

The journey of reconciliation at Holyrood Mennonite Church

Werner De Jong

Holyrood Mennonite Church of Edmonton, Alberta, is a multicultural congregation consisting primarily of older traditional Mennonites and younger West African immigrants. Together we are participating in the adventure of becoming one body that shares leadership and responsibility for all aspects of our life together. The journey is never boring.

There's no knowing where you might be swept off to

Near the beginning of J. R. R. Tolkien's Lord of the Rings trilogy, Frodo speaks memorable words to his fellow hobbit Sam about the adventure that lies before them: "Remember what Bilbo used to say. It's a dangerous business, Frodo, going out your door. You step onto the road, and if you



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don't keep your feet, there's no knowing where you might be swept off to." While their odyssey was fraught with risk, the journey was well worth it, with both characters being transformed through their participation in the mission to assure that darkness did not consume their world.

Our story has also been one of transformation. At Holyrood, we began our common journey with no clear idea of where it might take us, yet we are finding ourselves transformed into greater Christlikeness through walking the way

of reconciliation together. As we have sought to respond to the leading of God's Spirit, we have found ourselves feeling abundantly blessed by the gifts we offer each other, and also feeling lost and confused over our differences.

Wisdom for the journey

My intent here is to share what we at Holyrood are learning in our quest to integrate two very different cultural groups into one church body. What gifts and struggles have we discovered along the way?

After worship on a Sunday several years ago, a senior member of our congregation told me, “I just want you to know that I don’t like the Af-



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rican music. I find the *saa saa*¹ and the djembe irritating. The choruses are repetitive. I prefer the theological richness of the songs in our Mennonite hymnal.” Immediately I tensed up, but his next words warmed my heart: “Having said that, I want you as our pastor to ensure that we as a congregation never stop singing the African songs, because it’s not just about what I want. As a multicultural congregation, we must be hospitable and make space for each other.”

The wisdom he voiced is foundational

for all congregations that undertake the adventure of learning to be one diverse people in Christ. His perspective also demonstrates the growth potential for our church members as we embrace the journey of becoming global congregations.

Our common journey began in 2001, when Holyrood sponsored four young Liberian men as refugees. Today 40 percent of the congregation of about one hundred active members, with an average Sunday worship attendance of about seventy, consists of West Africans, primarily from Liberia, but also from Sierra Leone, Ghana, and Nigeria. Shortly after I arrived as pastor in 2006, I asked one of our Liberian members, “Why did you stay in this church once you arrived in Canada?” His answer was instructive: “We did visit other churches in Edmonton, and every church welcomed us. Week by week they welcomed us. But it went no further than that. Holyrood was the one church that invited us to use our gifts to help serve the congregation. The reason we are here is because we not only want to be welcome, we also want to participate.”

Over time this participation has deepened, as God is teaching us that we need each other. We are learning that we all benefit from the vari-

1 The *saa saa* is a gourd/bean percussion instrument.

ous gifts we bring to the table. Toward that end, we have made significant progress in embracing the gifts of all our members. Today we have six elders: four are African, including the congregational chair, and two are Caucasian. We sing Western and African worship songs. We have Western and African preachers, Sunday school teachers, worship leaders, and ushers. Our efforts to incorporate different peoples into one body have brought many blessings, which can be broadly summarized using three categories: opportunity for global church engagement, renewal of our spiritual lives through exposure to our different faith traditions, and strengthening of community life.

The gift of global church engagement

Embracing people of other cultures in our congregations provides a natural bridge to the wider church, and participation in the global church body is critical at a time of increasing nationalism. It doesn't just help



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us overcome isolation in our own congregations; it also stands as a witness to the world that unity and reconciliation among diverse peoples is possible.

Through our Liberian members, most of whom come from a Pentecostal background, we have been in partnership with two related Liberian Free Pentecostal groups since 2008. My wife, Joanne, and I have made numerous trips to Liberia for the sake of this partnership, and to our delight we have discovered that our Pentecostal partners, who

have lived through a brutal civil war, are eager to have us share our Anabaptist understanding of God's gift of peace.

In 2010 I was honored to be keynote speaker at the annual national conference of the Free Pentecostal Mission of Liberia. The conference ground we met on was riddled with bullet holes, and many church members had been killed on that very land. The theme for the conference was chosen specifically in light of our partners' new understanding of what a Mennonite speaker might have to offer: "Jesus is our peace, for he has knocked down the dividing wall between us." Later, I was told that this theme was so important that our partners took the risk of inviting a

non-Pentecostal to be their speaker for the first time in their decades-long history.

The blessings of the partnership flow both ways. Holyrood has been privileged to host two return visits from a Liberian Pentecostal pastor, and her teaching has been both inspiring and challenging, encouraging us to trust God, seek God in fasting and prayer, depend on the Holy Spirit, and engage more in evangelism. Further, when Leymah Gbowee, the winner of the 2011 Nobel Peace Prize for her war-ending work with the women of Liberia, was in Edmonton to receive an honorary doctorate, she graciously accepted my wife's spontaneous invitation to address our congregation, having learned of our Liberian members and partnership. Her message was strong and clear: "You have been blessed by God to be a blessing to others."

The gift of spiritual renewal

The merger of North American Anabaptists and African Pentecostals has



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enhanced our spiritual lives. Our African members contribute vibrancy and passion to our worship services, especially when it is the African team's turn to lead the singing. They engage their entire bodies in worship, clapping and dancing and raising hands. Over the years a few traditional Mennonites have learned to clap as well. Some even sway a little!

More than adding life to congregational worship, Holyrood's African members enrich the congregation through their strong faith in God's goodness and strength. Having survived a civil war, they display a faith that is not mere intellectual belief in the existence

of God but active trust and conviction that the God who was present in severe trial can be counted on to be present in any life situation. When Joanne struggled to find work, she asked a Liberian woman in the congregation to pray with her. The next morning at 6:00 the phone rang. When Joanne wearily answered it, the voice on the other end of the line enthused, "Time to pray! God will surely make a way!" Indeed, Joanne was soon back at work. To witness such faith is a blessing to those of us

who have grown up in a skeptical secular society. We benefit greatly from encountering strong enthusiasm for prayer and from hearing regular testimonies about answered prayer.

In our experience, African spiritual vitality energizes a missional impulse, integrating the interior life of devotion with the exterior life of action. Enthusiasm for mission, and evangelism in particular, seems to be part of the DNA of African Christianity. It is common, for example, for Holyrood's African members to invite friends to church. At a time when many churches in the West are in numerical decline, we can learn from our global brothers and sisters' experience of and passion for bearing verbal witness to their faith in Jesus.

Of course, learning from each other's spiritual traditions flows in both directions. At Holyrood, many of our Western members volunteer time to serve their neighbours in practical ways at the Food Bank, the Mennonite Central Committee thrift store, or Habitat for Humanity. We also emphasize and seek to live out the traditional Anabaptist values of working for peace, justice, and reconciliation in our relationships, whether in our church community or with our neighbours. Our African members have expressed appreciation for this Anabaptist peace emphasis, and have



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shared some of it with their fellow Africans in the city. As a result, I have been invited by the Liberian Friendship Society of Edmonton to speak on the theme of peacemaking, and on a few other occasions I have been asked by Liberians who do not attend Holyrood to help reconcile strained or broken relationships. Incorporating different peoples into our congregations and being open to each other's faith traditions opens new doors for missional opportunities.

The gift of strengthened community life

A third joy of seeking to be one people of God together is the wonderful enrichment of our congregation's community life. In a world often divided along racial lines, nothing warms my heart more than to witness the genuine and mutual affection between Holyrood's diverse members. Even

when we do not fully understand each other across the cultural divide, the simple, sincere effort to be God's people together helps break down walls of fear, prejudice, and indifference between us. Our very congregational life has become a school of reconciliation, in which we are all learning to respect and appreciate people who are different from us, to see the good and the potential in each other, and to recognize each other as cherished brothers and sisters in Christ. As this school of reconciliation trains us

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in multicultural understanding, we are better able to engage in mission. When we serve our neighbours together, as a visible community, our unified actions are a witness that reconciliation is a reality in Jesus Christ.

The women's group at Holyrood is leading the way in strengthening our community life. The group, half Africans and half Westerners, meets bi-weekly for fellowship, worship, and Bible study. As a group, they regularly visit congregational members who are sick, grieving, or simply in need of encouragement. They bring gifts and encourage mutual aid, which is strong among Holyrood's African members and supplements this historic strength of the Anabaptist tradition.

I have become a better pastor through Holyrood's African members, whose very way of being, as those coming from a community-based society, challenges my Western tendency toward individualism. I believe others in our congregation have been similarly affected. Last September, one of Holyrood's Liberian mothers, who has four young children, died tragically when her vehicle was struck by a runaway stolen truck. A Liberian family in our congregation opened their home as a place for the community to gather, and almost every day for a month dozens of people visited to support the grieving family. The hospitality was overwhelming, as food was carefully provided each day for all the guests, without complaint and in a spirit of solidarity. As many of Holyrood's traditional Mennonites learned, the most important thing was simply showing up, to be part of the grieving community. We didn't need to say anything. It was enough just to sit and be present, which further solidified the bonds between us. In the midst of tragedy, it was a privilege to participate as community in

this grieving process, as evening after evening we simply sat still, or talked, or praised God and cried together.

No adventure worthy of the name is without challenges

As enriching as our journey has been, the way has not always been smooth; no adventure worthy of the name is without challenges. The challenges we have encountered, broadly speaking, are of two kinds: discomfort with differences and the changes they bring, and difficulties around navigating power dynamics.

Becoming close to those who are different from us necessitates change. It forces us to rethink a lot of things, and that process makes



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us uncomfortable. At Holyrood we have known various sources of friction. These include our different ways of prioritizing time, our different understandings of the relationship between money and friendship, and our divergent worship styles. Less frequently, questions arise about theological differences. On account of these things, we have had a few members from both sides of the congregation leave and join monocultural congregations.

For the large majority who have chosen to remain together, our common journey requires a good measure of humility, forbearance, and generosity on all

sides, as we lay aside personal preferences in favor of the common good, are patient with each other's strange ways, and give each other sufficient space to express our God-given gifts. In practical terms, we have found it helpful to address our differences head-on. One fall, we dedicated each week of our adult Sunday school class to comparing Canadian and West African culture. It was the best-attended class in my twelve years at Holyrood, a sign of our desire to know each other better. Further, at our leadership meetings we frequently ask each other questions like these: How does your culture understand this question? How would you normally approach this situation? We are also blessed with a few leaders gifted in cross-cultural understanding, who take the initiative, when necessary, to interpret the words or actions of one culture to the other.

The other significant challenge we face is related to power, especially with respect to how we make decisions in the congregation. In Western culture, people readily think in terms of their own individual needs, and most people feel empowered to express their opinions as individuals. In West African culture, as in many global cultures, people think first in terms of the needs of the community and therefore do not have the same sense of empowerment to express individual opinions. Rather than individuals voicing individual opinions, leaders are looked to in order to express the voice of the community.

At Holyrood, this dynamic is most evident at our congregational meetings, which are often poorly attended by our African members, apart from a few leaders. Those Africans who are absent understand that their voice will be heard through their leaders, while the Westerners who are present wonder why so few African members are present. Given this context, it is difficult to make decisions that fairly represent the entire congregation. It is good for Westerners to understand that the voice of one African leader at such meetings likely represents the voices of many others. On the other hand, we also continue to encourage all members to attend our congregational meetings. This is an ongoing journey, and at present the African elders and I have frequent meetings with the African membership, typically after a Sunday worship service, to seek their input regarding various congregational concerns.

Participating in the church's multicultural future

In the end, while we may not always manage to stay on our feet, we are glad that God has swept us together into our shared adventure. We are being blessed, challenged, and transformed by the gift of each other. We need each other, and we are learning to appreciate and depend on each other. It is a privilege to participate together in God's mission, to shine the light of God's reconciling love into a world darkened by division. In an increasingly multicultural world, the future of the church is multicultural, and we are grateful to be part of it.

About the author

Werner De Jong is the pastor at Holyrood Mennonite Church in Edmonton, Alberta, where he has served for the past twelve years. He wrote this article in consultation with Holyrood's adult Sunday school class.