


Building a relationship of mutuality between two conferences

Fernando Pérez and Rebeca González

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cultures, languages, and ways of celebrating faith, life, and a vision of Jesus. By using the word *intercultural*, we mean to signal that our relationship is based on mutual respect and equality. We hope and expect to share what contributes to developing and growing into a visible sign of the kingdom of God on earth. We offer you our experience as one model of interculturality that breaks down barriers between insiders and outsiders and opens pathways through layers of privilege and under-privilege.

In this brief account of our development, we share our intercultural experience of shaping and being shaped throughout our ministry as pastors and teachers and members of the Conferencia de Iglesias Evangélicas Anabaptistas Menonitas de México (the Conference of Evangelical Anabaptist Mennonite Churches in Mexico [CIEAMM]), which consists of congregations in and around Mexico City.

Separation and learnings

Beginning in 1958, the Mennonite church in Mexico City was begun and nurtured through the efforts of workers sent by mission boards in the United States and Canada. The agencies supported missionaries and also provided financial assistance. Unfortunately, this approach did not lead to the development of local leadership, nor did it foster strong, autonomous congregations. Instead, what developed among pastors and national leaders was a competitive spirit that frayed relationships and divided and isolated congregations.

For these reasons, those of us who were part of the leadership of the CIEAMM decided in 2001 to ask the mission agencies to end the financial support they had given for many years. This was not an easy step to take! Because of it, communities of faith faced an uncertain future. But even though the financial resources were important, we needed them far



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less than we needed to build a culture of peace and strong, healthy, fraternal bonds between congregations, regardless of leadership position or status. We needed the money less than we needed to organize and deploy our own human resources. We needed to find ways to use our local limited resources to grow holistically and mature as communities of faith.

All this upheaval led to our pastors becoming bi-vocational. Our congregations did not have resources to pay full-time salaries. And we developed a model of pastoral teams in which two or three

people share responsibilities that earlier would have been carried out by a single pastor. Because of differences in the structure and make up of member congregations, each pastoral team has taken on its own characteristics.


Mutual support and accountability are always fundamental in a dialogue of trust, so we organized a process of resolving conflict around serious issues that always relied on mediation by an outside third-party.

Now we have new adult and youth pastors and leaders who did not live through the previous struggles of CIEAMM. These pastors have freedom to lead differently. They have studied Anabaptist history and theology, and they have a social conscience, an appreciation for community, and a sense of responsibility shared with all their brothers and sisters.

For thirteen years, we developed, experimented, and grew without any contact with the global church. Then in 2014, at an assembly of congregations, we agreed to send letters to several Mennonite conferences in the USA, with the hope of establishing new fraternal relationships. The only US conference that responded was Mountain States Mennonite Conference. As an assembly, we had decided to open our hearts to those who were willing to do the same with us. Having discarded the colonial practices of the past—economic dependency and autocracy—our desire was

to develop a new form of mutual support. As equals, we would rely on clear processes and firm steps for moving forward. History had taught us what we wanted in a new relationship.

It is on the basis of this conviction that interculturality is shaped: each culture is different, and no culture is superior or inferior to another. We are each open to understanding the other and to developing deep relationships with those who are different from us. Interculturality is an attitude of the heart. It involves being open to the life and practices of



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the other. It asks for transparency in the ways we worship and practice communion with God and each other. Interculturality welcomes the stranger in our midst. Just as the doors of our places of worship are open, so our hearts must be open. Opening our doors means that we receive, as a gift, the unknown one who speaks in a tongue we haven't heard before and have not understood. Through the presence of the Holy Spirit, interculturality opens doors of love.

We sought opportunities to foster a new relationship between our conferences. We wanted to forge bonds with

brothers and sisters who are Anglo-Saxon, Latin American, and Indigenous, from all corners of the earth. Our two conferences each selected a representative to initiate the contact. Herm Weaver was chosen from Mountain States and Fernando Pérez from CIEAMM. They communicated via Skype, email, and phone. In Mexico in November 2014, the first face-to-face encounter took place. During that encounter, Herm Weaver and Jaime Lazaro drew up a document that clarified the conditions of equality and mutual support that would guide us in our encounters. We did not have a clear understanding of what we might do together, but we knew we wanted to develop a fraternal relationship of open dialogue between South and North and North and South. We wanted true communion with each other.

A relationship of mutual support in action

The bond of love grew into a relationship of trust. Soon after that first encounter, the two of us (Rebeca and Fernando) were invited to visit the

congregations and ministries of the Mountain States conference during 2015. In October of 2015, a group of brothers and sisters from several Mountain States congregations came to Mexico to visit the CIEAMM churches.

We (Rebeca and Fernando) had retired from our pastoral ministry after thirty years of service. We had also completed four years as moderators of CIEAMM. Our conference approved the plan for us to spend April–October 2016 as missionaries with the Mountain States conference. We were involved in three areas of their ministry.

At Casa de Paz (Peace House), a multiservice community ministry providing services to newcomers in Denver, Colorado, we were involved in strengthening ties between congregations and services to immigrants. We helped organize donations of food and clothing and developed a roster of volunteers to visit people in detention. Many church members, Mennonites and others, volunteer time and give generously to support this ministry.

In Englewood, we participated in the group known as Beloved Community. Here we helped pastor Vern Rempel with worship services and shared our experience with Casa de Paz and the people who arrived from a detention center run by US Immigration and Customs Enforcement.

We were able to visit almost all the Mennonite congregations in New Mexico and Colorado. During these visits we challenged the congregations to become more involved with immigrants and encouraged them to support Casa de Paz. We led Bible studies engaging believers with the text. We showed pictures of the work and emphasized the need for engagement with immigrants and refugees. Many people responded positively to our call for action, and we witnessed a new openness to helping refugees.


Thoughts on relationships between Mennonites in the USA and in Mexico

Out of our initial experience with Mennonite missionaries to Mexico City and our subsequent exchanges with Mountain States conference, we have identified three general approaches to relationship between Christians from the USA or Canada and those in Latin America.

First, there are those who are authoritarian in their teaching and who create economic dependency. They come with far more financial resources than nationals can muster, and with a kind of authority that exerts power over their converts. These dynamics continue long after the mission workers have returned to their homes in the North.

Second, there are those who adopt an incarnational model. They incarnate the gospel in the context where they serve. Their commitment to the people they serve and to God is palpable. They live in the communities where they serve, and they serve as equals, respecting the context and culture of the place. They are servant leaders.

Third, there are those who do not have an Anabaptist identity. Perhaps the early Mennonite missionaries to Mexico adopted certain ways of doing things because of their obligations to the mission agencies that sent them. They needed to justify the investment of financial resources allocated to this area of mission work. But their sense of accountability pro-



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motivated lengthy procedures that were exhausting for the missionaries and unjust for those on the receiving end of their efforts. For many Mennonite churches in Latin America, strenuous efforts are underway to recover an Anabaptist identity, because many missionaries did not know Anabaptist theology and didn't teach it, live it, or promote its life-giving practices.

Conclusion

The reality we live with as Mennonites in Latin America is complicated. Some of our congregations and leaders still yearn for the good old days when resources were plentiful. Others live with the threat of poverty but at the same time seek to be honest and transparent, not fearing the effects of our present situation of uncertainty.

We are trying to be incarnational in our approach. The old model of church, in which some had plenty while others struggled to survive, reflected the wider society's unjust disparities between the wealthy and the destitute. It was the fact of this inequality that drove us to the decision that we needed to learn to depend on God and not on the security of funds and resources sent to us from outside and benefitting a few while the majority received nothing. If we cut off the donations and offerings, we could start something new and search for fresh ways to go forward together.

Uncertainties surrounding how to proceed with unfinished programs and projects motivated us to organize and move into the future from our



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own shared reality. Great effort on the part of many brothers and sisters of our conference has brought an end to interminable disputes and taught us a new kinship and fellowship. New attitudes emerge as we struggle together to meet needs and participate in a variety of ministries. We see with new eyes.

It hasn't been easy. We face new challenges and obstacles every day. But we know we need to face this reality and open ourselves to it in order to shape a culture of peace, to embody a new Anabaptist vision, to incarnate a new way of being as individual believers and as congregations. We do so in mutual intercultural partnership with our sisters

and brothers of the Mountain States Mennonite Conference, recognizing that they confront their own challenges and opportunities, and that we can support each other in our efforts.

About the authors

Fernando Pérez Ventura and Rebeca González Torres have served as pastors for more than thirty-three years in the Conference of Evangelical Anabaptist Mennonite Churches of Mexico (CIEAMM). Currently they work as volunteers with Mennonite Mission Network on Project CITA (Community of Anabaptist Theological Institutions), a network of Latin American theological institutions, promoting mutual aid and online theological education.

Rebeca has a master's degree in Biblical Studies (Divinity) from the Theological Community of Mexico, and is currently finishing her License in Education and Pedagogical Innovation. Fernando also has a master's in Biblical Studies (Divinity) from the Theological Community of Mexico, with a focus on Logotherapy.