

How can we sing those songs? Testimony in light of findings from the 2006 Mennonite Church USA member profile

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For decades Jeremiah had been forecasting the demise of Jerusalem and the temple, but his words fell mostly on deaf ears. When God's people were finally carried off into exile, Jeremiah suddenly changed his message from doom and destruction to hope and encouragement: "Build houses and settle down; plant gardens and eat what they produce. Marry and have sons and daughters; find wives for your sons and give your daughters in marriage. . . . Increase in number there; do not decrease" (Jer. 29:5; NIV). Such words from the weeping prophet must have taken both his friends and his foes by surprise. Why was Jeremiah changing tactics?

The prophet makes clear that God's people are not to enjoy the good life for themselves alone but rather for the sake of the

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very enemies who carried them into exile. In fact, Jeremiah makes a direct link between the shalom of Babylon and the shalom God's people will experience while in exile: "Also, seek the peace and prosperity of the city to which I have carried you into exile. Pray to the Lord for it, because if it prospers, you too will prosper" (29:7).

Jeremiah's instructions should have taken no one by surprise, because throughout history God's intentions had been that God's people would be messengers of shalom—to

the widow, orphan, exile, and stranger. In fact, it was the very failure to be such messengers that led to the Babylonian exile in the first place. Neglecting the countercultural message of Jubilee and justice and exchanging it for idolatry and affluence was at the root of God's judgment prophesied through Jeremiah. Now God's people had a chance to try again—to give testimony of God's shalom among the Babylonians.

But according to Psalm 137, their response to Jeremiah’s message was consistent with the behavior that had led to exile. Hanging their harps on Babylon’s branches and weeping along Babylon’s rivers, they refused to sing the songs of Zion—songs of deliverance, justice, and salvation intended for all people in all times and places. As their captors begged to hear the songs of Yahweh, God’s people stubbornly refused their testimony and instead called down curses on their enemies.

Findings from Mennonite Member Profile 2006

It’s easy to be hard on these people back in the sixth century BC. But doing so misses the point of our own struggle in the twenty-first century, our own difficulty in giving faithful testimony to the salvation we have experienced through Christ’s life, death, and resurrection.

Data from the Mennonite Member Profile 2006 (MMP2006) suggest that while most members of Mennonite Church USA believe that the good news of Jesus Christ is testimony worth telling, we’re just not sure who among us should be first to break that news to the world. MMP2006 was a study of more than 2,100 members of that body. These members were scientifically selected to represent the denomination. In addition, MMP2006 included a sample of members from racial/ethnic congregations in Philadelphia, Chicago, and Los Angeles, as well as a representative sample of active Mennonite ministers.¹

This study produced the following findings:

Mennonites in the U.S. believe the good news should be shared. One hundred percent of Mennonite members surveyed affirm that mission work (evangelism and/or meeting social and economic needs) is important. Members consistently agree that church planting and evangelism should be priorities of the denomination, and 88 percent believe that “Christians should do all they can to convert all non-believers to Christ.”

We believe the good news should be shared through both word and deed. For all three samples, sharing God’s love “in word and deed” is seen as the highest priority for Mennonite Church USA (81 percent of all members, 76 percent of racial/ethnic members, and 81 percent of ministers). In addition, Mennonites in the three samples consistently held together evangelism and an emphasis on

peace and justice, when considering the nature of the good news we have to share.

Racial/ethnic members are more active in evangelism efforts. While 51 percent of the representative sample of Mennonites say that they “speak about faith to persons outside their church and family” once a month or more, 67 percent of racial/ethnic Mennonites do the same. Eighteen percent of all Mennonites try to convert others to faith in Christ on a regular basis (once a month or more) as compared to 48 percent of racial/ethnic members. And while only 13 percent of all Mennonites invite a non-Christian to church at least once a month, 45 percent of racial/ethnic members do so.

Mennonites share the good news less today than in the past. In 1972, 84 percent of Mennonites had at one time or another invited a non-Christian to church, as compared to 67 percent today. And in 1972, 75 percent of Mennonites had tried to lead someone to faith in Christ, as compared to 58 percent in 2006.

Pastors want to create ministers, while members want to be ministered to. When asked about the top priorities of pastors, members responded that pastors should give greatest priority to preaching; pastoral care comes second. While ministers agree that preaching is the top priority, close behind are “shaping the congregation’s vision” and “equipping others for ministry.”

Pastors are less optimistic that their congregations are missional. While 38 percent of members strongly agree that their congregation has a strong commitment to serve the local community, only 25 percent of pastors believe the same. And whereas 37 percent of members strongly agree that their congregation has a “clear sense of mission and purpose,” only 23 percent of ministers responded similarly. Racial/ethnic members were much more likely than Mennonite ministers or other members to strongly agree that their congregations are connected to the local community and that their congregations have “a clear sense of mission and purpose.”

Members are less interested in church planting. In 1989, only 8 percent of Mennonites indicated no interest in church planting. By 2006, 22 percent had lost interest. Racial/ethnic members and their pastors are nearly three times more likely than other members to be willing to move in order to plant a church.

Conclusion

These findings suggest that Mennonites today, while still believing that the good news of Christ's life, death, and resurrection is to be shared with the world, are less engaged than in the past in giving testimony to this good news. In addition, there are substantial differences between racial/ethnic members and other Mennonites in their willingness or ability to give such testimony.

How do we make sense of these findings in light of God's intentions spelled out in Jeremiah 29—that though we may be in exile, we are to be ministers of God's hope and healing to the world around us? My central hypothesis is that increased assimilation—in education, occupation, and residence—into the larger culture has resulted in the “quiet in the land” becoming even quieter.

Becoming more affluent, highly educated, and professional offers us unique opportunities to give testimony to Christ in contexts not previously available to us, but my sense is that our assimilation in social status has resulted in a greater abandonment of our Christian testimony. As we have become more like the world around us in social status, we have become more like that world in our values and beliefs.

Anabaptist values and faith commitments, always most alive and relevant on the margins of society, are hard pressed to find a home in the center of an affluent and upwardly mobile context. As Mennonites in the U.S. in the late twentieth and early twenty-first century settle down and build houses, and give our sons and daughters in marriage, do we also refuse to sing the songs of Zion? Have the songs of Jerusalem lost their relevance as we enjoy the good life of Babylon? Have we forgotten that our own peace ultimately depends on our faithfulness in giving testimony to the healing and hope that come through Christ Jesus alone?

Note

¹ For more on the Mennonite Member Profile 2006 methodology and findings, see Conrad L. Kanagy, *Road Signs for the Journey: A Profile of Mennonite Church USA* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 2007).

About the author

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