



The Conrad Grebel Review

Volume 22, Number 3

Fall 2004

Foreword 3

Introduction 4

2004 Bechtel Lectures

Particular and Universal:
Shaping Twenty-first Century Anabaptist Identity (ies)
Nancy R. Heisey 11

Shared Convictions 29

Martyrdom as Metaphor:
Aspects of Global Anabaptist Witness
Nancy R. Heisey 31

Reflections on Mennonite World Conference Fourteenth Assembly 2003

“Sharing our Gifts in Suffering and in Joy”
“We Give What we Have”
Siaka Traore 49

Bounteous Blessings in Bulawayo <i>Barbara Nkala</i>	55
More than an Event <i>Dothan Moyo</i>	58
Heaven on Earth <i>Thomas E. Frank</i>	60
Cameras Can't Catch the Spirit Erv Wiens	64
No Longer Strangers: The Family Circle has Widened <i>Doris Dubé</i>	67
Why We Need the Mennonite World Conference <i>David Wiebe</i>	70

Anabaptist or Mennonite? Interpreting the Bible <i>C. Norman Kraus</i>	73
A Sixteenth-Century Anabaptist Social Spirituality <i>Thomas Finger</i>	93

Book Reviews

Mary A. Schiedel. <i>Pioneers in Ministry: Women Pastors in Ontario Mennonite Churches, 1973-2003</i> Reviewed by Nina B. Lanctot	105
Betty Jane Bailey and J. Martin Bailey, eds. <i>Who are the Christians in the Middle East?</i> Reviewed by Roy Hange	107
Alan Verhey. <i>Reading the Bible in the Strange World of Medicine</i> Reviewed by Joseph Kotva	109

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*

* * * * *

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

BECHTEL LECTURE ONE

Particular and Universal: Shaping Twenty-first Century Anabaptist Identity (ies)

Nancy R. Heisey

Introduction

Let me begin with a few statements that try to locate me – location is an important part of what I want to say about Anabaptist¹ identities in the many settings around the world where we Mennonites and Brethren in Christ people now find ourselves. While none of us is as ready to proclaim our objectivity as were scholars of earlier periods, a bit of vulnerability still persists when one decides to connect her academic thoughts with a personal narrative. Nevertheless, here is a bit of what I am and what I am not – I am not a theologian, and not a scholar of Anabaptist history. By practice, I am a historian of early Christianity with a deep interest in how that community is portrayed in the New Testament and in the centuries that immediately follow. By experience, I am the child of Brethren in Christ missionary parents who grew up among the Navajo people of the southwestern United States. I lived for a year and a half in France; worked with Mennonite Central Committee in Congo and Burkina Faso; did a two-year study project with my husband Paul Longacre, during which we visited churches and other Mennonite friends in 45 countries; and have been involved with Mennonite World Conference since 1995. So I also have a deep interest in the way our churches live and witness in diverse settings. These lectures are part of my ongoing process of trying to hear the conversation between what I have studied and teach, and what my life experience has been.

I begin this conversation by looking at the efforts of early Christians to identify themselves as “the third race,” suggesting that these efforts reflect the tension they experienced between the particularities that identified them and their sense of call or desire for a universal identity. Early Christian

Nancy R. Heisey, the daughter of Brethren in Christ missionary parents, is President of the Mennonite World Conference. She is an associate professor of biblical studies and church history at Eastern Mennonite University in Harrisonburg, VA, and has spent 18 years working with the Mennonite Central Committee.

particularity, or peculiarity, was a given of their emergence from within the Jewish community, which in the broader Mediterranean context had been known as different for centuries. Christian identity was further determined by the move, witnessed in the New Testament, to fully include Gentiles in the community. Thus, aspects of particularity were givens in the early Christian period but, as the exploration of second and third century documents will show, Christians also clung to their particularity.

While recognizing the strengths of what set them apart, Christians also were drawn toward a universal vision.² To the extent they chose to define themselves in universal categories rather than live within the tension between universal and particular, I suggest they opened themselves to the problematic consequences of what is often called “Constantinianism.” With that backdrop, I will then return to questions of twenty-first century churches in the Mennonite World Conference community, placing in dialogue John Howard Yoder’s concept of “catholicity” with that of historian Justo Gonzalez. This dialogue will suggest that catholicity opens a space for the many particularities within our family, while offering an understandable identity we can invoke in our invitation to those around us. I will suggest that the reality of our performative³ experience, that is, our lived-out experience, in the global Mennonite and Brethren in Christ community is one of many particularities who have chosen to be together in a common commitment that offers hope in our world.

In the study of early Christianity (I will not seek to describe the diversity that characterized the movement from the first century onward),⁴ traditionally scholars of Anabaptist history have identified the most determinative event as the transition that took place for Christians in the Roman Empire in the fourth century, when the Emperor Constantine proclaimed tolerance for Christianity as a religion. The extent to which this perspective has shaped the thinking of contemporary Mennonites who study church history is reflected in the fact that most people who have heard of Constantine report that he installed Christianity as the official religion of the empire, a transition that actually took place more than fifty years later under Theodosius.⁵ Nevertheless, the problem of the “Constantinianization” of the church has been perceived in various streams of the Christian movement ever since. The choices made during that period were frequently critiqued by

John Howard Yoder, choices defined in his naming of “the recurrent accents of the anti-Constantinian critique”:

- its concern for the particular, historical and therefore Jewish quality and substance of New Testament faith in Jesus;
- its holistic inclusion of communal and cultural dimensions of ‘way of life’ within the faith (decision-making patterns, e.g., or economics) as religious issues, rather than making them peripheral behind the priority of spirituality or dogma;
- its insistence on the voluntariness of membership in the visible church, usually expressed in the baptism of persons old enough to confess responsibly their own faith;
- its rejection of the support, defense, and control of the church by the civil rulers;
- its relativizing of the hierarchal dimensions of the church in favor of maximum freedom and wholeness in the local congregational fellowship.⁶

Based on this list, I suggest that the primary aspects of the Constantinian temptation are a quest to establish a universal identity, dogmatic spirituality, coercion, civil control, and hierarchy. For this paper, the temptation of a universal identity will be specifically in focus.

Walter Sawatsky has criticized the traditional Mennonite reading of Constantinianism within a “fall of the church” paradigm.⁷ However, for Yoder, the Constantinianization of the churches and of society was not something linked with Constantine himself. Yoder acknowledges that this process was going on for much of the early Christian period before Constantine himself became emperor (a process we will explore below), and that “the use of his name does not mean an evaluation of his person or work.”⁸ Further, Yoder sees the problems of the churches over the centuries as a series of compromises, which he dubs “neo”-Constantinianisms. Writing in 1966, for example, he comments: “Something of the same character takes place in Latin America when Christians give their a priori approval to the political revolution that they consider imperative and, therefore, imminent. Such advance approval of an order that does not yet exist . . . we would call ‘neo-neo-neo-Constantinianism.’”⁹

The “Third Race” or “New People”

In order to consider the particular-universal tension with which the early Christian movement lived, we should look at several documents from before the Edict of Milan in 313 C.E. The specific discourse to be considered is the efforts of Christians to define themselves in conversation with the ethnic categories that shaped the self-understanding of the peoples of Late Antiquity. Early Christian writers frequently used the terminology of “the third race” or “a new people” to talk about their identity. An inquiry into this discourse points out the unhelpfulness of the assumption that the rise of Constantinianism represented the fall of the church. Rather, the temptations to which the bishops yielded when they agreed to go along with Constantine’s maneuvers had always been present. While some aspects of the situation of twenty-first century participants in the Christian movement are vastly different, the loss of old identities that has accompanied the demise of Christendom suggests helpful analogies might be drawn between early Christian reflection on these matters and our own situations.¹⁰

At least thirteen references to Christians as a “third race” or a “new people” are found in second- and third-century texts. Each reference manifests both a sense of particularity as definitive of the Christian community and a pull toward the universal. The ancient Christian writers who used this language were not oblivious to tensions within their thinking, but rather than naming those tensions as between particular and universal, they were more likely to articulate them first on the spectrum between physical and spiritual. A second, multi-layered tension is equally visible within traditional binary oppositions such as Greek/barbarian and Jew/Gentile, and the relationship of those oppositions to an understanding of a human community as made up of a complex mix of peoples.

The *Epistle to Diognetus* articulates both physical/spiritual and Greek/barbarian tensions. The writer begins by identifying his audience as one that wants to learn “the religion of the Christians.” Asking “why this new race or practice has come to life at this time, and not formerly,” the writer situates his response between the Greeks, who “reckon as gods” those things that Christians do not accept as divine, and the Jews, who “keep . . . superstitions.” Thus the apologist has firmly established the boundaries from whose limits the author claims “the religion of the Christians” can liberate

one, and has offered a “new race,” Christians, as the answer to older problems of identity.¹¹

If a universal calling is hinted in this introduction, it is articulated more forcefully as the text proceeds. The theme of newness in relationship to old oppositions is underlined in section two, where the audience is enjoined to become “a new person” ready to listen to “a new word.” The problem with the old opposition between Jews and Greeks is spelled out as a problem with their respective cults. The text’s famous fifth section is introduced by the promise of a revelation of “the mystery of the Christians’ own religion.” Christians participate in the particular behaviors of many cultures, but their identity is distanced from the daily realities of human culture: “Yet while living in Greek and barbarian cities . . . and following the local customs, both in clothing and food and in the rest of life, they show forth the wonderful and confessedly strange character of the constitution of their own citizenship.”¹²

The remainder of the treatise (not including the last two, somewhat separate sections) completes the portrait of a reality that goes beyond the known cosmos, referring to Christians as the “invisible” soul of the world, formed by the Creator himself. For all of its questing toward a new universal identity, the *Epistle to Diognetus* nevertheless remained in conversation with the particular. For within this section the early Christian commitment to nonviolence is inscribed within a very particular understanding of God: “Did (God) send (Jesus) as a man might suppose, in sovereignty and fear and terror? Not so, but in gentleness and meekness . . . not compelling, for compulsion is not an attribute of God.” This non-coercive view of God is tied directly to the perseverance of Christians under persecution.¹³ The remainder of the text nevertheless insists on the spiritual foundation of Christian identity, manifested through faith rather than nature, and ordered by a God of mysteries who lives in heaven.¹⁴ The text’s overall leaning is toward the universal, describing an identity that it was hoped would come to characterize all of humanity.

Another second-century text, the *Apology* of Aristides, considers questions of identity in even more detail. The author’s initial question about the nature of God is answered throughout the body of the text with extended discussion about the various “classes” or “nations” of humanity. The Syriac text lays out a system of four classes – barbarians, Greeks, Jews, and

Christians. The Greek text names instead pagans, Jews, and Christians, perhaps an echo of the “third race” concept. However, it also recognizes greater complexity in human identity, as it subdivides pagans into Chaldeans, Greeks, and Egyptians.¹⁵ Both versions then proceed through a description of the errors of the cult of the “nations” they have named, including barbarians, Greeks, Egyptians, and Jews, with the culmination being a description of the proper worship of the Christians.¹⁶

In addition to this nuanced portrait of human experience, Aristides, when he comes to the Christians, does not spiritualize their way of life but defines them according to a series of concrete practices, including doing good to enemies, delivering orphans from those who mistreat them, and taking strangers into their homes. The importance of actual practice is further underlined as he commends Christian modesty that does “not proclaim in the ears of the multitude the kind of deeds they do.” Yet the spiritual nature of Christian identity is not forgotten and indeed is linked directly to their status as “a new people,” for this people is visible by “something divine in the midst of them.” Further, as for Diognetus Christians are the soul of the world, for Aristides “the earth abides through the supplication of the Christians.”¹⁷ Thus while Aristides articulates a strong sense of Christian identity as marked by the performative and particular, his use of “new people” language also evokes a universal vision.

Several other works that may be situated in the second and third centuries likewise use the language of “third race” or “new people.” The *Epistle of Barnabas* twice mentions a “new people,” both times as part of an explanation of the significance of Jesus’ death and resurrection.¹⁸ Both references lie within the internally contested space of Jewish-Christian identity. Its non-literal reading of the scriptures places it within the territory of the quest for the universal, as the treatise calls for circumcision of the heart rather than the flesh, and for a spiritual understanding of the food laws.¹⁹ The *Sibylline Oracles* provide a fascinating illustration of complex but universalizing negotiation of identity spaces, as both Jewish and Christian writers claim to be reading pagan sources as witness to their particular truths. In one of the Christian sections, a retelling of the events of Jesus’ life, death, and resurrection describes the result of the resurrection as the sprouting of “a new shoot . . . from the nations.” This conclusion follows the placement of

the story within the Jew/Gentile opposition, describing “Hebrews” as “stumbling” against the stone of the son of God, but Gentiles being “gathered under his leadership.”²⁰ *De Pascha Computus*, a third-century Carthaginian text dealing with the date of Easter, calls Christians “the third race of humanity,” a reality it locates as a spiritual identity by using the additional descriptive term “mystery.”²¹

Clement of Alexandria makes frequent use of “new people” language. At least four references to *laos kainos* are found in *The Instructor*, in contexts that suggest both the Jewish-Christian frontier and the emergence from the Jew/Greek opposition. In an explanation of how Christians are children of God, Clement speaks of “new people” as a biblical term,²² later juxtaposing the childlikeness of Christians with the hard-heartedness of the “ancient race.”²³ In his discussion of how Jesus as Instructor spoke through the Hebrew Scriptures, he links the new name given to Jacob by the wrestling angel and a “new name” “reserved . . . for the new people.” Later in the same section, Clement describes the progression of Logos beyond the Old Covenant: “To the fresh and new people has also been given a new covenant, and the Logos has appeared.”²⁴ While elsewhere in *The Instructor* Clement is exceedingly concerned with practical details of Christian life, his references to the “new people” clearly seem to choose a spiritual, universalizing approach.

In the *Miscellanies*, Clement moves along the edges of the Greek/barbarian tension, although at various points he refers to the more complex world of Egyptians, Scythians, and Greeks.²⁵ His one reference to Christian identity as emerging from such a tension is a citation from the *Preaching of Peter*, where that work calls for worship of God going beyond the cult of either Greeks or Jews. Having located himself on that boundary, however, he moves to redefine his desired territory: “But we, who worship Him in a new way, in the third form, are Christians. For clearly, as I think, he showed the one and only God was known by the Greeks in a Gentile way, by the Jews in a Jewish way, and in a new and spiritual way by us.” Throughout, the spiritual realm is the place of true Christian experience.

Clement’s North African contemporary Tertullian sounds a different note. Tertullian’s use of the “third race” is found in his attack on those who suggest that Christians can avoid persecution by confessing their identity in heaven rather than on earth. This reference is unique, putting the language of a new identity in the mouths of Christians’ opponents, and with a negative

connotation: “Will you plant there (in heaven) both synagogues of the Jews . . . before which the apostles endured the scourge, and pagan assemblies with their own circus . . . where they readily join in the cry, ‘How long shall we suffer the third race?’” Although the Jew/Gentile border is visible in Tertullian’s articulation, in an interesting divergence from the other passages under consideration, he also locates the expression in a concrete setting – that of Christian martyrdom. Further, his scorn for those who seek to avoid suffering offers a twist; his opponents are placed in heavenly territory, while his view of Christian identity insists on an earthly location. Tertullian has broken the ground for this unique perspective earlier in the chapter, when he looks not forward but backward, asking whether Christ “preserved a race such that He is looking for a testimony to Himself from them. . . .”²⁶

Origen’s argument *Against Celsus* offers a final third-century perspective on questions of Christian identity in the struggle between particular and universal. In Book 8, Origen deals at length with the pagan philosopher’s critique of an aspect of Christian particularity – the lack of support for the empire. For all of its philosophical posturing, *Against Celsus* in this final book takes on the cast of a dispute over practice. Somehow the points raised by the earlier critic have drawn Origen toward the realities of the everyday. Celsus had raised the question of Christian refusal to honor the *daimon* or fortune of the emperor, paraphrasing or misquoting the gospel text by stating that Christians said they could not serve many masters. He thus seemed to suggest it was the Christian rejection of the ambiguity of a world of many powers that made their way of life a problem for the empire. Such talk, he insisted, was “the language of sedition, and is only used by those who separate themselves and stand aloof from all human society.” For Celsus, the conflictual territory was between those people who could place their religious practice within the framework of the empire, and those who could not.

In his reply, Origen took up Celsus’ argument that if Jesus had been God, punishment would have come upon those who caused his suffering. He describes Jesus’ death as God’s plan, but sees it as related to the physical visibility of Jesus’ suffering. The concrete location of what has happened in the *polis* is then underlined: “Some new thing, then, has come to pass since the time that Jesus suffered – that, I mean, which has happened to the city, to the whole nation, and in the sudden and general rise of a Christian community.”

Origen's "new thing" is thus both particular and universal, the latter inclination being sustained elsewhere in his explanation of how the Roman empire made possible the spread of the Christian message.²⁷ Like Clement, Origen also spiritualizes the potential of Christian identity, when he refutes Celsus' claim that "any agreement between the inhabitants of Asia, Europe, and Libya, as well Greeks as Barbarians, (is) impossible." Impossible, Origen retorts, for all of these people within their physical identities. However, it is possible when humans are "released" from the body.²⁸

In their negotiation of the limited space of a proscribed practice within the pre-Constantinian empire, then, early Christian writers demonstrated that they were aware of the identity tensions within which their communities grew. Their choice of the images of a "new people" or "third race" represents both an awareness of their particularities and their desire to belong to something universal. To the extent they were able to live within the tension in the early centuries, their community life and their theological energy led to their growing appeal among the peoples of the Mediterranean world. Before the end of the period when Christianity was an illicit religion, it had spread not only north into Europe but beyond the borders of Rome's sway, south into Ethiopia and east into Persia. However, the reality that within decades after the Edict of Tolerance, Christian writers such as Lactantius had moved from a powerful articulation of the reasons that Christians would not fight to a spirited defense of the right of the emperor to use force suggests that the intersecting of the universal vision of the church with the universal vision of the empire created a deadly mix.²⁹ When the "third race" was understood to define a universal reality rather than a definition of particular spaces lived out where Christian faith was taking root, it defined a vision fraught with peril for the churches. Yet other early Christian language pointed in a different direction.

"Catholicity" as Another Approach

The "catholicity" of the church was another vision articulated among early Christian communities. This term can be used to describe the kind of experience reported on the second-century epitaph of a Christian from Asia Minor named Avircius Marcellus. Avircius had traveled as far west as Rome and as far east as Nisibis, east of the Euphrates. Everywhere he went, the epitaph reports, "he found other Christians who set before him 'the fish' . . .

from ‘a holy virgin’ . . . , accompanied by bread and wine.”³⁰ In contrast to later doctrinal arguments Avircius’ observations were metaphorical and couched in terms of practice. This usage suggests an understanding of Christian identity discussed in the second-century writings of Ignatius and Irenaeus. Ignatius brought the word “catholic,” literally “according to the whole,” into Christian discourse early in the second century, in his critique of so-called heretics.³¹ Their error, as Justo Gonzalez reads him, was to sow division by claiming universal status for their particular teachings rather than by paying “heed to the entire ‘catholic’ witness of the entire ‘catholic’ church.”³² Later in that century, Irenaeus explained why four gospels were included in the New Testament canon:

It is not possible that the Gospels can be either more or fewer in number than they are. For, since there are four zones of the world in which we live and four principal winds, while the Church is scattered throughout all the world, and the ‘pillar and ground’ of the church is the Gospel and the spirit of life; it is fitting that she should have four pillars, breathing out immortality on every side, and vivifying men (sic) afresh.³³

For Gonzalez, this passage, often ridiculed as a simplistic or magical perspective, offers a description of catholicity, connecting as it does the gospel accounts, both normative and plural, with the geographic diversity in which they were finding homes. Gonzalez links this understanding to the related concept of apostolicity. While it “later became a means of excluding all who could not claim a literal, mechanistic succession from the apostles,” in its earlier uses apostolicity was intended to oppose those who claimed secret or elite status based on the teaching of one apostle rather than from “the open tradition received from all the apostles, through all their successors, and shared alike by those successors and by all those others who agreed with them.”³⁴ Elsewhere, Gonzalez reiterates his definition of catholicity, warning against the tendency to equate “universal” and “catholic.” While the universal “is that which is uniformly present everywhere; ‘catholic’ is that which is according to the whole, that in which all have a place.”³⁵

Gonzalez raises the issue of catholicity and its definition as inclusive of Christian diversity in a context of stressing the danger of what he calls

“sectarianism,” the claim that one’s own group possesses all the truth. Acknowledging the countervailing danger of “syncretism,” he proposes the solution the early Christians worked out in the spreading diversity of the second century – the solution of creeds, canon, and the authority of the episcopacy.³⁶

For descendants of the sixteenth-century Anabaptists, the sound of those “safeguards” has a highly problematic ring. Yet within our own extended family, we too have manifested a yearning for an understanding of our defining central idea(s). Proposals for naming Anabaptist defining ideas have been made by Donald Durnbaugh, J. Denny Weaver, and C. Arnold Snyder. While they do not entirely agree, these proposals manifest a degree of coherence in their insistence on discipleship, community, and peace.³⁷

The desire for an agreed-upon expression of what everyone in the Mennonite/Brethren in Christ family shares is not uniquely northern, although northern theologians have been especially engaged in the effort to define such ideas for the whole. For example, in a discussion about Anabaptist distinctives at the Consultation on Theological Education on Five Continents in 1997 in Calcutta, one participant from the global south insisted that the consultation should determine the central “doctrines” of the Anabaptists, which could then be taught in all our theological training programs. A move in that direction is the statement of “shared convictions” presented for discussion to MWC member churches by the General Council in Zimbabwe. As important as this process is, it has not made specific space for the different histories and processes of coming into the Mennonite and Brethren in Christ community that have shaped the nearly 100 member churches of MWC.

In a study of how biblical texts serve as sources for character formation, Lisa Sowle Cahill describes a tension which pushes us a step further in understanding how our particular and universal identities might both be honored in our community. She criticizes biblical scholars for the perpetual lifting out of the diversity of voices within the biblical record, and agrees with Carol Newsom that Christians must agree on a “‘single, fairly coherent story’ of Jesus as the Christ” as central to our identity. Commitment to diversity alone, she argues, is of little use in ethical discussion, for it makes possible the argument that any behavior might be acceptable under particular circumstances.³⁸ Agreeing with Cahill, John Howard Yoder goes so far as to pronounce pluralism as “lazy.” Pluralism, or Cahill’s diversity, he suggests, would

defend the Crusades by seeing them in light of Bernard of Clairvaux's deep piety. In contrast, the NT perspective of diversity is that of "several members of one body, several functions with the same purpose, numerous people doing different things but each in unity with the others. Accountability and commitment to truth are important aspects of the church's unity in diversity."³⁹

Despite his sharp critique of pluralism, Yoder does not propose a simplistic universal agreement among the churches. Although he seems surprisingly unaware, even in 1990, of the growing international reality of and diversity among Anabaptist-related groups, his work on ecumenicity speaks to related issues. Drawing on the definition of catholicity of fifth-century Vincent of Lérins, he argues for catholicity as "what has been believed everywhere, always, by everyone." He argues that the only way to apply this definition is to look at specific places and times, that is, "locally." Veteran missionary to India Stephen Neill defined this local-based vision as representing an area "small enough that one can get to open fields by walking twenty minutes." Yoder adds to this geographic proposal a practical ecclesiological criterion: locality requires that what the church is supposed to be like must be possible. So, if the Eucharist is a regular part of church life, then those who can offer Eucharist regularly need to be readily present. "Catholicity has . . . been 'located' in that no one place, not Rome or Canterbury or Rhodes (nor, we might add, Kitchener-Waterloo, or Elkhart, or Strasbourg) is privileged; such conversation must take place everywhere."⁴⁰ Yoder's articulation does not go far enough, for it does not deal with the question that arises within a global fellowship. If the church must make possible what it proposes as authentic, and if mutual accountability is to be taken seriously, then members of a community need to be able to talk with each other. The givens which must be opened up for scrutiny are those which assume the impracticality of Elkhart talking to Kinshasa, for example, or even more critically for Djakarta to talk to Sapporo.

Yoder does locate the particularity in the particularity of the witness that is normative for the church, the New Testament writings.⁴¹ He does not naïvely insist that the normative witness look alike in all its genres. Rather, his work supports the reflection of others that even in the normative biblical witness, the particular people of God were always negotiating their identity in relationship to the broader forces around them. Walter Brueggemann makes this case for the prophetic witness of ancient Israel. The prophets recognized

that “the pressure of a ‘universal identity’ is always a threat to a particular identity; assimilation is ever a clear and present danger.” Yet they constantly interacted with the very identity they perceived as a threat. So “Hosea seems to mount a polemic against ‘fertility religion,’ but does so by a Yahwistic appeal to the modes and images of fertility.”⁴² Paul’s use of both rabbinic argumentation and Greco-Roman rhetoric in constructing his argument for Gentile inclusion in Galatians offers a NT example of the same negotiation at work. Indeed, the matter of NT normativity is itself caught up in the reality that it is impossible to determine exactly when the NT period was over.

Thus, the story of Jesus and his first followers, as it grows into the story of the spread of the world Christian movement, is one of continuing negotiation between the universality of God’s call and the particular places and times where that call was answered, as has been documented in our discussion of the “third race” conversation above. Rebecca Lyman describes the work of Justin Martyr in the second century against “heretics” as representing a similar negotiation. Justin’s efforts to articulate Christian thinking in philosophical terms “is not a transformation of ‘Hellenism’ by ‘Christianity’ or a cultural takeover by an external ‘third race,’ but a reconfiguring within the religious culture itself as a means of understanding ontological universality and multiple cultural identities.”⁴³

Dale Irvin and Scott Sunquist’s effort to present the geographical and theological diversity of the Christian movement is replete with illustrations of the perpetual Christian experience of defining ourselves to each other and in relationship to the contexts in which we find ourselves as both similar and as different. M. J. Heisey insists that this process has continued throughout the story of modern descendants of the Anabaptists. Her study of the Brethren in Christ peace witness in the United States and Canada in the period between World War I and World War II notes the BIC effort to define themselves while participating in and being influenced by many cross-currents. Quoting Martin Marty, she refers to their identity as full of “cross clefts and crisscrossing.” Building on the stories of many who participated in this body of peace practices, she describes the quest to maintain a peace witness as “messy.” The ideals articulated by the leaders often conflicted with the realities of daily experience, yet concrete expressions of the peace witness sometimes expressed the gospel more faithfully than the leaders’ pronouncements.⁴⁴

It may seem that historians are addicted to the messiness that theologians are determined to correct. Here I find helpful the intersection of the articulations of Yoder as theologian and Gonzalez as historian. While Gonzalez's discussion of catholicity seems largely focused on doctrinal matters, perhaps understandable for one whose career has been marked by reflections on the history of Christian thought, at one point he names "North Atlantic sectarianism" and "socioeconomic sectarianism" as problems of practice that threaten to overcome the Christian community, threats that are not foreign to a global Mennonite and Brethren in Christ community.⁴⁵ Yoder, as a theologian, also insists on geographical and practical realities of catholicity:

Catholicity is not 'looking for a home' in the sense of a vagabond who 'once lodged will no longer roam'; it is a lived reality that will have its place or 'location' wherever all comers participate, in the power of the Triune God, in proclaiming to all nations (beginning where they are) all that Jesus taught. Only if the avowed agenda is that broad and that open can we claim the promises of the Lord who pledged that he would accompany us to the end of the age.⁴⁶

Mennonite World Conference has operated with a membership application procedure that has been criticized as "loose," yet it has been able to respect the particularities among us. It is true that some member groups reflect very little practice or teaching that Northerners would find recognizably "Mennonite" or "Brethren in Christ." Yet the membership process begins with a group that expresses an interest, even a choice, to belong. In the first stage of the process, the applying group receives a short questionnaire that includes the following questions: "What are your reasons to consider yourselves Mennonite?" and "What are your relationships to other Mennonite groups in the world?" After a visit from MWC representatives, a report is made to delegates from member churches in the continent of the applicant church. Upon the recommendation of those continental caucuses, the church is admitted to membership. The document outlining this procedure stresses that the main objective of the procedure is for both the applicant church and MWC, especially in the continent where deeper relationships between churches might practically be developed, "to learn to know each other more fully."⁴⁷

The statement of "Shared Convictions" adopted for study by the General Council of MWC during Assembly 14 seeks to provide material that

can deepen applicant churches' understanding of the question, "What are your reasons to consider yourselves Mennonite?" Beginning with a statement of the importance of a catholicity which goes far beyond our own family, it claims that we are "part of the one body of Christ at all times and places." The document then proceeds to name both what we share with other Christians and what we consider distinctive to our particular faith story: the church as a community "following Christ in life," the interpretation of Scripture in the community "under Holy Spirit guidance" and "in the light of Jesus Christ," "becoming peacemakers who renounce violence, love our enemies, seek justice and share our possessions with those in need," and "the spirit of mutual accountability" in the faith community.⁴⁸

These "Shared Convictions," it is hoped, will prove helpful as they are used for the conversation and relationship outlined by the membership application guidelines. We still face the process of going beyond adopting these convictions for study to choosing them as central to our identity. It is not clear what currents of experience, history, or relationship to other parts of the church will come to bear on our efforts to provide this degree of self-definition. It can be hoped that we can agree on something manageable in translation, and at the same time clear and allowing room for member groups to use it in more particular self-definition within their specific locations.

Northern Anabaptists in the twentieth-century "rediscovery" of our sixteenth-century European heritage have at times chosen to describe ourselves as a "third way," "neither Catholic nor Protestant" reality.⁴⁹ This naming brings to mind the early Christian exercise of the language of the "third race." While this construction may have been valuable in considering relationships to our European and North American ecclesiastical history, it is not likely to be useful for the global community of Mennonites and Brethren in Christ in the twenty-first century. Some might propose an alternative, "neither Evangelical nor Pentecostal," but the reality is that in many places our sister churches fit one of those identities as much if not more than they do any traditional Anabaptist self-understanding. So it seems critical that rather than trying to find a new universal name for ourselves, we accept the particularities that we represent and learn to find in them gifts that we offer to each other. We follow our Anabaptist heritage in choosing to belong to one another as we follow Christ. Our particularities – the witness for justice of the church in

Colombia, the energetic evangelism of the church in Ethiopia, the openness to new learning of the church in the Netherlands, the creative worship of the church in the Congo, the service to the poor of voluntary service workers in Canada and the United States, and the practice of smallness as sign of the church in Japan – all of these have something to add to our community of faith.

We cannot be like each other in most ways. We can choose to walk together, to support each other financially, in prayer, and through meetings when it is possible for us to gather. We may not be in a position to measure the results of our becoming a global community within this collection of Anabaptist identities. Yet we carry within us the hope that our catholic witness will offer an invitation within the broader church and in the world to join those who, following Christ in life, are leaning into the coming fullness of God's reign.

Notes

¹ The discussion about whether and how the term “Anabaptist” is appropriate for (at least) the community of churches within the Mennonite World Conference (MWC) framework is a relevant one, but not one that will be pursued in depth here. See C. Norman Kraus, “Anabaptist or Mennonite?” in this issue of *The Conrad Grebel Review*.

² This universal vision can be seen in Paul's writings, in particular in his emphasis on the “all” in Romans. See Rom. 1.5, 2.16, 3.23, 4.16, 5.12, 8.14, 11.32, 14.10, 15.33. Paul is criticized by Daniel Boyarin for articulating and promoting a vision that destroyed the particular calling of first-century Jesus-believing Jews. See *A Radical Jew: Paul and the Politics of Identity* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1994).

³ For Homi Bhabha, nation is an ongoing process of what emerges in the tension between the “pedagogical,” or the expression of the idea or the image of what the nation is, and the “performative,” the reality of the way different individuals and groups live out their lives within and at the margins of that idea. It is within this tension that “people” emerge as “a problem of knowledge.” For “people represent the cutting edge between the totalizing powers of the social and the forces that signify the more specific address to contentious, unequal interests and identities within the population.” See Homi K. Bhabha, “Introduction: Narrating the Nation,” in *Nation and Narration*, ed. Homi K. Bhabha (London and New York: Routledge, 1990), 1-7; “DissemiNation,” in *Nation and Narration*, 297.

⁴ See Nancy R. Heisey, “Anabaptist Identity and Faithful Diversity,” *Brethren in Christ History and Life* (August 2003): 92-108.

⁵ Dale T. Irvin and Scott W. Sunquist, *History of the World Christian Movement*, Vol. 1 (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2001), 182; W. H. C. Frend, *The Rise of Christianity*, 636-37.

⁶ John Howard Yoder, “The Disavowal of Constantine: An Alternative Perspective on Interfaith Dialogue,” in *The Royal Priesthood: Essays Ecclesiological and Ecumenical*, ed. Michael G. Cartwright (Scottsdale, PA, and Waterloo, ON: Herald Press, 1998), 247.

⁷ Walter Sawatsky, “Taking Church History Seriously When Weighted Down by Yoder’s Dismissal of Constantinianism,” paper delivered at the Believers Church Conference, University of Notre Dame, March 8, 2002.

⁸ Yoder, “The Otherness of the Church,” in Cartwright, *The Royal Priesthood*, 56-57.

⁹ Yoder, “Christ, the Hope of the World,” in Cartwright, *The Royal Priesthood*, 197.

¹⁰ See Justo Gonzalez, *The Changing Shape of Church History* (St. Louis, MO: Chalice Press, 2002), 35-40, and chapter 5, “Mapping a New Catholicity,” for a discussion of reasons that considerations from the second and third centuries are useful to Christians reflecting on the issues they face in the twenty-first century. See a similar move by Alan Kreider, relating early Christian thinking about conversion to contemporary missiological issues, in *The Change of Conversion and the Origin of Christendom* (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 1999), xvi-xvii.

¹¹ *Epistle to Diognetus* 1.

¹² *Ibid.* 4.6, 5.1.

¹³ *Ibid.* 7.3, 7.7.

¹⁴ *Ibid.* 8, 10.7.

¹⁵ Aristides, *Apology* 2.

¹⁶ *Ibid.* 3-14.

¹⁷ *Ibid.* 15-16.

¹⁸ *Epistle of Barnabas* 5.7, 7.5.

¹⁹ *Ibid.* 9-10.

²⁰ *Sibylline Oracles*, 1.345-7, 383.

²¹ Kwame Bediako, *Theology and Identity: The Impact of Culture upon Christian Thought in the Second Century and in Modern Africa* (Oxford: Regnum Books, 1992), 39. (Migne, PL 4.930 D-968 A)

²² Clement’s use of this term in conjunction with the phrase “new name” seems to link it to Is 65.15 (LXX) rather than the more obvious connections to the “one new humanity” of Eph 2.15.

²³ Clement, *Instructor* 1.5.19-20.

²⁴ *Ibid.* 1.7.57, 59.

²⁵ Clement, *Miscellanies* 5.4, 5.7-8, 5.14.

²⁶ Tertullian, *On the Scorpion’s Sting* 10.

²⁷ *Against Celsus* 2.30.

²⁸ *Ibid.* 8.2, 43, 72.

²⁹ For a discussion of Lactantius and early Christian pacifism, see Alexander F. C. Webster, *The Pacifist Option: The Moral Argument Against War in Eastern Orthodox Theology* (Bethesda, MD: International Scholars Publications, 1998), 156-59.

³⁰ Irvin and Sunquist, *History of the World Christian Movement*, Vol. 1, 106.

³¹ Ignatius, *To the Smyrnians* 8.2.

³² Justo L. Gonzalez, *Out of Every Tribe and Nation; Christian Theology at the Ethnic Roundtable* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1992), 20-21.

³³ Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* 3.11.8-9.

³⁴ Gonzalez, *Out of Every Tribe*, 19-22, 122, n. 8.

³⁵ Justo L. Gonzalez, *The Changing Shape of Church History* (St. Louis, MO: Chalice Press), 71.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 71, 73-74.

³⁷ Donald F. Durnbaugh, *The Believers' Church: The History and Character of Radical Protestantism*, reprint ed. (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1985); J. Denny Weaver, *Becoming Anabaptist: The Origins and Significance of Sixteenth-Century Anabaptism* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1986); C. Arnold Snyder, *From Anabaptist Seed: The Historical Core of Anabaptist-Related Identity* (Kitchener, ON: Pandora Press, 1999).

³⁸ Lisa Sowle Cahill, "Christian Character, Biblical Community, and Human Values," in William P. Brown, ed. *Character and Scripture: Moral Formation, Community, and Biblical Interpretation* (Grand Rapids, MI/Cambridge, UK: Eerdmans, 2002), 10-13.

³⁹ Yoder, "The Imperative of Christian Unity," in Cartwright, *The Royal Priesthood*, 292-93.

⁴⁰ John Howard Yoder, "Catholicity in Search of Location," in Cartwright, ed., *The Royal Priesthood*, 301-20.

⁴¹ See, above, the first point in the witness against Constantinianism. See also Yoder, "Why Ecclesiology is Social Ethics," in Cartwright, ed., *The Royal Priesthood*, 110, 115.

⁴² Walter Brueggemann, "Ecumenism as the Shared Practice of a Peculiar Identity," in Brown, ed., *Character and Scripture*, 231-47.

⁴³ Rebecca Lyman, "Hellenism and Heresy," *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 11 (Summer 2003), 220.

⁴⁴ M. J. Heisey, *Peace and Persistence: Tracing the Brethren in Christ Peace Witness through Three Generations* (Kent, OH, and London, UK: The Kent State University Press, 2003), 21-23.

⁴⁵ Gonzalez, *The Changing Shape*, 75.

⁴⁶ Yoder, "Catholicity in Search of Location," in Cartwright, ed., *The Royal Priesthood*, 320.

⁴⁷ "Membership Application Procedure," unpublished MWC document (Heisey files).

⁴⁸ "What does it mean to be Anabaptist?" *Courier* (Quarters 3 & 4), 24.

Shared Convictions

In Bulawayo, the MWC General Council approved the following statement for study and reflection, based on statements of core convictions it had received from 19 of its member churches. MWC's General Council is requesting responses to the "Shared Convictions" statement from member and associate member churches after study in the next three years. This statement is to be reviewed at the Council's next meeting in 2006.

By the grace of God, we seek to live and proclaim the good news of reconciliation in Jesus Christ. As part of the one body of Christ at all times and places, we hold the following to be central to our belief and practice:

1. God is known to us as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, the Creator who seeks to restore fallen humanity by calling a people to be faithful in fellowship, worship, service and witness.
2. Jesus is the Son of God who showed in his life and teaching how to be faithful, and through his cross and resurrection redeemed the world.
3. The church is a community of those whom God's Spirit calls to turn from sin, acknowledge Jesus Christ as Lord, receive baptism upon confession of faith and follow Christ in life.
4. The faith community, under Holy Spirit guidance, interprets the Bible in the light of Jesus Christ to discern God's will for our obedience.
5. The Spirit of Jesus empowers us to trust God in all areas of life so we become peacemakers who renounce violence, love our enemies, seek justice and share our possessions with those in need.

[Cont'd]

6. The faith community gathers regularly to worship, to celebrate the Lord's Supper and to hear the Word of God in a spirit of mutual accountability.

7. We seek to live in the world without conforming to the powers of evil, witnessing to God's grace by serving others, caring for creation and inviting all people to know Jesus as Savior and Lord.

In these convictions, we draw inspiration from Anabaptist forebears of the 16th century, who modeled radical discipleship to Jesus Christ. Walking in his name, by the power of the Holy Spirit, we confidently await Christ's return and the final fulfillment of God's kingdom.

BECHTEL LECTURE TWO

Martyrdom as Metaphor: Aspects of Global Anabaptist Witness

Nancy R. Heisey

Introduction

Since my childhood when I was told stories about the suffering of Christians in Communist countries, the discourse of martyrdom has been part of my understanding of the Christian community. I did not grow up with the *Martyrs Mirror* on the family bookshelf, as have many Mennonites of my and earlier generations, but it was not long after I began to know Mennonite friends and colleagues that I learned about this work's importance to them and their sense of identity. My eventual study of sixteenth-century Anabaptism, limited though it was, was built on documentation in the *Martyrs Mirror*.¹ Occasionally in recent times, the martyr discourse in our circles has been raised with new urgency, as in James Brenneman's 1996 article in the *Gospel Herald*, whose subtitle proclaimed, "Against every law of North American advertising, martyrdom has always been the most effective propaganda for biblically focused church growth."² Stanley Hauerwas, reflecting on the fiftieth anniversary of the publication of Harold S. Bender's "Anabaptist Vision," described the Mennonite/Brethren in Christ/Anabaptist heritage within the tradition of "a free church (which) is one with the strength to narrate its life, and in particular the life of the martyrs, on its own terms." He urged contemporary Mennonites to "remember our story for faithful living" by returning to the *Martyrs Mirror*, and concluded "we will not know how to tell our story well unless we are able to know what martyrdom even today might look like."³

I must confess that I write and think as a citizen of the United States. I recognize that I have not taken adequate account of relevant Canadian discourse. Nor have I done the work that would be required even to become familiar with Canadian discussions on the churches' witness in the world. However, one important impetus for the comments I will make grows out of the analysis by [Canadian theologian] Douglas John Hall in Walter Brueggemann's collection *Hope for the World: Mission in a Global Context*.⁴ In defending his use of the term "despair" to describe the

contemporary condition, Hall differentiates between overt despair of those facing life's hardest realities, whether war, poverty, or illness, and "covert" despair, which is "able to masquerade under a guise of well-being so persuasive as to deceive the wearers of the masks themselves." He suggests that the response of Northern Christians to conflicts in our own midst as well as our responses to realities elsewhere reflect this covert despair. Indeed, overt and covert despair are intimately related, because the possessing people living at the center of empire do so at the expense of the poor people in our own midst and in the global South.⁵

Hall moves from this assessment to call Christians to a witness of hope: "The only fundamental reason for articulating Christian mission as hope in action is that we discern in our field of mission – today's global society – a pervasive loss, diminution, or distortion of hope."⁶ If Hall's assessment of northern Christianity is at all accurate, then Northern Mennonites and Brethren in Christ, if we want to become more intimately a part of the witness of our global faith community, must reevaluate the forms of our testimony to Jesus Christ.

The question of this paper is whether the martyr heritage of the Christian faith, as well as our own martyr tradition, might lead us toward some new ways to reflect on building and sharing Christian hope. I use the term "martyr" in a broad sense, including the witness of the sacrifice of one's life, but also assuming that "what mattered was that a man or woman had testified, with the parable of his or her entire life, great faithfulness to the Gospel."⁷ I use the term "metaphor" well aware of the impossibly long and ancient philosophical conversation surrounding its meaning. In this paper "metaphor" reflects the reflections of Nicholas Lash, who connects faithful witness to the story-telling, autobiographical dimension of Christian faith.⁸

Reflections from Third-century Christians

To provide perspective for reflections on the twenty-first century context, I will first consider the early Christian reflection on witness. To do so, I will compare Clement's, Tertullian's, and Origen's writings on martyrdom. These writings present different perspectives from those of the martyr *acta*, which are more often studied by those seeking an understanding of early Christian martyrdom. (The *acta* are also more similar to *Martyrs Mirror* accounts). The writings of Clement, Tertullian, and Origen reflect less the phenomenology

of these acts of witness with their exhortational approach, but more a less pressured and more theological reflection on the foundations and motivations for martyrdom. Those of us in Canadian and U.S. settings, who have the luxury of thinking about faithful witness where resulting confrontation and threat are not as immediate, might find resonances in the writings of these three theologians. I will show that the foundation for the willingness to accept the heaviest demands of witness lay, for these writers, in the prior disciplined life they advocated for Christians. Further, one Christian perspective that emerged in the third century placed martyrdom in a context of the sharing of love rather than of the search for reward, the more typical understandings articulated by Christians and pagans alike about special deaths in the ancient world. While this understanding of the love motivation was apparently a minority understanding among Christians, I will suggest that it speaks forcefully to our own situations. Questions raised by this exploration will then lead to a revisiting of the metaphor of martyrdom for Mennonites and Brethren in Christ who desire to faithfully witness to the gospel in the twenty-first century.

Tertullian, Clement, and Origen were contemporaries in Egypt and North Africa early in the third century.⁹ Clement and Origen both spent a considerable part of their lives in Egypt, while Tertullian lived in Roman Africa. Clement and Origen are connected, in the traditional understanding, as teacher and student in the Catechetical School in Alexandria. Whatever the details of their actual relationship, they shared the rich biblical hermeneutical tradition of Alexandria, as well as the desire to articulate their Christian faith in terms that would communicate in the philosophical milieu in which they studied and taught. It is not evident that the Alexandrians were familiar with Tertullian's work, but all of their writings indicated that they were concerned over the Christian theological articulations made by earlier Egyptian Christian teachers, known as "Gnostics." The writings of all three men reflected their concerns that those teachers sought to soften the call for a visible Christians witness in contexts of persecution.

Tertullian, Clement, and Origen each wrote about Christian witness, using the Greek term which we have come to understand as describing a witness of blood, *martyria*. How their own lives intersected with their reflections on witness may be significant, but I do not suggest that though none of the three apparently died as martyrs detracts from their writings on

the nature of Christian witness. Clement and Origen both experienced the Severan persecution in Alexandria at the beginning of the third century. This was the time that Clement apparently left the Egyptian city, and later letters referring to him offer no mention of anything other than a natural death. Origen was himself more directly affected, since it was during this persecution, while he was still a teenager, that his Roman convert father was executed.¹⁰ Origen himself died as a result of imprisonment and torture during the later Decian persecution. Tertullian, according to tradition, lived to a very old age, and died a natural death. Several of Tertullian's indirect comments suggest that he was converted by witnessing the courage of martyrs,¹¹ and his name has often been associated with the completion and editing of the famous martyr account of the African matron Perpetua and her slave Felicitas. However, his most direct reference to martyrs was in his account of an otherwise unknown Rutilius, whose martyrdom Tertullian interpreted as punishment for that Christian's flight during an earlier period of persecution.¹²

Histories of the early Christian period commonly suggest that the ascetic choices expressed in emerging monasticism responded to the end of persecution against Christians and evinced the desire for an alternative expression of deepest Christian faithfulness.¹³ The work of the three theologians considered here, however, suggests instead that ascetic disciplines laid the foundation for the commitment to martyrdom itself. The titles of Tertullian's writings emphasize the importance he attached to various disciplines for Christians, albeit often disciplines appropriate for women: *On the Apparel of Women*, *On the Veiling of Virgins*, *On Exhortation to Chastity*, *On Monogamy*, *On Modesty*, and *On Fasting*. Tertullian's image of the discipline required of the martyr at times came from military imagery and dwelt on the training necessary for battle. In his *Apology* he noted that some pagans criticized the complaints of Christians about their persecution, responding that Christians were like soldiers who objected to being called into battle, but after they were engaged fought with all their strength.¹⁴ Elsewhere he compares the prison of the martyr with the desert of the prophet, and describes the preparation for martyrdom as that of a soldier, in training under the Holy Ghost.¹⁵ Tertullian also emphasized the importance of ascetic disciplines for their own sake, or as prior to any challenge of persecution. The widow, the virgin, and eunuch, for example, were sustained by the patience that would

also be necessary for one resisting the temptation to flee persecution.¹⁶ Further, Tertullian clearly linked readiness for martyrdom with preparation in ascetic practices, when he criticized those Christians in prison who requested fellow Christians to bring them food: “A well-fattened Christian will perhaps be more necessary for bears and lions than for God”¹⁷

Clement likewise surrounded his reflections on martyrdom with comments on the importance of disciplines in life, although his perspective was less earthy than Tertullian’s. For him practical ascetic disciplines demonstrated philosophical or spiritual behavior. Clement, however, did not limit his admiration for such choices to Christians, frequently citing examples from contemporary pagan writings of bravery in the face of torture. The point was the importance of discipline: “So the Church is full of those, as well chaste women as men, who have all their life contemplated the death which rouses up to Christ.” This vision of the highest of human behaviors was remarkably inclusive, possible for both the educated and uneducated, and for Greeks, barbarians, slaves, men, women, and children. “For self-control is common to all human beings who have made choice of it. And we admit that the same nature exists in every race, and the same virtue.”¹⁸

Known for his ascetic practices, Origen lived on less than the minimum wage, fasted, allowed only a few hours for sleep, owned only one coat, and went barefoot. The extent of his discipline has been part of his notoriety, reflected by his self-castration, in a rigidly literal reading of Jesus’ comment about those who become eunuchs for the sake of the kingdom of heaven. According to his admiring biographer Eusebius, Origen’s ascetic practices were based in his reading of the New Testament, in contrast to both Clement and Tertullian, who seemed to draw strongly on pagan examples to make their case.¹⁹ Although his *Exhortation to Martyrdom* was less overt in laying an ascetic foundation for the ultimate witness of Christians, he emphasized the athletic nature of the martyr experience. His introduction called for the acceptance of tribulation “like a noble athlete,” and his retelling of the story of the martyrdom of the seven Hebrew brothers from 2 Maccabees described the oldest brother as an “athlete of piety.”²⁰

Nevertheless, in the personal comments he addressed to his patron Ambrose, whose fear in the face of the threat of martyrdom led to Origen’s writing, Origen emphasized the value as well as the difficulty of self-denial

for a wealthy and prominent citizen of Alexandria. “We have to strive not merely against denial (of Christ) but also lest we feel any shame when the enemies of God suppose that we are suffering shameful indignities. This is particularly applicable to you, holy Ambrose. Honoured and respected by a vast number of cities, you are now, so to speak, walking in the procession bearing the cross of Jesus and following him who leads you before governors and kings. . . .”²¹ All three third-century theologians, then, offer support for the contemporary argument that “the ascetic response (was) fundamental in earliest Christianity.”²²

If ascetic disciplines built a foundation upon which, if necessary, the most demanding forms of witness could be offered, a related issue is how early Christian thinkers understood the motivation for martyrdom. Here it is helpful to consider the work of several contemporary writers on the development of martyrological discourse during the early Christian period. From earlier times in the literatures of the Mediterranean world, the idea of special deaths, marked by particular honor, bravery, or righteousness, had been part of ancient thought. The death of Socrates was the most prominent example.²³ W. H. C. Frend, who extensively researched early Christian martyrdom, understood its roots as lying within Jewish tradition, beginning with stories such as the resistance of the Jewish young men in the furnace of Nebuchadnezzar.²⁴ Glen Bowersock, in contrast, argues that Christian martyr ideals came from the tradition of Roman deaths of honor, characterized by “a conceptual system of posthumous recognition and reward.”²⁵ Carole Straw likewise points to the appropriation by Christians of pagan models of honor and special death. She further agrees with Bowersock that Christians and pagans both viewed “special” deaths as a reciprocal process that offered “mutual gain by expenditure.”²⁶

Daniel Boyarin uses these perspectives as background to his argument that in the third century, in the not yet sharply delineated border territory between Christians and Jews, a new understanding of martyrdom’s primary motivation was emerging. Pointing to the accounts of the Maccabean martyrs in 2 and 4 Maccabees as a portrait of “the oldest, most clearly pre-Christian element of martyrology” – the idea of a reward after death, Boyarin articulates a new Jewish-Christian understanding that was beginning to emerge:

In late antiquity, for the first time the death of the martyr was conceived of as the fulfilling of a religious mandate per se, and not just the manifestation of a preference “for violent death” over “compliance with a decree.” For Christians, beginning with Ignatius, it was a central aspect of the experience of the Imitation of Christ. For Jews, it was a fulfillment of the commandment to “love the Lord with all one’s soul.”²⁷

Boyarin offers an extended analysis of the martyrology of Rabbi Akiva, an account of a first-century event which he argues was re-articulated in third-century rabbinic discussions. These discussions claim that Rabbi Akiva, in his death “loved (God) much more than the former saints.” For Boyarin, this judgment grew out of the emerging understanding that martyrdom was literally dying for love of God.²⁸

Tertullian, Clement, and Origen were clearly on the Christian side of the “fuzzy” border Boyarin describes. Nevertheless, their writings speak to the same debate over motivation for martyrdom articulated in Boyarin’s work. Tertullian’s understandings are more in keeping with the earlier ancient perspectives; indeed, Tertullian argued not that martyrdom was to be accepted in hopes of a posthumous reward but that it was primarily repayment of a debt to God. In commenting on whether a Christian could pay the authorities to be released from the requirements of the emperor cult, Tertullian insisted instead that the Christian, based on Jesus’ teaching about rendering to God and Caesar what is the due of each, owed God “the blood which his own Son shed for me.”²⁹ Among his strongest statements about the motivation for martyrdom were those made in his debate with the Gnostic Valentinus, whom he accused of building a case that would free Christians from the necessity of taking an open stand if it would mean their death. Valentinus, it seems, suggested that requiring Christian confession in the face of martyrdom would imply that God was “thirsting for blood.” Tertullian insisted that such an understanding of God does shape Christian behavior:

The world has held it lawful for Diana of the Scythians, or Mercury of the Gauls, or Saturn of the Africans, to be appeased by human sacrifices; and in Latium to this day human blood is drunk by Jupiter, and no one expresses reluctance If our God, too, had

required martyrdoms for himself, to have a sacrifice of his own, who would have reproached him of (creating) a deadly religion?³⁰

Origen's *Exhortation to Martyrdom* sounded a note that, while less strongly stated than Tertullian, shared some of his perspectives. A major section of the *Exhortation* was given to retelling the story from 2 Maccabees of the martyrdom of Eleazar and of the seven brothers, including its insistence that their deaths were "paying the penalty for (their) sins, and (they) are enduring these sufferings willingly, in order that by them (the Jewish people) may be purified."³¹ Later he argued that martyrdom was the way to obtain forgiveness for sins committed after baptism.³² Woven throughout the text were additional references to a witnessing death as a basis for rewards in the afterlife. These claims, to be sure, are founded in biblical references from which Origen draws. For example, he noted statements of Jesus (Matt. 5:10-12) and Paul (Rom. 8:18) regarding suffering and persecution as ways to, as Origen put it, "buy our salvation."³³ Drawing on the description in 2 Corinthians of Paul's sufferings, Origen urged Ambrose to "commend ourselves 'by scourgings, by imprisonments, by riots, by labors, by watchings, and by fastings.' For behold the Lord is here with his reward in his hand to render to each one according to his works" (Isa. 40:10, 62:11, Ps. 60:12, Rev. 2:23, 22:12).³⁴

However, Origen's *Exhortation*, a document roughly contemporary with the Akiva martyrology, also opened a window toward the idea that the motivation of love for God could sustain the martyrs' hope. He recalled the same Deuteronomy 6 text, on love for God with all the soul, that Boyarin claims shaped the emerging Jewish perspective on martyrdom.³⁵ In the midst of the recital of the Maccabean martyrs, Origen described the third brother as "trampling upon" his sufferings "for his love to God," an interesting addition to the Maccabean account which simply states that "he regarded his sufferings as nothing" (2 Macc. 7:12).³⁶ Origen advocated the imitation of Christ in martyrdom, and, with a quotation from Romans 5, tied this to the hope which grows out of martyr love for God.³⁷ Most strikingly, he reflected on the Song of Songs, repeating the call of the lover to "Arise, [to] come my friend, my lovely, my dove" after the "winter" of persecution is past.³⁸

While Origen was thus poised in the border territory between older views of martyrdom as offering a reward for the faithful and the emerging perspective of martyrdom out of love for God, Clement had already articulated

a foundation for the martyrs' suffering firmly rooted in the love motivation, albeit shaped with a Platonic understanding of love as beyond the passions.³⁹ His most extensive comments are found in Book 4 of the *Miscellanies*, where he began his praise of martyrdom by challenging the reward understanding: "(N)or does (the martyr) sell his faith in the hope of the gifts prepared, but in love to the Lord he will most gladly depart from this life." Further in this same chapter, Clement insisted: "We call martyrdom perfection, not because the (person) comes to the end of his life as others, but because he has exhibited the perfect work of love."⁴⁰

In this same section Clement provided extended comments on the Beatitudes, beginning with Jesus' words: "Blessed are they that are persecuted for righteousness' sake." He underlined that these words have both spiritual and "sensory" meanings, an interesting admission for one so devoted to describing the life of the "gnostic" Christian. All of the conditions described in the Beatitudes grew out of the love of righteousness that led to persecution, including poverty "whether 'in spirit' or in circumstances." Clement's final Beatitude was "Blessed are the peacemakers." Peacemakers subdued "the menaces of anger, and the baits of lust" (notice the ascetic thread woven through this statement) and continue to understand "Providence as good." Concluding this section, Clement returned to the blessing on the persecuted: "It is the sum of all virtue, in my opinion, when the Lord teaches us that for love to God we must as gnostics despise death."⁴¹

He then quoted Paul's claim in Romans 8 that "all things work together for good to them that love God," adding, "You see that martyrdom for love's sake is taught." After proceeding through a lengthy refutation of the views of the Gnostics Valentinus, Heracleon, and Basilides, Clement returned to the Sermon on the Mount and its command of love for enemies. This command was part of the Christian's call to "emulate (Jesus') deeds in this earthly life," a claim which again reminded him of Paul's words that nothing "shall be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord."⁴² Finally, Clement listed a string of other scriptures that spoke of the martyrs' reality, including the Johannine command to love in word and deed (1 John 3:18-19), the claim that no fear is present in love (4:16-18), and the command to love God by keeping his commandments (5:3).

This reading of the three theologians has stressed first the understanding that ascetic practices, based on readings of the NT, were assumed to stand behind and sustain Christians facing persecution and martyrdom.⁴³ It has also suggested that, while not widespread among Christians, Clement's thinking joined with that of developing Jewish reflection to assert that a witness even to the point of death could be built on love for God more than in the search to appease God's anger or to obtain a reward after death. This study will not pursue such observations and questions into the martyr literature of the sixteenth century, but it will assume that such early Christian reflections have value for contemporary reflection⁴⁴ and that they lead us to the following questions: If "martyrdom," or sacrificial witness, "for love's sake is taught," what is that kind of love? How might we become caught up in such love, on behalf of a hopeful witness to the gospel in a world of despair?

Martyrdom, Love, and Hope

In a recent collection of articles in the Catholic journal *Concilium*, Teresa Okure, Jon Sobrino, and Felix Wilfred encourage Christians to "rethink" martyrdom in the twenty-first century. Building on the example of violent deaths such as those of Archbishop Oscar Romero, the six Jesuits and two women in their household killed in El Salvador, and Bishop Gerardi after the release of the document "Guatemala Never Again!", this collection declares that these martyrs are a witness to the gospel because of their defense of the victims of violence and injustice. "They show no trace of 'sacrificialism', or of fanaticism, or even of any directly mystical intention of identifying themselves with the Crucified One. At the heart of their actions is a love of the poor like that shown by Jesus"⁴⁵

The way martyrdom for love's sake is linked to the life and death of Jesus is explored further by José Ignacio González Faus. He describes a Roman Catholic tradition emerging in the eighteenth century of insisting that, in order to be a martyr, one had to have experienced *odium fidei*, or hatred of the faith. However, he points out that some Roman Catholic thinkers, both medieval and modern, have continued to underline the link of martyrdom not to the martyr's experience of being hated but to the martyr's experience of loving. For Thomas Aquinas, the martyr was a "witness to the perfection of love."⁴⁶ The documents of Vatican II insist that "martyrdom in the church

has to be assimilated to the martyrdom of Jesus,” and therefore “martyrdom is a gift: ‘an exceptional gift,’” and “martyrdom is, above all, a proof of love.” From a contemporary perspective, then, Christians in comfortable settings should express such love at the very least by being “uncomfortable” with the suffering of sisters and brothers around the world, if not experiencing suffering ourselves.⁴⁷

Such observations concerning the connection of discomfort and love need further exploration, however. I suggest the connection can be made by taking on practices or disciplines that remind us of the family we are part of. As Hauerwas insists, he wants “to be part of a community with the habits and practices that will make me do what I would otherwise not choose to do and to learn to like what I have been forced to do.”⁴⁸ Recent efforts in the churches of the global North to develop practices of spiritual discipline have been bolstered by a call for the importance of “self care.” I do not wish entirely to repudiate this understanding, for when I arrive frazzled and exhausted at the end of a week of teaching, grading papers, preparing for presentations, travel to meetings, and care for family members, all at least in intent done in the name of Christ, I strongly sense a need for care of my own spirit in order to be able to continue. However, I do not think that spiritual discipline as self care alone can build in us the ability to be truly in solidarity with our global Mennonite and Brethren in Christ family of faith, not to mention the entire threatened human race. At the very least, disciplines of prayer and fasting, undertaken not individually but within the particular faith communities to which we belong, seem essential. Practices of self-denial, whether taxing the use of gasoline in recognition of how the demand for fossil fuels contributes to current global violence, or reducing food budgets by ten percent to acknowledge a connection with those who often go hungry, help us to remember to whom we belong.⁴⁹

But undertaking ascetic disciplines requires a fierce struggle for those in societies where comfort, at least for the middle and upper classes, is a primary value. That in the face of the dominant structures of the global North, we have been so unable, if not unwilling, to find disciplines that really connect us to the world of the poor is a sign of our co-option by this value. Precisely for this reason as churches we need to reconsider our understanding of love as the foundation for witness, whether through disciplines and actions on

behalf of others or in facing more extreme suffering, even death. As in Clement and the rabbis a new understanding emerged of love rather than reward as motivation for martyrdom, so we must move from Clement's view of passionless love, a concept that has strongly influenced Christian proclamation, to a new understanding of how love works in the community of believers. Most of us, I suggest, have been influenced by the idea advanced in Anders Nygren's study of *agape* and *eros*. Nygren, working from the fact that the word *eros* never appears in the New Testament, sharply contrasted it with the NT term *agape*: "'Eros is a desire of good for the self'; 'Agape is self-giving.' 'Eros is man's way to God'; 'Agape is God's way to man.' 'Eros is determined by and dependent on the quality of its object, its beauty and value'; 'Agape is sovereign and independent with regard to its object, and is poured out on the evil and the good.' The two thus represent opposing attitudes to life and to the divine."⁵⁰ While Nygren's reading is no longer accepted by most scholars as an adequate portrayal of biblical understandings of love, the currency of his articulation remains strong in contemporary discourse, indicated for example in a wedding sermon I heard on Valentine's Day.⁵¹

But it is possible to reconsider this understanding, beginning with a rearticulation of the nature of God's love. "The God of Christian revelation wills the world into being and cares enough for what he has made to redeem it when it goes astray. . . . The evidence suggests that God wants a response of love, and that in this sense – because he is love, perhaps – the response of love is something that it is appropriate for God to need," contends Gary Badcock.⁵² This passionate love is tied to God's nature as Creator, both in the cosmos and most particularly in the human being created in the image of God:

In this way, God has an other that images his own capacity to love, to adopt a course of action for the good of the other, and thus to find himself in relation to it. . . . In giving life to the other, God has clearly made himself vulnerable; he has exposed his heart of love in a way that he could not otherwise have done, in a way that is absolutely universal, and to an extent that is comparable only to the great singular act of compassion that we have before us in the cross of Jesus Christ.⁵³

It is this love that needs the other, and finds in that need the courage and the energy to work for the other's good that is also visible in human society, in the love of parents for their children in some stages of life, of children for their parents in other stages, of lovers for their beloved, and even in the sacrifice of many contemporary martyrs.⁵⁴

Perhaps our hesitation to sacrifice on behalf of our sisters and brothers around the world comes not only from the lack of knowledge of the other because of geographical and economic distance. Perhaps we are also caught up in a concept of love that assumes it must be disinterested. Here we must push farther than Clement, whose understanding of the martyr's love defined it as "passionless." But if we, like God, love out of "need" for the other, what might that look like in our global family of faith? I suggest that the emotion and delight experienced by those who attend MWC assemblies, as pictured in the reporting from Africa 2003, are an evidence of this kind of love. While our North-South sharing in such a setting has often been articulated as a "rich but spiritually poor Northern need for materially poor Southern spiritual vitality," in fact the assembly simply makes it possible for those who attend to eat together, talk together, pray hand-in-hand with one another, and plan face-to-face for further ways of common witness. The needs expressed belong to all of us, and the gifts shared in response to those needs are also able, when we are together, to come from all present. But assemblies are rare events, and only those who live close to the meeting location, or who are brave and wealthy, are able to participate. In adopting the recommendations of the International Planning Commission, the MWC General Council underlined its desire for MWC to operate as something more than an every-six-year assembly, with the vision that "Mennonite World Conference is called to be a communion (*Koinonia*) of Anabaptist-related churches linked to one another in a worldwide community of faith for fellowship, worship, service, and witness."

The natural enthusiasm for the relationships that can begin in settings such as an assembly faces many hurdles as it seeks to move in the direction of more concrete, longer-term sharing in fellowship, worship, service, and witness. Pakisa Tshimika and Tim Lind outline the impediments that challenge our global family: lack of means of communication, economic differences, lack of administrative capacity and centralization of decision-making in the churches, lack of broad vision, fear of cultural, racial, theological and other

differences, the view that some gifts are more valuable than others, and greed.⁵⁵ We cannot deny these obstacles or pass over them lightly. For those who have felt an internal impulsion to offer a gift because of deep care for the welfare of the other but have not found a way to act on that impulse, it is important to reflect on what stands in the way of the gift.

For those of us who are wealthy, at least compared to the vast majority of the world's population, one way we may be able to take steps away from the lure of greed (or the desire for comfort, which is perhaps closer to our hearts) is by coming to recognize the "'gift status' of money." We may be able to think more creatively, and with fewer worries, about the use of our money when we see it as sharing the gifts of enhancing communication of far-distant sisters and brothers, sharing educational opportunities, providing for the needs of mission and service workers who travel far from home, helping people to tell their own histories and to share them with the rest of the church, or making it possible for those without their own resources to travel to meet each other. In order for this gift understanding to take root, we must find ways to "de-individualize" our relationship with money. Individuals do indeed make choices for simplicity and generosity. But the freest, most generous, and most flexible gifts come out of a context where a community together are finding ways to share their gifts.⁵⁶

Tshimika and Lind envision a global church family made up of

. . . geographically dispersed communities, speaking different languages, worshiping with different styles, living in diverse socio-economic conditions, but sharing a common understanding of God's incarnational purpose of abundant life for all people, for the entire world. We see a church in the Philippines which, as it works toward this purpose in its local setting, calls on gifts of all kinds from sisters and brothers in Panama and in Italy. We see a Bible school in Zambia that welcomes students, teachers, and books from churches in Namibia and India and Canada . . . We see a church with many gifts, many relationships, and with one spirit, one purpose.⁵⁷

We cannot get there without sacrifice. Along the way, not only will we meet impediments but, if we become truly involved in our sisters' and brothers' realities, we may have to face the force, perhaps even the violence, of powers

that do not desire abundant life for all. The Zimbabwean Brethren in Christ Church, having graciously hosted 7,000 Mennonites and Brethren in Christ for a week in August 2003, continues to live in a situation of hunger, economic free-fall, and political intimidation. Its decision to create a special committee for peace and justice to monitor and to inform sister churches in the rest of the world of their situation represents a step of courage that might be costly. Pastors of the Mennonite churches in Vietnam have called for prayer and for information to be shared about the harassment they are experiencing as they seek to assure the right to live out their faith. Without concrete practices that allow us to sacrifice joyfully out of love, knowing more about what others are living with in Colombia, in India, in the Congo, and in rural and urban communities under stress in our own societies will only make it easier to give in to despair. If people are suffering from chronic unemployment and lack of health care, dying of hunger, being imprisoned or beaten for claiming their faith, or being threatened with extra-judicial execution because of their work for justice, it will seem all too often that the powers of darkness are triumphing.

Juan Hernández Pico insists it is exactly here that “the love of the martyrs leads to the birth of hope.” It is first important to remember those who are suffering and those who have given their lives, and to bring that memory into our own work so that we can work with “constancy.” “A constant memory of the martyrs that will lead to offering one’s own existence, ‘whether in tireless commitment or in sacrifice unto death violently suffered’, as Ellacuría (one of the Jesuit martyrs in El Salvador) wrote in the year of his martyrdom, is a service to hope.” Hernández Pico ties this expression of hope to the Eucharistic celebration, which remembers Jesus’ sacrifice. For those in the Anabaptist tradition, we add to this memory the experience of the community gathered around the table, and now the knowledge that the community of which we are a part has grown to be worldwide. This memory and knowing that we belong to this community gives strength for our witness to the gospel.

Pointing to the picture of the suffering servant of Isaiah 53, Hernández Pico notes the astonishment onlookers feel when they witness the love of the martyrs. Such astonishment, as the early Christians discovered, also made room for the invitation to others to join the community. So Tertullian, who commented that “the blood of Christians is seed,”⁵⁸ despite his failure to articulate the foundation of love for that witness, has continued to be accurate

throughout the centuries. Hernández Pico's contemporary reading of that ancient experience offers a challenge for this century: "The hope that sustained Jesus and his trusting faith in the Father, who appeared to have abandoned him, is the same hope that has sustained so many people to the point of martyrdom. Hope sustains faith and love. And then humble broken love, fragile and defeated, paradoxically victorious, brings hope laboriously to birth in us."⁵⁹ May Mennonites and Brethren in Christ around the world grow together in this hope and love in the days and years ahead.

Notes

¹ Nancy R. Heisey, "Women in Sixteenth-Century Anabaptism: Making a Difference," *Vox Benedictina* 9 (Summer 1992): 121-49.

² James E. Brenneman, "From Flaccid Whiners to Authentic Witnesses," *Gospel Herald* (Oct. 22, 1996), 1-3, 8. J. Lorne Peachey responded with an editorial, "So who wants to be a martyr?" *GH* (Oct. 22, 1996), 16.

³ Stanley Hauerwas, "Whose Church? Which Future? Whither the Anabaptist Vision?" in *In Good Company: The Church as Polis* (Notre Dame and London: University of Notre Dame Press, 1995), 65-78.

⁴ Douglas John Hall, "Despair as a Pervasive Ailment," in Walter Brueggemann, ed., *Hope for the World: Mission in a Global Context* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001), 83-94. See also Hall's assessment in "The Canadian Context," 35-38.

⁵ Hall, "Despair," 86-7, 91-2.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 83-4.

⁷ Prior Enzo Bianchi, as reported in a personal e-mail from Helmut Harder, 2 February 2004.

⁸ Nicholas Lash, "What Might Martyrdom Mean?" and "Ideology, Metaphor, and Analogy," in *Theology of the Way to Emmaus* (London: SCM Press, 1986), 75-119.

⁹ For the details and specific citations related to these biographical comments, see Nancy R. Heisey, *Origen the Egyptian: A Literary and Historical Consideration of the Egyptian Background in Origen's Writings on Martyrdom* (Nairobi, Kenya: Paulines Publications Africa, 2000).

¹⁰ Aline Rousselle, "La persécution des chrétiens à Alexandrie au III^e siècle," *Revue historique de droit français et étranger* 2 (1974): 222-29.

¹¹ Tertullian, *To Scapula* 5; *Apology* 50.

¹² Tertullian, *On Flight* 5.

¹³ Edward E. Malone, *The Monk and the Martyr: The Monk as the Successor of the Martyr* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1950), 1-8; W. H. C. Frend, *Martyrdom and Persecution in the Early Church* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1965), 356, 360; Dale T. Irvin and Scott W. Sunquist, *History of the World Christian Movement* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis), 250.

¹⁴ Tertullian, *Apology* 50.

¹⁵ Tertullian, *To the Martyrs* 2.8, 3.3.

- ¹⁶ Tertullian, *On Patience* 13.
- ¹⁷ Tertullian, *On Fasting* 12.2-3, 17.9.
- ¹⁸ Clement, *Miscellanies* 4.8.
- ¹⁹ Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History* 6.2.4-6, 6.3.1-7, 10-12, 6.8.1-3.
- ²⁰ Origen, *Exhortation to Martyrdom* 1, 23.
- ²¹ *Ibid.*, 36.
- ²² Heisey, *Origen the Egyptian*, 76. See in particular Maureen A. Tilley, “The Ascetic Body and the (Un)making of the World of the Martyr,” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 59 (Fall 1991): 467-68.
- ²³ See Heisey, *Origen the Egyptian*, ch. 2.
- ²⁴ Friend, *Martyrdom and Persecution*, 291-94, 351, 365, 367.
- ²⁵ Glen W. Bowersock, *Martyrdom and Rome* (Cambridge University Press, 1995), 5.
- ²⁶ Carole Straw, “‘A very special death’: Christian martyrdom in its classical context,” in Margaret Cormack, ed., *Sacrificing the Self: Perspectives on Martyrdom and Religion* (Oxford University Press, 2002), 40, 47-48.
- ²⁷ Daniel Boyarin, *Dying for God: Martyrdom and the Making of Christianity and Judaism* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1999), 95.
- ²⁸ *Ibid.*, 107.
- ²⁹ Tertullian, *On Flight* 12.
- ³⁰ Tertullian, *Antidote to the Scorpion’s Sting* 15, 7.
- ³¹ Origen, *Ex.Mart.* 25.
- ³² *Ibid.*, 30.
- ³³ *Ibid.*, 2, 4.
- ³⁴ *Ibid.*, 42.
- ³⁵ *Ibid.*, 3, 6, 15.
- ³⁶ *Ibid.*, 25, 27. It is significant that in the account of the martyrdom of Eleazar, the aged saint declares, “In my soul I am glad to suffer these things because I fear (the Lord).” (2 Macc. 6:30)
- ³⁷ *Ibid.*, 41.
- ³⁸ *Ibid.*, 31.
- ³⁹ Origen is known for his conversations with Jews and his particular relationship with a “Hebrew” teacher (see *On First Principles* 1.3.4, 4.13.14), which could suggest familiarity with the emerging Jewish discourse discussed by Boyarin. Clement, however, comes to more clear-cut understandings apparently without that dialogue.
- ⁴⁰ Clement, *Miscellanies* 4.4.
- ⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 4.6. Note that the Ante-Nicene Fathers translation of this text uses instead the adjective “gnostically.”
- ⁴² *Ibid.*, 4.14.
- ⁴³ This discussion does not deal with the question, also controversial among Christians and debated among the three theologians studied here, of whether and when Christians should make an effort to escape persecution if possible.
- ⁴⁴ See my Bechtel Lecture 1, note 10, for comments on the value of reflecting on early Christian experience for twenty-first-century Christians.
- ⁴⁵ Teresa Okure, Jon Sobrino and Felix Wilfred, “Introduction,” in Okure, Sobrino, and Wilfred, eds., *Rethinking Martyrdom* Concilium (London: SCM Press, 2003), 8.

⁴⁶ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* 11.11.9.125. art. 5.

⁴⁷ José Ignacio González Faus, “Witnesses to Love, Killed by Hatred of Love,” in Okure, Sobrino, and Wilfred, *Rethinking Martyrdom*, 59-66.

⁴⁸ Stanley Hauerwas, “Whither the Anabaptist Vision?” 75.

⁴⁹ A group of Harrisonburg, Virginia, citizens has formed such a gas tax group in response to the understanding that it was the lust for oil that led to the most recent war in Iraq. See www.voluntarygastax.com. The Brethren in Christ Church in 1974 set up a “World Hunger Fund” calling for a voluntary reduction of food expenditures in order to make food resources available to people in need. Recently, *Shalom*, a BIC journal for the practice of reconciliation, invited readers to continue to support this effort: *Shalom* 24 (Winter 2004) 12.

⁵⁰ Gary D. Badcock, “The Concept of Love: Divine and Human,” in Kevin J. Vanhoozer, ed., *Nothing Greater, Nothing Better: Theological Essays on the Love of God* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001), 33.

⁵¹ Ysabel de Andia, “*Eros* and *Agape*: The Divine Passion of Love,” *Communio* 24 (1997): 33-34. The ongoing influence of Nygrenian thought is demonstrated by the use of the terms *eros* and *agape* by a professor of history and geography in a journal of higher education: the liberally educated person is one who connects, or loves, not with “romantic or passionate love, but (with) the love that lies at the heart of all the great religious faiths: not *eros*, but *agape*.” See William Cronon, “‘Only Connect’: The Goals of a Liberal Education,” *The Key Reporter* (Winter 1998-99), 4.

⁵² Badcock, “The Concept of Love: Divine and Human,” 45.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 46.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 44; Andia, “*Eros* and *Agape*: The Divine Passion of Love,” 47-50.

⁵⁵ Pakisa K. Tshimika and Tim Lind, *Sharing Gifts in the Global Family of Faith: One Church’s Experiment* (Intercourse, PA: Good Books, 2003), 72-87.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 93.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 98.

⁵⁸ Tertullian, *Apology* 50.

⁵⁹ Juan Hernández Pico, “The Hope Born of the Martyrs’ Love,” in Okure, Sobrino, and Wilfred, *Rethinking Martyrdom*, 131-38.

REFLECTIONS ON
MENNONITE WORLD CONFERENCE
Fourteenth Assembly, 2003

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

Siaka Traore

Introduction

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

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

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

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

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

Sharing our gifts in suffering and in joy

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

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

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

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

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

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

We give what we have

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

missionaries as well.

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

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

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

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

Conclusion

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Bounteous Blessings in Bulawayo

*On Christ the Solid Rock I stand,
All other ground is sinking sand.*

Barbara Nkala

The image presented by this song has never been more vivid than during the fourteenth Mennonite World Conference (MWC) Assembly in Bulawayo, August 2003. To date, I'm still marveling at God's mysterious and abounding grace! The MWC Assembly was a precious gift to the Brethren in Christ Church (BICC) in Zimbabwe. The peaceful and joyous occasion surpassed all our expectations and defied all our misgivings. There were bounteous blessings in Bulawayo.

Picture a place that has one of the worst publicity reports of human rights ills. The inhabitants wallow in hunger, political violence, unemployment, poor communications, riotous inflation, and all manner of suffering. Then brothers and sisters from some fairly peaceful and comfortable areas are asked to go and hold a week-long gathering in such a place. No one can be blamed for thinking that is sheer madness. The first miracle for BICC Zimbabwe was the big step of faith taken by the international community of the Mennonite and BIC churches when they decided to come and share with us in suffering. It is easy to share in joy, but to share in suffering is another story. That commitment preached volumes to us. It became a challenge also for me and for many others, I am sure. Would I have done the same, presented with a similar scenario outside my country? Right inside our country, there are many of God's children languishing in various forms of suffering due to the sick economy and a harsh environment. What am I doing to share in this predicament with my country folk?

The visitors who came brought many gifts with them. These were food items; gifts of fuel to enable transportation; gifts of encouragement, love, and togetherness; not to mention huge donations of money that made

Barbara Nkala is Director of the International Bible Society of Zimbabwe and Malawi. She is an elder in a local Brethren in Christ congregation, and was the leader for plenary worship services at the MWC 2003 Assembly.

the Assembly possible. Zimbabwean brethren still talk with wonderment at God's providence. There is no way we would have taken care of even a tenth of the Assembly without the amazing gifts we received.

The colorful spectrum in the meeting hall was a blessing for us all. There were different nationalities, tribes, languages, colors, and classes. According to world standards, these differences can cause communication and relational barriers. A miniature model of what was happening during the Assembly is the vibrant international choir that performed as though they had been singing together for years. The choir was made up of nationals from fourteen different countries. They amply demonstrated that God's children are a united force. Music has no barriers. The message of the love of God through music says we are all heirs of the Father. We are family. We are one. I still can hear music in the air, which tells me God is good and compassionate all the time.

The youth did not feature much during the Assembly, but when they made their beautiful presentation of a song, they demonstrated that we still need to become globally oriented by communicating fully with everyone. They had one of the singers performing sign language as they sang. We need to engage in such [efforts] more and more, so that no one is left out.

Two major and relevant publications graced the occasion. Both texts were very significant to the theme of the Conference. If Siaka Traore's vivid illustration of the live chicken gift to a visitor to one's home in the African context was not clear enough, then Tshimika and Lind's *Sharing Gifts in the Global Family of Faith: One Church's Experiment* has enough illustrations to show that even those who are not materially rich have a lot to give. They can give of their time, talents, and spiritual gifts. The text is a rich and fresh way of approaching the topic of sharing gifts, especially when we consider the North/South relationship. The second text is *A Global Mennonite History: Volume One, Africa*, edited by John Lapp and Arnold Snyder. What is particularly exciting about this volume is that it is written by Africans, showing the African perspective of the development and spread of Christianity through the Mennonite and BICC involvement. It is hoped that future church historians can build further on this study. Again, there was sharing of gifts, in that the North provided the material resources and technical skills while Africa provided the human resources and knowledge of what had transpired in their areas. The effort was that of the body of Christ in action. What a rich resource for

posterity! What a gift for Africa! A good foundation has been provided for others to build upon.

One of the most powerful interactions during the Assembly was a workshop titled ‘God Invites Growth in the Midst of our Grieving.’ It was packed full each day with sisters and brothers sharing their painful stories of loss and grief. Many hearts were heavy and bleeding still. A number of participants mentioned how the burden seemed to have become lighter after listening to the stories of others. Some of those stories seemed worse than theirs. It was again noted that there are no boundaries where pain and grief are concerned. The love of God spans across nations and is shared in community. We are grateful that this workshop took place, because Radiant Publishing had been hoping to do stories of loss and grief and how the Lord brings healing in lives as testimonies to help brethren in similar situations. The Assembly beautifully jump-started that process. There are plans afoot to prepare some of the stories for publication.

In Zimbabwe, matters to do with HIV and AIDS are not yet wholly open topics. There is still some holding back when such issues are discussed. One of the highlights towards the end of the Assembly was the [memorial] quilt made out of 234 pieces beautifully sewn together. About a hundred people took part in this project. The love and patience shown in making each little piece shows how much the dearly departed are loved by us and by God. Again, this demonstrated how we all suffer the same pain in the loss of our beloved. God cares for all of us.

I cannot relate all the events that impacted many of us. But, whether it was a simple testimony of God’s goodness such as how the Lord God answered our prayers as shared by Ethel Sibanda, who headed the Prayer Committee; or a deeply researched topic such as ‘Saints, Sages and Singers’ by MWC President Nancy Heisey; or a symbolic act of forgiveness for past wrongs incurred during the slave trade, performed by an African and an African American, all messages were greatly uplifting.

Even streams in a desert or an oasis have some undesirable creatures lurking there, in search of a living. We were not blessed by the few incidents where some guests lost their precious belongings to thieves. Still, it could have been worse, considering an average of 5,000 – 6,000 people were hosted each day. God was with us. God is with us, and he continues to be our Solid Rock and Fortress.

More than an Event

Dothan Moyo

My father and mother-in-law recently visited us in Harare to see the new home that my wife Ski and I had built over the last two years. I had kept with me the Assembly 14 (“A 14”) conference bag, in which I had stuffed my Assembly program book, song book, the Anabaptist Seed, and a collection of previous Assembly song books. As soon as my in-laws had left, I found the bag contents sprawled on the floor, and I was sad in a way to learn that my mother-in-law had requested the bag. But I was later excited that even ten months after the Assembly, both of us valued that bag!

I still had the books and a couple of volunteer T-shirts that I had used at the Assembly, but most importantly I still have the good memories of the Assembly itself, and how God’s mighty hand had played a major part in the proceedings. Both my in-laws had attended A14 and even now they are amazed at how spiritually filling the sermons were. To them it was a great occasion. My parents were there too, and have fond memories of the Assembly.

I worked as the National Coordinator for Assembly 14, and it was an honor working with Ray Brubacher and others in planning for it. I am ever thankful to the MWC community at large for the opportunity to serve God in my assignment. In August 2001 at Thomas Hoff in Germany, I had just started my official assignment as coordinator. My task then, so it seemed, was to defend my church and my country as a good choice to hold the Assembly. Already there were too many questions – about security, food issues, the rule of law – but I had been convinced that by God’s grace all would be well. I drew a lot of inspiration and support from a prayer committee that we had chosen to intercede for the Assembly. My faith grew, and was never shaken, because then the only way to answer the concerns was by approaching God in prayer, knowing that he is a God who listens to and answers our prayers.

Dothan Moyo, a member of the Brethren in Christ Church, was National Coordinator for the MWC 2003 Assembly in Zimbabwe.

All may be history now, but my testimony is God is always faithful. I acknowledge that the Assembly itself succeeded not by might, power, or anyone's intelligence but by God's spirit and grace.

My role meant that I would be the team leader for the organizing committee. I had not done anything close to this before. Even Bishop Ndlovu allowed me to lead him at times. My age was against me, but I was determined to make this work. I met and made so many friends and connections both locally and overseas. I accessed high offices in Government departments, and at the end of it all had personal fulfillment. Today I don't think my wife would care to walk the streets of Bulawayo with me, because I now stop at every corner, meeting people who attended the Assembly, and hearing just how wonderful the event was and how much they wish another Assembly would be hosted in Zimbabwe again. Quite a few are ready to attend the next Assembly, wherever it might be held.

I attended a wedding in Bulawayo in May 2004. One of the cooks was wearing a volunteer T-shirt used at the Assembly. During the same month I was privileged to attend a BIC Men's Fellowship Conference. I was amazed at seeing so many Assembly bags carried by the participants. It was good to re-unite with all those who had played a part in making the event a success.

I draw many lessons from the Assembly: the power of unity, trusting in God, the power of prayer and fasting. "Assembly Scattered" effects are still being felt. One pastor thanked me for the vision of Assembly Scattered. He received a donation of a computer and fax modem from an A14 "scattered visitor," and the world was opened to him. A church in Mutoko is well mobilized to build a church building, thanks to a donation from other such visitors. A lecturer at a Bible school has connected with Bible Overseas to exchange information.

The Assembly may be history now, but it was more than an event: it was a blessing to us in Zimbabwe. We have fond memories of it, and we believe it was certainly a platform to share, in suffering, in joy, and all to the glory of God.

Heaven on Earth

Thomas E. Frank

In Bulawayo, there is a fairground called the “Zimbabwe International Trade Fair,” a collection of exhibition halls, all in disrepair but still usable. Also there is a college called Bulawayo Polytechnic, which can house large numbers of people when school is not in session. And finally, there are a few small hotels in the area that cater to western visitors. These were the facilities used in August 2003 for the assembly of Mennonites from around the world.

About 7,000 people attended the meetings. They came from 60 countries. About 5,000 of these were Africans from places like Zimbabwe, Zambia, Congo, Tanzania, Ethiopia, Kenya, Ghana, Nigeria, Burkina Faso and Angola. The other 2,000 came from the United States, Canada, Europe, and multiple Asian and Latin American countries.

The sequence of events included the following:

1. A week of meetings involving representatives from member churches. Their job was to plan the future of the MWC; to dream about what it might accomplish; and to set in motion new programs and activities that promise to expand the boundaries of the Kingdom of God on earth.

2. Then, a week of daily church services, one in the morning and one in the evening, each lasting about two hours. The services included singing, dancing, Bible study, testimonies, sermons, and prayers, and were attended by 6,000-7,000 each day.

3. The daily church services were led by Zimbabweans on Monday, August 11; followed by Asia Day; Europe Day; Latin America Day; North America Day; Africa Day; and then World Day, an amazing closing ceremony involving participants from every world region on Sunday, August 17.

4. Between the morning and evening services, participants attended seminars; toured a “Global Village” where multi-national art, music and stories were presented; they sat and spoke with each other; and enjoyed two simple, satisfying meals – lunch and dinner served buffet style.

Thomas E. Frank was baptized into a Mennonite Church in Ohio in 1996. He is an adjunct professor at the School of Business at Central Connecticut State University, and lives in West Simsbury, CT.

That's the background. Let me tell you what being at this meeting meant to me.

1. *It was like going into Toledo Mennonite Church for the very first time.* On December 19, 1996 I was baptized at Toledo Mennonite Church. A lot happened to my wife and me at that church before we were baptized. When we went there as strangers one day in March '96, the people of that little Mennonite congregation welcomed us as if they loved us. We were total strangers, but we were immediately swept up into their community. I felt the same way when I walked into the fairgrounds at Bulawayo. The people I met there – people from all over the world, most of whom I had never met before – welcomed me with open arms and swept me up into their community of faith and life.

2. *It was a humbling experience.* “Being Christian” for me is to be Christ-like in faith and in daily life, which is the essence of the Mennonite version of being Christian. I have made progress toward that goal. Sometimes I even feel a little proud of my new self, which of course is not a very good idea. At Bulawayo, I discovered how much farther I have to go on the journey to authentic Christianity. I heard African, Asian, and Latin American people give testimony about their struggle to remain faithful in the midst of poverty, disease, corruption, and oppression. I met people who were beaten and sent into prison for their faith, people who had suffered from unspeakable acts of cruelty. I heard stories of heroism in the face of persecution. I listened to men and women weep as they gave testimony to God's faithfulness to them in times of utter despair. I've never met people like this before, but I did meet them in Bulawayo. And they taught me what it means to be Christ-like.

3. *It was a series of “Precious Moments”.* When an American like me ventures into a country like Zimbabwe, joins up with thousands of strangers from all over the world, and enters into a host of new relationships, in a very intense environment, certain moments will be memorable. I had my share of these precious moments. Here are a few of them:

I was out in the country one day. There I met an old woman dressed in black rags who lived on a small farm where she and her family tried to

grow enough food to stay alive. In typical American style I reached out to her and said, “How are you?” She said, “Mister, I am very hungry and my husband has died. So now I am both hungry and sad.” It made me sad to hear this, but this woman unknowingly made an impression on me. Now I have seen for myself what millions of poor, rural African people are dealing with. And I have to think about what I should do about it.

On the first day of church services at the fairground, a Zimbabwean woman sitting nearby offered her baby to me, thinking I might enjoy holding her little girl during the service. I did enjoy holding that baby, and I had to think about what her life would be like, growing up in Bulawayo in the years to come. Later, that young African mother tracked me down and gave me a gift to bring home to America, a small table covering that she probably knitted herself. I will treasure it forever. She asked me to take some pictures and send them to her so she can show them to her family and friends.

During every worship service, during quiet moments of communal prayer, and during the pauses in sermons and Bible commentary, the great meeting hall was filled with the sounds of babies. There must have been at least 500 babies at the services. Many of them slept, many just sat silently. And a lot of them cried from time to time. It was like background music – the music of babies crying softly, always softly, in the spaces between our words.

On North America Day, the worship team sang a folksong about calling God’s children home to the table. They acted out scenes of people returning home to a table of worship and fellowship. One of the children they called home was a boy named Tim. I have a son named Tim, and when I heard them calling him to God’s table, I wept. Maybe Tim will come to God’s table someday. I hope that happens soon.

One day I felt a tap on my shoulder. When I turned around, there was a young woman. She smiled at me and said, “I made it. I’m here because of you; because of your speech at lunch in Goshen, Indiana.” I had met her about six months earlier, when I was raising money to pay for this Mennonite Assembly. When I discovered she had come to Zimbabwe because of what was said at that meeting, I broke down in tears of joy. She gave me a hug, smiled, and left without a word to join friends waiting to go to lunch.

4. *It was like Heaven on Earth.* Until August 2003, I had never been able to get my mind around the concept of heaven. I pretty much gave up on trying to predict what it will be like. But I found out about heaven in Bulawayo. There I felt the presence of God the Father during worship services. There I saw his son, Jesus Christ, displayed in many of the people I met there. There I felt the power of the Holy Spirit, moving me and other people at the fairground. For me, the presence of God was palpable. There also I found myself in the presence of 7,000 Christians, and we all were singing, dancing, learning, praying, and worshiping God. I think there will be lots of singing and dancing, learning, praying, and worshiping in Heaven. Bulawayo was a preview of coming attractions!

Moreover, not once did I see there any violence, meanness, selfishness, aggression, ego, or oppression. The atmosphere in the worship hall, the seminars, and the Global Village was pure. It was a love-in. People who had never met before were acting like they loved, respected, and cared about each other. I suspect that Heaven will be just like that.

Cameras Can't Catch the Spirit

Erv Wiens

Assembly Scattered, August 7-8 – Matopo Mission

Bone-jarring washboard brings us to Matopo, the first Brethren in Christ (BIC) mission in Africa, in the dark of night. The brilliant sparkle of a million diamonds draws the eyes upward through the black night. No Big Dipper here to orient by, but the Southern Cross beckons for attention.

The welcome, the uninhibited welcome, hugs and handshakes, no honorifics, no formalities, no titles – just “welcome” in that familiar African English. At various points heartfelt laughter erupts. How is it that Africans from every tribe and country have that familiar laugh which rocks the body, soul, and spirit?

Student guides lead us to the chapel. A fourteen-voice girl's choir begins its song in the pews and makes its way to the simple platform, moving to the music. Rich harmony, uninhibited rhythms, singing for the love of music – for the love of God. A lump forms in my throat. We are invited to speak. My words come out as a sob.

Night beds are simple, bathrooms basic. By five, roosters raise the morning alarm.

I rise to greet the African dawn. Dusty paths lead from simple house to simple house. Cows begin to move in their endless search for pasture in this dry winter season, leaving generous deposits everywhere. Around the mission, giant eucalyptus and gum trees tower like skyscrapers against the indigenous savannah scrub. So much space – so very much space, compared to Korea. The horizon appears twenty kilometers away without a single sign of occupation. So much physical and spiritual space wanting to be explored.

People begin to appear on the paths, feet sending up puffs of red dust, on their way to getting firewood, water, food. The rattle of a country bus announces its presence long before it can be seen. How does one describe

Erv Wiens and his wife Marian, appointed by Mennonite Church Canada, teach in an alternative school operated by the Jesus Village Church in Chun Chon, Republic of Korea.

an African country bus to someone who has never experienced it? I keep walking, trying to pray through my emotions and the flood of memories. I need to be here. I am emotional yet I am at peace – back in Africa where I discover a large part of my heart, left behind twenty-five years ago. Korea is polite and efficient and determined; Africa is simple and generous and inviting.

Sunday, August 10 – Mtshabezi Mission

Sunday morning we head for the Mtshabezi Mission church. Normally 1,200 people crowd in here but the students are on vacation. About 250 people merge toward the front of the church. Themhani Dube, the gifted young music teacher at the school, leads the worship music. He has persuaded a dozen foreign visitors to be his response choir in that familiar African singing style. We are willing but inhibited and awkward. He sings his lead line, then nods for us to respond. But before we get our first words out, a burst of energy erupts from the front pews occupied by about three-dozen children. I stare, mesmerized. Ranging in age from three to ten, these children just cannot keep from singing. Snapping fingers, they bounce to the music. As the service proceeds, the worship leader tries several times to hush the boundless enthusiasm of the young singers. I wonder if I will ever have occasion to tone down youthful energy poured into praise and worship. “Unless you become as little children, you will not enter the kingdom of God.”

Over lunch, the pastor informs us that many of these children are AIDS orphans. The BIC Church in Zimbabwe cares for nearly 10,000 such orphans. Once again the paradox of Africa leaves me speechless: all over the country creeps the terrible tragedy of the AIDS pandemic, yet here were its innocent victims praising God to the point where they were being hushed.

Assembly Gathered, August 11-17 – Bulawayo

Bulawayo, frayed former colonial hub – memories of Nairobi – sprawling jacaranda, flame trees, bougainvillea in bloom. Expansive homes of the wealthy, surrounded by walls and razor wire, juxtaposed with crowded townships of one-room shacks. Hawkers and beggars tug at the sleeve, hoping for a gift or an opportunity to relieve you of the burden of your wealth. We own too much. “Don’t display your cameras, don’t carry purses,” conference organizers tell us again and again. Listless security guards slouch everywhere.

“Assembly Gathered” squeezes 7,000 guests from more than 50 countries into the Bulawayo fairgrounds. It seems that every language under heaven is spoken here. Why it is that I recall more Swahili from thirty-five years ago than the Korean I learned last week? We stand in lines, waiting – watching anxious Americans and concerned Canadians push to the front, demanding answers to questions that haven’t even crossed the African mind. Waiting in food lines, waiting in the never-ending internet lines, I greet old friends, meet new friends, catch snatches of conversation, hugs and handshakes as the lines snake along. I’m still awed at being recognized by a woman who remembered me from fifty-two years ago in Coaldale, Alberta. We eat simple food of corn meal with plenty of stringy beef – and always oranges.

Worship and workshops fill our days. The money offerings are something else – large buckets overflowing with terribly devalued Zim dollars and sought-after American dollars. Cerebral Europeans, structure-conscious North Americans, energetic Latinos, emotional Filipinos, and heartwarming Africans communicate through body language, intonation, and words. And the music! Again and again the music, especially the African music, brings the crowd to its feet. We can’t get enough. All night long, snatches of song echo through my head and heart.

Multicultural worship, crosscultural fellowship, endless diversity of expression in dress and language and color – all making up “one body . . . called to one hope, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is above all and through all and in all.” How does one capture this rich diversity? Everyone is taking pictures, but cameras can’t capture spirit.

The conference theme, “Sharing our gifts in suffering and in joy,” remains etched on my mind. I took a few bags of sugar and boxes of biscuits and candy to share with our wonderfully hospitable hosts. But it seemed so insignificant in light of what I received in return. What can I say? I struggled to give up the opportunity to join Marian, spending precious time with family and extended family in Canada. In its place I had a foretaste of heaven in Africa. “After this I looked, and there was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb . . . saying, ‘Salvation belongs to our God who is seated on the throne, and to the Lamb!’”

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

Doris Dubé is the Mennonite Central Committee's Zimbabwe Country Co-Representative, together with her husband Jethro Dubé.

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.

Why We Need the Mennonite World Conference

David Wiebe

The choir number was announced and I watched with anticipation. As the choir left their pews they began to sing. Just a little chant, really. (I love it when they sing on their way.) The forty or so people filed into place, wearing amazing outfits. Once there, they stopped the chant, and started into the scheduled number. The richness. The profusion of sights, sounds. The depth. This symbolizes what Mennonite World Conference is for me.

About fourteen years ago MWC held its assembly in Winnipeg. At the time a cold, dry skepticism about it pervaded the conversations I had with many in our conference. It seemed the world fellowship had little life. Now, however, electric spiritual energy flows in abundance in MWC. It comes from the “South” – conferences in the Mennonite and Brethren in Christ Anabaptist fellowship, primarily from the southern hemisphere. They are passionate about God, the church, missions, and peace. The South is characterized by a holistic theology that the North needs desperately. Not the bitterness of liberation theology but a theology that effectively combines love, evangelism, and justice: the Kingdom of God for the whole person.

We often hear the reminder that “the local church is the hope of the world.” The Willow Creek Church of Chicago prominently featured that slogan on their Leadership Summit materials this summer. We in the North need that reminder, because it’s largely theoretical to us.

But many of our brothers and sisters of the South live that on a daily basis, literally. The local church helps put bread on the table. Sometimes it keeps people alive. In the Congo, for example, the Mennonite churches of Kikwit devised a plan to avoid the killings so many towns experienced in these last few years of civil war. The MWC is a place where we hear the stories of this struggle. We don’t just hear the stories; we feel them, because we’re face to face with survivors.

David Wiebe is Executive Director of the Canadian Mennonite Brethren Conference. This article is a slightly edited version of the one that appeared in the Mennonite Brethren Herald in October 2003 and appears here with the Herald’s kind permission.

For others, the local church is the evangelistic hope. The Miserete Kristos Church (MKC) of Ethiopia baptized 22,000 people last year. This year they expect to baptize 39,000! That's 5,000 more people than the membership of the Canadian Conference of Mennonite Brethren Churches. We don't just hear the numbers, we meet people like Emebet Mekonnen, a woman who trains church planters in the MKC school of evangelism. The MKC doesn't just talk about it; they're a church planting machine!

This passion spilled over into the Assembly Gathered as well as General Council meetings. During Assembly the International Choir led us in singing from all the continents. Each continent led worship on each of five days. Suddenly our North American "worship style wars" seemed really foolish to me. We fight over musical taste on a tiny, narrow band-width of the broad musical spectrum available to us from the globe. Believe me, there's musicality much harder to swallow than "rock" or "classical." It was good to remember that this diversity is God's doing! During three days of General Council meetings prior to Assembly, I encountered passion for God, evangelism, and justice all rolled into one theology. Our agenda took us into territory like finding a common missions focus and a common core theology, developing relief strategies, and finding ways to share the gifts God has given us. The MBs are at the table and need to be there. We contribute to the admixture and enrich it. We also hear how others come at these issues.

Finally, pragmatically, we need MWC to get us out of our cottages in Canada. If this Assembly had not been in Africa, I would not have visited our sister MB conference in Congo. Now, more than ever, news media paint a picture of danger in many countries. Travel agents steer clients away from most African countries. Yet, because we are members of the MWC, I had a responsibility to go to Zimbabwe. To come that close without a visit to Congo would have been *gaucherie* of the highest order. (Most of our group also visited our Angolan community.)

MWC has the capacity to impact us as a conference where we need it: in our spiritual fervor; in our evangelism and mission focus; in our need for holistic, shalom-based theology; in providing a space for sharing gifts meaningfully cross-hemisphere.

Siaka Traore, of Burkina Faso, spoke on Africa day. He reflected on the fact that due to political trouble, food and gas shortages in Zimbabwe, and

pressure from Northern churches about personal safety, the MWC executive almost cancelled the Assembly and would have moved the General Council meetings from Bulawayo to Johannesburg. If this assembly had not been held in Zimbabwe, “Where [is it] that we want to live out our faith?” Traore asked, noting that “the time is past when we can find . . . a place that is totally secure. Security is grounded in Jesus Christ” Not only is he correct, he is from a part of the world where these words carry more weight.

Ambrocio Porcincula, of the Philippines, spoke on Asia day. Using Hosea as his text, he warned, “When you no longer focus on trying to discover and do God’s will, it is only a matter of time until you will pay the consequences. History shows that God’s patience with sin does have its limits. Sooner or later society has to pay a terrible price for too long a history of injustice, selfishness, and greed. But as Hosea tried to show us, even the painful consequences of judgment are really expressions of God’s tough love trying to get us humans back on the right path.” Not only is he correct, he too is from a part of the world where these words carry more weight.

How valuable is MWC to you and me? Fifteen years ago I would have said it might hold us back. Now I would say we desperately need it if God is going to get through to us. The Anabaptist movement was an attempt, almost 500 years ago, to radically return to biblical values. It has seen coldness creep in and almost take over as the North dominated the discussion. But now, the Anabaptists are back – in the Mennonite World Conference. Get ready for a new radical commitment to biblical values, led by our sisters and brothers from the other hemisphere.

Anabaptist or Mennonite? Interpreting the Bible

C. Norman Kraus

Introduction

Generic use of the term “anabaptist” to designate the essence of Mennonite faith is well established today, especially in Mennonite World Conference circles. In the 1950s and 60s, however, some Mennonite leaders challenged the appeal to Anabaptism as a definitive paradigm for Mennonites, claiming that such authority belonged only to the Bible. Today, there are still groups of Mennonite origin who reject both the name Mennonite and Anabaptist, choosing to identify with Evangelicalism. What is the significance of the designation, how and why has it come into use, and how is it related to the question of biblical authority?

Are Mennonites Anabaptists by virtue of being Mennonite? If not, what is the difference? Are only Mennonites Anabaptists? What about other believers who belong to “Free” or “Believers” churches? For example, should the Baptist denominations in America be included as “Anabaptists”? If not, what differences would exclude them? The late James McClendon, who grew up in the Baptist tradition, used the lower case “b” to include all those who shared a theology of voluntary church and discipleship. This seems to suggest that “anabaptism” and “believers church” are synonymous. Is there a generic anabaptism – “anabaptist” with a lower case “a” – and if so, what does it mean?

This essay suggests that the original Anabaptists were neither biblical literalists nor sectarians, and that generic anabaptism should not be understood as a new orthodoxy, but rather as an authentic perspective on reading Scripture.

The Problem of Pluralistic Interpretations

Virtually every denomination or theological grouping has its own set of biblical commentaries – Baptist, Methodist, Presbyterian (Reformed), Lutheran,

C. Norman Kraus is a professor emeritus of Goshen College in Goshen, IN and of Associated Mennonite Biblical Seminary in Elkhart, IN.

Ecumenical, Evangelical, Catholic, “Believers Church (Mennonite/Church of the Brethren)”, Liberal, Conservative, Fundamentalist. How much of this is due to ecclesiastical conviction and concern, or to publishing companies’ entrepreneurial enterprise may be debatable! However, this raises a set of related questions. What is implied when we speak of perspectives in biblical interpretation? The Bible is read and interpreted from many “perspectives,” both Jewish and Christian. Is only one of these perspectives correct? Is there only one orthodox interpretation of each biblical text? Missionaries of previous centuries assumed that there was.

Biblical scholars of different religious traditions can pretty well agree on the historical contexts – language, culture, situational background – of the texts, and on the contemporary meaning of the words, at least on their ambiguity. The *Anchor Bible* commentaries written by Jewish, Catholic, and Protestant scholars were planned to interpret the Scriptures from this historical perspective. But the more difficult question is their significance for present-day multicultural contexts.

Should we be content with pluralistic interpretations of Scripture? Should we expect the Bible to have many different meanings and interpretations for different people? Is its message primarily for personal inspiration, instruction, and encouragement? Are its texts, read more or less at random, intended serendipitously to meet the need of the moment? Or do they primarily speak to larger theological and social issues that define the unity of the ecumenical church? If so, how do we go about understanding their correct meaning and application? What is the significance of an *anabaptist* perspective?

Other questions arise: Whose responsibility is it to unpack and apply the biblical message? Is it that of scholars, priests, preachers, or officially appointed church study committees? Each congregation and its leadership? Everyone for him or herself? If we talk about an *anabaptist* perspective, are we suggesting that this is the only correct perspective? Or are we proposing it as a conversational position to be considered in the larger, ecumenical discussion of the Bible? All these issues are implied in our recognition of *anabaptist perspectives*.

Current Meaning of “Anabaptist” in Mennonite Circles

At the turn of the twentieth century there was a generally recognized North American “Mennonite perspective” on the meaning and application of

Scripture. Common ethnic mores that were thought consistent with biblical ethics characterized Mennonite communities. Social and economic patterns inherited from Europe were adapted to meet the conditions of the American frontier and handed down in a tradition of biblical interpretation. These patterns were preached from the pulpit in a recognized style of exposition. Then this German Mennonite tradition collided with the emerging Fundamentalist movement, one of predominantly English origin and closely linked to the King James Version, that was making exclusive claims to correct (orthodox) biblical interpretation. In its battle with “Liberalism” and higher criticism of the Bible, Fundamentalism insisted on literalistic precision in interpretation of Scripture as God’s very words of instruction to humankind.

The impact of this fundamentalistic literalism upon Mennonites who, until then, had assumed that they were literally following the biblical teachings led to a sea change in Mennonite biblical interpretation, application, and preaching style. Mennonite pulpits began to apply fundamentalist literalism to New Testament teachings on dress, adornment with gold, use of alcohol and tobacco, sexual mores, the “spiritual” life, evangelistic outreach and missions, and on what were dubbed “restrictions” demanded by the nonconformed life. For example, John S. Coffman introduced a literalistic interpretation of 1 Cor. 11:1-17 that eventually made the wearing of a prayer covering a biblical requirement for sisters.¹

Expository preaching, i.e., explaining a particular scriptural passage, became the model for sermons. The preacher did not simply choose a text of a verse or two to launch his own inspirational comments. Rather, guided by the church community tradition, he chose significant passages that could be expounded to support and encourage uniformity of belief and practice. At the climax of this style in the 1960s and 70s, John R. Mumaw tried to give it some guidance with a book on expository preaching, but it came at the end of a long tradition and the beginning of a new hermeneutical approach.²

To understand the significance of an “*anabaptist* perspective” in contrast to a more general “free church” perspective on biblical interpretation, one needs to see its relation to this sectarian *Mennonite* perspective. What led North American Mennonites to renew their interest in their Anabaptist origins? Through the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries they had continued to show interest in the *Martyrs Mirror* and in the works of Menno Simons.

But around the turn of the twentieth century, at the same time some of their leaders began to be acquainted with Dwight L. Moody and the fundamentalist revival movement, there was renewed interest in Anabaptism. The revivalist movement sparked new life and emphases into the old Mennonite patterns that raised questions about the source and validity of the contemporary North American Mennonite tradition. This in turn raised the question of their Mennonite origins in the Anabaptist movement.

As Mennonite leaders came into contact with the dynamic revival movement, they became more self-consciously aware of themselves as a potentially competitive evangelical group. This in turn led them to explore their Anabaptist origins for precedents that could define their own distinctive character over against English expressions of piety and mission. Men like Bishop John F. Funk, John S. Coffman, Menno Steiner, and other self-aware leaders who introduced a more dynamic and evangelistic strain of piety into the Mennonite communities looked to the sixteenth century for a model that could be followed in nineteenth-century America.

The first instinct was to identify Anabaptism and the essence of Mennonitism by contrasting it to Protestantism. In his *Mennonite History*, first written and published in 1927, Daniel Kauffman wrote, “When we say ‘Mennonitism’ we mean the same as Anabaptism, for the Mennonites (though not known by that name until later) were the pioneer Anabaptists.”³ He distinguished them from the Reformers as “nonresistant in life, and scripturally orthodox in fundamentalism” [sic]. The issue that divided them, he said, was twofold, namely “(1) State-Churchism vs. individual conscience and choice; (2) the sword, and what is behind it.” And he added, “While times have changed, circumstances now are different from what they were then, and issues have shifted somewhat, yet the fundamental difference between these two schools of thought and classes of people remains substantially the same.”⁴

In mid-century C. Henry Smith published his *Story of the Mennonites* (c. 1941), in which he portrayed Anabaptists as “the extreme Left of that day” and the origin of the conviction that religion is a matter of individual conscience.⁵ The next year (1942) John Horsch, who had been researching and writing on Mennonite history, published his *Mennonites in Europe*. In it he portrayed Anabaptists as strict biblicists of high moral character and evangelistic zeal.⁶ (In a series of articles in *The Gospel Herald* earlier in the

century he maintained that they were essentially a fundamentalistic movement of the Reformation.)

In his *Conrad Grebel 1498-1526, Founder of the Swiss Brethren* (written earlier but published in 1950) Horsch's son-in-law, Harold Bender, portrayed "evangelical" Anabaptism as a biblically based New Testament movement with emphasis on "full Christian discipleship in its transformation of life after the pattern of Christ."⁷ In his now famous presidential address to the American Church History Society in 1943, "The Anabaptist Vision," he spelled out the implications of this discipleship. It included a voluntary community of committed members, dedicated to the Scripture as the Word of God and the sole standard for the church, and committed to a life of nonresistant love. This Anabaptist perspective was identified and promoted as the ideal for the twentieth-century Mennonite denomination.

In the 1950s and early 60s church leaders in Pennsylvania and Virginia challenged this appeal to Anabaptist beliefs as an authoritative perspective for Mennonites today. They insisted that the first-century "Bible," not the sixteenth-century Anabaptist interpretations, was the only authority.⁸ By "Bible," however, they were defending certain doctrines such as premillennialism, inerrancy of the Bible, the "two-kingdom" theory of church and state, the necessity of a personal experience of salvation – all current fundamentalist doctrines. They were afraid of an incipient "liberalism" and social emphasis on the gospel. They accepted John Horsch's fundamentalistic interpretation of Anabaptism, and they were suspicious of H. S. Bender and Guy F. Hershberger, who were propounding the new vision.

At the same time there was growing dissatisfaction with the fundamentalist view of the biblical text. A more literary and experiential interpretation of the text was being introduced into Mennonite circles through the "inductive approach."⁹ This new conservative but non-fundamentalistic perspective is clearly reflected in the 1963 *Mennonite Confession of Faith*. Under the guiding hand of John C. Wenger, the language of the confession took on a more biblical character. It signals a distinct cultural shift away from a literalistic and sectarian understanding and application of Scripture. This is epitomized in the self-conscious replacement of the phrase, "inerrant in its original writings," with "infallible Guide to lead men [sic] to faith in Christ" (Article 2).¹⁰

The *Confession of Faith in a Mennonite Perspective* (1995), drawn up by the two Mennonite groups, General Conference Mennonites and (Old) Mennonites, that now form the Mennonite Church USA, continues this conservative but not fundamentalist approach to Scripture. It emphasizes the central hermeneutical importance of Christ for understanding the whole Bible, the authority of Scripture for the guidance of ethical behavior and the relation of the church to society, and the centrality of the congregation in discerning and testing biblical interpretation (Article IV, p. 24). These emphases clearly reflect what was then understood as distinctive “anabaptist” characteristics.

Impact of Trans-cultural Missions

The closing decades of the twentieth century saw a realignment of Mennonite loyalties. Significant groups, some in the name of “evangelical Anabaptism,” and some reacting against an identification of anabaptist Mennonitism with peace and social service emphases, broke clear of the major Mennonite denominations. Cooperative projects, such as publishing Sunday school materials, and a new hymnal-worship book, were undertaken by two major Mennonite groups and the Church of the Brethren. There was increasing cooperation between the various Mennonite related groups on the mission field. All of these collaborative projects ignored twentieth-century differences in theology and practice and implied a common faith without clearly formulating its content. The 1995 Confession of Faith, mentioned above, explicitly attempted to formulate a statement for the two largest Mennonite groups, who were in the process of merging, that “follows some traditional patterns, but also introduces new elements in line with their Anabaptist heritage.”¹¹

Beginning in the late 1970s Herald Press began planning for a *Believers Church Bible Commentary Series*, and the first volume came out in 1986. Mennonites, Brethren in Christ, Church of the Brethren, and the Mennonite Brethren sponsored the ongoing project. Use of the term “Believers Church” and the inclusion of a number of related groups indicate that they were seeking for a more ecumenical perspective than the older name “Mennonite” implied, but the denominations included in the project all represent an *anabaptist* orientation. The Herald Press catalog does not explicitly advertise the series as Anabaptist, but it does emphasize that it is organized and written for “lay leaders” as well as teachers and pastors – clearly an

anabaptist perspective. This shift in nomenclature indicates that the progressive groups were moving toward a more inclusive position as the attrition of conservative groups, who still felt more comfortable with the old Mennonite label, continued.

During this same post-World War II period the Mennonite label began to feel restrictive on the mission field. But what was the alternative? Some Mennonite missionaries in Asia allied themselves with fundamentalist Evangelicalism, which emphasized personal conversion and church planting. Others were still convinced that the Mennonite tradition had something to offer to the evangelical Protestant world, even though they were abandoning the older literalistic traditions. Yet others began to stress an “incarnational” approach to witness and the contextualization of the gospel in the name of Anabaptism.

Were we – I was one of these missionaries – merely another of the crusading, church-planting evangelical missions preaching an individualistic, born again, personal experience with Christ apart from which individuals were heading for hell? In order to distinguish ourselves from this truncated view and establish our evangelical identity in the original sixteenth-century meaning of that word, we began to use the more inclusive word “Anabaptist.” We began to take critical contextualization of the gospel seriously. For those dissatisfied with the fundamentalistic gospel of individual salvation, the “Anabaptist Vision” as outlined by Harold Bender provided the perspective for an approach on the mission fields throughout the century’s second half.

The first Mennonite missionaries to Hokkaido (Mennonite Board of Missions) in the early 1950s, who went directly from Goshen Biblical Seminary, introduced an egalitarian concept of Christian community, strict biblicism, and nonresistance as the distinctive Anabaptist principles. Well into the 1970s Japanese congregational leaders in Hokkaido were self-supporting, holding jobs that allowed them to give time to the church, and on principle refused to be “ordained.” At the same time, several of the first generation leaders in the Osaka and Kyushu area with the General Conference Mennonite mission were pressing these same non-institutional features as the marks of Anabaptism. In the 1980s one of the major leaders in the Brethren in Christ Mission also began pressing the question of what it means for Japanese churches to be Anabaptist.¹²

In the context of this cultural ferment, in 1986 I wrote a paper (unpublished) entitled “The Relevance of Anabaptism to Twentieth-Century Japanese Christianity.” I asked whether a sixteenth-century European movement born in Christendom could be applied meaningfully in the Japanese culture, where the state religion was Shintoism and the dominant popular religion was Buddhism; and if so, what elements might authentically represent the gospel. Similar questions were being raised in other Asian countries such as Indonesia and Australia.

Then in May 1986 the Asian Mennonite Conference was held in Taipei, Taiwan. It demonstrated the new mood among the Asian church bodies and marked the beginning of Asian leadership. This raised in a new way the question of common identity. Commonality was not marked by a shared “Asian” identity. Indeed, the primary language the delegates had in common was English! Representatives came from vastly different cultural settings. “Mennonites” around the world were a multilingual, multicultural multitude of varied socio-economic status, moral values, social practices, interpretations of Scripture, worship patterns, and understanding of discipleship.

It was at this conference that leadership shifted from mission boards’ responsibility and financing to Asian church responsibility, from missionaries to the younger leaders of the Asian Mennonite churches. In a report to the Mennonite Board of Missions secretary for Asia I wrote, “The atmosphere of the conference was quite different from the one in Osaka in 1980. The old guard [dominated by missionary structures, financing, and goals] is out! There seems to be a new air of cautious realism and responsibility as the leadership shifts to younger Asian leaders.” This signaled a redoubling of the search for a common self-identity as Mennonite churches. The banner word for this identity became “anabaptism.” Just how these various cultural expressions of church related to sixteenth-century Anabaptism was not clear, but there was a sense that a generic anabaptism and “discipleship” could provide a unifying slogan. This has become a developing reality in the Mennonite World Conference movement in the decades since.

What is Generic Anabaptism?

In the meantime in the United States and Europe the interpretation of anabaptistic Mennonitism as an evangelical pacifistic, nonhierarchial (lay),

socially concerned church group with emphasis on a Jesus-centered view of the Bible began to gain a hearing, especially in academic religious centers. Through the centuries Anabaptists had been considered *Schwaermer* (fanatics), and their interpretations of scripture were dismissed as “sectarian.” Now scholars from other church traditions and perspectives on biblical interpretation began to take Anabaptist contributions to the discussion seriously.¹³ What precisely is generic anabaptism?

Anabaptism with a lower case “a” is a twentieth-century phenomenon – an attempt to adapt and adopt the insights and values of sixteenth-century Anabaptism as a guide to the interpretation and use of Scripture in twenty-first century North American culture. When written with a capital “A,” it refers to the historical movement in sixteenth-century Europe that developed as part of the Protestant Reformation. While contemporary generic anabaptism tries to preserve an authentic continuation of that movement, it is not, and cannot be, a replica of pristine Anabaptism. Rather, it represents a post-denominational perspective that seeks to dialogue across denominational lines.

Much has changed over the past five centuries. We live in vastly different political cultures than did the sixteenth-century Anabaptists. Historical studies have changed our way of understanding and interpreting the Scriptures. The concept of “Orthodoxy” with which the sixteenth century began no longer furnishes the paradigm for ecclesiastical relations. Both Protestant and Roman Catholic institutions have recognized the legitimacy of theological pluralism and the right of voluntary religious commitment. Scientific research and technological developments have altered our very way of life. Subtly these changes altered the cultural, political, and religious climate so that the conservative patterns of Amish and Mennonite communities less and less resemble the dynamic innovative responses of the original Anabaptists. This has introduced an ambiguity into claims on the “Anabaptist” label.

Within worldwide Mennonitism there are two contemporary versions of Anabaptism, each claiming to be authentic representations of sixteenth-century Anabaptism. This complicates defining the terms. While they have much common ground, at the same time they differ concerning the nature of the Bible and its interpretation. The conservative groups assume a pre-critical view of Scripture and method of interpretation. Some of these groups take a fundamentalist, charismatic perspective and some take a more traditional

American Mennonite (“old orders”) perspective. However, the divide that separates these more traditional (pre-critical) Mennonite positions from present-day “generic anabaptism” is their view of the Bible. The fault line lies along the historical distinction between the “critical” and “pre-critical” assumptions and methodologies brought to biblical interpretation.¹⁴

Not all who take an anabaptist perspective in biblical interpretation are Mennonites, but *anabaptistic* Mennonitism as a participant in interdenominational dialogue is, as noted earlier, an evangelical pacifistic, nonhierarchical (lay), socially concerned church group (denomination) emphasizing a Jesus-centered view of the Bible. This ecumenically oriented anabaptism is intellectually comfortable in the left wing of Evangelical scholarship, and does not draw sharp lines of distinction between its conservative and liberal interlocutors. It has a conservative but “critical” perspective on biblical interpretation, attempting to preserve and promote an authentic modern contextualization of the pre-critical hermeneutic of the sixteenth-century Anabaptists. It assumes that the Bible is the historical witness to and record of God’s revelation through Israel that climaxed in Jesus who came as the Christ, the Son of God.

Various stages of this transition from a pre-critical to a critical approach to Scripture exist simultaneously among groups of contemporary Mennonites who themselves are at different stages of sociological accommodation to North American culture. Historical groups of Hutterites, Amish, and Old Order Mennonites still claim to represent the true Anabaptist perspective. Conservative Mennonite groups like the Evangelical Anabaptist Network, the Fellowship of (Biblically) Concerned Mennonites, and other independent groups who have withdrawn from the main body over issues of biblical interpretation continue to regard the Bible as the infallible and literal Word of God. What these groups have in common is a hermeneutic that continues to view the meaning of Scripture through the lens of Protestant orthodoxy.

By way of comparison, the goal of generic anabaptism is not a fixed, uniform position. Its goal is not *orthodoxy* but *authenticity* – authentic interpretation of the Scripture through the lens of its own Anabaptist tradition. This necessitates a dialogue in two directions: (1) between sixteenth-century Anabaptism and twenty-first century Mennonitism; and (2) between twenty-first century Mennonitism and other denominational traditions. At least implicitly

it recognizes that an authentic expression of Christ-centered faith as portrayed in the NT requires an inclusive conversational dialogue among all those seriously seeking to follow the way of Christ.

Generic anabaptism's dialogical character has resulted from the "denominational" rather than "sectarian" stance that Mennonite bodies adopted in the twentieth century, and from their missionary activity crossing many different cultures. It became increasingly clear almost from the first that western Mennonite interpretations and applications of the Bible did not always fit the diversity of cultural practices where missionaries were planting churches. Neither could they give an effective inter-denominational witness by pontificating a position. Effective witness needed to take a conversational, dialogical approach.

A Generic Anabaptist Hermeneutical Perspective

What perspective does generic anabaptism bring to the interpretation of the Bible? Again we must note that it is not an exclusively Mennonite perspective. Biblical students of one tradition and another share many of its understandings, but Anabaptism brings its own historical tradition to the dialogue.

Anabaptism does not establish a new orthodox creed for the universal church to follow, or a standardized theological and ethical formula to achieve uniformity among the diversity of the world's cultures. Rather, it is a perspective, a way of reading and contextualizing Scripture under the tutelage of the Holy Spirit that adapts to multicultural dialogue. It makes Jesus the lens through which all Scripture is read, concentrating attention on the pattern of Jesus' life as the authentic example of God's will for human society. It offers a way to deal with the multicultural expressions of Christian faith in Jesus.

To further elucidate, perhaps we should begin with the conviction that *the Bible is the book of the church*.¹⁵ This is a perspective that the Anabaptists inherited from and share with the Catholic tradition. The Bible is the inspired witness to and record of God's self-revelation to be interpreted and used as authority in the church. The books of Scripture issued out of the life and experience of Israel and the church, and the church created the Christian canon, i.e., the list of recognized authoritative books. To speak with theological precision, the church does not give the canon its authority but recognizes its divine authority for the life of the church. The warrant for this

authority is found not so much in the text of the Bible as in the Spirit of God that initially inspired the text and is given to the church to guide it in its understanding and use of the text. Today, we refer to this as “contextualization” of the text, i.e., the interpretation and application of it in different and changing cultural contexts.

Both the Catholic and Anabaptist traditions recognize that this responsibility has been given to the church as the “body of Christ,” which continues the salvific work of the historical Jesus Christ. The Bible has not been given to individuals as a private revelation to provide serendipitous authority and guidance. But here the Anabaptist and Catholic traditions have different perspectives. For Anabaptists the church is made up of voluntarily committed members who are full participants in the life of the church. This includes participation in discerning the spiritual meaning, relevance, and practical application of the text to specific situations.

To say that interpretation, which includes contextual theology and application, is basically the responsibility of Christian congregations living in the cultural situation does not mean the congregation is a law unto itself. The congregation is dependent upon the ecclesial and scholarly resources at its disposal. The process of hermeneutical contextualization begins with the study of original languages, historical and anthropological studies of the biblical cultures, biblical translation, and theological evaluations, all of which require technical scholarly effort and insight. But at the end of the process it is the local congregation of Christian believers in the Spirit/spirit of Christ that is responsible to act in the name of Christ. This is a fundamental aspect of the historical Anabaptist perspective that generic anabaptism attempts to re-establish.

A second distinguishing perspective, one that marked the Anabaptists off from other Protestants, was their insistence that *because the New Testament is the record of God’s revelation in Jesus, the Christ, it has authority over what preceded it*. This was not merely a legalistic shift from the text of the Old to the text of the New. Rather, their new authority was Jesus, the Messiah, and not Moses, the Lawgiver.¹⁶ Christians’ mandate is to follow Jesus, and because the NT scriptures are the trustworthy written witness to him, they are of supreme importance. The Anabaptists valued the Old as a preparatory document, the historical witness and record of God’s covenant with Israel preparing the way for Christ and a new covenant to be written on

the hearts of God's people, in the words of Jeremiah 31. The NT, they held, is the culmination of, fulfills, and serves as the interpretive key to the Old.

Protestant leaders, as Stuart Murray has pointed out,¹⁷ continued the medieval pattern of appealing to the OT law to establish a socio-political structure within which the church functioned. In effect they continued the social pattern in which the church (spiritual) and the state (secular) joined to establish a sacral community in which the civil structures for the total community were found in the OT. The hermeneutical debate between Lutherans and Reformed merely continued the medieval argument as to whether the spiritual trumped the secular in authority, or vice versa, but both fully agreed that the Testaments – Old and New – shared an equal authority in the institutional church. Thus in Calvin's Geneva the church could render a judgment of heresy with the intention and full expectation of the death penalty to be carried out by the "Christian" government.

Anabaptists understood the NT to be a new covenant between God and humans creating a "new people of God" – a new social order. It was not merely a spiritual directive for individuals in their religious life, but a social directive to guide the ethical life of the human community. The Hebrew covenant is explicitly a religio-cultural covenant providing a socio-political structure for a "people of God" among the pagan nations of the earth. The NT gives little or no political instructions. Christians are simply to be "salt and light" for the world – a rather non-specific ethical directive. They are to follow the Spirit of agape according to the new ethical alternative taught for followers of "the Way." How is the new Christian covenant to be interpreted?

Protestant reformers held that the new covenant assumes and accepts the political context of the old, and merely provides for a mid-course correction and personalization of the relationship. Anabaptism, on the other hand, asserted that the new covenant establishes a new spiritual and cultural pattern based on the example of Jesus as "the true and living Way" (John 14:6). The church as the people of God under this new covenant is to be a voluntary alternative society taking its precedent from the New Testament. Where the New differs from the Old, Jesus' words, "It has been said by them of old . . . but I say unto you" are the authority for action. Christians are to be guided by a new ethical pattern. *Nachfolge Christi* was not equated with patriotism in a Christian nation governed in the spirit and form of the Hebrew scriptures.

The consequences of this hermeneutical revision of the Hebrew covenant had inevitable sociological implications. The government that Paul says “does not bear the sword in vain” was de-sacralized and understood as part of the fallen natural order. The secularization of the political order placed it outside the church, and in effect gave it the status of the pagan nations surrounding Israel. For the Anabaptists this created a tension between the true church and Christendom.

Although the first generation of Anabaptism did not function as a sectarian movement, it became so in the centuries following. This is generally attributed to the social and political pressures that forced Anabaptists to separate their societies from the continuing Christendom patterns of church and state. Yet the old covenant is explicitly a socio-cultural covenant creating a settled, national “people of God” among the pagan nations. The new covenant, on the other hand, assumes the dispersion of Israel as its metaphorical pattern. This ambiguity in the Anabaptist interpretation of the relevance of the OT has left contemporary generic anabaptism with a similar dilemma.

The Mennonite perspective on NT ethical interpretation led eighteenth and nineteenth-century Mennonites to withdraw from political society, which it called “the world.” Where the example and teaching of Christ – understood as including the ethical admonition of the Apostles – did not provide a practical political guide for action, there was nothing to do but withdraw. Now that the Mennonite world has assimilated much of the professional, institutional, political, and economic (“world”) culture, the relevance and role of the OT is being re-examined. Generic anabaptism, however, maintains that Jesus as “pioneer and perfecter of the faith” is the ethical and spiritual gestalt and exemplar for Christian action.

That leads us to the third hermeneutical perspective of contemporary anabaptist biblical interpretation, namely, that *Jesus as the climax of revelation – the Word made flesh (John), and “image of the invisible God” (Paul) – is both the personal-spiritual and social-ethical pattern for Christians.* Evangelical Protestantism has interpreted Jesus as a spiritual redeemer and ideal for personal life, but not as an example to be followed in social ethics. Beginning with the original Protestant, Martin Luther, Jesus was understood to have had the unique “vocation” of Savior, a vocation or calling that his followers do not and cannot share. Although the spirit of Christ motivates lay Christians, the law of justice guides their secular functions in the world.

One can find beautiful passages in Luther's works extolling the nonresistant love of Jesus as an example for Christians to follow in their personal attitude, but alongside such passages are the exhortations to these same Christians to apply for the public job of hangman, because as individuals of faith and love they bring the right spirit to the ghastly job. Jesus' call to "take up your cross and follow [my example]" does not apply to the Christian calling in the public arena. Discipleship is a matter of private faith and love.¹⁸

This perspective on Jesus' divine person and work led Protestants to a focus on justification by "faith-belief," not by "works-righteousness." Christ's role as God's penal substitutionary sacrifice became the almost exclusive center of interest, and our relation to him was interpreted as one of dependence and trust (*fiducia*) – a favorite word of Luther. He remained focused on the cross and blood of Christ, made effective for lay Christians in the sacrament, rather than on the ministry and lifestyle of Jesus that resulted in his execution as a religious and political threat. From this perspective the resurrection of Christ became the vindication of his divine self-sacrificial atoning death, not of his incarnational identification with us as the "true and living Way."¹⁹

The recognition of Jesus' sacrificial identification with us as God's "pioneer" (Hebrews 12:2), and "servant" in whose likeness we are to be formed (Phil. 2:6-8) is virtually ignored. His role as peacemaker is interpreted as a theological adjustment to satisfy the justice of God, and the ethical and social dimensions of peacemaking are muted. Salvation as reconciliation and transformation of human life and society through faithful commitment and enablement to follow his pattern – what one might call the "hermeneutics of reconciliation" – is dismissed as "works righteousness." The classic tradition of *imitatio Christi* (imitation of Christ) is rejected as a theological error of atonement theory and is suspect as "works righteousness."

By contrast, the Anabaptist tradition has from the beginning insisted that salvation is by faith alone, but that "faith without works is dead." Faith is understood as faithfulness in following "the Way" marked out by Christ. It is not simply belief and trust in the merits of his substitutionary example. Following Christ, who is the culmination of God's revelation, is the essential core of Christian faith.

Finally, related closely to the above understanding of Jesus' pioneer role, is *the concept of discipleship as Nachfolge Christi – the imitation of*

Christ. Anabaptists understood discipleship as apprenticeship. A *disciple* is one who learns by following the example of the master, not merely by calling him lord but by imitating his lifestyle. A. M. Hunter caught the import of this perspective when he entitled his exposition of the Sermon on the Mount, *A Pattern for Life* (Westminster Press, 1953). Jesus is the “pioneer and perfecter of our faith” who set the pattern to be followed (Hebrews 12:3ff). His endurance of society’s hostility and, in the end, his execution as a political criminal is understood as a personal-social path to be followed as a kind of discipline. To keep the faith means to persevere in this pattern modeled by Jesus.

The goal of biblical study, therefore, is not theoretical knowledge but practical behavior, namely “justice, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit” (the spirit of Christ), as Paul wrote in Romans 14:17. Generic anabaptist hermeneutics is the “hermeneutics of obedience.”²⁰ Its theology is a theology of apprenticeship. To be a Christian disciple means to participate in and live under the mandate of Jesus Christ, the Master, who not only leads but also enables and transforms us in and through the discipline of following.

In their literature Anabaptists referred to this alternative way of living in society as “taking up the cross and following Christ.” They characterized the Christian life as the way of the cross, exemplified in the nonviolent lifestyle of Jesus. In the same manner, the anabaptist perspective interprets this call as a summons to the nonviolent pattern of life that led Jesus to the cross. It does not regard “cross bearing” (nonviolence) and “crucifixion of self” (self-denial) in the typical Protestant evangelical manner, that is, of simply equating it with self-denial. Certainly the nonviolent lifestyle of a peacemaker will often require self-denial, but not every act of self-denial can be identified as “taking up the cross and following Christ.”²¹

According to Matt. 28:19, from the Anabaptist perspective, the apostolic commission is to make followers of all the nations. Discipleship is not just for those of the Jewish nation but for all humankind. The gentile nations are to be “apprenticed,” i.e., formed according to the archetypical pattern through following Jesus’ lifestyle. They are to be inducted into the holy nation being formed under the new covenant (baptism), and instructed in the commandments and example of Jesus (“teaching them”). This discipleship is not just the vocation of a special class – religious orders, pastors, or preachers. It is the pattern of the transformed life to which Christ calls everyone.

Such an anabaptist hermeneutical perspective calls for authentic contextualization of the message and example of Jesus in the tradition of the Apostle Paul and first-century writers of Scripture. Indeed, the NT epistles themselves provide a model of such discernment and translation of the meaning of the life of Christ for the diverse cultures of the world. Given the inevitable diversity of world cultures where Christian Mennonite witness has taken root, the call to authentic discipleship as a hermeneutical principle becomes fundamental. We must again emphasize the guiding motto of Menno Simons: “Other foundation can no man lay than that is laid, which is Jesus Christ” (1 Cor. 3:11), and move forward under the aegis of the Holy Spirit of Christ.

“Bearing the heavy cross of Christ” was a favorite phrase of Menno to describe the martyr vocation of Christians. For him it clearly meant following the nonviolent pattern of Christ’s life and patiently bearing the consequences. That he considered this the calling of every Christian with no exceptions is illustrated by his approach to whether a Christian could hold office as a magistrate, which he admitted is a “dangerous office.” He did not give a direct answer with scriptural proofs. He simply insisted that whether a person is ordained of God to be king, magistrate, or judge, as a Christian he is first called to follow the word and example of Christ in that office. There are no exceptions. Indeed, I will end by quoting from Menno’s *Reply to False Accusations* [that Anabaptists will not obey the magistrate]:

Henceforth, beloved rulers, see to it, you who call yourselves Christian, that you may be that also in deed and in word. Water, bread, wine, and the name do not make a Christian, but those are Christian who are born of God, are of a divine spirit and nature, are of the same mind as Christ Jesus . . . love their neighbors as themselves; lead an unblamable, regenerate, pious life, and willingly walk in the footsteps of Christ These the Word of God calls Christians.²²

Notes

¹ In her unpublished dissertation, *The Articulation of Mennonite Beliefs about Sexuality 1890-1930* (Union Theological Seminary, Richmond, VA, May 2003, p. 93) Brenda Martin Hurst traces the explicit teaching of the covering as a biblical ordinance to John S. Coffman. She writes, “The cap became a ‘prayer head covering’ symbolizing a woman’s submission to God’s order of authority: God, Christ, Man, Woman.”

² John Mumaw, *Preach the Word: Expository Preaching from the Book of Ephesians* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1987) attempted both by homiletical instruction and example to advocate expository preaching in Mennonite pulpits.

³ Daniel Kauffman, *Mennonite History, Including a Brief Sketch of the Church from the Time of Christ* (Scottsdale, PA: Mennonite Publishing House, 1927), 48.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 49.

⁵ C. Henry Smith, *The Story of the Mennonites* 3rd ed. (Newton, KS: Mennonite Publication Office, 1950), 4.

⁶ See “Character of the Evangelical Anabaptists,” 293-98.

⁷ *Conrad Grebel c. 1498-1526: The Founder of the Swiss Brethren Sometimes Called Anabaptists* (Goshen, IN: The Mennonite Historical Society, 1950), 209-10.

⁸ The proper interpretation of nonresistance and its biblical basis became a focal issue in this debate. Guy F. Hershberger’s argument that both testaments teach nonresistance was strongly refuted by John L. Stauffer, president of Eastern Mennonite School, and an ardent premillennialist. (See his “The Error of Old Testament Nonresistance,” in *The Sword and Trumpet*, Vol. 28, no. 2, 6-16. Later published posthumously as a pamphlet entitled *The Message of Scripture on Nonresistance* in 1971.) John R. Mumaw published a pamphlet, *Nonresistance and Pacifism* (Scottsdale, PA: Mennonite Publishing House, 1952), arguing against a more vague presentiment that an activist “anabaptist” nonviolence was leading to liberal pacifism. The *Sword and Trumpet* kept up a steady barrage of articles presenting a traditional literalistic Mennonite interpretation, implicitly if not always explicitly critical of the emphasis on Anabaptism.

⁹ See my “American Mennonites and the Bible, 1750-1950,” first published in the *Mennonite Quarterly Review*, 1967, and reprinted in Willard M. Swartley, ed., *Essays on Biblical Interpretation: Anabaptist-Mennonite Perspectives* (Elkhart, IN: Institute of Mennonite Studies, 1984), 131-50 for more detail on this period.

¹⁰ That this is indeed the intention of the *Confession*’s authors is illustrated by other significant changes. For example, in contrast to the Garden City confession (1921), which declared the seven day creation account to be “an historic fact and literally true,” it speaks of God as the infinite Creator, source and end of all things, and of creatures as limited and dependent upon God. It speaks of revelation as “supremely and finally [given] in His incarnate Son,” and it bases Scripture’s authority on its witness to Christ, who is the “key to [its] proper understanding.” The command to nonresistance is based on “Christ’s redeeming love and sovereignty over all men,” and nonconformity to the world is described in terms of spiritual allegiance to Christ’s kingdom, not hortatory texts from Scripture.

¹¹ *Confession of Faith in a Mennonite Perspective*, Published by arrangement with the General Board of the General Conference Mennonite Church and the Mennonite Church General

Board (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1995), 8.

¹² At the time the Brethren in Christ missionaries had chosen not to emphasize the connection of Japanese congregations with an American denomination. This led some of the Japanese leaders to search for their identity among the many Christian groups. Unsatisfied with the Fundamentalism of the Japan Evangelical Association, and aware of their Mennonite relations, they were exploring the Anabaptist alternative that was being tendered.

¹³ People like Stanley Hauerwas, who calls himself a “camp follower,” and Richard Hays at Duke University, Christopher Rowland and Stuart Murray of England, James McClendon, Jr., Glen Stassen, Nancey Murphy, and the like from Evangelical backgrounds began to accept anabaptism as a dialogical partner. See the October 2000 issue of *The Mennonite Quarterly*.

¹⁴ In his chapter, “Evangelical Reconstruction of the Anabaptist Vision,” Levi Miller writes, “A reconstructed understanding of evangelical Anabaptism would be completely at home within the basic theological categories of Protestant orthodoxy. . . . An evangelical Anabaptism for the next century will embrace an orthodox Christianity, holy living and intimacy with God, along with an ethic of nonresistance, peace and justice.” (John D. Roth, ed., *Refocusing A Vision: Shaping Anabaptist Character in the 21st Century*, Goshen, IN: Mennonite Historical Society, 1995, 31, 34.) Miller takes his stand with the “pre-critical” hermeneutic of orthodox Protestantism and interprets any revision of it as a watering down of “transcendent and revealed biblical Christianity.” Scholars who deny or reject such “revealed biblical Christianity,” he continues, can still be accepted as anabaptist “if the author – especially if the author has Mennonite parents – still believes in pacifism, ecological wholeness or perhaps liberation and justice.” (*Ibid.* 29) These comments illustrate well the character of the divergence that separates the two versions of generic anabaptism.

¹⁵ In Article 4 on Scripture, the 1995 Confession states that the Bible is “the essential book of the church” after affirming its inspiration and trustworthiness as the “Word of God written.” An earlier edition sent to the constituencies for testing made the statement the lead sentence for the article, but in both editions the point is clear. The Bible is an instrument of the Holy Spirit to nurture “the obedience of faith to Jesus Christ and guide the church in shaping its teaching, witnessing, and worship” (22).

¹⁶ Menno Simons has a particularly clear reference to this in his discussion of the swearing of oaths: “The Scripture teaches that we should hear Christ . . . [and] Christ Jesus does not in the New Testament point His disciples to the Law in regard to the matter of swearing . . . but He points us now from the Law to yea and nay, as to the dispensation of perfectness [sic]. . . .” *The Complete Writings of Menno Simons, c. 1496-1561*, John C. Wenger, ed. (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1956), 518.

¹⁷ Stuart Murray, *Biblical Interpretation in the Anabaptist Tradition* (Kitchener, ON: Pandora Press, 2000), 223. See also his chapter on “The Two Testaments.”

¹⁸ Carl F. H. Henry’s two volumes on Christian ethics are a modern example of this kind of emphasis. In 1957 Henry published his 690-page *Christian Personal Ethics* with the promise that a volume on social ethics would follow. Finally, seven years later in 1974 he published a 190-page volume entitled *Aspects of Christian Social Ethics* (both published by Eerdmans).

¹⁹ One might refer to this as the “hermeneutics of justification.” The concept of “justification by faith alone” (*sola fide*) dominated Protestant interpretation of passages where righteousness/

justice, peace and reconciliation were the subject.

²⁰ Murray, *Biblical Interpretation*, 225.

²¹ For example, in a recent seminar in Northern Ireland my appeal to “the way of the cross” as the call to nonviolence prompted an objection from one participant. He pointed out that his friend had felt called to volunteer for military duty in the Iraq war as a matter of cross bearing. He considered his willingness to deny himself personal security in order to help violently overthrow Saddam’s regime an example of bearing his cross. While respecting the sincerity of his sacrifice, one cannot but remember Jesus’ word to Peter when he reached for his sword in the Garden. The defense of Jesus with the sword at the risk of his own life did not qualify as “taking up his cross,” as 1 Peter 2:21-25 so eloquently states.

²² *Complete Writings*, 553.

A Sixteenth-Century Anabaptist Social Spirituality

Thomas Finger

It is hardly novel to observe that an interest in, even a hunger for, spirituality has been escalating throughout North America for several decades. This has affected not only the general public, often in esoteric forms, but nearly all churches as well. Along with most Protestant bodies, however, those descended from sixteenth-century Anabaptism often assume that they lack a spirituality of their own. To fill the apparent void, churches in all these traditions turn to others, most frequently the Roman Catholic. Such explorations have enriched Anabaptists. I have joined in and gained much from them. Nonetheless, as Anabaptists seek not only spiritual nurture, but also to rediscover and re-form their own identity in rapidly changing social circumstances, few, regrettably, realize that their own heritage offers rich spiritual resources.¹

In seeking this identity, North American Anabaptists have been greatly aided by Harold Bender's *Anabaptist Vision*. Bender defined historic Anabaptism's "essence" as *discipleship*, expressed through the church as a voluntary, close-knit fellowship, distinct from "the world," which applied an "ethic of love and non-resistance" to "all human relationships."² Despite Bender's intention, this *Vision* was often reduced largely to social-ethical dimensions. Not surprisingly, the Anabaptist Vision, when so construed, eventually gave rise to complaints about its "spiritual poverty."³ It was often assumed that historic Anabaptism itself shared this lack.⁴

To help correct this, I will briefly chart the course of a spiritual stream that flowed through early South German/Austrian Anabaptism. Often called *Rhineland Mysticism*, it arose in medieval Catholicism. Yet as this current approached and then entered early Anabaptism, features central to the latter movement emerged more distinctly. For example, while the Rhineland stream remained deeply "spiritual" in the inward devotional and mystical sense, it increasingly assumed outward ethical and social form. I will first trace its course up to, and then part way into, early Anabaptism. Then I will suggest

Thomas Finger is the author of A Contemporary Anabaptist Theology (InterVarsity Press), forthcoming.

that such developments render it surprisingly relevant to the pressures and problems, personal and social, of our highly materialistic, consumption-oriented age. This spirituality can help actualize the *Anabaptist Vision's* social-ethical promise while alleviating the “spiritual poverty” which results from interpreting it solely in those terms.

Rhineland Mysticism

The source of this spiritual current is usually identified as the Dominican theologian, vicar general, and mystic Meister Eckhart (1260?-1328?). Eckhart's mysticism itself bore few direct social implications. He strove for union with a mysterious *Ground of Being*, which he found so overwhelmingly real that he often spoke as if the creaturely world were hardly real at all.⁵ Nonetheless, that world seemed solid enough to most people. According to Eckhart, they lost sight of *Being* because they became *attached* to particular *creatures* – as Paul said in Romans, they worshipped the creature rather than the Creator (1:18-25). That is, most people place great, often ultimate, value on finite realities such as their children, spouses, possessions, social reputations, ethnic groups, or nations. Through their desires to grasp and possess these *creatures*, the latter take root, as it were, in the ground of peoples' souls.

The mystical process for Eckhart involved painful detachment from these creatures (*Geschiedenheit*): ripping up, or allowing God to rip up, the roots we let them plant within us. When the soul's ground is cleared of these entanglements, it can be filled with, or open up to, its deeper Ground, which is God. Human souls, for Eckhart, originally came forth from God, as the Son comes forth from, or is perpetually begotten by, the Father within the Trinity.⁶ Souls then came into this world, as did the Son through his incarnation. But now our souls must make their way painfully back to God through this world, as did the Son through his life, death, and resurrection. Eckhart could call this process a path on which we follow Jesus, or the way of the cross. This, however, was largely symbolic language for the soul's inward return to God. Indeed, since God, or Being, was so much more real than our spatio-temporal world, Eckhart perhaps regarded the soul, in its depths, as already divine.⁷ This mystical process could be called *divinization* – possibly in the literal sense that humans become, or already even are, identical with God in *essence*.

The Rhineland current rolled on through channels like Eckhart's younger Dominican contemporary, Johannes Tauler (1300?-1361) and the unknown author of a mystical writing, *The German Theology* (ca. 1430). They accelerated its flow on its way to Anabaptism in several significant directions. First, while they still called the spiritual process *divinization*, it became increasingly evident that they did not regard humans as divine, or capable of becoming so, in *essence*. They meant to say, rather, that through grace and the operation of what we might call divine energies, people could become more and more like God – through a union of *wills*, not a union of *being*.⁸ Second, these later mystics often worked with ordinary lay people. They stressed that divinization need not be sought in the cloister but could be attained through the challenges of everyday life.⁹

Third, the main obstacle was still attachment to creatures. Less often, however, did it seem that creatures themselves blocked the way to God – by being ultimately unreal, or even evil.¹⁰ More often, *attachments* to creatures – precisely, *inordinate* attachments – were pinpointed as the problem. That is, plants, animals, persons, and many forms of human relationship were not themselves illusory or evil. But human attitudes towards them, or uses of them, usually were. This did not make detachment easier. The roots which inordinate attachments sink into our being, crowding out God, entangled even the will. People could be released only through a continual purging, and increasing conformity to God's will, by grace.

Tauler and *The German Theology*, like Anabaptists, frequently called this extirpation process *Gelassenheit*.¹¹ Anabaptist scholars often translate *Gelassenheit* simply as “yieldedness.” I find this far too general and tame to express such a wrenching loose, in the depths, from those ties which separate people from God and draw them into possessiveness, war, and Death.

Fourth, these mystics, like Eckhart, taught that we can return with the Son to the Father and become one with him. Yet Jesus' earthly journey no longer functioned chiefly as a symbol for an inner mystical process. It also provided the pattern for pursuing this process in one's concrete daily walk. Tauler urged his hearers to accept “the cross, from whichever direction it comes, *from outside or from within* . . . follow your crucified God with a humble spirit, in true abnegation of yourself, *both inner and outer* . . . and unite yourself with him.”¹² Eventually, this inner crucifixion would lead to

resurrection. This clearing of the soul's ground would unclog that "delectable and pure stream" flowing from its deeper Source,¹³ which "will overflow with living waters which stream forth to eternal life."¹⁴ This "lofty drink" will be "diffused by God's loving ardor into all the members, into our entire life and being."¹⁵

Before the Rhineland current entered Anabaptism, it took another, sharper turn through Thomas Müntzer (1491?-1525). This radical priest led German peasant armies to disastrous defeat by their noble overlords. Nonetheless, Müntzer drew this spirituality's social implications more fully into the light. That grasping for creaturely things, he claimed, that desire to possess and control more and more – lands, persons, wealth, large territories, and much else – was social inequality's very source. It bred conflict and war, through which some people accumulated vastly more possessions and power than others.

Such injustices, however, could not be redressed simply by redistributing property or redesigning institutions – not unless God first plowed up inordinate attachments from the ground of many souls so that spiritual seed might grow. Müntzer himself endured a plowing so severe that even God disappeared. Yet this, he claimed, purged his soul so thoroughly that God's Spirit could write directly on it, bypassing even Scripture.¹⁶ This Spirit revealed that God would very soon plow society, uprooting the rulers and the rich.¹⁷ Then earth's bounty would flourish, and those whose souls were purified would distribute it equally. Who would they be? Peasants. For hard experience had already loosened their attachments to material things.

Why did this vision fail? Partly because Müntzer experienced God chiefly as harsh and violent. He knew well the *bitter Christ* of the cross, but deplored talk of a *sweet Christ* and knew little of joy and resurrection. Müntzer's inner experience lacked intrinsic connection with that Jesus who, for Tauler and *The German Theology*, provided an outer pattern for its expression. That pattern, the way of the cross, suggested that spiritual growth requires patience. But Müntzer expected his harsh God, whose Spirit sent sudden revelations, to rapidly expunge weeds from peasant hearts and feudal society.¹⁸

Despite Müntzer's failure, let us not overlook his insight that the same grasping for creaturely goods which draws people into themselves and away from God also draws them away from, and then into conflict with, each other.

South German/Austrian Anabaptist Spirituality

Sweeping past Müntzer's debacle, the Rhineland current poured into early South German/Austrian Anabaptism. Within a few years, however, its four main leaders – Hans Denck, Hans Hut, Leonhard Schiemer, and Hans Schlaffer – were dead. Still, they managed to channel some waters further in several directions.

First, as Anabaptists were persecuted publicly, they felt they were experiencing “none other than Christ experienced.”¹⁹ Jesus became an even more explicit behavioral norm than for Tauler or *The German Theology*. This way of life, or following “in the footsteps of Christ,”²⁰ can be designated by Bender's term, *discipleship*. Yet it is crucial to add that, in South Germany/Austria at least, this was the necessary *outward* social-ethical expression of an *inward* spiritual participation in Jesus' “conception, birth, death, and resurrection in us.”²¹ These severely persecuted people could hardly have undertaken the outer journey had it not been strengthened by the inner. Conversely, the inner would hardly have been true transformation in Christ had it not taken this outer form. Here again, the process was often called *Gelassenheit*, and transformation was understood as *divinization*.²² To dispel the notion that this meant actually becoming God, and was ultimately ethereal and socially irrelevant, I would call it *Christomorphic divinization*.²³

Second, the uprooting of attachments to creaturely goods intrinsically led to sharing those goods with others. These Anabaptists applied literally what *The German Theology* had said: that sin arises “when the creature assumes for itself some good thing . . . as though the Good *belongs* to the creature” or assumes that it is one's “own property.”²⁴ The *Gelassenheit* process, then, not only purified people “inwardly from greed and lust” but also outwardly and socially, as Müntzer had claimed, “from injustice in our way of living and our misuse of the creatures.”²⁵ It led to baptism and church membership, which involved sharing of possessions.²⁶ This profound spirituality was taking on specific ethical, economic, and communal forms. Scarcely had this commenced, however, before its four main early proponents were dead and many of their followers deceased or scattered.

Nonetheless, these socio-economic implications soon became visible. Several Anabaptist groups formed as communities of production and consumption. Foremost were the Hutterites, who still exist today. According

to their theologian, Peter Riedemann, creatures had been made to lead people to God.²⁷ God had created all of them for everyone; none, therefore, should be owned by anyone.²⁸ Humans, however, had so misused material things, by turning them into objects of greed, that these now led people away from God.²⁹ Sin originated in “wrong taking”³⁰ which filled the heart with these creatures and left no room for God. Salvation, accordingly, included surrender of everything that had been wrongly appropriated – that is, all private property.³¹ This struggle of detachment was painful, as in all Rhineland spirituality.³²

For Riedemann also, salvation was plainly *divinization*. Yet his Anabaptist predecessors, burdened by heavy persecution, had focused on inner *crucifixion* with Christ. Though Riedemann and the Hutterites were hardly strangers to such suffering, they experienced occasional respite from it. This may partly explain why Riedemann often celebrated inner *resurrection* as well, usually in vivid organic and personal terms. For example, repentant persons are grafted into Christ by the Spirit, who “makes them one with him in mind, in his very character and nature so that they become one plant and organism with him. . . . Christ is the root and the vine, and . . . as the sap rises from the root and makes the branches fruitful, so the Spirit of Christ rises from the root, Christ, into the branches and twigs, to make them all fruitful . . . of the same nature as the root and bear[ing] its kind of fruit.”³³

Simultaneously, Jesus provided divinization’s outward or *Christomorphic* pattern. For “When Christ begins to work in people, he causes them to do nothing but what he himself did during his life on earth.”³⁴ Jesus’ earthly comportment, however, emerged from deep spiritual roots in the Trinity, as Eckhart also had said. For “the Father has nothing for himself, but everything he has, he has with the Son. Likewise the Son has nothing for himself, but all he has, he has with the Father.” The incarnate Son, moreover, shared and continues to share all that he has with us. Consequently, by sharing what we have with others, we can become “one with the Son as the Son is one with the Father.”³⁵ The journey back to the Father with the Son was not only an individual but also a corporate venture.

The Rhineland current flowed further into Anabaptism, mingling with other streams and forming new branches through Pilgram Marpeck and the Dutch. But since its social implications attained a clear expression with

Riedemann, I will stop here. What resources can it provide for Anabaptists and others today who seek a deeper spirituality, especially a socially relevant one?

Contemporary Significance

We often hear that our era is *postmodern*, and that people are, or should be, more concerned with promoting particular local values, identities, and projects than alleged universal principles and movements. Though this is partly true, I propose that all facets of life today are increasingly being pervaded by a process that is perhaps *modernity's* climactic expression: globalization.³⁶ Particularly through world-wide communication webs, corporations and financial markets are interweaving with a celerity that overleaps national boundaries, outracing many customary governmental and socio-cultural restraints. Through this global networking, the pursuits of profit, consumption, and expanding production – all *modern* forces, unleashed through early capitalism – are surging towards their maximum unhindered operation. Note that I speak only of unrestrained maximization of profits, consumption, and production, unchecked by other values. I am not critiquing all forms of these forces, for many are moderated by other forces. Unlike the Hutterites, I am not rejecting all private property. Neither do I mean to portray globalization as entirely negative. It harbors great potential, for instance, for increasing understanding among nations, peoples, and classes.

Nonetheless, it is clear that globalizing megaforges often disrupt and destroy local less developed economies or render them permanently dependent. This faceless process repeatedly disintegrates communities and social and religious networks, and disorients people displaced in their wake. Additionally, globalization impacts society not only by reshaping such structures but at least as much by shaping its members – inwardly and psychically. It seeks above all to construct us as consumers. How many websites can you simply search for information without flashing signs or intruding spam urging you to purchase something? How many companies can you call with simple questions about service or charges without being urged, usually at the start, to buy something else? If pursuit of profit, production, and consumption increasingly mould a society's members as well as its structures, every social injustice will be shaped by them on both levels.

The *Anabaptist Vision* implies that injustices are best addressed by communities which draw on Jesus' distinctive life-pattern to propose and provide creative, alternative approaches to the issues involved. But if the *Vision* by itself cannot affect inward "spiritual poverty" among its adherents and others, how might South German/Austrian Anabaptist spirituality help? Primarily, perhaps, by warning that we cannot attack the roots of these problems if the desires and patterns which produce them are rooted in ourselves and also in their victims. Appeals to consume do not simply impinge on people from outside, as on a blank slate, leaving them fully free to respond. They are woven through nearly everything we experience. Frequently unnoticed, they arouse cravings to possess more and more. Often subliminally, they incessantly seek to shape the very character and patterns of one's desires and choices. If we seek to alter today's systems while we and their victims are still deeply structured by these creaturely attachments, we will, at best, produce some altered version of them.

South German/Austrian spirituality tells us that to really combat these systems, people must be restructured – inwardly and outwardly. This will involve identifying and letting go, often painfully, of ways they have become inordinately attached to values, behaviors, persons, and things. These must be replaced at equally deep levels by healthy, non-grasping, non-possessive ways of relating to all other creatures. By themselves, however, intellectual recognition of negative and positive patterns, or volitional efforts to reject the first and adopt the second, will scarcely penetrate the levels where structuring and re-structuring occur.

To apply the Anabaptist-Rhineland diagnosis to these levels, I should clarify several points. First, creaturely attachments are not simply to possessions, as if sin were merely desire for, or accumulation of, objects. Quite often desires for security, self-worth, even love and affection lead us to grasp after not only material goods, but also persons or social position or reputation or power, and to possess them. Second, since this spirituality stresses *crucifixion* of these desires and attachments, it might seem to imply that all desires are evil and that spirituality's goal is simply renunciation. However, it is *inordinate* attachments that must be uprooted. Attachments are inordinate when they bind us to anything that keeps us or others from receiving what they legitimately desire and really need. Some such attachments, indeed, are

clearly negative: people are often bound internally to destructive self-images, self-defeating behaviors, and oppressive relationships. But attachments to good things often become inordinate also – say, to a loved one, when the lover’s fears, possessiveness, or demands destroy the relationship. Grasping for or clinging to good things, moreover, draws these goods and ourselves away from, and creates conflict with, other people who want them; and above all, away from God. Inordinate attachments, then, must be uprooted to open us to non-grasping relationships with other creatures and people that will fulfill the real needs and desires of all.

Third, this detachment from old patterns and movement towards new ones is simply the inward, personal dimension of transformations in outward, interpersonal relationships with material goods, people, and structures. Inward sanctification, at least in Anabaptist developments of Rhineland spirituality, cannot occur apart from outward actions. But neither can lasting individual or social change emerge apart from inward participation in Jesus’ life, death, and resurrection. Since these inner experiences and outer actions, among Anabaptists, transpire in a communal context, patterns of corporate life quite different from those governed by creaturely attachments will emerge. Since these communities continue to extend Jesus’ cruciform yet resurrected life in the world, they will inevitably affect, and perhaps alter, broader social behaviors and structures.³⁷ In today’s world, the Life so extended will clear many a person’s “inner ground” of roots by which consumption- and profit-driven force have entangled it, thereby opening its deep longing to God’s presence.

Notes

¹ Some early Anabaptist writings have been published rather recently, in Daniel Liechty, ed., *Early Anabaptist Spirituality* (New York: Paulist, 1994); and C.J. Dyck, ed., *Spiritual Life in Anabaptism* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald, 1995). Among the first to argue that Anabaptism was significantly linked to earlier spiritual movements were Kenneth Davis, *Anabaptism and Asceticism* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald, 1974), and Werner Packull, *Mysticism and the Early South German-Austrian Anabaptists* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald, 1977).

² Harold Bender, *The Anabaptist Vision* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald, 1944), 31.

³ See esp. Stephen Dintaman, “The Spiritual Poverty of the Anabaptist Vision,” *The Conrad Grebel Review* 10.2 (Spring 1992): 205-08; “Reading the Reactions to ‘The Spiritual Poverty of the Anabaptist Vision,’” *The Conrad Grebel Review* 13.1 (Winter 1995): 2-10; and “The Pastoral Significance of the Anabaptist Vision,” *Menonite Quarterly Review* 69.3 (July 1995): 307-22.

⁴ By historic Anabaptism I mean the period from 1525-1575, though I will not trace it much beyond 1550. I trace Anabaptism's origins to three main, relatively independent sources: in Switzerland, South Germany/Austria, and the Netherlands. Bender prioritized the least mystical of these, the Swiss, which encouraged a minimizing of spirituality. This tendency was strengthened by Bender's colleague, Robert Friedmann, who distinguished historic Anabaptism sharply from historic Pietism. (See *Mennonite Piety Through the Centuries* [Goshen, IN: The Mennonite Historical Society, 1949], esp. 85-88). True Anabaptists, Friedmann argued, focused *outwardly* on working and suffering in light of God's Kingdom, but Pietists focused *inwardly* on individual enjoyment of salvation.

⁵ See the discussion in Oliver Davies, *God Within* (New York: Paulist, 1988), 43-45.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 55-56. Moreover, in the soul's depth, or *ground*, the Son's birth from the Father transpired "'entirely in the same way as . . . in eternity'" (quoted on 57). See Bernard McGinn's discussion in Edmund Colledge and McGinn, *Meister Eckhart: The Essential Sermons, Commentaries, Treatises and Defense* (New York: Paulist, 1981), 51-57.

⁷ "'God is present in the soul in the whole of his divinity'" (quoted in Davies, 48). When critiqued by the Inquisition for calling the human soul divine, Eckhart replied that only a faculty or power within it was divine. The rest was "'touched by createdness'" and was therefore "'itself created'" (49). See also Colledge and McGinn, *op. cit.*, 42-44, 80.

⁸ See Davies, 78-80, 83, 113-117; Josef Schmidt in Maria Shradly, trans., *Johannes Tauler: Sermons* (New York: Paulist, 1985), 28-34; Bengt Hoffman in Hoffman, trans., *The Theologia Germanica of Martin Luther* (New York: Paulist, 1980), 14-20 (Luther appears in this title only because the translation is based on a version of *The German Theology* edited by him. Luther praised this work when he first read it, but his enthusiasm for it later diminished while that of early Anabaptists increased [*Ibid.*, 24-25]). The distinction between divine essence and energies came from not the Rhineland, but the eastern Orthodox mystic Gregory Palamas (1296-1359). I find it useful in specifying a main difference between Eckhart and his two successors. This difference, however, was not always obvious, for Tauler in particular often spoke much like Eckhart.

⁹ Davies, 73-74; Shradly, 2-9; Hoffman, ed. 2-8.

¹⁰ Still, *The German Theology* sometimes sounded more like Eckhart. Being, it could say, cannot be known "on the basis of . . . creatureliness, createdness, and I-relatedness." (Hoffman, 61) Consequently, creatureliness, the self, and the I had to be destroyed (61, 77). But on balance, it appears that the self's grasping and control of creatures were meant.

¹¹ For Eckhart's, Tauler's, and *The German Theology's* use of this term, see Shradly, 31-33. For its use in historic Anabaptism, see Walter Klaassen, "'Gelassenheit' and Creation," *The Conrad Grebel Review* 9.1 (Winter 1991): 23-35.

¹² Quoted in Davies, 89 (*italics mine*), cf. 96; cf. Shradly, xv: "the decisive difference between Tauler and Eckhart . . . is the imitation of Christ, placing an emphasis on His humanity never to be abrogated." Yet Tauler also mentioned, like Eckhart though less often, being born from the Father as is the Son, and returning to the Father with the Son in the soul's *ground* (82). For *The German Theology* on following Jesus, see Hoffman, trans., esp. 67-68, 97.

¹³ Johannes Tauler, Sermon 11, in Shradly, 59.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 60.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 61.

¹⁶ See Muentzer's development of these themes in his "Sermon Before the Princes," in George Williams and Angel Mergal, eds., *Spiritual and Anabaptist Writers* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1957), 54-62.

¹⁷ "The weeds must be plucked out of the vineyard of God in the time of harvest. Then the beautiful red wheat will acquire substantial rootage and come up properly (Matt. 13:24-30). The angels (v. 39), however, who sharpen their sickles for this purpose are the serious servants of God who execute the wrath of the divine wisdom." (*Ibid.*, 68-69. In this sermon, Muentzer was seeking to enlist the princes of Saxony in the task.)

¹⁸ Shortly before his execution, Muentzer allowed that his revolution had failed because the peasants were not as purified from creaturely attachments as he had thought.

¹⁹ Leonhard Schiemer, "The Apostles' Creed: an interpretation," in Dyck, 33.

²⁰ Hans Hut, "On the Mystery of Baptism," in Liechty, 65.

²¹ Schiemer, "Three Kinds of Grace," in Liechty, 90.

²² For the thesis that historic Anabaptists understood salvation primarily as divinization, see Alvin Beachy, *The Concept of Grace in the Radical Reformation* (Nieuwkoop, the Netherlands: B. De Graf, 1977). Early South German/Austrians occasionally appeared to construe divinization as becoming God in essence. For example, Schiemer could say that we were created not to remain "as humans (*der mensch*), but . . . to become godly, divinized" ("The Apostles' Creed: an interpretation," 32 [translation of "Epistel an die christlich Gmein zu Rotenburg" in Lydia Mueller, ed. *Glaubenszeugnisse oberdeutscher Taufgesinnter* Leipzig: M. Heinsius Nachfolger, 1938: 49]). He added that "the creaturely (*die creatur*)" is a covering obscuring the divine light in us and "must be removed" (67). Yet the first expression hardly seems literal, for this divinization was "true human rest (*menschlichen rue*)" [49]). In the latter context, Schiemer affirmed the body's resurrection and exclaimed that true awareness of God would involve "a pure joy . . . that would surge through my body," making it "wholly immortal and glorified" (1938: 67). "The creaturely (*die creatur*)," then, likely meant creatures as objects of human grasping, along with that grasping – not the created nature of humans or any other beings. (Liechty, however, translates "die creatur" as "our creaturely nature" [92]). Schiemer affirmed bodily resurrection elsewhere (Dyck, 35), and also that God hates sin, but not the creatures God made (Mueller, 46).

Hut mentioned that in being baptized as new creatures, "all sin and human characteristics (*menschlicher eigenschaft*)" must be washed away ("The Mystery of Baptism," 78 [cf. Mueller, 25]). But the context shows that, like Schiemer and earlier Rhineland mystics, Hut was critiquing inordinate attachment to creaturely realities, not creatures or human features themselves.

²³ See my *A Contemporary Anabaptist Theology* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2004), Chapter 5.

²⁴ Hoffman, 62.

²⁵ Hut, *op. cit.*, 70.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 72; cf. Schiemer, "Three Kinds of Grace," 92; and "The Apostles' Creed: an interpretation," 39; and Hans Schlaffer, "A Simple Prayer" in Dyck, 205.

²⁷ John Friesen, trans., *Peter Riedemann's Hutterite Confession of Faith* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald, 1999), 129.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 62, 94.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 63; consequently, all creatures made “by God for his honor, but used by humans to dishonor and shame him, will be a witness against those selfsame people at the last judgment.”

³⁰ Instead of “wrong taking,” Friesen translates “embracing what is unrighteous” (94). “Wrong taking,” however, is more appropriate for the original “unrechten Annehmen,” especially since Riedemann cited Genesis 3:6 in support (Peter Riedemann, *Rechenschaft unserer Religion, Lehr und Glaubens*, 1565 [Reprinted by Cotswold-Bruderhof, Ashton Kennes, Wiltshire, England: Verlag der Hutterischen Brueder, 1938], 59).

³¹ Friesen, 94, 120.

³² Although it was not conceptualized chiefly in Rhineland terms, but as remorse and repentance in response to the preached Word (*ibid.*, 95-96, 166-67, 174-78).

³³ *Ibid.*, 97. Faith, moreover, “grasps the invisible, one and only, mighty God, making us close to God and at one with him, and able to partake of his nature and character.” It makes people “resemble God in his nature, living in God’s righteousness, ardent in God’s love, and observing his commandments” (84).

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 134; cf. 132-37, 217-24.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 80, cf. 119. Christ came to lead the human race back to God (176), to gather those who belonged to God and lead them into the liberty of heirs (181). He became a lowly servant (71) to guide and instruct us, especially in the face of wealth and power (120, 134).

³⁶ A lucid, detailed analysis is provided by Thomas Friedmann in *The Lexus and the Olive Tree* (New York: Random House, 2000).

³⁷ Since most early Anabaptists were quite pessimistic about positive change in “the world,” it might seem that they formed alternative communities to isolate themselves from, rather than engage, society. Yet the Hutterites, who were as pessimistic as any, developed the most comprehensive alternative structures precisely to become “a lantern of righteousness, in which the light of grace is held up to the whole world, so that . . . people may learn to see and know the way of life. . . . It sheds abroad its light more brightly and clearly than the sun to enlighten all people” (Friesen, 77-78). Hutterites served their local neighbors by manufacturing clothing, tools, and numerous other useful articles that became highly demanded. Some even became doctors and served the sick. They offered hospitality to all travelers who asked (149-50). While Hutterites were accused of withdrawing from society, they were actually seeking to forge a “polity for the whole world” (Ulrich Stadler, “Cherished Instructions on Sin, Excommunication, and the Community of Goods,” in Williams and Mergal, 278).

Mary A. Schiedel, *Pioneers in Ministry: Women Pastors in Ontario Mennonite Churches, 1973-2003* (Kitchener, ON: Pandora Press, 2003; co-published with Herald Press).

One of the highlights of my thirteen years as a Mennonite pastor has been the Women Pastors Meeting that takes place during Associated Mennonite Biblical Seminary's Pastors Week. Mary A. Schiedel has recreated the heart of such a gathering in her book *Pioneers in Ministry: Women Pastors in Ontario Mennonite Churches, 1973-2003*. This volume is the result of a writing project in which Scheidel invited fifty women in ministry in Ontario to respond to questions such as What is your image of ministry, and how have you worked with it?, What important experiences in ministry have confirmed your sense of call?, and What is your vision for women in ministry in the Mennonite Church? The twenty-five women who responded, including Schiedel, represent the changing face of women in ministry over the past three decades.

The essays highlight core issues for each succeeding generation of pastors and the congregations they serve. In the overlapping voices we hear the themes of call and confirmation, of gifts affirmed and questioned, of transitions, disappointments, successes, and hopes. This balanced collection reveals the shifting context for women claiming pastoral identity. Five sections are included: Trailblazers, Pioneers, Women on Teams, Sole Pastors, and Pastors and Mothers. We travel with Trailblazers who broke virgin ground behind each pulpit to make a sacred and safe place for women. We come home with the youngest generation, Pastors and Mothers, who, as Julie Ellison White writes, are discovering "a central role to play in the spiritual birthings of congregations" even as they bear and birth their own babies.

I found reading this book similar to successive outings for coffee and conversation with engaging colleagues. I smiled at the wry reflection of Doris Weber, a Trailblazer, who asked, "Were women pastors expected to bring a dish to the pot luck? Or, since we were ministers, was there no need to because we had been serving spiritual food?" When Doris Gingrich Gascho shared, "Women pastors have brought a particular 'mothering' which has given permission, even for men, to be more nurturing pastors," I nodded, remembering my teamwork with male colleagues. My heart went out to one of the youngest contributors, Hendrike Isert Bender, as she reflected on a

persistent “mother guilt” which is “especially pronounced when the children are sick or have specific needs that require attention. The compelling feeling of wanting to be with them, and yet wanting and needing to be with church members and programs, can tear our hearts apart.”

Further perspective is offered here to seminaries, conference and denominational leaders, and pastors regarding the ever-changing and revealing images women use to define their work. Early images were grounded in listening and caring, emerging often from prior vocations in parenting, social work, or teaching. As the authority and relational power of ministry grew, images of teacher, shepherd, preacher, and worship leader became stronger. Only more recently have women more joyfully embraced ordination as the entrance into the “office” of leadership. As women claimed more openly their responsibility in ministry, they coined new images to define their unique leadership styles. Sue Clemmer Steiner perceived herself as a “spiritual companion – the one who tends the communal soul of the congregation.” Several other women turned to the metaphor of midwifery to describe their work. Ministry as labyrinth and journey and going against the current, and minister as gardener, evangelist, and coach are additional images.

In the early years Martha Smith Good looked for a model of ministry and found none for women. She found direction in these questions: “‘Who was Jesus?’ ‘How did he know what his role was?’ ‘Who was his mentor?’ and ‘Where was his source of strength?’” She claimed as her mission statement Jesus’ own: Luke 4:18-19. And as the decades turned, many women note how they self-consciously took the role of model and mentor to younger leaders, and particularly to other women.

Susan D. Shantz’s cover drawing, entitled “Of Her Was Born,” is a subtle rendition of a saintly Mary stunned at the mysterious unveiling of Babushka dolls. There they are before her, in various stages of “coming apart,” revealing doll upon inner doll. The parts of all the smiling dolls are scattered on the table next to a large apple (from the orchards of Ontario?). The tiniest inner doll has a halo that matches the halo of the awe-filled Mary. And Mary, like God, holds a thin thread that unveils this scene.

Even so in this collection Mary A. Scheidel has exposed the Holy – God at work, in Mennonite women, in the congregations of Ontario, in leading. *Pioneers in Ministry* is a gift to fellow pioneers and those considering the trek.

The changing face of pastoral ministry has affected all Mennonites, men and women, and will continue to shape the church and its leaders for years to come.

Nina B. Lanctot, associate pastor, Belmont Mennonite Church, Elkhart, IN.

Betty Jane Bailey and J. Martin Bailey, eds. *Who are the Christians in the Middle East?* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003).

The Baileys have turned years of work and travel in the Middle East into a comprehensive guide to the churches of that region. Four essays introduce the book and set the current context. In the first, David Kerr of the University of Edinburgh gives “A Western Christian Appreciation of Eastern Christianity.” While both the New Testament and Western church history focused on the apostles who went westward, Kerr acknowledges and focuses on those who went eastward. The second, “The Future of Christians in the Arab World,” is by Dr. Riad Jarjour, a former general secretary of the Middle East Council of Churches (MECC). Jarjour describes how Middle Eastern Christians have found, and will find, a significant role for themselves in spite of the “Middle East’s structure of endemic crisis.”

The Baileys then move into an essay that describes the commendable work of the MECC in fostering renewal and unity among the Middle Eastern churches. Though this chapter focused on the work of MECC, I missed mention anywhere in the book of the monumental ecumenical work of the late Cardinal Konig’s Austrian-based organization, Pro Oriente (www.prooriente.at). For decades this organization has sponsored encounters between various Middle Eastern churches and has facilitated resolution of various ancient divisions.

Following is an essay on “The Importance of Jerusalem to Christians,” where the authors note that Jerusalem is on the verge of becoming a museum for Christians rather than a living Christian community, because of the emigration of Palestinian Christians. In the book as a whole I sensed a tendency to focus on Jerusalem because of its historical prominence, rather than on areas like Egypt, Syria, Lebanon, and Iraq, where there are many more Christians and more prominent church leaders.

Concluding the first section is a very helpful timeline for the events in Middle Eastern church history and a discussion of how numbers are determined in an attempt to count Middle Eastern Christians.

Part two profiles the churches of the region and is introduced by an excellent essay, "The Origins of the Diversity of Christianity in the Middle East." This essay is followed by profiles of the different families of churches including the Eastern Orthodox, Oriental Orthodox, Catholic, Evangelical/Protestant, and Assyrian. Scattered to this section are profiles of various patriarchs. I would have found it helpful, for reasons of inclusiveness and propriety, to include profiles of all the patriarchs, as they often are the focus of the churches' corporate identity. I also noted a tendency to mention the institutions of Protestant churches (e.g., Coptic Evangelical Organization for Social Services in Egypt, Near East School of Theology in Beirut) often to the neglect of similar Catholic institutions like Holy Spirit University in Beirut and the extensive network of over 100 Catholic nuns doing social service work in Syria.

Part three is a country-by-country profile of the role of church and state in the Middle East. The introductory essay is an excellent brief history of the events of the region. The profiles give a vivid sense of the dilemmas and circumstances of the Christian communities as they struggle to maintain their national identities and their religious identity.

I would have appreciated a more focused coverage of the role of Christian women, including their role in the recent renewal of Christian education and ecumenical work. The index indicates only six places where women's work is mentioned by name. Of note is the Greek Orthodox woman Mahat Khoury, who was one of the co-founders of the MECC and staffed their office in Damascus for over twenty years. Also noteworthy is the vital role trusted Christian women have played in the Middle East, including the Egyptian Protestant, Mrs. Safwhat, an engineer who controlled the flow and division of all the water into the Nile Delta for years; the Palestinian Christian, Hannan Ashrawi, who has been a spokeswoman for her people; and an Armenian woman who is one of the foremost international lawyers in Iran. The Palestinian Jean Zaru is the only woman profiled in the book.

The book concludes with an annotated bibliography followed by list of three web sites of interest. Readers would have been aided by a list of video and multimedia resources and a more comprehensive list of web sites.

Also missing was consideration of the renewal and role of monastic communities in Middle Eastern churches. Readers could have been impressed and drawn to visit some of these monasteries by a complete list and a brief description of their centrality to the church. Nevertheless, I highly recommend this book for persons traveling to, studying about, or working in the region.

Roy Hange, co-pastor, with wife Maren, of Charlottesville Mennonite Church in Charlottesville, VA.

Alan Verhey, *Reading the Bible in the Strange World of Medicine*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003.

What do the ancient texts of the Bible have to do with the moral complexities of modern medicine? Judging by most medical ethics texts, including those written by Christian ethicists, the answer is little or nothing. It is easy to come to this negative conclusion. After all, Scripture is necessarily silent about modern medical technology and its corresponding dilemmas, and what Scripture does say about medicine and healing often strikes us as ranging from quaint to antiquated to outright odd. Yet, in *Reading the Bible in the Strange World of Medicine*, Alan Verhey, Professor of Christian Ethics at Duke Divinity School, shows that Scripture is essential in our efforts as Christians to engage the pervasive reality of modern medicine.

Verhey does not offer simplistic solutions for how we should read and appropriate the Bible or for the issues that we confront in modern medicine. Keenly aware of the historical and social distance between ourselves and Scripture's authors, he rejects proof texting and appealing to Scripture as a collection of timeless moral codes. He instead sees the reading of Scripture as a community practice that shapes our lives as we prayerfully and humbly read the Bible together, discerning what actions and patterns of behavior are fitting to or coherent with the whole story that it tells.

Verhey is confident that reading Scripture as a community practice provides the memory and wisdom necessary to guide us through the complex terrain of contemporary medicine. In fact, Scripture trains us to see that modern medicine is "strange" in that it is often driven by the corrupt assumptions

of a Baconian, liberal, capitalist society with particularly distorted notions of personhood, compassion, freedom/autonomy, justice, parenting, and children.

A careful, gifted reader of the Bible, Verhey offers his own wrestling with contested moral questions in medicine as a contribution to the community practice of discernment in light of Scripture. Dealing with questions of personhood, suffering, genetics, abortion, artificial reproductive technologies, physician-assisted suicide, care for neonates, and access to healthcare, he strives to hear the wisdom of the broader biblical narrative. Thus, for example, his effort to understand “personhood” draws on the beginning narratives of Genesis, the infancy and resurrection stories of Jesus, the story of the Good Samaritan, and Paul’s concern for the body in First Corinthians. The result is a notion of personhood that is embodied and social, that reduces a “person” neither to a capacity for agency nor to sheer genetic uniqueness, and is more dependent on our orientation to care for others than on abstract categories.

This volume is difficult to classify: Most of the material has previously appeared in some form, but the book is not just a collection of essays. Verhey has organized, rewritten, and synthesized earlier material into a coherent whole that is more than a set of essays but less than a new monograph.

Verhey is an engaging speaker, and writes in the same way that he presents. Stylistically, the written results are often mixed. For scholars and those familiar with Verhey’s work, this volume is sometimes verbose and repetitive. Yet, these same “flaws” make it more accessible and truly engaging for the nonspecialist. Scholars will occasionally need to skim-read, but Verhey’s insights justify wading through some extra verbiage. Nonspecialists will find an engaging volume that is wide-ranging enough to constitute a strong Christian introduction to medical ethics.

The volume is especially well-suited to clergy. Pastors who spend time with it will find themselves better prepared when congregation members struggle with realities such as infertility, unwanted pregnancies, and painful, lingering deaths. It does not provide a set of ready-made answers, but it does provide tools to better think through these issues together as Christians. Besides, the range of subject matter and the serious engagement with Scripture make this book a fertile field for sermon and Bible study ideas.

Joseph Kotva, Anabaptist Center for Healthcare Ethics, Elkhart, IN.