

## Diversity: Blessing, curse, or call to communion? A reflection on the Mennonite World Conference experience

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**T**he first global Anabaptist-Mennonite family portrait, taken in June 1925 at the initial Mennonite World Conference gathering (Basel/Zurich, Switzerland), reveals precious little diversity. The photograph shows a group that is uniform in race (white), culture (white shirts), age (very mature), gender (dominantly male), and—one surmises—wealth.<sup>1</sup> The caption reveals another powerful dimension of homogeneity: it is written in German, the sole language of the first Mennonite World Conference assembly.

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The most recent family photos, snapped from all angles in July 2009 (Asunción, Paraguay), explode with colour.<sup>2</sup> MWC's fifteenth world assembly drew 6,200 participants from 63 nations; nearly 700 of them had already participated in the energy-packed Global Youth Summit held just a few kilometres down the road. While participants did not come from every tribe on earth, they

did represent many ethnic and cultural groups, levels of wealth—from the poorest in the land to the richest—and languages. For worship services, the “platform language” was Spanish; those who spoke other languages listened through headsets to interpreters speaking French, German, English, Portuguese, Nivaclé, or Enlhet.

“Are you Mennonite?” a policeman asked Ditrich Pana as he approached the huge white church where Anabaptists from around the world were gathering. In Paraguay, Mennonites are known as fair-skinned, German-speaking farmers and ranchers who live in isolated colonies and produce much of the country's cheese. Pana, an Enlhet, does not fit that profile; he belongs to an indigenous group.

Pana, member of the world assembly's national organizing committee and a radio evangelist, answered his uninformed questioner: "Through the Holy Spirit, yes, I am a Mennonite." In a sermon to the assembly, Pana went a step further in explaining his identity: "This gathering unites us with glad hearts," he said. "We belong to each other and to [God] this week as sisters and brothers and friends."<sup>3</sup>

### **Diversity: More blessing than curse**

For most who experience it in the context of Mennonite World Conference—whether in global assembly or less dramatically but more substantially in enduring international relationships within the MWC community of churches—diversity carries a positive value: it is the work of the Spirit and a joyous blessing to the family. Multifaceted diversity in the global church usually feels exciting, renewing, life giving. It is received as the future of the church breaking into the present patterns of our emotions, our spirits, our lives, our missions, our understandings of God's creative work in and through the church.

Yet from the beginning diversity hidden in the Mennonite World Conference picture posed problems. The record of the first assembly indicates that divergence of theological convictions among the approximately one hundred participants, including the group of fifteen official delegates from five nations,<sup>4</sup> was sufficient to impede agreement on the future of the conference. Already prior to the event, Harold S. Bender had written to Christian Neff, German Mennonite leader and convener of the first three assemblies, to say that it "seems that our community will not officially take part in the common celebration and festival in Zurich or Basel. They especially take exception to the idea of a Mennonite World Union in which believing and unbelieving Mennonites would be united."<sup>5</sup> And, added Bender, who would later become a main organizer of four MWC assemblies, "many of our preachers are on principle against any festival and celebration."

More recently, diversity has fractured unity and limited participation in Mennonite World Conference. Subsequent to the MWC executive secretary's participation in the Day of Prayer for Peace in the World, convened by Pope John Paul II in October 1986 (Assisi, Italy), one European conference dropped membership in

Mennonite World Conference. A few years later, following MWC's twelfth global assembly in July 1990 (Winnipeg, Canada), one South American conference withdrew from membership on the conviction that MWC leaders had not spoken clearly enough at that gathering in opposition to homosexual practice as sin. Other Anabaptist-related groups have not joined MWC or participated in MWC activities because of concerns about "union" with Mennonites perceived as "unbelieving" or inadequately believing.

In the meantime, as the Anabaptist-related majority moved to the global South,<sup>6</sup> diversity between and within MWC member churches continued to increase, not only ethnically, culturally, linguistically, and theologically, but also economically. Disparity of wealth is one of the most basic obstacles to mutual blessing in the Anabaptist-Mennonite family of faith.

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Usually this diversity is barely visible in the global church; it can be ignored because oceans separate our daily lives. But economic inequality encroaches destructively on relationships when northern benefactors make decisions about funding that eliminate initiatives southerners deem necessary to the life or mission of their churches—just as it does when southerners see northerners as the "sugar daddies" of the family of faith. And when we find ourselves worshiping together by day in global assembly while lodged at night in a pattern resembling economic

apartheid—because of differences in comfort criteria and purchasing power—our diversity can feel like a curse on the family.

Indeed, by the late twentieth century, some were saying that the diversification of the Anabaptist-Mennonite movement had created so much distance between us that we were no longer family:

*Very little connects one place with the other; little do the people know of one another. A Mennonite Indian in the Chaco and a Mennonite businessman in Krefeld, and a Mennonite woman in Siberia—worlds separate them.*

*Perhaps they refer back to a mutual confessional source, especially to their nominal patron Menno Simons of Witmarsum. But what they believe and how they believe separate them no less from each other than from Catholics, Lutherans, and Mennonites in Europe and North America. The “worldwide brotherhood” is an illusion.<sup>7</sup>*

But other equally eloquent voices articulated an altogether different perspective on the value of diversity for contemporary Anabaptist-related Christians.

*I think the first time I [an American] was struck by my great wealth was in Luanda, Angola in 1999. It was a Sunday morning in November. . . . I came before the congregation to give words of greeting, . . . [and] I recall struggling to decide what words I should offer them—this group about whom I knew so little and with whom I obviously had so little in common. I knew nothing of their theology, as they knew nothing of mine. I knew nothing of their joys, their sufferings, or their daily lives. Yet these were people who understood themselves to be part of a family of which I, too, considered myself a part. How could this be? What did it mean? As I stood looking over all those beautifully different faces, I was overcome by one thought: What wealth! What incredible, lovely riches! And how terrible it would be not to be related to them!<sup>8</sup>*

How impoverishing it would be not to be related to those so different from us! By the beginning of the twenty-first century, this version of a prosperity gospel had become the dominant perspective on diversity within MWC. Our diversity is our wealth, a mark of God’s blessing—and a call to relationship.

### **Diversity: A call to communion**

From 2001 to 2003, an MWC International Planning Commission gathered information from member churches around the world. What do you say about the future of MWC? the commission asked. What principles should shape MWC activities and structures in the years ahead? Of the ten main conclusions, one reports the desire of most MWC members—national churches and conferences—to remain autonomous: “The scope of authority of MWC

should not supersede the autonomy of any member church” (conclusion 10). While this insistence on autonomy may be rooted in established Mennonite and Brethren in Christ ecclesiology, it no doubt also reflects concern about how to deal with certain varieties of diversity: “Some members fear that theological differences among members will not be taken seriously and others fear the differences will be divisive” (conclusion 9).

At the same time, however, it was evident that members not only “recognize and appreciate the cultural diversity embodied in the MWC family” (conclusion 8) but also hear in this diversity a call to closer relationship: “People desire more relationships and identity at global and regional levels” (conclusion 2). “Solidarity (relationships) is perceived as essential for effective witness and development (growth, survival) of the Anabaptist Christian community at local and international levels” (conclusion 3). “Churches around the world see themselves as linked in equality and reciprocity, no longer as parent-child” (conclusion 7). In sum, the message to MWC from its members was dual: within the complexities of diversity, you must both respect the autonomy of the national churches and provide paths beyond autonomy into global ecclesial relationships. The question was how to do so.

### **Beyond autonomy**

With the adoption of a new MWC vision statement in August 2003 (Bulawayo, Zimbabwe), rooted in the conversations between the International Planning Commission and the member churches, MWC interpreted the multiple diversities within itself not only as a call to relationship but, more pointedly, as a call to communion: “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 mission statement adopted at the same time expanded on the vision. “Mennonite World Conference exists to (1) be a global community of faith in the Anabaptist tradition, (2) facilitate relationships between Anabaptist-related churches worldwide, and (3) relate to other Christian world communions and organizations.”

The call to be a communion and a global community of faith must be realized, as already underlined, within the context of

relationships between autonomous churches. MWC recognizes that diversity in the Anabaptist-Mennonite family is enshrined in structures of autonomy. This was the case in all MWC constitutions prior to the adoption of the communion vision, and it remains the case in the new constitution, inspired by this vision and adopted in July 2009 (Asunción, Paraguay): MWC member churches are churches “organized as an autonomous national or transnational Mennonite, Brethren in Christ or other Anabaptist-related church for at least five years” (MWC constitution, article 2).

The same article of the same constitution, however, establishes affirmation of the communion vision and the accompanying mission statement as a criterion of membership. In other words, with their membership in the MWC community, autonomous churches commit themselves to move beyond autonomy into communion with other members of the diverse body.

How can MWC enable fuller communion between diverse—and sometimes divergent—members who remain autonomous? How can members of a body marked by diversity move from autonomy to autonomy-in-communion? Three key practices through which MWC seeks to develop communion while respecting autonomy are sharing gifts, stating convictions, and coming to consensus.

### **Sharing gifts**

Many kinds of diversity characterize the MWC community: diversity of nationality, ethnicity, culture, language, gender, wealth, worship, theology, and more. But of all the varieties of diversity, MWC lifts up diversity of gifts as foundational and primary for growth in communion. On becoming members of Mennonite World Conference, churches make a commitment to “share gifts in the MWC community and the wider body of Christ” (MWC constitution, article 2).

Biblical perspectives (Rom. 12 and 1 Cor. 12, for example) undergird the primacy of sharing gifts in the body of Christ. So does experience in MWC. “We have looked upon many congregations and church groups in every continent. . . . We have seen and heard of many kinds of gifts. . . . But nowhere have we spotted an un-gifted person. This is the tie that binds us—our given-

ness, and our invitation to participate in God's purpose through sharing of our unimaginable diversity of gifts."<sup>9</sup>

If all gifts come from God, and if all gifts are given for the common good of the body, then it is through discerning and sharing these gifts that communion is incarnated; it is given form and substance. If every member of the body has received a gift

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that is needed by the whole body, every member must be included in the processes of sharing gifts in order for us to reach full communion. Inclusiveness in this perspective is communion where every member's gifts are recognized, received, and released to shape the common life and mission of the body.

The idea of including all members of the diverse global communion in sharing gifts is nearly utopian. Obstacles to sharing gifts fully are many: economic differences; lack of administrative capacity; centralized decision making; lack of broad vision; fear of cultural, racial, gender, theological, and other differences; the notion that some gifts are more valuable than others; greed.<sup>10</sup>

We'll need countless initiatives in order to take even a few small steps in the right direction. Indeed, the vision of fuller communion through sharing our gifts has inspired and shaped most MWC actions undertaken since the mid-1990s and maintained for shorter or longer periods of time: as needs arise, gifts are discerned, and means of sharing are available. The list is long and constantly changing: World Fellowship Sunday, Global Church Sharing Fund, Global Mennonite History project, Global Anabaptist-Mennonite Shelf of Literature, Global Gift Sharing project, Global Anabaptist Peace and Justice Network, Connecting Theological Educators on Five Continents, Jerusalem Seminar for Bible Teachers from the Global South, women theologians networks in Africa and Latin America, Young Anabaptist-Mennonite Exchange Network (YAMEN!), AMIGOS youth network, Francophone Network, Koinonia Delegations, Global Anabaptist Deacons and the Deacons Commission, the Global Mission Fellowship and the Mission Commission, the Faith and Life Council/Commission, the Peace Council/Commission, *Courier/*

*Correo/Courrier*—the Anabaptist-Mennonite world’s only three-language quarterly publication. Even the periodic global assemblies, for which MWC is best known, and the Global Youth Summit can be understood as face-to-face occasions for gift exchanges in the global community. And the dialogues with other Christian world communions have proceeded in a spirit of giving and receiving gifts in the wider body of Christ.

### **Stating convictions**

As sharing gifts gained momentum in the MWC community, so did consideration of common convictions. Even though member churches edged closer to one another through conversation and gift exchanges, they remained not only fully autonomous but also without a shared confessional statement. But building relationships by sharing gifts invites grounding relationships by sharing convictions. As churches learned to know one another better, opening themselves to mutual counsel and accountability, articulating shared convictions became not only more important but also more feasible.

Do the autonomous MWC member churches share basic convictions? In order to answer that question, MWC set out in the mid-1990s to discover what beliefs the members hold in common. A task force gathered and compared confessions of faith from member churches. Through a questionnaire it received additional information on the variety of ways the churches answer in their own contexts the question of what it means to be Anabaptist today.

According to the report presented to the MWC councils (General Council, Faith and Life Council) in January 1997 (Calcutta, India), while “this work represents only the beginning of a process, we can affirm that Mennonite and Brethren in Christ churches around the world, though diverse, have much in common. Even though they can no longer identify themselves in ethnic terms, Mennonites and Brethren in Christ share a common history of faith and common understanding of the nature of the church.”<sup>11</sup>

On the basis of this initial finding of meaningful confessional commonality, MWC undertook a conversational process to articulate a brief statement of “shared convictions.” The first step



was a study in the MWC councils (July 2000, Guatemala) of “core convictions” sixteenth-century Anabaptists held in common across their theological diversity.<sup>12</sup> During the next several years, member churches drafted short statements summarizing their own core convictions. An MWC-appointed global group of seven individuals reviewed these statements, then drafted a short, simply formulated statement of shared core convictions of member churches. In their next meetings (August 2003, Zimbabwe), the MWC councils digested, discussed, and modified this document. This second draft statement of shared convictions was available for review in and response by member churches for two years.

On the basis of the responses, the global writing group prepared draft three of the statement for consideration by the member church delegates gathered in council for a final decision (March 2006, USA). By the end of the Pasadena meetings, all delegates of all member churches present had moved together through a series of inspired and inspiring moments into a joyful consensus on a statement of shared convictions.

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Though the statement carries no established authority within the jurisdiction of any MWC member church, positive reception of it has been unexpectedly broad in a relatively short period of time. National churches and

local churches on all continents—significantly different from one another theologically and in many other ways—have chosen to use these shared convictions in their own lives and witness.

Still more surprisingly, several church-related institutions have followed suit. Mennonite Central Committee’s new “vision and purpose” statement, adopted in 2009, includes the entire “Shared Convictions” statement. In April 2010 members of Mennonite Savings and Credit Union (Ontario, Canada), meeting in Annual General Meeting, will vote on a change in by-laws redefining the credit union’s “membership bond.” The initiative includes a proposal to ask new members to endorse MWC’s statement of shared convictions, thus expressing their agreement “to be open to supporting our credit union and fellow members by sharing in the journey as we live this statement in our daily lives.”<sup>13</sup>

Further evidence of the positive reception of “Shared Convictions” is provided by the global interest manifested in the book MWC commissioned to explore these convictions—their biblical rooting, their historical and theological background, and how they might be lived in the world today.<sup>14</sup>

It seems fair to assume that this phenomenon of reception both reveals and extends communion of conviction in the MWC community of churches.

### **Coming to consensus**

When MWC members accepted the communion vision statement, they also changed MWC’s mode of decision making. They set aside majority rule, the adversarial approach to decision making developed in Western democratic societies, in order to seek the common mind of the community through a process of coming to consensus. A well-defined and well-led consensus method of decision making, the members agreed, “can enhance the participation of all members in meetings, provide a collaborative and harmonious context for making decisions, and enable representatives to discern together the will of God (Eph. 5:17) for the church and for MWC.”<sup>15</sup>

Mennonite World Conference’s “Guidelines for Making Decisions by Consensus” identify six reasons for this approach to decision making in a diverse ecclesial community seeking fuller communion of its members.

- Coming to agreement through honest, respectful discussion is a widely understood and accepted procedure around the world, including in traditional and indigenous cultures.
- Rather than adversarial debate, it encourages consultation, exploration, questioning, and prayerful reflection.
- It values and seeks to utilize the experience and perspective of all members.
- It seeks to hear, understand, and respect all concerns and points of view.
- It encourages participation by all churches in shaping the decision.
- It facilitates churches learning from one another and deepening their communion with one another.

With a modest stretch of theological imagination, one might suggest that coming to consensus within the global MWC community not only deepens communion between the members but also constitutes participation in the catholicity of the church universal. This hypothesis speaks, in turn, to the question of the potential scope and authority of MWC decisions.

Catholicity is realized in part “whenever and wherever everyone concerned converses about everything they do, and should believe and do, as they respond to the Lord who sent them to all nations with all that he had taught them.”<sup>16</sup> In other words and to contextualize, no issue, no doctrine, and no practice is excluded from consideration in the MWC General Council. No consensus reached by the council—if received under the Lordship of Christ

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and enabled by the Spirit—is without potential authority as the members of the council carry out their delegated responsibilities on behalf of and within their national churches composed of local churches.

But to have authority beyond the life of MWC, any conclusion reached in the global council must be offered to the member churches for further discernment and consensus. To be fully catholic, this process of widening the consensus must involve the

discernment not only of those in leadership of the member churches but also of the entire diverse people of God who bear responsibility for the faith and work of the churches in all places. As consensus in accordance with the will of God grows in all directions, the church becomes more radically catholic, both in extension around the world and in fullness of the faith.

Is the growing global reception of MWC’s “Shared Convictions” statement an example of how radical catholicity works in the diversity of the church universal? To make that claim would be presumptuous and premature. But a closer look at this phenomenon at some point may provide insight on what kind of process of continually widening a consensus can lead nonviolently beyond autonomy into communion in diversity.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Because Swiss authorities had refused them entry into the country, no representatives of Russian Mennonites, perhaps the poorest Mennonites of that era, were present.

<sup>2</sup> Enjoy the Paraguay 2009 Photo Gallery at [www.mwc-cmm.org/en15/index.php?option=com\\_content&view=article&id=280&Itemid=154](http://www.mwc-cmm.org/en15/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=280&Itemid=154).

<sup>3</sup> Reported by Paul Schrag, "From every tribe: the global church unites," *Courier* 24, no. 3–4 (2009), 2.

<sup>4</sup> France (one delegate), Germany (seven delegates), the Netherlands (four delegates), USA (one delegate), Switzerland (two delegates).

<sup>5</sup> Handwritten letter from Harold S. Bender to Christian Neff, 14 December 1924 (archived in the Christian Neff files, Mennonitischer Geschichtsverein, Bolanden-Weierhof, Germany).

<sup>6</sup> Mennonite World Conference announced in 1994 that for first time in Mennonite and Brethren in Christ history, more baptized members lived in Africa, Asia, and Latin America than in Europe and North America. Today, 64 percent of baptized members live in Africa, Asia, and Latin America.

<sup>7</sup> Hans-Jürgen Goertz, "From the edge to the center," in *Mennonite World Conference Handbook: Mennonites in Global Witness*, ed. Dieter Götz Lichdi (Carol Stream, IL: Mennonite World Conference, 1990), 287.

<sup>8</sup> Tim Lind, in *Sharing Gifts in the Global Family of Faith: One Church's Experiment*, by Pakisa K. Tshimika and Tim Lind (Intercourse, PA: Good Books, 2003); 15–16; published in cooperation with Mennonite World Conference.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 16–17.

<sup>10</sup> See *ibid.*, 74–87.

<sup>11</sup> Rainer Burkart, "Exploring Anabaptist-Mennonite Faith and Practice: Faith and Life Council Meeting in Calcutta," *Courier* 12, no. 4 (1997), 7.

<sup>12</sup> C. Arnold Snyder led the study, based on his articles commissioned by MWC and published initially in *Courier* 13, no. 1–3 (1998), under the title "Anabaptist Seed, Worldwide Growth: The Historical Core of Anabaptist-Mennonite Identity," then as *From Anabaptist Seed: The Historical Core of Anabaptist-Related Identity* (Kitchener, ON: Pandora Press; Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1999).

<sup>13</sup> From proposal attached to a letter to Mennonite Savings and Credit Union members from Nick Driedger, CEO; no date (late 2009).

<sup>14</sup> Alfred Neufeld, *What We Believe Together: Exploring the "Shared Convictions" of Anabaptist-Related Churches* (Intercourse, PA: Good Books, 2007); commissioned by and published in cooperation with Mennonite World Conference.

<sup>15</sup> From the document "Mennonite World Conference Guidelines for Making Decisions by Consensus," available from MWC.

<sup>16</sup> John Howard Yoder, "Catholicity in Search of Location," in *The Royal Priesthood: Essays Ecclesiological and Ecumenical* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1994), 319.

## About the author

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