

Encountering the global church

From Mennonite culture to radical witness

Doug Klassen

Mennonite culture and the global church

Five years ago in January, our son Levi indicated that he wanted to join the baptism and membership class at Foothills Mennonite Church in Calgary where I was pastoring. Rose and I were excited, and the Pentecost party planning for May 27 began in earnest.¹

I phoned my parents and invited them out for the event. Most certainly they were coming, and then my dad said, “Would you have time a few days afterwards for us to drive north to Beaverlodge, Alberta, to see if we can find my parents’ old homestead?”

“Let’s plan for it.”

“Great. I will contact some of the relatives up there to say we are coming.”

So, after the baptism weekend, we drove eight hours north to Peace River country. There it was: the log cabin with the dirt floor. This is where they landed in 1926.

The family only stayed for several years. The work was hard, and the farmer holding the mortgage was dishonest. They decided to leave with some others for Tofield to work in the open coal mine. My Opa and his coworkers had to fill one boxcar per day with coal.

Some years later, right after World War II, General Motors in St. Catharines was hiring, and one of the foremen spoke German. Some families packed up and arrived in Vineland right when Vineland United Mennonite Church was coming into its own.

Before long there was a new building, vibrant German school, bursting Sunday School programs, choirs, another building expansion, quilt-

1 This essay is adapted from a plenary address delivered at the Mennonite Church Manitoba AGM, March 3-4, 2023, hosted by Douglas Mennonite Church in Winnipeg; the below dialogues are reconstructed from memory and are not intended to serve as transcriptions of the conversations.

ing circles, and in 1965 a new minister, J. K. Klassen, from the far away land of Winkler, Manitoba.

In 1973, when Grand Funk Railroad, Stevie Wonder, Dianna Ross, and the Doobie Brothers were topping the billboard charts, the congregation made the decision to separate the German and English services, though it was not going to happen until J. K. implored the congregation that this would result in a 25 percent increase in his workload, and he was not asking for further compensation.

This story is not meant to belittle the congregation. These were people who still carried trauma from the Russian Revolution. Anxiety decreases when you are worshipping in the company of others who share an experience. And this is not just the experience of Vineland. Many of the Eurocentric churches among us would have been the same—with heart-language hymns and chorales, Low German conversational language, and so much good food. There was safety in like company.

But what was once an attraction to like-minded others eventually became a barrier to those in the neighborhood who did not share the same story. The kids did not carry the trauma either, at least not in the same way.

Fast forward fifty years, and many of these churches have limited Sunday School programs, if any, buildings that are more than they need, difficulty pulling a choir together, and pastors' salaries that—though lower than other similar professions—are the largest lines in the budget.

Cultural peculiarities have become more of a societal identifier of what it means to be Mennonite than our expressions of faith in Jesus Christ.

As far as Mennonite culture goes, I was amused by Ivan Emke's columns in the *Mennonite Distorter* and more recently Andrew Unger's satire in *The Unger Review* (previously *The Daily Bonnet*). My amusement was mixed with concern,

however, because cultural peculiarities have become more of a societal identifier of what it means to be Mennonite than our expressions of faith in Jesus Christ. What worries me even more is that, for the most part, we have forgotten (or maybe given up on) the vision of what the church is to be in the world.

Paul starts Ephesians 3 with a wide-angle lens, talking about how in God's wisdom, God held onto the mystery of Christ until the moment it was revealed to the apostles (of whom Paul says he is the least) so that it

could be shared beyond the bounds of the *freundschaft*, beyond the Israelites to the gentiles:

Although I am the very least of all the saints, this grace was given to me to bring to the gentiles the news of the boundless riches of Christ and to make everyone see what is the plan of the mystery hidden for ages in God, who created all things, so that through the church the wisdom of God in its rich variety might now be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly places. This was in accordance with the eternal purpose that he has carried out in Christ Jesus our Lord, in whom we have access in boldness and confidence through faith in him. (Eph. 3:10–12)

If I would have read these verses in Africa or other places in the Global South where 84 percent of the Mennonites in Mennonite World Conference are now located, there would have been a rousing applause or several *amens*, not only because they are more expressive than North American Mennonites but also because they have entrusted their lives to God's vision for the church as the vehicle through which the restoration of all creation will come. Lao people have told us that they would drop everything for Jesus. Leaders in Vietnam and China have been jailed for the gospel. Below I recount two recent encounters with people from the Global South as a challenge to those of us Mennonites in North America who can let Mennonite culture supersede the radical call of discipleship to Jesus.

An elderly man in Ethiopia

We had just finished worshipping with the Mennonite Church in Adama, Ethiopia. The building was packed to the rafters, and there were no cars allowed in the small parking lot because there were benches set up and a loudspeaker for the overflow crowd. There were at least five hundred people there, the majority under the age of forty.

After the service they wanted to show us the elementary school that they run. Of the six hundred students enrolled, one hundred of them attend for free because they cannot afford to pay. If Mennonite leaders see a child living on the streets, they pick up the child, contact the authorities, and, if the child has no home to go to, take the child into a Mennonite family and send the child to this school. I did not see any street children in Adama. The Mennonites make sure there are none.

As we were driving to the school and then to the hospital established in 1945 by the first Mennonite missionaries to arrive there, an elderly man kept trying to sit beside me in the van. I could not figure out what was going on until he said, “I want to tell you something. I did not have a good childhood. My life was in peril. I took a chance and came to this hospital that the Mennonites started here. I asked them for a job, and they hired me to be an orderly.”

“That’s great.”

“I’m not finished. You see this building here? Every day the Mennonites would go in there together for a time. We asked them what they were doing in there. They answered that they were worshipping God. We asked if they were doing that so they wouldn’t get sick. They answered no. They came together to tell each other what they have seen God doing in their lives and in the lives of the patients, and they worship and give thanks to God for it all. And then they also pray for the many needs. We asked if we could join them, and they said yes!”

The elderly man went on to tell me breathtaking stories of how the peace of Jesus Christ transformed his life and the life of the other Ethiopians who worked alongside him. In the end he asked, “Do you know why I told you all of this?”

“I think you wanted to express gratitude—”

“No,” he interrupted. “I want to tell you this because I know in North America you are struggling. You are losing the vision for the gospel, and all I can say is, How dare you? How dare you keep the good news to yourself? It is my choice whether or not to follow Jesus, but withholding the good news from others, the good news that can transform their lives—that, my friend, is colonial.”

Just then Fanosie, an Ethiopian who serves in Mennonite Church Eastern Canada, put his hand on my shoulder and said, “You just got told!”

“Did I ever!”

A tribal chief in the Philippines

Dann and Jojo Pantoja, Mennonite Church Canada witness workers, have been made honorary members of the Tagabawa tribe way up on Mount Apo on the island of Mindanao in the Philippines because of their relationship with the tribe and how they have been instrumental in bringing peace between warring factions around Mount Apo.

When visiting, I asked the chief why she and her people have paid attention to Dann and Joji. Surely, she has met many missionaries and others who have come. Why them?

“The Tagabawa people are polytheistic,” she replied. “We believe in a supreme god who is the creator, and we have many demi-gods who assist. But like many other indigenous peoples, the Tagabawa regard the *limokon*, the dove, as a messenger of the spirit world. We heed the direction from which the dove coos either as a warning or as good news. Your symbol in Mennonite Church Canada is a dove with a branch. You have come from the spirit world as messengers of good news.”

Dann and Joji have not lost a vision for the gospel but bring the good news in the spirit of the *limokon*, the dove.

Learning from the global church

Change is happening in the global church. The winds of God’s Spirit are swirling all around us. The question is whether we choose to participate or not. What if we North American Mennonites—together with Lutherans, Anglicans, Baptists, and others—followed the example of the global church and started thinking and praying together in our own neighbourhoods about how we can be people of God’s peace?

I remember standing in that field with my dad in Beaverlodge, Alberta. Little did he know that he and I would travel together to Thailand, where he would meet migrant workers from Myanmar, house church leaders from Khon Ken, a former Buddhist-Muslim who is now Christian business owner and house church pastor in Hau Hin, or that he would celebrate his eighty-second birthday in Tokyo in the company of people in the global Mennonite church. His heart nearly explodes when he talks about how big his church is now—not only back home but now around the world. This is the wisdom of God being made known through the church, as Ephesians describes. And we are headed, I believe, for abundantly far more than we can ask or imagine.

About the author

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