

## Guiding thoughts for the study of the faith Reflections from Guatemalan Mennonites

Mario Higueros

*We are pleased to have, for our issue on confession, this document compiled by Mario Higueros for facilitating the study of the proposed confession of faith of the Guatemalan Evangelical Mennonite Church. We regret that we lack space to print the entire document. It can be found on our web-site, [www.MennoVision.org](http://www.MennoVision.org). Printed here are selected reflections representing points at which the document seems to us to contrast most vividly with the North American Confession of Faith in a Mennonite Perspective. We also felt that North American readers would benefit from some contextualization, so we posed some questions about the document, to which Higueros graciously replied. That interview follows an introduction and the selected reflections. We are grateful to Carol Keeney for translating the reflections and to John Driver for conducting and translating the interview. Ed.*

**T**he reflections that follow represent ideas from the foundational document presented by a commission of the Guatemalan Evangelical Mennonite Church. Others are those of the author, the brothers and sisters on the staff of SEMILLA (Seminario Anabautista Latinoamericano), and some Mennonite churches in the capital of Guatemala. Ideas were incorporated throughout the process from reflections made with the brothers and sisters of Jesus the Good Shepherd Church, La Brigada Colony, and Casa Horeb.

The confessions of faith are not formulated to encourage a legalistic spirit or doctrinal boxing-in, but rather are starting points for ongoing reflection on the meaning of the Word of God expressed in the Bible and Anabaptist-Mennonite tradition. With these thoughts, I wish to establish guidelines of faith that encourage unity as the body of Christ, brotherhood and reconciliation as a witness to the world, human dignity and worth

as the will of God, and the search for our identity as an Anabaptist-Mennonite family. Above all, we wish, with these reflections, to better know the ineffable mystery of our beloved Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ, who lives and reigns among us.

These guidelines also serve discernment in concrete circumstances of faith and personal and group ethics (divorce, remarriage, vocations, social service, theological emphases, liturgical influences). The Guatemalan Evangelical Mennonite Church wants to assume the role of guarantor of the autonomy of its member churches and at the same time be a concrete entity for relating to other Christian families in our country.

## **The people of God, the church, the community of faith, is the living body of Jesus Christ**

### **A. Its nature**

1. We confess that in this world a family of God exists which gives witness to the deeds and words of the person and life of Jesus Christ, trying to imitate him in their being (Phil. 2:1–6) according to the content of the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5–7). This family is good news for all those around them.
2. We confess that God made this family his people (2 Cor. 6:16) through his son, Jesus Christ, who gave us this prerogative (Eph. 2:18, 4:6) by his sacrifice on the cross, thus giving us a father (Rom. 8:15).
3. We confess that this community is leaven, salt, and light in the midst of humans, walking, suffering (Matt. 5:13–16, 2 Tim. 2:12, 2 Cor. 1:5–6), and committing themselves like their Lord to respect life and human dignity, and to follow peace and harmony among all (Rom. 12:16).
4. We confess that this community of faith composed of men and women is the living organism, the body of Christ. We confess that all its members are obedient to the commandments of the Lord, and all participate in and administer the gifts (1 Cor. 12:4, 1 Tim. 4:14) and ministries the Lord gives them (Eph. 4:7–16) without distinction (Gal. 3:26–28) for the edification of the community. These gifts are developed and perfected for the adoration and praise and glory of God and so that all will be at the service of the world.

5. We confess that this community of believers meets regularly and voluntarily in unity to share (Acts 2:44–47, 1 Pet. 4:8) and to respond to the continuing mission of Jesus (Luke 4:18, Matt. 28:18–20, Ps. 146:7–9, James 1:27, Eph. 4:4) commended by the Lord.

6. As disciples (John 8:31–35) of Jesus, the followers of Christ obey him above all in the conflicts that occur in their pilgrimage (Acts 5:29) and identify themselves with the poor and oppressed of this world (Luke 4:18–19).

7. We confess that we are a community where the power of God is made manifest because it is founded on Christ whom nothing and nobody can destroy (John 17:21, Matt. 16:18, Luke 6:46–49, Col. 1:18) and whom we are committed to following in our lives.

8. We confess that the united community carries out its ministry by the power and the presence of the Holy Spirit (John 14:26).

### **B. Its authority and discipline**

1. We confess that the community of faith is subject to the mutual discipline of its members and, principally, the Word of God that lives among them, carrying out discipline in love with those who voluntarily submit to it and freeing (loosing) those who do not desire it (binding and loosing) (Matt. 18:16–19).

2. We confess that the discipline is restorative and is characterized by limitless forgiveness in accordance with the words of Jesus (Matt. 6:14–15) for mutual exhortation (2 Cor. 13:10).

3. We confess that excommunication is an action caused by the member who no longer desires to continue united in communion with and healthy submission to the body of Christ. The community has the authority to ratify it, but it is to be done with the unceasing expectation of receiving the strayed member again (1 Cor. 5:12–13, Titus 3:10).

### **C. Its distinctive character: Nonviolence and peace witness**

1. We confess that life is a gift of God and therefore inviolable (Exod. 20:13, Job 33:4).

2. We confess that the profound message of the Bible places its emphasis not on destructive weapons but rather on the constructive efforts of production (Isa. 2:4).

3. We confess that power is not in human efforts by means of weapons and armies trained to kill but rather in the Spirit of God (Zech. 4:6).
4. We confess that violence and hate between humans come from themselves and the influences that have created them and from the evil spirit called the devil (James 4:1). Consequently, we confess that all war is an instrument of death and destruction and that as such it must not be sacralized or valued by the people of God (Luke 9:51–55).
5. We confess that we desire to follow a path that shows a life style of peace (Luke 1:79; Rom. 10:15, 14:19), meekness, humility, and peacefulness, as followers of the nature of God and of Christ himself (1 Cor. 14:33, 2 Cor. 13:11, Matt. 11:29, James 4:6, Rom. 12:14–21), with signs that do not conform to what our history and cultures teach (John 14:27, Luke 6:33).
6. We confess the power of love (2 Cor. 5:18–19) that comes from God and that we as Christians are to copy.
7. We confess that we adopt nonviolence as a life style and the commitment to be on the side of the weak and humble of this world, as God is in the Old Testament and Jesus in the New Testament, understanding that this may lead to persecution and risk (Heb. 13:16; Rom. 12:17–21; Prov. 25:22; Matt. 5:38–39; Prov. 11:19, 12:28).

### **The reign of God is made real and begins in us**

1. We confess that the kingdom of God is Christ himself, the hope of those who trust in God according to the testimony of the Old and New Testaments and the reality of his church today.
2. We confess that the kingdom of God has a historical development that begins with a concrete people with its monarchical line and its prophetic revelations in this world, that it includes the birth, life, and ministry of Jesus Christ, and that communities of faith incarnate it and carry it toward its complete fulfillment at the end of time.
3. We confess that the message “the kingdom is near” was preached by Saint John and by Jesus Christ himself as a concrete way to announce the realization of the greatest hope of the people of God in the person of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. This kingdom is not based on overwhelming force or prestige or

privilege but rather on a life of sacrifice and service and humility (Matt. 20:20ff).

4. We confess that the gospel is the good news for humanity in the person of our Lord, Jesus Christ (Matt. 6:9–10, 12:28; Mark 1:14; Luke 11:20, 17:20). Gospel and kingdom are two parts of a whole. One is the announcement and the other the realization or putting into practice.

5. We confess that the kingdom of God is already being realized in his community through unequivocal signs of the way of Jesus, and that these signs are gradually being perfected with much struggle and suffering until their full realization.

6. We confess that the kingdom of God in Christ is at the service of the world and not only of his community (Matt. 11:2–6, Luke 7:18–23) and that its sign is justice and peace in the midst of the world in every age and every time forever.

7. We confess that the kingdom of God will be fully manifested in the transformation of all creation, finally reconciling all the structures with God through Jesus Christ and the faith of his community.

## **The signs and practices or ordinances with which the community of faith celebrates and announces Christ and denounces the failures of this world**

### **1. Baptism by water (testimony-mission)**

We confess that baptism is the sign of commitment and mission of the individual and the community of faith to the life and ministry of our Lord, Jesus Christ. It is a commandment to be proclaimed to all people in all places. It is a responsible and conscious act that signals our readiness to accept the ultimate consequences, if necessary, in following Christ in this world. It is an act that implies unity and diversity in community when the Trinity of God is invoked (Mark 10:38, Rom. 6:4, Acts 2:38, Rom. 6:3, Col. 3:10–11). Those being baptized commit themselves to follow in the footsteps of Jesus and to deny themselves and take up the cross but also to live in the resurrection of life.

### **2. The Lord's Supper (denunciation-announcement)**

The Lord's Supper is a mystery of faith instituted by the Lord

himself to commemorate, remember, and celebrate his sacrifice in his broken body and his blood spilled for humans who are following the forces of evil, and to benefit humanity as often as he can until he appears again in visible form (Luke 22:7–23, 1 Cor. 11:23–26, Mark 14:12–25, John 13:21–30, Matt. 26:17–29)

With the celebration of this mystery, we denounce all the failures and pain of the humans in this world and at the same time announce the hope in Christ Jesus and the virtue of suffering as the power that changes human life and the world (Matthew 25). Therefore, all those who in word and deed have committed themselves to the way of Jesus and are not apart from the body of Christ are to participate in it.

It is the act that empowers, nourishes, and gives unity and identity to the community. Its efficacy is witnessed by the apostles and all the saints in Christ who have preceded us.

### **Interview with Mario Higueros**

**Vision:** *We noticed some differences between the proposed Guatemalan confession of faith and the recently adopted North American Confession of Faith in a Mennonite Perspective. One is that the family metaphor figures more strongly in the Guatemalan description of the church, and another is that nonviolence and peace witness have a more prominent place and are explicitly rooted in the love of God.*

**Higueros:** Perhaps there are psychological, sociological, and cultural variables in our tendency to view the community of believers as family. The psychological is evident in our feeling of belonging in the face of rapidly disintegrating traditional family structures. In the capital city, many families are in the process of disintegration, or have already disintegrated. Many single mothers, abandoned women, and widows find a place in our congregations. For this reason, many see the congregation as their true family, even more so than their biological family. To have a name, a family name, is something one needs for one's own sense of dignity. To have a father is an experience that many children and adults especially need. The images found in the New Testament that include these analogies are especially appreciated: Father, Son, brother, sister, "One Father." According to their ancient beliefs, those of Mayan cultural heritage see their descendants as a blessing from God. Hope of reunion with dead

ancestors in a great family is reinforced in the beliefs of Christians. Indigenous ethnic groups form true families. They are recognized not so much by abstract concepts such as nationality or church as by extended families, or clan. This approach is similar to the ancient Hebrew tendency to maintain clan or tribal identity and the practice of taking one's name from their father—"Yeshua ben Joseph," for example.

As for the prominence of nonviolence and peace witness, in the conflict experienced in Guatemala, as well as in the rest of Central America, rivalry and hatred have abounded. Attempts to make peace through the establishment of agreed-on accords have been disheartening. Perhaps for that reason Christians quite understandably prefer a peace that arises out of feeling, or sentiment. Guatemala, like other countries in the region, is made up of peoples who live and express themselves through their emotions and sentiments. Rationality and the need for calculation are relegated to a secondary status. Our churches probably feel intuitively that peace comes from God incarnate in His Son, sent out of love, and they believe that his disciples should follow his example. The peace that Jesus gives is not like that which the world gives. When we worked on this part of our confession, there were many intense discussions about the anthropomorphic images drawn from the realm of husband-wife relationships. For that reason the Old Testament text speaking of peace and justice kissing implicitly points to love as the bond joining that marvelous pair that we call peace and justice.

*Please reflect further on human dignity and respect for life as part of following Jesus.*

This project arose out of the many differences among the churches that had originated out of the alliance of Pentecostal congregations. A spiritualizing and fundamentalist influence led to setting beliefs ahead of human life. They worked with a theology that viewed reality "from above" rather than from below. That is, an incarnational theology (if we dare use this term) was not viewed as sound doctrine. Discipline, for example, could not be understood as restorative without an understanding of human dignity. We wished to overcome those rigid moralistic approaches. A Mennonite Christology and ecclesiology depends on the fact

that being human is a privilege that God himself has appropriated in the incarnation of his Son.

*How will the confession function in the Guatemalan context?*

This depends on whether it is adopted by a given community of faith. For example, in the Casa Horeb congregation it has been used for orienting new brothers and sisters who are being integrated into the community. The same is true of the congregation in La Brigada. It serves as a guide.

*The reflection on communion says to partake is to “denounce all the failures and pain of the humans in the world.” What does this mean?*

The Lord’s Supper not only announces a life that is new but also denounces the old life that is superceded. The spiritualization and consubstantiation of the elements have served to rob this memorial of its power to proclaim against the sin of the world represented in them. Further shedding of human blood is rendered unnecessary. God does not require it in order to placate his wrath, nor do humans need it in order to solve their differences or to maintain their privileges: the bruised and broken body of peoples for the sake of policies. The communion table is for all without distinction. To partake of the supper without discerning, as Paul writes in 1 Corinthians 11, is to not recognize the divisions and the boasting that contribute to fracturing the body of Christ. Guatemala, as well as the rest of Latin America, is filled with the needlessly spilled blood of broken bodies through the indifference of the rich, both national and foreign, who with their exploitative policies, or their forgetfulness, go on slowly murdering thousands of human beings while the Lord is seeking to redeem them.

### **About the author**

Mario Higueros has been a member of the board of elders of the Casa Horeb Mennonite congregation in Guatemala City and served as coordinator of the pastoral team in 1999. Since 1987 he has been academic dean of SEMILLA, the Latin American Anabaptist seminary in Guatemala, and is adjunct faculty in peace, justice, and biblical interpretation at Associated Mennonite Biblical Seminary.