

Paying for our sins

What Mennonites should confess in the wake of 9-11-01

Melanie Zuercher

No literate, educated adult in North America should have been caught off guard by what happened on September 11, 2001. I am not saying we should have been expecting religious extremists to carry out an action that would kill thousands of civilians. But ours were not the first civilians to die (never mind that it was not only the United States that lost people in the attacks), nor have they been the last. And no one in the United States is truly innocent

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(Canadians will have to decide their status for themselves), although that has nothing to do with whether people deserve to be victims of evil actions. If we believe that all human beings are created in the image of God, we also believe no one deserves that.

Should Mennonites, with a doctrinal foundation of following Jesus' way of peace and reconciling love, have even less excuse for their shock and stunned helplessness in the wake of the World Trade Center and Pentagon attacks and the crash of a jet in a western Pennsylvania field in what could be described as "Mennonite country"? Perhaps—but maybe not for the obvious reasons.

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To help flesh out what I was thinking regarding the events of September 11 and confession, I decided to talk to four

Mennonites who are directly involved in peace and justice work. It is probably not a coincidence that all of them either work for Mennonite Central Committee or have strong MCC ties, although I chose them based on geographical and gender balance.

Rachel Stutzman (a graduate student) spent nearly three years in North Newton, Kansas, as peace and justice resource education staff person for MCC Central States, a region that comprises 16 states, from Texas to North Dakota. Larry Leaman-Miller worked with Witness for Peace in Nicaragua and MCC in El Salvador and Denver, Colorado, and has directed the Colorado office of the American Friends Service Committee for the past four years. Since 1999, Lois Hess Nafziger, Goshen, Indiana, has worked in peace and justice resource education for MCC Great Lakes. John Rempel is currently the MCC liaison to the United Nations in New York, a position he has held for the last decade.

All four touched on similar themes, yet I was struck that each had a particular emphasis when asked what they thought we Mennonites should confess in the wake of the events of September 11, 2001.

Rachel Stutzman immediately pointed to what people of color within the MCC Central States region said about the profiling of Middle Easterners (or those who “looked” Middle Eastern) that occurred after the attacks. “Not much changed for [MCC constituents of color],” she says. “They were living in fear on account of profiling before [September 11] and they still are.”

She also talked about her experiences meeting with high school-aged Mennonite youth. “They say, ‘Yes, we’re pacifists,’ but few seem to have made a conscious choice,” she says. “They are caught between who they have been taught they are, and embracing [a peace theology] as their own.”

But it is not only the young people who seem unable to articulate clearly the how and why of the Mennonite peace position, she says. “We [as peace and justice advocates] can go out in the field and talk until we turn blue, but it’s like seeds falling on parched ground without the theology. We have it, but we don’t seem to know how to articulate it or make it practical.”

The work of peacemaking and educating people on what it means to be peacemakers is certainly not new, she says. “But there

hasn't been this sense of urgency, until now when there's the possibility of a draft, or that we won't get home safely at night. For white, middle-class Mennonites, the urgency has been missing from the equation, even though we should have been feeling it because our neighbors [of color] do, every day.

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"I haven't heard many of us addressing our privilege as white North Americans, or how we benefit from a system that oppresses people all over the world. I've heard a lot of speaking out against the government, but not much about how we benefit from that government. I'd like to hear more conscious effort to acknowledge that."

Larry Leaman-Miller has spent his whole working life with faith-based non-profit organizations in Central America and the United States. Over the past eleven years in Denver, as he has moved in the more activist circles, he has heard this question increasingly often: "Where are the Mennonites?" He recognizes from his own preference that "Mennonites dislike public expressions that border on being confrontive. We're always planning these kinds of actions at AFSC, and I admit I don't like them. I'm always racking my brain for some alternatives that are more inclusive [of the quieter folks]."

But, Larry says, there is one thing that Mennonites quietly do, along with most U.S. citizens, that makes them complicit in a global culture of violence that many perhaps have only recently recognized. "Draft resistance has been a major part of our history as Mennonites," he says. "But the draft is now pretty well irrelevant. The military doesn't need people for today's high-tech weapons. They need money. And we continue to pay, through our taxes.

"Before September 11, our military budget was six times more than that of the next highest nation. It represented almost half the world's spending, and then add on our allies," plus the Bush administration's requested increase as of spring 2002, he says. "We need to change our focus from draft resistance and nonregistra-

tion. It's difficult, because this means everyone and is not limited by gender or age. We need to face and confess that we have been contributing to military 'solutions,' and our whole country suffers in the long run. Education, job training, and all kinds of social services and community development take the cut [when military spending increases or demands a bigger percentage of the national budget]."

Lois Hess Nafziger notes that Mennonites have a variety of responses to conflict, violence, and war. Before September 11, she says, "I knew the reality, but since then I've become more aware of the spectrum along which we confess to being 'a peace church.' Amish, Beachy Amish, Mennonite Brethren, Brethren in Christ, Mennonite Church USA—all support MCC, but there are differences in how they speak to the state, or even if they do. It seems we do speak to government when it directly affects us, such as the Amish [in northern Indiana] when they were ordered to put reflective triangles on the backs of their buggies.

"We in MC USA are not driving buggies, but we are consuming huge amounts of petroleum and petroleum products, and then we wonder why there's so much chaos and violence in the world." Or, as Rachel Stutzman puts it, "I am not as disturbed by the [proliferation of] flags as by the push to buy, buy, buy and 'prop up the economy,' without looking at the roots of the problem."

As citizens of the richest country in the world, U.S. Mennonites need to confess their responsibility, Lois says. "We need to confess our dependency [on our economic system]. And we need to confess that in some ways we [Mennonites] have wronged people by being the providers to the world.... We have the money and resources, so we have the power to dole them out. And this is hard for me to say, because I work for MCC, and I don't know the answer to that."

In May 2001, Lois joined an MCC learning tour to South Africa. While she was in Durban, she met some refugees from the Congo. "These were men who had been in university, in pre-med and pre-law, and all they could find in Durban to do was to guard cars. When I got back, I had letters from two of them, one asking for money. I don't blame him. You look for whatever light and

hope you can find. But I didn't know what to do. The economic inequality in the world—in our churches—needs to be addressed. It's tough to talk about—it's our security."

John Rempel says there are three areas in which he as a Mennonite needs to confess in the wake of the events of

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September 11. One of these is "being a bystander." "I [see] the Anabaptist Vision as a way of living critically in relationship to our society," he says. "The danger is that this makes us into bystanders, as 'really not part of' the society whose actions around the world brought about this unleashing of vengeance."

A second area for confession deals with "solidarity in suffering," he says. "I'm not cynical, at the basic human level, about the

outpouring [from people all over the country] of solidarity with those who suffered in the attacks. No matter why people were in the World Trade Center, they didn't directly provoke or deserve what happened.

"The other side is that it's been hard to empathize with the desperation [of the hijackers], with the poverty [of their people], the fear of having their religion and culture obliterated by the West. I had to struggle with myself not to get caught up in the stereotypes of Islamic militants." To choose to be nationalistic, John says, is to choose with whom you are in solidarity, a thing he says is "not Mennonite."

Finally, he points to a need to confess "false claims of innocence." He heard of Mennonites both in New York City and elsewhere saying, along with most other Americans: "We are innocent. We did nothing to deserve this."

"For a while," he says, "I made myself read the [daily] obituaries in the *New York Times*," of those who had perished in the attacks. "Eventually, I couldn't take it any more. It evoked powerful and primal feelings and frequently the question: 'How could they do this to us?' But no American is innocent.... The United States is imperialistic. We derive unequal economic benefit from other countries. That doesn't undercut a basic

human empathy, but we're not innocent. We can't separate ourselves from our complicity with the institutions." And, he adds, we are not barred by law or threat of violence from expressing our dissent from or disagreement with our government's policies and actions, yet few of us do so.

For Mennonites, a confession of faith is a statement of our beliefs as Christian people. It helps us interpret Scripture and guides our practice of what we believe (discipleship), among other things.

The *Confession of Faith in a Mennonite Perspective* includes articles on "Sin" and "Salvation," the latter of which we receive when we

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"repent of sin, ...accept Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord...[and] are reconciled with God and brought into the reconciling community of God's people" (Article 8).

But we do not do well at naming our sins, at least not in public. September 11, 2001, and what happened in three communities in the eastern United States on that day, has since been used to justify everything from urging us to buy a new Ford Explorer and spend more money at the mall, to supporting having bombs dropped on Afghan people who have already been violated for decades, to watching Israel and the West Bank incinerate as U.S. dollars keep flowing to the Israeli military. To Mennonites, whose

foundation of faith is Jesus Christ who refused to choose sides and who spoke hard words to the powers and lost his life for it, let September 11 be a reminder of something we should never have forgotten. The majority of us in North America are white and middle class. We pay for, and we benefit directly from, social and economic systems that helped evil take root not only in the hearts of nineteen hijackers and those who supported them, but also in others around the world and in our own neighborhoods.

When asked what Mennonite pastors should be doing in these days, John Rempel, himself a pastor for nearly three decades, had this to say: "Pastors should help us face the places where we as individuals, churches, and a society falsely claim innocence and

claim not to be part of evil systems. The pastor should bear concrete truth about how we as Christians live in this society and are complicit, but should also distinguish facing responsibility from being guilt-tripped.

“At the same time, the pastor should also be the guardian of people’s souls. We need to continue our Christ-centered worship. We need deep exposure to prayer and the Bible. These are our touchstones.”

Another role for the pastor is to enable lament, which John found himself doing at the U.N. soon after the September 11 attacks. “One thing that struck me, working at the U.N., was the universal need for rituals of mourning,” John says. “There were many public statements coming from the U.N.,” he adds, “but a few people I work with said: ‘All these statements have been political. They’ve been humane, but none has touched a religious vein or used religious language, even in the broadest sense.’” So John and some others at the U.N. organized an inter-religious memorial service for those who had died. “It was an interesting marriage of people from different religions who all wanted to find a common ground in lament and grief,” he says. “The service included elements of confession and contrition for our complicity with the evil in the world, in helping to create a world where such evil could take place.”

Luke 12:48b contains familiar words of Jesus: “From everyone to whom much has been given, much will be required; and from the one to whom much has been entrusted, even more will be demanded” (NRSV). White, middle class, North American Mennonites need to confess that God has blessed us but we have not done with all our blessings what God requires. We need to confess that there are things we have left undone. We need to confess that we, too, have evil in our hearts, and to mourn its reality. We need to repent. Because we are Mennonites who believe in discipleship, we need to act. And because we live in free North American societies, we can.

About the author

Melanie Zuercher graduated from Associated Mennonite Biblical Seminary in 1998. She spent two years as assistant editor of *The Mennonite* (in its General Conference Mennonite Church incarnation) and four years as news service editor for the GCMC. She is currently a freelance writer and editor.