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Vision: A Journal for Church and Theology

Unity and diversity

3 Editorial
Dan Epp-Tiessen

5 The dream: One multiethnic church
A sermon on Colossians 1:21–27
Steve Heinrichs

13 "That they may all be one": Diversity and unity within the ministry of Jesus
Dorothy Jean Weaver

22 The one and the many, the part and the all: Unity and diversity in the Messiah's body politic
Gordon Zerbe

36 Signposts on the journey toward an antiracist, multicultural church
Iris de Leon–Hartshorn

45 Toward becoming a multicultural church
Samson Lo

53 Thelma Meade: "I know where I go"
An Aboriginal elder's experience with the church
Deborah Froese

62 Diversity: Blessing, curse, or call to communion?
A reflection on the Mennonite World Conference experience
Larry Miller

74 Unity and diversity in the canon: Implications for the church
Loren L. Johns

84 Sanctuary: Where we maintain the unity of the Spirit
Nancy Kauffmann

Editorial

Dan Epp-Tiessen

In every generation the church negotiates the struggle to embody unity of the Spirit while also embracing the diversity that comes with seeking to live out the fullness of the gospel. The church is rarely diverse enough, falling well short of being God's community in which barriers of race, class, gender, and nationality are overcome in Christ. On the other hand, the limited diversity we do embody poses challenges enough to maintaining the identity, mission, and unity granted to us in Christ. This issue of *Vision* explores the interplay between unity and diversity, assuming that both constitute a gift and challenge to the church.

Loren Johns observes that "diversity is beautiful only if some unifying factor provides a sense of order in all the chaos." This statement highlights two themes running through this issue. Diversity is a gift to be cherished and consciously nurtured, but for diversity to be a blessing the church must also nurture a theological and spiritual center that empowers it for witness and mission.

This issue of *Vision* explores the interplay between unity and diversity, assuming that both constitute a gift and challenge to the church.

Steve Heinrichs brings these two themes together by asserting that the church's center is the ministry of Jesus Christ through which God is breaking down the dividing walls of hostility and creating one new interethnic humanity in which we are reconciled to God and one another. Dorothy Jean Weaver paints a vivid picture of the amazing diversity of people Jesus relates to. Their unity is built on the magnetic force of Jesus himself and his invitation to follow him. Such following creates a defining and unifying identity, sense of belonging, and mission. Gordon Zerbe explores Paul's vision of the church as God's eschatological community that prefigures the breaking down of divisions in the cosmos that will characterize the final reign of God. Commitment to Christ must supersede other

identities, rankings, loyalties, and beliefs, even as the church embraces the multitude of gifts offered by its diverse membership.

Iris de Leon–Hartshorn names the reality of racism and the fact that Sunday worship is the most segregated hour of the week in North America. She calls the church to confess, and challenges us with concrete suggestions for moving toward an antiracist future. In a manner perhaps more gentle than we deserve, Samson Lo analyzes barriers to cross-cultural relationships in our congregations, and suggests ways we can reach out to people who are different from us. Deborah Froese tells the moving story of Aboriginal elder Thelma Meade. In Thelma's life and community the church's fear of diversity has caused much pain, and yet the church has also been a source of healing for her. Larry Miller celebrates the diversity that graces Mennonite World Conference, while being honest about the challenges this gift poses. He describes the process of moving autonomous Anabaptist-Mennonite groups toward deeper communion through sharing gifts, stating convictions, and building consensus.

The Mennonite church may be somewhat comfortable (at least in theory) with ethnic and class diversity, but theological diversity poses a much greater challenge. Loren Johns highlights the theological diversity enshrined in scripture and asks wherein then lies the Bible's unity. He suggests that the focus on God unifies scripture, and especially its witness to Jesus. To some this may seem like a minimalist answer, but perhaps a danger of overemphasizing the Bible's unity is failure to see how the Bible's own diversity spawns much of the theological diversity within the worldwide church and our own denomination. Nancy Kauffmann reminds us how challenging and messy it can be for the church to "hold to a theological center that allows for flexibility at the edges." She remains modestly optimistic that the church can embrace concrete practices through which we yield ourselves to the "unity of the Holy Spirit in which our rich diversity finds its proper expression." By God's grace, may it be so.

The dream: One multiethnic church
A sermon on Colossians 1:21–27

Steve Heinrichs

Before a crowd of two hundred thousand longing for liberation, before governmental and spiritual powers bent toward segregation, Martin Luther King Jr. set out one of the most famous visions the world has seen or heard. On that August day in 1967, from the steps of the Lincoln Memorial in Washington, DC, King told the assembled mass, "I have a dream today"—a dream that one day his children would "live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character." "I have a dream," he said, "that one day every valley shall be exalted, every hill and mountain be made low, the rough places shall be made plain . . . and the glory of the Lord will be revealed and all flesh shall see it together."[1]

Sisters and brothers, it's abundantly clear. The dream of many different peoples coming together is God's holy dream; it's the dream of Jesus' kingdom and the dream of the new creation.

Although King's speech about the reconciliation of the races is more than forty years old, this dream of a beloved community where all nations and peoples are respected and accepted still rings true. It resonates with something deep inside us. And why is that? Why is it so powerful? It's because the dream wasn't a dream King concocted one evening down in Birmingham. And it wasn't a dream some friends had passed on to him. No, this was a dream that had come down from the heavens, an eternal dream—God's dream.

God's dream? Yes. Martin King got this dream of a racially reconciled society straight from the sacred page. Do you remember when the prophet Isaiah once said (Is. 2:2–4), I have a dream that one day all the peoples of the world will come up to the Lord's mountain? They will get rid of their hostility, and together they'll live in God's peace, learning God's ways and walking God's paths. Do you remember when our Savior Jesus once said (Mk. 11:14),

I have a dream—that the house of God shall be a house not just for Jews but for all the nations, for black men and white men, for red women and brown children? Do you remember when the apostle John once said (Rev. 7:9), I have a dream that in heaven there will be people from every nation, from every tribe, from every language, standing before the throne and worshiping the Lamb? And do you remember when the apostle Paul once said (Col. 3:11), I have a dream that not only in heaven *but right now*, right here on earth, here in the church, there will be no Jew or Gentile, no Barbarian or Scythian, for Christ is all and in all?

Sisters and brothers, it's abundantly clear. The dream of many different peoples coming together is God's holy dream; it's the dream of Jesus' kingdom and the dream of the new creation.

But get this. This dream is not just one dream among many. It is not a nice dream that we can file next to many other pleasant utopian dreams. This dream of a new society, of a new church united in faith and mixed in ethnicity, is exceptionally important. In fact, it might be *the dream of all dreams*, a dream that is so important to God that without it we don't have the gospel at all!

What? Racial reconciliation is the dream, and without it we have no gospel of Christ? Exactly. Check out Colossians 1:21–27 (NIV):

> *Once you were alienated from God and were enemies in your minds because of your evil behavior. But now he has reconciled you by Christ's physical body through death to present you holy in his sight, without blemish and free from accusation—if you continue in your faith, established and firm, not moved from the hope held out in the gospel. This is the gospel that you heard and that has been proclaimed to every creature under heaven, and of which I, Paul, have become a servant.*
>
> *Now I rejoice in what was suffered for you, and I fill up in my flesh what is still lacking in regard to Christ's afflictions, for the sake of his body, which is the church. I have become its servant by the commission God gave me to present to you the word of God in its fullness—the mystery that has been kept hidden for ages and generations, but is now disclosed to the Lord's people. To them*

God has chosen to make known among the Gentiles the glorious riches of this mystery, which is Christ in you, the hope of glory.

As you may know, Paul is writing this epistle to a predominantly Gentile congregation. The word *Gentile* means "not Jewish"; Gentiles were of many different ethnic groups. Paul says to these folks—in verse 21—that they were once a people who were alienated and enemies. And whom were they alienated from and enemies of?

Paul doesn't say. If you're thinking the answer is "God," you might be right, but only half right, for the text doesn't actually say that the Colossians were estranged from God. There is no object to those verbs, *alienated* and *enemies*. It could be God. And yet, if we search through the rest of Paul's writings, we discover something else, something radical. Paul thought the Gentiles were separated—segregated—not only from God but also from the Jews.

This dream of a new society, of a new church united in faith and mixed in ethnicity, might be *the dream of all dreams,* a dream that is so important to God that without it we don't have the gospel at all!

Where do I get that idea? I'll show you where in Colossians, but first let's look at Paul's letter to the Ephesians, because in that text the apostle's speech is much more direct. He writes: You Gentiles were at one time without Christ, being alienated from the community of Israel, having no hope and without God in the world. But now, in Christ Jesus, God has broken down the dividing wall and the hostility between us—the Gentiles and the Jews. He has made both groups one (Eph. 2:12–14). This is a stunning passage. Paul tells us that the gospel is not only about the reconciliation of individuals to God but also about the reconciliation of nations to nations and tribes to tribes.

John Howard Yoder explains the significance of this text:

The hostility brought to an end in Christ is first and foremost in this passage not the hostility between a righteous God and the creature who has trespassed against his rules, but the hostility between Jew and Greek. . . . The work of Christ is not only that he saves the soul of individuals and henceforth they can love each

> *other better; the work of Christ, the making of peace, the breaking down of the wall,* ***is itself the constituting of a new community made up of two kinds of people.***[2]

Breathtaking, isn't it?! The work of Christ is precisely, primarily (!) the creation of a new, interethnic people—the beloved community Martin King described. And this is exactly what we find Paul declaring with passion in Colossians 1. Paul says that in Christ God has reconciled all things on earth and in heaven (Col. 1:20). Then, in verse 21, he turns to the Colossians and says, See! *You* are the *proof* of this cosmic reconciliation, for you—*Gentiles*—were once alienated, but now you are at peace.

Paul says that in Christ God has reconciled all things on earth and in heaven. Then he turns to the Colos–sians and says, See! *You* are the *proof* of this cosmic recon–ciliation.

At peace with whom? In chapter 3 Paul tells us specifically: they are at peace with the Jews, and also with one another—Gentile Scythians, Gentile barbarians, and so on. *Every nation and ethnic group is one in Christ*, for "Christ is all and in all!" (Col. 3:11).

Now you may be saying to yourself: Okay, Steve, the nations are all one in Christ. I'm fine with that. But you still haven't proved to me that this dream is the dream of the gospel and that it's fundamental to the very existence of the church.

If that's the case, consider verses 26 and 27 of Colossians 1, where Paul talks about this great mystery that's been revealed to him and the church. Now by *mystery* Paul does not mean some spooky secret known only to a select few.[3] Here mystery refers to a strategic purpose of God that only becomes known at the point of its being carried out. In other words, when God's heavenly decisions come into play on earth, then they are anything but secret. They are public knowledge.

So what's this great mystery that has been revealed? Listen carefully to what Paul says: The mystery that has been hidden for ages and generations has now been revealed to the saints. The mystery is *Christ in you* (Col. 1:26–27).

Christ is in you? That's the mystery? What does that mean, and how does that relate to racial reconciliation? The key to understanding what Paul is saying here is knowing who the "you" is in "Christ in you." The you is the Gentiles! Paul writes in verse 27,

"God has chosen to make known among *the Gentiles* the glorious riches of this mystery." And so that's the great secret, that God has reached out in Christ beyond the Jews to all the nations and is reconciling them all to one another.

Again, Paul puts this more clearly in the letter to the Ephesians, where he pens the following: The mystery has now been revealed to humanity: that "the Gentiles have become fellow heirs, members of the same body, and sharers in the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel" (3:6; NRSV).

Now if Paul saw the reconciliation of Gentile and Jew as an act of cosmic significance, and as God's strategic and climactic plan for peace, what might that mean for us as today's people of God?

Here's what one leading New Testament scholar, James Dunn, thinks:

> *Breaking down of barriers of nation and race, often so impenetrable to human resources, must . . . be one of the primary goals of the gospel. Indeed, we might even say that such reconciliation between the diversity of nationalities and races was one of the main tests for the church, one of the most crucial signs of the effectiveness of the gospel. Without the reconciliation of nation to nation and of race to race . . . the reconciliation of all things 'to [Christ]' has not even begun.*[4]

Did you catch that last bit? Without the reconciliation of the nations and races in the church, the good news of the reconciliation of all things to Christ *has not even begun*. Wow! Yet that's what Paul says. The question for us then is whether we believe it to be true. And if we do believe it, how will this truth shape the way we do church and the way we live as Christians in this place?

I believe this dream. And I believe God is saying to us today, Come, Church of the Way, and grab hold of my good dream. Become a community that takes up the mystery of the gospel—that in Christ, Jew and Gentile, white and First Nation, are one new people. Flesh out that peaceable dream by becoming a multiethnic fellowship of radical Christian love that breaks down all those hellish barriers. Experience life together as it was truly intended to be! Experience the gospel that Christ died for! Experience it and the fullness of my salvation, maybe for the first time!

If that were God's Word to us, what might we to do? Let me rephrase that. Far too many weasel words. This *is* God's Word to us. This *is* the gospel. So what shall we—the people of the Word—do?

I don't know. I have lots of ideas. And I'm sure you've got some stirring within you. So let's do the usual stuff: let's pray, on our own and together, and let's talk and encourage one another. If we want to hear God's heart on this, we will hear, because this is God's dream. Then, let's do the strange, remarkable thing. Let's *act*.

We are good at talking the game, preaching fancy sermons, nodding an approving Amen, underlining our Bible's sacred imperatives. But talk is no substitute for the concrete walk of reconciliation.

That's the kicker. To act. We Christians—especially we white Christians—are good at talking the game, preaching fancy sermons, nodding an approving Amen, underlining our Bible's sacred imperatives. Christian ethicist David Gushee laments: "The problem is that when white [Christians] speak of forgiveness and reconciliation they normally do not do so out of the experience of solidarity with [people of color] in suffering for justice [and reconciliation and true community] but instead as a *substitute* for that work."[5]

Talk is no substitute for the intentional, concrete walk of reconciliation. I've got to do something. You've got to do something. And together, by God's grace, we can do something to reverse the old and still-present evil that in North America the most segregated time in our week is Sunday morning. What a damnable fact that is!

But we can do this. Jesus did it by reaching out to those backward Samaritans and spending time with those hated Syrophoenicians. The early church did it by intentionally choosing a racially diverse leadership (that's evident in Acts 13:1, where Palestinian Jews serve alongside folks from Cyrene and Niger—the latter probably a black African—in the Antioch congregation).

Of course, if we do act, let's be fully aware: the pursuit of the dream will entail persecution. Some persecution will come from outside the church, and some will likely come from within. Addressing racial reconciliation is like talking about money or war or sex. It's taboo; it's forbidden, and it'll get you into trouble.

Look at what happened to Jesus. When our Lord delivered his first sermon in Nazareth (Luke 4:16–30), the congregation loved every word he spoke. He was quite the preacher—a golden boy in their eyes. But then, just when everything was going so well, he brought up the issue of race. At the end of his sermon, Jesus told his fellow Jews that one could find many God-fearing people outside Israel—in Sidon, for example, or Syria. And when the synagogue heard what he said about those damned strangers (read "Natives," "Arabs," "Palestinians," and so on), they exploded! They rushed at Jesus and tried to lynch him. That congregation, like many congregations, just didn't want to hear anything about those other people, living over there.

To talk about and live for racial reconciliation is to be a prophet. And prophets, as Jesus says time and again, aren't honored in their own country and house. Their words and actions are constantly challenged. They are mistreated and beaten—and yes, even murdered—all because they have faithfully discharged their duties as those who are sent out, all because they have faithfully lived out the dream.

That was the experience of Jesus—executed for his inclusive love. And that was the experience of Martin Luther King—shot down for speaking and living out gospel reconciliation. And where was Paul when he wrote this letter celebrating God's reconciliation of Jew and Gentile? In prison! In chains—and not because he preached a gospel of individual salvation, of individual souls being rescued from earth by a heavenly savior. Like Martin King, he was put in jail because he was living out a dream in which the sacred social boundaries between Jew and Greek, the ancient and eternally decreed divisions between upper-class Greek and lower-class barbarian, were being overturned in Christ and (please hold on to this!) in the church. These walls of hostility were being broken down in God's new human community.

So—like Jesus, like Martin, and like Paul—we must be ready to live and suffer for the gospel dream. I doubt that any of us will get killed, or even tossed into prison. That's not likely. But we will encounter resistance, and we will have to endure some hardships.

Yet here is the good news in all this. Not only does Jesus toss a loving Beatitude our way—"Blessed are the persecuted"—but he also promises he will not leave us to suffer alone. God willing, we

will suffer in a community that will actually understand the value (the joy, as Paul puts it in Colossians 1:24) of such affliction, because that community believes the dream, seeks the dream, and lives the dream in a context comprising those many different peoples, especially those estranged peoples who experience exclusion by the powers and the dominant church of the day.

God's dream of a racially reconciled people demands hard work, patience, and suffering. There's no denying it. But it is well worth it, precisely because it comes from God and is so just and true, right and beautiful. The dream is a sign, promise, and realization of the reconciliation of all things in Christ. Check that. It is *the* sign and *the* promise.

Isaiah took hold of the dream and lived it. Jesus took hold of the dream and lived it. Paul and Martin King grasped the dream and lived it. What about you and me? Do we have the dream? Does the dream have us? And will we live it?

Notes

[1] Martin Luther King, Jr., *A Testament of Hope: The Essential Writings and Speeches of Martin Luther King Jr.*, ed. James M. Washington (New York: HarperCollins, 1991), 219.
[2] John Howard Yoder, *The Politics of Jesus* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1994), 218–19. My emphasis.
[3] Ibid., 218.
[4] James D. G. Dunn, *The Epistles to the Colossians and to Philemon: A Commentary on the Greek Text,* New International Greek Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1996), 122.
[5] David P. Gushee and Glen H. Stassen, *Kingdom Ethics: Following Jesus in Contemporary Context* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2003), 407.

About the author

Steve Heinrichs is the pastor of Church of the Way, an interdenominational fellowship affiliated with Mennonite Church BC and Mennonite Church Canada. Church of the Way is in Granisle, BC, a former mining town that is home to 300 people (predominantly Euro-Canadian) and located next to Tachet, a First Nations reserve of 100 Carrier people.

"That they may all be one"
Diversity and unity within the ministry of Jesus

Dorothy Jean Weaver

Even the most casual tour through the canonical Gospels reveals a striking and undeniable fact: Jesus' disciples and the crowds who gather around him are, by the most positive reading of the Gospels, a motley crew. Within the cultural and religious boundaries of their first-century context—largely Palestinian and predominantly Jewish—the people who associate themselves with Jesus of Nazareth reflect vivid diversity on a variety of fronts: class, gender, lifestyle, ethnicity, and ideology. These people are not carefully screened for compatibility with one another or even for their likelihood of success as followers of Jesus. One might actually wonder what Jesus hopes to accomplish with a following this diverse. And yet these are the folks whom Jesus links to one another in the closest of human bonds, when he names God as their "one Father" (Mt. 23:9; compare Lk. 11:2//Mt. 6:9)[1] and claims them collectively as his brother and sister and mother (Mk. 3:35b//Mt. 12:50b). These are crucial and transformative claims that have profound implications for Jesus' first-century followers.

In the canonical Gospels the people who associate themselves with Jesus of Nazareth reflect vivid diversity on a variety of fronts: class, gender, lifestyle, ethnicity, and ideology.

And these are claims that we, from our 2000-year distance, need to hear. Within our twenty-first-century context, we too live with diversities on all manner of fronts. And these diversities, even as they expand and enrich our collective identity, present a challenge to the unity for which we long. What can we learn from the story of the earliest Jesus movement with regard to our own diversity and our own unity? How can the canonical accounts of the first-century ministry of Jesus give us insight and courage for our corporate search to be faithful disciples of Jesus, even and precisely in the midst of our twenty-first-century diversity? The

following study offers a brief glimpse of the insight we might gain from the canonical Gospels on the diversity and the unity of the people of God.[2]

Diversity within the ministry of Jesus

Perhaps the most prominent diversity reflected within the earliest Jesus movement has to do with socioeconomic factors and associated class divisions. Jesus' immediate circle of associates comprises for the most part people of humble origins and means. They are fishermen who ply their trade on the Sea of Galilee and mend their nets on its shore (Mk. 1:16–20//Mt. 4:18–22; compare Lk. 5:1–11; Jn. 21:1–14). They are shepherds who tend their flocks in the wilderness (Lk. 15:4b) or on the mountains of Palestine (Mt. 18:12b), who search persistently after lost or strayed sheep (Lk. 15:4c; Mt. 18:12c), and who live in the fields in order to keep watch over their flocks (Lk. 2:8). And they are village women who grind at the village mill (Mt. 24:41//Lk. 17:35), draw water at the village well (Jn. 4:7), mix yeast with flour to make bread dough (Mt. 13:33//Lk. 13:21), spin wool (Mt. 6:28//Lk. 12:27), serve men (Mk. 1:31//Mt. 8:15//Lk. 4:39), and nurse their children (Mk. 13:17//Mt. 24:19//Lk. 21:23). These are the folks who surround Jesus day by day throughout his ministry.

But there are also people of greater prominence and means within Jesus' circle of associates, men and women alike. Jesus engages with wealthy Jewish men,[3] synagogue leaders (Mk. 5:22// Lk. 8:41//Mt. 9:18), respected members of the Jewish Sanhedrin (Mk. 15:43; compare Lk. 23:50), prominent Jews with access to the highest Roman authorities,[4] Jewish leaders from the Pharisees (Jn. 3:1; Lk. 14:1), teachers of Israel (Jn. 3:10), and wealthy Roman centurions who build synagogues for local Jewish communities (Lk. 7:2–5; compare Jn. 4:46). Jesus encounters women with costly items in their possession (Mk. 14:3//Mt. 26:7; compare Jn. 12:3), wealthy female householders (Jn. 11:1–2; compare 12:3 and Lk.10:38–42), and women of means who provide for Jesus out of their resources and follow Jesus to Jerusalem (Mk. 15:40–41//Mt. 27:55–56; Lk. 8:1–3). And Jesus' associates likewise include prominent women married to public officials (Lk. 8:3).

Beyond economic disparities Jesus' associates likewise reflect significant divergence in social standing within their respective

communities. Along with rich people (Mt. 27:57) and respected community leaders (Mk. 15:43), Jesus associates regularly and openly with people of low status or public disrepute. There are blind beggars who sit beside the road and importune the passersby (Mk. 10:46//Lk. 18:35; Jn. 9:1/8), and poor widows with little money (Mk. 12:41–44) and no means to support themselves (Lk.7:11–17). There are tax collectors, who extort their compatriots and earn their contempt.[5] There are sinners and prostitutes, who associate with the tax collectors and share their negative reputation.[6] There are women with colorful marital histories (Jn. 4:16–18). And there are Zealots (Lk. 6:15; compare Mk. 3:18// Mt. 10:4), known for their hatred of the Roman occupiers, and criminals executed by Rome for their crimes against the empire (Lk. 23:32–33/39–43).

How can the accounts of the ministry of Jesus give us insight and courage for our search to be faithful disciples of Jesus, even and precisely in the midst of our diversity?

Nor do the diversities stop with economics and social standing. Gender diversity also plays a significant role within Jesus' ministry. In a social world profoundly shaped by patriarchal structures and perspectives, where men are the prominent actors in society, women are strikingly visible and active among Jesus' associates. They seek Jesus out, actively and urgently, to find healing for themselves (Mk. 5:25–34//Mt. 9:20–22//Lk. 8:43–48) or for others (Mk. 7:24–30//Mt. 15:21–28; Jn. 11:1–44). Men likewise bring women into prominent attention as they appeal to Jesus in their behalf.[7] And Jesus reaches out on his own initiative to heal women with physical illnesses (Mt. 8:14–15; Lk. 13:10–17). Women are present in the crowds that Jesus heals and feeds (Mt. 14: 21; Mt. 15:38). They bring their children to Jesus for his blessing (Mk. 10:13–16//Mt. 19:13–15//Lk. 18:15–17).[8] Women follow Jesus throughout his ministry and provide for his physical needs.[9] They accompany Jesus on the way to his crucifixion (Lk. 23:26–31) and stand vigil at his cross.[10] Women witness Jesus' burial (Mk. 15:47//Lk. 23:55–56//Mt. 27:61) and return to the tomb on the first day of the week to anoint Jesus' body (Mk. 16:1/ /Lk. 24:1) and see the tomb (Mt. 28:1; compare Jn. 20:1). And because they are present at the tomb, women are the first to learn that Jesus is alive (Mk. 16:1–8; Mt. 28:1–7; Lk. 24:1–8), the first

to meet the risen Jesus (Mt. 28:9–10; Jn. 20:11–17), and the first to proclaim his resurrection (Mt. 28:8/11a; Lk. 24:9–11; Jn. 20:18).

Along with economic, social, and gender diversity, the people who surround Jesus also exhibit a wide range of physical illnesses for which they need healing. The list of those whom Jesus heals is long and diverse. Jesus casts out unclean spirits and demons from those oppressed by the powers of evil.[11] He cures the one with epilepsy (Mt. 17:14–21) and heals people burning with fever (Mk. 1:29–31//Mt. 8:14–15//Lk. 4:38–39; Jn. 4:46–54). Jesus restores the limbs of those with paralyzed legs[12] and withered hands (Mk. 3:1–6//Mt. 12:9–14//Lk. 6:6–11), and he heals people who are lame (Mt. 15:29–31; Mt. 21:14), crippled (Lk. 13:10–17), and maimed (Mt. 15:29–31). Jesus cures those regarded as untouchable, men stricken with leprosy (Mk. 1:40–45//Mt. 8:1–4//Lk. 5:12–16; Lk. 17:11–19) and women plagued with long-term hemorrhaging.[13] He restores sight to people who are blind,[14] hearing to those with deafness (Mk. 7:31–37; 9:14–29), and speech to those who are mute[15] and with speech impediments (Mk. 7:31–37). And Jesus restores life itself to those who have died.[16] As the Gospel accounts clearly suggest, Jesus' circle of associates includes people who have suffered a wide variety of human diseases and afflictions.

And there is ethnic diversity as well. Within the largely Palestinian and predominantly Jewish context of the Gospel narratives, the circle around Jesus includes ethnic outsiders as well: Syrophoenicians (Mk. 7:24–30) or Canaanites (Mt. 15:21–28), Samaritans (Lk. 17:11–19; Jn. 4:1–42), Romans (Mt. 8:5–13//Lk. 7:1–10), and Greeks (Jn. 12:20–36). At the beginning of Jesus' life it is Gentile stargazers from the east—most likely Persians—who seek out "the child who has been born king of the Jews" and travel long distances to pay him homage (Mt. 2:1–2). And as Jesus makes his way toward the cross, it is a native of Cyrene, a distant Mediterranean city on the northern coast of Africa, who is forcibly drawn, even in this penultimate moment, into Jesus' circle of influence (Mk. 15:21//Mt. 27:32//Lk. 23:26).

Within Matthew's narrative Jesus knows his mission as a mission to "the lost sheep of the house of Israel" (Mt. 15:24) and charges his disciples to bypass the Gentiles and the Samaritans on their mission to these same Israelites (Mt. 10:5–6). But Jesus

nevertheless travels beyond Galilee to predominantly Gentile areas: the district of Tyre and Sidon to the north (Mt. 15:21; compare Mk. 7:24, 31) and the Decapolis across the Jordan to the east (Mk. 5:20; 7:31; compare Mt. 4:25). And Jesus ultimately breaks through his own Israelite boundaries (Mt. 15:24) and finds his calling and his ministry transformed as he engages in dialogue with ethnic outsiders (Jn. 4:1–42; compare Jn. 12:20–36), heals them of their illnesses,[17] and casts out their demons (Mk. 5:1–20// Mt. 8:28–34//Lk. 8:26–39). In Luke's narrative Jesus specifically highlights foreigners—a widow from Zarephath in Sidon and a leper from Syria—as the recipients of God's healing power channeled through the ancient Israelite prophets Elijah (Lk. 4:25–26) and Elisha (Lk. 4:27).

What partnership can exist between Simon the Zealot, who hates the pagan Roman occupiers, and tax collectors whose rich hands are filled with Roman coins extorted from their compatriots?

There can be little question that Jesus' circle of followers and adherents reflects wide diversities and seemingly intractable differences. Where does the hope for unity lie within this motley assortment of folks? What ideological partnership can exist between Simon the Zealot (Lk. 6:15; compare Mk. 3:18//Mt. 10:4), who hates the pagan Roman occupiers with the righteous passion of a faithful Israelite, and Levi (Mk. 2:14//Lk. 5:27; compare Mt. 9:9) and Zacchaeus (Lk. 19:1–10), tax collectors whose rich hands are filled with Roman coins they have extorted from their own compatriots on behalf of the occupying power? What social links connect a destitute widow with two leptons to her name (Mk. 12:41–44) and Joseph of Arimathea (Mk. 15:42–47//Mt. 27:57–61//Lk. 23:50–56), a man whose personal wealth is reflected in the tomb he has hewn in rock for himself (Mt. 27:60), whose personal stature is reflected in his public reputation as "a good and righteous man" (Lk. 23:50) and "a respected member of the council" (Mk. 15:43), and whose political clout gets him access to the highest Roman authorities (Mk. 15:42–45//Mt. 27:57–58//Lk. 23:50–52)? And how can Jesus, with a well-earned reputation as a partygoer (Mt. 11:19//Lk. 7:34), associate himself with John the Baptist, an ascetic (Mt. 11:18//Lk. 7:33)? These questions send us back once again to the Gospels on a search for answers.

Unity within the ministry of Jesus

The search for unity within the circle around Jesus must focus by definition on the person of Jesus himself, since it is Jesus and none other who both calls and draws this improbable and disparate circle into being with his proclamation of the reign of God (Mk. 1:14–15/Mt. 4:17 and throughout) and his ministry of powerful deeds.[18] The unity that exists within Jesus' circle of followers and adherents is not a unity built on common ethnic origins, common social ties, or common ideological perspectives. Rather this unity emerges from the powerful magnetic force of Jesus himself, as he proclaims the reign of God,[19] heals the sick,[20] challenges the *status quo* and the religious authorities who carry it out,[21] calls people to follow him,[22] and sends them out[23] on his behalf to multiply his mission. Accordingly, to characterize the unity among Jesus' followers is to identify the prominent motifs highlighted by Jesus' ministry itself.

No doubt the most prominent point of departure in this search for unity lies in the call accounts of the Gospels.[24] Here Jesus challenges fishermen (Mk. 1:18–22//Mt. 4:18–22; Jn. 21:15–22; compare Lk. 5:1–11), tax collectors (Mk. 2:13–14//Lk. 5:27–28// Mt. 9:9), wannabe disciples (Mt. 8:18–22//Lk. 9:57–62), the rich and powerful (Mk. 10:17–22//Mt. 19:16–22//Lk. 18:18–25), and all who hear his message (Mt. 10:38//Lk. 14:27; Mk. 8:34//Mt. 16:24) to a lifetime of following. And those who accept this call to follow Jesus find themselves unified by that very act. Following Jesus not only brings them together but it also gives their lives a powerful and unifying focus. These followers go where Jesus goes,[25] stay where Jesus stays,[26] listen to what Jesus says,[27] witness what Jesus does,[28] and participate corporately in Jesus' ministry to the crowds.[29] Accordingly, the unity among those who follow Jesus is a unity of calling that depends, by definition, on Jesus himself, and not on those whom he calls.

And this is only the beginning. When Jesus calls people to follow him, he claims them as children of God, their one Father[30] and their heavenly Father.[31] And Jesus likewise claims all these children of God as his own siblings: "Here are my mother and my brothers! For whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother and sister and mother" (Mt. 12:49b–50//Mk. 3:34b–35// Lk. 8:21). To follow Jesus and to do the will of God creates

indissoluble bonds not only with Jesus and with Jesus' Father but also with all those others who likewise follow Jesus and do the will of God. Here is unity of kinship that cannot be denied. As Jesus points out in parabolic fashion (Lk. 15:30; compare Lk. 15:32), those who are sons (and daughters) of the same Father are always and undeniably brothers (and sisters) of one another.

And for those who follow Jesus and do the will of God, this unity of calling and kinship opens out, ultimately, if gradually, into a unity of character. Jesus' proclamation focuses crucially on the arrival of the reign of God: "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news" (Mk. 1:15). And to repent and believe in the good news is to experience profound transformation of character. The unity among Jesus' followers is ultimately the unity of those whose deep-rooted perspectives and whose daily praxis are invaded and transformed by the reign of God which has come near in the person and the ministry of Jesus.

For those who follow Jesus, this unity of calling and kinship opens out, ultimately, if gradually, into a unity of character—the unity of those whose perspectives and praxis are transformed by the reign of God.

Such a unity reflects core values of the reign of God, as Jesus spells them out in his proclamation and teaching: reconciliation among brothers and sisters;[32] forgiveness for those who have wronged you;[33] refusal to judge, condemn, or despise others;[34] refusal to harbor jealousy (Mt. 20:1–16; compare Lk. 10:38–42; 12:13–21) or anger (Mt. 5:21–22); love of enemies (Mt. 5:38–48//Lk. 6:27–36); active concern for the physical welfare of others;[35] faithfulness vis-à-vis earthly riches;[36] honesty and sincerity in place of hypocrisy (Mt. 6:1–18; 23:1–39); profound trust in God for the resources of daily living (Mt. 6:25–34); sexual integrity and marital faithfulness;[37] radical hospitality to all people in need;[38] and willingness to emulate Jesus in being a servant and slave to others (Mk. 10:41–45//Mt. 20:24–28; Lk. 22:24–27; Jn. 13:1–20).

As the canonical Gospels make clear, however, such unity is deeply challenging for Jesus' disciples. They find Jesus' marital ethics rigorous beyond possibility (Mt. 19:10). They experience extravagant generosity as waste (Mk. 14:3–9//Mt. 26:6–13). They are ready to "command fire to come down from heaven" in order

to consume their enemies (Lk. 9:54). They strike out with the sword when threatened (Mk. 14:47//Mt. 26:51//Lk. 22:49–50//Jn. 18:10). And they regularly jockey for positions of prominence within their own circle (Mk. 9:33–37//Mt. 18:1–5//Lk. 9:46–48; Mk. 10:35–45//Mt. 20:20–28; Lk. 22:24–27). Transformation of character, as the Gospels illustrate, is not an instantaneous reality but rather an ongoing, lifelong process of growth toward unity, a growth intimately tied to the lifelong calling to follow Jesus.

But if the unity of Jesus' disciples grows out of calling, kinship, and character, it likewise grows out of commission. As the Gospels make clear, it is the disciples' common mission—given to them by the risen Jesus, who sends them out (Mt. 28:18–20; Jn. 17:18; 20:21; compare Lk. 24:44–49) on a cosmic journey to "proclaim the good news to all nations" (Mk. 13:10//Mt. 24:14)—that unites the followers of Jesus in a monumental task far beyond their individual capabilities and their individual lifespans. This task will occupy the energies of Jesus' disciples until the end (Mt. 24:14). It is a task for which they need the authority of God (Mt. 28:18b–20a), the presence of the risen Jesus (Mt. 28:20), and the power of the Holy Spirit (Lk. 24:46b–49; Jn. 20:21–22). And this task is, ultimately, one that calls for the unity that God alone can give (Jn. 17:20–23a), "so that," as Jesus prays, "the world may know that you have sent me" (Jn. 17:23b).

Diversity and unity: challenge, gift, and calling. May God give us the courage to acknowledge the challenge, receive the gift, and live out the calling with faithfulness.

Notes

[1] In this article I will use the first-century "God language" found within the canonical Gospels. All biblical references are from the NRSV.

[2] This study will draw on the collective witness of the canonical Gospels for a composite account of the ministry of Jesus and, where possible, will cite parallel texts to substantiate this account.

[3] Mk. 10:17–22//Mt. 19:16–22//Lk. 18:18–25; Mt. 27:57.

[4] Mk. 15:42–45//Mt. 27:57–58//Lk. 23:50–52//Jn. 19:38.

[5] Mk. 2:13–17//Mt. 9:9–13//Lk. 5:27–32; Lk. 15:1–2; Lk. 19:1–10.

[6] Mk. 2:15–17//Mt. 9:10–13//Lk. 5:29–32; Lk. 15:1–2; Mt. 21:28–32; Lk. 7:36–50.

[7] Mk. 1:29–31//Lk. 4:38–39; Mk. 5:21–24/35–43//Mt. 9:18–19/23–26//Lk. 8:40–42/49–56.

[8] While the Gospel writers do not specify this detail, it seems most likely that it is women, those who are the normal caregivers for children, who take this initiative.

[9] Mk. 15:40–41//Mt. 27:55–56//Lk. 23:55–56; compare Mk. 1:31//Mt. 8:15.

[10] Mk. 15:40–41//Mt. 27:55–56//Lk. 23:55–56; Jn. 19:25–27.
[11] Mk. 1:21–28//Lk. 4:31–37; Mk. 1:32–34//Mt. 8:16–17//Lk. 4:40–41; Mk. 3:7–12//Lk. 6:17–19; Mk. 5:1–20//Mt. 8:28–34//Lk. 8:26–39; Mk. 7:24–30//Mt. 15:21–28; Mk. 9:14–29//Lk. 9:37–42; Mt. 12:22–30//Lk. 11:14–23; Mt. 4:23–25; Mt. 9:32–34.
[12] Mk. 2:1–12//Mt. 9:1–8//Lk. 5:17–26; Mt. 4:23–25; Mt. 4:23–25; Mt. 8:5–13//Lk. 7:1–10//Jn. 4:46–53; Jn. 5:1–46.
[13] Mk. 5:25–34//Mt. 9:20–22//Lk. 8:43–48.
[14] Mk. 8:22–26; Mk. 10:46–52//Mt. 20:29–34//Lk. 18:35–43; Mt. 9:27–31; 12:22–30; 15:29–31; 21:14; Jn. 9:1–41.
[15] Mt. 12:22–30//Lk. 11:14–23; Mt. 9:32–34; 15:29–31.
[16] Mk. 5:21–24/35–43//Mt. 9:18–19/23–26//Lk. 8:40–42/49–56; Lk. 7:11–17; Jn. 11:1–44.
[17] Mk. 7:24–30//Mt. 15:21–28; Mt. 8:5–13//Lk. 7:1–10; Lk. 17:11–19.
[18] Mk. 6:1–6//Mt. 13:54–58; Lk. 4:14–30; Mt. 11:2–6//Lk. 7:18–23 and throughout.
[19] Mk. 1:14–15//Mt. 4:17 and throughout the synoptic Gospels. Matthew frequently substitutes "kingdom of heaven" for "kingdom of God." John cites this term only infrequently (3:3, 5).
[20] See the discussion above. This motif is prominent in all four canonical Gospels.
[21] Mt. 23:1–39 and throughout.
[22] Mk. 1:18–22//Mt. 4:18–22; Mk. 2:13–14//Lk. 5:27–28; compare Mt. 9:9; Mt. 8:18–22//Lk. 9:57–62; Mt. 10:38//Lk. 14:27; Mk. 8:34//Mt. 16:24; Mk. 10:21//Mt. 19:21//Lk. 18:22; Jn. 21:15–22; compare Mk. 10:28//Mt. 19:27–28//Lk. 18:28.
[23] Mk. 6:6b–13//Lk. 9:1–6; Lk. 10:1–20; Mt. 9:35–10:42; Mt. 28:18–20; Jn. 20:19–23; compare Lk. 24:44–49.
[24] See footnote 23.
[25] Mk. 2:23; 3:7; 6:1; 8:27 and throughout.
[26] Jn. 1:39; 2:12.
[27] Mt. 5:1–2; 10:5; 13:36–37a; 18:1–3a; 24:3–4a and throughout.
[28] Lk. 5:1–11; Mt. 8:23–27; Mk. 9:2–8; Jn. 13:1–20 and throughout.
[29] Mk. 6:30–44//Mt. 14:13–21//Lk. 9:10b–17; Mk. 8:1–10//Mt. 15:32–39.
[30] Mt. 23:9.
[31] Mk. 11:25//Mt. 6:14–15; Mt. 5:16, 45; 6:1, 4, 6, 8, 18, 26; 7:11; 10:20, 29; 13:43; 18:14; 21:31; Mt. 5:48//Lk. 6:36; Mt. 6:9//Lk. 11:2; Mt. 6:32//Lk. 12:30; Lk. 12:32; 15:12, 17, 18, 20, 21, 22, 27, 28, 29.
[32] Mt. 5:21–26//Lk. 12:57–59; Mt. 18:15–20.
[33] Mk. 11:25//Mt. 6:14–15; Mt. 6:12//Lk. 11:4; Mt. 18:21–35.
[34] Mt. 7:1–5//Lk. 6:37–42; Mt. 18:10–14//Lk. 15:3–7; compare Mk. 14:3–9//Mt. 26:6–13//Lk. 7:36–50//Jn. 12:1–8; Lk. 18:9–14.
[35] Mt. 25:31–46; Lk. 16:19–31; compare Lk. 12:41–48.
[36] Mk. 10:17–22//Mt. 19:16–22//Lk. 18:18–23; Lk. 6:20–26; 12:13–21; 16:19–31; 19:1–10; 21:1–4.
[37] Mk. 10:2–12//Mt. 19:3–9; Mt. 5:27–30, 31–32; compare Jn. 4:16–18; 7:53–8:11.
[38] Mk. 2:13–17//Mt. 9:9–13//Lk. 5:27–32; Lk. 4:16–30; Lk. 10:25–37; 14:12–14; Mt. 22:1–10//Lk. 14:15–24; Lk. 19:1–10.

About the author

Dorothy Jean Weaver is professor of New Testament at Eastern Mennonite Seminary, Harrisonburg, Virginia.

The one and the many, the part and the all
Unity and diversity in the Messiah's body politic

Gordon Zerbe

Paul's pastoral rhetoric frequently engages the issue of unity and diversity, in close connection to core themes of the gospel. This article will attempt to schematize Paul's contribution in this area, while acknowledging that his varied exhortations or arguments emerge as contextual, fluid, and interventionist persuasion that often resists systemization. Paul does not treat the subject in the abstract, and his perspective on unity and diversity is itself marked by unity and diversity; his approach is varied and flexible, even if fundamentally coherent. His interest in various types and levels of diversity and of unity has much to offer contemporary readers.

Paul's mission is framed and energized by a vision of the imminent arrival of the reign of God, which means the merging of heaven and earth, overcoming the most fundamental division in the universe.

The part and the all: Differences and disparities that divide human beings will one day be overcome in God's ultimate act of cosmic reunification.

A crucial premise for any discussion of ecclesial unity and diversity in Paul's thought must be his eschatological vision, his world-transformational hope. Paul's mission is framed and energized by a vision of the imminent arrival of the universal reign of God, through the faithful agency of the Messiah. For Paul, this goal of a restored creation means the ultimate merging of heaven and earth, overcoming the most fundamental division in the universe, so that God's imperial reign will be universal, and "God will be all in all." Sometimes Paul pictures this drama as world-subjection[1] and sometimes as world-reconciliation.[2]

Central to this vision is the notion that God's reign will ultimately embrace all humanity, overcoming not only the binary distinction between "Israel" and "the nations," but also the binary

of belief and unbelief itself, loyalty and disobedience (Rom. 11). In a grand drama of interdependence, the portion enlarges into the "fullness of the nations," and the remnant is reabsorbed into "all Israel." Paul bases this conviction on four logics: (1) God's overcoming of enmity through love, (2) the greater persistence of divine fidelity over human infidelity, (3) an asymmetrical economy of restorative justice, in which mercy ultimately transfigures distributive justice, and (4) the inevitably universal sovereignty and reconciling work of the Messiah.[3]

But since theological assertion in Paul's writings never stands by itself, we must ask to what rhetorical end Paul makes these claims. The main target has to do with growing arrogance among the faithful of non-Jewish descent, not only over many Torah-observant faithful of Jewish descent (Rom. 14–15), but also over the disloyal "root" of Israel more generally (Rom. 11).[4] Paul's worry when he pens Romans 11, as he looks both east and west from Corinth (Rom. 15–16), has to do with the global unity of the church. Paul is very much aware that the growing gap between "denominationally" organized and increasingly separated house churches in Rome is being played out on the global scene more generally (the Judean church vs. the churches of Asia and Greece).

Not only that: Paul is also confounded, despite his visionary resilience,[5] by unrealized eschatological hopes that relate precisely to what God's people is supposed to look like on the way to this cosmic goal. The concrete issue has to do with persistent disbelief by some (the occasion of massive anguish and grief),[6] but also pride of status among others—in particular, claims about who is in and who is out, left behind, disinherited, and on the way to inevitable destruction. Paul's rigorous rejoinder is that the persistent unbeliever (even hostile opponent) is always the one for whom God's mercy never ends. Identity and status, therefore, are mediated only on the basis of what is to come, never solely on what is in the past, or even what is in the present. Paul's eschatological horizon allows no room for any final ecclesial self-assurance, nor any confidence in a presumed destiny of the other, the unbeliever or the enemy.

The church, then, is the prefigurative, provisional, interim eschatological community, living as a sign of, in anticipation of,

and in alignment with God's cosmic reunification of all things, when the part merges into the fullness. In effect, the church exists to lose itself in the fullness. But two other crucial premises should also be noted. For Paul, the church is that body politic patriotically loyal only to Lord Messiah Jesus. Incorporation into the global political community (*ekklesia*) is by an act of "loyalty" (a pledging allegiance which includes conviction/belief and trust), and ongoing participation in that assembly is expressed and assessed by the "obedience" appropriate to that "loyalty-fidelity"—conduct worthy of messianic citizenship.[7] Paul is not interested in particular boundary definitions as much as in fundamental loyalty to the Messiah, expressed through virtues, not casuistry. Finally, the church is as much an act of God in the world through the agency of the Messiah as it is a community of human willing, running, and acting. There is a divine energy and sovereignty in Paul's thought that confounds our modern liberal notions of the ultimacy of individual autonomy and freedom of choice (whether we think of how things happen, or of who is to be included and who should be excluded).

Paul is not interested in particular boundary definitions as much as in fundamental loyalty to the Messiah, expressed through virtues, not casuistry.

The one and the many: What about differences in the present order of time?

As for the diverse reality of the church as interim "part" in the present order of time, Paul at critical junctures uses the imagery of the "one" amid the "many." This imagery occurs specifically in reference to (1) the baptismal unity of the church, highlighting the notion of an incorporating rebirth that transcends or suspends other identities, rankings, and loyalties;[8] (2) the celebration of the Lord's table;[9] and (3) the diversity of gifts, functions, and members, where it applies not just to harmonious interpersonal relationships but also to giving greater honour to "dishonourable" members.[10]

When we trace exhortations that express the notion of "being of one mind" or of "having the same mentality," we find a similar diversity of use: (1) in caution about social ranking relative to gifts;[11] (2) in challenge against "superior thinking," arrogance, and

status seeking, in contrast to solidarity with the lowly;[12] (3) in confrontation against factions and divisions;[13] (4) in encouragement toward solidarity among leaders;[14] and (5) in exhortation to maintain a common front of loyalty to the gospel in the face of external pressure.[15] When Paul uses this wording of "thinking the same," or "having the same mind," he refers primarily to regarding one another as of the same rank, value, or status, or to holding to a common purpose (in contrast to "thinking high" or "thinking of oneself"); he is not referring to having the very same ideas or thoughts, in the sense of unanimity of opinion.

For analytic purposes, we might say that sometimes Paul's discourse on unity and diversity in the church addresses (1) issues that involve biological and social factors of human life, and at other times (2) matters of conviction and practice that pertain to fundamental loyalty to the Messiah. But even these two arenas are not always kept distinct. Paul's disputes with some congregations over matters we might consider theological or ethical are inseparably linked to, and perhaps stem from, questions of social status and rank distinctions, or from ethnocultural identities. For instance, Paul's discourse in 1 Corinthians on crucifixion (chap. 1) and resurrection (chap. 15), and on communion (chap. 11) and gifts (chap. 12), is in large measure a way to get at disputes deriving from disparities in social, educational, and economic status that have plagued the congregation.

When Paul writes about "having the same mind," he refers primarily to regarding one another as of the same rank, value, or status, or to holding to a common purpose, not to have the very same ideas.

If we focus, first, on how Paul understands the ecclesial meaning of those differences and disparities that pertain to biological and social factors of human life, we can distinguish four categories.

First, there are biological and social "givens" that stem from birth or birthright.[16] These include those binary distinctions of (a) male/female, (b) Jew/Greek (that is, genealogical community, which for Paul does not signify ethnic or cultural differences in the modern sense of multicultural arbitrariness, but genealogical community defined by birth, with its attendant customs), and (c) slave/free (that is, legal status as a function of birthright). The

emphasis on rebirth or re-creation in Messiah as that which reorients the meaning of these differences confirms that Paul perceives these categories primarily as functions of birth.[17]

Second, there are what we would term class or economic differences, evident in Paul's reference to the powerful and weak, the rich and poor (1 Cor. 1–4; 2 Cor. 8), and even the wise and foolish, a disparity based on the privilege of education (1 Cor. 1; Rom. 1). Even these differences, Paul admits, are largely functions of birth, although not enshrined in law (as with slavery), such that he can refer to this "class" distinction in terms of the "well-born" and the "non-born," as a way to highlight its honour/shame implications (1 Cor. 1:26-28).

Third, there are individual differences not primarily attributable to genealogical or social givens, or to class standing, namely, those various abilities and functions of the many, as energized by the Spirit for the common good, for instance gifts of public speaking or of knowledge (2 Cor. 10; 1 Cor. 2).

Finally, but most importantly for Paul, all of these in some way contribute to the construction of status and honour (inferior/superior; honourable/shameful; boasting/despising), which in many ways is the most critical disparity that Paul confronts concretely. Paul lives in a society ranked especially by status/honour-consciousness, oriented around some combination of the prior three factors. Paul is concerned far more about disparities of status/honour constructions pertaining to any or all of the factors above, than about class or economic means by itself, or even ethnicity by itself.

What, then, does Paul suggest we should do with these types of difference and disparity? We could schematize Paul's approach as follows.

1. Some differences are negated or suspended, and must be disregarded, by virtue of incorporation "in Messiah," a realm that anticipates the final eschatological reunion. Here we can include those differences that pertain to certain "givens" of birth: sexual differentiation, genealogical community, and legal status. Paul indicates that these differences are in some way negated[18] through the process of absorption into the body (politic) of Messiah.[19] But the question is, what is meant concretely by this negation? Does Paul propose simply that an attitudinal shift must

take place in how a person is regarded, while the structures of the status quo are maintained?

It is sometimes claimed that Paul consistently applied only the negation of the Jew/Gentile binary, while compromising on the male/female and slave/free binaries, for reasons of practicality or because of his own internalization of prevailing norms. There is some truth to this, but the matter is actually more complex. Paul's particular solutions in this area must be framed in connection with three factors.

First, Paul understands these binary constructions largely as givens of birth and not generally amenable to change, insofar as they entail being and status "in the flesh" or "in the world." But at the same time there is being and status "in the Messiah" and "in the assembly."[20] As givens of birth, these are things that one should not seek to change "in the flesh," with the proviso that a slave might make use of the opportunity of freedom, if it should come.[21] But "in the Messiah" and "in the assembly," all this is negated, while at the same time those other structures remain. One can only imagine the tension, perhaps the contradiction (from our perspective), that while masters will still have slaves, during the time of the assembly any disparity based on that difference must come to an end. Paul seems to think of the actual time of congregational assembly as a distinct, liminal space in which the final goal of cosmic re-creation is socially and ritually enacted, when no one who is poor can be humiliated by common banquet practice (as they are "in the flesh"), and when all join at the table without any status hierarchy or honour distinction (1 Cor. 11:17–34).

Paul seems to think of the time of congregational assembly as a distinct, liminal space in which the final goal of cosmic re-creation is socially and ritually enacted, when all join at the table without any status hierarchy or honour distinction.

Second, any hierarchical given "in the flesh" is subject to inversion in the arena "of Messiah" (see further below): "for the person called in the Lord when a slave is a freedperson of the Lord; likewise, the person called who was free is a slave of Messiah" (1 Cor. 7:22). The further radicality of the letter to Philemon is that Paul requests that Philemon make the slave Onesimus free not only "in the Lord" but also "in the flesh," that

is, that Philemon grant freedom because of his "usefulness" in the work of the gospel (Phlm. 11, 16). In the main, however, the negation (or inversion) of prevailing structures of the world happens most fully in the sacred space of the actual ecclesial assembly, when the charisma of the Spirit reigns supreme (1 Cor. 12), not status and roles attached to being "in the flesh." We can thus understand the severity Paul attaches to "disregarding the body," when those who have nothing are humiliated in the sacred, ritual space of the gathered, banqueting community (1 Cor. 11).

The problem of the legacy of Paul's voice is that when apocalyptic urgency is removed, what remains is a conservative affirmation of the status quo. The imperative for us is either to recover the exigency of radical apocalyptic destabilization, or to rethink agency.

Third, for Paul these binaries of existence in the world will soon be overcome in the age to come, to which their final negation can be deferred. Just as justice must be deferred (as a warrant for nonretaliation; Rom. 12:17–21), so also Paul proposes that other transformations pertaining to life "in the flesh" or "in the world" can also wait, because the "structures of the world are passing away" (see, for example, 1 Cor. 7:29–31). Apocalyptic mentality is paradoxically both revolutionary (in creating liminal spaces that unplug from the prevailing structures and norms) but also conservative (by inviting people to wait, to defer in matters pertaining to the world as a whole).

The problem of the legacy of Paul's voice is that when apocalyptic urgency is removed, what remains is a conservative affirmation of the status quo: let slaves and women stay in their place, even in the assembly (as becomes the prevailing view by the middle of the second century). The imperative for us is either to recover the exigency of radical apocalyptic destabilization, or to rethink agency. In other words: Paul puts the emphasis entirely on messianic agency in the eschatological drama.[22] In what ways, however, must the Messiah's assembly today take on a greater risk of agency in the world (never mind in its own midst), in light of a different eschatological situation?

2. Some differences are necessary and must be celebrated. Here we can include those differences that concern individual gifts, abilities, and functions, which aid the common good. In

addition, even though Paul does not mention this specifically, we might include here the variation of culture and gender as a specific benefit for the community and its ministries. Even Onesimus, though bound by his slavery, is thought to be a special useful asset to Paul's ministry. We should also observe that the Spirit's bountiful distribution of charisma on all members is blind to structures of order or givens of birth, whether of gender, genealogical community, or legal status. It is undoubtedly the charismatic nature of early Christian communities that accounts for the prominent roles of women in ministry and leadership, which at various times still conflicts with prevailing social norms (outwardly, or internally, in the form of ambivalence, as seems the case with Paul).

3. Some differences and disparities must be eradicated or minimized. Two key images need to be considered here. One is the vision of ecclesial equity in economic terms (2 Cor. 8:13–14). While Paul acknowledges the role of donors (Rom 12:8), he explicitly rejects the system of patronage that accompanied most gift giving in his society. Rejecting the balanced reciprocity of patronage relationships, Paul promotes a kind of general reciprocity as typical of village societies, which treats differences of means and needs as temporary. Acts of giving and receiving therefore imply no hierarchy of status or honour. Paul's commitment to refuse any subsidy and to work with his hands is directly tied to this rejection of the patronage/benefaction system. In the one case where he does accept subsidy, he carefully frames it in terms of the second key image: "partnership" (Phil. 1:5, 7; 4:14, 15).

The imagery of partnership in Paul expresses his commitment to a mutualism that seeks to mitigate economic disparity and hardship while refusing paternalism. Paul thus exhorts "partnership with the needy" (Rom. 12:13) along with "solidarity with the lowly" (Rom. 12:16), and refers to the massive undertaking of financial aid for the poor in Jerusalem as an expression of partnership (2 Cor. 8–9; Rom. 15). Indeed, he acknowledges that this mutualism of economic support is an integral part of a deeper partnership in the gospel enterprise (Gal. 2:9–10). The financial gift for Jerusalem is meant not only to assist those in need but also as a symbol of the worldwide unity of the church, and no doubt as a peace offering in the midst of the emerging rift in the church.

Paul emphasizes that it represents an exchange in kind (a mutualism of the spiritual and material), without presuming patronage one way or the other (Rom. 15:14–33).

4. Some disparities based on difference are subject to inversion. As hinted above, Paul's interest peaks, and his rhetoric becomes most radical, when it comes to (dis)establishing status and honour. The classic text on the inversion of the prevailing status and honour system of his world is 1 Corinthians 1:26–31 (along with 2:1–8; 3:18–23; 4:6–21; 11:17–34; 12:4–26), which functions to shame (some of) his status-preoccupied Corinthian readers. Paul's shaming sarcasm continues in 2 Corinthians, climaxing with his own ironic claim to status by boasting in weakness.[23] Philippians also includes calls to divest from status and honour, in accordance with the path of the Messiah's humiliation and exaltation, which parodies Roman imperial claims and undermines prevailing social norms (Phil. 2–3). This concern to invert status constructions is sprinkled across Paul's letters: others are to be considered superior in rank to oneself (Phil. 2:3); the sign of devoted love is to "outdo one another in showing honour" (Rom. 12:10); one must "associate with the lowly," regard others as having the same status as oneself, and refuse to consider oneself in superior terms (Rom. 12:16). The model is the Messiah, "who though rich became poor for your sake" (2 Cor 8:9).

Rejecting the balanced reciprocity of patronage relationships, Paul promotes a kind of general reciprocity as typical of village societies, which treats differences of means and needs as temporary. Acts of giving and receiving therefore imply no hierarchy of status or honour.

Finally, we turn to consider differences that we might label as theological or ethical, while recognizing that these are intertwined (overlaid) with variations that we can identity as regional-political, sociocultural, or even economic.

5. Some differences are to be challenged and confronted. For Paul those variations in conviction and practice that are inconsistent with loyalty to the Messiah must be confronted and rectified through mutual exhortation or disciplinary procedures. These pertain to (1) idolatry, especially participation in civic festivals dedicated to local deities, which would have included aspects of the imperial cult (1 Cor. 10:1–22), and (2) ethical

immorality (1 Cor. 5–6; 1 Thes. 4), not to any ontological precision in christological confession (as would become crucial at a later time). Behaviour displaying (egregious) disloyalty to the Messiah is subject to internal disciplinary procedure (1 Cor. 5; 2 Cor. 2, 7), and met with threats of potential[24] exclusion from the reign of God (1 Cor. 5, 10). These judicial proceedings may result in punishments (2 Cor. 2, 7), or decisions to exclude members from local assemblies (1 Cor. 5), but do not include pronounce-ments on an individual's final destiny, which is left in God's hands (see, for example, 1 Cor. 5:5).

We might also include here Paul's confrontation (indeed, cursing) of those who preach a "different gospel," his disparagement of "false brothers and sisters," and his confrontation of Peter (in connection with "men from James") in the name of "the truth of the gospel" (Gal. 1–2). The issue in these cases has to do with controversy over matters of Torah observance appropriate to loyalty to the Messiah, and thus for some a marker for inclusion or exclusion. In 2 Corinthians, Paul also attacks opponents for preaching a "different gospel" and a "different Jesus" from the one they received, but the particular issues at stake remain vague. Most likely the disloyalty warranting such attack has to do with a combination of moral laxity and status preoccupation (of the sort that rejects the cruciform way of solidarity with the lowly and its inversion of prevailing status norms).[25] Key non-negotiables for Paul, against any mere spiritualizing of the salvation drama, are the crucified Messiah and its implications for a cruciform pathway of life (1 Cor. 1–2), and the resurrection, which guarantees and anticipates the final victory of Messiah over all other rule, and undermines preoccupation with worldly status (1 Cor. 15; Phil. 2–3).

6. Some differences are to be approached through mutual forbearance, accommodation, and deferring to God. We can roughly schematize the ecclesial situation in Paul's day as one in which the ethno-religious, regional-geographic, sociopolitical, economic, and confessional divergences among early Christians had fallen into two main "denominations": the majority of congregations (house churches) in urban centres of the Greco-Roman world, on the one hand, and the congregations in Judea and Jerusalem, along with the remainder of congregations in urban

centres, on the other. We might speak of those within the sphere of Paul and his associates, and those congregations within the sphere of Peter and James (Gal. 2:1–10).[26]

The most important text in this connection is Romans 14–15. We are accustomed to thinking about the particular issues at stake here, and those for which we are therefore to forbear, as applying only to those things that are *adiaphora*, that is, indifferent, not significantly consequential. But that would hardly be the view of both parties. What was a matter of indifference to one group (Paul and "the strong") was a matter that for the other party ("the weak") involved the negation of the very status of the Word of God, the essence of God's covenant.[27]

With the integrity of his Gentile congregations assured, but with the worrisome trend that many of them would prefer to disinherit those of Judaic descent, the terms of Paul's rhetoric shift, for the sake of the deeper and broader unity of Messiah's people.

What we in fact find is that Paul's approach to some forms of confessional-ethical variation differs according to context. In Galatians, Paul is uncompromising in cursing his theological opponents (from the "other" denomination), all for the sake of defending the status in the Messiah's community of those not of Jewish birth. And his rhetoric leads him to undermine almost completely the entire Word of God, negating all those Mosaic commandments (in God-inspired scripture) that have to do with purity and separation. But in Romans, as he contemplates the emerging rift between these very communities, both locally in Rome and globally across the Mediterranean, his approach moderates significantly.

While Paul could use Peter's supposed hypocrisy in Galatians for very effective persuasion in solidifying the integrity of his congregations (Gal. 2:11–14), we must also appreciate that Peter, no less than Paul, was simply trying to be "all things to all people" (1 Cor. 9:19–23). Paul can hardly have been naïve to the fact that it is easy to accommodate to either community (those under the law, and those not) when those communities don't interact and are not aware of the shift in the conduct of the one doing the travelling, whether Peter or himself. But when those who seek to mediate the middle (and transgress the boundaries) are put to the test from their respective community of primary responsibility or

affiliation (Gal. 2:7–8), they will inevitably be forced to move one way or the other. Peter was forced one way, to protect the integrity of his community, while Paul was forced the other way, to protect the status of his community.

In Romans, however, Paul is desperately seeking a rapprochement between the two communities that he (ironically) helped to push apart in Galatians. With the integrity of his Gentile congregations assured, but with the (more?) worrisome trend that many of them would prefer to disinherit those of Judaic descent, the terms of his rhetoric shift, for the sake of the deeper and broader unity of Messiah's people, both locally and globally.

Paul has not changed his position ("I know and am persuaded in the Lord that nothing in itself is unclean"; Rom. 14:14), but now he asks the (liberal) "strong" who share that view to accommodate to the views of the (conservative) "weak," inviting them to consider limits to their legitimate "freedom" and evident "knowledge." Paul pleads for one side to cease despising and for the other to desist judging. Ultimately, Paul says, the final determination about what counts for loyalty to the Messiah (for the strong) and fidelity to the Word of God (for the weak) will have to be deferred to the heavenly tribunal (Rom. 14:10–12).

Paul does not think everything can be fully solved by the internal, ecclesial procedure of theo-ethical discernment; indeed, some matters of grave importance to many must be deferred to God.

In effect, Paul does not think everything can be fully solved by the internal, ecclesial procedure of theo-ethical discernment; indeed, some matters of grave importance to many must be deferred to God.[28] But equally clear is that Paul is also not content with a false unity founded on perpetual separation, harmony through avoidance. He pleads, therefore, that parties embroiled in vigorous and divisive dispute about what constitutes messianic fidelity (the key category for some) in relation to what constitutes scriptural fidelity (the key norm for others)[29] might somehow still be able to "welcome one another" in the mutuality of table fellowship, so that the world will hear the "one voice" of their allegiance to the God of Lord Messiah Jesus.

Notes

[1] See, for example, 1 Cor. 2:6–8; 15:24–28, Phil. 2:9–11; 3:20–21; Rom. 15:12; 16:20.
[2] See, for example, Rom. 8:18–25; 11:25–36; Col. 1:19–20; compare Eph. 1:10.
[3] For the texts, see Rom. 3:3–8, 19–26; 4:13–25; 5:6–11; 9:6–29; 11:17–36; 15:7–13; Phil. 2:9–11; 3:20–21; 1 Cor. 15:24–28. I discuss this matter in detail, and its tension with other themes in Paul, in "The relevance of Paul's eschatological ecclesiology for approaching ecumenicity," in *New Perspectives on Believers Church Ecclesiology*, ed. Abe Dueck, Helmut Harder, and Karl Koop (Winnipeg: CMU Press, 2010), 30–47.
[4] This is the twofold grouping that also worries Paul in Rom. 15:31.
[5] See, for example, Rom. 8:23–25; 13:11–14; 16:20.
[6] Rom. 9:1–5.
[7] Phil. 1:27–4:1.
[8] Gal. 3:26–28; 1 Cor. 12:12–13; Col. 3:12, 15; compare "both as one"; Eph. 2:14, 15.
[9] 1 Cor. 10:17; anticipating 1 Cor. 11:17–34, and evoking comparisons with the problem of table fellowship between Jew and non-Jews in Gal. 2 and Rom. 14–15.
[10] 1 Cor. 12:4–31; Rom. 12:3–8; compare Eph. 4:1–16. For the inversion theme, see esp. 1 Cor. 12:22–26; Rom. 12:3.
[11] Rom. 12:3; cf. 1 Cor. 12:14–26.
[12] Phil. 2:2–13; Rom. 12:16; compare Rom. 11:18, 20, 25; 12:10, 13; compare boasting by factional proponents in Corinth: 2 Cor. 5:12; 11:12, 18, 21.
[13]Rom. 15:5; 2 Cor. 13:11; 1 Cor. 1:10–11. Factionalism is associated with (a) intolerance of legitimate variation (Rom. 14–15); (b) faulty identity formation (1 Cor. 1–4); or (c) faulty practice or teaching (Rom. 16:17–19).
[14] Phil. 4:2–3.
[15] Phil. 1:27–28.
[16] Gal. 3:26–28; 6:15; 1 Cor. 7:19; 12:12–13; Col. 3:11, 15.
[17] See, for example, Gal. 3:26–4:11; 4:21–5:6; 6:15; Col. 2:8–3:15. We could also say that citizenship is also mainly a function of birth, a very important prestige factor that seems to have affected unity (Phil. 1:27–30; 3:17–21).
[18] Neither/nor: Gal. 3:28; Col. 3:11; 1 Cor. 7:19; Gal. 6:15.
[19] In terms of the body politic, Paul can also use the imagery of transfer of dominion relative to membership in a prior organic community: Col. 1:13; 1 Thes. 2:12.
[20] See, for example, 1 Cor. 7:25–31; 11:17–34; Phlm. 16.
[21] 1 Cor. 7:17–24.
[22] See, for example, 1 Cor. 15:24–28; Rom. 11:26.
[23] 2 Cor. 4:7–12; 5:12; 11:21–12:10.
[24] It is important to note that Paul considers any judicial decision, including one that might involve exclusion from the local assembly, to be penultimate, relative to the higher judgment to be enacted at the judgment seat of Messiah (Rom. 14; 1 Cor. 3–4; 2 Cor. 5). That is, Paul specifically avoids making pronouncements on eternal destiny. Paul's equanimity in Phil. 1:15–18 does not involve any mitigation of the serious denouncement, but transfers the situation to the agency of the Messiah, in a crucial use of the passive voice.
[25] The attack on preachers whose motivation is identified with rivalry in Phil. 1:15–18 probably stems from a similar issue. For an attack on anonymous opponents from a different (presumably Judeo-Christian) persuasion, see Rom 3:5–8. Whether we are to think of these pronouncements as authoritarian intolerance is a matter for a different discussion; the point here is that some behaviours and practices are inappropriate to loyalty to the Messiah and must be confronted. Paul's apparent equanimity in Phil.

1:15–18 does not involve any mitigation of the denouncement but transfers the situation to the agency of the Messiah, in a crucial use of the passive voice.

[26] The situation is obviously more complex. One can also point to differences within these general camps—for instance, fissures within the Judean group (for example, Acts 11, 15, 21; Gal. 2). We could also distinguish those congregations within the sphere of John; in large measure these would appear more closely affiliated with the Pauline stream. But they seem to go even further than Paul in the rejection of institutions of Judaism, including the temple.

[27] It is only because of years of distance and separation from the Jewish tradition that we are unable to understand how Paul's perspective was so subversive to "Jewish-Christian" sensibilities.

[28] Paul pleads for the almost impossible. And ironically, that community of Judaic, Torah-observant believers with whom Paul sought rapprochement was a hundred years later denounced and eventually excluded as heretics by the majority "great church" of Gentile believers.

[29] Article 4 of *Confession of Faith in a Mennonite Perspective* (Scottdale, PA, and Waterloo, ON: Herald Press, 1995) similarly distinguishes between the "living Word" and "the Word of God written."

About the author

Gordon Zerbe teaches mostly New Testament at Canadian Mennonite University, Winnipeg, Manitoba. He has been wrestling with Paul for a couple of decades, and is close to finishing a commentary on Philippians for the Believers Church Bible Commentary Series.

Signposts on the journey toward an antiracist, multicultural church

Iris de Leon–Hartshorn

Since its inception the Christian church has struggled with diversity. First-century Christianity was varied in its worship and religious practices, and the early church faced conflict related to that diversity.[1] Jewish Christians weren't sure whether to include Gentiles at all. And if they were to be included, should Gentile Christians be expected to follow Jewish dietary laws and be circumcised? Subsequent church history has been filled with many such conflicts around issues of diversity.

Divisions are ingrained in the fabric of our society and of our congregations and denominations. But division around racial and ethnic diversity need not define our future.

A racist past, an antiracist future?

The church in the United States is no exception. Shaped by the particularities of the nation's history, politics, and sociology, American Christianity displays the racism that has permeated every segment of the society since colonial times. Before the Civil War, African slaves could convert to Christianity, but they were not allowed to worship with whites. This segregation continues, and the pattern has come to apply to other groups. Sunday morning is still the most segregated hour of our week, and churchgoing Native Americans, as well as Hispanics, Asians, and other immigrant groups, tend to worship in separate congregations. These divisions are ingrained in the fabric of our society and of our congregations and denominations.

But division around racial and ethnic diversity need not define our future. In 1994 I got involved in the General Conference Mennonite Church's quest to become an antiracist church. The intent was to become more inclusive of people of color. In the past fifteen years we have made many steps forward and some steps backward. The journey has not always been smooth.

For years now I have worked on the issue of racism, sometimes as an activist, sometimes in other roles. Here I will focus on the past five years, in which I have worked as an educator, bridge builder, and translator. These four roles—activist, educator, bridge builder, translator—are all vital if we are to become an antiracist multicultural church.

Why do I add the qualifier *antiracist*? A lifetime of experience, including twenty-five years of work in addressing racism, has convinced me that some multicultural settings remain racist. Is there less racism in the U.S. now than in the 1950s, when the Ku Klux Klan was active and segregation was enshrined in law? Yes, in some respects. But racism continues to manifest itself in the twenty-first century, and it is still operative in congregations and church institutions when decisions about church life and ways of worshiping reflect only the dominant culture's patterns.

Finding a way forward

I wish I could say I have found the magic formula for transforming a congregation or church institution into an antiracist multicultural organization. What I can do is lay out some things that need to happen to begin the journey of transformation.

Acknowledge that we have a problem. If our church is situated in a multicultural setting and the majority of members are white, we have a problem. If our institution knows the growing edge of the church is first-generation immigrant churches but such congregations have little or no voice in shaping the organization's future, we have a problem.

Agree that we want to change. The journey will require that people in our congregation or institution agree that we want to change. The decision must be intentional, because it will mean commitment and work for all of us, not just a few of us. The process will entail both individual and corporate transformation.

Proceed to teach, practice, follow through, and monitor. Begin by teaching about why inclusion is important to our faith formation. What does the Bible say about inclusion? Why does it matter to the body of Christ?

Then schedule a basic antiracism workshop. Such workshops are available through many groups and agencies in Canada and the United States. A workshop can help people understand

racism and recognize it when it crops up (it can be subtle!). A workshop can also provide a common language, a shared set of terms that will help us talk together about racism.

We'll need to keep doing social analysis of racism and keep working at spiritual formation, in order to further our understanding and to help in our transformation as the body of Christ. Acts 20 reports Peter's vision and his realization that "God shows no partiality, but in every nation anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him" (34–35). In Paul's letter to the Galatians (2:11–14), though, he scolds Peter for his inconsistency and expresses his dismay that others are being led astray by Peter's hypocrisy in "not acting consistently with the truth of the gospel" (v. 14). At Antioch Peter had apparently yielded to the prejudices of the Judaizers—"the circumcision faction" (v. 12)—and pulled back from his inclusive vision: he had stopped eating with converted Gentiles. Like Peter, if we are not diligent about our teaching, not attentive to our spiritual formation, we are apt to revert to our old ways of doing things. It's human nature.

If we are not diligent about our teaching, not attentive to our spiritual formation, we are apt to revert to our old ways of doing things. It's human nature.

Becoming antiracist congregations and institutions will require that we practice new ways of thinking and doing things. Practice will be crucial in moving from understanding to implementation. We may be tempted to jump right away to the doing, but if our doing is not rooted in our spiritual formation, in a connection between head and heart, it will be meaningless and will not result in lasting change.

We will need to follow through on, monitor, and evaluate whatever changes and practices we agree on. Lasting change requires all three steps. Change can't be sustained without agreement by the whole, commitment to spiritual formation and learning, follow through, monitoring, and evaluation. These, in my experience, are essential elements of the process.

The principles that apply

Each congregation and institution needs to understand the context in which God has placed it, so some pieces of the process are

context specific. In the past five years, though, I have become convinced that some principles apply to all successful efforts to become antiracist multicultural faith communities.

Take responsibility. It is not enough to say that racism exists; we must be able to own the ways we benefit from it. And we must be able to confess our mistakes, our transgressions, in areas that hinder interpersonal and corporate relationships. We need to acknowledge how we have benefited from the oppression of another group. Confession is part of being in community.

Model a learning community. If we saw our communities of faith as places for learning together, we would be able to offer counsel, receive it from others, and extend grace. Unfortunately, people in many faith communities cling to an ideal of perfection and are therefore unlikely to engage in a process in which they will make mistakes. This realization leads me to my next principle:

Take risks. Taking risks is essential in learning communities. It's also essential to taking responsibility. We must be willing to take risks for the sake of God's kingdom.

Create space so that others can exercise their power. Power is something we may feel uncomfortable talking about, but the fact is, people use power in all spheres of life. The issue is not whether we have power but how we use it. Will we use it to make decisions that create space in which others can exercise their power?[2]

Connect the interpersonal with the systemic. Often the dominant culture is more comfortable working at racism at the interpersonal level, but systemic changes are critical to organizational transformation. We need to resist the impulse to keep things at an interpersonal level, dealing only with our feelings rather than with substantial systemic change that would allow "the other" access to institutional power.

Extend grace. Grace is an integral part of being the body of Christ. Extending grace on all sides is vital to successful transformation of relationships at all levels.

What I have seen in practice

The application of these principles will vary with our contexts and our imaginations. What I share in the following comes out of my attempts and the attempts of others who are working toward

transformation, toward becoming the kind of church in which "a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, [stands] before the throne and before the Lamb" (Rev. 7:9). My goal in sharing the following stories is to inspire, not to prescribe particular methods.

The junior partner defers. On a trip to the Middle East I met Jeff Halpner, an Israeli working with Palestinian families whose homes have been demolished. I asked him how he handles the issue of power in his work. He talked about his idea of partnership: he sees his organization as the junior partner and the Palestinian families they work with as the senior partners. The senior partners make all final decisions. Jeff's approach demonstrates a use of power in unequal relationships that increases the power of the other.

We need to resist the impulse to keep things at an interpersonal level, dealing only with our feelings rather than with substantial systemic change that would allow "the other" access to institutional power.

A first-generation immigrant church symposium. When I agreed to serve as Mennonite Church USA's director of intercultural relations, I wanted to find a way to create space for first-generation immigrant churches to use their gifts and give voice to their dreams and needs within Mennonite Church USA. Inspired by the idea of a learning community, I took a risk and contacted several conferences, to see if I could find three that would embark on a journey with me. Southeast, Pacific Southwest, and Western District conferences agreed to partner with me on this project. The project was to plan a first-generation immigrant Mennonite Church symposium that would be owned and led by first-generation immigrant Mennonites from the three conferences. The planning committee was exclusively first-generation immigrants, with me in the role of staff support.

After eighteen months, what the planners unveiled was something I could have never envisioned on my own. They planned three plenary sessions and two workshop times, all led by first-generation immigrants. They also invited church agencies to send observers who would give response at the end of the symposium about what they had heard and learned. No more than a third of the people in attendance would be agency people, so it would be

a safe place for the immigrants to offer their gifts, tell their stories, and share their vision for the church.

I had to give up control and let go of my ideas about how things should happen. We did have a schedule, but at times the Spirit led participants to stop what we were doing and pray. In the end the event was meaningful: new voices were heard and new gifts shared. The church took a risk and created space in which members of first-generation immigrant congregations could exercise power. A learning community formed and took initial steps to connect the interpersonal with the systemic. Whether this event yields systemic transformation will depend on whether church agencies are able to translate what they heard: Will they be inspired to develop resources that are useful for immigrant congregations? Will they value the gifts of people in these congregations and draw on their contributions in churchwide settings?

A People of Color Council. When I started work for Mennonite Church USA, I became aware that three entities were doing similar work, not necessarily overlapping but each in its own sphere, not connecting with the others: (1) the Mennonite Church USA executive board had an antiracism team; (2) there were three recognized constituency groups from people-of-color groups—Hispanic Mennonite Church, African-American Mennonite Assembly, and Native Mennonite Ministries; and (3) an intercultural reference group helped inform my work. I and others raised questions about the results: these disparate voices lacked a way to bring to the forefront common issues of accountability: How do we see proposed changes through to their realization? How do we get from the interpersonal to the systemic, in bringing transformation to the church?

I went to these groups and proposed an experiment. If it didn't work, we could change our approach. I suggested that we create a People of Color Council, with representation of first-generation immigrants as well as the recognized constituency groups and leaders from the reference council. The group would assemble twice a year to identify common concerns and think about how to address them. They would meet once a year with the Mennonite Church USA executive director and board moderator, and once a year with the chairs of the executive board's antiracism team. The first meeting would be an opportunity to articulate their insights

and suggestions about how to move forward. We hoped the council and the church leaders would endorse one or two of these suggestions and agree on a way forward on these fronts. The second meeting of the year would engage the antiracism team, which would monitor and report back to the People of Color Council any progress on the items that had been agreed to.

In October 2009 this group met for the first time in their official role. What resulted was a movement forward. At that meeting the council asked that they be given responsibility to plan at least one worship session for the 2011 convention of Mennonite Church USA, and executive leaders agreed. It will be an opportunity for learning. It means taking some risks and creating some space in which people of color can exercise power as part of a communal worship experience. We don't know exactly where it will lead, but it's a concrete step.

A cross-cultural simulation and our own case studies. In January 2009 Addie Banks (a member of the MC USA executive board) and I led a learning event for the board. We guided a cross-culture simulation exercise called Bafa Bafa, designed for people who need an experiential understanding of another culture, of the other. After the simulation and debriefing, we discussed four case studies, actual incidents related to diversity in Mennonite institutions.

The simulation was fun, but it also generated some deep feelings. The case studies afterward gave us an opportunity to connect mind, soul, and commitment for change. I thought this experiment succeeded: the executive board became a learning community; they took responsibility, connected interpersonal and systemic realities, and extended grace to one another.

A New Humanity covenant. The antiracism task force for the Mennonite Church USA Constituency Leaders Council (CLC) has just ended its work, with hopes that the learning community ethos will continue. Our task force, in existence for two years, was to figure out how to increase the number of people of color who are part of the CLC. This was a daunting task: first, because the CLC meets only twice a year, and second, because each entity represented there picks their representative. Our first piece of work was to put together a covenant we named "A New Humanity"; it spoke of the vision of a new humanity in Christ. This

covenant was also a way to name and take responsibility for places where we as a church have fallen short of being inclusive of people of color. The covenant also outlined goals we want to strive for, as a way to gauge our progress. After much discussion and debate, the covenant was approved. Now we are entering into finding ways to work at becoming a new humanity.

Our first "experiment"—a label we chose intentionally—was to figure out how many people of color should be present if the composition of the group were to reflect the church's demographics. Then we asked for a specific number of white male volunteers (the number in excess of their proportionate representation) to be silent and listen at their tables. We suggested that they think of keeping silent as a spiritual practice, a way to hear what they may have not heard before. We got a lot of response, both positive and negative, to this experiment. What I thought might happen—an increase in the voices of people of color at the tables—didn't happen to the degree that I had hoped. At our next meeting our task force reported on the responses and some of the findings.

These learning opportunities are laced in grace, and we can allow for mistakes, take responsibility, and offer forgiveness that may in the end result in transformative reconciliation.

We tried another experiment, in "circle process" listening. This pattern of conversation is used in some indigenous cultures. People of the dominant culture in North America are geared to debate and respond in discussion. Some other cultures see it as rude to respond directly to what others have said, and they instead value speaking from the heart and directly to the question. The circle process allows people to speak one at a time, and it keeps a few talkative people from dominating. We asked table groups to use the circle process. Some found it difficult, others found it helpful, and still others felt we needed more time to get used to it. This exercise is a way to increase our intercultural skills. It is a learning event and speaks to our desire to create space in which we can listen to voices we don't usually hear.

Opportunities laced with grace

None of these examples is the key to finding our way on the journey toward becoming an antiracist multicultural church, but

they are all signposts indicating that we are moving forward, finding our way. I offer these ideas, principles, and stories in hopes that they will spark our imaginations about what might be possible in our congregations, conferences, and denominations. These learning opportunities are laced in grace, and we can allow for mistakes, take responsibility, and offer forgiveness that may in the end result in transformative reconciliation. I am grateful to my family and colleagues who have supported me in my own imperfect work on this journey. I have seen glimpses of this new humanity, and I know the vision to be true. May God continue to grant us grace for the way ahead.

Notes

[1] James D. G. Dunn, *Unity and Diversity in the New Testament* (Valley Forge, PA: Trinity Press International, 1990).

[2] For more on this subject, see my contribution on power in Michelle E. Armster and Lorraine Stutzman Amstutz, eds., *Transformation and Restorative Justice Manual,* 5th ed. (Akron, PA: Mennonite Central Committee Office on Justice and Peacebuilding, 2008).

About the author

Iris de Leon–Hartshorn is married to Leo Hartshorn; they have three adult children and a grandson. Iris is currently executive conference minister for Pacific Northwest Mennonite Conference. She served with Mennonite Central Committee for eleven years as peace and justice director for the the U.S., and as director of the Intercultural Relations Office for Mennonite Church USA. She has a master's degree from Eastern Mennonite University in conflict transformation and peacebuilding.

Toward becoming a multicultural church

Samson Lo

Society in Canada and the U.S. is becoming more and more multicultural, because of the continuing influx of newcomers from across the globe. These newcomers have various statuses on this piece of land: they are immigrants, international students, visitors, businesspeople, refugees, people who come here to join their families. These newcomers may live in your town and visit the shopping malls you frequent. They may even move in next door. You are now meeting and greeting them day after day.

How do you think about these new neighbors when you observe their ways of speaking, dressing, and behaving? What reaction do you have when you hear them speaking in languages other than your own?

How do you think about these new friends and neighbors when you come across them and observe their ways of speaking, dressing, and behaving? What reaction do you have when you hear them speaking in languages other than your own?

The world is changing; so is the church

Some of these newcomers are Christians; others become Christians after their arrival in Canada or the U.S. They may attend your church and participate in your congregation's life. Then you have more opportunities to relate to these peoples who are culturally and ethnically different from you.

The children of these new church members may share the same Sunday school classroom with your kids. And one day when you come to your Bible study group, you may be introduced to a person whose race and color of skin is different from yours. You may even be asked to provide services to them, such as helping out in an English language class or being an assistant in a childcare program. Some of these children and their parents have different customs and speak little English.

Human beings may experience culture shock when they face changes that arise with an influx of people of another culture. Specialists in cultural research and studies tell us that human beings usually respond in the following ways when faced with people of another culture:

Xenophobia. Fear of another culture may result in racism, hate groups, and crime. Xenophobic people may blame the newcomers for any misfortunte that happens in town. Immigrants' traditions, values, and ways of life may be ridiculed. They may be harassed when they shop in the town. Violence may even break out on public transit. Fear of another culture may be manifested as hate.

Ethnocentrism. The belief that one's own culture is the best may display itself in patronizing people of other cultures or in stereotyping their cultures. It may lead to tokenism, in which newcomers are invited to participate in the dominant culture, but not in a meaningful way.

For example, when church leaders elect council members to represent the growing number of ethnic groups joining the church, they need to examine their motives: do they really want to include these newcomers and open themselves to change that will inevitably result, or do they seek the illusion of representation even as they maintain the status quo?

Forced assimilation. With the belief that everyone should be "like us," people welcome newcomers of other cultures as long as these others will assimilate: people of other cultures can be on our team only if they play by our rules. The approach seems friendly and helpful to others. But people of other cultures are told to integrate into the mainstream culture and give up part or all of their own culture. "English only" is a must.

Acts 15 tells us that some leaders of the early church were willing to accept Gentile converts into their midst only if they became Jews. Do we express the same mentality, without really being aware that we are doing so?

Segregation. Some people believe that different races and culture groups should remain separate from each other. But a "separate but equal" policy usually means "separate and unequal." People taking this position stress that only leaders of their own culture can give appropriate guidance to a group and therefore should do so in separate venues.

Acceptance. People who are willing to respect and welcome people of other cultures seek to coexist, accommodate, and build relationship with them. Tolerance is important in the accepting process. People who adopt this posture see all cultures as equal and worthy of respect.

Celebration. Acceptance is a good beginning, but God wants something more: that we value other cultures. God created us as cultural beings and values diversity in all creation. Celebration extends beyond accepting and tolerating to embracing and valuing. People learn to appreciate one another, and they desire multicultural experiences and relationship.

Acts 15 tells us that some leaders of the early church were willing to accept Gentile converts only if they became Jews. Do we express the same mentality, without being aware that we are doing so?

When people of different cultural groups come together, a process of cultural synthesis and adaptation can take place. Then a new culture and new identity are formed that include and incorporate elements of various cultural heritages. In fact the mission of the church of God is not to promote one outcome or one culture over the others but rather to proclaim the gospel of Jesus Christ to people of every race and language and culture in terms they can understand, and to transform every culture from within so that its life is grounded on values of God's kingdom. According to Isaiah's vision, God's house is to be a house of prayer for all nations (Isa. 56:7).

From this perspective, the presence of diverse cultural and linguistic groups in and around a church becomes a real challenge for the organization and leadership. Church leaders and volunteers may need to undertake some cultural awareness training in order to provide appropriate care and services to their members and contacts.

Stereotypes and archetypes

Stereotypes have three characteristics: They are the perspectives of cultural outsiders, people outside the culture being stereotyped. They are restrictive or limiting. And they are accusatory.

Peter observes that in gatherings within the culturally mainstream church, members of the Chinese minority group speak only to one another, unless approached by an English speaker.

Then they only respond to the speaker's specific question. After a while Peter comments to other church members who share his cultural background, "Chinese people are quiet and cliquish and must not like to speak in English."

Generalizing from limited observation of certain qualities and then attributing these qualities to all members of a cultural group creates a box that limits the way others of that group will be seen by the majority group. Stereotyping leads people outside the group to decide who these others are, without considering the qualities of individuals. A comment based on a stereotype creates barriers to real and fruitful communication and relationship.

Peter could respond in another way. He could begin to learn about Chinese culture from someone within the Chinese culture and so develop a general idea of Chinese values and beliefs. Then Peter would learn that Chinese who are not comfortable speaking English will not want to lose face by making linguistic mistakes.

This alternate response is called an archetype. It allows a person to have a general idea of cultural norms, customs, and values without limiting individuals to that archetype. An archetype is put forward by an insider and is nonaccusatory and nonrestrictive. This archetypal model can help us avoid stereotyping, and it can make for better relationships in a multicultural setting.

Misattribution

Misattribution is another big problem in multicultural relationships. It attributes meaning and motive to another's behaviour based on one's own culture or experience. Misattribution is inaccurate and often evokes an immediate emotional response that further weakens the developing relationship.

Two women serving on the same committee are assigned to pair up in order to talk about a subtopic. Ly is a Hmong woman and Susan is Anglo-Canadian. When the conversation ends, they each share their comments about the other to a person of their own cultural background. Ly says that Susan spoke very fast and was eager for Ly to make certain commitments in the course of the conversation. Susan tells her friends that she found her encounter with Ly frustrating. She observed Ly sitting quietly with her arms crossed, refusing to talk. She also said that Ly would only listen and gave little response.

See how each woman interpreted the behaviour of the other through her own cultural lens? If each one had understood more of the other's culture, their interpretations of the other would have been quite different. Ly would have understood that Susan's rate of speech only indicates where she was born and grew up and does not mean that she is trying to be unclear, pushy, or domineering. She would understand that Susan's culture is result oriented, so the expectation that conversation would yield some kind of commitment would be usual. This information would have helped Ly to avoid her misattribution.

People feel valued and respected when others approach them and warmly ask them about their life, family, and activities. But our questions must reveal honest interest in others, and when they respond, we must listen attentively.

Likewise, if Susan had understood Ly's culture, her conclusions would have changed. In Ly's culture, it is a sign of respect to sit quietly while someone is speaking, and it is inappropriate to make a commitment hastily. This cultural awareness would have given Susan the ability to attach a totally different meaning to the encounter.

High and low context cultures

What is context? Context includes ***environment*** (location, setting, decoration etc.); ***process*** (how the meeting is arranged, how participants are invited, and how guests are introduced etc); ***expression*** (body gesture, facial language, tone of voice, etc,); ***appearance*** (clothes, jewellery, hairstyle, etc.). Different cultures relate to context in different ways. Low context cultures attach little importance to context, while high context cultures attach great significance to context.

People of a high context culture believe that the context of an event is as important as the event itself. Low context cultures believe that the content of the message is more important than the context. In other words, people who belong to low context cultures value directness.

Some years ago, when an Anglo-Canadian church invited some Korean Christian families to form a worship service in the Korean language, the Korean community responded positively. The pastor of the hosting church thought that instead of locating

the brand new worship service in the sanctuary, where the main worship service took place, it would be better to hold the Korean worship service in a classroom in the church basement. The pastor belongs to a low context culture, and he thought the smaller group would feel cosier and the participants would be more at home if they gathered in the basement. But the Korean families felt humiliated and thought they were being treated as second-class members of the church. They believe that worship belongs in the sanctuary.

Many Asian cultures are high context cultures. Remember that for high context cultures, the setting or context of a meeting or interaction will be as significant as the meeting or interaction itself. High context may not always mean formal, but it will mean that one pays attention to the context. What did the church inadvertently communicate through the context of the event? By bearing in mind this cultural difference, we can remove obstacles and enhance opportunities for building cross-cultural relationship.

Culture shock

In a multicultural society in a postmodern world, newcomers and long-standing members of the church need to cultivate a new culture in which they can live and worship together. Culture shock is the experience of anxiety or frustration that comes of not knowing the rules or having the skills to adjust to a new culture. Culture shock is almost inevitable when you approach or are approached by a new culture.

Joseph doubtless experienced culture shock when he was betrayed by his brothers and sold into slavery in Egypt (Gen. 37). But he eventually learned a new language and acquired a new way of living in the new environment. God did not leave Joseph alone. To the new immigrants, the God of Joseph is the same God who takes them to this new land and helps them adjust to the new culture. To the existing members of the church in Canada or the U.S., the same God is able to help us embrace and walk along with these Christians who come from other parts of the world.

How can we be approachable?

How can newcomers and long-standing members who share church life together be more approachable?

Be open. Openness is an ability to welcome people into our presence and help them feel safe and comfortable. Openness and approachability are keys to helping newcomers overcome culture shock and make new friends. Most of the time our actions reveal a certain degree of openness to others. Trust can grow as we are willing to open ourselves and make ourselves approachable.

Smile. A genuine smile and warm greeting convey welcome to others. On Sunday morning, we should show others our genuine smiling face. Our smiles will warm church life and remove cultural barriers. If we all have a genuine smile on our faces, both newcomers and long-time members of the congregation will find the church a peaceful and relaxing place to talk, share, and worship together.

Be slow to make judgments when socializing with someone whose culture is different from yours. Try to learn more about their culture and be considerate of those who may find it difficult to speak a new language or get used to new practices.

Reach out. Jesus reached out his hands to people, so why shouldn't we? Move toward people, either by holding the door open as you see them coming, or by physically drawing near as they come into the church. These gestures are simple ways of reaching out to people in our church. Our words of greeting and our handshake may make someone's day.

Ask questions. People feel valued and respected when others approach them and warmly ask them about their life, family, and activities. But our questions must reveal honest interest in others. When people respond to our questions, we have to listen attentively. Then we need to let our thoughts and concerns flow into the conversation. When this exchange happens, people will sense bonds forming within the congregation.

Engage people. Invite people into small group conversation, projects, and activities, and their sense of belonging will grow. Never turn away people who want to join in; don't leave them feeling unwelcome and rejected.

Make no judgment. Last but not least, be slow to make judgments when socializing with someone whose culture is different from yours. Try to learn more about that new culture and be considerate of the situation of others who may find it difficult to speak a new language or get used to new practices.

Tom Sine's words in *Wild Hope* continue to be worthy of our attention: "We are headed into a future in which we have the opportunity to be enriched by the many and expanding ethnic cultures that [constitute] our country. But before we can receive each other's gifts, we must repent and be reconciled to one another across racial and cultural barriers."[1]

Note

[1] Tom Sine, *Wild Hope* (Tunbridge Wells: Monarch, 1991), 142–43.

About the author

Samson Lo lives in Vancouver, British Columbia. He is the pastor of Chinese Grace Mennonite Church in a multiracial, multicultural area of the inner city of Vancouver. He also works with Mennonite Church Canada as director of Multi-cultural Ministry.

Thelma Meade: "I know where I go"

An Aboriginal elder's experience with the church

Deborah Froese

"God, if our language is not good and if the way we live is not good, why did you even make us? Now we don't want to be Indians—but you made us as Indians." This was the lament of Christian Aboriginal elder and teacher Thelma Meade during her boarding school years.[1] She has since come to embrace her identity, and in the process, she has evolved into a staunch advocate for other Aboriginal people, particularly women.

Though Thelma never lost sight of Jesus, she admits to wariness toward the church. Her story represents one fragment of a historical canvas depicting the troubled relationship between Aboriginal people and those who came to North America in search of opportunity.

Thelma has worked with various organizations in Manitoba, including Mennonite Church Canada, Mennonite Church Manitoba, Mennonite Central Committee Manitoba, Winnipeg's Core Area Initiative, and the Aboriginal Women's Network. She founded Kikinamawin Training Centre in Winnipeg and served on the board of governors of the University of Manitoba. As an educator, she assisted in the development of *Reaching Up to God Our Creator,* a Mennonite Church Canada resource designed to foster respect and understanding among Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal communities. Her contribution to the resource included the creation of a curriculum connecting Aboriginal Seven Sacred Teachings with biblical principles.

Thelma is director of the Aboriginal Senior Resources Centre in Winnipeg and serves as an elder to the Assembly of Manitoba Chiefs and to the Ike Women's Shelter board of directors. She is also an elder co-chair of Keteyatsak Elder/Seniors.

Though Thelma never lost sight of Jesus, she admits to continued wariness toward the church. Her story represents but one fragment of a broad historical canvas depicting the troubled

relationship between Aboriginal peoples and those who came to North America in search of new opportunities.

Thelma attributes the relational disconnect to fundamental differences in worldview. Author Christine Sivell-Ferri summarizes the contrasts in a government report about a native spirituality program among the Anishinabe people of Thelma's home community. "Euro-Canadian ordering is hierarchical and one-directional. It reflects European worldview. The Anishinabe spirituality and way of seeing the world is best understood with the analogy of the *circle* and an image of the community as a web of meaningful interconnections among kin, the land, and the non-physical world."[2]

In his book *One Church Many Tribes*, Aboriginal speaker and author Richard Twiss refers to insights of R. Pierce Beaver: "The historical record of missions among the tribes of North America is a saga marked by enormous potential, great failures and profound sadness. With a few notable exceptions . . . those engaged in 18th century mission work disdained Native American culture and barred it from churches. Early missionaries failed to embrace the intrinsic God-given value of the people to whom they were sent."[3]

For Canadian Aboriginals, this legacy is most painfully identified through the dark and well-publicized history of church-led residential schools. Prime Minister Harper formally acknowledged their failure in 2008. "The legacy of Indian residential schools has contributed to social problems that continue to exist in many communities today. . . . In separating children from their families, we undermined the ability of many to adequately parent their own children and sowed the seeds for generations to follow."[4]

Generosity and leadership

Thelma was born in the early 1940s on the Anishinabe reserve of Hollow Water First Nation, about 190 kilometres north of Winnipeg, where the Wanipigow River tumbles into Lake Winnipeg. She joined a large family, eventually becoming the third youngest of eighteen children, seven of whom died in infancy. The Barker family's five-bedroom home was often happily crowded, welcoming those with nowhere else to go.

Thelma's father, George Barker, worked for Manitoba Forestry and as a trapper, but he also spent forty years as the outspoken and politically active chief of Hollow Water. Barker played an

instrumental role in obtaining the right to vote for Aboriginals in Canada and in forming the Manitoba Indian Brotherhood, the precursor to the present-day Assembly of Manitoba Chiefs. Working as his assistant when she was in her late teens gave Thelma unique opportunities at home and in Ottawa to observe the political system at work—and to witness her father's skilful approach to manoeuvring through it.

Barker practiced *Midewin* or native Ojibwa spirituality until he became a Christian in his later years, while Thelma's mother, Ida Barker, was a devout Christian. More soft-spoken than her husband, Ida exhibited a strong community presence in her own way, dedicating her time and energy to the Anglican Church and caring for the community as a midwife and healer, utilizing the medicinal properties of local roots and plants.

Thelma watched her mother burn sage for its soothing scent when someone in the community faced difficulties, and at the same time she prayed to God. Hymn singing and Bible reading were regular events in the household.

Traditional practices were intricately woven into Thelma's perspective on life. To care for Mother Earth, Thelma turned vegetable peels back into the soil. She collected and cared for various roots and plants used for medicines and teas. Thelma watched her mother burn sage for its soothing scent when someone in the community faced difficulties, and at the same time she prayed to God, whom she addressed as "Manitou." Hymn singing and Bible reading were regular events in the Barker household.

"[Mom] had a lot of expectations, and I guess in one sense it was good. She seemed to be a leader in the community," Thelma says. "I knew about Jesus [when I was] very, very young."

A community divided

Although there appeared to be a natural acceptance of differences in the Barker home, life in the wider Hollow Water community was not as simple. Interdenominational friction divided residents.

During Thelma's formative years, families in Hollow Water belonged to the Anglican Church or the Roman Catholic Church and attended schools associated with those denominations. Roman Catholics were forbidden to attend the Anglican Church

or school, and those who did so risked excommunication. While Thelma's family was Anglican, many of her friends were Roman Catholic. "There was a very strong division there," she recalls. "The majority of the community were Roman Catholics."

Children from both denominations met to play after school, exacerbating the sense of division that arose when school or church resumed. "I sensed that our friends were over there. . . . This is not fair," Thelma says. "Their rules were *vibrantly* strong."

People from both denominations were discouraged by their families from developing close relationships with those belonging to the "other" church. Though this created problems in a small community where everyone crossed paths daily, it did not prevent relationships. Out-of-wedlock pregnancies were common. Ironically, strong family commitments to one denomination or the other eventually drove many expectant young couples apart, creating many single-parent families.

Denominational politics also damaged the self-worth of many individuals, who, Thelma surmises, felt they could never live up to the expectations of the church. "It was very detrimental to both sides."

As Hollow Water chief, George Barker was caught in the middle of the conflict. "It was my dad who closed the Anglican and RC schools down in the community," Thelma says. "He said enough is enough [with] this fighting. We're all Native people and we're all God's people. The Creator put us here. This is going to stop."

Barker determined that all children should attend one school. He negotiated with the provincial government and the Frontier School Division, eventually establishing a consolidated school. Community churches and individual families became responsible for religious training.

By the 1970s, the elders who provided leadership and garnered financial support for the Anglican and Roman Catholic denominations had died, and no one assumed their roles. For a brief period, a Baptist pastor and his wife came to Hollow Water. Mennonite pastor Jake Unrau visited from the nearby Métis community of Manigotagan and held evening prayer meetings at the Barker residence. Although a Mennonite church was never formed, Unrau and George Barker collaborated to establish the

Wanipigow Producers Co-op, encouraging economic self-sufficiency in commercial fishing and lumber.

Whether by coincidence or consequence, as church influence in Hollow Water faltered, years of intergenerational trauma bubbled to the surface. Low self-worth, depression, and spiritual emptiness were expressed through increasing addictions and family violence. As the community struggled to cope, native spirituality resurfaced, and the door opened for a new program, Community Holistic Circle Healing (CHCH). Using elements of native spirituality such as sweat lodges, fasting, healing of the inner child, and growing self-awareness, the program brought survivors and offenders through four stages or circles of confession and healing. "When they brought that program . . ., they brought out a lot of things that were in the core of the people that they could not deal with in any other way," Thelma says.

"I looked at the churches, and I thought, I don't know if I could trust people, to share with them. I had to be a completely different person when I would go there, because if I was me, I thought I wouldn't be accepted."

Those who supported native spirituality condemned Christianity, and yet another struggle of faith struck the small community. "When that happened, a lot of people pulled back [from CHCH], because there was enough Christianity in them that they weren't going to have it totally crushed in front of them," she reflects.

Thelma's nephew, an alcoholic in search of healing, asked for her opinion of CHCH. "I told him that I found my Creator, my God, and I trust my God and my God will help me, but if people feel that they can be healed through the sweat lodge, through the Creator, I don't disrespect that, but for me, I know where I go when I'm down and out."

Boarding school

Anglican boarding school plunged Thelma into a deeply personal faith-related trauma. At the age of fourteen, she was forbidden to refer to her way of life in Hollow Water or to speak her mother tongue. She became increasingly aware of a distinction between the cultural practices of lifestyle and faith. Loneliness and continual pressure against her roots eroded her sense of self-worth.

Mistrust of the school's administration left her feeling she had nowhere to turn. "If you had something to talk about or if something happened . . ., you only dealt with the head people, but . . . everybody knew whatever you did," Thelma says. "I wouldn't even tell them if I was lonely, because there was no confidentiality. . . . I wouldn't let go of anything. Everything was just in here all the time." She taps her chest.

With her parents' encouragement, Thelma remained in boarding school, but she continued to struggle against a theology that seemed to emphasize God's commandments over grace and redemption. "There were things in my heart that I wanted to deal with. I looked at the churches, and I thought, I don't know if I could trust people, to share with them. I had to be a completely different person when I would go there, because if I was me, I thought I wouldn't be accepted."

Thelma told herself, "People like me, who went to school and who've got something to show for it, should stand up—*I* should stand up—for the rights of my people. . . . I started to say 'my people.'"

Not surprisingly, Thelma drew away from the institutional church. She kept her distance for many years. "How come Jesus never instructed everybody to have a church? Why did he go all over and preach everywhere? And he loved poor people. This is the big question I always had in my head."

Identity and purpose

After graduating from clerical school in the late 1950s, her first of many educational achievements, Thelma encountered a new level of discrimination and racism in the workforce. But this time, she drew on her parents' leadership examples and told herself, "People like me, who went to school and who've got something to show for it, should stand up—*I* should stand up—for the rights of my people. . . . I started to say 'my people.'"

She gradually reclaimed her heritage and sense of self-worth through various courses and seminars, finding the courage to challenge people and circumstances with new grit. Standing up for herself and other women—and affirming the God-given equality of all people—became her mission. "It took me [time] to heal inside . . ., to know who I was, that I was just as good a woman as any other woman. . . . I used to cry every time I said bad things to

somebody. . . . I used to just condemn myself, because I thought that was what you were supposed to do. . . . I don't anymore. I ask for forgiveness."

It wasn't until 1969, when she and her husband, Norman Meade, moved to Manigotagan, that she began to find a place in church again—a Mennonite church. "I knew that I needed to get closer to God," she reflects, "and I wanted my children to know God. I knew that [faith] had kept me from going through real turmoil in life."

In Manigotagan, the Meades met Edith and Neill von Gunten, who are currently co-directors of Native Ministry for Mennonite Church Canada. "Neill and Edith were like angels who fell from the sky," Thelma says of the timing. With similar interests and children of the same age, the couples connected instantly. Thelma stepped back into the church and gradually acquired the university education that bolstered her ability to help others find their way.

"If we are your partners, let your hair down," Thelma suggests. "Be a person. Get to know us." "You've got to be open like Jesus was, open to everybody."

Thelma credits the Mennonite Church with bringing the Word of God to Manigotagan, but also for assisting in other areas of need, such as education, economic development, and counselling. Through the Mennonite Church, the Meades have travelled throughout Canada and the U.S. and participated in two Mennonite World Conference assemblies. "All of this gave Norman and [me] strong personal strength in our journey . . . walking with the Lord. It also helped us to learn the ropes of parenting, [how to] deal with forgiveness. . . . We needed that continual support in our lives."

Breaking down the barriers

Thelma still sees traces of racism and stereotyping in churches. "I used to try and blank it out of my mind, but it's there," Thelma says. "You can feel it and you can hear it."

Thelma's five grandchildren sense it too. They usually attend a First Nations church some distance from their home, but one Sunday Thelma introduced them to a Sunday school nearby. When she attempted to take them there again, they protested. "There's too many yellow-heads there, and you can't even say

anything. They know everything," her six-year-old granddaughter commented bluntly.

Thelma chuckles. "I guess she wasn't given a chance. That really helped me, because that's how I felt all the time."

Education, Thelma believes, is the only way to bridge the difference between cultures. "If there is no understanding, there is still all of this stereotyping, and there's still this myth that Indians can't learn, Indians are lazy."

Through Mennonite Central Committee's Aboriginal Neighbours program, Thelma and Norman presented a workshop about Aboriginal culture and history. "Some women broke down and cried when we finished talking about how we were treated," Thelma says. "Like in a residential school, you lose a lot of things. And people are saying, 'Oh, they're given so much money.' The money they give out is peanuts compared to what a lot of people lost. When you go home, you question how your people are living. That's destroying your family."

Continued misunderstandings trouble Thelma. "Maybe it's not racist, but there is a lot of stereotyping and a lot of saying, 'Those people over there.' 'Poor Indians.' Maybe not those exact words but, 'Oh, we're trying to help those poor Indians.' It bothers you. It really bothers you."

She suggests that there are better approaches to mission than the traditional ones. "Here, I'll do it for you. Oh, I'll run around for you. I'll do this for you. This is what you need—" Thelma waves her hand. "Throw that out the window. "Work *with* the people. Find out what [their] needs are."

Budgeting and finances create challenges, too. From an Aboriginal perspective, wealth is a God-given resource designed to meet needs, to be shared with no strings attached. From the Western point of view, however, wealth must be managed logistically, with a balance sheet in mind. If churches want to build strong connections with Aboriginals, Thelma encourages them to take another look at their approach to financial support. "You've got to drop some of your robes as you come—and maybe hand them over," she chuckles.

But more important than money is the development of relationships that allow all parties to feel valued. "If we are your partners, let your hair down," Thelma suggests. "Be a person. Get

to know us." "You've got to be open like Jesus was, open to everybody," she says. "It's really a lot to do with two different cultures. But there can be understanding with two cultures."

Notes

[1] Thelma differentiates between boarding school and residential school by the living arrangements; although she lived away from her home in Hollow Water, she had room and board in one location of Winnipeg and travelled by city bus to attend school in another.

[2] Christine Sivell-Ferri et al., *The Four Circles of Hollow Water*, Aboriginal Corrections Policy Unit, Report APC-15-CA (1997), 127; http://www.eric.ed.gov/ERICDocs/data/ericdocs2sql/content_storage_01/0000019b/80/16/b3/dd.pdf.

[3] R. Pierce Beaver, *The Native American Christian Community: A Directory of Indian, Aleut and Eskimo Churches* (Monrovia, CA: MARC, 1979), 31, 46; quoted in Richard Twiss, *One Church Many Tribes* (Ventura, CA: Regal Books, 2000), 26.

[4] Prime Minister Stephen Harper, "Prime Minister Harper offers full apology on behalf of Canadians for the Indian Residential Schools system"; http://www.pm.gc.ca/eng/media.asp?id=2149.

About the author

Deborah Froese works for Mennonite Church Canada as director of News Services and PrayerNet coordinator. A member of First Mennonite Church of Winnipeg, she serves on the newsletter editorial committee and leads the grade 9–12 Sunday school class. She has written a picture book, *The Wise Washerman* (New York: Hyperion Press, 1994), illustrated by Wang Kui; and a young adult novel, *Out of the Fire* (Toronto: Sumach Press, 2001).

Diversity: Blessing, curse, or call to communion?
A reflection on the Mennonite World Conference experience

Larry Miller

The first global Anabaptist-Mennonite family portrait, taken in June 1925 at the initial Mennonite World Conference gathering (Basel/Zurich, Switzerland), reveals precious little diversity. The photograph shows a group that is uniform in race (white), culture (white shirts), age (very mature), gender (dominantly male), and—one surmises—wealth.[1] The caption reveals another powerful dimension of homogeneity: it is written in German, the sole language of the first Mennonite World Conference assembly.

Many kinds of diversity characterize the Mennonite World Conference community. But of all the varieties of diversity, MWC lifts up diversity of gifts as foundational and primary for growth in communion.

The most recent family photos, snapped from all angles in July 2009 (Asunción, Paraguay), explode with colour.[2] MWC's fifteenth world assembly drew 6,200 participants from 63 nations; nearly 700 of them had already participated in the energy-packed Global Youth Summit held just a few kilometres down the road. While participants did not come from every tribe on earth, they did represent many ethnic and cultural groups, levels of wealth—from the poorest in the land to the richest—and languages. For worship services, the "platform language" was Spanish; those who spoke other languages listened through headsets to interpreters speaking French, German, English, Portuguese, Nivaclé, or Enlhet.

"Are you Mennonite?" a policeman asked Ditrich Pana as he approached the huge white church where Anabaptists from around the world were gathering. In Paraguay, Mennonites are known as fair-skinned, German-speaking farmers and ranchers who live in isolated colonies and produce much of the country's cheese. Pana, an Enlhet, does not fit that profile; he belongs to an indigenous group.

Pana, member of the world assembly's national organizing committee and a radio evangelist, answered his uninformed uniformed questioner: "Through the Holy Spirit, yes, I am a Mennonite." In a sermon to the assembly, Pana went a step further in explaining his identity: "This gathering unites us with glad hearts," he said. "We belong to each other and to [God] this week as sisters and brothers and friends."[3]

Diversity: More blessing than curse

For most who experience it in the context of Mennonite World Conference—whether in global assembly or less dramatically but more substantially in enduring international relationships within the MWC community of churches—diversity carries a positive value: it is the work of the Spirit and a joyous blessing to the family. Multifaceted diversity in the global church usually feels exciting, renewing, life giving. It is received as the future of the church breaking into the present patterns of our emotions, our spirits, our lives, our missions, our understandings of God's creative work in and through the church.

Yet from the beginning diversity hidden in the Mennonite World Conference picture posed problems. The record of the first assembly indicates that divergence of theological convictions among the approximately one hundred participants, including the group of fifteen official delegates from five nations,[4] was sufficient to impede agreement on the future of the conference. Already prior to the event, Harold S. Bender had written to Christian Neff, German Mennonite leader and convener of the first three assemblies, to say that it "seems that our community will not officially take part in the common celebration and festival in Zurich or Basel. They especially take exception to the idea of a Mennonite World Union in which believing and unbelieving Mennonites would be united."[5] And, added Bender, who would later become a main organizer of four MWC assemblies, "many of our preachers are on principle against any festival and celebration."

More recently, diversity has fractured unity and limited participation in Mennonite World Conference. Subsequent to the MWC executive secretary's participation in the Day of Prayer for Peace in the World, convened by Pope John Paul II in October 1986 (Assisi, Italy), one European conference dropped membership in

Mennonite World Conference. A few years later, following MWC's twelfth global assembly in July 1990 (Winnipeg, Canada), one South American conference withdrew from membership on the conviction that MWC leaders had not spoken clearly enough at that gathering in opposition to homosexual practice as sin. Other Anabaptist-related groups have not joined MWC or participated in MWC activities because of concerns about "union" with Mennonites perceived as "unbelieving" or inadequately believing.

In the meantime, as the Anabaptist-related majority moved to the global South,[6] diversity between and within MWC member churches continued to increase, not only ethnically, culturally, linguistically, and theologically, but also economically. Disparity of wealth is one of the most basic obstacles to mutual blessing in the Anabaptist-Mennonite family of faith. Usually this diversity is barely visible in the global church; it can be ignored because oceans separate our daily lives. But economic inequality encroaches destructively on relationships when northern benefactors make decisions about funding that eliminate initiatives southerners deem necessary to the life or mission of their churches—just as it does when southerners see northerners as the "sugar daddies" of the family of faith. And when we find ourselves worshiping together by day in global assembly while lodged at night in a pattern resembling economic apartheid—because of differences in comfort criteria and purchasing power—our diversity can feel like a curse on the family.

Diversity in the global church is usually received as the future of the church breaking into the present patterns of our emotions, our spirits, our lives, our missions, our understandings of God's creative work in and through the church.

Indeed, by the late twentieth century, some were saying that the diversification of the Anabaptist-Mennonite movement had created so much distance between us that we were no longer family:

> *Very little connects one place with the other; little do the people know of one another. A Mennonite Indian in the Chaco and a Mennonite businessman in Krefeld, and a Mennonite woman in Siberia—worlds separate them.*

> *Perhaps they refer back to a mutual confessional source, especially to their nominal patron Menno Simons of Witmarsum. But what they believe and how they believe separate them no less from each other than from Catholics, Lutherans, and Mennonites in Europe and North America. The "worldwide brotherhood" is an illusion.*[7]

But other equally eloquent voices articulated an altogether different perspective on the value of diversity for contemporary Anabaptist-related Christians.

> *I think the first time I [an American] was struck by my great wealth was in Luanda, Angola in 1999. It was a Sunday morning in November. . . . I came before the congregation to give words of greeting, . . . [and] I recall struggling to decide what words I should offer them—this group about whom I knew so little and with whom I obviously had so little in common. I knew nothing of their theology, as they knew nothing of mine. I knew nothing of their joys, their sufferings, or their daily lives. Yet these were people who understood themselves to be part of a family of which I, too, considered myself a part. How could this be? What did it mean? As I stood looking over all those beautifully different faces, I was overcome by one thought: What wealth! What incredible, lovely riches! And how terrible it would be not to be related to them!*[8]

How impoverishing it would be not to be related to those so different from us! By the beginning of the twenty-first century, this version of a prosperity gospel had become the dominant perspective on diversity within MWC. Our diversity is our wealth, a mark of God's blessing—and a call to relationship.

Diversity: A call to communion

From 2001 to 2003, an MWC International Planning Commission gathered information from member churches around the world. What do you say about the future of MWC? the commission asked. What principles should shape MWC activities and structures in the years ahead? Of the ten main conclusions, one reports the desire of most MWC members—national churches and conferences—to remain autonomous: "The scope of authority of MWC

should not supersede the autonomy of any member church" (conclusion 10). While this insistence on autonomy may be rooted in established Mennonite and Brethren in Christ ecclesiology, it no doubt also reflects concern about how to deal with certain varieties of diversity: "Some members fear that theological differences among members will not be taken seriously and others fear the differences will be divisive" (conclusion 9).

At the same time, however, it was evident that members not only "recognize and appreciate the cultural diversity embodied in the MWC family" (conclusion 8) but also hear in this diversity a call to closer relationship: "People desire more relationships and identity at global and regional levels" (conclusion 2). "Solidarity (relationships) is perceived as essential for effective witness and development (growth, survival) of the Anabaptist Christian community at local and international levels" (conclusion 3). "Churches around the world see themselves as linked in equality and reciprocity, no longer as parent-child" (conclusion 7). In sum, the message to MWC from its members was dual: within the complexities of diversity, you must both respect the autonomy of the national churches and provide paths beyond autonomy into global ecclesial relationships. The question was how to do so.

Beyond autonomy

With the adoption of a new MWC vision statement in August 2003 (Bulawayo, Zimbabwe), rooted in the conversations between the International Planning Commission and the member churches, MWC interpreted the multiple diversities within itself not only as a call to relationship but, more pointedly, as a call to communion: "Mennonite World Conference is called to be a communion (*Koinonia*) of Anabaptist-related churches linked to one another in a worldwide community of faith for fellowship, worship, service, and witness."

The mission statement adopted at the same time expanded on the vision. "Mennonite World Conference exists to (1) be a global community of faith in the Anabaptist tradition, (2) facilitate relationships between Anabaptist-related churches worldwide, and (3) relate to other Christian world communions and organizations."

The call to be a communion and a global community of faith must be realized, as already underlined, within the context of

relationships between autonomous churches. MWC recognizes that diversity in the Anabaptist-Mennonite family is enshrined in structures of autonomy. This was the case in all MWC constitutions prior to the adoption of the communion vision, and it remains the case in the new constitution, inspired by this vision and adopted in July 2009 (Asunción, Paraguay): MWC member churches are churches "organized as an autonomous national or transnational Mennonite, Brethren in Christ or other Anabaptist-related church for at least five years" (MWC constitution, article 2).

The same article of the same constitution, however, establishes affirmation of the communion vision and the accompanying mission statement as a criterion of membership. In other words, with their membership in the MWC community, autonomous churches commit themselves to move beyond autonomy into communion with other members of the diverse body.

How can MWC enable fuller communion between diverse—and sometimes divergent—members who remain autonomous? How can members of a body marked by diversity move from autonomy to autonomy-in-communion? Three key practices through which MWC seeks to develop communion while respecting autonomy are sharing gifts, stating convictions, and coming to consensus.

Sharing gifts

Many kinds of diversity characterize the MWC community: diversity of nationality, ethnicity, culture, language, gender, wealth, worship, theology, and more. But of all the varieties of diversity, MWC lifts up diversity of gifts as foundational and primary for growth in communion. On becoming members of Mennonite World Conference, churches make a commitment to "share gifts in the MWC community and the wider body of Christ" (MWC constitution, article 2).

Biblical perspectives (Rom. 12 and 1 Cor. 12, for example) undergird the primacy of sharing gifts in the body of Christ. So does experience in MWC. "We have looked upon many congregations and church groups in every continent. . . . We have seen and heard of many kinds of gifts. . . . But nowhere have we spotted an un-gifted person. This is the tie that binds us—our given-

ness, and our invitation to participate in God's purpose through sharing of our unimaginable diversity of gifts."[9]

If all gifts come from God, and if all gifts are given for the common good of the body, then it is through discerning and sharing these gifts that communion is incarnated; it is given form and substance. If every member of the body has received a gift that is needed by the whole body, every member must be included in the processes of sharing gifts in order for us to reach full communion. Inclusiveness in this perspective is communion where every member's gifts are recognized, received, and released to shape the common life and mission of the body.

How can MWC enable fuller communion between diverse—and sometimes divergent—members who remain autonomous? How can members of a body marked by diversity move from autonomy to autonomy-in-communion?

The idea of including all members of the diverse global communion in sharing gifts is nearly utopian. Obstacles to sharing gifts fully are many: economic differences; lack of administrative capacity; centralized decision making; lack of broad vision; fear of cultural, racial, gender, theological, and other differences; the notion that some gifts are more valuable than others; greed.[10]

We'll need countless initiatives in order to take even a few small steps in the right direction. Indeed, the vision of fuller communion through sharing our gifts has inspired and shaped most MWC actions undertaken since the mid-1990s and maintained for shorter or longer periods of time: as needs arise, gifts are discerned, and means of sharing are available. The list is long and constantly changing: World Fellowship Sunday, Global Church Sharing Fund, Global Mennonite History project, Global Anabaptist-Mennonite Shelf of Literature, Global Gift Sharing project, Global Anabaptist Peace and Justice Network, Connecting Theological Educators on Five Continents, Jerusalem Seminar for Bible Teachers from the Global South, women theologians networks in Africa and Latin America, Young Anabaptist-Mennonite Exchange Network (YAMEN!), AMIGOS youth network, Francophone Network, Koinonia Delegations, Global Anabaptist Deacons and the Deacons Commission, the Global Mission Fellowship and the Mission Commission, the Faith and Life Council/Commission, the Peace Council/Commission, *Courier*/

Correo/Courrier—the Anabaptist-Mennonite world's only three-language quarterly publication. Even the periodic global assemblies, for which MWC is best known, and the Global Youth Summit can be understood as face-to-face occasions for gift exchanges in the global community. And the dialogues with other Christian world communions have proceeded in a spirit of giving and receiving gifts in the wider body of Christ.

Stating convictions

As sharing gifts gained momentum in the MWC community, so did consideration of common convictions. Even though member churches edged closer to one another through conversation and gift exchanges, they remained not only fully autonomous but also without a shared confessional statement. But building relationships by sharing gifts invites grounding relationships by sharing convictions. As churches learned to know one another better, opening themselves to mutual counsel and accountability, articulating shared convictions became not only more important but also more feasible.

Do the autonomous MWC member churches share basic convictions? In order to answer that question, MWC set out in the mid-1990s to discover what beliefs the members hold in common. A task force gathered and compared confessions of faith from member churches. Through a questionnaire it received additional information on the variety of ways the churches answer in their own contexts the question of what it means to be Anabaptist today.

According to the report presented to the MWC councils (General Council, Faith and Life Council) in January 1997 (Calcutta, India), while "this work represents only the beginning of a process, we can affirm that Mennonite and Brethren in Christ churches around the world, though diverse, have much in common. Even though they can no longer identify themselves in ethnic terms, Mennonites and Brethren in Christ share a common history of faith and common understanding of the nature of the church."[11]

On the basis of this initial finding of meaningful confessional commonality, MWC undertook a conversational process to articulate a brief statement of "shared convictions." The first step

was a study in the MWC councils (July 2000, Guatemala) of "core convictions" sixteenth-century Anabaptists held in common across their theological diversity.[12] During the next several years, member churches drafted short statements summarizing their own core convictions. An MWC-appointed global group of seven individuals reviewed these statements, then drafted a short, simply formulated statement of shared core convictions of member churches. In their next meetings (August 2003, Zimbabwe), the MWC councils digested, discussed, and modified this document. This second draft statement of shared convictions was available for review in and response by member churches for two years.

On the basis of the responses, the global writing group prepared draft three of the statement for consideration by the member church delegates gathered in council for a final decision (March 2006, USA). By the end of the Pasadena meetings, all delegates of all member churches present had moved together through a series of inspired and inspiring moments into a joyful consensus on a statement of shared convictions.

As churches learned to know one another better, opening themselves to mutual counsel and accountability, articulating shared convictions became not only more important but also more feasible.

Though the statement carries no established authority within the jurisdiction of any MWC member church, positive reception of it has been unexpectedly broad in a relatively short period of time. National churches and local churches on all continents—significantly different from one another theologically and in many other ways—have chosen to use these shared convictions in their own lives and witness.

Still more surprisingly, several church-related institutions have followed suit. Mennonite Central Committee's new "vision and purpose" statement, adopted in 2009, includes the entire "Shared Convictions" statement. In April 2010 members of Mennonite Savings and Credit Union (Ontario, Canada), meeting in Annual General Meeting, will vote on a change in by-laws redefining the credit union's "membership bond." The initiative includes a proposal to ask new members to endorse MWC's statement of shared convictions, thus expressing their agreement "to be open to supporting our credit union and fellow members by sharing in the journey as we live this statement in our daily lives."[13]

Further evidence of the positive reception of "Shared Convictions" is provided by the global interest manifested in the book MWC commissioned to explore these convictions—their biblical rooting, their historical and theological background, and how they might be lived in the world today.[14]

It seems fair to assume that this phenomenon of reception both reveals and extends communion of conviction in the MWC community of churches.

Coming to consensus

When MWC members accepted the communion vision statement, they also changed MWC's mode of decision making. They set aside majority rule, the adversarial approach to decision making developed in Western democratic societies, in order to seek the common mind of the community through a process of coming to consensus. A well-defined and well-led consensus method of decision making, the members agreed, "can enhance the participation of all members in meetings, provide a collaborative and harmonious context for making decisions, and enable representatives to discern together the will of God (Eph. 5:17) for the church and for MWC."[15]

Mennonite World Conference's "Guidelines for Making Decisions by Consensus" identify six reasons for this approach to decision making in a diverse ecclesial community seeking fuller communion of its members.

- Coming to agreement through honest, respectful discussion is a widely understood and accepted procedure around the world, including in traditional and indigenous cultures.
- Rather than adversarial debate, it encourages consultation, exploration, questioning, and prayerful reflection.
- It values and seeks to utilize the experience and perspective of all members.
- It seeks to hear, understand, and respect all concerns and points of view.
- It encourages participation by all churches in shaping the decision.
- It facilitates churches learning from one another and deepening their communion with one another.

With a modest stretch of theological imagination, one might suggest that coming to consensus within the global MWC community not only deepens communion between the members but also constitutes participation in the catholicity of the church universal. This hypothesis speaks, in turn, to the question of the potential scope and authority of MWC decisions.

Catholicity is realized in part "whenever and wherever everyone concerned converses about everything they do, and should believe and do, as they respond to the Lord who sent them to all nations with all that he had taught them."[16] In other words and to contextualize, no issue, no doctrine, and no practice is excluded from consideration in the MWC General Council. No consensus reached by the council—if received under the Lordship of Christ and enabled by the Spirit—is without potential authority as the members of the council carry out their delegated responsibilities on behalf of and within their national churches composed of local churches.

As consensus in accordance with the will of God grows in all directions, the church becomes more radically catholic, both in extension around the world and in fullness of the faith.

But to have authority beyond the life of MWC, any conclusion reached in the global council must be offered to the member churches for further discernment and consensus. To be fully catholic, this process of widening the consensus must involve the discernment not only of those in leadership of the member churches but also of the entire diverse people of God who bear responsibility for the faith and work of the churches in all places. As consensus in accordance with the will of God grows in all directions, the church becomes more radically catholic, both in extension around the world and in fullness of the faith.

Is the growing global reception of MWC's "Shared Convictions" statement an example of how radical catholicity works in the diversity of the church universal? To make that claim would be presumptuous and premature. But a closer look at this phenomenon at some point may provide insight on what kind of process of continually widening a consensus can lead nonviolently beyond autonomy into communion in diversity.

Notes

[1] Because Swiss authorities had refused them entry into the country, no representatives of Russian Mennonites, perhaps the poorest Mennonites of that era, were present.
[2] Enjoy the Paraguay 2009 Photo Gallery at www.mwc-cmm.org/en15/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=280&Itemid=154.
[3] Reported by Paul Schrag, "From every tribe: the global church unites," *Courier* 24, no. 3–4 (2009), 2.
[4] France (one delegate), Germany (seven delegates), the Netherlands (four delegates), USA (one delegate), Switzerland (two delegates).
[5] Handwritten letter from Harold S. Bender to Christian Neff, 14 December 1924 (archived in the Christian Neff files, Mennonitischer Geschichtsverein, Bolanden-Weierhof, Germany).
[6] Mennonite World Conference announced in 1994 that for first time in Mennonite and Brethren in Christ history, more baptized members lived in Africa, Asia, and Latin America than in Europe and North America. Today, 64 percent of baptized members live in Africa, Asia, and Latin America.
[7] Hans-Jürgen Goertz, "From the edge to the center," in *Mennonite World Conference Handbook: Mennonites in Global Witness*, ed. Dieter Götz Lichdi (Carol Stream, IL: Mennonite World Conference, 1990), 287.
[8] Tim Lind, in *Sharing Gifts in the Global Family of Faith: One Church's Experiment*, by Pakisa K. Tshimika and Tim Lind (Intercourse, PA: Good Books, 2003); 15–16; published in cooperation with Mennonite World Conference.
[9] Ibid., 16–17.
[10] See ibid., 74–87.
[11] Rainer Burkart, "Exploring Anabaptist-Mennonite Faith and Practice: Faith and Life Council Meeting in Calcutta," *Courier* 12, no. 4 (1997), 7.
[12] C. Arnold Snyder led the study, based on his articles commissioned by MWC and published initially in *Courier* 13, no. 1–3 (1998), under the title "Anabaptist Seed, Worldwide Growth: The Historical Core of Anabaptist-Mennonite Identity," then as *From Anabaptist Seed: The Historical Core of Anabaptist-Related Identity* (Kitchener, ON: Pandora Press; Scottdale, PA: Herald Press, 1999).
[13] From proposal attached to a letter to Mennonite Savings and Credit Union members from Nick Driedger, CEO; no date (late 2009).
[14] Alfred Neufeld, *What We Believe Together: Exploring the "Shared Convictions" of Anabaptist-Related Churches* (Intercourse, PA: Good Books, 2007); commissioned by and published in cooperation with Mennonite World Conference.
[15] From the document "Mennonite World Conference Guidelines for Making Decisions by Consensus," available from MWC.
[16] John Howard Yoder, "Catholicity in Search of Location," in *The Royal Priesthood: Essays Ecclesiological and Ecumenical* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1994), 319.

About the author

Larry Miller (Strasbourg, France) has been general secretary of Mennonite World Conference since July 1990. He is a member of Église Évangélique Mennonite de Strasbourg. He and Eleanor enjoy their three grand children and three grandchildren.

Unity and diversity in the canon
Implications for the church

Loren L. Johns

The Bible itself is a lesson in unity and diversity that the church would do well to learn. It is a collection of many different kinds of documents written by many different persons over more than 1,000 years. It consists of legal material, love poetry, wisdom sayings, historical narrative, teachings, letters, prophecies, worship material, parodies, and many other types of material. Even works of the same genre betray remarkably different interests (compare Amos with Jonah or Zechariah).

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The recognition of diversity within the scriptures is not new. In 1864, German Protestant Johann Peter Lange included, in the introduction to his commentary on Genesis, sections entitled, "Import of the Unity of the Bible in Its Diversity" and "The Riches of the Scriptures in Their Endless Diversity." Lange probably goes a bit too far when he says,

> *The records of Revelation, especially of the Old Testament Revelation, or the sacred writings, notwithstanding their endless diversity, as to authors, time, form, language, constitute one Holy Scripture perfectly consistent with itself, and perfectly distinct from all other writings; yet entering into such a relation and interchange with them as to manifest as perfect a unity of spirit as if they had been written by one pen, sprung from one fundamental thought, in one year, in a single moment.*[1]

Schooled in unity

The church has consistently emphasized the unity of scripture. Many of us grew up learning that the whole Bible says more or less

the same thing in different ways. Proverbs 26:5 says, "Answer fools according to their folly," and the verse just before it says, "Do not answer fools according to their folly." As a child I learned that this meant that one should answer *some* fools according to their folly, but not others.

Examples of diversity within the canon

There are so many examples of diversity in the Bible that only a couple of examples must suffice. Mark 1:9 says in a rather matter-of-fact way that Jesus was baptized by John in the Jordan. Matthew 3:14 reports that when Jesus approached John for baptism, "John would have prevented him, saying, 'I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?'" Why the difference? Some would say that Matthew is supplying additional information that Mark thought unnecessary to include. Others suggest that since John's baptism was a "baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins" (Mark 1:4), the fact that Jesus was baptized by John could have given the wrong impression that Jesus needed such repentance and forgiveness. In order to avoid giving that wrong impression, Matthew added or supplied the additional words. While it may well not have been *factually* or *historically* true that John articulated this objection, his words are nevertheless true at a deeper, more important level. (It appears that biblical writers did not always keep in mind the odd modern rule that only what is factual can be true.)

It appears that biblical writers did not always keep in mind the odd modern rule that only what is factual can be true.

The Bible exhibits considerable diversity in its internal conversation about what qualifies a person as being acceptable to God. For instance, Deuteronomy 23 identifies some of the community boundaries for the Israelites. Barred from the "assembly of the LORD" are those with missing or crushed genitalia (v. 1), those born of an illicit union (v. 2), Moabites and Ammonites (vv. 3–6), and Edomites (vv. 7–8). The second and third categories of people are barred from the assembly "even to the tenth generation" (vv. 2, 3), though Edomites of the third generation are allowed (v. 8). Such boundary setting seems prejudicial and offensive in our day.

When the book of Moses was read to the people in the post-exilic era, Deuteronomy 23:3–6 sparked the conscience of the

people with regard to the presence of foreigners in their midst—much of it due to intermarriage. Many of the Israelites responded to the reading of Deuteronomy by segregating along ethnic and national lines (Neh. 13:3). Nehemiah himself was incensed at how things had gotten out of hand through intermarriage. He went so far as to curse, beat, and pull out the hair of those Israelite men who had married foreign wives (Neh. 13:25).

Nehemiah's reading of Deuteronomy 23 was not the only one around. Some unknown Israelite challenged his reading by writing a beautiful love tale about how one particular foreign Moabite woman (Ruth) displayed the kind of covenant loyalty (*hesed* in Hebrew) to which Israelites aspired. Her covenant loyalty is clearly blessed by God in the text, resulting in a marriage with Boaz that conformed impeccably to the legal standards of the *go'el* (kinsman-redeemer). And just in case the reader missed the import of this story, the writer notes subtly at the end of the book that Ruth, this Moabite foreigner, was the great grandmother of King David (Ruth 4:17–21). If Deuteronomy 23 had been taken at face value, this would have disqualified from the LORD's assembly many of the kings of Judah!

The book of Ruth is not the only participant in this conversation with Deuteronomy. The third part of Isaiah (chapters 56–66) is usually considered to be postexilic, probably a little earlier than Ezra and Nehemiah. The author begins this part of Isaiah with what can only be a (re)reading of or response to Deuteronomy. He begins with his bottom line, the central message of Trito-Isaiah: "Maintain justice, and do what is right, for soon my salvation will come, and my deliverance be revealed" (Isa. 56:1). He then pronounces a blessing on those who keep the Sabbath and do what is right (v. 2). Following this, he responds to Deuteronomy 23: "Do not let the foreigner joined to the LORD say, 'The LORD will surely separate me from his people' [compare Deut. 23:3–8]; and do not let the eunuch say, 'I am just a dry tree'" [compare Deut. 23:1–2] (Isa. 56:3; compare also vv. 5–8). Here the author of Trito-Isaiah maintains that it is the *life of faithfulness* that counts with God, not how or in what circumstances one was born.

Another example of diversity in the Bible comes in the conversations about how one can and should understand who God is. At

the heart of the biblical tradition is the revelation to Moses on Mt. Sinai, when the Lord passed before Moses and proclaimed,

> *The LORD, the LORD,*
> *a God merciful and gracious,*
> *slow to anger,*
> *and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness,*
> *keeping steadfast love for the thousandth generation,*
> *forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin,*
> *yet by no means clearing the guilty,*
> *but visiting the iniquity of the parents*
> *upon the children*
> *and the children's children,*
> *to the third and the fourth generation. (Exod. 34:6–7)*

But what, exactly, does "slow to anger" mean? Nahum emphasizes that even though the LORD is "slow to anger," God "will by no means clear the guilty" (Nah. 1:3b; compare Exod. 34:7). Why? Because God is "jealous and avenging . . .; the LORD takes vengeance on his adversaries and rages against his enemies. The LORD is slow to anger but great in power" (Nah. 1:2–3a). In particular, this means that Ninevites should not expect God to go easy on them.

Nineveh was the capital of the Assyrian kingdom. Assyria was a powerful and hated nation. The Assyrians had conquered the northern ten tribes of Israel in 722 BCE and forcibly resettled many of its leading citizens in different parts of the Assyrian Empire, never to return. Their army was notorious for its ferocious violence and cruelty to the citizens of other lands. So it is no surprise that the prophet Nahum burned with rage against Nineveh and imagined God burning with rage right along with him:

> *Who can stand before his indignation?*
> *Who can endure the heat of his anger?*
> *His wrath is poured out like fire,*
> *and by him the rocks are broken in pieces. (Nah. 1:6)*
> *There is no assuaging your hurt,*
> *your wound is mortal.*
> *All who hear the news about you*
> *clap their hands over you.*

For who has ever escaped
your endless cruelty? (Nah. 3:19)

The prophet Jonah shared Nahum's attitude. That is why, when God called Jonah to prophesy to Nineveh, he ran the other way (Jon. 1:2–3; 4:2). But the *author* of Jonah gently prods the *character* of Jonah to rethink his attitude:

> *And the LORD said, "Is it right for you to be angry?" [Jon. 4:4]. . . . God said to Jonah, "Is it right for you to be angry about the bush?" [Jon. 4:9]. Then the LORD said, "You are concerned about the bush, for which you did not labor and which you did not grow; it came into being in a night and perished in a night. And should I not be concerned about Nineveh, that great city, in which there are more than a hundred and twenty thousand persons who do not know their right hand from their left, and also many animals?" [Jon. 4:10–11].*

Here we see God and the *author* of Jonah gently—and a little humorously—urging Jonah the prophet to rethink his attitudes and maybe to take on himself something of the character of God, who, *unlike Jonah the character*, is "gracious . . . and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love, and ready to relent from punishing" (Jon. 4:2).

The categories of unity and diversity are limited in their capacity to describe the biblical witness. Unity and diversity are not only binary options. One can as well talk about the unity *within* the diversity, or the diversity within the unity.

Canonical unity

The categories of unity and diversity are limited in their capacity to describe the biblical witness. They certainly do not represent the only way to conceptualize the breadth and character of the biblical witness—and perhaps not even the best way. Unity and diversity are not only binary options, as if one could ask whether the Bible exhibits unity or diversity on a given topic. One can as well talk about the unity *within* the diversity, or the diversity within the unity. Unity and diversity can be considered as two points along a continuum, both of which may appear between the extremes of unanimity and

chaos. But even the concept of a continuum here may be too simplistic, since unity and diversity can be thought of as overlapping planes.

In the field of Old Testament theology, questions about the unity of Old Testament theology predominated in the late twentieth century. Walter Eichrodt claimed that covenant defines the center that unifies the Old Testament amid all its diversity, even though the wisdom literature never fit the category well and therefore had to be marginalized theologically in order to make the category work. Others claimed that salvation history—the ever-changing story of God's saving acts in history—provides the glue that unifies the Old Testament. However, increasing recognition of the diversity of the theologies within the Old Testament has increasingly led interpreters of the Hebrew Bible to appreciate the significant diversity within the Old Testament.

Is postmodernism and the diversity it celebrates something we should embrace and celebrate, or are they cause for concern? Yes: both. Diversity is beautiful only if some unifying factor provides a sense of order in all the chaos.

Theological implications of unity and diversity

The theological implications of unity and diversity within the canon have not been obvious. The quotation by Johann Peter Lange at the beginning of this article reflects the impulse of many Protestants: Whatever the realities and expressions of diversity that we see within scripture, it is important to recognize and demonstrate the unity that exists within the canon, in order to defend its authority. The *Evangelical Dictionary of Biblical Theology* illustrates this concern: "The focus of skepticism in relation to Scripture as a unified divine revelation has been on what it views as irreconcilable diversity within the phenomena of the biblical text."[2] The dictionary exposes its defensive posture with regard to diversity in the following comment: "If Scripture is viewed for what it claims to be, reasonable explanations for diversity can usually be provided."[3] In other words, diversity is a problem for which Christians must account.

A remarkably different take on diversity is expressed in so-called cultural interpretation of the Bible. Eurocentric interpretation

of the Bible has been heavily influenced by the Enlightenment and its emphasis on rationalism. The Enlightenment and the modernism that derived from it taught us that one can and should rise above one's own social and cultural location in biblical interpretation.[4] In modernist perspective, social location can only be a negative influence in the study and interpretation of scripture. The task of the biblical interpreter is to rise above culture in order to neutralize it and eliminate it as an influence in interpretation. The assumption here is that interpretation is a "controlled" enterprise—more science than art—and that there is only one correct interpretation of a passage. Of course, one needs to be skilled in the sciences of (Western!) scholarship in order to hope to interpret anything correctly. In (postmodern) retrospect, this belief system looks amazingly arrogant and epistemologically optimistic. Ada María Isasi-Díaz says it well: "Most of the time what is considered objectivity is the subjectivity of dominant groups who can impose their understandings on others."[5]

What—if anything—unifies the Bible in all its wonderful diversity? From a human perspective, I am not sure that anything adequately qualifies. But from a divine perspective, *God* is what unifies scripture.

As Chris Wright puts it, "Postmodernity celebrates diversity of culture, whereas modernity pushes for uniformity and homogenization of human life into secular, scientific, and materialistic categories."[6] So, is postmodernism and the diversity it celebrates something we should embrace and celebrate, or are they cause for concern?

The answer is probably yes: both. There is a difference between diversity and irreconcilable difference.[7] Diversity is beautiful only if some unifying factor provides a sense of order in all the chaos. As R. S. Sugirtharajah has noted, much changed between the publication of the first (1991) and third (2006) editions of his book *Voices from the Margins*. Although the first edition celebrated the liberation of voices from the margins, recent years have seen "the atomization of the discipline and the fragmentation of audiences and readership."[8] Furthermore, the empowerment of voices from the margins has made it possible for "extreme fundamentalists" to "project a God who unleashes retaliation," a mean-spirited God who acts on behalf of the powerful.[9]

So, what—if anything—unifies the Bible in all its wonderful diversity? Many have been the attempts to answer this question. From a human perspective, I am not sure that anything adequately qualifies. But from a divine perspective, it seems to me that *God* is what unifies scripture, especially its witness to Jesus.[10] As James Dunn has noted, such a unifying center may seem to some to be too little. However, in the end "the unifying element of Jesus himself is not finally reducible to some precise formula."[11] God must be God. "To think that we somehow can finally pin down or determine the unity and therefore strictly control or legislate the diversity is the modern sin against the Holy Spirit."[12]

God created the universe in order to enjoy its beauty in all its marvelous diversity. The book of Revelation says as much when it repeatedly emphasizes the diversity of God's creation united in praise.

God's celebration of diversity

When God created the universe, God created it with a remarkable diversity. We are only beginning to catch a glimpse of that diversity as we continue to learn about new species in our environment, an environment that in all its beauty, breadth, and diversity inspires awe and praise to the Creator. Similarly, images of galaxies billions of light years away taken by the Hubble telescope inspire awe and wonder in the light of God's majesty.

Augustine is sometimes credited with inspiring the thought behind the expression that became famous in the Westminster Confession: humanity's chief purpose is to glorify God and enjoy God forever. God created the universe in order to enjoy its beauty in all its marvelous diversity.

The book of Revelation says as much when it repeatedly emphasizes the diversity of God's creation united in praise of the one seated on the throne and of the Lamb. At the very moment that the Lamb is revealed as the key to humanity's redemption in the dramatic scene in Revelation 5, we read,

> *"You are worthy to take the scroll and to open its seals,*
> *for you were slaughtered and by your blood you ransomed*
> *for God*
> *saints* ***from every tribe and language and people***
> ***and nation;***

you have made them to be a kingdom and priests serving
our God,
and they will reign on earth." [Rev 5:9b–10; my emphasis]

This litany of diversity—"every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages"—is repeated in 7:9; 11:9; 13:7; and 14:6 (and with slight variations in 10:11; 15:4; 17:15). The diverse fruits from the tree of life are unified in their purpose: to bring healing to the nations (22:2).

In the days before the end of apartheid in South Africa, Archbishop Desmond Tutu said,

> *I will always have a lump in my throat when I think of the children at St. Mary's [Cathedral in Johannesburg], pointers to what can be if our society would become sane and normal. Here were children of all races playing, praying, learning and even fighting together, almost uniquely in South Africa. And as I have knelt in the Dean's stall at the superb 9:30 High Mass, with incense, bells and everything, watching a multi-racial crowd file up to the altar rails to be communicated, the one bread and the one cup given by a mixed team of clergy and lay ministers, with a multi-racial choir, servers and sidesmen—all this in apartheid-mad South Africa—then tears sometimes streamed down my cheeks, tears of joy that it could be that indeed Jesus Christ had broken down the wall of partition and here were the first fruits of the eschatological community right in front of my eyes, enacting the message in several languages on the noticeboard outside that this is a house of prayer for peoples of all races who are welcome at all times.*
>
> *St. Mary's has made me believe the vision of St. John the Divine: "After this I looked and saw a vast throng, which no one could count, from every nation, of all tribes, peoples, and languages, standing in front of the throne and before the Lamb. They were robed in white and had palms in their hands, and they shouted together: 'Victory to our God who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb!'" (Revelation 7:9).*[13]

Notes

[1] Johann Peter Lange, *Genesis*, Commentary on the Holy Scriptures (1864; repr. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1950), 3–4.
[2] Gary T. Meadors, "Scripture, Unity and Diversity of," in *Evangelical Dictionary of Biblical Theology*, ed. Walter A. Elwell (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1996), 717.
[3] Ibid.
[4] I am using *social location* and *cultural location* synonymously to refer to the ways we are all subconsciously determined to some degree by the social environment and cultures in which we grew up and in which we live. This "determination" is most dangerous when it is either unacknowledged or denied.
[5] Ada María Isasi-Díaz, "'By the Rivers of Babylon': Exile as a Way of Life," in *Reading from This Place: Social Location and Biblical Interpretation in Global Perspective*, ed. Fernando F. Segovia and Mary Ann Tolbert (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995), 151.
[6] Chris Wright, "Christ and the Mosaic of Pluralisms: Challenges to Evangelical Missiology in the 21st Century," *Evangelical Review of Theology* 24, no. 3 (July 2000): 211.
[7] See James D. G. Dunn, *Unity and Diversity in the New Testament: An Inquiry into the Character of Earliest Christianity*, 3rd ed. (1977; repr. London: SCM Press, 2006), xxvi.
[8] R. S. Sugirtharajah, ed., *Voices from the Margin: Interpreting the Bible in the Third World*, 3rd ed. (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2006), 4.
[9] Ibid., 3.
[10] Dunn, *Unity and Diversity in the New Testament*, esp. pp. 403–8.
[11] Ibid., xxx.
[12] Ibid.
[13] Desmond Mpilo Tutu, *Hope and Suffering: Sermons and Speeches*, ed. John Webster, comp. Mothobi Mutloatse (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1984), 134–36.

About the author

Loren L. Johns is associate professor of New Testament at Associated Mennonite Biblical Seminary, Elkhart, Indiana, where he loves teaching the Bible. He also serves as director of the MDiv program at AMBS, as New Testament editor of the Believers Church Bible Commentary, and as assistant editor of the Princeton Theological Seminary Dead Sea Scrolls Project.

Sanctuary: Where we maintain the unity of the Spirit

Nancy Kauffmann

In Ephesians 4:1–3 Paul implores the Gentiles at Ephesus to demonstrate "all humility and gentleness . . ., making every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace." Two thousand years later, we love the words but struggle to put them into practice when the current conflict happens to be one we're dead certain we're right about.

Paul implored the Ephesians to make every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. We love the words but struggle to put them into practice when the current conflict is one we're certain we're right about.

Like other denominations, the Mennonite church always has had and always will have conflicts. Two have dominated in recent decades.

Conflict #1: Women in ministry

My ministry began at College Mennonite Church (CMC) in Goshen, Indiana, in 1981, during the early days of the debate about women in ministry. At that time only a handful of women in the entire denomination had been credentialed as pastors. Because the term *ordination* seemed to be a sticking point for many, CMC chose to abandon the word *ordained* and instead adopted the word *commissioned*, redefining the latter word to mean "called to serve the church with all the rights and privileges of an ordained pastor."

To further defuse controversy, CMC decided to do my installation in a leaderless worship service that unofficially (without the presence of a conference representative) "commissioned" all members of the congregation for roles, from elder to usher. In a worship service held on September 27, 1981, participants (those commissioned and those to be commissioned) followed along with a twelve-page liturgy in which designated members stood on written cue and the other members proceeded to read aloud their commissioning statement.

When it came time for my installation, the only apparent difference was that I went forward and stood—alone—in front of the congregation, while they read the words of commissioning to me. Because I was the mother of two young children, it had taken me six years to earn my MDiv degree. On the long-anticipated day that marked the beginning of my ministry, all I remember feeling was loneliness, embarrassment, and sadness.

Time has softened my perspective on this event. While I still may wish it had been a more meaningful service (many church members have since apologized for it), I realize that discerning big issues within the church is often a messy and slow process, and sometimes a painful one.

It helped that Indiana Michigan Mennonite Conference set up a formal process for discernment about the issue of women in ministry, one that had integrity. They developed study materials and encouraged each member congregation to spend time studying the resource before voting on the issue.

Our annual session in 1980 was marked by passionate and sometimes heated debate among the delegates. When some congregations requested more time to study, the moderator and most of the delegates agreed.

The vote that finally passed the next year did not specifically validate ordaining women for ministry, but it detailed the characteristics of a minister, acknowledged that God gives gifts to women, too, and granted each congregation authority to decide who (of whatever gender) its ministers would be.

As a woman minister, this agreement was not all I had hoped for, but I could be at peace with it. It gave congregations space to live out their understanding of scripture while remaining in fellowship with congregations with different views about women in ministry. As a woman I still faced occasional opposition at conference gatherings, and even in the congregation where I served, but the resolution allowed the conference to move on to other issues.

Conflict #2: Homosexuality

About twelve years later, the issue of homosexuality surfaced in Indiana-Michigan Mennonite Conference, and in the denomination as a whole, when a congregation brought their struggles to

the executive board of the conference and asked for counsel. The board, following protocol, again took the matter to the delegates.

But rather than bringing us together, the debate seemed to push members and congregations further apart. Congregations and individuals who advocated openness to homosexual members called for dialogue, citing statements on the issue adopted at churchwide assemblies in Purdue (1987) and Saskatoon (1986). Those who felt that scripture clearly identifies homosexuality as a sin said there was nothing to debate. They saw the call for dialogue as an attempt to wear them down with arguments until they finally gave in. Advocates for dialogue saw this refusal to talk as rooted not in faith but in fear.

Thanks to hard work, ours and the Spirit's, and our weariness from a decade of stagnation, we found a way to transcend this impasse, at least temporarily. Relationships were restored and creative energy began to flow again.

Impatience and mistrust grew, and conference leaders felt pressure to take action against any congregation not holding the denomination's position, even those that had not taken in a gay or lesbian member but were only considering it. This issue and the pain and mistrust that accompanied it dominated conference life for a decade. Leadership was hammered from both sides.

When I joined the conference staff in 2000, this issue still had the conference in a death grip. It sapped our creativity and energy and kept us from becoming the mission-minded conference we wanted to be.

Thanks to hard work, the movement of the Spirit, and perhaps our accumulated weariness from a decade of stagnation, we did eventually find a way to transcend this impasse, at least temporarily. Relationships were restored and creative energy began to flow again. Unlike the issue of women in ministry, though, the issue was not resolved but put on hold.

Reflecting on these conflicts

As I watch the debate on homosexuality again heating up across the church, I reflect back on these two experiences. While both issues continue to cause conflict, the practice of ordaining women for ministry has generally gained some acceptance over the years,

while debate about homosexuality still threatens to divide our denomination. I recognize that the conflicts are different, yet I believe we can gain some insight by reviewing how Indiana Michigan conference (and perhaps other conferences as well) approached these two conflicts.

The similarities. I see the key similarities in these two conflicts as follows: People began each debate being intensely passionate about a particular outcome. Each issue could have torn the conference and the broader church apart. Some congregations left—because of a decision made about women in ministry, and because of the lack of decisiveness about homosexuality. Both issues engendered—and still engender—fear. Both groups wanting change were told to be patient. Both groups holding to the existing position were accused of being bigoted rather than biblical. At times the words and example of Jesus seemed to be the last verses from scripture invoked in the conflict, rather than the first ones.

The differences. It is the differences, I believe, that have defined the varied outcomes.

While some saw women in ministry as disobedient to God's intent, few labeled their desire to minister as sin. Such labeling quickly emerged in the debate about homosexuality. The conflict about women in ministry included Bible study, discussion at various levels, prayer, and a search for common ground that would allow space for some disagreement in thought and behavior. While the delegates expected leaders to design a process for congregational use, to guide the discussion, the delegates expected to eventually shape and discern an action. By contrast, in the early days of the homosexuality debate, little or no agreement emerged about a process that would lead to discernment.

On women in ministry, the conference-wide decision gave congregations autonomy to decide how they would handle the issue. The member congregations chose to respect the decisions of their sister congregations, giving them the benefit of the doubt and trusting that all seek to be faithful to God. In the conflict around homosexuality, some congregations called on the conference to discipline any church considering openness to gay members.

The decision regarding women in ministry was made by the delegates and not by conference leaders. On homosexuality, some

voices pressed conference leadership to act unilaterally and impose a decision from the top.

Perhaps most importantly, those debating the issue of women in ministry sought a unity of the Spirit, while the homosexuality debate often seemed more focused on enforcing conformity in a false unity.

Two key scriptures

Such debates would be easy if scripture provided unambiguous answers to every conflict we face.

On women in ministry, do we claim Galatians 3:27–28—"In Christ there is neither male nor female"—or do we follow Paul's comment that women should be silent in the church (1 Cor. 14: 34–35)? Along with the teachings of Jesus, which should always be foundational, there are two passages that I believe can help guide our way through the issues.

The first is Ephesians 4:1–6, which calls us "to lead a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, making every effort to *maintain the unity of the Spirit* in the bond of peace. There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to the one hope of your calling, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is above all and through all and in all" (my emphasis). Here we are told unambiguously what we are called to, what characteristics we are to display, what we are to do, and the reason why we are to do these things. The call is to live a life worthy of the calling to which we have been called. The characteristics are humility, gentleness, and patience. The activity in the call is to bear with one another in love, making every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. We are to do this because there is one body, one Spirit, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is above all and through all and in all.

The call to "maintain the unity of the Spirit" acknowledges that this unity is not our creation but a gift given by God through the Holy Spirit. And it is not a gift given unconditionally but one we must keep working at through discernment.

So how do we live together when we do the things called for in Ephesians 4 and we still disagree? I find guidance for that in a

second passage: the Lord's Prayer. We have all prayed many times: *"Your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as it is in heaven."* Here in an amazing reversal, God is not calling on us; we are calling on God for God's plan to be put into place among us just as it is in heaven.

But for that to happen, we must be ready to pray and humbly work not for what we want but for what God desires! To pray this prayer means to open ourselves to God's leading and shaping of us by the Holy Spirit.

What might God's will look like, then? What visible shape might it take? One of my favorite images comes from a seminary professor who said, "Sanctuary is where heaven and earth meet, where everyday assumptions and rationalizations are broken open like the frail elements they are, in order to reveal a more inclusive, just, empowering, and satisfying truth through the presence of the sacred." I find a satisfying richness in the image of God's will for our church being a sanctuary, a safe place where heaven and earth intersect.

Sanctuary isn't some remote oasis. It is a place where we wrestle with the issues of life in the presence of God. And it is not a place of mindless and spiritless conformity.

Just imagine having a safe place where we could without recrimination do a self-awareness check of our behaviors, motives, and attitudes. We could work at how we interact with one another, how we talk to one another, how we listen to one another, how we make decisions, and how we give grace to one another, just as God is daily giving all of us grace. It would mean accepting that God—not the conference or the denomination—is the final authority on who is in and who is out.

Sanctuary isn't some remote oasis where we quietly abide until heaven beckons. It is a marketplace where we can encounter and embrace the messiness of discernment, a place where we wrestle with the issues of life in the presence of God. And it is not a place of mindless and spiritless conformity. In fact the very image of sanctuary has diversity built into it: the opposites of heaven and earth, sky and land, Holy Spirit and flawed flesh.

As our confession of faith confirms, it is by the guidance of the Holy Spirit that the church comes to unity in doctrine and action. It will be the Holy Spirit who calls us to clarity and repentance

when necessary. And it will be the Holy Spirit who leads us into the will of God. Here in this sanctuary we yield ourselves and our conflicts to the Holy Spirit, as we seek not a cloned sameness but the unity of the Spirit in which our rich diversity finds its proper expression.

Four clarifying questions

On a beautiful November Saturday that looked much like a physical manifestation of spiritual sanctuary, the Illinois Mennonite Conference gathered for a day of discernment. Building on past learnings, they did all the right things: studied scripture, prayed together, talked together, and celebrated together.

Did they come to a final resolution? No. But what they did accomplish is what I believe gives this issue and our denomination hope. They affirmed their common faith in God and their theological understandings about what God is calling them to do. They laid a foundation for how they wanted to interact with each other. They expressed a willingness to trust each other and God. They sat across the table and worked out what they could agree on. They gave themselves space to breathe and allow the Spirit to work on them and in them.

At the end of the day, Chuck Neufeld, conference minister, suggested four questions that should be asked of both sides who have come into conflict: Is Jesus Christ Lord and Savior in your life and in your congregation? Is scripture authoritative for your life? Is the *Confession of Faith from a Mennonite Perspective* your foundation?[1] Are you gathering as a people of faith to pray for and discern the Holy Spirit's guidance? Neufeld maintains that if we can answer yes to these questions, then we can sit down together and find our way through anything.

A time to move forward

If we can answer all these questions in the affirmative, will our conflicts disappear? Will we move forward in the same way, and with all the congregations we have had in the past?

Not necessarily. As our history and that of Christianity as a whole demonstrate, there are many legitimate ways to be part of God's kingdom, and sometimes going our separate ways is how we resolve conflict and give breathing space to each other. Jesus says

in John 14:2 that within God's house, there are many rooms. When we separate, we may just be moving to a different room within God's dwelling.

Our goal, then, should not be to impose conformity, or even to keep members from leaving, but to maintain the unity of God's Spirit, wherever that might lead or whatever shape it might take. That is hard work. It is messy and often frustrating. But God created diversity and had to know that disagreements, new challenges and ongoing issues, would result from that diversity. God must have wanted an alive and dynamic creation that interacts with God and with the other parts of creation to discover the richness of life.

Three decades of wisdom

After three decades of ministry at the congregational, conference, and denominational levels, I sometimes think I know less about what it takes to resolve church conflicts than when I was fresh out of seminary. Can we hold to a theological center that allows for flexibility at the edges? Can we maintain the unity of the Spirit rather than a spirit of unity that often becomes a smothering conformity? Is it even possible?

I believe we will fail if we

- focus on our disagreements rather than on the foundational beliefs we have in common;
- assume we know what the other is thinking instead of sitting down with the other and fully listening until we understand their point of view;
- think we have the corner on the truth;
- aren't willing to study scripture together;
- aren't open to the Spirit of God moving within and through us;
- distance ourselves from others while we discern on our own;
- threaten to walk away or withhold money to force the other's hand;
- use negative adjectives to describe the behaviors, beliefs, motives, and language of others; or
- expect leaders to impose a decision on those with whom we disagree.

I believe we can succeed if we

- allow God to manage the conflict;
- understand that God is the final judge in our disputes;
- act with humility and offer an open heart and hands to God and each other;
- are clear about the center of what unites us and take time to reflect on that core;
- pray for each other and for ourselves;
- study scripture together;
- wait on the Lord and give the Spirit time to work on us;
- assume that others are trying, as we are, to be faithful to God;
- offer others the same love and grace that God has showered on us; and
- are not afraid to be wrong.

Our denomination holds us together with the foundational theology laid out in the *Confession of Faith from a Mennonite Perspective*, affirmed at the 1995 assembly of delegates from Canada and U.S. But we must decide whether to use this document as an encircling arm or as a hammer. As conflicts arise, can we allow congregations and conferences—as they rely on this document, on scripture, and on the counsel of fellow believers—to discern where they will stand, even though we might disagree with them? Then we can continue in fellowship and communication, together creating a sanctuary that may produce not conformity but something far better and more biblical: the unity of God's Spirit.

Note

[1] *Confession of Faith in a Mennonite Perspective* (Scottdale, PA, and Waterloo, ON: Herald Press, 1995).

About the author

Nancy Kauffmann is a denominational minister for Mennonite Church USA. She relates to six area conferences: Central District, Illinois, Lancaster, Mountain States, Ohio, and Southeast. She also manages the call system for Mennonite Church USA and serves as staff for the denomination's leadership discernment committee.