services. These groups have continued to grow in virtually every country where they have settled; and in some countries—namely, Belize and Paraguay—they have come to exert a national economic and political influence far out of proportion to their numbers.

Mennonites in North America are largely ignorant of the magnitude of these Mennonite groups in Central and South America, though many would nonetheless recognize some sense of cultural and theological affinity with them.

2. Missions

A second impulse behind the globalization of the Anabaptist tradition has been the missionary movement. Here North American Mennonites have followed the general trajectory of the larger history of Protestant missions, albeit with a typical time lag. The beginnings were very slow: Mennonites had established only seven missions before 1900, with another 18 initiated between 1900 and 1944. But by mid-century, a new generation—shaped by their experiences in Civilian Public Service or European relief work—became much more interested in the world. North American Mennonites established more than 50 new missions in the 1950s alone and another 75 since then, mostly in India, Africa, South America, and Asia.[7]

Parallel to these missions, thousands of Mennonite young people

[6] For a superb summary of this story, see Royden Loewen, "To the Ends of the Earth: An Introduction to the Conservative Low German Mennonites in the Americas," *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 81, no. 3 (July 2008): 427-48.

[7] Shenk, "Mission and Service," 9.

served as relief and service volunteers with Mennonite Central Committee (or the Teachers Abroad Program, PAX, or a dozen other international programs). These volunteers were people with practical skills, often more inclined to offer "the cup of cold water in Christ's name" than to hold evangelistic services. These international mission, service, and relief initiatives had a profound impact. They not only brought the good news of the gospel to many previously unreached regions of the world, they also embodied a distinctive expression of gospel that linked Christian faith to a strong sense of community, a desire to follow Jesus in daily life, and a commitment to reconciliation and peacemaking, even at great personal cost. As a result, the reality of the global church has become much more visible to local congregations in North America. Today, virtually every Mennonite congregation in the US and Canada has some connection to the global church through a retired service worker, a short-term mission project, a sister-church relationship, or perhaps more indirectly through the *More With Less* cookbook, or an impulse of some members to make international crafts sold at the local "Ten Thousand Villages" store a central decorating motif in their homes.[8]

3. Indigenization

The real engine behind the dramatic growth in our worldwide fellowship, however, has come about through the "indigenization" of the missionary message—that is, in those countries where the recipients of the gospel brought to them by missionaries have retranslated it into their local context and made it genuinely their own. Here, the story of the Mennonite church in Ethiopia is especially instructive. Mennonite missionaries first arrived in Ethiopia in 1945, long after other Protestant missions had already been established there. In typical fashion, they initially focused on education and health care, establishing elementary schools, an institute for the deaf, and several clinics and hospitals.[9] The shift toward an indigenous church began in the late 1950s, when a charismatic revival movement prompted

[8] Cf. Steven M. Nolt, "Globalizing a Separate People: World Christianity and North American Mennonites, 1940-1990," *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 84, no. 4 (Oct. 2010): 487-506.

[9] Cf. Dorothy Smoker, Chester L. Wenger, and Paul N. Kraybill, *God Led Us to Ethiopia* (Salunga, PA: Eastern Mennonite Board of Missions and Charities, 1956).

the foundation of the Meserete Kristos Church (MKC). But it was political events that led to the real transformation of the church. When Marxist revolutionaries came to power in Ethiopia in 1974, they quickly imposed restrictions on all forms of evangelical Christianity—harassing or arresting church leaders, sometimes beating them or holding them in custody for long periods of time. Still MKC members continued to meet. In 1982 the government officially closed the church and, for the next four years, held six of its key leaders in prison.[10]

Remarkably, however, the MKC church did not die. With their leaders imprisoned and their churches shut down, the MKC developed a new model of church life, strikingly Anabaptist in nature. Small cell groups, many led by women, met secretly in homes for prayer and Bible study. These groups quickly reorganized whenever they grew to 10 or 12 participants. Leaders developed a Bible study curriculum, which they printed on secret presses, and required new converts to undergo an extended period of instruction and Bible study. Above all, the underground church was sustained by prayer—regular sessions of intense intercession to God that often lasted for hours. Even though their gatherings were illegal, those who participated in the movement later recollected that "no one was afraid."[11] The results of persecution, creative persistence, and prayer were astounding. Before the period of persecution the Meserete Kristos Church numbered around 10,000 members. In 1991, when persecution came to an end, it had grown to a fellowship of well over 50,000 baptized members. Today, there are some 175,000 baptized believers in the MKC church, making it the largest national Mennonite body in the world.[12]

The central themes of the Ethiopian story have since been repeated among other Anabaptist groups in many other countries. As local people have emerged into positions of leadership—and as the church has faced

[10] For an overview of the full MKC story, see the chapter by Alemu Checole, "Mennonite Churches in Eastern Africa," in *Anabaptist Songs in African Hearts: Global Mennonite History Series: Africa*, John Allen Lapp and C. Arnold Snyder, Series Editors (Intercourse, PA: Good Books, 2006), 191-253.

[11] The story is recounted in Nathan B. Hege, *Beyond Our Prayers: An Amazing Half Century of Church Growth in Ethiopia, 1948-1998* (Scottdale, PA: Herald Press, 1998).

[12] Cf. the map of the Mennonite World Conference member census from 2009 posted at the MWC site: www.mwc-cmm.org/images/files/MWCMap2009.pdf (accessed July 20, 2012).

persecution—it has witnessed enormous growth: a church transformed in Indonesia amid ethnic and religious persecution; steady growth in the Congo in the face of prolonged civil war; renewal in Zimbabwe despite unimaginable economic hardships and a dictatorial regime.

Models of Ecclesial Unity: Making Sense of the Global Church

At some level, Mennonites in North America are aware of all this. At a time when church membership on this continent is stagnant or declining, they are pleased to learn that "our numbers are growing" internationally. We hear these statistics, church papers are filled with stories about Mennonites in places like Congo, Zimbabwe, India, Colombia, or Australia, and local congregations are becoming aware that the "real action"—especially in terms of spiritual vitality, numerical growth, and renewal—is taking place in settings far from North America.

Yet, at the same time, many North American Mennonites are genuinely bewildered about what this transformation means. What is the glue that holds the global Anabaptist fellowship together? When a new church emerges in Ghana or Chile that calls itself "Mennonite," what exactly do they mean by that term? Is it related in any way to what North American congregations understand when they use it? Lurking somewhere behind these questions are deeper concerns about marketing and identity—a desire to preserve the brand name of the franchise, and perhaps also an unspoken uneasiness about our own qualifications as heirs of the Anabaptist tradition.

For many years I have taught an elective course at Goshen College on Anabaptist-Mennonite history. I have always enjoyed the class, in part because it is a story that I know quite well. In my standard way of telling it, the past becomes a means of helping make sense of our own contemporary context, questions, and issues. The narrative begins in 16th-century Europe and moves in a reasonably linear path to the Mennonite church in North America today. Yet recently I have found new life and energy for the course by framing the story in a rather different way. How would I tell this history differently, I have begun to ask, if from the very beginning I assumed that the narrative arc of the story was not about "us"—the Mennonite Church USA? Rather, what new shape would the story take if I assumed that what God had in mind with the first adult baptisms on January 21, 1525 in

Zurich, Switzerland was the global Anabaptist-Mennonite church? What if the primary heirs of the story—those to whom the gift of this tradition was being entrusted—were the 1 million Mennonites outside Europe and North America who have no direct historical, cultural, or ethnic connections to the story? The challenge of reframing a familiar narrative has been wonderfully unsettling.

The fate of the North American Mennonite church, I believe, rests in our capacity to engage the growth and vitality of the church beyond our local, denominational, and national context. Yet we are far from clear about what that would mean. How do the bonds of trans-national ecclesial unity find expression? What are the crucial markers offering assurance that we are indeed part of the same family of faith?

One initial impulse in thinking about the unity of the global Anabaptist-Mennonite fellowship is to narrate the relationship in *historical*, or genealogical, terms. In this scenario, Mennonites describe their connection to each other by means of a family tree that ultimately has a taproot going back to the Anabaptist movement of the 16th century. So, if a group in Indonesia or Kenya asks what it means to be Mennonite, the answer proceeds historically, tracing a lineage back to a Mennonite missionary who first made contact with them, from there to the church in North America, and then back to Europe and to the history of the 16th-century Anabaptists. Global Mennonites can establish their identity by following a line of filial connection back to the Reformation disputes of the European 16th century.

Or perhaps we are inclined to describe the taproot primarily in *theological* language, in which all those who identify themselves as part of the group formally agree to adopt a core set of foundational Anabaptist convictions. In this model of ecclesial identity, the Mennonite church in North America serves as a kind of "accrediting agency," defining a set of normative theological principles—Bender's "The Anabaptist Vision" perhaps, or John Yoder's *Politics of Jesus,* or maybe *The Naked Anabaptist*—that will qualify a group from the Global South to claim the name. The criteria for membership in the global Anabaptist-Mennonite church will be defined by some distillation of the essence of Anabaptist theology, though what that essence looks like or who will do the defining remains somewhat ambiguous.

At one level, both of these approaches have an appeal. The Christian faith is always anchored in a tradition; and theological emphases will inevitably give shape and form to group identity, even if they are not explicitly named. History and theology are constitutive to identity. But both models suggest a pattern of relationships that I suspect we do not really want to affirm. In both instances, North Americans or European Mennonites become the gatekeepers of faithful Anabaptist identity, guardians of the franchise, at precisely a moment in time when Mennonites in both regions are struggling to sort out that identity themselves or asking themselves if indeed they even have a future.

No image for describing ecclesial relationships is perfect. The apostle Paul, of course, uses the metaphor of the body, insisting on the mutual importance and interdependency of each specific part (1 Cor. 12). An alternative image, one that might preserve certain elements of an Anabaptist-Mennonite ecclesiology, is the biological metaphor of a *rhizome*. Rhizomes are plants that propagate by sending out a profusion of roots laterally horizontal to the soil above. At various points, the interconnected roots of a rhizome develop nodes that send sprouts up above the ground which appear in unexpected places. From the surface it seems as if these sprouts are quite distinct entities. But underground they are all joined together in a complex, interconnected web of horizontal relationships. Rhubarb, lilies, and bamboo are all rhizomes, as are aspen trees. Indeed, the Pando colony of aspens in Utah consists of nearly 50,000 trees extending over 105 acres; yet beneath the soil the colony is a single living organism. In fact, scientists have determined that damage done to trees in one part of the grove is "sensed" by other trees at a far distance.[13]

Mennonite World Conference is—by intention and perhaps also a bit by accident—a rhizomic organization. In contrast to many parallel organizations in other Christian communions, its administrative footprint is very small, and its primary emphasis has been on strengthening relationships between and among its member groups. The process leading up to the "Seven Shared Convictions," for example, a statement of faith embraced by MWC member

[13] Michael C. Grant, "The Trembling Giant," *Discover* (October 1993). Available online at: discovermagazine.com/1993/oct/thetremblinggian285 (accessed July 19, 2012).

groups in 2006, was slow and arduous, shaped by input from numerous area churches and by the insights of academically-trained theologians. The primary organization of MWC's most recent assemblies—in India (1997), Zimbabwe (2003), and Paraguay (2009)—has been borne almost entirely by local committees of the host conferences. Many publications in the Global Anabaptist-Mennonite Shelf of Literature are joint projects, linking authors from the global North and South.[14] The five-volume Global Mennonite History initiative has taken nearly 15 years to complete, largely because the project insisted on staying "close to the ground," using local writers with a wide range of academic training who wrote in their own languages, many of them drawing on oral sources.

To argue that a global Anabaptist ecclesiology may ultimately be defined less by a shared genealogical taproot (that can find its way to the gospel only through the 16th-century Anabaptists), or by a set of carefully-worded confessional claims (that are ultimately created and managed by self-appointed gatekeepers in the North) should not be understood as an appeal to a Spiritualist understanding of the church. The retreat to an invisible church has frequently been a powerful temptation for those weary of organizational torpor, confessional wrangling, and all the petty idolatries that particular identities can foster. Instead, the ecclesial identity of the global Anabaptist-Mennonite fellowship may be defined by something far less linear, and far more risky—a vast inter-connected, sometimes unpredictable, web of relationships whose character, like that of the Holy Spirit itself, is likely always to exceed our capacity to grasp or pin down.

To be sure, the metaphor of a rhizome has limitations. The rich heritage of the Anabaptist hermeneutical tradition, the memory of the martyrs, the distinctive expression of Christian discipleship, the patterns of ecclesial formation—all these are roots shared by the global Anabaptist-Mennonite family that should not be ignored. And the fact that the visible sprouts of a rhizomic plant all look alike is sharply at odds with the rich variety of cultural expressions that the Anabaptist movement is taking today. Still, the image of a rhizome suggests that an Anabaptist ecclesiology is likely to emerge out of a complex, unpredictable constellation of intertwining,

[14] A great example of this sort of collaboration is Pakisa Tshmika and Tim Lind, *Sharing Gifts in the Global Family of Faith: One Church's Experiment* (Intercourse, PA: Good Books, 2003).

face-to-face relationships, many of them unplanned and many happening in settings outside academic halls or church buildings.

For example, one reason Rafael Arevalo's death mattered to me is that I have had students from the Iglesia Evangélica Menonita Hondureña in my classes at Goshen College. My wife lived in the home of a Honduran Mennonite family for three months while she was in college. And my home congregation in Millersburg, Ohio has had a long-standing relationship with Honduran Mennonite churches; in fact, I heard the news of Arevalo's death from my brother-in-law, who happened to be leading a group of construction workers on a service trip to Honduras.

What would a rhizomic global church actually look like? What would it mean concretely to share in the suffering of those with whom we claim a connection? What would it look like for our congregationally-oriented tradition to become more committed to promoting rhizome growth? What sort of transformation of mind and heart—what kind of renewal—might be required of the nine percent of us who are used to thinking of ourselves as being at the center of the church rather than at the periphery?

The Earth is the Lord's

In April 1525, only a few months after the first adult baptisms that had given birth to the Anabaptist movement, Zurich authorities arrested a young woman named Elsy Boumgartner on the charge of "rebaptism." But when they offered to release her if she would promise never to return to the area, Boumgartner stubbornly refused. Instead, she quoted the first verse from Psalm 24: "The earth is the Lord's," saying that "God had made the earth for her as well as for the rulers."[15] During the century that followed, persecuted Anabaptists returned repeatedly to this verse—"the earth is the Lord's"—referring to it in interrogation transcripts, confessional statements, letters of comfort, and even their hymns. The last Anabaptist to be executed in Switzerland, a seventy-year-old, self-educated farmer named Hans Landis, cited the verse repeatedly to government authorities before he was beheaded in 1614; and it offered comfort to many who did flee their homeland, often

[15] Cf. Arnold Snyder, "Margret Hottinger of Zollikon," in *Profiles of Anabaptist Women: Sixteenth-Century Reforming Pioneers*, ed. C. Arnold Snyder and Linda A. Huebert Hecht (Waterloo, ON: Wilfrid Laurier Univ. Press, 1996), 44.

in the form of a wall motto or an inscription posted in immigrant homes and worship spaces.[16]

"The earth is the Lord's!" What was it that the Anabaptists found so compelling about that simple verse? And how might this claim open up new understandings for a global Anabaptist ecclesiology?

1. A Political Claim Regarding Sovereignty and Authority

In the first place, as Elsy Boumgartner and Hans Landis argued, the claim that "the earth is the Lord's" is a fundamental declaration about political sovereignty, authority, and identity. Throughout the long sweep of their history, Anabaptist-Mennonites have generally respected the ordering function of the state in its mandate to protect the good and to punish evil-doers. Yet until recently Mennonites in North America have generally regarded citizenship as possessing only relative importance. Becoming a Christian, the Anabaptists taught, means that you are now joined to a new body—the Body of Christ—whose life in worship, in breaking bread, in washing each other's feet, in sharing possessions, and in mutual admonition and encouragement demonstrates to the world what the Kingdom of God looks like. Membership in the visible Body of Christ, we have argued, has a prior and more fundamental claim on our time, our resources, our identity, our allegiance, and even on our life itself, than anything else, including the nation. And if the church is truly the Body of Christ in the world, then it—not the nation—is our primary point of reference for understanding and engaging the world.

This commitment to clarifying and ordering political allegiances has taken a wide variety of expressions. In the US, for example, Mennonites have traditionally been hesitant to pledge their allegiance to the flag or to put their hands over their hearts during the national anthem. I vividly remember my grandfather telling me stories of his experiences during World War I at Camp Sherman in Chillicothe, Ohio.[17] Once he was rousted out of bed in

[16] Cf. James W. Lowry, David J. Rempel Smucker, and John L. Ruth, *Hans Landis, Swiss Anabaptist Martyr,* in *Seventeenth Century Documents* (Millersburg, OH: Ohio Amish Library, 2003).

[17] For a full collection of stories—many of them quite traumatic—of World War I conscientious objectors, see Jonas Smucker Hartzler, *Mennonites in the World War; Or, Nonresistance Under Test* (Scottdale, PA: Mennonite Pub. House, 1922).

the middle of the night, forced to go to the edge of camp, dig a grave, and lie down in it—assuming he was about to be shot—because he refused to put on a military uniform. Communal memories are still alive from World War II of church buildings painted yellow or lynch mobs showing up at the homes of those refusing to buy war bonds. In more recent years, Mennonites in North America have nurtured other forms of witness to the larger world, through programs like PAX, Mennonite Disaster Service, the Teachers Abroad Program, or numerous other volunteer relief and social service assignments that have helped them connect at a deep level with people from many different countries and cultures.

Of course, the lure of national tribalism remains powerful, especially in the context of a democracy where the rituals of citizenship nurture deep, if often subtle, identification with the nation-state. Particularly since the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001 the social and political culture in the US has been deeply shaped by a climate of fear. As a result, Mennonites have become more active participants in divisive political rhetoric that pits Christians against Christians, often in our own congregations. But at their best, Mennonites in the US and Canada have found ways to express deep gratitude to their country while still carrying their passports somewhat lightly, not assuming that the benefits and freedoms provided by governments were "rights" to be bought at the price of other people's blood, and always ready to move elsewhere if the nation decided we could no longer be tolerated. If the whole earth is the Lord's, then Christians will find themselves at home anywhere in the world.

To those North American Mennonites inclined towards passionately following public policy debates on either the Left or the Right, Psalm 24 is a *political* statement. It is an assertion about sovereignty and authority and trust, reminding us that Jesus calls us to be part of a fellowship of believers whose identity transcends national boundaries, and that the future of the Kingdom of God does not hang in the balance of an election in Canada or the United States. If "the *earth* is the Lord's"— if God is Lord of the *whole* world—then our allegiance to the Body of Christ comes before all other allegiances. If "the earth is the Lord's," then we must take seriously the claim that "in Christ there is no east or west, in Him no south or north; but one

great fellowship of love throughout the whole wide earth."[18]

As one practical suggestion for cultivating a deeper sense of the global character of Christ's Body, consider undertaking the following exercise as spiritual discipline or a Lenten practice. Imagine how differently we might look at the world if, for a season of time, we would resolve to turn off BBC, CBC, Fox News, CNN, NPR or all the standard news media sources we currently depend on for information on the important things happening in the world. Instead, we would agree to tune into news reports sent to us only by MCC, Mennonite World Conference, our mission agencies, or our sister churches in the Global South.[19] If we believe that "the earth is the Lord's," then we will need to reclaim Anabaptist practices that help us view the world through the eyes of Jesus rather than the lens of the nation.

2. A New Understanding of Possessions

The Psalmist's declaration that "the earth is the Lord's" is also likely to unsettle our assumptions about possessions. Over and over again in their history Mennonites have encountered a fundamental paradox. Wherever they emigrated—whether to Penn's Woods, the plains of South Russia, the scrubland of the Paraguayan Chaco, or the fertile soil of Waterloo County, Ontario—they struggled against enormous obstacles. But they eventually flourished. A tradition of mutual aid, combined with a strong work ethic, a tendency toward large families, and a firm conviction that God would bless their labors have consistently translated into economic wealth. Yet almost inevitably another pattern also emerged. The land and opportunities Mennonites received from God as a gift quickly became possessions, rightfully owned because they had been earned by hard work and wise decision-making. As a group, Mennonites in North America today are very comfortable. And along with their wealth, they have become increasingly insulated from dependence on God and on each other.

In his letter to the church in Corinth, Paul did not mince his words to

[18] The hymn, which appears in many Protestant hymnals, was written by John Oxenham in 1908.

[19] I made this suggestion as part of a larger critique of the partisan nature of US Mennonite political involvement in a C. Henry Smith lecture: John D. Roth, "Called to One Peace: Christian Faith and Political Witness in a Divided Culture," *Mennonite Life* (Online), 60, no. 2 (June 2005). Available (with responses) online at www.bethelks.edu/mennonitelife/2005June/.

wealthy members of the congregation who turned a blind eye to the needs of poor members. The rich ate sumptuous meals while other brothers and sisters looked on, hungry and thirsty. And then the whole congregation would all gather to celebrate the Lord's Supper. That's wrong, Paul told them! In fact, "that is why many of you are weak and ill, and some have died" (1 Cor. 11:30). To say that the "earth is the Lord's" is a reminder that all Creation belongs to God. If political leaders have no ultimate claim over the things of this earth, then neither do we—the earth is the Lord's, not ours.

This is not a new insight for Mennonites. Deep within their tradition, they have always had a profound appreciation for the gift of God's abundance. One expression this has taken is seen among the Hutterites, descendants of the Anabaptists who regard private possessions as a mark of the Fall—a direct consequence of sin. The gift of salvation—of becoming "new creatures in Christ" (2 Cor. 5:17)—they taught, is an invitation to be liberated from the burden of possessiveness and the economies of scarcity. In their view, radical economic sharing was a foundational principle of Christian life.

Most Mennonites today do not practice community of goods. But the best of their tradition has always cultivated a deep commitment to caring for each other in the generous sharing of possessions. Each year, for instance, the Relief Sales held in dozens of Mennonite communities generate millions of dollars for people in need around the world. But such attitudes are also evident in the humbler practices within congregations of bringing meals to the sick, showing up on work projects, or offering financial assistance to members in times of crisis. At the heart of all this is the virtue of stewardship. If the "earth is the Lord's," then the gift of the Mennonite tradition is to remind us that we are merely stewards—that the fruits of the earth belong not to us but to God, and that we are called to share the bounty that has been entrusted to us freely and joyfully with others.

3. The Lordship of Christ

Finally, beneath all this is an even more fundamental claim. To say with the Psalmist that "the earth is the Lord's" is not only an affirmation about political sovereignty or economic stewardship; it is ultimately a confession that God has entered history in the person of Jesus Christ, that Jesus rose victorious from the grave in victory over the forces of sin and death, and that

the outcome of history has already been settled. It is a statement of praise and worship.

The 16th-century Anabaptists were not naive about the power of sin and evil in the world. They knew from personal experience that humans were capable of inflicting enormous cruelties on each other. They did not hold to sentimental or romantic notions that "turning the other cheek" or "being nice" was going to make tyrants put down their weapons. Nor were they liberal optimists who saw nonresistance as a political strategy that could guarantee effective results. To the contrary. They often envisioned the world in fairly stark terms as a cosmic battle between the forces of evil and the forces of good—the Schleitheim Confession describes it as a struggle between Christ and Belial or between the Children of Light and the Children of Darkness. And many suffered deeply for their faith. But the reason that so many Anabaptist martyrs could go to their deaths with resolve and confidence—some of them singing amid the flames—was their absolute certainty that God had already won the victory, that Satan would ultimately be defeated, that love was the most powerful force in the universe, and that life would win out over death.

This legacy of costly discipleship, symbolized so powerfully in the testimony of the *Martyrs Mirror*, should not be understood as a glorification of suffering in itself. Rather, it speaks to a deep recognition of the fact that, since "the earth is the Lord's," followers of Jesus can enter into the fellowship of suffering with brothers and sisters in other parts of the world knowing that God has already triumphed over the forces of evil. Because God has won the victory, Christians today can share in Christ's ministry of healing and reconciliation and in the confident hope of the resurrection.

A Concluding Story

One spring day several years ago, while driving through the isolated Costa Rican province of San Carlos, I stumbled rather unexpectedly upon a fascinating microcosm of the global Anabaptist fellowship. My first clue was a group of local women, walking along the muddy mountain road, dressed in normal clothes but wearing devotional coverings that looked vaguely familiar. Then, at the outskirts of the tiny village of Pitál, I encountered a simple brick homestead surrounded by a manicured yard. The Penner family,

as it turned out, were Kleine Gemeinde Mennonites who had moved to Pitál from Spanish Lookout, Belize only a few years earlier. The patriarch of the family had grown up in Manitoba, but his wife was born in Chihuahua, Mexico, and they had raised their children in Belize. On the mantel were faded photographs of great-grandparents, born in Tsarist Russia and among the wave of 35,000 Russian Mennonites who emigrated to North America in the 1870s in search of religious freedom and new economic opportunities.

Just up the road from the Penners lived the Yoder family, part of a sprawling clan of Beachy Amish who had come from Virginia to Costa Rica as missionaries in the 1960s. Over coffee around their kitchen table I heard stories from their past that went back to colonial Pennsylvania, and beyond that to Alsace and Switzerland. This was only the beginning of a long series of visits through the afternoon and into the evening as I went from home to home of Costa Rican Mennonites who had assumed leadership of the local church and were in the midst of an aggressive church planting effort in the surrounding countryside.[20]

Here, woven together within this tiny greenhouse of Mennonite ecumenicity, were the threads of a wonderfully complex story: born out of the same 16th-century renewal movement in central Europe, two traditions had traversed oceans, continents, and cultures before meeting up again nearly five centuries later in a remote region in Central America; but the future of these traditions was clearly in the hands of energized second-generation Costa Rican Mennonites, who had adopted some—but not all—of the distinctive practices of their missionary teachers.

The form of the Mennonite witness in Costa Rica's San Carlos region is still unfolding. But in the worship service that I attended, I had a fleeting glimpse of the heavenly vision of the Apocalypse of John in which people of every nation and tribe are joined together in praise to God. Hanging on the roughhewn walls of the meetinghouse was a verse from Psalm 24: "Del Señor, es la tierra y su plentitud" – "The earth is the Lord's, and the fullness thereof!" The Costa Rican pastor preached in Spanish to a congregation

[20] The story of this community can be traced in part through a history of its origins as told by Sanford Yoder and Elva Miller, *God's Call to Costa Rica: Experiences 1968-1970* (Stuarts Draft, VA: Mrs. Amos Miller, 1977) and through the pages of *La Antorcha de la Verdad*, a devotional periodical published by the community.

seated on benches, separated by gender. Together we sang gospel hymns, accompanied by a guitar and a creative variation of four-part harmony. The potluck that followed featured rice and beans, and the conversation shifted fluidly from Spanish to German to English. Through it all, there was no mistaking the warmth that is possible only through the fellowship of the Spirit. "The Earth is the Lord's."

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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, a devoted churchman with an active interest in Mennonite history. His dream was to make the academic world of research and study accessible to a broader constituency, and to build bridges of understanding between the academy and the church. The lecture series provides a forum though which the core meaning and values of the Anabaptist-Mennonite faith and heritage can be communicated to a diverse audience, and be kept relevant and connected to today's rapidly changing world. Held annually and open to the public, the Bechtel lectures provide an opportunity for representatives of various disciplines and professions to explore topics reflecting the breadth and depth of Mennonite history, identity, faith, and culture. Lecturers have included Terry Martin, Stanley Hauerwas, Rudy Wiebe, Nancy Heisey, Fernando Enns, James Urry, Sandra Birdsell, Alfred Neufeld, Ched Myers and Elaine Enns, Ernst Hamm, and Roger Epp.