

A vision of global communion

Mesach Krisetya, President, Mennonite World Conference
Professor, Satya Wacana Christian University, Salatiga, Indonesia

During the closing communion service of India 1997, the thirteenth world assembly of Mennonite World Conference, Jonathan Larson sat near the back of the worship *shamiana*, deeply moved by what he saw. Directly in front of him sat two young women, one from Zambia and the other possibly from Taiwan.

The two had obviously found a deep friendship during their days

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together in Calcutta. As the service proceeded, as the bread and wine were passed, Jonathan noticed the Zambian woman begin to weep openly. Tears trickled down her face, perhaps from sadness that the week together would soon end. Then he realized that the young Taiwanese woman was also weeping. Both partook of the elements, then turned to one other and tearfully embraced in a wonderful expression of the communion that the Lord's table represents. This moment left the strongest impression that Jonathan took home from Calcutta: the bonds of *koinonia* now make the Zambians kin to the Taiwanese. And Argentineans are now kin to

Russians. And Koreans are now kin of Guatemalan Mayans.

Communion is a thing of exquisite beauty indeed!

More than a conference

For more than 28 years, since I first attended a Mennonite World Conference assembly (as an AMBS student), I have been observing the worldwide family of faith with great interest. And I have come to believe that MWC is the only truly global Anabaptist-Mennonite church body. In this body, the member churches experience equality and feel like they own the

organization. This body belongs to them. In it they feel neither superior nor inferior. It is a space where Anabaptist-Mennonite family members from all over the world feel at home. They have the freedom to express their feelings and beliefs with dignity. The only problem is that many people still believe that the primary task of MWC is to prepare the next general assembly.

As the unique international church body of the global faith family, Mennonite World Conference should not only be an organization that provides for a carefully planned conference every six years. The expectations of the churches in the global South are not the same as they were—and perhaps still are—for many churches in the North. I have a vision for more than a conference. And I can best introduce this vision through two examples, one from southern Africa and the other from Indonesia.

The first is a story about the practice of sharing among the SAN (Bushmen) people of the Kalahari. An anthropologist who

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visited the SAN forty or fifty years ago recorded an interesting phenomenon after the men had killed a giraffe. There was, of course, a highly developed protocol establishing which hunter had priority when the meat was divided. But what interested the anthropologist most was the pattern of intense giving and receiving when the meat was carried into the settlement. She was able to track some 240 separate transactions of meat sharing. On receiving a share of meat, a family would subdivide its share and carry a portion to someone else. At the same time, others were appearing at the family's shelter, leaving other portions of meat. In the process, the meat was passed multiple times in small

portions among the members of the clan. The anthropologist's conclusion: in the harsh setting of the desert, reliable community is all that stands between a clan and obliteration. The passing of the gift portions of meat was a way for each of them to affirm their life-sustaining mutual bonds.

The second example is the Javanese cultural practice of *selametan*. This word comes from *selamat* which means "to save" or

“shalom.” *Selametan* is basically a religious practice. But it has social and cultural consequences. *Selametan* is a practice and symbol of solidarity. In *selametan* all members of the group are treated the same. All sit on the *pandan* leaf mat, which is spread across the floor. Regardless of rank, all—from the mayor to the bum—eat the same simple meal. In *selametan* each one is aware that every other one is part of the group. This condition can be achieved only when the participants in *selametan* understand that the sense of community must surpass individual differences. And it is this sense of solidarity, as the outcome of *selametan*, which leads to the spirit of helping each other and working together interdependently.

This kind of interdependence is not dependent on physical closeness. Proximity can produce group conformity and narcissistic manipulation in which one person uses another out of anxiety and self-defense. Enforced living together may increase real isolation under the guise of getting along with one another. Such relationships inevitably appear phony to the sensitive observer, particularly the young. Living together interdependently produces not an aggregate, but a collectivity, in which each member of the community feels the need for each other member.¹

Communion in the body of Christ

The concept of interdependence in the church is supported by several biblical images. The most profound is that of the body of Christ (1 Cor. 12:12–31). And the main point of this image is the mutual concern, the solidarity and, most of all, the communion of all members of the body.

Overcoming dependency

In Corinth, two groups were fighting over inferior and superior spiritual gifts. The church had apparently emphasized the more spectacular, such as healing and tongues, thus making the members who did not have these gifts feel inferior. Some churches in Asia today—offspring of western mission work—are left feeling inferior, unable to meet the standards set by their “parents,” and subject to leadership crises. In addition, many have inherited the bad Protestant inclination to split, and thus suffer division. Under these conditions, the churches feel they do not have anything

worthy to contribute. They develop a sense of dependency and the ongoing expectation that what is coming from the West is always right. What is local is never considered worthy. Consequently, local initiative and creativity are hindered.

Dependency is fundamentally tragic. Empirically, the relationship of dependency is wrong because it builds on negative feelings, namely, feeling threatened and feeling helpless in facing the present condition. Theologically speaking, a relationship of dependency is totally wrong also because the orientation is to self: self-existence, self-survival, self-prestige.

Humility comes when we realize that no one is perfect. It removes arrogance. We become less concerned about who is right and more concerned about what is right.

Paul stresses the sovereign purpose of God in diversifying the parts of the body (1 Cor. 12:14–20). He is saying by implication that God has arranged different Christians in the body of Christ so that they can exercise

different gifts. God's method employs diversity to create unity. God creates communion to overcome dependency and a sense of inferiority in the body.

Overcoming independency

While some members of the church in Corinth apparently felt inferior and dependent, others must have thought themselves to be superior and independent (1 Cor. 12:21–26). Those who feel their gifts are superior are not aware that they need other people. They see other people as a reflection of themselves, as objects and as resources to get done what they want to get done. They won't listen because they feel they don't need to hear other people's opinions. Arrogance is the better term for this attitude, I would say.

With this kind of outlook, people tend to see success in terms of independent achievement. Perhaps this mind-set is true to a certain extent, if one is dealing with things. But the church is not a thing. When we are dealing with people, we are dealing with living, breathing human beings who have their uniqueness, culture, emotions, feelings, ideas, minds, and other resources.

When we are dealing with the church, we are dealing with a body. For a healthy functioning of the body, we need to overcome

dependency with interdependency. We need to overcome magnifying some gifts by finding communion in all gifts.

Coming over to communion

The fundamental principle of relationship that Paul advocates (1 Cor. 12:21) is the interdependence of the parts of the body. As members of Christ's body, churches and Christians are mutually dependent, or interdependent, even as they exercise their distinctive functions.

As the body of Christ, we have to start by showing our empathy to one another, and empathy also means respect. In order to obtain that kind of character, we first have to listen,

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seeking to understand one another's point of view, and then to be understood. For many of us, however, communication is first and foremost seeking to be understood.²

As members of the body, we must take the initiative to find ways for all members to cease competing with one another so they can cooperate with each other (Phil. 2:3–4). Humility comes when we realize that no one is perfect. It removes arrogance. We become less concerned about *who* is right and more concerned about *what* is right. I think that is the image of the healthy body of Christ.

The fact is that members of the body are better together than they are alone. No one individual has all the gifts, all the talents, all the ideas, or the capacity to perform all the functions of the whole body. What is vital for the quality of life of the body is the ability to work together, learn from each other, and help one another grow.

As the body of Christ, we are called to value the other members, not because of what they have, but because of who they are. What Paul is trying to say to the Corinthians is that all members of the body have value. And the value is even greater when they pool their gifts and cooperate with one another for the benefit of the whole body.

All of this can be done by loving-kindness. By definition, to love is to become interdependent. Love is not love until one gives

it away. It involves relationships with others and belonging to one another. It means reciprocity. “In everything, do to others as you would have them do to you; for this is the law and the prophets” (Matt. 7:12).

A vision of global Anabaptist-Mennonite communion

I have a vision for worldwide *koinonia* in the Anabaptist-Mennonite family of faith. I have a vision that Mennonite, Mennonite Brethren, Brethren in Christ, and related churches around the world will one day form a global communion whose members are not judged according to race, ethnic group, wealth, or whether they are the result of missionary work from the North. All churches will be accepted on the basis of their commitment to Jesus Christ and to Anabaptist beliefs—and on the basis of the unique contribution they can make to the church universal.

Global communion in the Anabaptist-Mennonite family can be achieved by placing the trilogy of natural church development at the center of our vision.³

- *Faith*—understood as holding basic biblical and Christian convictions in Anabaptist perspective. When Christians from different races and cultures have the same purpose because of common faith in Jesus Christ, they live in communion. MWC should provide information about the uniqueness of Anabaptist beliefs.
- *Fellowship*—which is the expression of our solidarity and commitment to work together, pooling resources for the kingdom. This is more than simply networking or exchanging information and resources. It is the heartfelt communion of spirit that comes from an acknowledged and shared experience of Christ. MWC should provide space so that churches can develop intimate relationships with one another and thus be able to work together interdependently.
- *Service*—defined as caring for and helping one another for the glory of God’s kingdom (Mark 10:42–45). Communion cannot be achieved only by agreement on difficult theological issues. Communion is more than sentimental fellowship. Communion implies the willingness to forget traditional differences, denominational boundaries, successful investments, and material wealth. It assumes confessing that

division is a sin and that it is as wrong to be at war with one another as it is to be at war with another country. Communion includes the willingness to talk face-to-face about spiritual concerns, with frankness at all times. Communion comes when we know each other well enough to trust each other with our innermost thoughts and then look for common ground on which to serve one another. So MWC should provide channels for mutual service.

Frankly, I do not have a blueprint for the new pattern of relationships in the global communion. But I do know that they will not be based on human wisdom and strength, on human structure and organization. The relationships will grow up naturally (Mark 4:26–29). Only through creative communication with the Spirit of God can there be communion through which each church can affiliate with others in genuine community.

The blessing of this community is not just the outstretched hands or the kindly smile, or the joy of companionship. It is the spiritual inspiration that comes when you discover that someone believes in you and is willing to trust you with their communion.

I have a vision that Anabaptist-Mennonite churches around the world will one day form a global communion in which all will be accepted on the basis of their commitment to Jesus Christ and to Anabaptist beliefs—and on the basis of the unique contribution they can make to the church universal.

Such community is characterized by authentic involvement and by the warmth and openness of the people who compose it. As Paul said to the Galatians, “In Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith. As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus. And if you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham’s offspring, heirs according to the promise” (Gal. 3:26-29). Paul is saying that in Christ there is no East nor West, no North nor South. There is no Mennonite Church or

General Conference or Mennonite Brethren or Evangelical Mennonite Conference or Evangelical Mennonite Missions Conference or even Brethren in Christ.

The idea of community, in its scriptural tradition, implies a place or a space and a relationship where people have the freedom to love, to share, and to fellowship. Community is a place or a space and a relationship where love removes barriers of denominationalism, ethnicity, and social status, and in doing so creates both communication and communion. Can we perceive MWC as the space for exercising this spirit of communion?

The miracle of partnership in communion

Communion implies and provides the context for partnership. And this is the place where we need to work hard. But when we do, we can see the miracle of partnership in communion.

Working in partnership is not easy because it involves power and money. But partnership within the context of communion can be different and synergistic. It is not necessary to hide power or feelings of loss even though some have more than others. We do not need to bargain or compromise. We simply invest what we already have and see what happens. We pool our resources and power, then watch them grow in surprising ways!

This was the approach Jesus took when he faced a multitude of 5,000 hungry people (Mark 6:30–44). The first thing that came to the disciples' minds in this situation was money or the power of money: how much money was needed to purchase the food to feed the multitude. And because they did not have enough money, the mission to feed the 5,000 immediately got stuck. But Jesus did the opposite. He started with people, with relationships. He started by creating fellowship in small groups (Mark 6:39). He

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started by providing a space where the people could relate with one another more intimately, more compassionately, and with more understanding. In that setting, the sharing of wealth and belongings was not a problem at all. When people get together in one accord, they have the same vision, the same mission, and deep spiritual

understanding of their relationships. All know their functions in relation to the group. Nothing is impossible to accomplish.

That is the miracle of partnership in the context of communion. When the multitude experienced fellowship, they

sensed the same problems and the same needs and began to share. The people started with five loaves of bread and two fish—and finished with twelve baskets of leftovers. They were synergistic, not bargaining or compromising. They were able to contribute what they had and to do so with dignity. They achieved mutual understanding and maintained a sense of solidarity that made equal interdependency possible.

If your hearts are in communion with one another, the rest will follow. “For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also” (Matt. 6:21).

Note

¹ Donald B. Kraybill, *The Upside-Down Kingdom* (Scottsdale: Herald Pr., 1978), 26.

² Stephen R. Covey, *Principle-Centered Leadership* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1991), 123.

³ Christian A. Schwarz, *Paradigm Shift in the Church: How Natural Church Development Can Transform Theological Thinking* (Carol Stream: ChurchSmart Resources, 1999).