

Confession

Restoring trust, repairing the breach

Muriel Bechtel

The word *confession*, for some Mennonites, conjures up memories of friends who had to admit contritely that they were pregnant before their marriage could be blessed by the church. Others associate confession with standing before the leaders of the church and answering questions to determine whether one was worthy to receive the Lord's Supper. Still others remember members being excommunicated for beliefs or behaviour judged to be outside the boundaries of their particular faith community.

Too often our rituals of confession focus only on individual responsibility for sin. We seldom acknowledge that the church is also "imperfect and thus in constant need of repentance."¹

Rituals of confession can begin the process of repairing the breach and opening the way for people to be reconciled to God and to each other.

Confession of Faith in a Mennonite Perspective affirms that "the enslaving nature of sin is apparent in the powers of evil, which work through both individuals and groups and in the entire created order. These powers, principalities, and elemental spirits of the universe work through political, economic, social and even religious systems to turn people away from justice and righteousness."²

The commentary develops that concept further by explaining that "organizations have a 'spirit' that can incite persons to do evil they would not have chosen on their own.... Human violence toward each other, enmity between peoples, the domination of men over women, and the adverse conditions of life and work in the world—these are all signs of sin in humanity and in all creation."

In my work with congregations and pastors, I have discovered that in times of conflict, when sin is not acknowledged in our worship, a hypocritical gap develops between the community's conduct and what it knows God desires. As we read in Isaiah 58, worship that merely makes us feel good while being untouched by

God's concerns and character violates God's intentions.³ Instead of reconciling worshipers with God and each other, such false worship widens the gap. Singing that "God's love is for everybody...from across the street to around the world"⁴ without confessing our failures to welcome "all who join themselves to Christ to become part of the family of God"⁵ leaves us with a sense of incongruence between our life and our confession of faith.

Efforts at mediation and reconciliation and changes in behaviour may bring a measure of healing and hope. But something more is needed among those who have been entrusted with the message of reconciliation. When our efforts to exercise discipline and be mutually accountable become barriers instead of "signs of God's offer of forgiveness and transforming grace to believers,"⁶ we need to confess our failures to be the just, loving, and forgiving people we know God intends us to be. When conflicts divide us, we need to confess our regrets and grief over all we have lost. When we are in positions of authority and hurt

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those entrusted to our care, we need to confess our responsibility for abusing our power. When we have been sinned against, we find it hard to let go of past hurts and work toward reconciliation if we do not see or hear signs of confession.

According to Frederick Buechner, "To confess your sins to God is not to tell him anything he doesn't already know. Until you confess them, however, they are the abyss between you [and God]. When you confess them, they become the Golden Gate bridge."⁷ Likewise, confessing my failures to another may not tell her anything she doesn't already know, but it starts to rebuild the trust needed to mend the rifts between us.

For our worship to be true, we need to confess the brokenness sin causes among us, as well as our faith in Jesus Christ who reconciles us to God, to ourselves, and to each other. The following rituals of confession began the process of repairing the breach and asking God's Spirit to open the way for people to be reconciled.⁸ Through them the hypocritical gap narrowed, and the worship of those involved became more true.

A congregational liturgy of confession

A congregation decided to have joint summer worship services with another congregation that included some people who had left the first congregation during a conflict. The decision to worship together precipitated the idea of planning a ritual of confession. Some were convinced that honest worship required acknowledging the alienation of past hurts and affirming their longings for a different future. Others were determined not to let their children's teeth be set on edge because of the sour grapes their parents ate (cf. Jer. 31:29, Ezek. 18:2).

All who had been involved in the original events were invited to a special service preceding the first joint worship service. The opening words gave the purpose of the gathering and expressed the hope that God would use the occasion to open doors to further healing and reconciliation. Scripted prayers of confession expressed feelings that were still too tender to name, and songs spoke to wounded hearts about God's healing and forgiveness. Isaiah 58 provided rich images of a restored community with a renewed purpose:

*Then you shall call, and the LORD will answer;
you shall cry for help, and he will say, Here I am.
If you remove the yoke from among you,
the pointing of the finger, the speaking of evil,
if you offer your food to the hungry
and satisfy the needs of the afflicted,
then your light shall rise in the darkness
and your gloom be like the noonday.
The LORD will guide you continually,
and satisfy your needs in parched places,
and make your bones strong;
and you shall be like a watered garden,
like a spring of water,
whose waters never fail.
Your ancient ruins shall be rebuilt;
you shall raise up the foundations of many generations;
you shall be called the repairer of the breach,
the restorer of streets to live in. (Isa. 58:9–12)*

As every participant took a piece of lemon, he was invited to name silently the bitterness and hurts he had caused and suffered, and to offer them to God for healing and forgiveness. Likewise, as each person took a small cup of honey, she was encouraged to taste it and remember the gifts of grace and kindness she had given and received, even in the midst of pain, and to honour them as gifts from God to the community.

At the front of the room, a large bowl of water reminded participants of their baptismal commitments and of the Spirit's power to restore the church so that it would be like a watered garden. One by one, people dropped the lemon and honey into the water as the group sang "Jesus, remember me,"⁹ acknowledging their dependence on Christ's love to forgive and reconcile them to God and each other. The worship concluded with the prayer of St. Francis and a prayer of blessing:

*Gracious God, we go on from here
as witnesses to new life through your grace.
We face the future with renewed confidence
and deeper humility,
a stronger sense of the sacredness of all life
and the dignity of all people.
Fill us with your grace and peace,
so that through us others may come to know of your love
and life everlasting. Amen.*

Ritual of confession and closure for estranged colleagues

Liturgies for larger gatherings are often best planned with scripted prayers, hymns, and Scripture rather than with personal sharing. However, smaller, more intimate circles can provide important opportunities for personal confession between aggrieved parties, as in the following ritual of confession and closure developed by colleagues whose conflict led to the end of their working relationship.

A Scripture reading set the stage for the small gathering of estranged colleagues and their supportive friends: "Pursue peace with everyone, and the holiness without which no one will see the Lord. See to it that no one fails to obtain the grace of God; that no root of bitterness springs up and causes trouble, and through it

many become defiled” (Heb. 12:14–15). An opening prayer acknowledged their need for Christ’s presence among these “two or three” gathered in his name (Matt. 18:20):

*God of numberless blessings,
we ask for a special blessing in these moments.
Bless us with a keen awareness of your presence.
Be with us as we gather in the name and spirit of Christ,
the great physician.
Be with us to hear the thoughts expressed in words
and the longings too deep for words.
Be with us to calm anxiety, to forgive sin, to ease pain.
Amen.*¹⁰

After the prayer, participants shared statements of confession they had prepared, naming their regrets and sorrow. They acknowledged disappointments and hurts, and they honoured the sincere efforts they had made to serve together and to resolve their differences. The prayer that followed focused on God’s mercy and reconciling power:

*Holy God, we thank you that you deal with us
not according to our sins
nor punish us as we deserve,
but receive us according to your overflowing grace
and your unmeasurable mercy.
You receive us as we are;
you show us what we can be.
You have come to us in Jesus Christ
to share our common lot
and to reconcile us to yourself.
Sweep over us with your Spirit,
change us by your love,
resolve our alienation.
Let us be made whole to sing with joy before you
and to live to your glory in the world. Amen.*¹¹

In preparation for anointing with oil, the leader asked God to grant to each participant release from attitudes and actions that

had brought pain and fracture in their working relationship, closure to the team relationship, courage to regain trust in social contexts, and the gift of a restored self-confidence grounded in God's love and call. With the anointing, the colleagues were invited to receive, "in faith and reality, an opening to the gifts of reconciliation, healing, restoration and peace."

A statement of agreement on how to proceed professionally and socially and a covenant to pray for one another followed the anointing. The service ended with the singing of "Gentle Shepherd"¹² and a closing prayer:

*May the God who brings light out of darkness,
order out of chaos,
wholeness out of brokenness,
life out of death,
bless us with transforming love
now and through all life's endings.*

Endings are especially difficult in significant relationships where trust has been broken. Restoring trust takes time, but genuine confession creates an opening for Christ's Spirit to enter and begin its healing work in the hearts of those involved.

The healing power of Scripture in our confession

A few years ago, as my husband and I were leaving the congregation I had served as pastor through several difficult years, one of the members was inspired to write a song. The hymn brought together two texts that became more poignant and powerful when placed side by side: Psalm 51, in which the psalmist begs for God's mercy for the evil he had done, and Ezekiel 36:26, in which God promises: "A new heart I will give you, and a new spirit I will put within you."

The hymn, "A new heart" became a focal point for the farewell service. As Tim Bergen, the composer, observed, "The words expressed what our congregation has been experiencing over the last few years, after a long and difficult period. We have been receiving a new heart and spirit, at first imperceptibly, then with greater sureness and power."¹³ Through the words of Scripture, Tim helped us express our regrets for past actions and lost

opportunities, our thanks for the renewal God had begun, and our faith that God would continue to work in our lives as we went our separate ways.

Confession is not a magical solution to the problem of sin in our personal and corporate life. We need to guard diligently against the temptation to use confession to cover over the deep scars left by sin and evil. But we also need to attend to the gap that false worship creates between us and God, within ourselves, and between us and our neighbours. Genuine confession affirms our faith in a God of grace and truth, in Jesus Christ who came to reconcile the world to God, and in the Spirit who is at work in us to bring about a new creation where restored relationships and true communion are possible.

Notes

¹ *Confession of Faith in a Mennonite Perspective* (Scottdale and Waterloo: Herald Pr., 1995), 31, 39.

² *Ibid.*, 31–2.

³ Walter Brueggemann, *Isaiah 40–66*, vol. 2 of *Isaiah*, Westminster Bible Companion Series (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Pr., 1998), 186.

⁴ Bryan Moyer Suderman, *God's Love Is for Everybody: New Children's Songs for the Missional Church* (Winnipeg: Ministries Commission of Mennonite Church Canada, 2001), no. 1.

⁵ *Confession of Faith in a Mennonite Perspective*, 40.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 55.

⁷ Frederick Buechner, *Wishful Thinking: A Seeker's ABC* (San Francisco: Harper San Francisco, 1993), 18.

⁸ My thanks to those who gave permission to use their materials and experiences.

⁹ *Hymnal: A Worship Book* (Elgin: Brethren Pr.; Newton: Faith & Life; Scottdale: Mennonite Publishing Hse., 1992), no. 247.

¹⁰ *For All Who Minister: A Worship Manual for the Church of the Brethren* (Elgin: Brethren Pr., 1993), 261.

¹¹ Arlene M. Mark, *Words for Worship* (Scottdale: Herald Pr., 1996), no. 296; adapted from United Church of Christ Statement of Faith, in Ruth C. Duck and Maren C. Tirrabassi, eds., *Touch Holiness: Resources for Worship* (Cleveland: United Church Pr., 1990), no. 105.

¹² *Hymnal: A Worship Book*, no. 352.

¹³ Timothy L. Bergen, quoted by Mary Groh in "Pastor leaves with a new song," *Canadian Mennonite*, 10 July 2000, 26.

About the author

Muriel Bechtel came into pastoral ministry with a background in nursing, community development, and conflict mediation. She earned an M.Div. and D.Min. at Toronto School of Theology, and served as pastor for 11½ years in Toronto. She and her husband, Dave, moved to Kitchener, Ont., in 2000, where she is minister of pastoral services for Mennonite Church Eastern Canada. She has two grown children.