

# Gifts of a global church

## The Mennonite World Conference experience

Alfred Neufeld

Temporally and spatially, the church is a global reality. In theology we talk about the church's synchronic and diachronic dimensions. These terms point to the church's presence simultaneously (synchronically) in many places and to its existence throughout the ages (diachronically).

The writer of the New Testament letter to the Hebrews says that followers of Jesus are surrounded by a cloud of witnesses (Heb. 12:1). This global cloud provides the church with courage, strength, correction, wisdom, and fellowship.

From its beginnings in Moscow and Switzerland in 1925, Mennonite World Conference was conceived as a global community. Although a hundred years ago its cultural identity was predominantly Dutch, German, and Swiss, now this global family consists of more than a hundred regional associations from more than fifty culture groups.

### **The work of the MWC Faith and Life Commission in global perspective**

The MWC Faith and Life Commission enables MWC member churches to give and receive counsel on Christian faith and practice and on Anabaptist-Mennonite witness. The commission develops teaching resources in order to bind these many churches together through common theological work.<sup>1</sup> So far, four teaching resources have been approved by the MWC General Council:

1. "A Heart With Four Chambers: A Theological Foundation for the Work of MWC's Four Commissions (Peace, Mission, Faith and Life, and Deacons)," by Alfred Neufeld Friesen
2. "The 'Anabaptist Tradition'—Reclaiming its Gifts, Heeding Its Weaknesses," by Hanspeter Jecker

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1 Links to these resources are at <https://mwc-cmm.org/article/teaching-resources>.

3. “Koinonia—The Gift We Hold Together,” by Thomas R. Yoder Neufeld
4. “An Anabaptist Theology of Service,” by Arnold Snyder

But already the gathering and editing of the seven “Shared Convictions” was a successful global initiative of doing theology together and sharing gifts and insights from different cultures, languages, and continents. The little commentary *What We Believe Together: Exploring the “Shared Convictions” of Anabaptist Related Churches* was spontaneously translated into local languages in Vietnam, India, and Korea.<sup>2</sup>

At present, two global topics are subjects of Faith and Life Commission work: How do we as a global family deal with controversial issues such as homosexuality and polygamy? Should we change the name of MWC, dropping the word “Mennonite,” so that groups such as the Brethren in Christ who embrace Anabaptist identity could feel part of the family without needing to identify themselves as Mennonite?

A wonderful gift and source of enrichment have been interchurch dialogues between Mennonites and Baptists, Reformed, Pentecostals, Lutherans, and Catholics. They open a wider horizon for us, to see the reality of the one body of Christ made up of people of every nation, culture, and church tradition. These conversations challenge our beliefs and help us understand other ways of reading the Bible. They provide evidence of differences in situations facing churches in other places. And they provide opportunity for healing. Had it not been for the friendship Danisa Ndlovu (MWC president from 2009 to 2015) had with fellow Zimbabwean Ishmael Noko (General Secretary of the Lutheran World Federation since 1995), it is unlikely that the Lutheran-Mennonite reconciliation process culminating in the 2010 LWF assembly in Stuttgart would have happened.<sup>3</sup>

## Benefits of being a global church

**1. The global church provides us with koinonia.** As the writer of the letter to the Hebrews testifies, Jesus’s followers are surrounded by a cloud of witnesses. These are the faithful who put their trust in God. According

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2 Alfred Neufeld, *What We Believe Together: Exploring the “Shared Convictions” of Anabaptist Related Churches* (Intercourse, PA: Good Books, 2007).

3 “Action on the Legacy of Lutheran Persecution of ‘Anabaptists,’” in *Give Us Today Our Daily Bread*, Official Report, LWF Eleventh Assembly (Geneva: The Lutheran World Federation, 2010).

to Hebrews 11, they extend from Abel, son of Eve and Adam, right up to the present (Heb. 11:1-40). According to the author of Hebrews, the church of our day lives in fellowship—*koinonia*—with the church of yesterday.

Those of us in Anabaptist circles do not often invoke the ancient Christian idea of the communion of saints, the spiritual union of the members of the church, the living and the dead. But the idea of this communion captures an important dimension of Christian faith, reminding



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us that we are not the first generation of “saints”: Many Christians of the past are surrounding us. They are our cheerleaders, encouraging us to run the race faithfully to the end that God has set before us.

In addition to the fellowship that exists between the church militant and the church triumphant, we experience *koinonia* in cross-cultural, transnational, and intercontinental senses. During the wonderful multicultural worship that happens in the MWC assemblies

that take place for a week every six years, it is easy to feel linked together globally. But after the assembly, after participants return to their respective continents, nations, daily life, this feeling of *koinonia* retreats.

The writer of the New Testament letter to the Ephesians shows us that the redeeming work of Christ (Eph. 2:8-10) is the sole basis for this kingdom *koinonia*. To make it happen day by day requires that Christ tear down walls of separation, kill enmity between Jewish Christians and Gentile Christians, bring them close to each other, and create from all of them one reconciled body, thus proclaiming and establishing peace (Eph. 2:11-22).

**2. *The global church offers us the gift of critical outside perspectives.*** When African Christians were having a hard time finding their way from a traditional polygamous to a Christian monogamous marriage culture, Christians from North America and Europe were eager to assist them with council and instructions. And to a large extent, that engagement was appropriate. Today, European and North American Mennonite churches are struggling with cultural issues of sexual identity, but they

have a hard time accepting council and instruction from their sisters and brothers in Asia and Africa.

When Latin American Mennonite Christians were living under military regimes, a strong prophetic voice from the North was heard at

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the MWC assembly in Curitiba, Brazil, in 1972. And it was opportune. But it is far more difficult at this moment for Christians in the United States to accept criticism about (for example) the meddling the Pentagon engages in all over the world, weapons deals that strengthen the global war industry and increase risks of violent conflict, and televangelists who spread a diluted and distorted gospel and monopolize Christian media all over the world.

We need one another not only for fellowship and encouragement but also for correction and exhortation. Our cultures and traditions blind us to certain

realities and leave us unable to comprehend the full extent—the breadth and length and height and depth—of the kingdom of God, unable to grasp fully the implications of its righteousness. The perspectives of others expand our perceptions and increase our understanding.

**3. *The global church frees us from ungodly nationalism.*** The church has been called God’s new nation out of all nations. And that reality reminds us that the nationalism we should advocate is limited. A follower of Christ cannot wholeheartedly say either “America first” or “Zimbabwe first.” More radically still, the Christian peace witness relativizes all patriotism and nationalism. Wars are motivated by a desire to expand territory (conquest) or defend territory (stopping conquerors). So most of our national-geographic limits are quite bloody. And far too often, as in World War I and World War II, Christians fought against Christians, Mennonites fought against Mennonites. This is a betrayal of our citizenship in the reign of God. It is a betrayal of our identity: “But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God’s own people, in order that you may proclaim the mighty acts of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light” (1 Pet. 2:9, NRSV).

And then there is the reality of Christian denominations, outside of the Mennonite world and within the Mennonite family. Denominations have often found their genesis in movements of renewal, but sometimes also they originate in splits and fights. The denominational landscape can inspire and give us an appreciation of Christians' complementarity, but all too often, even among Mennonite groups, it reflects and fosters distance, misunderstanding, self-righteousness, and superiority—"holier than thou" feelings. The killing of enmity that Christ accomplished on the cross has implications on an emotional level, when it comes to living out, in the Christian and Mennonite family, Christ's work of peace and reconciliation.

**4. *The global church helps us understand the mission of God and the mission of the church.*** Mennonite missiologists have some-

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times wondered why historian Harold S. Bender in his articulated recovery of the Anabaptist vision did not include missions as a core value of Anabaptism. In my view, the answer is simple: Bender—and sixteenth-century Anabaptists—did not differentiate between church and mission: The mission of God is the church, and the church exists to activate the mission of God globally. This may be one of the greatest insights of sixteenth-century Anabaptist theology. Long before we had a modern concept of missions, long before we had mission soci-

eties and mission agencies, long before the disciplines of missiology and history of missions were developed, Anabaptists saw the sending of the church into the world as an obvious thing. When you break with the Constantinian paradigm and with the corpus Christianum, as the medieval concept of a unity of church and state has been called, the whole world—at home and abroad—becomes a mission field.

The "missio Dei" is strongly linked to the global extension of the kingdom of God. "Your kingdom come; your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven" might be the best synthesis of God's mission. The horizon of this mission is the whole of heaven and earth.

**5. *The global church speaks truth to power.*** I will never forget the Lausanne Movement 2004 Forum for World Evangelization that gathered

1500 Christian leaders in Pattaya, Thailand. George W. Bush and the US army had invaded Iraq in 2003 and were fighting to defeat Saddam Hussein. For many of us, it was frustrating to see the US government use language taken from the Crusades: the “coalition of the willing” were fighting the “forces of evil.” The old ghost of manifest destiny was once more alive and well.

Several friends of the Latin American Theological Fellowship (FTL) put up a petition inviting the Lausanne Forum and the gathered group of international leaders to sign it as a way of distancing themselves from this Christian crusade language. Most of our colleagues from Africa, Asia, Latin America, and Europe signed willingly. But many of our North American friends, who were leading the event, were strangely silent. The next day we were asked to stop the initiative.

Because of his involvement in the initiative, Ecuadorian evangelical theologian and missiologist René Padilla received a kind of reprimand: he

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had been scheduled to become honorary president of the Lausanne Movement, and that nomination was dropped. This incident affecting my friend and mentor showed me again how difficult it is on a global level to speak truth to power. But it is necessary. It is imperative. And there are crucial moments in history where the global church must speak truth to power.

**6. *The global church makes the kingdom of God visible.*** Anabaptist theology rejects the idea of the church invisible. For Anabaptists, the local church is a tangible community of believers. But that is not the whole truth: There is just one body of Christ. All Christian traditions, all denominations, all local churches be-

long to that one body. And there is just one bride of the Lamb, and one heaven of blessed hope. And above all states, governments, and kingdoms of this earth, there is the one kingdom of God, coming, breaking into time and space!

If the local churches all over the world built a common frontier, expanding this kingdom, fighting the darkness, defeating the prince of this age, the kingdom of God would turn out to be more visible. And if the

primary loyalty of all local churches to this kingdom, over against their own nationalities and civil identities, were evident, then the kingdom of God would gain credibility.

**7. *The global church enriches our theology.*** In his brilliant little book *Making Sense of the Cross*, British theologian Alister McGrath writes about five different settings that illustrate five meanings of the cross: the courtroom—no condemnation; the prison—deliverance; the hospital—healing; the battlefield—victory; the family—identity and dignity.<sup>4</sup> Different cultures have particular affinities for particular understandings of atonement and the message of redemption in Christ. For a forensic culture, like that of Martin Luther and the Protestant Reformation, legal images and language for redemption predominate. For a shame culture, the language of victory, belonging, and dignity captures the core of the gospel. In postmodern global times, the idea of healing has great relevance. In animistic cultures, the Christus Victor theory and the language of Christian warfare (Eph. 6) are meaningful.

Which group holds the true belief about the cross? Who captures its biblical meaning? To some extent, each of these traditions contributes a biblical view. And many of these biblical images are complementary in nature. And that fact of the diversity of images within the Bible surrounding this central Christian symbol reminds us that the Christian message is accessible to all human cultures. The Aristotelian-Thomistic logic, so crucial for Western orthodoxy, is actually limited and limiting. In contrast, John's vision described in Revelation 5 is of a great crowd from every tribe and language and people and nation, singing praises to the Lamb. This vision becomes reality here and now, when we learn to do theology in global dialogue with respect and sensitivity.

### **About the author**

Alfred Neufeld is a Latin American Mennonite theologian who chaired the Mennonite World Conference Faith and Life Commission from 2009 to 2018. He was founding dean of the School of Theology of the Protestant University of Paraguay (Decano de la Facultad de Teología de la Universidad Evangélica del Paraguay) and at present serves as president (rector) of that university.

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4 Alister McGrath, *Making Sense of the Cross* (London: InterVarsity Press, 1992).