

# **Responding to the Call: Reflections on *Called Together to be Peacemakers***

**Mennonite – Roman Catholic Dialogue Group  
Toronto School of Theology**

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## **Preface**

1. Over the course of two academic years, approximately 10 graduate students in theology and other interested members of the faith groups gathered on the invitation of the Toronto Mennonite Theological Centre. Half of the participants were Mennonite and the other half Roman Catholic. Our meetings over the first year incorporated prayer and fellowship, as well as our initial theological reflections on *Called Together to be Peacemakers: Report of the International Dialogue between the Catholic Church and Mennonite World Conference, 1998-2003* (CTP)<sup>1</sup>. In addition to learning more about one another theologically, our discussions also served to develop relationships between Mennonite and Roman Catholic faith communities in Toronto.

2. Our goal during the second year was to provide a response to CTP that might be helpful for future dialogue. We formed sub-groups based on personal interests to examine more closely the questions that arose during our first year of discussion. Each sub-group, composed of representatives from each tradition, dealt with a specific area of CTP and brought their reflections back to the larger group. The sections that follow are the responses of each sub-group; this short paper is our shared response to the call “to promote reconciliation between [Mennonites and Catholics] for the sake of the Gospel” (5). Although each section in this paper is primarily authored by a specific sub-group, the larger meetings allowed for broader reflection, so that the final paper reflects the consensus of the whole group. In thanksgiving for the work done by the members of the international dialogue and in the hope that our reflections might inspire further discussion, we offer the fruit of our collective thought.

## **Theme 1: Method**

3. Throughout our discussion, the intersection between authority and reception in speaking for the church was a continual source for dialogue. We have come to appreciate, in our own discussions, the difficulty of speaking on behalf of our respective faith traditions and commend the members of the international dialogue for their willingness to bear witness to the faith of their communities and for their commitment to the project of ecumenical dialogue.

4. As we continued to meet, we began to recognize more clearly a need for greater sensitivity to how authority and receptivity function within each tradition. The general formulas of “Mennonites believe...” or “Catholics believe...” tend to obscure diversities within each faith tradition. Diverse expressions of faith reflect different ways that each tradition embodies,

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<sup>1</sup> Available at [www.bridgefalk.net/dialogue2003/calledtogether.htm](http://www.bridgefalk.net/dialogue2003/calledtogether.htm).

experiences, and speaks about itself and its beliefs. Further, the way CTP presents Roman Catholic beliefs alongside Mennonite beliefs, each with footnoted references, gives the false impression that our ecclesiologies are similar enough to allow us to speak authoritatively in a formally similar way.

5. For example, in paragraphs 70-110, the Roman Catholic view of the church is cited almost exclusively on the basis of Conciliar documents, while the Mennonite view makes reference to a Confession of Faith, Mennonite theologians, and non-Mennonite historians. This multiplicity of sources is appreciated, but the significance and authority of these sources for each tradition could be more explicit. The attempt to produce formal consistency in CTP may be one reason why the section on Mennonite views of the church rarely mentions the congregation (with the exception of paragraph 105), which some Mennonites consider the primary embodiment of and source of authority for the church. Mennonite traditions rely less on making authoritative statements and more on actual practices and judgments of congregations. Though this makes doing comparative ecclesiology more difficult, future dialogues might wrestle more explicitly with the Mennonite resistance to an authoritative organ of theological self-definition. While Roman Catholics have a highly developed theology of tradition, Mennonites have not sufficiently clarified how their own history is theologically normative. Appeals in CTP to Mennonite history as indicative of Mennonite theology overemphasize a similarity to Roman Catholic understandings of tradition.

6. Furthermore, we are concerned that the theological positions of each side are represented as more monolithic and more settled than they actually are. Even within the framework of magisterial teaching, there are diverse and legitimate Roman Catholic traditions of interpretation and practice. Some may object to intra-Mennonite or intra-Catholic debates being reflected in such a dialogue; we worry, however, that to gloss over such inner diversity might shift the emphasis of dialogue from some measure of reconciled diversity to a monolithic version of unity represented by overly narrow self-presentation. We value the ways in which dialogue can result in greater self-examination and clarification within each community of faith.

7. Our concern with method is not a suggestion that future dialogues ought to be conducted in a radically different way, or that all the details of method must be clarified before moving on to substance. Our basic suggestion is to make explicit the assumptions and methodologies operative within each tradition to prevent false conceptions regarding the commonality of structures of authority, receptivity and self-understanding.

## **Theme 2: Religious Liberty**

8. Flowing from our concerns surrounding the naming of sources, several issues emerged concerning paragraphs 60-61 on religious liberty, which contain a disagreement not in doctrine but in fact. Paragraph 60 contains a statement of essential agreement between Mennonites and Roman Catholics on religious liberty, but paragraph 61 describes what appears to be the lack of a shared historical understanding concerning official, historical Roman Catholic doctrine.<sup>2</sup> CTP

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<sup>2</sup> There are also inaccuracies that give rise to the divergent historical understandings. Section 61 carries the implication that Mennonites or Anabaptists instigated, were the exclusive harbingers of or unanimously believed in religious liberty, and further, that they were the exclusive advocates for such a doctrine during the Reformation

appeals to the Vatican II document, *Dignitatis Humanae* (DH) as the basis for Roman Catholic positions on religious freedom. We are concerned with the CTP representation of the statement on religious liberty in DH; we believe there is more divergence between DH and Mennonite understandings of religious liberty than CTP acknowledges.

9. We recognize that DH states it is wrong for a public authority to “compel its citizens by force or fear or any other means to profess or repudiate any religion or to prevent anyone from joining or leaving a religious body” (6). A review of the minutes from the discussion sessions at Vatican II and a closer reading of the text and its context, however, show clearly that it was aimed primarily at criticizing totalitarian governments around the world who did not allow liberty of belief or practice to Roman Catholics in those countries. We are concerned that DH was only implicitly concerned with the Roman Catholic Church’s relationship to other ecclesial bodies that have sought religious liberty in traditionally Roman Catholic countries.

10. Closer reading of DH also brings into question CTP’s assumption that the “entire text reflects in many ways the position that was taken by sixteenth century Anabaptists” (60). We believe that a reassessment of how CTP appeals to DH may lend greater clarity to the issue of religious liberty as an area of agreement between Roman Catholics and Mennonites. Appealing to more recent Roman Catholic statements on religious liberty might bypass the interpretive issues that arise from basing Roman Catholic positions on DH.<sup>3</sup>

11. We acknowledge that the Vatican II statement did affirm that “there has at times appeared a way of acting that was hardly in accord with the spirit of the Gospel, or even opposed to it” (61). We would suggest, then, that the question is not whether there have been individuals who have offered theological justifications for religious coercion throughout the centuries on behalf of the Roman Catholic Church, but whether the official doctrine of the Roman Catholic Church has ever justified such coercion. It behooves those Mennonites and Roman Catholics who object to the Roman Catholic account in CTP that an official doctrine of non-coercion has always stood firm to cite specific documents that contradict this claim.

### **Theme 3: Baptism**

12. One avenue that seems to be particularly fruitful for continuing dialogue involves the theology of the action of God along, in and with the human actions in the performance of baptism. Baptism is the ritual by which people are inducted into both the Mennonite and Roman Catholic churches, and both traditions believe that baptism effects a real change in the nature and status of the person being baptized in relation to the Christian community and in relation to God. Given these strong points of unity, we believe it is likely that there is room for further convergence in this area.

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period. There were some important Protestants, Roman Catholics and non-Christians, who have also argued for forms of religious liberty or toleration since the time of the Reformation.

<sup>3</sup> For example, John Paul II’s statement in *Redemptor Hominis* (4 March 1979), “[Human] rights are rightly reckoned to include the right to religious freedom together with the right to freedom of conscience,” is more akin to the sixteenth century Anabaptist position on religious liberty than DH.

13. We felt it was an unfortunate oversight that the political significance of believer's baptism in the sixteenth century was not given more prominence in the sections on the shared understanding of history and on sacraments and ordinances. The dispute over believer's baptism in the sixteenth century involved state and citizenship issues as well as church doctrine, and so became highly political in nature. This raises two questions we believe that the document glossed over. First, how have changes in the doctrines of the relationship between church and state within both traditions influenced the political and ecclesial nature of baptism? And second, have these changes provided an opening for a new conversation on the political and ecclesial nature of baptism? We believe that the changing context in which Mennonite and Roman Catholic political theologies have developed since the sixteenth century have had a more profound influence on the respective doctrinal formulations than CTP acknowledges, as the section below on peace will examine further.

14. One of the significant differences between Mennonites and Roman Catholics, highlighted in the above section on methodology, is the nature of ecclesial authority. One of the recent changes in some Mennonite churches has been a practical acceptance of the legitimacy of other ecclesial traditions. This shift in ecclesiology has been mirrored in the Roman Catholic Church following Vatican II. As a result, Mennonite churches have to decide how to accommodate Christians baptized as infants who desire membership in their churches. We call on Mennonite churches to consider accepting those who were baptized as infants as members upon confession of faith, evidence of renewed life and commitment to a covenant of accountability with the congregation. This is already a practice in some congregations. We recognize that the restoration of the Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults in the Roman Catholic tradition has provided a renewed appreciation of believer's baptism; we call on Roman Catholics to consider further the connections between the initiation rites of baptism, confirmation and first communion and the significance of an adult assent on the part of the individual believer.

15. Both Mennonites and Roman Catholics insist that baptism is a pre-requisite for full involvement in the life of the church. Given that the Roman Catholic Church recognizes the validity of Mennonite baptism done in the name of the Trinity, we wonder what the next step would be for Mennonites who would desire to attend and participate in the life of a Roman Catholic church. Furthermore, Mennonite clarification on the way in which children who have not been baptized can or cannot participate in the life of the church would also help to illuminate the presuppositions underlying the dialogue on baptism.

#### **Theme 4: Eucharist**

16. We recognize that the goal of full communion between Roman Catholics and Mennonites will not be realized simply or easily. Sharing the table of one another's Eucharistic celebrations cannot be viewed as one step to the realization of full communion but as the sign of its fulfillment. In light of this reality, we have chosen to focus our comments on what each tradition can do to clarify its own doctrine and practice and understand the doctrines and practices of the other tradition, so that the obstacles to full communion could be more fully identified and mutually understood.

17. We commend the drafters of CTP for identifying significant points of convergence between Mennonite and Roman Catholic celebrations of the Lord's Supper/Eucharist, while at the same time acknowledging the significant divergences that remain. In particular, we are grateful for the recognition that Mennonites and Roman Catholics share a common belief in the presence of the risen Christ in the celebrating community and in the proclaimed Word. We invite Roman Catholics to acknowledge that Mennonites may recognize the real presence of Christ in the congregation and the Word during the celebration of the Lord's Supper.<sup>4</sup> We invite Mennonites to further reflection on the nature of Christ's presence, and to consider whether, or in what sense, it might be extended to include also the bread and the wine.

18. Another significant area of convergence is the shared understanding of the Lord's Supper/Eucharist as a communal meal. We appreciated that the Roman Catholic understanding of the Eucharist as both meal and sacrifice were presented. However, it was suggested that further clarification concerning the relationship between meal and sacrifice might be helpful, particularly given the absence of sacrificial terminology, such as altar and priest, in the presentation of Roman Catholic Eucharistic theology. This absence is striking, given that the sacrificial aspect the Roman Catholic Eucharist is identified as an area of divergence.

19. Finally, given that mutual recognition of baptismal practices was identified in paragraph 144 as an area of major study, we suggest that the mutual recognition of the Lord's Supper/Eucharist is also an area that requires further study. Clarity might be brought to this issue through an examination of the intimate connection between the identity of the person celebrating and the sacrificial nature of the Eucharist for Roman Catholic theology. We invite Mennonites to consider whether Christ's presence as the host inviting us to the table might require that an ordained person officiate and we invite Roman Catholics to consider the validity of ordained ministry among Mennonite churches. Furthermore, recognizing the significant barriers to full ecclesial communion, we invite Roman Catholics to consider under what circumstances individual Mennonites might participate in Roman Catholic Eucharistic celebrations and investigate whether or not there might be ways to extend such dispensations to larger groups as well.

## **Theme 5: Peace**

20. We commend the members of the international dialogue for the attention given to peace initiatives. Given the title of the document, we expected CTP to spend some time addressing the major causes of violence in today's world. We believe it would be fruitful in future dialogues to delve more deeply into how our churches should minister for peace in the world and to identify major obstacles to such action.

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<sup>4</sup> See Art. 12 of *Confession of Faith in a Mennonite Perspective*: "As Christians eat the bread and drink the cup, they experience Christ's presence in their midst. The Lord's Supper both represents Christ and is a way in which Christ is present again ("re-present") in the body of believers," and Art. 9 of *Confession of Faith* (Evangelical Mennonite Mission Conference, 2001): "The church is the visible representation of Jesus through its gatherings and ministries in the world... The Lord's Supper... represents the believer's communion with Christ and the unity that believers find in the body of Christ."

21. Our concerns about methodology resurface here. Without naming the significant differences in each tradition's self-understanding, the convergences on peace ministry in the world cannot be realized to the satisfaction of both faith traditions. We believe that the divergence on the structure of the church (105) has more serious consequences than the paragraphs on convergences in ecclesiology and peace (175) acknowledge. Whereas Roman Catholics tend to affirm participation in government, social structures and even, in some cases, the military, Mennonites tend to be more suspicious of governmental structures (186). We also note that the hierarchical structure of the Roman Catholic Church historically and presently has functioned more like a nation state. We call on both traditions to examine more closely the relationship between their political theology and ecclesiology.

22. This leads to a number of questions that might be helpful in future discussion: To what extent, despite convergences on metaphors for ecclesiology, does the structure of the Roman Catholic Church (modeling the hierarchical structure found in historical nation-states) limit its capacity of be a peace church? More discussion might follow the statement that "both Catholics and some Mennonites acknowledge that when all recourse to non-violent means have failed, the state or international authorities may use force in defence of the innocent" (187). The structure of the Roman Catholic Church as an international player and the size of her membership seem to contribute to maintaining a just-war theory. The relationships between ecclesial structure and peace witness require further attention in future dialogue. Roman Catholics might consider the ways congregational models of church facilitate peace ministries. On the other hand, given the role of John Paul II in the fall of communism, Mennonites might consider to what extent the hierarchical structure of the Roman Catholic Church and the unity represented by the pope can enable a more visible commitment to peace.

23. Perhaps most critically, as our questions reveal, we believe that the church's relationship to the state is insufficiently addressed in CTP. The resulting lack in the document is especially apparent in the "Considering History" section. Even near the end of our two years of discussion, it came as something of a revelation for several Roman Catholic members of our committee that the rejection of pedobaptism in the sixteenth century was seen by established ecclesial and secular authorities as eminently dangerous because of the threat it posed to the medieval relationship between the church and the state. Only one short sentence<sup>5</sup> in the section considering rupture between Mennonites and Roman Catholics addresses this issue directly. We believe that the suggestion of a "provocative effect" as the result of a "close relationship between church and state" fails to capture the initial enormity of the problem and its continuing consequences, both positive and negative, for future dialogues.

24. We call on Roman Catholics and Mennonites to reflect seriously on the historical Mennonite concern (186) that the very structure of the modern nation-state might inhibit the realization of justice and peace. Some members of our dialogue group suggested that the existence and structure of the nation-state is in some significant ways quite contrary to the spirit of the gospel, as evidenced by the continual conflicts over borders, leadership, racism, material wealth and colonialism of the twentieth century. In the areas of future study, CTP suggests that further discussion is necessary to understand "the relationship of the different Christian peace positions

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<sup>5</sup> Paragraph 40: "Given the close relationship between church and state, the practice of rebaptizing those who were already baptized as infants had an extremely provocative effect in the sixteenth century."

to the apostolic faith” (189). Where we agree that “the church is called to be a living sign and an effective instrument of peace” (175), we would encourage future dialogue relating to how the *structure* of apostolic churches must be used to witness against the nation-state where it is opposed to peace.

25. We feel that CTP has opened the door for this discussion in a few instances. First, it insists that “allegiance to the Christ as Lord takes precedence over the demands of the state” (87 cf. 117, 176). Second, the historical section suggests that Roman Catholics approve the medieval Church’s goal that “all social, political, and economic structures” be brought “into harmony with the Gospel” but that this goal is one to which “Mennonites remain opposed” (59). We do not agree that this is necessarily the case. Representatives of three of the largest Mennonite denominations in North America directed us to language in their confessions of faith affirming such a goal with remarkably similar language.<sup>6</sup> Mennonite opposition throughout history has more often been to the use of violence to achieve these ends.

26. We wonder how future discussion might consider the cross as political resistance. Even in sections exploring Christology and Peace (162 and 174), CTP perpetuates a longstanding reading of Scripture as affirming existing “political authority as God given”(186),<sup>7</sup> and asserts that state and international authorities, rather than being a part of the problem, could legitimately be the last “recourse” when “nonviolent means ha[ve] failed” (187). We would suggest that question five in the areas for future study (189) be more explicit in its questioning of the assumptions underlying the relationships between church and state.

## **Conclusion**

27. For the past two years, *Called Together to be Peacemakers* has been the source of much discussion between Mennonites and Roman Catholics, and more importantly, has brought us together to form relationships across the boundaries of our traditions. We are most thankful to the members of the international dialogue for the opportunity to gather together, to learn more about one another and our respective traditions, to pray together and to build relationships. CTP has highlighted for us the many ways in which our churches benefit from engaging with other Christians. We are very grateful for the work of the members of the international dialogue, and regard their report as a gift to the Church; the invitation for our response is most appreciated.

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<sup>6</sup> See Art. 24 of *Confession of Faith in a Mennonite Perspective*: “The church is to be a spiritual, social, and economic reality . . . in anticipation that the kingdom of this world will become the kingdom of our Lord”; Mennonite Brethren denominational statements agree that all aspects of society will eventually come under the rule of Christ, but more explicitly await the second coming of Christ for the advent of such a reality. See the *Mennonite Brethren Confession of Faith* Art. 12 and 18.

<sup>7</sup> Mennonite theologian John Howard Yoder has extended Karl Barth’s insight that the chapter division between Roman 12 and 13 artificially divorces Paul’s insistence on enemy love from the apparent affirmation of political authority as God given.

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